

Parapsychology

From the Skeptics Dictionary

<http://skeptdic.com/parapsy.html>

"...parapsychology is the only realm of objective inquiry in which the phenomena are all negatively defined, defined in terms of ruling out normal explanations." -- James Alcock (2003)

Parapsychology is the search for paranormal phenomena, such as ESP and psychokinesis. Most scientists try to explain observable phenomena. Parapsychologists try to observe unexplainable phenomena. All the other sciences have led us away from superstition and magical thinking, while parapsychology has tried to find a scientific basis for divination, magical powers, and spirits.

Much parapsychology today attempts to find statistical oddities that can't be explained either by the laws of chance or by any other known natural causes. Parapsychologists assume in such cases that they have found evidence for psi.

Scientific methodology in this field dates from at least 1882 at the founding of the Society for Psychical Research in London, which continues to flourish. Its initial members sought to distinguish psychic phenomena from spiritism, and to investigate mediums and their activities. They studied automatic writing, levitation, and reports of ectoplasmic and poltergeist activity. In America, Joseph Banks Rhine (1895-1980) conducted psi experiments at Duke University in the 1930s. His work continues at the Rhine Research Center and at various labs across the country where experiments have concentrated principally on extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis, remote viewing, and astral projection. There are at least half a dozen peer-reviewed journals of parapsychology. However, research in this area has been characterized by deception, fraud, and incompetence in setting up properly controlled experiments and evaluating statistical data (Alcock 1990; Gardner 1981; Gordon 1987; Hansel 1989; Hines 1990; Hyman 1989; Park 2000; Randi 1982).

Americans Charles Tart and Raymond Moody, among many others continue to expand upon Rhine's work. The CIA and the U.S. military have hired parapsychologists and studied alleged psychics such as Ingo Swann and Joe McMoneagle. Parapsychological research has been done at several places in the U.S., including the Maimonides Hospital Dream Laboratory in Brooklyn, New York, the University of Nevada at Las Vegas, the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research lab; the University of Virginia Division of Perceptual Studies, and the University of Edinburgh, whose psychology department has the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology, and publishes the European Journal of Parapsychology. Parapsychologists have many other publications, as well.

Psi researchers often find evidence for psi, but a yearlong study done by the United States Air Force Research Laboratories (the VERITAC study, named after the computer used) was unable to verify the existence of ESP. A careful and properly designed study by Richard C. Sprinthall and Barry S. Lubetkin published in the *Journal of Psychology* (vol. 60, pp. 313-18) found no evidence of ESP. Some parapsychologists, such as Susan Blackmore, have abandoned the search for psi after years of failing to find any significant support for paranormal phenomena (Blackmore 1987, 2000).

Despite the fact that psychologists have been in the forefront of paranormal studies, a study of 1,100 college professors in the United States found that only 34% of psychologists believe that ESP is either an established fact or a likely possibility. Comparable figures for other disciplines are much higher: natural scientists (55%), social scientists [excluding psychologists] (66%) and for academics in the arts, humanities, and education (77%). Of the psychologists surveyed, 34% believe psi is an impossibility, while only 2% of the other respondents maintained this position (Wagner and Monnet 1979).

Parapsychologists who claim to have found positive results often systematically ignore or rationalize their own studies if they don't support psi. Rhine discarded data that didn't support his beliefs, claiming subjects were intentionally getting answers wrong (psi-missing). Many, if not most, psi researchers allow optional starting and optional stopping. Most psi researchers limit their research to investigating parlor tricks (guessing the number or suit of a playing card, or "guess what Zener card I am looking at" or "try to influence this random number generator with your thoughts"). Any statistical strangeness is attributed to paranormal events.

From the standpoint of physics there seems to be a major problem with the assumption and alleged discovery by some parapsychologists that spatial distance is irrelevant to psi. Three of the four known forces in nature weaken with distance. Thus, as Einstein pointed out in a letter to Dr. Jan Ehrenwald, "This suggests...a very strong indication that a non-recognized source of systematic errors may have been involved [in ESP experiments]" (Gardner 1981, 153). The skeptic would rather believe that ESP doesn't exist than that there is some very strong and powerful force that is undetectable even though we're able to detect what must be a much weaker force, gravity, without any trouble at all.

Recently, the work of Charles Honorton and his ganzfeld experiments have been put forth as examples of proper scientific studies whose integrity cannot be doubted. Maybe. But the data from these experiments illustrate another problem with much research in parapsychology: correlations don't establish causality. Finding a correlation which is not what would be predicted by chance does not establish a causal event, much less that if it is a causal event it must be a paranormal event. Furthermore, even if there is a causal event, the correlation itself isn't of much use in determining what that event consists of. What you think is cause may be the effect. Or, there may be some third, unknown, factor which is causing the effect observed. Or, the correlation may be due to chance, even if it is statistically unlikely in a certain sense. The apparent chance correlation may actually be statistically likely over the long run. So, the fact that a group of test subjects identifies correctly which of four pictures someone else has seen at a .36 rate when .25 is what chance predicts doesn't establish a causal event. Nor does it, of course, establish ESP as the cause, if there is a cause. The event may well be causal, but the real cause may be something quite ordinary, such as fraud, unintentional cues, or some tendency to bias in the subject matters selected by chance. If other researchers can duplicate the results with more and more rigorous tests, then it will become highly probable that causal events are being measured. Then, the problem will be to find the cause. Maybe it will turn out to be a psychic force hitherto undetected by physics, but this seems unlikely.

Parapsychologists, such as Dean Radin, also point to the work of Robert Jahn at Princeton University as an example of strong evidence of psychokinesis. Skeptics disagree.