

## HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

### Distortions of the Past

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**Abstract**—While no view of past parapsychological developments is free of problems, it is worthwhile to discuss how our accounts can be distorted, if only to be more aware of our working assumptions. In this address I will focus on the writings of parapsychologists, and particularly on some problems in these writings producing a distorted view of the past of the discipline. I argue that the past is distorted when we neglect the work of specific groups and individuals (such as lesser-known figures and women); when we see the past as a function of the present (neglect of unpopular ideas today, justification of research programs); and when we focus mainly on positive aspects of the study of psychic phenomena (neglect of critics and of examples of the rejection of the field). It is my hope that a consideration of these issues will assist us in expanding the reach of such writings.

**Keywords:** history of parapsychology—history of psychical research—great men history—justification history—presentism

This paper is an expanded version of an invited address that was part of the Outstanding Contribution Award the Parapsychological Association granted to me at the 2010 convention held in Paris, for which I thank the Association. While I have covered many topics during my career in parapsychology, perhaps my best-known work has been my papers about various aspects of the past literature of psychical research. This includes discussions of parapsychological terminology (Zingrone & Alvarado 1987), trends in the study of OBEs (Alvarado 1989b), the influence of the idea of survival of death on parapsychology (Alvarado 2003), ideas of human radiations (Alvarado 2006), and many others (e.g., Alvarado 1989a, 1993, 2009b, Alvarado, Biondi, & Kramer 2006). In this address I will not discuss the past literature proper, but will focus instead on some problems that produce an incomplete and unbalanced view of the past development of our discipline. These issues are important because, having a more complete

grasp of their subject, parapsychologists may improve their writings and may acquire a different sense of the complexity of factors behind their discipline. Furthermore, these new perspectives will affect the views of students of and newcomers to the field as well.

In summary, it is my hope that these comments—addressed to parapsychologists who write about aspects of the history of our field—will help us expand the reach of such writings.

### Prologue

Before starting to discuss my topic, it is important to recognize that the history of disciplines such as science and medicine is written by different types of scholars. The history of academic fields is mainly discussed by practitioners and by professional historians.<sup>1</sup> By practitioners I mean those individuals who are active members of the discipline in question, be they teachers, researchers, or something else, while professional historians are those who have been formally trained in history. Generally practitioners writing about past parapsychological developments focus on issues related to the practical use of the old literature, such as the use of these publications to generate or to guide current research and theorization (Alvarado 1982). Furthermore, they are concerned with the reality of the phenomena and the validity of related research findings and concepts, as well as with the issues of precursors and antecedents of current developments. In contrast, professional historians tend to avoid these issues, focusing instead on seeing the discipline in the intellectual and social context of its time, but generally without concern for the reality of psychic phenomena (Noakes 2008).<sup>2</sup>

The practitioner is generally engaged in disciplinary history which purpose is the crafting of a professional disciplinary identity based on currently perceived conceptual and methodological continuities coming from the past to the present day.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected, for example, in discussions about the life and contributions of past researchers in the field, including a variety of celebratory publications (e.g., Alvarado 2004, Rao 1982). These writings do much more than document the past, they legitimize the present. That is, they allow us, and each generation anew, to construct a developmental history of the field connecting past researchers and conceptual developments to present ones, and to defend the importance of current concepts and methods.

Like other disciplines, parapsychology has had many examples of histories written by workers in the field (e.g., Beloff 1993, Dèttore 1976, Parra 1990, Tischner 1960). Furthermore, in the past many researchers have presented historical accounts of parapsychology in chapters or sections of their textbooks (e.g., Broughton 1991:Chapter 2, Irwin & Watt 2007:Chapter

2, Richet 1922:16–42), and in overview articles (e.g., Alvarado 1989b, L. E. Rhine 1971).

Regardless of whether one is a practitioner or a trained historian, everyone writing about past developments is concerned with the issue of objectivity in presenting the past (for a discussion, see Newal 2009). That this problem is a relative one, and more an ideal than a reality, is clear in historian Peter Novick's (1988) designation of the issue as a "noble dream." This should not come as a surprise to anyone, particularly to those who have had some experience in crafting accounts of the past. Certainly many factors can affect our accounts, including personal interests and biases, the conceptual approach we use, and the sources and examples we select. As human beings we select aspects of the past, emphasizing some things and deemphasizing and neglecting others. An awareness of such selectivity has led historian of medicine Vivian Nutton to state in his book *Ancient Medicine* (2004): "History is an art of forgetting as well as of remembrance" (p. 1).

