Our PA: Who, What, Whither, How Lately?

# James Carpenter

# Who are we?

Since being honored with the presidency of our Parapsychological Association, I’ve come to wonder just what we are now, who we are, what we are about.

First of all, we are not a big organization in absolute numbers, although our reach – geographically, conceptually, aspirationally – is very great. We come from about 38 different countries, so it’s safe to say that we are spread around most of the inhabited world (although North America and Europe still have the biggest shares). We are modestly and steadily growing in numbers, but the fact that we are still not large is an interesting datum. We are still a rare breed. We are committed to the scientific study of certain unusual experiences that imply an expanded understanding of how mind and mind, and mind and matter transact with one another. Few of that vast number who engage in scientific study of anything find our subject matter interesting enough – or safe enough – to pursue. Few of that even vaster number who have an interest in the unusual experiences are inclined to study them scientifically, or have the training to do so.

Why do we care enough to try to put science and these unusual experiences together? Because the *implications* of an expanded understanding of mind/mind and mind/matter interaction are very great indeed, or so we believe. And because we believe that *science* will be greatly enriched by inclusion of a better understanding of these phenomena. And because we believe that *people who have a scientifically unsophisticated interest in these experiences* will be benefited by objective, factual understanding of them.

# What are we?

We are an organization of psychologists, physicists, engineers, philosophers, physicians, biologists/neuroscientists, statisticians, psychotherapists and representatives of diverse other disciplines. Some of us are full-time academics, many others are not. A few may be said to work full-time in this field, but most earn their livings in other ways, and find the time and means to pursue their parapsychological work using their wits and grit.

The fact that we are so spread out across the globe gives us one reason that the PA is important to us – it is the human structure that ties us together. We need to communicate and criticize and advise and support one another. The PA ties us together. It does this primarily with:

* our annual convention
* this fine newsletter (produced so handsomely by Etzel Cardeña and his team)
* our website (kudos to our Executive Director Annalisa Ventola and her staff)
* our *Journal of Parapsychology* (much thanks to John Palmer and his editorial staff)
* our team of international liaisons
* our research grants and awards

# What do we do?

There is great variety to what we do. Glance at the programs of the last few annual conferences of the PA to see that variety at play. Judging from the work reported at the last meeting, in Viterbo, Italy, we study, among other things:

* The implicit power of consciousness (or unconsciousness) to affect random processes as a function of the meaningfulness of events that grip public response
* The technical and practical implications of applying clairvoyant (remote viewing) procedures to predicting real-world events
* The implications of quantum-mechanical constructs involving entanglement and retro-causation for understanding mind-matter interaction
* The psychic implications of twinship
* Psi and psychoanalysis
* Techniques for sharpening our understanding of implicit physiological response to future events
* Exceptional experiences that people have, what they might mean, and how they can be easily and unconsciously misinterpreted
* States of absorption, immersion, meditation, hypnosis, and loss of ordinary ego boundaries, and how these relate to accurate psi experiences
* The psi implications of mental or “energy” healing techniques
* The effects of geomagnetic activity on psi response

# What do we want to become?

Parapsychologists have their feet firmly (or not) planted in the future. If we were people occupied mainly with present-day concerns we would not be so committed to questions that garner few present rewards but promise such enormous potential implications. At a recent meeting I had a long, interesting talk with a professional futurist. He is someone who tries to predict trends, often for corporate business interests. He told me that parapsychologists are the real futurists. We are so devoted to things that lie ahead and (he believed) we have some unusually good ideas about it.

Yet our imagined futures diverge widely. An interesting, recent issue of the *Journal of Parapsychology* was devoted to what a number of parapsychologists imagine will be the state of our field 25 years in the future, when the *JP*, presuming its existence, will be an even 100 years old. Here are some of the themes in the futures different ones of us imagine:

* We will have developed a greater commitment to understanding people’s anomalous experiences, as they occur in real life. This may entail several different implications:
  + We will have better guidance for persons distressed by “paranormal” experiences
  + We will know more about how these are explained by physical and neuropsychological processes
  + We will better integrate our work into academic departments of psychology, biology, medicine, sociology, etc.
  + We will appreciate better, and shed more light on, how such experiences may carry important implications for individuals and society
  + We will better understand their implications for the perennial questions people have about spiritual matters
* We will understand much more about how psi works in the larger, natural world, including field effects, and implicit information-gathering, and “good luck” vs “bad luck.”
* We will advance the understanding of psi effects in terms of quantum mechanics. This may have different implications according to different visions:
  + We will come to understand that psi phenomena are only very narrowly predictable and may never be practically applied due to constraints built into the structure of Nature
  + (Or) We will understand and predict psi so well that we will have to struggle with the ethical difficulties that come from the application of psi.
  + We will resolve the age-old dichotomy between spirituality and matter.
  + We will accept and in some sense prove, the validity of religious experience.
  + (Or) We will understand that supernatural attributions are logical errors, and psi will be explicable in the context of a universe constituted solely of matter and energy.
  + The quantum aspects of biological processes will be sufficiently well understood that psi phenomena will be scientifically explicable and respectable
* Psychological theories of psi will become more sophisticated and more capable of predicting psi phenomena and even applying them to gather information for real-life concerns, and producing mental effects on systems that matter to people, as in healing illness.
* The most charming prediction was a fantasy news item from the future. Twenty-five years hence, a young neuroscientist from Stanford University is being awarded the Nobel Prize for her work in parapsychology. Hers was the first research that located precise brain areas and processes that mediate psi experiences, and this has led to an avalanche of research that has vastly increased the reliability – and hence applicability -- of psi. Science and culture are beginning to grapple with the convulsions caused by these developments.

