

# EXPERIENTIAL RECLAMATION AND FIRST PERSON PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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When J. B. Rhine proposed the formation of the Parapsychological Association (PA) in 1957, he intended that the organisation be both a professional and an international group, in order to better promote communication between the scattered academics working in the field. The following year, 1958, the first PA convention was held at Duke University in North Carolina, in the US. Despite being an international body the PA was at that time, and has always been, a predominantly American organisation, and approximately half of the current 320 members live in the United States. Naturally, then, the first six PA conventions were held in the US, until 1964 when my good friend Steve Abrams, who was doing his PhD in parapsychology at Oxford at the time, was able to organise the first overseas event from there.

From then on, the convention returned to the US for three consecutive years and was then hosted by a foreign country every fourth year, switching to once every three years in Europe from 1991, until finally in 2000 it began alternating evenly each year across the Atlantic. So far, outside of the US, the annual PA convention has been hosted by the UK, Germany, Holland, Iceland, Canada, France, Austria, and Sweden, but has never yet left the northern hemisphere.

I'm pleased to say that, with the support of my board and my good colleagues here in Brazil, I spearheaded the move to have the PA fully engage with its international objective and host the convention beyond the usual Euro-American confines. This manoeuvre somewhat disrupted the comfortable back and forth pattern, causing quite some unexpected commotion last year at the PA business meeting in Paris, regarding where the next convention location would be. Europeans tussled with North Americans for their turn next, now that the cycle had been broken. Fortunately there were neither baguettes nor bagels thrown, but I had not anticipated such a disagreement, and I diplomatically opted to let the board decide *later* instead of there and then, rather than face half an angry crowd whichever way the issue was resolved. I am, nevertheless, extremely pleased that PA members get very passionate about where the next convention will be held.

Bringing the PA's annual event to Brazil, however, was for me the obvious thing to do. Having visited here in 2008 for the *4th Psi Meeting* and *3rd Journey Into Altered States*, I was immediately impressed by the great enthusiasm for parapsychology among Brazilians, and deeply enamoured

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with the earnest and concerted efforts to legitimise the field among researchers here, especially Wellington Zangari and Fatima Machado of the University of Sao Paulo, and Alexander Moreira-Almeida of the Federal University of Juiz de Fora. I was also hugely compelled by the excellent organisation of the joint Brazilian events by Fabio da Silva, one of Professor Zangari's parapsychology PhD students at USP.

The incorporation, quite literally at some points, of the *3rd Journey Into Altered States* into the Brazilian parapsychology meeting added a much-needed experiential dimension to all the heady intellectual presentations that are typically delivered at an academic conference. And this is the true difference between Brazil and other countries in which the PA has been hosted: that many people here do not just explore parapsychology as an academic discipline, they attempt to live it as a dimension of their personal belief system. For Brazil, as you may have noticed, has one of the most open minded, diverse and progressive approaches to different religious practices, towards paranormal phenomena, and towards the often fraught relationship between science and spirituality.

Here at the PA we are typically scientists first and foremost—no matter what else we are—but the advantage of studying parapsychology in a country like Brazil is that there is no shortage of natural phenomena to study, and the amount of people both believing in and experiencing the paranormal are easily in the majority. This is truly an anomaly in a country as developed as it is. For instance, in a survey conducted by Fatima Machado (2010) here recently (as reported by Wellington Zangari this morning) an extraordinary 80–90% of Brazilians reported having had a psi experience.

Typically, we also find the same types of anomalous phenomena here that we find elsewhere in the world, such as the everyday occurrence of apparently psychic episodes, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, et cetera, but there are also occurrences of less common phenomena such as poltergeist-like manifestations and, something especially Brazilian, we also have psychic surgery (for a review of some famous Brazilian cases of the above phenomena see Playfair, 1975). There's also the common and widespread practice of mediumship, perhaps here more than anywhere else in the developed world: such as among the two million or more practising Spiritists in Brazil, who even have mediums working alongside psychiatrists in Spiritist mental health hospitals, helping to remedy otherwise conventionally untreatable cases of schizophrenia and other problematic disorders (e.g., see Luke, 2009; Silveira, 2008). Some of our delegates were earlier this week treated to a visit to a local institute to witness this extraordinary institutionalised mental health practice.

