

Parapsychology as a Career

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ABSTRACT: Many young people become fascinated by the subject matter of parapsychology and are moved to consider the prospect of becoming a professional parapsychologist. This article offers some considered observations in relation to such an aspiration.

Each year I receive several letters from young students expressing a strong ambition to make parapsychology their career and seeking advice on how best to achieve this objective. As one of a handful of Australians who could justifiably claim to have established themselves as a professional scientific parapsychologist it is fair to suggest that I am suitably placed to offer informed advice on this issue. Having reflected on my own experience and listened to the accounts of others who had similar aspirations, I have written the present article with the explicit aim of alerting readers to some major considerations in the choice of parapsychology as a career. I cannot, of course, make any claim that I know what is right and true for any other person. But I do offer my observations on the matter in the hope that they may help to inform others' deliberations on their parapsychological ambitions. Other sources of advice (e.g., Stanford, 1984) might also be consulted.

You may occasionally have encountered a few people who represent themselves as "professional parapsychologists" and who offer to put clients in touch with the spirits of the deceased or to provide a glimpse of unknown futures. Some others calling themselves "parapsychologists" would have been known as psychical researchers in earlier times or in different settings; they are enthusiastic, well-intentioned but essentially untrained amateurs who look into reports of haunted houses and the like as a purely casual interest or hobby. I should make it clear at the outset that in this article I am using the term *parapsychologist* in a fundamentally different sense from the above instances. A parapsychologist is defined here as a trained scientist or other research-oriented academic, usually with a PhD degree, who undertakes rigorously controlled experimental or otherwise objective empirical investigations of anomalous phenomena that are hypothesised to have a paranormal basis. Parapsychologists most frequently would be employed in a university environment; a few others may conduct their research in independently funded laboratories that nevertheless operate along similar lines as their university counterparts. An aspiration to be a parapsychologist therefore is realistic only for those students who have the academic ability to undertake a Ph.D. in due course and thence to secure employment as a university academic.

More specifically, the aspiring parapsychologist ideally needs to be academically gifted with a balance of strong skills in the sciences (including some mathematics) and written expression. The capacity to think both scientifically and critically is crucial. A person who is even contemplating a career in parapsychology would almost inevitably be an independent thinker, but there are some additional personality characteristics that could be advantageous in this field. In order to be an effective scientific researcher it is helpful to have a patient, meticulous, and highly organised disposition. Given that parapsychologists often are the butt of criticism and debunking, this is not a vocation where overly sensitive people can thrive, but at the same time a genuinely warm personality seems to facilitate productive interaction with people acting as experimental participants. If you judge yourself to have this range of abilities and personal dispositions, how might you then pursue an education in parapsychology?

Many people who have become academic parapsychologists began their education in parapsychology in an informal way whilst still in high school. Perhaps their curiosity may have been tweaked by reports in the popular media about the latest paranormal “fad” such as spoon-bending, near-death experiences, or channelling. In any event, they generally were inspired to read some of the many books designed to introduce the general public to scientific parapsychology. Among some of the classics of this type are Gardner Murphy’s (1961) *Challenge of Psychological Research*, Rosalind Heywood’s 1971) *The Sixth Sense*, Louisa Rhine’s (1975) *Psi: What is It?*, and Scott Rogo’s (1976) *Parapsychology*. These books still are recommended reading for school students and others seeking a non-technical introduction to the field. More recent surveys are offered by Richard Broughton’s (1991) *Parapsychology: The Controversial Science* and Dean Radin’s (1997) *The Conscious Universe*. Such introductory accounts serve as a helpful bridge between an interest in anomalous everyday experiences and the endeavours of researchers to subject parapsychological hypotheses to critical scrutiny in a laboratory setting.

It is often at this point that students are at a loss as to what to do next. Introductory books implicitly convey the tantalising prospect that the reader could indeed become a professional parapsychologist, but almost invariably they offer no information on how this ambition might be realised. Before pursuing such an objective in any formal way the student is urged to progress their reading on two fronts.

