

## BOOK REVIEW

**The Elements of Parapsychology** by K. Ramakrishna Rao. Jefferson: NC: McFarland, 2017. 337 pp. ISBN 978-1476671222.

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Rao is a major force in parapsychology research, having first published in the 1950s, and this book publication is right up-to-date in 2017. The book is almost 300 pages of text spread out over 9 chapters. I initially found the book title to be confusing because it could be taken to mean something like a primer or an introduction to the essential parts of parapsychology. Whereas in fact the book is more like a selection of discrete areas of parapsychology such as psi missing (the tendency to actively avoid the ‘target’ of a psi experiment, to the point of statistical deviation away from chance); the experimenter effect (similar to the experimenter effect of conventional psychology, but here the suggestion is that experimenters are using their own psychic powers to influence experimental results); problems with replication in psi experiments; and some other philosophical or epistemological considerations. I’ll come back to the question of the title at the end of the review.

There is much to recommend in this book, but there are also problems depending on what one’s expectations are in reading the book.

I found myself many times in this book wondering which audience Rao was trying to address. First of all, it is not for the casual reader (i.e. non-scientist), as the text is written in a straightforward ‘academic’ prose style. There are no diagrams, figures, or graphs, just a few tables to help the ‘newbie’ to understand the concepts that Rao is espousing. Secondly, many technical terms that would be familiar to the professional parapsychologist, are used without definition, or they are defined much later in the text. One example is that the term ‘sheep–goat’ (so-called believers vs. nonbelievers in psychic powers) is used early on, but it is defined several chapters later and there is no entry to this term in the index. This leads me to guess that Rao’s target reader audience is very firmly in the professional parapsychology camp.

I did find that some of Rao’s writings were too brief or condensed and would require considerable unpacking for someone not familiar with the

research database to understand effectively. For example, in Chapter 4, on page 119 (Problems of Replication and Application), Rao writes:

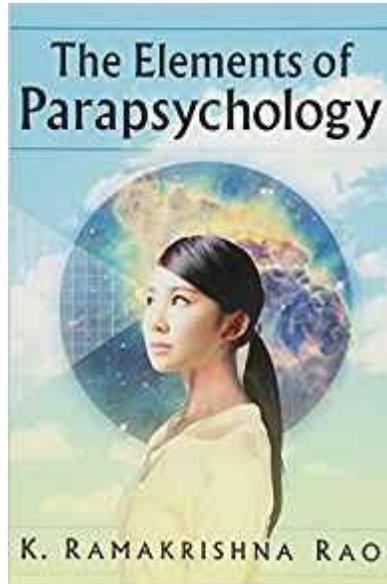
In psi research, the decline of effect sizes is all too common, leading researchers to frequently change their strategies often resulting in reinventing the wheel.

For a variety of reasons I think this is an important sentence but then I know what the 'decline effect' is (I know that it's not quite the same as the 'decline of effect sizes' but it's clear that Rao is referring to the decline effect), and I think I have a vague idea of what Rao is saying when he states that researchers frequently change their [research] strategies, but without him spelling it out I am not too sure. I have to state I'm intrigued when he says that psi researchers are reinventing the wheel, but I am left grasping at straws to understand which wheels he is referring to. I looked for clues later in the book, and if they were there then I missed them. I am reasonably experienced in parapsychological research literature, so I can imagine that the non-parapsychologist reader would probably gloss over this and other points that Rao tends to write in a super-condensed format. The last four or so paragraphs of the same chapter deal with issues around replicability in the Ganzfeld and this is an area that I am more intimately aware of since I met and worked with the main architects of the Ganzfeld, but I would have to say that the reading was so condensed that I was not any the wiser after several attempts at reading it (of course that could just be that I am not as intelligent a reader as I think I am).