Historian of science Steven Shapin (1996/1998:10) has commented about such selectivity, arguing that this is inevitable in the work of historians, something that should make us skeptical about claims of "definitive" and "exhaustive" histories. In his words:

What we select inevitably represents our interests, even if we aim all the while to "tell it like it really was." That is to say, there is inevitably something of "us" in the stories we tell about the past. This is the historian's predicament, and it is foolish to think there is some method, however well-intentioned, that can extricate us from this predicament. (Shapin 1996/1998:10)

In addition there are many blinders that produce incomplete and distorted views of the past. In other words, because of the complex nature of the enterprise, history is to some extent always distorted or changed in some way, depending on our looking glass as practitioners or as trained historians. Nonetheless, like scientists and their efforts to do the best study they can while being aware of the imperfections of methodology, those engaged in the study of the past need to always consider the above-mentioned problems, regardless of whether they are completely unavoidable. If anything, such awareness will allow us to be conscious of our assumptions and of the subjective nature of attempts to chronicle the past.

In this paper I will not focus on statements showing errors or ignorance about the past, nor on examples of how belief or skepticism about psychic phenomena affect historical accounts. Instead I will discuss the following problems found in the writings of parapsychologists: (1) Neglect of the work of specific groups and individuals; (2) Seeing the past as function of the present; and (3) Emphasis on progressive aspects.

## Factors Affecting Our Views of the Past

### ***Neglect of the Work of Specific Individuals and Groups***

Overall, and to quote from historian Christopher Hill's book *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972/1985),

... most of our history is written about, and from the point of view of, a tiny fragment of the population, and makes us want to extend in depth as well as in breadth. (Hill 1972/1985:16)

The following are examples of this problem.

***The "Great Man" Approach to History.*** One of the main ways in which history in general may be distorted is through what has been called the "great man" approach. As expressed by Scottish historian and writer Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881) in his book *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*,

Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world, is at bottom the History of the Great men who have worked here. (Carlyle 1840:3)

Ever since Carlyle, and even before, much of history has been written with emphasis on the exceptional and heroic qualities and work of a few individuals. The point here is not to deny that specific individuals—men such as Frederic W. H. Myers (1843–1901), Charles Richet (1850–1935), Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1862–1929), and J. B. Rhine (1895–1980)—made important contributions to the development of the systematic and scientific study of psychic phenomena. In fact, we need more work about influential figures who distinguished themselves for their work, productivity, and leadership. But history also needs to include the less-prominent if only because the past is a collective construction and not only the product of the elites.<sup>4</sup> This implies that there were many other less-known figures whose work converged with the work of the better-known individuals, helping to achieve and create the work for which they are known today. They deserve our attention if we are interested in realistic views of the past. A case in point are the individuals surrounding and working with J. B. Rhine. In addition to J. Gaither Pratt (1910–1979) and Louisa E. Rhine (1891–1983), there were others such as Betty Humphrey (b. 1917) and Charles Stuart (1907–1947) (Mauskopf & McVaugh 1980).

Discussions of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) have been dominated by emphasis on figures such as Frederic W. H. Myers, Henry

Sidgwick (1838–1900), and Edmund Gurney (1847–1888). While their work was essential, we also need to remember there were also other figures involved in the development and research conducted by the Society. For example, much more could be written about other important figures such as Richard Hodgson (1855–1905), Eleanor M. Sidgwick (1845–1936), and Alice Johnson (1860–1940), not to mention lesser-known figures.<sup>5</sup>

There is also a general tendency to refer to the scholars and scientists who formed the Council of the early SPR with no acknowledgement that some of them were spiritualists.<sup>6</sup> This was the case with Hensleigh Wedgwood (1803–1891), and of others such as E. Dawson Rogers (1823–1910), Morell Theobald (1828–1908), and William Stainton Moses (1839–1892).

Wedgwood, a philologist, was one of the vice-presidents of the early SPR, and one the authors of the first report of the Committee on Haunted Houses (Barrett, Keep, Massey, Wedgwood, Podmore, & Pease 1882). Furthermore, he participated in many SPR meetings (Meetings of Council 1885), and contributed cases to the spiritualist literature (Wedgwood 1881, 1883). Like other spiritualist members of the early SPR, Wedgwood fulfilled an important function in that he criticized the assumptions and methods of SPR researchers in their own publications (e.g., Wedgwood 1887).<sup>7</sup>



**William Stainton Moses**

Moses (see photo) is remembered today by many mainly as a medium. But he was also an early SPR vice-president and an active member who participated in such tasks as the collection of cases for the Society (Barrett, Moses, Podmore, Gurney, & Myers 1882). His writings show that he was also a serious student of psychic phenomena with a considerable knowledge of the literature on the subject (Moses 1889), as does his editorship of the spiritualist journal *Light* for several years. His studies of psychic phenomena appeared in his books about direct writing and mediumistic communications (Moses 1878, 1879) and in his detailed article discussions about phenomena such as apparitions of the living (Moses 1876) and materializations (Moses 1884).<sup>8</sup>

