

History of Parapsychology

1882-1932

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Introduction

In 1882 the 'Society for Psychical Research' was established in London, Great Britain. The society was the first learned or academic organization of its kind in the world, to study claims of purported spontaneous mental and physical paranormal phenomena. The society was formed on the back end of nineteenth century spiritualism and would establish a foundation for psychical (as it was more generally known in the early years) and parapsychological research for nearly fifty years and beyond.

The stimulus of the 'Society for Psychical Research' became prevalent around the globe, in particular the United States and within a multitude of European countries, with many comparable organizations emerging, and furthermore a number of autonomous researchers developed their own interest in the phenomena such as the Englishman Harry Price.

In the primary years between 1882 and 1932, the majority of studies carried out by the numerous societies of psychical research, were generally based on assured individuals, that claimed the ability to portray such ostensible mental phenomena as 'thought-transference' and 'clairvoyance' and also paraphysical phenomena, such as the ability to be able to move or levitate objects under defined conditions (mainly in low light or total darkness).

It can be strongly debated that the early pioneers of psychical or parapsychological research have influenced the development of modern day psychology (Alvarado 2002, 2004). However, conversely Parapsychological and Psychical Research has continuously been shrouded in controversy and skepticism, which still remains in-situ within modern day academia, mainly due to the stigma of fraudulent intentions.

Spirituality in the Nineteenth Century

Victorian societies during the nineteenth in both Europe and the United States had developed a fascination with self-appointed 'new sciences' or 'pseudoscience's (Roach, 1999) such as spiritualism, mesmerism and phrenology. This was a transitional period in time (post industrial revolution and Darwinian theories) and common attitudes tentatively bordered between the new materialistic scientific era and traditional religiosity and values. Victorian society's belief systems started to become open to the concept that when practicing such subjects it would give them a better insight and understanding to the purpose of their lives and also gave them perception and belief of the soul surviving after death. This was as common in the upper gentry as it was in the working classes of society (Mackenzie 1983).

In hindsight, towards the last quarter of the nineteenth century, there was a progressive awareness of deficient objectivity and substantiation towards the purported 'new sciences', which mainly at best consisted of anecdotal reports, and at worst blatant fraudulent motivations. The latter become the more litigious of the two categories, due to suspicion and exposing of fraud in many of the cases, with the exception of some strikingly unexplainable cases studied such as the Didier brothers or D. D. Home (Beloff 1993).

The Formation of the ‘Society for Psychical Research’

Very much hitherto there had never been a comprehensive study taken by a scientific society in the subject of unexplained phenomena and then in February of 1882 the ‘Society for Psychical Research’ (SPR) was founded in London (Haynes 1983). Initially the idea was developed by Edmund Dawson Rogers a Journalist and Spiritualist and William Barrett, who was at the time a Professor of Physics at the Royal College of science in Dublin and a spiritualist sympathizer. Early influential members of the society were an assembly of prominent scientists and philosophers including; Edmund Gurney, Frederic William Henry Myers and Henry Sidgwick who were primarily connected to Trinity College in Cambridge.

The intention of the Society is firmly outlined in every one of its succeeding publications;

“Is to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis” (SPR Proceedings 1882, P5)

The first president of the society was Henry Sidgwick, a renowned philosopher at Cambridge University with a status and prevailing reputation of being vigilant and skeptical. Sedgwick’s reliability is most probably the factor (Mackenzie, 1983) that attracted the support from its early influential members. In the early days there was a close relationship between Spiritualists and the ‘Society for Psychical Research’ (For example founding member Edmund Dawson Rogers was a practicing spiritualist) and they hoped their beliefs would be scientifically justified by the council and committee members through empirical studies. However it was soon made apparent that the society

would become most critical in its study of such purported phenomena and the subject of spiritualism and other reported phenomena would eventually come under austere scrutiny with no preconceptions or bias towards ones beliefs. This eventuated in a number of the Societies earliest pro spiritualist members resigning, believing that the organization was no more than a group of skeptics (Beloff, 1993).

Six committees were established by the Society by 1883 in order to investigate the various types of purported phenomena which fell under the categories of; Thought-Transference (later to be termed as 'Telepathy' and then 'Extra Sensory Perception'), Mesmerism, Physical Phenomena, Haunted Houses, Reichenbach's Phenomena and a Literacy Committee of which was reported through its periodic journals and a publication titled 'proceedings'.

The "Literacy Committee" of which Edmund Gurney and Frederick Myers were the honorable secretaries , proved to be the most focused of them of them all, in terms of study (Beloff 1993). Its purpose was sourcing and collecting evidence, both past and present of purported phenomena by everyday individuals (as opposed to persons claiming to have such abilities as 'Thought-Transference), which then resulted in some of the most influential and comprehensive studies undertaken by the Society; titled 'Phantasms of the Living' by Gurney et al (1886)

Development of Psychological Research into the Twentieth Century

Within three years of the societies establishment in London, it was evident many scientists and academics in the United States and Europe became influenced by the early journal writings and systematic studies carried out by the 'Society of Psychological Research'

(Otis, 1989), as similar originations were formed under the inspiration of the London equivalent. The other two significance societies worth noting, that have become an enduring feature in psychical research are the 'American Society of Psychical Research' (ASPR) which was founded within three years of the SPR in 1885 and also the 'Institut Métapsychique International' which was founded in Paris in 1919.

