

Parapsychology

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Parapsychology

Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Anomalistic Psychology, Philosophy of Mind, Frontier Science

1. Core Definition

Parapsychology is formally defined as the scientific and academic study of paranormal phenomena, specifically those that appear to transcend or violate currently understood scientific laws and principles. These phenomena, often referred to as psi (from the Greek letter ψ , representing psyche or mind), include forms of extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), and experiences suggestive of survival after bodily death. Unlike mainstream psychology, which focuses on behaviors and mental processes within the established framework of biology and physics, parapsychology ventures into areas considered inexplicable by conventional scientific paradigms, attempting to apply rigorous scientific methodologies to investigate these elusive occurrences.

The field posits that certain human experiences and interactions with the environment cannot be adequately explained by known physical, biological, or psychological mechanisms. While individuals reporting such experiences might, in some contexts, be pathologized or considered delusional by conventional medical or psychological frameworks, parapsychologists often adopt a different perspective. They believe that these occurrences, far from being symptomatic of mental illness, can represent genuine, albeit poorly understood, aspects of human consciousness and interaction with the world. This divergence in interpretation underscores the unique position of parapsychology at the periphery of mainstream scientific inquiry, often challenging orthodox views on the nature of reality and consciousness.

Central to parapsychology is the exploration of experiences that many individuals find profound and transformative. Advocates within the field suggest that validating and studying these phenomena can be profoundly healing and empowering for those who report them, offering alternative frameworks for understanding deeply personal and often inexplicable events. This focus on the potential positive impact and inherent validity of such experiences sets parapsychology apart from purely skeptical or dismissive approaches, fostering an environment where subjective accounts are given serious consideration as potential data points for scientific investigation.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "parapsychology" itself was coined by philosopher Max Dessoir in 1889, derived from the Greek "para" (meaning "beside" or "beyond") and "psychology," to denote a discipline that explores phenomena lying "beyond" or "alongside" conventional psychology. However, the systematic investigation into what are now called parapsychological phenomena predates this coinage

significantly. The latter half of the 19th century witnessed a surge of interest in spiritualism and psychic phenomena, leading to the formation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in London in 1882. The SPR was founded by prominent academics and intellectuals with the explicit goal of investigating alleged psychic phenomena and mediumship using scientific methods, marking the formal inception of psychical research as a distinct area of study.

The early 20th century saw the emergence of key figures who sought to bring greater scientific rigor to the field. Perhaps the most influential was J.B. Rhine, an American botanist who moved into psychology and established the first parapsychology laboratory at Duke University in the 1930s. Rhine's work, particularly his systematic experimental studies on extrasensory perception (ESP) and psychokinesis (PK) using card-guessing and dice-throwing experiments, revolutionized the field. He introduced statistical methods to analyze results, aiming to move parapsychology away from anecdotal evidence towards empirical data. His efforts led to the institutionalization of parapsychological research within academic settings, albeit often met with skepticism from the mainstream scientific community.

Following Rhine's pioneering efforts, parapsychology experienced periods of fluctuating academic acceptance and significant criticism. The Parapsychological Association was established in 1957, eventually becoming an affiliate of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 1969, a recognition that represented a significant, albeit controversial, step towards legitimization. Despite this, parapsychology has largely remained a marginalized field, struggling to gain widespread scientific acceptance due to persistent issues with replication, methodological challenges, and the perceived incompatibility of its claims with established scientific principles. Nevertheless, dedicated researchers continue to explore these phenomena, often adapting new technologies and statistical approaches in their pursuit of empirical evidence.

3. Key Concepts and Components

Parapsychology investigates a diverse range of phenomena, broadly categorized into extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), and experiences related to the survival of consciousness. **Extrasensory Perception (ESP)** refers to the purported reception of information not gained through the recognized physical senses or empirical inference. It encompasses several distinct categories. **Telepathy** is the direct mental communication or transmission of thoughts, feelings, or ideas from one mind to another without the use of conventional sensory channels. For instance, the original text humorously invites the reader to imagine an orange alligator with pink stripes through telepathy, highlighting the subjective and often unverifiable nature of such claims in a non-experimental setting.

Other forms of ESP include **Clairvoyance**, which is the alleged ability to perceive objects, events, or information that is not within sensory reach, such as seeing a distant event or a hidden object.

Precognition involves the perception or knowledge of future events, while **Retrocognition** is the purported knowledge of past events that could not have been learned through conventional means. These concepts challenge the fundamental understanding of how information is acquired and processed, pushing the boundaries of what is considered possible within the realm of human perception. Experiments designed to test ESP often involve forced-choice tasks, such as Zener card guessing, or free-response tasks, like remote viewing, where participants attempt to describe hidden targets.

Psychokinesis (PK), also known as telekinesis, refers to the purported ability of the mind to influence matter, energy, space, or time without physical interaction. PK can be envisioned on a macro scale, involving the observable movement or alteration of physical objects, such as bending spoons or levitation, though evidence for such large-scale phenomena is overwhelmingly anecdotal and has largely been discredited in controlled settings. More commonly researched in contemporary parapsychology is **micro-PK**, which involves subtle mental influence on random physical systems, such as the output of a random number generator (RNG) or the decay rate of radioactive particles. Researchers attempt to demonstrate small, statistically significant deviations from chance in these systems, attributed to mental influence.