There is a similar need for expansion in discussions of early parapsychology in the United States of authors who focus on well-known individuals such as James H. Hyslop (1854–1920), William James (1842–1910), and Australian Richard Hodgson (e.g., Berger 1988). One hopes that

the scope of the history of American psychical research may be expanded to cover a variety of additional figures. One example was Hereward Carrington (1880–1958), known in his early career for his discussion of mediumistic and other forms of trickery (Carrington 1907).<sup>9</sup> Others include publisher and lexicographer Isaac K. Funk (1839–1912), physician Rufus Osgood Mason (1830–1903), and minister and writer Minot J. Savage (1841–1918) (Funk 1904, Mason 1897, Savage 1902).

Another important point is that the work of eminent individuals, no matter how important or innovative, was generally conducted in a context. Other individuals around the figures in question were important in creating an intellectual context that provided the opportunities, encouragement, and critiques that allowed the “great men” to conduct their work. This is seen in some writings about the history of parapsychology (e.g., Gauld 1968, Mauskopf & McVaugh 1980), and in other writings coming from the histories of science and medicine (e.g., Frank 1980, on prosopography see Clark 2003).

**SPR-Centered History.** Another distorting influence is the tendency to focus on the early research of the British SPR, while work conducted in places such as Italy, France, and Germany is barely mentioned.

In addition to what I have written above about researchers, emphasis on SPR material may blind us to the existence of different conceptual traditions, as seen in the following example. Partly because of the philosophical–psychological emphasis of the SPR, and because of the discovery of fraud with some mediums, their researchers paid less attention to physical mediumship than other groups. I made a comparison of articles about mental and physical mediumship published in the *SPR Proceedings* and in the French journal *Revue Métapsychique* for the period 1920–1930, which revealed that the *SPR Proceedings* had a higher proportion of papers about mental manifestations as compared with physical ones, while the French journal showed the opposite (Alvarado, Biondi, & Kramer 2006). Such trends, discussed by Inglis (1984), alert us to the existence of specific interests or styles in psychical research that characterize the mentality of research groups or countries.

**Women.** Closely related to this topic is the emphasis on men, to the neglect of the contributions of many women, a topic I have discussed before in another paper (Alvarado 1989a). It is common to mention prominent women such as Eleanor Sidgwick, Louisa E. Rhine (1891–1983), and Gertrude Schmeidler (1912–2009). But we neglect



**Juliette Bisson**



**Fanny Moser**

many others whose work was influential. Among them I may mention Lydia Allison (1880–1959), Juliette Bisson (1862–1956)<sup>10</sup> (see photo), Esther M. Bond (1913–1963), Laura Dale (1919–1983), Betty Humphrey (b. 1917), Fanny Moser (1848–1925), Helen Salter (1883–1959), Gerda Walther (1897–1977), Margaret Verrall (1859–1916), and Zoë Wassilko-Serecki (1897–1978) (see photo).

In my paper on women in parapsychology (Alvarado 1989a),

I argued that the issue is not merely one of saying that there have been women in parapsychology, but that their contributions need to be seen from their particular point of view. Because of women's position in society, they have frequently occupied positions of support and administration that are subordinate to those of men. This is what Margaret Rossiter referred to in *Women Scientists in America* (1982) as women's work in science. In turn, these aspects are generally ignored by parapsychologists who write about the history of their field. Furthermore, women's lack of opportunities, like those of minorities in general, connected to low prestige and difficulties in obtaining education, show that our past is gendered because the different sexes have enjoyed different opportunities and privileges in relationship to their intellectual development and work.

**Emphasis on English-Language Developments.** Another problem is the common practice of seeing our history through an Anglo-American lens. Over the years I have encountered parapsychologists whose view of the past is generally limited to American and British developments published in English, forgetting the contributions of many other groups.

One only has to see some of the writings of parapsychologists whose main language is English to realize that they generally ignore developments that have been published in other languages (e.g., Broughton 1991, Irwin & Watt 2007, Radin 2006, J. B. Rhine 1977). This is also seen in the history chapter of the *Handbook of Parapsychology* (Beloff 1977), which did not include a single reference that was not published in English, although it had a few translations of foreign works. While European developments



**Zoë Wassilko-Serecki**

Peter Mulaicz

were included in the account, the emphasis was on British and American developments.