The American Society for Psychical research was founded in 1885, in New York City, however there was deficient support and remained a subsidiary of the London SPR until 1904 when it was taken over by James Hyslop, a professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University.

One other notable individual figure whose was closely connected to the British and American Societies was the highly regarded American psychologist and Harvard Professor, William James (1842-1920), who was a major contributor to psychical research in the early years. James is credited with the discovery of an exceptional trustworthy trance medium named Mrs. Leonora Piper. Mrs. Piper was reported to have channeled or manifested spirits during séances in a mesmeric or trance like state and was studied for around forty years by both the British and American societies.

Another noteworthy fellow was that of Harry Price (1881-1948). Price became a well known psychical researcher and ghost hunter in and around the nineteen twenties and onwards into the inter-war period. Price set up an independent laboratory called 'The National Laboratory of Psychical Research', and became one the most famous psychical researchers of all time.

This was an exuberant period in psychical and parapsychological history with a large number of clairvoyants and physical mediums being studied throughout America and

Europe either solely by one specific society or even passed between each other. However despite the subsequent formation of other psychical organizations, between the years of 1890 and around 1930 the original Society for Psychical Research remained the most influential and respected of all the Societies.

Predicament of Fraudulent Intention

From the onset of organizational studying of psychical research the fundamental challenge that many researchers face (also inherent to parapsychology), is that it has been made very clear there are numerous indiscretions on the subject of fraudulent intention, by individuals claiming such purported phenomena. This gave critics and debunkers of psychical research ammunition to condemn the whole field by picking up on just one or two known cases of fraud. (.Schoch, Robert. M, Yonavjak, L, 2008).

In spite of this much credit must be given to the SPR and other societies, as in the early years they intentionally set out, as part of an invariable approach to investigate and expose fraudulent persons claiming to have the abilities such as thought transference and in séance room activities, using purported parapsychical singularity, of which the latter produced the majority of fraudulent cases (Beloff 1993).

Also at certain times the societies were subject to internal indifferences and fissure regarding the subjects of their research. On one hand fraud or lack of substantiation was suspected and accepted to be the case by certain members, where as the remainder of members were inclined to recognize the subject as a promising case for genuineness. An example of this is the American Society of Psychical Research as political leanings of its members towards a 'psychic' named 'Margery' (Beloff 1993) in the nineteen twenties.

Skepticism and the Influential Legacy of Psychical Research

The subject of psychical and parapsychological research has been bordered by a certain stigma and derision since the earliest days, regardless if it's at individuals who are experiencing and reporting such phenomena or academic organizations and societies that undertake stringent meticulous studies. (Schoch, Robert. M, Yonavjak, L, 2008).

The co-founder of the former CSICOP Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (now know as the 'Skeptical Enquirer'), Kurtz (2001) claimed "of these groups mainly attracted believers who were predisposed to accept the phenomena; the skeptics in their midst were few and far between". Kurtz in his statement was referring to such organizations as the Society for Psychical Research and its American counterpart;

American Psychologist Ray Hyman who is a proven ardent skeptic and disbeliever of psychical and parapsychological research, released a comment through a National Research Council Subcommittee in the United States of which he was head of; "There is no scientific justification from research conducted over a period of 130 years for the existence of parapsychological phenomena" (Druckman & Swets, 1988 p. 22).

However Alvarado (2002, 2004) argues that the early pioneers of psychical research have become extremely influential with latter day psychology organizations especially in their empirical studies of the subconscious mind and dissociation. Once such person according to Alvarado (2004) is Frederick D H Myers who's formulate studies have influenced the psychology and philosophy of William James and in addition were primary factors of psychology paradigms.

Despite the example statements by Kurtz (2001) and Hyman (1988) this would contradict the very proclamations that are printed within each one of the societies journals and proceedings publications since 1882. (Mackenzie1983). Skeptics have continuously disseminated that psychical researchers are 'believers' in such purported phenomena that is studied, even though many of the members are devoted and rational academic individuals from various backgrounds that adapt rigorous standards in the research.

Conclusion

Psychical Research which originated in London 1882 was a perspicacious foundation for parapsychological studies that continues to be practiced and studied in modern day academia and private societies including the original learned society for Psychical Research. Early pioneers progressed and expanded an enduring concept in their approach and as discussed, the disseminated findings, systematic non biased research and publications would prove influential in the development of modern day psychology (Alvarado 2002). However according to Truzzi (1998) despite the large amount of evidence collected by the Society of Psychical Research and continuing development of rigorous methodologies, the subject of study of anomalous phenomena has come under agnostic examination by critics and self styled skeptics who have a propensity to 'move the goal posts' on many occasions in order to obtain an unfalsifiable standpoint.

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