

## RECENT PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL RESEARCH IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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The British have made many significant contributions to parapsychological research, especially in the early pioneering days, but in recent years, although popular interest in the subject does not seem to have diminished, the amount of serious work done in the United Kingdom has been small in comparison with developments elsewhere, particularly in the United States. I believe this state of affairs to be due in part to a lack of professional status. Historically, the subject has been left to enthusiastic amateurs, and the dominant organization in the field, the Society for Psychical Research in London, has tended, whether deliberately or otherwise, to foster an amateur tradition.

At the end of the nineteenth century, when the Society was founded (and its output of published work can only be described as prodigious), the amateur tradition worked rather well. Although the Society was open to all and sundry, and there were many spiritualist members, effective control naturally fell into the hands of those who did the work and wrote the research reports. This was a nucleus of energetic and gifted young men who had time, skill and money at their disposal, and support from a number of persons of considerable academic or social prestige.

Times have changed. Research today calls for skill and training in experimental and statistical techniques that are normally only acquired by professional scientists. There is less scope for the dilettante, and the professionals are fully committed to earning their living in orthodox research projects. Wealthy academics, free to pursue unconventional research interests at their own expense, are no longer available. The almost insuperable difficulty confronting the Society for Psychical Research in London is to find investigators who have the time, the interest and the ability to do the work, and to do it without the financial and institutional support customary and necessary for modern research.

Much swifter development could be hoped for if the universities

would adopt parapsychology as a proper subject for teaching and research. Rhine, Murphy and others in the United States have had a limited success in integrating parapsychological research into university organization, but in England there has been very little progress in this direction. One reason for this is that American universities are more open to the receipt of private funds for the promotion of all sorts of purposes, whereas the state-funded British universities have not the same independent resources to draw upon.

In England, the limited amount of funds which private donors have produced have found their way to bodies outside of the universities. Even the Perrott-Warrick Studentship in psychical research, although administered by Trinity College, Cambridge, has so far had little connection with the University itself. Holders of the Studentship have worked free-lance, without being provided with research facilities by any university department, and without being members of either the University or of Trinity College. Other ventures into psychical research in Britain, such as Celia Green's Psychophysical Research Unit at Oxford, even though they may be run by graduates, have been set up by private funds independently of any university connection. The Society for Psychical Research itself has a research fund, separate from the general purposes fund, which was set up explicitly for the furtherance of research. Up till now the income from this fund has been used almost exclusively for paying the running costs of projects conducted by self-supporting amateur research workers.

There are signs that this state of affairs is changing. At the instigation of John Cutten, currently Honorary Secretary of the Society for Psychical Research, a new Studentship Trust Fund has been set up to promote and sponsor university studentships for the study and investigation of paranormal phenomena. In connection with this enterprise, two British universities have been approached, and the heads of the relevant departments have agreed in principle to consider the admission of suitable students, financed by the new fund, as candidates for graduate work leading to a submission for a doctoral degree, provided that the proposed program of parapsychological research meets with their approval. Already one such student has been selected for graduate work in a university department of psychology and has been given appropriate financial support from the new fund.

The significance of this development is that it may lead to a number of graduate students being recruited into full-time parapsychological research at different universities. These students will have a great advantage over free-lance investigators in having a recognized university status, in having the advice and supervision of academics appointed

for the purpose, and finally, if their work proves of sufficient merit, in having the fact acknowledged by the conferment of a degree. As there are no permanent posts in parapsychology available in Britain, it is important that an individual who devotes some years to parapsychological research should not forfeit his place on his ordinary career ladder. By working at parapsychology and for a higher degree at the same time, this difficulty is overcome.

Of course, the obtaining of a higher degree for parapsychological research has long been theoretically possible. It was done, for example, by Drs. Soal, Bendit, and Hettinger, and in the case of one of my own doctorates certain parapsychological publications were taken into consideration by the examiners. But hitherto these have been exceptional cases of work done more or less as a spare time hobby by persons whose everyday employment had been in some more orthodox pursuit. The new provisions will allow full time professional research to be carried out under proper auspices and to receive proper recognition.