A considerable amount of the work of individuals such as Ernesto Bozzano (1862–1943), Gustave Geley (1868–1924), Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909), and Joseph Maxwell (1858–1938) has been published in languages other than English and tends to be neglected. Some argue that they do not know the relevant languages, but few seem interested in taking steps to solve the problem. In addition to learning languages, we can always collaborate with colleagues with knowledge of the necessary languages, something I have done in the past (e.g., Alvarado, Biondi & Kramer 2006, Alvarado & Nahm 2011). Unfortunately, and as has been my experience in the United States, sometimes the problem seems to go beyond languages, as seen in lack of knowledge of European works translated into English (e.g., Bozzano n.d., Maxwell 1903/1905). This suggests that the problem is not only one of a language barrier, but that there are wider cultural problems here affecting the writings of parapsychologists.<sup>11</sup>

Not knowing what has been published in other languages reduces our knowledge of the history of parapsychology, and produces incomplete, if not provincial, views of history. It also condemns us to follow particularly American, British, or other perspectives of the past, forgetting that, while there are international commonalities, there are also differences coming from different cultures, and that those collective differences, together with the similarities, are what form our history. Works written about developments in non-English language countries (e.g., Biondi 1988, Brower 2010, Parra 1990, Wolfram, 2009), as well as overviews that cover materials generally neglected in English-language works (e.g., Castellan 1955, Gutierrez & Maillard 2004), will assist us in spreading information necessary to correct this situation.

We may get some inspiration from the field of world history. This has been described by one of its representatives, Patrick Manning, in his book *Navigating World History* (2003), as historical work attempting to “portray the crossing of boundaries and the linking of systems in the human past” (p. 3).

While no one will put in doubt the historical importance of developments from English-speaking countries, it is important to bear in mind that those developments may be seen somewhat differently from the perspective of others in different countries. The SPR, to give an example, was known and was influential in France. Some of this work, such as that authored by Myers, was cited and translated in the *Annales des Sciences Psychiques* (e.g., Myers 1897–1900). While Myers was known in France (Alvarado 2010), his ideas seemed to have been less influential there than in England



and in the English-speaking world in general. The point here is that one cannot assume the universal equivalence of specific national events or contributions.

The situation is similar in the history of psychology. For example, Adrian C. Brock (2006:3) has stated in his anthology *Internationalizing the History of Psychology* that American psychologists sometimes assume that behaviorism was international, forgetting that most of its impact was felt in the United States. Following this trend of thought we may ask questions such as the nature of J. B. Rhine's influence in countries other than England and the United States (for example, see Parra 2010).

Although Rhine was influential in, say, Europe, the influence was not as intense as that felt in the United States. Some Europeans conducted research following Rhine's experimental procedures (e.g., Warcollier 1955) but this did not develop as much as it did in the United States where a community of researchers formed around Rhine, when a journal was founded, and when the research transcended parapsychological circles in critical examinations by psychologists (Mauskopf & McVaugh 1980). In addition, it is clear from the content of the well-known 1953 parapsychology congress held at Utrecht that by that time the parapsychological world had not become Rhinean. In fact, there were many who centered their work on theory, philosophy, and spontaneous cases (Alvarado 2009a).

### ***The Past as a Function of the Present***

Another problem is writing about the past in a presentist way, which includes the practice of presenting past developments basically as they relate to present needs, concerns, and ideas, and not on their own terms, as well as the interpretation of the past from the perspective of the present (Stocking 1965, Wallace 2008:37–41).<sup>12</sup> While this is understandable because it helps practitioners to build a professional identity, such emphasis can be problematic. For example, if the account in question focuses solely on work and ideas of the past that are similar to those of the present, we will end with an account that supposedly “explains” the present but that misses many developments important in past times. This may stop justificatory history but will not give us a study of what actually took place (if that is ever possible considering limitations of documentation and context). Parapsychology developed not only through ideas similar to present ones but also from the influence of dissimilar concepts.

***Unpopular Ideas Today.*** Ideas that are not popular or that are undesirable today tend to be neglected in looking to the past. For example, many in parapsychology today do not believe that psi phenomena have a physical basis in the sense that ESP and PK are explainable by the projection



**Asa Mahan**

of physical or biophysical forces from the human body. Consequently, the topic receives little contemporary discussion in the writings of parapsychologists about the past literature. But there is a large literature about such forces published before and during the initial development of psychical research (Alvarado 2006, 2008). For example, many wrote about physical mediumship in terms of force models. This was the case with American educator and clergyman Asa Mahan (1799–1889, see photo). He wrote about the phenomena of raps:

The physical systems of the individuals in these circles may be compared to a galvanic battery which is continuously, but more especially on occasions of the least extra excitement, developing this force. As soon as it is developed to a certain degree, in the organism of the rapping medium, it passes off to some object near, a chair, table, the ceiling, or floor, as the case may be, and produces, in passing into the object, the raps which have astonished the world so much. (Mahan 1855:129)