Ah, the many different futures that pull us! How widely we dream. But as Marshall McLuhan paraphrased, a man’s reach must exceed his grasp, or what’s a metaphor?

# How are we doing lately?

Given that we are reaching so, how are we moving along these days? Remarkably well, I think.

First of all, as the above remarks suggest, we have widened our scope to include a more “normalized” branch to our efforts. On one hand we are still occupied with trying to establish the reality of psi processes, understand them theoretically, sharpen our empirical picture of how they work. On the other, we also have an interest in the experiences people have (anomalous, exceptional) that they think of as psychic or paranormal. This establishes fertile fields for collaboration with sociologists, psychiatrists, cognitive scientists, historians. It should give us more to offer people who simply want help understanding and coping with odd experiences.

In our traditional area, studying genuine mind-mind and mind-matter interactions that take place beyond the somatosensory system, we continue to contribute new findings. There are discernable changes, though, in how we are going about this.

To greatly simplify the history of our experimental efforts, it seems to me that there has been a certain rhythm to our engagement with mainstream science, and that we are now well into a new phase of that. The initial work of the Society for Psychical Research aroused a great deal of interest and controversy among important scientists of the day, and then it faded into a controversial fog that made it seem forgettable for most of them. Then in the 1930’s a heightened awareness and controversy erupted again, with the publication of Rhine’s *Extra-Sensory Perception*, and work from other laboratories around the world that followed that. After another decade or two of scientific interest and debate, a period of foggy amnesia set in again for most scientists, and students came to be told only that the findings were difficult to replicate, so cheating and incompetence was the likely explanation. Another burst of interest in parapsychological science blossomed briefly again in the 1960’s and ‘70’s, with the phenomenon of Uri Geller and books by researchers such as Murphy, Thouless, Stevenson, Targ and Puthoff, Tart, Schwartz, Bender and others. Serious work was framed in the heady times of psychedelics and the fictional anthropology of Carlos Castaneda. Scientific awareness twitched then quickly slumbered again. Parapsychologists were marginalized but kept up their work in their own arena, adding to their knowledge, sharpening their methods, correcting their errors, talking to each other. This work has been almost exclusively presented in our specialty journals and conferences (or kept secret by the intelligence establishment), and came to be virtually invisible to the mainstream. Parapsychologists were largely content with this, and not too aggressive in trying to get more attention again.

Then for the last decade at least, we have changed. We have been presenting more of our work in journals and meetings beyond our specialty – among physicists, engineers, cognitive and neuro-psychologists, historians, physicians, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, sociologists and anthropologists. We are attracting the controversy and antagonism that we might logically have expected, and we have been resourceful and intelligent in responding to that. A few are embracing us, and others are finding us a conscious irritant, a mosquito bite that is hard to ignore. We should rejoice for all of that. Feeling relevant, we are claiming more relevance.

There have been many threads to this inclusion effort, and many bold and determined leaders. A series of meta-analytic papers in various journals has made it clear that our basic phenomena are reproducible and real and meaningfully patterned. Recently, the single event that most stands out is the publication by Daryl Bem, in 2011, of his finding-packed and elegantly presented paper, Feeling the Future, in the prestigious *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology.* Bem is a highly esteemed psychologist. He knows how to conduct excellent research, and he knows how to present it in clear and compelling ways. This paper awakened a new wave of popular and scientific interest, and howls of protest that ranged from ugly and juvenile to profoundly thoughtful. The best of these criticisms are now answered by a new meta-analytic paper that is under editorial review as I write. This paper analyses a collection of 90 experiments (Bem’s original 9, plus 81 new ones), carried out both by psi-proponents and psi-skeptics, that attempt to answer Bem’s basic question: Can the inadvertent behavior of persons show “time-reversed” effects, reliably anticipating random future events? The report responds to the most sophisticated and seemingly plausible complaints – that only certain positively-oriented experimenters can find the effects, that the effects are not really strong enough to be convincing when methods (Bayesian) are used that take into account the apparent unlikelihood of validity, or, conversely, that the results are “too strong” (too consistent) to be real, and must represent slippery misdeeds of analysis and selection. The most sophisticated techniques currently available to address these problems are used by the authors, and it is clear that none of the problems can account for the observed results. Like it or hate it, our sensed reach to the unpredictable future is objectively real.

We see our best methods and our most fruitful questions at work in this paper. Look for it online, where pre-publication drafts are available (Feeling the Future: A Meta-analysis of 90 Experiments on the Anomalous Anticipation of Random Future Events). We also see the international character of our best work. The authors are from the United States, Italy, France and the United Kingdom. We are not numerous, but we are around your corner. And we are constructing and presenting genuine knowledge that can no longer be easily ignored or forgotten.

# References

Bem, D. J. (2011). Feeling the future: Experimental evidence for anomalous retroactive influences on cognition and affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100*, 407–425.

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