

*HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE*

**Psychical Research in the *Psychological Review*,  
1894–1900: A Bibliographical Note**

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**Abstract**—While there was much conflict during the 19th century between psychology and psychical research, the latter was occasionally discussed in psychology journals. The purpose of this paper is to provide a guide to existing discussions of psychical research and related topics in the American journal *Psychological Review*. Many of the discussions were authored by individuals favorably disposed to psychical research, such as William James and James H. Hyslop, but also by such skeptics as James McKeen Cattell and Joseph Jastrow. With a few exceptions, the majority of the authors were critical of psychical research. This reflected the hostility on the topic shown by many psychologists at the time.

**Keywords:** *Psychological Review*—history of psychology—history of psychical research—criticism—William James

Many works discuss the interactions between 19th-century psychology and psychical research (e.g., Alvarado, 2002; Coon, 1992; Oppenheim, 1985; Plas, 2000). Some of the primary literature on the subject appeared in a variety of intellectual reviews and psychology journals, such as the *Psychological Review*. While some general information about the historical context of the material is presented, the purpose of this note is to provide bibliographical guidance for those interested on the topic by identifying papers and book reviews about psychical research published in the *Review*.

Psychical research during the 19th century was on the rise, as can be seen in the work of members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) in England (Gauld, 1968), and the work of individuals in other countries.<sup>1</sup> Several prominent figures in psychology, such as William James (1896d), Julian Ochorowicz (1887), and Charles Richet (1884), defended the validity of some of the claims of psychical research. In addition, psychical researchers contributed to the study of the subconscious mind, of dissociation, and of hallucinations. The work of members of the SPR (e.g., Myers, 1884; Sidgwick et al., 1894) provides examples of this.

While aspects of the work of the SPR were controversial and rejected by many psychologists, several of these individuals were acquainted with it (e.g., Janet, 1889; Jastrow, 1889). One indication that the SPR work was well-known was the fact that educator, psychical researcher, and SPR member Eleanor Mildred Sidgwick (1902) contributed a summary of the work of the SPR for the well-known reference work *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*. Furthermore, members of the SPR, and psychical research itself, appeared often at 19th-century congresses of psychology (Alvarado, 2006; Nutting, 1992). Psychical research was also discussed frequently in the journal *Science* and in prominent newspapers (e.g., Mason, 1893; "Psychical Research," 1884; "The Society for Psychical Research," 1884).

In the United States William James was the most prestigious defender and popularizer of psychical research during the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> James wrote in the *Psychological Review* that psychical research "has . . . many enemies, fair and foul, to elude before she gets her scientific position recognized . . ." (James, 1896d: 649). Many of those enemies were psychologists who reduced telepathy and mediumship to known natural processes. Mediumship was reinterpreted by Pierre Janet (1889) as a dissociative phenomenon, while others argued that telepathy could be accounted for by unconsciously perceived sensory cues (e.g., Hansen & Lehmann, 1895; Rualt, 1886). There was also a literature in which psychical researchers were considered to lack the necessary scientific training to conduct their studies, a situation that was believed to lead to the use of improper methodology (e.g., Jastrow, 1889; Scripture, 1897; see also Coon, 1992).

In addition to complaints about methodology and theoretical interpretation of unexplained phenomena, professional psychologists rejected the anti-materialistic ideas some psychical researchers used to explain their phenomena (on the latter see Gurney et al., 1886). The new empirical psychology, in an attempt to separate itself from metaphysical ideas about the soul, embraced a materialistic view in which the mind was the product of the nervous system.<sup>3</sup> Working under this assumption, action at a distance (such as telepathy), and the idea that the mind could be independent of the body, was unlikely to be accepted as part of psychology.

Several of these topics, as well as the phenomena of psychical research, were occasionally discussed in leading psychology journals, among them the American journal *Psychological Review*.