First, some rather more erudite surveys of parapsychological research might be inspected. These include my own *Introduction to Parapsychology* (Irwin, 1999) and Edge, Morris, Palmer, and Rush’s (1986) text, *Foundations of Parapsychology*. In this context, Michael Thalbourne’s (1982) parapsychological glossary may be helpful to young readers who are unfamiliar with the technical terminology of the field. Although these books certainly are pitched at a more advanced level than those intended for the general public, even a superficial perusal of them will reinforce the strongly scientific orientation of contemporary parapsychology. Generally speaking,

parapsychologists do not study UFOs or witchcraft. This is an important feature to appreciate, and there will undoubtedly be some students who have their more magical perceptions of the field shattered by this revelation. The fact nevertheless remains that the work of a parapsychologist demands a stringently scientific outlook, and the scope of parapsychology's subject matter is defined much more narrowly than is typically presumed by members of the general public.

A second area of reading that I would commend at this point is the skeptical literature. Although it might seem paradoxical that a parapsychologist would make such a recommendation, the novice would benefit in various ways by reading one or two skeptical commentaries on parapsychological research. Andrew Neher's (1980) *The Psychology of Transcendence*, for example, will serve as a caution that the parapsychologist must always be alert to the possibility that seemingly anomalous phenomena might well be explicable in terms of currently accepted ("normal") physical or psychological processes; awareness of such possibilities certainly helps to sharpen one's critical orientation. More aggressively skeptical accounts such as the works of Martin Gardner, James Randi, or James Alcock might also indicate the type of belligerent rhetoric to which professional parapsychologists may be subjected; notwithstanding lip-service to the principles of academic freedom, parapsychology is not a widely condoned pursuit, and overly idealistic students should be alerted to the sorts of antagonism levelled at its practitioners. An interesting if slightly odd mix of both parapsychological and skeptical surveys is available in the recently published *Encyclopedia of the Paranormal* (Stein, 1996).

If readers remain undeterred by these considerations and persist in their ambition to become parapsychologists, how does one proceed to study the subject at a formal level? Direct instruction in parapsychology has all but vanished from the undergraduate curricula of Australian universities. For many years students of psychology at the University of New England could include an option in parapsychology in their degree program, but staffing restrictions have now limited this area of study to a small number of Fourth Year students. A similar undergraduate unit at the University of Tasmania lapsed upon the retirement of its coordinator. In the main, opportunities for specialist study of parapsychology in Australia are limited to a few students who are doing individual reading programs or research projects in the Fourth Year of their degree (e.g., Honours); within the current contracted operation of tertiary institutions, such options currently are available at the University of New England, at Adelaide University, and perhaps at one or two other universities by negotiation. Again, it must be stressed that admission to Fourth Year programs typically requires outstanding performance in the previous years of the degree, and thus the study of parapsychology would be accessible only to the most capable students.

A postgraduate qualification (Ph.D. or equivalent) nevertheless is essential for the professional parapsychologist. This would entail at least three years full-time study (or part-time equivalent) following the meritorious completion of the four-year

undergraduate program. The doctoral program usually comprises a substantial empirical project on the topic of study and its presentation as a thesis. In selecting a university for the completion of such a qualification it is important to ascertain the availability of a project supervisor who has an established international reputation in the field of parapsychology. Studying under a supervisor who does not have a first-hand acquaintance with the field would run a substantial risk of fatal conceptual or methodological flaws appearing in the thesis, resulting in its rejection by examiners. At the present time in Australia, the New England and Adelaide universities are best placed for the supervision of postgraduate research in parapsychology; one or two other universities have staff who could supervise an isolated topic here and there (but not the full range of possibilities for a parapsychological thesis). The availability of suitable supervisory staff nevertheless is inclined to change within a short period of time, so an inquiry on this matter should always be made with the relevant university authorities shortly before enrolment.

Another possibility is to complete a postgraduate qualification in parapsychology at an overseas university. Details of these programs can be located on the World Wide Web; it must be added that such programs are becoming increasingly scarce, and any item of information obtained from the Web should be fully checked for its currency. One popular international postgraduate centre for parapsychology students is the Parapsychology Laboratory at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland. This unit has places for suitably qualified students wishing to undertake research leading to the award of a Ph.D. A major advantage in working at such a specialist unit is that one has daily contact with several students and staff with parapsychological interests, and in this respect Edinburgh can be a very stimulating and supportive environment in which to study the subject; in Australian universities it is often the case that the sole person with any direct involvement in parapsychology is the student's supervisor.