Apart from this particular scheme, there are other indications that British universities are no longer completely opposed to parapsychological studies. At the University of Edinburgh, Dr. J. Beloff, in the Department of Psychology, has been able to pursue an intensive program of parapsychological research for some years, and to recruit research assistants to help. Indeed, his work represents the most important and extensive research effort in Great Britain at present. Another important development is the research unit set up at Oxford University by Sir Alister Hardy, emeritus Professor of Zoology, who is investigating both telepathic phenomena and religious experiences. At the time of writing, Cambridge University has just allowed Dr. Y. Raef, an Egyptian scientist, to submit, for a doctorate in philosophy, a thesis on psychic phenomena among the Islamic mystics. This historical and analytic study, carried out at Cambridge, aroused the interest of the late Professor Arberry, a distinguished Islamic scholar, and the late Professor C. D. Broad, so it is good news that it has been brought successfully to completion.

Another step in bringing parapsychology into the universities was foreshadowed in the Vice Chancellor's Address to the Court of the University of Surrey on January 17, 1970. Referring to stages in the evolution of human consciousness, from individual preoccupations to steadily growing group awareness, Dr. Leggett referred to the need to promote investigation in these fields. He cited, as an example, the work of Sir Alister Hardy, and went on to suggest: "A start could be made with one senior appointment, maybe a research professor of

metapsychology." In fact, there is hope now that this development may come about quite soon.

Turning now from the question of the organization of parapsychology in Britain to what work has actually been done recently, it has to be admitted that we have had more negative results, and more critical commentaries, than we have had new developments. Indeed this trend has been noticeable for quite some years. The organizational problems referred to earlier, which make it difficult to carry out new research programs, may be in part responsible. On the other hand, one must not underestimate the difficulty inherent in all parapsychological research. Professor Rushton, in his presidential address to the S.P.R. in November, 1970, put it aptly and concisely: "Paranormal phenomena seem to fade away in the attempt to perfect the techniques for eliciting them. . . . It is clearly false in most cases to believe that sensitives are tricksters, but the history of their performance often resembles strikingly that of a fraud whose tricks are being inspected too persistently and analyzed too closely." Anyway, whether the worse difficulty is the nature of the subject or the lack of organized facilities for research, it is certainly easier to find fault with previous investigations than to produce new and better research.

A recent paper in the critical tradition has unfortunately appeared posthumously. It is "The Origin of the 'Prepared Random Numbers' Used in the Shackleton Experiments," by the late Dr. R. G. Medhurst. This refers to the famous Soal-Goldney experiments in telepathy carried out during the Second World War. Many of you may wonder at the British preoccupation with these ancient experiments, which have long been superseded by American work, but the fact is that Soal's researches represent about the only long-continued series of successful ESP experiments that have been reported in Britain in the last thirty years. They stand out as the great exception to the British tradition of failure to reproduce high-scoring ESP effects. Moreover, the Shackleton experiments were widely acclaimed as not only successful, but also as the most carefully conducted and virtually fraud-proof experiments ever done. Anything which seems to cast the least doubt upon them is quite shocking to the British. Medhurst set out with the idea of locating Soal's randomized target sequences in the Chambers's Logarithm Tables from which they were said to have been taken. His purpose was to show that the allegation by Mrs. Gretl Albert that she had seen Soal altering some target numbers must have been mistaken. He used a high speed digital computer to reproduce the last digits of Chambers's seven-figure logarithms, and devised a computer program to match specimen sequences from the ESP targets

against all the sequences that could be obtained from the logarithms by the method described by Soal. He found that none of the sequences matched properly. Medhurst's discoveries have since been confirmed by others. The inescapable conclusion appears to be that however Soal prepared his targets it could not have been exactly in the way he reported.