We also find that the events on offer alongside this conference occur readily here in Curitiba and all over Brazil, such as Umbanda trance incorporation rituals (Giesler, 1985) and the drinking of psychoactive jungle decoctions such as the one once called telepathine by chemists, now

typically called ayahuasca, yage, or Daime (Luke, 2011b). This is because these ancient techniques of utilising altered states of consciousness *for healing*, which is what they are intended for, never left the culture here in Brazil—despite the modernisation that has seen such practices die away in many parts of the world, particularly in North America and Europe.

In many cases such traditional healing practices were actually actively killed off, for example by the Inquisition, which all but ended much of this type of approach to healing in Euro-America, and since then the hegemony of the medical establishment has continued with that process in recent centuries but in a somewhat less brutal fashion. Nevertheless, as a concurrent outgrowth of the scientific age we had the establishment of psychical research in the UK some 130 years ago, which has continued to thrive, particularly in recent years, in the form of the academic study of parapsychology (Luke, 2011c).

One of the developments occurring in the UK, perhaps partly as a reaction to the rise of parapsychology and psychical research, is the growth of anomalistic psychology. There is the need for some explanation here when I talk about anomalistic psychology, because I am using that term in a rather restricted sense. I am sure that in the minds of many here, you see the research that you do as anomalistic psychology, in that you scientifically study psychological experiences and phenomena of an anomalous nature. And I am aware that many researchers in our field who are sympathetic or at least open to the psi hypothesis like to use this term, but I am using the term anomalistic psychology here to apply to the so-called skeptics who research in this field and adopt the term exclusively to that of parapsychology, because they have a prejudice against the very notion of psi.

### Should A Priori Be a Priority?

In principle, this skeptical approach to the anomalous adopts the stance of researching the psychology of anomalous beliefs and experiences without assuming that anything paranormal exists, but *in practice* it commonly maintains—as a working hypothesis—that nothing paranormal ever occurs, at best, or, more typically, assumes a priori that the paranormal is bunk, woo woo, flim flam (e.g., Randi, 1994), hocus-pocus, mumbo jumbo, or, in a somewhat imperialistic fashion, just plain voodoo (e.g., Park, 2000), that is, just some kind of gullible, primitive, retarded, illogical, crazy, foreign, and/or juvenile type of magical thinking (e.g., Alcock, 1981; Hood, 2009; Vyse, 1997; Zusne & Jones, 1989).

So while some respected researchers in our midst like to use this anomalistic psychology term, in my mind, and for the purposes of this talk, it has come to represent the prejudged and prejudiced type of psychological approach that supposes that paranormal belief *is* degenerate and that paranormal experiences *are* delusional. And it is this academic shadow of parapsychology that is seemingly also growing, in the UK at the very least.

So while anomalistic psychology has the objective of reducing the unknown to the known—as Professor Zangari (2011) reminded us yesterday—there is an inherent danger of assuming that we really do fully comprehend the universe already, which, at its core, projects a sort of ignorant arrogance, because, for me at least, the more I learn the more I realise how little I know. Now, obviously the findings of anomalistic psychology, and that of parapsychology, serve an extremely important function in helping us to understand “what looks like psi but isn’t.” And I have an enormous amount of respect for the late Professor Bob Morris, and others (e.g., Pekala & Cardena, 2000), for ceaselessly determining these criteria, but Morris didn’t leave the research there (and neither would Zangari), and he would also consider “what looks like psi and, given that we’ve ruled out other factors, it probably is.”

