

## WOMEN SKEPTICS

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Parapsychology appears to have fallen upon hard times. Several of the few laboratories in the world have recently had to close, mainly because of lack of funding; two journals have ceased publication; and research is not increasing.

Meanwhile, the skeptics' movement is gathering momentum. The Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) is expanding, and its journal, the *Skeptical Inquirer*, has nearly 30,000 subscribers. All over the United States and Europe, local skeptical groups are starting up, and for the most part, are flourishing.

However, they include very few women. All the founders of CSICOP were men, and the Executive Committee is still almost entirely male. The few women associated with CSICOP still number well under 10% of both the Committee and the Scientific and Technical Consultants, and all the subcommittees are chaired by men. I wonder whether the aims of skeptical inquiry into the paranormal are simply not of interest to women or whether they are so greatly outnumbered for some other reason. To answer this, first we must ask: What is the essence of skeptical inquiry?

I am personally interested in understanding many strange and thus far unexplained experiences people have: anything from out-of-body experiences to apparent telepathic events, from appreciating the services of a Tarot reader to having dreams that come true. I think the way to understanding them is through experimentation, empirical research of all kinds, and genuine skeptical inquiry. As John Palmer (1986) points out, that means being skeptical about all hypothesized explanations—including the paranormal ones. He labels his preferred approach "progressive skepticism." This is how I understand the aims of studying the putatively paranormal—whatever the explanations turn out to be.

From this perspective the present situation could prove encouraging or profoundly discouraging. The bright side is very bright. It is possible that the increase in skepticism will itself raise interest in the paranormal, raise funds to study it, and lead to generally increased interest in understanding these issues. If critical, intelligent, and accomplished scientists lend their skills to the study of the paranormal, then the whole

subject will improve beyond measure. I would love to see a thorough study done of glimpses of the Being of Light or the tunnel of death, of what people learn from fortune-tellers, or of what difference one's paranormal beliefs make to living one's life.

Alternatively, and perhaps more likely, the worse kind of pseudoskepticism will take over. There are some members of the skeptics' groups who clearly believe they know the right answer prior to inquiry. They appear not to be interested in weighing alternatives, investigating strange claims, or trying out psychic experiences or altered states for themselves (heaven forbid!), but only in promoting their own particular belief structure and its cohesion—fighting to ensure that all claims can actually be explained away by recourse to "real science."

I have to say it—most of these people are men. Indeed, I have not met a single woman of this type (I believe some people think I am one—I leave it to them to judge whether this is so or not!).

So why are there so few women skeptics? The evidence seems to be accumulating year by year that women's brains are different from men's. The levels of testosterone and estrogens affect brain development differently in the sexes and are implicated in the differences in interests and abilities (see Moir & Jessel, 1989, for a review). The most obvious of these differences is females' greater verbal ability and males' greater spatial ability. It has also been found that the corpus callosum is thicker in men than women, and that women show less hemispheric asymmetry for emotional responses than men do. In other words, this might underlie the claim that women are better at articulating emotions and at integrating a lot of information at once, whereas men are more single-minded and prefer logical, serial thinking. Differences have also been found in perceptual sensitivity, with women being more sensitive to sounds and touch than men.

These claimed differences are interesting as far as the paranormal is concerned. If they are valid it seems unsurprising that women are more prone to psychic experiences that often involve emotional reactions to stimuli and sensitivity to faint signals. It may be that the greater auditory sensitivity means that women detect (normal) stimuli that are inaudible to men, and hence their experiences get labeled as paranormal. From the purely logical point of view, putting together a lot of faint stimuli and reacting emotionally to them may appear to be bizarre. To many women it is central to their whole way of being.

What has this to do with skepticism? My point is that it is predominantly women who have the "inexplicable" experiences. They are more often the mediums, psychics, and fortune-tellers; they more often consult these people; and they more often report spontaneous psychic experiences. The way to understand all these things is not by explaining them away but by treating them as genuine and interesting experiences in need of progressive skepticism. The ideal progressive skeptic is not one who is certain he is right and there is no paranormal; rather, it is one who has personal access to the experiences, who knows that they occur, who is aware they can have a profound influence on people's lives, and who can simultaneously apply the best of scientific analysis and inquiry to them.

In other words, they need to contain the best of both worlds: a balance between sensitivity, openness to experience, and analytical ability. I can only suggest that we need more women skeptics.

#### REFERENCES

- Moir, A., & Jessel, D. (1989). *Brain sex: The real difference between men and women*. London: Octopus.
- Palmer, J. (1986). Progressive skepticism: A critical approach to the psi controversy. *Journal of Parapsychology*, 50, 29-42.