### ***The Psychological Review***

The *Psychological Review* was founded in 1894 by James Mark Baldwin and James McKeen Cattell, who were both the owners and the editors (in alternate years) of the journal between 1894 and 1903 (Calatayud et al., 1987; Kintsch & Cacioppo, 1994; Sokal, 1997). From the beginning, the *Review* became a prominent journal that represented the new empirical psychology then prevalent in American universities (O'Donnell, 1985). The first volume, published in 1894,

included contributions by such authors as James R. Angell, Mary Whitton Calkins, John Dewey, Christine Ladd Franklin, William James, Joseph Jastrow, George H. Mead, Hugo Münsterberg, Edward W. Scripture, and Lightner Witmer, among others. In addition to articles, the book review section of the journal informed the American public of the wide range of available literature from psychology, as well as from areas such as philosophy and sociology. The journal, still in print today, currently publishes theoretical papers.

### **Psychical Research in the *Psychological Review***

#### *Articles*

One of William James' (1896d) papers was a reply to James McKeen Cattell's (1896) critique of James' (1896a) presidential address to the SPR.<sup>4</sup> To counter James' view that groups of apparitions cases were more impressive than single cases, Cattell argued:

When we have an enormous number of cases, and cannot find among them all a single one that is conclusive, the very number of cases may be interpreted as an index of the weakness of the evidence. The discovery of a great many gray crows would not prove that any crows are white, rather the more crows we examine and find to be black or gray, the less expectation have we of finding one that is white.<sup>5</sup> (p. 582)

Cattell was not impressed by James' assessment of Mrs. Piper as his "white crow." In a critical tone, Cattell (1896: 582–583) stated: "The ablest of men have followed alchemy and astrology, have worshiped strange gods, have consulted witches and burned them. Geese have before now been mistaken for swans, and often to the honor of those who made the mistake. One white crow is enough, but its skin should be deposited in a museum."

James (1896d) disagreed with Cattell's argument of the weakness of accumulated cases, arguing that he did not have any evidence of "erroneousness," but instead was working on the assumption common to some scientists that the evidence against psychic phenomena was too strong to be questioned. In other words, he implied that Cattell was talking from prejudice and not from actual evidence or conventional explanations. James further wrote:

The presumption has remained presumption merely, the scientist saying, "I can't believe you're right," whilst at the same time he has been unable to show how or where we were wrong, or even except in one or two cases to point out what the error most probably may have been. . . . Professor Cattell says: Can the exhibition of any number of gray crows prove that any crows are white? But our reports are not of gray crows; at the very worst they are of white crows without the skins brought home . . .; and where there are such obvious reasons why it must be easier to see a wild beast than to capture him, who can seriously maintain that continued reports of merely seeing him tend positively to decrease the probability that he exists? . . . Continued reports, far from strengthening the presumption that such things cannot exist, can only detract from its force. (p. 650)

In a long paper, philosopher and psychical researcher James H. Hyslop (1898) discussed "psychical research and coincidence." He argued that the coincidental

phenomena studied by the SPR “has done much to strengthen the interest and belief in the possible meaning of such phenomena, especially when they take a certain form” (Hyslop, 1898: 362). Hyslop, aware of veridical cases and cases with supporting testimony, was not convinced that chance coincidence and illusions explained all the cases reviewed. However, he believed he found in some cases “evidence of an extraordinary combination of emotional interests and a predisposition to automatism to simulate supernormal phenomena” (Hyslop, 1898: 386).

Hyslop (1899) also criticized Hugo Münsterberg’s critiques of the evidence for psychic phenomena, which generated a counter reply (Münsterberg, 1899a).<sup>6</sup> In a short note complaining that the newspapers had distorted his statements about the immortality of the soul, Hyslop (1900b: 65) stated that the time was past for ridiculing the study of psychic phenomena: “Scientific method must control the study of these phenomena or lose its prestige and authority where it has the supreme right. . . .”

In a fascinating paper, University of Iowa’s psychologist G. T. W. Patrick (1898) discussed secondary personalities. He criticized the assumption of disincarnate agency presented by Hodgson (1898: 556) as an illegitimate hypothesis that failed to “connect the phenomena in question with any other known facts or laws.” Similarly, he criticized the lack of attention experimental psychologists had dedicated to the topic, and to automatism in general, perhaps designed to “maintain the dignity of experimental psychology” (1898: 556).