But for researchers to restrict an approach to a purely disconfirmatory agenda would be throwing the baby out with the bath water, or at least wilfully not checking to see if the baby is in the bath first, because we just don’t like children. Essentially then, by restricting the agenda to maintaining that paranormal experiences really are just normal experiences—and not potentially phenomena currently inexplicable by scientific knowledge—the paranormal experience itself is being wholly appropriated by the so-called skeptical anomalistic psychology community. As such I am calling for the reclamation of “the experience” from anomalistic psychology, which is pushing to make us all believe that anyone having an anomalous experience is cognitively faulty. Thus, from this perspective, all experiencers are suffering from some sort of misperception, misremembering, poor judgement, fantasy, faulty reasoning, self-delusion, deception, fraud, or coincidence. Of course, all these considerations are valid, because they do sometimes occur, but, problematically, they are all too often offered as whole and complete explanations for all phenomena by so-called skeptics. The “experience” has all but been swept up and dumped into a filing cabinet labelled as “broken brain.”

### **Paranoid Normality: Why They Don’t See What Is There**

Take Richard Wiseman’s (2011) latest best-selling book on anomalistic psychology that came out this year, *Paranormality: Why We See What Isn’t There*. It gestures towards legitimate science but without actually taking a balanced or even an empirical viewpoint on certain experiences. For instance, the neat explanation given for the great prevalence among the public for reports of precognitive dreams is that, yes, these experiences occur with some degree of frequency, but, no, they are not paranormal, they are just coincidental. In this view, dreams of future events are merely products of the law of truly large numbers, that is, that given that enough people are having dreams each night then the probability of someone dreaming a particular future event is almost certain.

Wiseman takes the example of the numerous people who reported precognitive dreams about the 1967 Aberfan disaster in Wales that killed 128 children in a school when a landslide destroyed the building. According to the rationale, the average person has 60 years of adult dreaming in their lifetime, 365 days of the year, which equates to roughly 22,000 nights of dreams. Assuming that events like the Aberfan disaster only occur once in each generation, and the average person only dreams of such a disaster once in a lifetime then the odds of such a dream are 22,000 to 1. Then, considering that there were about 45 million Britons in 1966, this equates to roughly 2,000 people dreaming the Aberfan disaster. According to Wiseman, the law of truly large numbers accounts for Barker's (1967) seemingly impressive collection of 36 dreams of the Aberfan disaster before it happened.

There's some faulty logic at work in all of this. What is meant by generation in this context? Should we expect 2,000 people to dream *the* Aberfan disaster or to just dream of *some* disaster, as supposedly only occurs once in a lifetime, according to Wiseman? Wiseman's calculation also assumes that the coincidence of the dream and the event can occur any time throughout one's lifetime. Clearly though, the dream didn't occur at any time in the entire lifespan of 45 million Britons, it happened on one day when some of them were old and some were young, so it's unsound to use entire lifetime calculations for a cross section of the population. Dreaming of the disaster *after* the event doesn't really count as precognition, does it? So it rather depends on the average age of people when they have such dreams, not how long they live for (Luke, in press). I could go on.

Not only does this example demonstrate the inherently dodgy use of estimated probabilities in this sort of reasoning, but Wiseman (2011) and many other anomalistic psychologists (e.g., Blackmore, 1990; Charpak & Broch, 2004; Esgate & Groome, 2001; Hines, 2003; Mueller & Roberts, 2001; Zusne & Jones, 1989) utterly fail to consider any genuine experimental research into dream ESP, and rely solely on subjective estimates of probability and subsequently dubious calculations, all of which, perhaps unsurprisingly, are completely different from one researcher to another. Consequently, 50 years or so of diligent experimental dream research using clear objective probabilities, conducted since the start of Stan Krippner's era at Maimonides, is completely ignored at the expense of some logically sketchy tales. All this despite the call from skeptic Michael Shermer (1997, p.48) that the study of paranormal beliefs needs "controlled experiments, not anecdotes." I assume Shermer is using the term *anecdote* in the common use of the word as a story told without any evidence to back it up, rather than in the literal sense of the word, of an account that remains unpublished.

