

The Fourth Bial Foundation Symposium: A Personal View

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Every second year, when the Northern spring is taking hold, the Bial Foundation holds its Symposium at the Casa do Medico in Porto, Portugal. The Bial Foundation is one of the major sponsors of parapsychology in the world, and I have been variously involved in two grants so far, both of them to two of our Associate Editors, Lance Storm and James Houran. It seems fitting, therefore, to give our readers a digest of the many and varied presentations in Porto at the Fourth Symposium called "Behind and beyond the brain". It should be noted that the presentations were simultaneously translated into Portuguese and English.

The opening session on Thursday 4th April began with a presentation by the President of the Bial Foundation, Dr. Luis Portela, M.D. He was followed by a highly technical psychophysiological paper given by Emeritus Professor António Coimbra and called "Cerebral mechanisms of stress activation".

The first full session was entitled "Exceptional interpersonal interactions: Basic issues", and was chaired by Koestler Professor of Parapsychology Robert Morris, from the University of Edinburgh. The first paper was by Daryl Bem of Cornell University, Ithaca, USA, and was entitled "Errors and biases in our perception of self and others". He pointed out that we are all psychologists—we collect data, try to detect what goes with what (i.e., what the correlations are), and we infer cause and effect. Our informal theories often work, but there are systematic errors. For example we are influenced by stereotypes, and stereotypes persist.

The next paper was by Emeritus Professor at Oxford Michael Argyle, speaking on "The role of non-verbal communication in relationships, happiness and religion". For example, he addressed the question "Does money make you happy?", and answered it by saying that yes it does if you are poor, does less so for people of middle income, and people are far worse off happiness-wise if they win the lottery because they tend to give up satisfying jobs.

Following coffee Rodrigo Saraiva, a psychology professor at Lisbon, gave a paper called in English "Attraction and mating: Between biology and culture".

Richard Broughton, with whom I was a postgraduate at the University of Edinburgh, and who now is President of Intuition Laboratories, USA, gave an invited address on the topic "Telepathy: Revisiting its roots". Dr. Broughton tried to distinguish between telepathy and clairvoyance, but agrees with me that "we are probably dealing with a single ability to acquire information without use of conventional sensory systems".

Viewing and discussion of the multitudinous array of "posters" then followed, about which more later.

The 2nd session, on Friday, April 5th, was chaired by Harvard University's psychologist Jerome Kagan, and entitled "Exceptional interpersonal interactions: Affiliation and emotion". Colwyn Trevarthen, Emeritus Professor at the University of Edinburgh, gave a presentation called "Sensing self and other, out-of-body and in the future: Exceptional explanations for everyday human experiences." This somewhat obscure title was followed by an intriguing lecture with video footage of babies: "research on the spontaneous actions of infants, and their orientation to events, has brought evidence that exposes the limitations of standard explanations of perception, cognition, learning, emotion and communication in psychological science. Findings confirm that a newborn infant can act as one coherent agent, can be aware of an object located in space and time outside its body, etc."

Isabel Soares presented a paper entitled (in English) "Construction of attachment: From relation to self and from self to relations".

After the coffee break, Kathy Dalton gave her paper "Anomalous communication among relatives and others with a special relationship." She asked, "Does ESP run in the family?" "Is there such a thing as mother's intuition?" Perhaps the function of psi ties in with the survival instinct, reproductive success, and the continuation of evolution. Twins, however, give ambiguous results. Dalton adopts the noise reduction model for internal attention states. She has isolated two factors: emotional closeness, and the biological link. The best ESP performance seems to come from those persons who are biologically linked and emotionally close.

David Fontana asked "Does mind survive physical death?" He notes that "materialistic science, with its emphasis upon the body and the brain, has continued to reject the notion of survival." Fontana reviews the evidence and claims that there is no reason for there to be consciousness, but it nevertheless is there. Consciousness is central to our understanding. It is unscientific not to read the literature on survival and the paranormal. The

Scole group produced evidence of disembodied voices, lights that pass through objects, materialisation of hands and figures, and levitation of objects. A conjuror judged that it was not possible to duplicate the phenomena. They were ostensibly communications from the founders of psychical research. In surveys, 50% of people claim after-death communications.

After lunch was the 3rd session, chaired by Ian Stevenson of the University of Virginia, USA. Rui Mota Cardoso of Porto gave a paper whose translated title was “Therapeutic relationship: A personalized approach of science and art”.

