

AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

Authored by
mohammad looti

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AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR PSYCHICAL RESEARCH (ASPR)

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Parapsychology, Psychology, Philosophy

1. Core Definition and Mission

The **American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR)** is the oldest organization in the United States dedicated to the scientific and scholarly examination of alleged psychic phenomena, often referred to collectively as parapsychology or extrasensory occurrences. Established during a period of intense public interest in spiritualism and mediumship, the ASPR was fundamentally committed to applying rigorous, science-based methodologies--including empirical observation, statistical analysis, and controlled experimentation--to determine the veracity of claims regarding telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, psychokinesis, and survival after bodily death. Its founding ethos centered on moving the study of these phenomena out of the realm of religious belief or anecdotal evidence and into the nascent field of scientific inquiry, positioning it as a crucial early component of American psychological research.

The organization's mission has remained relatively consistent since its inception: to advance the understanding of phenomena that appear to transcend conventional physical explanations. Unlike groups devoted solely to the promotion of spiritualist beliefs, the ASPR adopted a skeptical yet open-minded stance, demanding evidence that met high standards of objectivity and reproducibility. This approach necessitated the careful investigation of mediums, the meticulous documentation of séances, and the later development of laboratory protocols designed to test extrasensory perception (ESP) under controlled conditions. The ASPR's commitment to publishing its findings, regardless of whether they confirmed or refuted psychic claims, cemented its role as a key historical institution in the academic debate surrounding the mind-body problem and the limits of human consciousness.

2. Historical Foundation and Early Years (1885-1889)

The ASPR was officially formed in 1885 in Boston, Massachusetts, following the highly successful model of the **British Society for Psychical Research (BSPR)**, which had been founded three years earlier. The American founding committee comprised distinguished academics and public figures, lending immediate intellectual credibility to the endeavor. Crucially, the list of early members included renowned philosopher and pioneering psychologist **William James**, who served as vice-president and later played an integral role in shaping the field of psychology in the United States. Other notable founders included astronomer Simon Newcomb and psychologist G. Stanley Hall, demonstrating an initial broad base of scientific support for investigating these controversial subjects.

The primary objective of the initial iteration of the ASPR was to systematically investigate the pervasive claims of spiritualism flourishing in the late 19th century. Early research focused heavily on examining mediums, documenting apparitions, and collecting detailed case histories of alleged paranormal experiences. However, the organization soon faced significant internal challenges, stemming partly from a lack of consensus on investigative methods and the inherent difficulties in securing conclusive results. Many of the initial, more skeptical scientific founders gradually withdrew their active participation, finding the phenomena too elusive for standard empirical analysis, leading to a temporary decline in the society's autonomous operations shortly after its founding.

3. The BSPR Affiliation and Re-establishment (1889-1906)

Following a period of organizational instability, the ASPR effectively merged with its British counterpart in 1889, becoming the American branch or "Department" of the BSPR. This restructuring was instrumental in maintaining the continuity of psychical research in the US and brought the American investigations under the strict methodological oversight of the London-based society. During this period, the Department was heavily influenced and often led by **Richard Hodgson**, a dedicated BSPR investigator known for his rigorous and sometimes controversial debunking of famous mediums, such as Helena Blavatsky, as well as his support for the medium Leonora Piper. This affiliation ensured that the ASPR's work maintained a high, albeit contentious, standard of investigation.

The desire for renewed independence and localized control over research efforts eventually led to the severance of ties with the BSPR. In 1906, largely through the efforts of Professor **James H. Hyslop**, a former professor of logic and ethics at Columbia University, the ASPR was re-established as a fully independent, private entity, operating out of New York City. Hyslop's leadership marked a critical turning point, refocusing the society on the systematic collection of verifiable data and the promotion of psychical research as a legitimate, if marginal, branch of academic study. Hyslop emphasized that the primary goal was not to confirm spiritualism, but to determine whether any genuine psychic phenomena existed that demanded scientific explanation.

4. Organizational Structure and Methodology

The ASPR operates as a non-profit organization sustained by member subscriptions, donations, and grant funding. Historically, its core activities revolve around three main pillars: investigation, publication, and education. Investigations typically involve field research into spontaneous cases (e.g., hauntings, poltergeist activities) and controlled laboratory studies focused on quantitative measurements of ESP and psychokinesis. The organization maintains a sophisticated library and archive, documenting historical and contemporary case studies, many of which date back to the 19th century.