The major problem with Wiseman's (2011) proposal that such precognitive dreams occur but once in a lifetime is that this estimation is also plucked out of an intellectual vacuum. Reclaiming the dream

experience, if you were to work with, record, and study your dreams every day as I did for just 18 months, then you might actually discover, as did I, that on average 1 dream in 10 had some compelling precognitive component. I am not the only one who reports this either, as we have comparable figures from other dream diary studies (e.g., Bender, 1966; de Pablos, 1998, 2002). While such self-reports are not evidential, can the law of truly large numbers actually account for these rates of occurrence? Indeed, suggesting that such frequent occurrences are expected by chance is essentially the opposite of what psychiatrist Klaus Conrad (1958) somewhat oddly called *apophenia*, the discovery of patterns in (apparently) random data. Perhaps we should call this opposite phenomenon of attributing chance probability to (apparently) related phenomena *randomania*, as a label for believing that everything one cannot currently explain is just due to chance and coincidence. One assumes that such a condition derives from a deep-seated rejection and fear of the paranormal—which I'll come back to—a kind of paranoid normality.

### **Experiential Reclamation: Repossessing Possession and Other Anomalies**

Essentially though, for me, Wiseman's assumed rarity among individuals (though not populations) of precognitive dreams indicates the importance of truly getting inside our subject matter. I don't have to take somebody else's word for it that 10% of their dreams are seemingly precognitive when I can experience it for myself. There are other advantages to pursuing this line of personal research too, in that the subtleties of negotiating the dream psi experience can also teach us about the first-person process involved in the experience and, perhaps, even teach us something about ourselves too (e.g., Luke, 2005). So what I am asking for is the reclamation of the anomalous experience from anomalistic psychology. Yes parapsychology studies anomalous experiences too—though mainly in other people—but the field seems increasingly to retreat further away from the lived experience and towards the abstract, objective experimental domain, often to the point where the personal meaningfulness of the task for the participant has been all but squeezed out. This year's banquet speaker, Michael Winkelman, nailed this nicely earlier today (Winkelman, 2011) by indicating the importance of ecological validity in relation to Carlos Alberto Tinoco's comments that his own ayahuasca-drinking ESP participants much preferred to enjoy their visions than engage with his psi task (Tinoco, 1994, 2011). Participant-experimenters would probably be advantageous in such a situation, or would at least be useful in anticipating design flaws that would likely arise with other participants.

Clearly, experimental control is essential for having some certainty that our effects are genuine, and this will usually be at the expense of ecological validity (as Winkelman pointed out), but, beyond just striving for a well-controlled naturalistic study, we can also gain a great deal from

exploring the personal dimensions of our subject matter. I'm not asking that everyone in our field become Platonic maniacs—as illuminated by Etzel Cardeña (2011) last night in the opening keynote address for this convention—but I am saying that we have something to gain from a Jamesian radical empiricism. William James reminds us that, “to be radical an empiricism must neither admit into its construction any element that is not directly experienced, nor exclude from them [*sic*] any element that is directly experienced” (James, 1912/1996, p. 42).

And as we progress next year into the centenary of James's posthumous *Radical Empiricism*, we should recall his noble first-person approach to his subject matter, unafraid as he was to experiment with “the atmosphere of heaven” and partake of nitrous oxide, and further still he was also unafraid to write about it in the *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1901/1958). As Ralph Metzner (2005, p. 27) says about radical empiricism, “it is not where or how observations are made that makes a field of study ‘scientific,’ it is what is done with the observations afterwards.”

Now, some of you here may find this radical epistemology challenging, and for others I may well be preaching to the converted, but I would like to encourage and celebrate first-person science as a means of approaching anomalous phenomena. It needn't be everyone adopting this approach, and neither can nor should it be used to investigate *all* phenomena (e.g., near-death experience). Nor is this approach a replacement for objective methodologies but rather an augmentation of our current epistemology.

