

MARTIN JOHNSON
1930–2011

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Martin Johnson grew up on a farm in Västerbotten, one of Sweden's most northern provinces, in which there are still today people who attempt to either revive or keep the old shamanistic traditions alive. Growing up in an environment with rich folklore, Martin inevitably had contact with the paranormal early in his life, but in his case it took on a more familial form.

Martin's grandmother (on his father's side), who died before Martin was born, was regarded as a healer able to stop bleeding and as having the "second sight," in this case most often concerning the future death of a person. Martin's grandfather was even said to have met the "little people," at that time part of Swedish folklore. Furthermore, Martin's mother's foster mother had the Scandinavian gift known as "Varsel"—hearing the arrival of a person a few minutes prior to the actual arrival, which Martin experienced several times himself (Björkhem & Johnson, 1986). Intrigued by all this, he began at an early age in life to think about how the paranormal could be investigated, and became, like many others, fascinated with it. So

when a man in the village claimed that a glowing, luminous, howling entity would frequently open his door (even if it was locked), Martin decided to investigate. The entity failed to show up, and after his visit, it appeared less frequently (Svahn, 2006).

In addition to the folklore in his home environment, a major inspiration for investigating where the paranormal came from seemed to be Martin's own premonitory dreams. One of the most impressive, given in an interview with W. G. Roll (1976), concerned a dream about a missing DC-3 Swedish spy plane that had been shot down by Russian fighters. Appropriately, the dream was written down and the account given to a witness prior to receiving the verification of the contents of the dream. During his lifetime, Martin would have five or six such apparently precognitive dreams for which he had no readily available normal explanation. One of the most meaningful to him personally was a dream that his foster father would die. The day after this dream, his foster father, whose health had been unstable for 2–3 years, rapidly became much worse and he died 8 days after Martin's dream (Johnson, 1995).

In addition to this family background and the challenging nature of some of his own dreams, three individuals in particular would contribute to drawing Martin into the field of parapsychology. These were the parapsychologist/physician/theologian John Björkhem, the astronomer Knut Lundmark, and the pioneer in parapsychology J. B. Rhine. Martin was 15 or 16 when he became interested in physics and wrote to the physicist and Nobel laureate Manne Siegbahn, asking for advice regarding his future. In line with Siegbahn's advice, Martin took a correspondence course in chemistry and later, when he was 17, moved to Skellefteåhamn to work at Boliden's Gruvaktiebolag (Mining Company). Once there, he came across Björkhem's dissertation, *The Hypnotic Hallucinations*. Inspired by this, Martin conducted informal and more-or-less improvised experiments with hypnosis and even parapsychological experiments.

He moved to Lund in 1949 to study psychology and satisfy his interest in astronomy, occasioned by growing up in Lapland with the Northern Lights. He was able to work as assistant to Knut Lundmark, Sweden's foremost astronomer of the time. Lundmark became an ersatz father to Martin after his own foster father's death. He was convinced of the reality of

paranormal phenomena (Stromberg, 1961), but like Martin, he was sceptical of mediums. It was apparently Lundmark who first recommended to Martin that he become a parapsychologist, even with some prescience suggesting that Martin might eventually become a professor in parapsychology. In Lund, Martin began to correspond with Björkhem, attended séances arranged by the psychic Olof Jönsson (later to be involved in the Apollo 14 ESP test with Ed Mitchell, but whom Martin regarded as a card trickster) and at some point also conducted at least one informal experiment with the medium Helga Braconnier, who was well known in Sweden.

After completing his studies in psychology, he carried out his

military service in 1955 in Stockholm, where he was able to finally meet Björkhem. The same year, W. H. C. Tenhaeff from the Parapsychological Institute in Utrecht, The Netherlands, was asked to give a lecture to the psychology students in Stockholm, which Martin attended. The methodology of Tenhaeff's studies was criticized at the lecture, but nevertheless Martin was intrigued by what Tenhaeff told the students about the psychic Gerard Croiset. Together with Björkhem, Martin discussed how Croiset's ability could be examined in a psychometry experiment. Thanks to a letter from Björkhem to Tenhaeff and money from the Sydney Alritz Foundation, Martin was able to go to Utrecht with his wife in the summer of 1956. Tenhaeff unfortunately cared little about Martin's ideas, and they disliked each other from the beginning. Nevertheless, in secret, Martin conducted an experiment with Croiset. Due to the circumstances, the study was not published, but Rhine heard about it in 1962 and requested the unpublished report.