Other examples of ideas of force to explain physical mediumship were those of English chemist and physicist William Crookes (1832–1919) and Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli (Crookes 1874, Morselli 1908), who also wrote about materializations. The same may be said about the concept of ectoplasm (which for some was associated with ideas of force, see Alvarado 2006) and writings about physical ideas of ESP (Alvarado 2008). To ignore such ideas in our accounts of the development of the field because many do not believe today in physicalistic explanations of psychic phenomena may be consistent with some current views, but is a distortion of the historical record. I am not calling for a defense of these forces today, but to acknowledge the existence of a conceptual tradition generally ignored in historical accounts (e.g., Beloff 1993). Failure to do this may not impact on modern parapsychologists' work, but it results in an incorrect account of our history and in the elimination from the current record of aspects that contributed to the development of the field.<sup>13</sup>

We could also learn much from historians of science and medicine who study concepts believed today to be erroneous. This is important not only to get a more complete account of past developments, but to understand the

work and assumptions of past workers. Examples of this include studies of cosmology (Grant 1994), of the humors of Hippocratic and Galenic medicine (Nutton 2004), and other concepts such as the ether (Cantor & Hodge 1981).

Similarly, we also need to pay attention to more recent scholarship in the field of the history of science. There is much modern work whose authors have questioned traditional dichotomies of ideas in the development of science. A good example is the study of occult and mystical ideas in relation to the so-called scientific revolution during the seventeenth century. Part of the more recent literature on the topic presents those ideas as contributing factors and not as factors that had to be conquered in order for science to develop (for reviews see Applebaum 2005 and Henry 2002).<sup>14</sup> A similar situation exists in studies of the historical relation between Western religion and science. Different from ideas of conflict, such as those expressed by English-born chemist, historian, and physician John William Draper (1811–1882) in his book *The Conflict Between Science and Religion* (1874), many historians today believe in more complex interactions, some of which include ways in which religion helped science to develop. These views are evident in several recent works (e.g., Dixon, Cantor, & Pumfrey 2010, Ferngren 2002, Lindberg & Numbers 2003), developments that should make us cautious of seeing parapsychology as a simple conquest of the metaphysical or the occult in general, which would be a partial distortion of the past.

As I have argued in a previous paper, it is possible to see spiritualism, and more specifically, the concept of survival of bodily death, as a factor providing impetus for the development of psychical research (Alvarado 2003). Part of this is that such a concept provided psychical research with phenomena forming some of its subject matter (e.g., mediumship) and some of its conceptual agenda (survival of death). Furthermore, spiritualists had an empirical orientation that nurtured the idea that psychic phenomena could be studied collecting facts, as opposed to only accepting things by faith. Regardless of how their methods were evaluated, a good proportion of the spiritualistic literature emphasized the importance of empirical observations of mediumistic phenomena to form a belief, a value that came into psychical research as well. This was expressed by many spiritualists, among them American judge John W. Edmonds (1799–1874):

There was never . . . a religious creed promulgated among men, which so entirely eschewed blind faith, and so fully and always demanded the exercise of the judgment and the supremacy of the reason. (Edmonds & Dexter 1853:77)

Furthermore, Edmonds stated that the explanation for the phenomena was “capable of being found out by human research . . .” (p. 78).

**Justification of Research Programs.** The past is frequently used by scientists to justify the present. As historians Roy Porter and Mark Micale (1994) have stated in their anthology of essays *Discovering the History of Psychiatry*:

. . . for professional purposes, each generation of practitioners has written a history that highlights those past ideas and practices that anticipate its own formation and consigns to marginal status competing ideas and their heritages. (Porter & Micale 1994:5–6)

In fact, this is one of the main uses of history by practitioners (Graham, Lepenies, & Weingart 1983), and one seen in the writings of both J. B. Rhine (1977) and Louisa E. Rhine (1971). Their accounts of the development of the field present a justification and a defense of the uniqueness of their experimental research program consisting of a sequential account culminating in the research conducted at Duke University and one reducing the field to experimental approaches and to specific phenomena, namely ESP and PK.

Unfortunately such attempts to uphold the importance of the Duke University studies came with questionable rewrites of history. This was the case when Louisa E. Rhine discussed the forms of expression of spontaneous ESP experiences, arguing that before the 1950s “no particular attention had been paid to the manner in which psi was expressed” (L. E. Rhine 1971:46). A brief look at earlier work shows that the topic had been discussed in detail before (Gurney, Myers, & Podmore 1886). It is possible, and this is a speculation, that Louisa Rhine’s inaccurate statement was motivated by her present perspective in which the Duke work was seen as the most advanced and innovative development in the field. But this alerts us to be careful not to misrepresent previous workers in the field to support later views.

