

Research on Psychic Phenomena: Science or Pseudoscience?

Such concepts as clairvoyance, psychokinesis, and telepathy are being studied
at about 20 universities in the U.S.

By KIM McDONALD

BUFFALO, N.Y.

Research on extrasensory perception, reincarnation, and the abilities of psychics is being conducted at dozens of major universities and other institutions, but some scholars charge that many of the studies are rife with error or fraud and should not receive serious public attention.

"Parapsychologists keep on testing the same hypothesis over and over again without obtaining any results," said Mario Bunge, a professor of logic and metaphysics at McGill University, who called much of the research on psychic or paranormal phenomena "pseudoscience." "Parapsychology has existed for 3,000 years and it has not come up with a single statement," law, or substantiated case to make the field worthy of continued attention by scientists, he added.

Mr. Bunge addressed his comments to the first international conference on "Science, Skepticism, and the Paranormal," an event that attracted more than 300 scientists, skeptics, and scholars from 10 countries to the State University of New York at Buffalo to discuss the problems of paranormal research.

Paranormal phenomena, which are not explainable by present scientific concepts or physical laws, include such concepts as telepathy, clairvoyance, apparitions, and psychokinesis.

A report written by the Congressional Research Service this year estimated that research on those phenomena, known as "psi" for short, is being conducted at about 20 universities in the United States and "in at least as many institutions in Western Europe and Great Britain." Many scientists engaged in psi research are members of established professional societies, such as the Parapsychological Association, and publish their results in journals that require peer review.

But while the critics of psi who addressed the conference did not question the qualifications or motives of such researchers, some questioned the accuracy of their methods—and their gullibility when dealing with persons posing as psychics.

Reports Can Be Faulted

James E. Alcock, an associate professor of psychology at York University in Toronto, said reports by researchers that suggest the existence of psi could often be faulted for errors in reporting, for the selective publication of data, and for the misuse of or overdependence on statistics. "All one can gain from statistical procedures is an indication that the observed results are unlikely to have been observed by chance, as described by the particular probability model being used," he said. "Unfortunately, despite claims to the contrary, parapsychologists routinely interpret statistical departures from 'chance expectation' as evidence that psi is involved."

James Randi, a magician who won international acclaim for repeating the same tricks performed by Uri Geller, a self-proclaimed psychic, said scientists who conduct psi experiments in a laboratory setting without a magician present also stand the risk of being fooled by their subjects.

Mr. Randi said he had demonstrated his point in 1979, when he sent two magicians posing as psychics to the McDonnell Laboratory for Psychical Research at Washington University. Over three years, he said, the two magicians tricked researchers there into believing that, with their psychic powers, they could bend metal, burn fuses, and turn rotors scaled in glass jars. Those feats, which were videotaped and shown last year at a meeting of the Parapsychological Association, are "obvious" to any magician as fakes, Mr. Randi said, but, he said, were presented at the meeting as evidence of psi.

However, Peter R. Phillips, director of the McDonnell Laboratory, said in a statement distributed at the Buffalo meeting that he "did not claim these events were good evidence of psychokinesis. We were showing the tape primarily to get advice from our peers on how to make a better one."

‘Project Alpha’

Some researchers have been critical of Mr. Randi’s efforts to publicize his experiment, called “Project Alpha,” claiming that he had used it to gain widespread publicity for himself.

Mr. Randi, who says he started the project after receiving letters from magicians who complained that “psychics” were misrepresenting their trade, denied this, stating that he hoped the results of Project Alpha would simply teach researchers to be more careful. “I’m not saying there should be no paranormal experiments,” he said, “but they should be carefully controlled.”

Nevertheless, many researchers do regard such experiments as a waste of time and money, and they wonder why many of their colleagues persist in such endeavors when so much of the psi evidence fails to hold up under careful scrutiny.

Regarded as ‘Kooks’

One university physicist said in an interview that he regarded many of the people who continued to study psi phenomena despite evidence to the contrary as “kooks,” and that scientists should not dignify people who present evidence of psi with their attention, “but ignore them to death.”

Scientists should “no longer argue about whether psi exists, but why?,” said York University’s Mr. Alcock. “I would like to ask parapsychologists under what conditions psi never exists.”

Washington University’s Mr. Phillips said in a telephone interview that many scientists who hold the view that psi research “is degrading to science” reach that conclusion instinctively, without understanding that paranormal phenomena are labeled as such because they cannot be easily explained. “It’s certainly true that there is no obvious way psychic phenomena can be incorporated into the traditional view of science,” he said “But we know so little about the human mind that almost anything is possible.” Mr. Phillips, who is also a physics professor at Washington University, said he “went through a tremendous intellectual struggle” in attempting to understand psychic phenomena rationally. After close examination of the phenomena and examination of the research literature on the subject, he added, “I’m very strongly persuaded that these phenomena do exist. It doesn’t mean that I understand them. But if these things exist at all, they are very important.”

‘Useful Information’

Robert L. Morris, a senior research scientist at Syracuse University, said that if scientists were simply to dismiss the field, they would lose any opportunity to gain “useful information” that might result from such research. “First of all, if there is nothing to it, then I think it’s really important that we document that,” he said. “Unfortunately, much of the rhetoric from certain people doing the debunking has been expressed in a way that I think turns a lot of people off.”