It was due to this clandestine study that Martin was invited by Rhine to visit the Parapsychology Laboratory at Duke University for a couple of months in the summer of 1963. During his first visit, Martin introduced the Defensive Mechanism Test that had recently been developed by Ulf Kragh and Gudmund Smith at the psychology department in Lund where Martin had worked until 1972. Martin and Rhine became friends and Martin visited the Duke Laboratory and its successor, the FRNM, several times over the years, where he often attended the so-called coffee hours. It was at one of these meetings that he became good friends with John Beloff, and he also at some point developed a friendship with the hypnosis researcher Theodore X. Barber. In the summer of 1967, he was able to get the Psychology Department at Lund to invite John Beloff as a visiting lecturer, and it was during this period that Martin carried out one of the most forgotten and yet possibly one of the most revealing studies in ESP research. Miss KLB produced significant scores with Martin and with Gertrude Schmeidler, who was also a visitor, but not with John Beloff. Equally interesting is that some of the results with unpleasant words related to her case history gave support to the idea that psi-missing has a psychodynamic basis (Johnson & Nordbeck, 1972). Another important series of successful experiments were conducted at Lund which are much in need of replication and follow-up. During a real school examination, some of the answers to the printed exam questions

were enclosed in carefully sealed packages and hidden beneath the exam questions (Johnson, 1973). One can only speculate on the dilemma that proposing such a study might create for today's ethics committees.

In 1969, a state-financed chair in parapsychology was established at Utrecht University, and Rhine, Gertrude Schmeidler, and Gaither Pratt were recruited to evaluate the candidates. Rhine and Schmeidler placed Martin first and Pratt placed him second. For a period, Utrecht University was in the unique but also in this case unenviable position of acting as host to two professors of parapsychology (although the chair held by Tenhaeff was honorary). The occupants had diametrically opposite approaches—

Tenhaeff being firmly committed to case studies and Martin to experimentation. Tenhaeff did all he could to hinder Martin and even refused to meet him. Martin was chosen to be Utrecht's guest professor in parapsychology in 1971–1972. After the trial period, his work was evaluated and he became a regular professor in 1973, remaining as professor at the Psychologisch Laboratorium until 1986.

His long-term coworker was Sybo A. Schouten. There was also a visiting lectureship at Utrecht, which supported, among others, John Palmer, Richard Broughton, Brian Millar, and John Hartwell. During this time, Martin supervised four doctoral students, among them Joop M. Houtkooper and Jerry Solfvín. While at Lund, he was supervisor for Nils Wiklund's master's thesis. At Utrecht, he was also the external examiner for Deborah Delanoy at Edinburgh University.

Martin established respect in Sweden and abroad for his careful and somewhat skeptical approach. He was chosen as President of the Parapsychological Association for the year 1975–76. At the PA convention in 1976, he invited the Swedish magician Ulf Mörling to carry out a simple, but for the audience impressive, mind reading trick. Martin was appalled when, according to him, at least 10 PA members began to believe Mörling possessed psychic powers. This claim was, however, disputed by the former president of the Swedish Society for Psychical Research, Rolf Ejvegård, who had attended but did not recall meeting a single parapsychologist who believed that Mörling was psychic (Magnusson, 1976).