I will say that I found Rao's foundation in experimental research rooted very much in the pre-meta-analytic days of parapsychology with his reliance on the '*p*-value,' standing for meaningful significance (instead of this index actually standing for statistical significance). Rao knows about meta-analysis and cites the work done in key areas of parapsychology, but he still does not seem to focus on the 'effect sizes' as being the essential meaningful index of measurement in experimental psychology. In Chapter 6 'The Problem of Psi Missing,' Rao speaks at length about the differential effect (DE) which is the phenomenon that participants tend to score either toward the intention or away from the intention of the experiment because of either different experimental conditions within the experiment, or different types of tasks, or even different types of potential responses. So for instance participants might prefer to respond to ESP (extra-sensory perception) experiments that have positive words as targets, compared with negative words. DE is one of the areas that Rao's own research and publications have focused on. He explains how he and others compiled a review of all the available DE-

ESP experiments and then provided tables to show what percentage of the reviewed experiments achieved statistical significance; so he evaluates the quantitative research literatures by counting a study that reached statistical significance as a datapoint regardless of effect size or number of participants. For instance, on page 182 he writes:

There are 73 studies in the category of dual target conditions. The subjects in these tests attempted to guess two different sets of targets such as words in two languages. In 46 of them (63 percent) there is differential scoring, i.e., the scores are in the opposite direction for the two conditions, when you expect such a scoring in about one half of them. The probability of 46 studies showing differential scoring in a total of 73 studies is  $<.05$ . In 20 of these 46 studies, the difference between the scores obtained under the two conditions is highly significant. The associated p-value with such an outcome is very, very small indeed.



A table is provided on the same page, and it is clear that Rao is evaluating his database in, by today's standard, an outdated way. This part of the text pretty much jumped out of the page and screamed 'do a meta-analysis'! After all, as the original review of the experimental literature was done by Rao and his associates, one would have thought that (perhaps with the help of others) his extensive knowledge of those studies would have enabled him to have a far keener insight into the meta-analytic results, than someone coming in 'cold' to the data.

Parapsychology suffers in my view, by being constrained with an Anglo-Eurocentric Weltanschauung. This is of course a charge that can still be made in psychology today, and the number of active researchers in parapsychology is several magnitudes of order fewer than in psychology. Rao does make mention of parapsychological observations, events, or research done in India and some other places outside of Europe and North America, and personally I thought/hoped that I would read a lot more about that given Rao's education and upbringing in India. For anyone not steeped in cross-cultural psychological research, these mentions require considerably more 'unpacking' than is given. I acknowledge that he has

already written on the comparison of a ‘Westist’ approach versus others in more traditional psychology (Rao 2002). Perhaps Rao’s insights into a ‘Westist’ approach in parapsychology specifically is for another book—I for one would look forward to it eagerly.

Much of the book seems to be rooted in the experiments and research between the 1930s and 1980s. That is not to say that Rao is ignorant of the current research or that there are not current citations in the text, but rather that the preponderance of the citations are firmly established in the 40-year time period mentioned. If one takes the view that this book gives a firm oversight of essential research done in this time period, then this is an excellent current resource to revise one’s background understanding of original experimental research done in parapsychology.

To return to the title of Rao’s book, I feel that it deserves a different title to help readers figure out what they can get out of the book. I’m not a copywriter so forgive my meagre talents at snappy titles or headlines. I am just trying to propose the spirit of a new title, something along the lines of: “Selected Thorny Issues in Parapsychology,” or “Conundrums in Parapsychology: Some Reflections,” would have orientated me far better to approach Rao’s otherwise comprehensive academic book.

Whom is this book for? I think Rao is writing for an audience of people already in the parapsychology field. It serves as an effective summary of the research findings of the middle and toward the latter part of the Twentieth Century with some updated citations from the Twenty-First Century. I want to stress that this is **not** a criticism but rather a strength of the book. Rao has personal insight by being at ‘the coal face’ during the majority of this fertile time period in parapsychology, and there is much to commend the quality and insight of this work. Modern parapsychologists might be using key citations from this time period but not with the breadth and depth and critique that Rao provides. All research arenas probably suffer from the lessons of previous generations of researchers or inquirers not being remembered (well), including the nuanced considerations in summarizing the work that might lead to (at the time) future avenues of research. Parapsychology is no different in this regard, and having a book such as Rao’s is a welcome addition for the researchers of today to not forget those hard-earned insights of the mid-to-late Twentieth Century.

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