Patrick believed these phenomena could throw much light on the workings of the mind, and called for the investigation of simple cases to further understand the more complicated ones. Expressing the typical skepticism of psychologists to survival of bodily death and the ideas of Frederic W. H. Myers, Patrick wrote that the former were similar to Descartes’ concept of “animal spirits,” while the latter’s concepts about the mind, and its telepathic dimensions, were essentially a “metaphysical, not a psychological hypothesis” (1898: 562). However, Patrick touched on many topics previously discussed by Myers without any acknowledgement. Some examples were the “remarkable activity of the constructive imagination” (1898: 573), the suggestibility of secondary personalities, and the low intellectuality of some of them.

Patrick referred to the veridical statements of mediumistic personalities as a “happy intuition.” This did not imply the action of either spirits or telepathy because he believed other explanations could be forthcoming when the “characteristics of the secondary personality become subject to accurate scientific description” (1898: 576).

Following on the topic of conventional explanations, E. E. Slosson (1899), from the University of Wyoming, discussed the power of suggestion to produce hallucinations. He reported that during a lecture to students he was able to induce an olfactory hallucination in three-fourths of the audience. Hallucinations of sensations of temperature and pain, he said, “are easily induced by suggestion in susceptible individuals by the use of magnets. . . . It is of course, necessary that

the subject should have hazy ideas about magnetism. . . . Sensations of heat may be produced by the north pole of the magnet, and cold by the south, or one pole may be made to give a tingling or smarting pain in the right hand and side of the body, and the south pole on the left . . ." (1899: 407–408).<sup>7</sup>

### *Book and Article Reviews*

The rest of the discussions consist of book and article reviews, such as those of William James. In some of these writings James criticized criticisms of work with veridical hallucinations (James, 1895a, 1897c), and commented on SPR work on the subject (James, 1895c,d). In addition, James (1896b) summarized the paper in which Hansen and Lehmann (1895) attempted to redefine experimental thought-transference as an exercise in involuntary whispering.<sup>8</sup>

Other reviews were about discussions of telepathy (James, 1895b, 1896c, 1897b), possession (James, 1895e), the subliminal self (James, 1896e), involuntary whispering and thought-transference (James, 1897a), and Mrs. Piper (James, 1898b). James also brought attention to publications in languages such as French (James, 1894), German (James, 1895a), and Italian (James, 1897b). All of these writings contributed to the popularization of psychical research topics among American psychologists.

John Grier Hibben (1897), from Princeton University, commented on William Crookes' SPR Presidential Address. Referring to Crookes' (1897) hypothesis that ether waves affecting the brain could account for telepathy, Hibben commented that the concept was not even a hypothesis: "At best he establishes merely the possibility of his speculation, for he presents no facts to indicate its probability or to save it from being relegated to the sphere of bare conjecture" (1897: 536).

In his discussion of two books about stage magic and illusions, Cattell (1899) continued his critical attitude, arguing that suggestibility and the psychology of the crowd are topics for psychological study. The books in question "should certainly be read by those interested in 'psychical research'" (Cattell, 1899: 554).

The psychology and physiology of the dying, including reports of panoramic memory, were reviewed as well. H. N. Gardiner (1896a,b, 1897, 1898), from Smith College, commented on several articles on the topic published in France. The reviewer was skeptical of ideas in which a psychological self was held to react to the experience of being near-death by producing past memories.

Finally, Joseph Jastrow (1900), from the University of Wisconsin, a well-known critic of psychical research (e.g., Jastrow, 1889), reviewed the French edition of Théodore Flournoy's psychological study of medium Hélène Smith, which was translated into English (Flournoy, 1900). The medium produced communications about past lives in India, descriptions of planet Mars, and a Martian language.<sup>9</sup> The main value of the book, Jastrow stated, was the "success with which the various phases of these 'mediumistic' phenomena have been described and traced to natural and tangible points" (1900: 406). Flournoy's tracing of the

medium's Martian language, Jastrow commented, was a "truly classical instance of the psychological comprehensiveness of the automatic self in exceptional cases" (1900: 411). He wrote further:

The dangers of a false interpretation of this "psychic" tale are many, and are certain to mislead many who's interest in and powers of comprehension of cases of this kind are not equally developed. . . . It seems probable that when a sufficient number of these cases have been collected, that their general nature and law-abiding character will be understood, that a rational group of associations may be clustered about the term 'mediumistic,' (sic) and that the temptation to magnify the doings of some of this class into a bundle of miracles will gradually pass away—all of which would be welcome consummations for the progress of Psychology. (p. 411)