Take the phenomena of lucid dreaming. While lucid dreams have long been reported as anomalous experiences, they were for many years considered by some researchers to be delusionary, impossible, and absurd (e.g., Malcolm, 1959) and they were largely thought to be “micro-awakenings” (Foulkes, 1974) until the late 1970s. Lucid dreams weren't actually widely accepted as real by the scientific community until Stephen LaBerge taught himself to lucid dream to such an extent that he learned that he could control his eye movements and demonstrate to an objective observer that he was actually consciously in control of his dreams whilst in a physiologically verified sleep state (LaBerge, Nagel, Dement, & Zarcone, 1981). Perhaps once we can demonstrate psi ourselves in our personal encounters with critics, they may well also take a different view, perhaps not.

### **Do You Do Voodoo? The Perks and Perils of Going Native**

Another parallel example comes from the field of anthropology, which witnessed a revolution of methods in the 1970s that, in particular, had a profound effect on many anthropologists' view of ostensibly paranormal phenomena (Luke, 2010a). During the late 1960s and early 1970s a number of anthropologists, such as Harner (1968), Kensinger (1973), and, controversially, Castaneda (1968), passed over the objective threshold that

had been maintaining prejudices in their field, and, rather than merely observing, began participating in native rituals and actively journeyed into altered states of consciousness, particularly those utilising psychedelic plants. As a result they finally transcended the etic-emic divide that had separated researchers ethnocentrically from a deeper understanding of their subject matter, and the technique of participant-observation was finally fully embraced with respect to anomalous phenomena (Luke, 2010a). For the first time in the history of anthropological research, researchers not only participated but actually “went native” and reported having transpersonal experiences (they had usually kept them quiet until this time), and, in the process, transformed themselves, their data, and their methodology.

After apparently witnessing a spirit leave a body during a healing ceremony with the Ndembu of Zambia in 1985, Edith Turner (1992, 1994) strongly urged for a deeper participatory approach to anthropology and the ostensibly paranormal, chastising those who merely participated in a “kindly pretence.” Turner’s call to ethnographers was also echoed across all fields of consciousness research at that time, and Harman (1993) warned that, “the scientist who would explore the topic of consciousness ... must be *willing to risk being transformed* in the process of exploration” (p. 193, italics in original).

Nevertheless, such advances in the understanding of the natives’ rituals and their belief in magic presented some problems within the established academic doctrine, and the ontological boundary the anthropologists crossed once they had gone native often caused their peers to immediately question the validity of their experience (MacDonald, 2001). So, despite the epistemological advances forged through participant-observation, the spectre of the “removed” ethnographer still persists in haunting researchers (Turner, 2006), continuing to give rise to a fear of ostracism within the anthropological community (Winkelman, 1983; Young & Goulet, 1994).

For instance, Richards (2003) recently testified to this fear by announcing that all the anthropologists she knew had had paranormal experiences themselves, but that their so-called scientific training demanded that they explain away the ostensibly psi phenomena as coincidence (more randomania) or psychosomatic healing—itsself a notion held to be superstitious until recently. One theory put forward for this fearful data-burying is that the culturally acceptable arguments for paranormal phenomena given by Western scientists serve to alleviate the anxiety induced by the possibility that magic may be real (Van de Castle, 1974), a notion which anthropologists, parapsychologists, and even magical practitioners themselves (Luke, 2007) find equally difficult to accept. Charles Tart (1984), Harvey Irwin (1985), Stephen Braude (1993) and others have written at length about this matter in our own field and the problem inherent in both our acknowledged and unacknowledged fears of psi that may not only hold back participants but also researchers and, inevitably, the data we collect.