As far as it goes, this finding does not in itself much affect the validity of the experimental results (since the targets were still sufficiently random), but it suggests that Soal was not so obsessively accurate in his reporting as one might otherwise suppose. Inevitably it reactivates the doubts and suspicions raised when Soal announced, long after the event, that he had lost the original score sheets on a train, and lost with them all possibility of proving by direct examination that no tampering with the figures had taken place. I predict that Medhurst's contribution will trigger off further examinations and further critical reappraisals of the Soal data. I hesitate to predict the outcome, but one thing at least will be proved, namely, that British parapsychologists will not let a positive result stand if there is the slightest chance of exposing it as fallacious.

As has already been remarked, most of the experimental reports in Britain in recent years have been produced by John Beloff and his collaborators. Despite their industry and ingenuity, their results have been disappointingly negative. In many experiments they have made use of an electronic ESP tester, built for the Department of Psychology at Edinburgh University, which produces a random sequence of targets and registers automatically the numbers of hits and trials. The machine was used for some telepathy tests using pairs of "sweethearts" (i.e., engaged couples and newlyweds) as agent and percipient. It was concluded that "mutual attraction between two people is not sufficient to insure telepathic rapport in a guessing situation such as we have here described." In other experiments, conditions were varied in different ways to try to encourage ESP phenomena. For instance, the effects of giving a percipient immediate or delayed information as to the result of each guess were compared. In another telepathy test, physiological responses charted by a polygraph were scrutinized for indications of unconscious awareness on the percipient's part of emotive stimuli being looked at by an agent. In their report on work during the year 1968-1969, the experimenters concluded that the electronic tester and other guessing techniques had failed to provide any solid evidence for the manifestation of ESP.

During 1969-1970, the Edinburgh workers made a determined attempt to use the ESP tester to replicate, as closely as possible, the re-

markable experiments of Dr. Helmut Schmidt. Schmidt used as subjects a few volunteers who had shown some promise in initial screening tests. In an extensive series of trials, under precognitive and/or clairvoyant conditions of guessing, Schmidt built up deviations from chance expectation of enormous statistical significance. The Edinburgh workers failed to reproduce the successes reported by Schmidt. They concluded: "All we know for the time being is that he found subjects who gave significant scores; we did not."

This particular failure was specially disappointing. It had been hoped that the Schmidt technique, which allowed subjects to make their guesses in their own time, unhampered by clumsy processes of manual recording and supervision, would prove to be the potentially repeatable procedure we have all been waiting for. Dr. R. H. Thouless had the idea that the Schmidt machine, by allowing immediate feedback of the result of each guess, might enable a percipient to improve his performance by learning, in a manner analogous to the learning of a skilled task by gradual elimination of mistaken moves. Thouless took the opportunity, during a visit to the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man in 1970, to try out the Schmidt machine himself with this possibility in mind. He did not succeed in producing statistically significant learning effects, and in his report concluded, "It is obvious that this is the report of an experimental failure."

The fact that British experimenters so often report null results in parapsychological experiments may be due to some essential psychological factor missing from their tests. The more skeptically minded might suggest alternative hypotheses, for example that the British are particularly cautious and meticulous in the conduct of their tests, and thus eliminate spurious results. Personally, I don't believe that explanation. Another more plausible possibility is that the British are engagingly frank about publishing their failures, whereas in other places it may be the policy to refrain from publication until something positive emerges. Undoubtedly the British are right to publish failures. In the present state of our subject it is important for potential experimenters to know before they begin the difficulties likely to be encountered.

Recent experimental work in England has not been limited to guessing tests. J. L. Randall, an enterprising teacher at Leamington College, has been carrying out, with the assistance of interested students, a series of experiments in which subjects tried to influence by psi the movement of small animals. In simplicity and elegance of

design his experiments are, in my opinion, superior to various previous attempts of the kind.

In one such experiment he used woodlice. The animal was placed in the center of a circular dish. The subject tried to influence it to climb over the edge of the dish at some point on a particular (randomly determined) sector of the circumference. The results of these experiments have not all been published yet, but it would appear to be a promising line of inquiry.