### Concluding Remarks

The contents of the *Psychological Review* reflect the hostile position many psychologists took towards psychical research during the 19th century. As argued elsewhere (e.g., Alvarado, 2006; Coon, 1992), psychical research was generally rejected by psychologists of the time for a variety of reasons, one of which involved psychology's own struggle to be recognized as a science. Coon (1992: 150) has stated: "Psychologists were stationed at the periphery of science, and therefore they were the most threatened by challenges to the boundary and the most susceptible to cultural anxieties about what it meant to be 'scientific.'" Psychic phenomena represented one of these threats, both in terms of expertise and the non-materialistic explanations of telepathy and other manifestations.

Some of those openly critical of psychical research in the *Review* were Cattell, Jastrow, Münsterberg, and Patrick. These authors redefined psychic phenomena as the operation of sensory cues, hallucinations, and a variety of subconscious phenomena that included secondary personalities and automatic writing, among others.

Nonetheless, there were a few exceptions. The most notable was the work of James. But Hyslop also defended the field.<sup>10</sup>

It is my hope that the above comments will guide interested readers to the psychical research content of the *Psychological Review*. However, the study of this literature needs to be extended to contributions appearing in several other journals. Interested readers should also consider publications such as the *American Journal of Psychology*, *Mind*, and the *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For reviews of developments in different countries see Biondi (1988), Moore (1977), Oppenheim (1985), Plas (2000), and Wolfram (2005).

<sup>2</sup> This is clear in the material referenced below, as well as in critiques (James, 1886) and reviews of specific works (James, 1887). Recent discussions of James and psychical research include the work of Blum (2006) and Knapp (2003). For a collection of his psychical research writings see James (1986).

- <sup>3</sup> This process, intimately related to the study of localization of functions in the nervous system (Clarke & Jacyna, 1987), has been discussed in general overviews of the history of psychology (e.g., Boring, 1950), as well as in histories devoted to specific countries (e.g., Nicolas, 2002; O'Donnell, 1985).
- <sup>4</sup> There were other controversies between James and Cattell. In response to criticisms about research with medium Leonora E. Piper (Cattell, 1898a) in the pages of *Science*, James (1898a) wrote a letter to the journal, which was answered by Cattell (1898b).
- <sup>5</sup> This was a reference to James' famous comment about Mrs. Piper: "If you wish to upset the law that all crows are black, you musn't seek to show that no crows are; it is enough if you prove one single crow to be white. My own white crow is Mrs. Piper" (James, 1896a: 884).
- <sup>6</sup> Münsterberg (1899b) was a well-known critic of psychical research. He was criticized by Hyslop (1908) and Schiller (1908).
- <sup>7</sup> This should be seen in the context of 19th-century interest in the influence of magnets to induce a variety of phenomena on human beings (e.g., Binet & Féré, 1885; Durville, 1895).
- <sup>8</sup> Hansen and Lehmann's (1895) paper was very influential. It was cited by many psychologists either implying that the study took care of the evidence for telepathy (e.g., Titchener, 1898: 897), or directly saying so (Scripture, 1897: 63–68, 259–260). As another psychologist wrote a few years later, this study showed "that much of the alleged transfer of thoughts might be accounted for by hints and suggestions given . . ." (Stratton, 1903: 206). See also the important critical comments of Sidgwick (1897), and the controversy between William James and Edward B. Titchener in the pages of *Science* (James, 1899a,b; Titchener, 1899a,b).
- <sup>9</sup> The medium's real name was Catherine Élise Müeller. Her performances, and Flournoy's work, have been discussed by Shamdasani (1994).
- <sup>10</sup> In later years Hyslop became even better known than James in the United States as a defender of psychic phenomena from its numerous critics (e.g., Hyslop, 1909). His work as a popularizer of psychical research is evident in his books (e.g., Hyslop, 1905), and in ideas discussed in newspapers ("Mrs. Piper, Trance Medium," 1900), and magazines (Hyslop, 1900a).

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