Again, there is a cogent case to be made for doing postgraduate work on a topic that is not parapsychological. The rationale for this suggestion relates to employment opportunities. It is rare for a person to be appointed to an academic position in parapsychology, especially a tenured one. As far as I am aware, universities in Australia have never advertised a post in parapsychology, and they are unlikely to do so in the foreseeable future. The situation in most other countries is little different. Many current academic parapsychologists in fact were originally appointed to teach in a more mainstream discipline; it was only some time after their initial appointment that they developed parapsychology as a explicit research specialisation. Additionally, students who do complete a postgraduate thesis on parapsychology may find they are disdained by alternative employers; in light of the contraction of the university sector in Australia, such a qualification might rapidly become a vocational dead-end.

With the practicalities of future employment in mind, an effective tactic therefore might be to pursue advanced research training (by way of a Ph.D.) in the context of an orthodox or "mainstream" topic, secure an academic position in a university, and then

allow professional research (and perhaps teaching) interests in parapsychology to evolve in a gradual manner to a level that can be tolerated by the locally prevailing intellectual zeitgeist. This tactic may strike many students as a frustratingly slow means of achieving their objective of becoming a parapsychologist, but it should be noted that in addition to its vocational practicabilities such a strategy would provide the strong grounding in a mainstream discipline that is so valuable as a conceptual framework within which critically to assess parapsychological hypotheses and conduct innovative parapsychological research.

For some students there may be a viable compromise position, namely, to undertake postgraduate research that comprises a mainstream approach to a parapsychological phenomenon. By way of illustration, many current doctoral students with interests in parapsychology are investigating psychological functions of belief in the paranormal. Such projects do not even consider if such beliefs are in any way well-founded but rather, they inquire how a belief in ESP and the like might make a person's life a little more bearable or meaningful, or is a reflection of specific facets of the person's personality. Similarly, instead of addressing out-of-body experiences or near-death experiences in a direct fashion, the postgraduate student might investigate the psychology of dissociative experiences as more broadly conceived. Such research topics also have the advantage that there is a high probability of yielding results of which one can make some conceptual sense; by contrast, an ESP experiment very easily could produce data that are inconclusive, and such an outcome might fail to impress some thesis examiners. The principal feature of these compromise research topics, however, is that while they may still cater to the student's parapsychological interests, they might be deemed of sufficiently mainstream relevance as to maintain reasonable appeal in the eyes of potential employers.

If I am seen to have painted an overwhelmingly pessimistic picture of the prospects of becoming a parapsychologist, I must reiterate that I have sought to offer a realistic rather than romanticised account. At the same time I can affirm that in my experience, the life of a professional academic parapsychologist can be a most intellectually challenging and stimulating one.

Appendix: Useful Addresses for Further Inquiries

Academic Parapsychologists

Assoc. Prof. Harvey Irwin

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e-mail: hirwin@metz.une.edu.au

Dr Michael Thalbourne

Department of Psychology, University of Adelaide, Adelaide SA 5005

e-mail: psym-tha@psychology.adelaide.edu.au

Prof. Robert Morris

Department of Psychology, University of Edinburgh, 7 George Square, Edinburgh
EH8 9JZ, Scotland

e-mail: ejua30@edinburgh.ac.uk

Parapsychological Organisations

American Society for Psychical Research, 5 West 73rd Street, New York, NY 10023,
USA

Exceptional Human Experience Network, 414 Rockledge Road, New Bern, NC
28562, USA; phone 919 636 8734; email ehenwhite@coastalnet.com; website
<http://www.ehe.org>

Institute for Parapsychology, Rhine Research Center, 402 North Buchanan Boulevard,
Durham, NC 27701, USA; phone 919 688 8241, fax 919 683 4338; website
<http://www.rhine.org/index.html>

Koestler Unit of Parapsychology, Department of Psychology, University of
Edinburgh, 7 George Square, Edinburgh EH8 9JZ, Scotland, UK; phone 031 650
3348; fax 031 650 3369; website <http://moebius.psy.ed.ac.uk/index.html>

Parapsychological Association, P.O. Box 92209, Durham, NC 27708-2209, USA;
phone 919 682 3752; fax 919 683 4338; website <http://www.parapsych.org>

Parapsychology Foundation, 228 East 71st Street, New York, NY 10021, USA; phone
212 628 1550; fax 212 628 1559; website <http://www.parapsychology.org>

Society for Psychical Research, 49 Marloes Road, London, W8 6LA, England; phone
01 937 8984

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