

SPIRITUAL MOTIVATIONS OF PARAPSYCHOLOGISTS? EMPIRICAL DATA

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ABSTRACT: Contrary to the beliefs of both extreme skeptics and spiritually committed people that parapsychologists are either, at the one extreme, mainly driven by attempts to validate their personal spiritual convictions under the guise of science or, at the other extreme, too unaware of the spiritual implications of parapsychological research findings, empirical survey data from almost half of the members of the relevant scientific association, the Parapsychological Association, show 49% giving an unqualified “no” answer to spiritual motivation being important in their entering the field and 36% saying “yes.” A third of the respondents indicated spiritual interests were of some importance in their current work, but many of these felt these interests were in conflict with the dominant laboratory orientation of contemporary parapsychological research. Illuminating comments on these issues by the respondents are available in a Web archive.

Scientific parapsychologists are the recipients of enormous amounts of (mostly unwarranted and inaccurate) criticism. One kind of criticism of interest here, that I have heard audience members express frequently when I have spoken about parapsychology, concerns the degree to which parapsychologists’ work might be influenced by “spiritual” beliefs. On the one hand, the debunkers and pseudo-skeptics claim that parapsychologists are only pretending to do objective science, that they really have a hidden agenda to promote personal spiritual beliefs. On the other hand, people with spiritual belief systems wonder how parapsychologists can create such a humanly arid field of work, almost completely ignoring the obvious spiritual implications of their subject matter.

Without becoming involved in arguments for or against the objective truth of either of these positions, I will note that they are opinions based on almost no actual data. This article presents data on scientific parapsychologists’ (Parapsychological Association [PA] members) own reporting of the degree to which spiritual interests or concerns are involved in their work.

METHOD

As part of the preparation of a more general article arguing for important connections between parapsychology and spiritual concerns,

especially as expressed in the field of transpersonal psychology (Tart, 2001), I decided to survey PA members and ask them four questions, one for background and three on spirituality. Potential respondents were assured that their identity would be kept confidential, so they could be frank in their comments.

Background Question: How active have you been in parapsychology over the last 5 years? Write "very" if it's been your primary professional work, "moderate" if it's been about half time, "somewhat" if you have done some things but it's less than half time, and "mainly an interest" if you haven't been able to actively contribute at all to the field. Also write "Full" or "Associate" to indicate your membership status in the PA.

Q1. Did you enter the field of parapsychology because of, to some significant degree, what we might call "spiritual" interests or motivations, that is, important concerns with questions of meaning, spirit, connection, and the like?

Q2. If yes, does your current (now and last few years') work in parapsychology come primarily from that spiritual motivation?

Q3. If you answered yes to the first question, do you sometimes feel significant conflicts between your spiritual motivation/interests and what we might call the mainstream of laboratory, experimental research in parapsychology today?

Because almost all scientists who engage in scientific (as opposed to popular) parapsychology are full or associate PA members, I e-mailed all who had e-mail addresses listed in the 2001 *Membership Directory* of the PA (practically all of them) and had 77 responses to the 160 questionnaires e-mailed out. This was a 48% return rate, which is excellent for any kind of mail questionnaire study. Full members have shown greater contributions and commitments to advancing the field than associate members, as reflected in membership requirements. Although the questionnaire return rate was higher for full members (60%) than associate members (39%), there were no obvious differences in their responses to the questions, so I treat the two groups as one in this report. I did not attempt to contact honorary or affiliate members. Criteria for various grades of PA membership may be read on the PA Web site (<http://www.parapsych.org>).

Questionnaires were e-mailed out on June 26, 2001, and I collected all responses for the following 3 weeks (July 17th), a cutoff date picked for convenience in finishing the larger lecture mentioned above (Tart, 2001), given my other work commitments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As briefly reported in Tart (2001), the responses to my questions on spirituality were a strong indication of how controversial the word *spiritual* and its variations are to parapsychologists. I received many critical

comments in addition to the answers to the questions. What did I really mean by the word *spiritual*? Why didn't I define it precisely? I had deliberately used no specific definition, in order to cast my net widely and provoke strong responses, and it was successful.

I asked for "yes" or "no" responses to the first question, with perhaps a few words of explanation, in the questionnaire. Explanations were frequently offered and usually reinforced the yes and no answers. In a few cases the explanations clouded the meaning of the yes or no, forcing me to create "partly" and "unclear" categories. As the actual explanations are presented in full in the raw data archive discussed below, interested readers can do their own analyses of these partly and unclear categories if they wish, but changes in these small categories will not affect the overall thrust of this report.

Thirty-six percent of respondents replied yes to the first spiritual question: Spiritual interests, ignoring exactly how you would define *spiritual*, were a common, but far from dominant, reason for becoming a parapsychologist. But even more, 49%, answered no, 9% fell into the partly category, and the remaining 6% were unclear.

Although I indicated on the questionnaire that a "not applicable" response to the second and third questions was an option if the respondents had not answered yes, that significant spiritual motivation was important in their entering the field of parapsychology, to the first question, a few people gave yes or no responses to them.

Thirty-four percent of the *total* respondents answered yes to the second question, "If yes, does your current (now and last few years') work in parapsychology come primarily from that spiritual motivation?" Remember the positive responders in that 34% were not always the same ones who indicated spiritual motivations were a reason for going into the field in the first place: Some people's motivations had changed. Of the 28 who had indicated that spiritual motivations were important in bringing them to the field, 64% indicated this motivation was still important in their current work.

Similarly, 26% of the total respondents replied yes to the final question, "Do you sometimes feel significant conflicts between your spiritual motivation/interests and what we might call the mainstream of laboratory, experimental research in parapsychology today?" If responses were restricted only to those who answered yes to the first question that spiritual motives were important in bringing them to the field, 54% of these 28 people felt there were significant conflicts.

Many respondents wrote extensive and illuminating commentaries to amplify their yes or no responses, which make the data far richer than the simple percentages given above. As I do not know whether, in my semiretirement, I will work any further with these data, I have decided, with the sponsorship and assistance of the *Journal of Parapsychology*, to make it publicly available on the Rhine Research Institute's Web archive (www.rhine.org). Real names have been eliminated there, and in the rare

instance where I thought the content of a comment might be too clearly associated with the identity of a particular individual, I have slightly modified the comment in a way so as to preserve its sense but omitted particulars that might be identifying. I believe these raw data and commentary may be useful to historians, sociologists, or others concerned with the human factor in scientific parapsychology.

CONCLUSIONS

While my own convictions are that the spiritual implications of parapsychological data are among the most important aspects of the field (Tart, 2001), empirical data show that this is not a majority opinion of members of the PA, even though held by a significant number. Further, the assumption that interest in spiritual issues automatically lowers the quality of the science practiced by parapsychologists is clearly fallacious. The issue clearly deserves much richer exploration, however, and the respondents' comments presented on the Web archive will generate many hypotheses for those interested in further exploring this issue.

REFERENCE

- TART, C. (2001). Parapsychology and transpersonal psychology: "Anomalies" to be explained away or spirit to manifest? *Journal of Parapsychology*, **66**, 31–47.

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To see the extended answers various parapsychologists gave, go to the site

<http://www.rhine.org/journal/TartSurveyData.pdf>