### First Person Parapsychology: Being Subjective Is the New Objective

Experience tells us, however, that a first-person approach can help us to deal with both the fear of psi and with the restrictions of an ethnocentric perspective. Furthermore, we have heard a good deal today about altered states of consciousness, and it is hard to deny their relevance and importance to the field of parapsychology (Luke, 2011a). They are indeed, as Professor Cardena (2011) so eloquently reminded us, a many splendored thing, but lurking within the purely detached and objective observation of these states lies what Grof (2008) calls *pragmacentrism*: an inherent inability to fully understand the state itself without having experienced it oneself. And despite having sounded the revolutionary call for state-specific sciences some 40 years ago, Charles Tart's (1972, 1998, 2000) hugely important demand for studying altered states on their own terms has all but been ignored.

There are exceptions, of course, in various pockets of the study of consciousness, and following from his work investigating the cognitive psychology of so-called hallucinations through the use of ayahuasca—both by himself and by others—Benny Shanon (2002, 2003) points out the basic limitations of *not* being inside one's subject matter: Few people would trust a deaf person to teach us about music. The same principle goes for altered states and their phenomena, be they form constants (Luke, 2010b) or psi. Indeed, in the study of altered states, some researchers (e.g., Strassman, 2001) indicate that it is the researchers' duty to go first so that they can anticipate the kind of states that participants may have, leading to increased awareness and insight into difficult experiences. Charles Laughlin (1992) illuminates the issue of pragmacentrism further by delineating the differences between *monophasic* and *polyphasic* cultures, that is, respectively, the difference between cultures that primarily regard the ordinary waking consciousness as the only true and trusted state, compared to those cultures that recognise the importance, even the necessity, of other states of consciousness for their own psychological well-being and for the well-being of their community and habitat.

So I am asking for the reclamation of the anomalistic experience itself from the arm's length stylisation of it as a dysfunctional dimension of being human. I am not saying that the inclusion of first-person science is essential in all domains of our research, but it may certainly be advantageous in some areas. As I have pointed out, it can help us transcend the intellectual gulfs of ethnocentrism, pragmacentrism, and the fear of the implications arising if our theories are actually right. Getting inside our subject matter may also be an ethical imperative and, additionally, may have a positive transformative and cathartic effect upon us as researchers, perhaps leading to better insights and an opening up of our creative potential. For example, the sociologist and anthropologist of mediumship Charles Emmons (in press) actually went all the way and trained as a medium, pointing out

that this allowed him to better appreciate the experiences of his research participants.

Furthermore, given the very special subject matter of parapsychology and the near-inescapable trickster element of experimenter psi that plagues the very interpretation of any findings (e.g., Stanford, 1981; Hanson, 2001), then *N*-of-one self-experimentation the likes of which many parapsychologists have attempted (e.g., de Pablos, 1998, 2002; Radin, 1990, 1990–1991; Schmidt, 1991, 1997, 2000; Tart, 1983; Thalbourne, 2006) at least circumvents this issue somewhat and gives us some faith in the source of our results. Self-experimentation also guarantees a number of factors that may be found to be problematic with other-than-us participants, such as motivation and honesty (e.g., Luke & Zychowicz, 2011), security, and adherence to the protocol. Further, Thouless (1960) suggested that psi self-experimentation could help with getting more reliable results. Such “participatory science,” as Emmons calls it (in press), can also help us personally determine if particular anomalous experiences are genuinely paranormal. Ultimately too, a first-person approach may help us discover new ways in which we can utilise the phenomena we study, so that we are not forever burdened with an almost entirely theoretical science that, ironically, is in need of a comprehensive theory, and we may instead begin to discover new applications for the useful implementation of the phenomena we study.

Perhaps too, parapsychology, like transpersonal psychology can have the additional aim of being hermeneutic (Daniels, 2005) and reach for an emphasis on understanding and interpretation, thereby living up to the psychological dimension of its name, love it or loathe it, and not just striving for physical or physiological levels of explanation. Ultimately, if there is a central theme here it is merely that we should “get inside” our subject matter. Anyway, seeing as we are running late, and I’ve been talking all day, the next subject matter of the evening is to enjoy ourselves and have a drink, so I hope you both get inside your subject matter and let your subject matter get inside you; the drinks are served. Thank you.

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