One line of research which has been giving apparently positive results concerns paranormal physical effects at séances. Mr. Colin Brookes-Smith has constructed various pieces of apparatus for registering the operation of paranormal physical forces. He follows the theories of K. J. Batchelor, according to which paranormal phenomena are likely to grow out of effects that are initially produced by normal means. Owing to some natural psychological resistance to conclusive demonstrations of paranormality, conventional methods of direct control against fraud and artefact are likely to inhibit the phenomena. Hence Brookes-Smith has tried to set up methods of registering effects which are unobtrusive and non-inhibitory. In one such test, he arranged an electric bulb on top of a covered table in such a way that it would light up if a hinged flap, mounted on an extension from the table, were lifted up. The "sitters" found that they could cause the lamp to light and go off in exact response to verbal orders. Their concentration upon the lamp rather than the spot where the paranormal force would have to be applied presumably helped to overcome psychological resistance. The sitters were positioned around three sides of the table well away from the hinged flap, so that it would seem that none of them could have produced the necessary movement by normal means.

Opinions differ, of course, as to the value of Brookes-Smith's approach. Avoidance of direct controls and "crucial tests" may be a necessary condition, just as dim lights and curtain screens have in the past been thought to be necessary for physical phenomena. It is unfortunate, however, that these are also the very conditions to facilitate deception. On the other hand, if the Brookes-Smith approach can be used, as he appears to believe it can, to enable all and sundry to obtain paranormal physical effects, then of course elaborate precautions against deception would no longer be necessary. Proof would come from repetition by others.

I prefer to suspend judgment on this issue. If I understand him correctly, Brookes-Smith hopes to circumvent the inhibitory effects of doubt by building up a psychological atmosphere which is free and

informal and conducive to paranormal manifestations. At the same time, by using sophisticated, unobtrusive and adaptable apparatus, he hopes to obtain now and then an objective, and hopefully indisputable record of some of the manifestations. It is certainly an interesting prospect, but it sounds rather like a battle of wits between the experimenter and the phenomena. It remains to be seen which side will win.

So far I have mentioned only S.P.R. publications. Few systematic research projects in Britain are to be found in other periodicals. One exception is the *Journal of Paraphysics*, edited by Benson Herbert and M. Driver, with M. Cassirer as research officer. This covers a variety of phenomena, including both séance room effects and unidentified flying objects.

The journal *Light*, one of the oldest psychic periodicals, still flourishes. It is the organ of the College of Psychic Studies, and has predominantly spiritualistic orientation. Most of the contributions are discursive rather than research reports. A recent issue was devoted to a review of the Raudive voice phenomena, following publication of the book *Breakthrough*. Another journal is the *Quarterly Review of the Churches' Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies*, but this, too, is discursive and philosophical rather than empirical in content. Finally, one might mention the *Journal of the British Society of Dowsers*, another long-established periodical. This very rarely contains material of interest to the serious empirical scientist.

This brings me to the end of this brief review of recent parapsychological experiments in Britain. It has been a very short review for the simple but sad reason that not very much experimental work has been published recently. Studies of an anecdotal and historical nature are going on. For example, interest in the scripts of the SPR cross-correspondence automatists continues, though half a century or more has elapsed since most of them were produced. G. W. Lambert is still producing papers seeking to establish new meanings to names and allusions taken from the scripts. In my view, these efforts will remain for ever inconclusive, for the reason that we have no way of estimating the likelihood of coincidences occurring by chance in such a vast mass of material. Just how vast the material is we are prevented from knowing, and much of it is thought to have been destroyed. The late W. H. Salter, custodian of the bulk of the unpublished scripts which remain, left the material to Trinity College, with the proviso that they were not to be examined before 1995. By that time there may not be many of us around to pursue the matter.

One outstanding historical study deserves mention. I refer to the



paper "Supernormal Phenomena in Classical Antiquity" by Professor E. R. Dobbs (*Proc. S.P.R.* [1971] 55, 189-237). This work surveys the beliefs and practices of the ancient world in regard to divination, possession, telepathy, automatism and the like. It is an authoritative statement revealing the extraordinarily close analogy between modern spiritualist phenomena and similar manifestations reported by the ancients. One is tempted to conclude, with reference both to the phenomena and to their baffling quality of elusiveness and inexplicability, "Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."