**Evidentiality.** The same may be said about discussions of the past based only on evidentiality. It is easy to dismiss many important issues from the past if we believe now that specific phenomena do not exist or are weak evidentially. This is also done with topics and phenomena some find embarrassing and threatening to the scientific status of modern parapsychology, such as the materialization phenomena of mediums, poltergeist reports, or the issue of survival of death. While this serves some present purposes of presenting high standards as researchers and respectable images of the field, it fails to represent the events present in our history and the beliefs of those who worked in previous eras.

**Phases and Stages.** Our need to classify history in periods or in stages is another source of distortion, but also a traditional way to see history. In his widely read and influential *Traité de Métapsychique*, Charles Richet (1922) (see photo) presented an influential classification consisting of the following periods: mythical (from antiquity to Mesmer), magnetic (from Mesmer to the Fox sisters), spiritistic (from the Fox sisters to William Crookes), and scientific (from Crookes on). Later authors continued with variant classifications (Castellan 1955, J. B. Rhine 1953, Sudre, 1956/1962, Xiong 2008), or had sections in their books about the movements of mesmerism and spiritualism (Beloff 1993, Broughton 1991, Irwin & Watt 2007). While these are useful heuristics to organize our past, and they make sense conceptually, they tend to lead us to believe in discrete sequential stages that were not completely so.<sup>15</sup>



**Charles Richet**

Take for example the case of mesmerism, generally presented as coming before spiritualism. While the heyday of the mesmeric movement was over by the middle of the nineteenth century, belief in magnetic action continued into the late nineteenth and the twentieth centuries (Alvarado 2009b, 2009c). This was evident in the writings of philosopher Émile Boirac (1851–1917), who collected his essays in his widely cited book *La Psychologie Inconnue* (1908). But several others also defended the existence of a magnetic force capable of inducing trance and other phenomena, among them Alexandre Baréty (1844–1918), Hector Durville (1849–1923), and Albert de Rochas (1837–1914) (Baréty 1887, Durville 1895–1896, de Rochas 1887). Consequently, mesmerism was more than a stage taking place before spiritualism. In fact, mesmerism coexisted with spiritualism and with psychical research at different time periods.



**Traité de  
Métapsychique**

The same may be said about spiritualism, which did not cease by the time psychical researchers from countries such as England, Germany, Italy, and France were conducting investigations. In fact, the movement was going strong and its influence continued into the twentieth century (e.g., Hazelgrove 2000), and it is still around today. Consequently, ideas of chronological

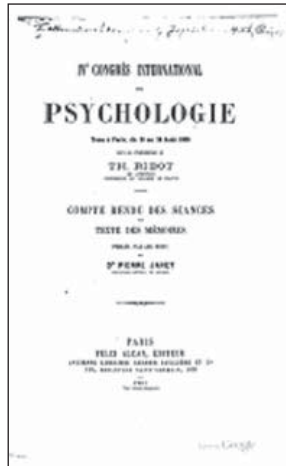
stages cannot be taken too literally because the boundaries of movements were not static, but fluid.

### **Emphasis on Progressive Aspects of Psychic Phenomena**

**Positive Events.** Parapsychologists tend to present events or developments in their field in terms of achievements, of positive moments or events (e.g., Radin 2006). Much emphasis is put on the results of work supporting the existence of phenomena and on events such as the founding of organizations and triumphs such as the acceptance of the Parapsychological Association as a member of the AAAS. Such things are certainly part of our past, but the overall past, what has made the discipline, also includes a variety of negative developments that are frequently neglected. I am not referring to those negative accounts whose authors present interest in psychic phenomena as a history of fraud and deception in general (e.g., Hall 1963, Polidoro 1995). My point is the consideration of neglected events of different sorts to understand the development of the study of psychic phenomena.

An example of this is the rejection of psychical research, a topic that has been discussed by some historians (e.g., Mauskopf & McVaugh 1980, Sommer 2012, Wolfram 2009). Such rejection may be conceptualized under the concept of “boundary work.” Sociologist Thomas Gieryn referred to this process in his book *Cultural Boundaries of Science* (1999) as one conducted “for the purpose of drawing a rhetorical boundary between science and some less authoritative residual non-science” (Gieryn 1999:4–5).

An interesting study of this topic is Bertrand Méheust’s (1999a) discussion of the rejection of the paranormal from mesmerism in France. He has argued that many of the representatives of the nineteenth-century hypnosis movement in the 1878–1895 period adopted a variety of strategies to eliminate from the newer movement of hypnotism phenomena such as the healing action of a magnetic agent and clairvoyance. This was accomplished by denying the existence of the phenomena and by reinterpreting the observed effects via physiological and psychological arguments. Méheust argues that the “magnetic menace was appropriated, filtered, recalibrated,



**Cover of the Proceedings  
of the IV<sup>e</sup> Congres  
International de Psychologie**

metabolized . . . by institutional medicine” (Méheust 1999b:11).