Methodologically, the ASPR has always struggled with the challenge of applying conventional scientific standards to phenomena that are inherently difficult to replicate and quantify. Early methodologies focused on detailed testimonial gathering and the use of undercover investigators in séances to detect fraud. Following the 1930s and the rise of experimental parapsychology led by J.B. Rhine, the ASPR incorporated more statistical methods, utilizing forced-choice experiments (such as Zener card tests) and various randomization techniques designed to isolate alleged psychic abilities from chance occurrences or sensory leakage. The ongoing methodological debate within the ASPR centers on balancing the need for statistical rigor with the ecological validity of the complex, spontaneous phenomena often reported by the public.

5. Key Research Areas and Contributions

Over its long history, the ASPR has contributed significantly to the documentation and classification of phenomena considered outside conventional science. One of its most enduring contributions is the meticulous investigation of **mediumship**, particularly the work conducted on figures like Leonora Piper, whose apparent abilities baffled researchers including William James for decades. This work laid the groundwork for modern studies concerning dissociative states and altered consciousness, even if the paranormal conclusions remain disputed.

A second major research area involves the study of **survival research**, focusing on evidence suggesting the persistence of consciousness after death, primarily through analyzing mediumistic communications and detailed accounts of near-death experiences (NDEs). Furthermore, the ASPR was crucial in promoting early experimental work in telepathy and clairvoyance, publishing foundational papers that established the initial statistical frameworks later adopted by academic parapsychology departments, such as those at Duke University. The ASPR's publications remain primary historical sources for tracing the evolution of psychical research from philosophical inquiry to experimental science.

6. Notable Figures and Leadership

The ASPR has attracted and been led by individuals from diverse professional backgrounds, often crossing the boundaries between philosophy, medicine, and psychology. Beyond founders like **William James** and re-establisher **James H. Hyslop**, other influential figures include **Walter Franklin Prince**, who served as research officer and editor, and whose skeptical investigations maintained methodological integrity during the 1920s. Following the mid-20th century, the ASPR was influenced by figures like Gardner Murphy, a prominent psychologist who maintained a serious interest in parapsychology, providing a crucial link between the ASPR and mainstream academia.

The society's leadership has often reflected the internal tensions of the field--balancing the desire to affirm the existence of psychic phenomena with the need to adhere to scientific skepticism. The

involvement of figures from mainstream academic institutions, though fluctuating over time, ensured that the research maintained a dialogue with established scientific standards, distinguishing the ASPR from purely amateur or advocacy groups. These leaders often managed the highly publicized, challenging task of investigating spectacular claims of the paranormal while simultaneously striving to avoid sensationalism and fraud.

7. Academic Reception and Criticisms

From its founding, the ASPR faced significant resistance and skepticism from the mainstream scientific community. While the inclusion of figures like William James initially gave the field intellectual gravitas, the inherent difficulty in replicating psychic phenomena consistently led many mainstream psychologists to dismiss parapsychology as a pseudoscience. A primary criticism leveled against the ASPR involves alleged methodological flaws, including inadequate control groups, potential statistical misinterpretations, and the ongoing difficulty of fully eliminating the possibility of conscious or unconscious deception on the part of subjects or experimenters.

Furthermore, critics argue that despite decades of research and thousands of published papers, the ASPR and associated organizations have failed to produce a single, verifiable, and theoretically explained instance of ESP or psychokinesis that is accepted by the broader scientific consensus. This lack of definitive proof prevents the field from transitioning out of the realm of exploratory research into an established scientific discipline. The organization's persistence, however, is often defended by its proponents as necessary exploration of anomalies, challenging the materialist boundaries of current scientific understanding, echoing the original conviction of William James that anomalies should not be dismissed simply because they are difficult to integrate into existing frameworks.

8. Significance and Legacy

The **American Society for Psychical Research** holds immense significance as a foundational institution in the history of psychology and science in the United States. It was among the first organizations to systematically apply scientific methodology to subjective, experiential claims, forcing early psychologists to grapple with the boundaries of their discipline. Its legacy is preserved through its extensive archival records, which offer a unique historical window into American intellectual life during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, documenting the cultural transition from pure spiritualism to attempts at scientific rationalization.

While parapsychology remains marginalized within modern academia, the ASPR continues to function, publishing the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, which provides a peer-reviewed outlet for research in the field. The ASPR stands today as a testament to the persistent human interest in anomalous experiences and the enduring quest, begun by figures like

James, to reconcile scientific materialism with the vast, often unexplained, landscape of human consciousness.

Further Reading

[American Society for Psychical Research \(Official Website\)](#)

[American Society for Psychical Research \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[William James \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Society for Psychical Research \(Wikipedia\)](#)

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