Beyond ESP and PK, parapsychology also examines phenomena related to the survival of consciousness after bodily death. This area includes investigations into reincarnation, the belief that an individual's soul or consciousness can be reborn into another physical form after death, as mentioned in the source material. Research in this area often involves collecting and analyzing detailed accounts from individuals, particularly children, who report memories of past lives. Other phenomena studied within this survival hypothesis framework include apparitions (ghosts), near-death experiences (NDEs), out-of-body experiences (OBEs), and mediumship, all of which suggest aspects of consciousness or identity persisting beyond the physical body's demise. These concepts collectively form the diverse and often controversial subject matter that parapsychologists attempt to explore through systematic inquiry.

4. Significance and Impact

The significance of parapsychology, despite its contested scientific status, extends into several domains, influencing cultural narratives, individual experiences, and philosophical debates. For individuals who report psychic abilities or other paranormal occurrences, parapsychological research can provide a framework for understanding and validating their experiences. The field's perspective that these phenomena are not necessarily indicators of mental illness, but potentially genuine, transforming, and healing experiences, offers a counter-narrative to medicalizing or pathologizing such reports. This validation can be crucial for individuals seeking meaning and explanation for deeply personal and often unsettling events, fostering a sense of understanding rather than isolation or self-doubt.

Culturally, parapsychology has exerted a profound influence, permeating literature, film, television, and popular belief systems. Concepts such as telepathy, precognition, and psychokinesis are staple elements in science fiction, fantasy, and horror genres, reflecting a pervasive human fascination with the limits of consciousness and the unknown. This popular appeal, while sometimes blurring the lines between fact and fiction, also serves to keep the questions posed by parapsychology relevant in the public imagination. It encourages an ongoing discussion about phenomena that, for many, represent possibilities beyond the mundane, stirring curiosity about the deeper mysteries of existence.

Philosophically, parapsychology challenges fundamental tenets of materialism and reductionism, which dominate much of contemporary scientific thought. If psi phenomena were unequivocally proven, it would necessitate a radical rethinking of the nature of consciousness, its relationship to the physical brain, and the very fabric of reality. Such findings would have profound implications for epistemology, ontology, and ethics, potentially leading to new paradigms in science and philosophy. While this revolutionary impact remains hypothetical due to the lack of widely accepted evidence, the mere possibility continues to fuel debate and speculation among thinkers grappling with the enduring mind-body problem and the ultimate nature of the cosmos.

5. Debates and Criticisms

Parapsychology has been the subject of intense debate and extensive criticism from the mainstream scientific community, primarily due to the persistent lack of independently verifiable and replicable evidence for its claims. The most significant criticism centers on the failure to consistently reproduce experimental results under controlled conditions. While some parapsychological studies report statistically significant findings, these results often prove elusive upon replication by independent researchers, or even by the original experimenters over time, a phenomenon sometimes referred to as the "decline effect." This inability to achieve consistent reproducibility is a fundamental barrier to parapsychology gaining acceptance as a legitimate scientific discipline, as reproducibility is a cornerstone of the scientific method.

Methodological flaws are another frequent point of contention. Critics often highlight issues such as inadequate experimental controls, potential for sensory leakage (where information is inadvertently transmitted through normal sensory channels), improper randomization, and statistical anomalies. For instance, the use of optional stopping rules or "p-hacking" in some studies has been criticized for increasing the likelihood of reporting false positives. Furthermore, historical instances of fraud and deception, such as the Uri Geller spoon-bending controversy or the S.G. Soal-Shackleton telepathy experiments, have cast a long shadow over the field, contributing to a general atmosphere of distrust and skepticism, despite efforts by contemporary parapsychologists to adhere to stricter protocols.

Given these persistent issues, the majority of mainstream scientists, including psychologists, physicists, and neuroscientists, classify parapsychology as a pseudoscience. This classification stems from the belief that its methodologies often fail to meet conventional scientific standards, its hypotheses are not falsifiable, or its claims contradict established laws of physics and biology without offering plausible alternative mechanisms. Critics argue that alleged psi phenomena can often be explained by conventional means, such as cognitive biases (e.g., confirmation bias, illusory correlation), chance, wishful thinking, or subtle sensory cues. The burden of proof in science rests heavily on those making extraordinary claims, and for many in the scientific community, parapsychology has not yet met this burden. Despite ongoing research, the fundamental questions about the existence and nature of psi phenomena remain largely unresolved and highly contentious within the broader scientific discourse.

6. Further Reading

[Parapsychology - Wikipedia](#)

[The Parapsychological Association](#)

[Committee for Skeptical Inquiry \(CSI\)](#)

[Extrasensory Perception \(ESP\) - Wikipedia](#)

[Psychokinesis \(PK\) - Wikipedia](#)