Boundary work was also shown by psychologists in relation to psychical research in the psychology congresses held between 1889 and 1905. While psychical research was discussed in the congresses, eventually it was rejected, as seen in the proceedings of the Fourth Congress held in Paris (Janet 1901) (see photo). Such process has been referred to as one of separation “between the acceptable and the unacceptable in psychology” (Le Maléfan 1995:624). This, like other examples of rejection from psychologists in the past (e.g., Coon 1992, Sommer In Press), represented attempts by psychologists to bolster their scientific reputation by pushing away what they regarded as undesirable and compromising from their field. This is an area in which we can find a continuity of purpose between older and more recent developments.

**Criticism.** The work of critics is also neglected in historical accounts authored by many parapsychologists (for an exception, see Zingrone 2010). My impression is that this neglect may be related in part to the fact that many parapsychologists feel beleaguered by critics, and believe that critics are basically destructive and negative in their work, contributing nothing or little to parapsychology. But while one may understand this reaction, we need to keep in mind that the history of the discipline is not formed solely by those who have produced positive evidence for the existence of psi. Instead it is formed from the interplay of a variety of factors and forces, among them the writings and arguments of critics. A history that explores only the achievements of those defending the existence of psychic phenomena is only half of a discipline. To understand the development of parapsychology research, we also need to study the writings of critics because they were part of the intellectual milieu in which concepts and methods developed. One such example is the criticisms of psychologists such as Joseph Jastrow (1863–1944), who frequently wrote to criticize psychical research in attempts to establish a difference between psychology proper and psychical research in terms of quality of evidence and training of practitioners (Jastrow 1889, see also Coon 1992). Other examples of critics include figures such as William Carpenter (1813–1885) and Pierre Janet (1859–1947), whose work did much to develop ideas of dissociation and automatic mental action (Carpenter 1877, Janet 1889). Regardless if the critics were interested in constructive criticism, or how parapsychologists feel today about their objections, their writings were influential at the time and affected the reception of work about psychic phenomena.

Of course the issue gets complicated when we recognize that we cannot always classify individuals neatly as proponents or as critics. Almost everyone in parapsychology is also a critic when it comes to specific

methodologies, phenomena, or concepts. Many figures from the past were both critics and proponents at the same time, depending on the topics of discussion. An example is the well-known SPR critic Frank Podmore who defended telepathy in his book *Apparitions and Thought-Transference* (1894). But he is also remembered for his skepticism about poltergeists and physical mediumship, as can be seen in his *Studies in Psychical Research* (1897). His approach contributed much to the critical mentality prevalent in the early SPR, although not everyone agreed with his analyses.

Those individuals who were negative overall in the sense of negating the existence of ESP and other phenomena were also part of the development of the field, a perspective recognized by professional historians but which does not seem to be shared by some practitioners. In any case, psychical research is not only a defense of phenomena, it is a critical approach to a group of phenomena with various implications about the nature of the mind. The same should be true in the case of its history.

### **Concluding Remarks**

In this paper I have discussed various practices that distort our views of past developments in parapsychology. I have focused on problems of the neglect of groups and individuals, seeing the past as a function of the present, and placing an emphasis on progressive aspects of the field. I have not discussed many other aspects or topics that are generally ignored by parapsychologists when they talk about the history of their field, and which are not strictly examples of distortion. This includes the recognition that our past is not only the research, theoretical, and methodological work conducted in relation to psychic phenomena. Our past includes issues other than what parapsychologists do. An example is the role of psychics and mediums in terms of their goals and life situations, as well as in terms of their relations to researchers and to other functions they have played in shaping the field (Alvarado 1993), and the study of particular cases from the past, (e.g., Hunter 2005). Both can offer more to our understanding of past developments than an analysis of their evidential value.<sup>16</sup>

In criticizing the writings of parapsychologists about the past of their discipline, we must remember that their goals are different from those of the trained historian. Theirs is not an attempt to do formal history or to document the above-mentioned wider aspects of the field. Their approach in writing about the past exists because it fulfills disciplinary needs and interests. But still, and regardless of their right to pursue their own agenda, we need to be aware that the end result also produces distorted views of the past of the discipline.