“When you close the door on [psi] research, you do the most unscientific thing,” said one angry participant at the meeting. “Deny them grants if you want, but don’t ridicule them.”

Paul Kurtz, professor of philosophy and chairman of the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, which sponsored the conference, said his group believed that paranormal activities should be investigated by researchers, but they should also be dismissed if shown to be false. “Some debunking is not only useful but necessary, particularly if we are to deal with the realities of belief in our media-coddled society,” he said. “Given the level of ready public acceptance of the ‘incredible’ and a tendency toward gullibility, one horselaugh in its appropriate setting may be worth a dozen scholarly papers, though never at the price of the latter.”

Several speakers at the conference noted that sensationalized news accounts of reports of paranormal phenomena were responsible for disseminating much of the misinformation to the public, whose members, according to public opinion polls, generally believe that psi exists even though most scientists believe it does not.

“People believe what they hear the most,” said Stephen Barrett, a psychiatrist who noted that such a belief even extended to the misconception promulgated by advertisers that vitamin supplements are valuable for healthy adults. “When you hear it a lot, you tend to believe it.”

However, K. R. Rao, director of the Institute for Parapsychology in Durham, N.C., said in an interview that such deception could not explain many of the paranormal phenomena that people claim to have experienced. “I think it is proper for any scientist to study these phenomena,” he said. “Not only do these phenomena seem to exist, but they seem to follow certain patterns.”

Research Has Progressed

Mr. Rao denounced scientists who claim that psi research has made no progress, stating that researchers had found evidence that some people can influence random events and had developed techniques to eliminate the psychological barriers to enable demonstrations of extrasensory perception in the laboratory. "There are many lines of research that seem promising," he said. Mr. Rao admitted that progress in psi research had not been as great as in other fields, but said that was because of the relatively minor amount of support given to the field.

While the exact level of support is unknown (much of the psi research conducted in the U.S. is financed by foundations or performed by scientists on their own time), the Congressional Research Service report estimated that it probably does not "greatly exceed" \$500,000 per year. One scientist says that the Pentagon spends an additional \$7-million a year on such research, but that the information is classified.

Group of Skeptics Seeks to Alert the Public to Claims that Lack Scientific Support

BUFFALO, N.Y.

To many scientists and scholars, the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal is one of the few voices of reason in a world in which astrology, claims of supernatural events, psychic feats, and superstition have managed to flourish without criticism.

But to its detractors, including scholars who have been the object of its ridicule, the group known as CSICOP (rhymes with high-top) sometimes appears to be as close-minded and uncritical as some of its targets.

CSICOP, which counts more than 200 members worldwide, 90 per cent of whom work at universities, was established in 1976 by Paul Kurtz, a professor of philosophy at the State University of New York in Buffalo. "The committee was formed as a loose organization of scientists and skeptics who believed that we had critical information that had to be disseminated to a larger public," Mr. Kurtz said. "People needed to know that biorhythms hadn't been tested, that the moon does not lead to madness, that you can't match sun signs with picking your mate, that people can't regress to earlier conditions through hypnosis, and that there has been no evidence found of a U.F.O. based in the Atlantic near what is known as the Bermuda Triangle."

The group, which has no affiliation with the University but maintains an office nearby, publishes a quarterly journal, *The Skeptical Inquirer*, in which paranormal claims are "debunked." It does not finance research, but it promotes its cause through the media. Mr. Kurtz said the main concern of the group was to debunk the false claims made by those who have built a billion-dollar industry selling paranormal health cures, astrological charts, and other psychic advice to the public. He said CSICOP members also examine "a great deal of research in this field which needs responsible criticism," but take care not to criticize legitimate studies of paranormal phenomena. "Some of the research in parapsychology is done with some care and caution, and we surely would not want to attack that."

Some investigators of paranormal phenomena, however, say that CSICOP uses little care in selecting its targets, is primarily interested in ridiculing such phenomena, and, in the words of one, has used "all kinds of illogical arguments to discredit" legitimate research.

"I would be very happy if CSICOP would do careful research on parapsychology and tell us what is wrong with the research objectively, instead of simply telling us it's wrong," said K. R. Rao, director of the Institute for Parapsychology in Durham, N.C. "What this science needs is an attitude to give it a chance to show itself."

One university researcher involved in studies on reincarnation said that she too would welcome criticism of ridiculous claims "that should have been dismissed," such as those taught in "courses on how to develop your psychic ability." But "if we haven't explained all the cases, they need to be looked at," she said, adding that the frequent ridicule of the field of paranormal research makes communication with scientists working in other fields difficult for her. "You are very much on the defensive when you say what you're doing, right from the start," she said.

The frequent ridicule of paranormal investigations has also created a barrier between researchers in the field and their critics, she added. “Critics have a lot to say to us and we have a lot to say to them, and when we don’t talk, it’s unfortunate.”

K. McD.



Dana Fineman, DISCOVER Magazine, ©1983 Time Inc.

*CSICOP and its journal do not criticize legitimate research,
says chairman Paul Kurtz.*