Arguably, the attempt to achieve replicable ESP with the Defense Mechanism Test (DMT) was Martin Johnson's major experimental work. The DMT is a projective test, and its application here can be seen as a marriage of the experimental approach of Rhine to the psychodynamic approach that for some years was a distinctive feature of psychology at Lund. The DMT had originally achieved some promise due to its use for the selection of pilots in the Swedish Royal Air Force, although it was later rejected by the RAF, and since then interest in its use has declined. Nevertheless, Martin was the first student of Ulf Kragh, the test's cofounder, and was an expert in its use. During the 1970s and 1980s, the work of Erlendur Haraldsson and Martin Johnson initially indicated that the DMT could yield a replicable experiment, as low anxiety scores on it appeared to consistently

predict high ESP scores. The problem was that Martin was the only parapsychologist able to carry out the complicated DMT scoring. After gaining some supervision in its use from Martin, Adrian Parker (1995) carried out a pilot study with 35 participants but did not find the sought-after effect. Later, Haraldsson, Houtkooper, Schneider, and Bäckström (2002) carried out a comprehensive analysis of the DMT work, which suggested that it was only when Martin unexpectedly deviated from normal scoring procedures that the effect emerged. One interpretation is that the serendipity here may indicate that Martin's own experimenter psi was at work, which given the previously described background, may not be as implausible as it seems.

Another major achievement by Martin was the founding of the *European Journal of Parapsychology*. In doing so, he declared a publication policy of publishing studies independent of their results, a declaration challenging the authority of J. B. Rhine (who insisted that the null findings of socially unskilled or skeptical experimenters should not stifle the growth of a young science). Nevertheless, this did not destroy the mutual respect between Rhine and Martin, who would later, following Rhine's death, note that he had received a Christmas letter from Rhine congratulating him for being a professor of parapsychology, president of the PA, and founding editor of the *European Journal of Parapsychology* (Johnson, 1982).

During his Utrecht period, Martin published two books (in the Swedish language): One of them, *Parapsychology: The Attempt to Research the Limits of Experience and Knowledge* (Johnson, 1980), is one of the few books in Swedish about parapsychology written by an authoritative researcher. The other was as second author with John Björkhem's son, Örjan Björkhem: *Parapsychology and Over-Belief* (Björkhem & Johnson, 1986). In line with Björkhem's varied interests, the book covered not only parapsychology but also mystics, magic, and Forteanism.

In the mid-1980s, the economic situation meant that severe cut-backs led to closures of many departments. During the first round of closures, thanks to letters of support even from skeptics such as Ray Hyman, the professorship survived, but it did not survive the second round. Martin's subsequent return to Lund coincided with the illness of his wife, who had developed Parkinson's. Nevertheless, for a time until the mid-1990s, he was still active in Lund as an emeritus professor and a dissertation supervisor. It was also during this period that he supervised William Roll, who gained his doctorate with a thesis on a parapsychological topic. Discord with the Lund department had, however, begun, and Roll had to defend his thesis in the Philosophy Department rather than, as intended, in the Psychology Department. In the late 1990s, Martin resigned to take care of his ailing wife. His later attempt to re-enter the academic world was thwarted. By 2000, the Lund department's attitude about parapsychology was changing, along with many universities, towards the adverse. Martin was dropped from the committee deciding the fate of the large Thorsen donation, which had been donated in order to establish a professorial chair in parapsychology

(teaching was to be given on altered states such as hypnosis). Never quite making the transition to the digital world of emails and the Internet, he became isolated from most of his former colleagues. He deplored the ongoing globalization, which he saw as pandering to the needs of narcissistic and materialistic competitiveness and making it more difficult for parapsychology to gain much-needed funding (Johnson, 1998).

For 15 years, Martin Johnson had held the western world's only state-funded chair of parapsychology. It is, then, a fitting tribute that the book *Debating Psychic Experiences* (Krippner & Friedmann, 2010), published around the time of his death (March 17, 2010), contains praise of Martin

by the veteran skeptic Ray Hyman: Martin was evidently one of the few parapsychologists who gained Hyman's respect.

Martin is remembered as a careful and skeptical parapsychologist, whose work inspired both of the present writers. For Adrian Parker, he was a friend and colleague whose mentorship was equivalent to that of John Beloff and whose work he had hoped to continue at Lund, but which now inspires that being done at Gothenburg. The second author, Nemo Mörck, never had the chance to meet Martin. However, during the past year, it was the wisdom in Martin's writings that provided a guiding influence for his master's thesis at Gothenburg (Mörck, 2011). Martin's ability to steer between naïve belief and naïve skepticism is still inspirational. So in a sense the story goes on.

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