I am afraid this paper has taken the form of a list of complaints. But



my main purpose has not been to vent. Instead I want to caution fellow parapsychologists about selected problems limiting our views of the history of the field. These issues are not only related to parapsychology, but also to the way other professionals discuss the past of their disciplines, as seen in some of the histories of science written by scientists (Brush 1995, Graham, Lepenies, & Weingart 1983). However, and as stated at the beginning of this paper, no overview of past developments is free of problems, and this applies as well to the work of professional historians. The enterprise is always a subjective one involving selection of sources and events, not to mention interpretations of those materials,<sup>17</sup> something which determines our views of the past.

To conclude, it is my hope that my discussion of the strategies and practices that distort our views of the past will help parapsychologists to obtain a better understanding of the dynamics of their field, including a view of the range of factors involved and of the subjective nature of writing about the past. Such range is a constant reminder that the meaning and construction of the past is anything but simple.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> For discussions of aspects of these differences, see Brush (1995), Forman (1991), Reinhold (1981), Turner (1990), Windsor (2001), and various papers in the anthologies of Gavroglu and Renn (2007) and Söderqvist (1997). There are also other types of individuals who produce valuable writings, among them professional writers of different sorts.
- <sup>2</sup> Both approaches may be combined, and both have their own problems (Windsor 2001). For discussions of methodological and conceptual approaches in the study of the history of scientific disciplines, see Hessenbruch (2000), Krag (1987), Olby, Cantor, Christie, and Hodge (1990), and Wallace (2008).
- <sup>3</sup> On this topic, see Graham, Lepenies, and Weingart (1983). I have discussed aspects of this in relation to parapsychology (Alvarado 1992). It can also be argued that professional historians have their own agendas related to the concerns of their discipline (Windsor 2001).
- <sup>4</sup> For summaries of papers about such figures, see "Forgotten Pioneers of Parapsychology" (2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Gauld (1968) emphasized the work of men such as Gurney, Myers, and Sidgwick. But he also mentioned the contributions of many others.
- <sup>6</sup> Affirmations that some SPR leaders were scholars and scientists are not wrong, and some spiritualists may also be included in these categories. But such emphasis may have a function beyond the merely descriptive, that of enhancing the respectability and prestige of the organization. Of

course the fact that few parapsychologists mention the spiritualists may reflect their ignorance on the subject.

- <sup>7</sup> On Wedgwood, who was Charles Darwin's cousin and brother-in-law, see *In Memoriam* (1891).
- <sup>8</sup> On Moses, see Myers (1894/1895) and Podmore (1902:Volume 2, Chapter 5). Current views of SPR history are also centered on nineteenth-century developments. While there is no doubt this period was of basic importance, this leads us to neglect from the historical record the later contributions of individuals such as Theodore Besterman (1904–1976), Everard Feilding (1867–1936), Helen Salter (1883–1959), William Salter (1880–1969), H. F. Saltmarsh (1881–1943), and G. N. M. Tyrrell (1879–1952).
- <sup>9</sup> Carrington, born in St. Saviour, Jersey, one of the Channel Islands, developed his psychical research career in the United States (Tabori 1972:24–70, see also Alvarado & Nahm 2011).
- <sup>10</sup> I am grateful to Renaud Evrard for providing me with the dates for Bisson.
- <sup>11</sup> Some say defensively, but not completely mistakenly, that English is the current universal language for communication in science. But such comments reflect a myopic view about the complexity of our modern world.
- <sup>12</sup> Pickering (1984) has argued that scientists have frequently evaluated ideas from the past using current ideas of what is valid or not, what he refers to as retrospective realism:

Having decided upon how the natural world really is, those data which supported this image were granted the status of natural facts, and the theories which constituted the chosen world-view were presented as intrinsically plausible. . . . (Pickering 1984:404).

The explanation or determination of how something was developed or constructed in the past should not be based on current consensus in a discipline, but on a contextual study of the actions, meanings, and ideas at the time the initial work was conducted.

- <sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the old literature about forces has also been ignored in discussions of parapsychological theory (e.g., Irwin & Watt 2007:Chapter 8, Stokes 1987).
- <sup>14</sup> Actually, this trend has been going on for many years (Henry 2002).
- <sup>15</sup> The artificiality of chronological and conceptual headings frequently used by some to organize articles (e.g., Alvarado 1989b, L. E. Rhine 1971) should also be kept in mind.
- <sup>16</sup> Other topics parapsychologists may explore to enlarge the range of their

views of their field include issues such as attempts to popularize the field, the reception of research and ideas, interactions with other fields or disciplines, professionalization, and the role of overarching concepts such as vitalism and ideas of evolution in relation to psychic phenomena.

- <sup>17</sup> The use of particular concepts to guide historical analysis—issues such as modern views of gender relations, economics, and professionalization—may also be seen as a distortion of the past and as a validation of history as a profession.

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