James Carpenter, of Chapel Hill and Durham, North Carolina, spoke on “The intrusion of anomalous communication in group and individual psychotherapy: Clinical observations and a research project.” He noted the occurrence of psi in therapeutic contexts, for example, from clients. He described a test of clairvoyance in a leaderless clinical group. The average rank scores showed significant evidence of correspondence between the pictorial target and the clinical response.

After coffee and an interlude with the posters, John Gruzelier of London spoke on “New insights into the nature of hypnotisability”. I am in the process of following him up because of the similarity of his results to mine with the concept of “transliminality” (“across the threshold”: Thalbourne, 2000). He noted the opinion that “schizophrenia is a chronic state of hypnotisability”, and that therefore one should steer clear of hypnosis in this context. In a group assessment of British university students a moderate positive correlation was found between hypnotic susceptibility and such features of so-called “schizotypy” (psychosis-proneness) as unreality and “cognitive activation”. The personality correlates of hypnotisability include absorption, imaginative involvement, vividness of imagery, perceptual alteration, fantasy proneness, creativity, effortlessness of process, flexible control of sleep, and flexibility (both cognitive and neuropsychological). Many of these variables are components of transliminality. Finally, the speaker asked, is psychopathology all bad news? It has been found that there are exceptional abilities among the relatives of psychotics.

Mitchell Krucoff and Suzanne Crater, both from Duke University, Durham, USA, spoke passionately on “Spiritual intervention in acute cardiac care: The Monitoring & Actualization of Noetic Trainings (MANTRA) Study Group.” They studied patients with heart attacks. They assert that “Noetic (nonpharmacologic) therapies may reduce anxiety, pain and distress, enhance the efficacy of pharmacologic agents, or affect short and long-term procedural outcomes.” They applied four noetic therapies: stress relaxation, imagery, touch therapy and prayer. “The lowest absolute

[in hospital] complication rates were observed in patients assigned to off-site prayer.”

On the third and final day of the meeting, Saturday April 6th, I was unwell with pneumonia and unable to attend the Symposium in person, but I have gathered information about these closing papers where possible from the collection of abstracts given us. The session was chaired by the electrophysiologist Fernando Lopes da Silva.

Alexandre Castro-Caldas, of Lisbon, spoke in Portuguese on “Research on psychological development”.

Stanley Krippner, of the Saybrook Graduate School and Research Center, San Francisco, asked “Is love good for your health? Intimacy and the process of flow”. For example, he said “...a study at Harvard University revealed that twenty-five percent of the men who rated their parents high in love and caring had diseases thirty-five years later. However, eighty-seven percent of the men who gave their parents low ratings had fallen ill.”

Following coffee Harald Walach gave a scholarly paper of which I have a copy on “Melting boundaries—Subjectivity and intersubjectivity in the light of parapsychological data”. He presented some parapsychological data that suggest “that under certain circumstances there can be something like a direct interconnectedness between subjects. These data challenge the modern world view of separate individuals.”

And finally, Caroline Watt, of Edinburgh, told the audience about “Researcher effects and remote enhancement of focussing of attention”. “Three studies investigated how the researcher’s attitude towards psi affected participants’ performance on a remote mental influence task”. These studies “demonstrate researcher effects on participants’ psychological approach to the task, but not on the participants’ psi performance.”

A final comprehensive round table joined António Coimbra, Robert Morris, Jerome Kagan, Ian Stevenson and Fernando Lopes da Silva. Such roundtables maximised interaction between participants as well as with the audience.

It should thus be clear that the topics of a good many of the papers were not parapsychological per se, but were chosen to be of broader general interest to the audience. In this respect the Bial Symposium differs from a Parapsychological Association convention or a conference of the Society for Psychical Research. This may account for the fact that I have never seen a Bial Symposium written up for a parapsychological journal or magazine.

I promised to say something about the posters. These were summaries of research or ideas in progress or reaching completion. For example, James Houran (in absentia) and I presented a poster about the

conditions under which apparitions were experienced. Lance Storm (in absentia) and I presented an outline of the theory of psychopraxia (Thalbourne, 2001) and some of the results from tests of it. Adrian Parker and Joakim Westerlund presented a detailed description of an experiment using the ganzfeld technique. Erlendur Haraldsson presented some of his work on children who claimed a previous life. John Palmer (in person)—editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology*—and Vernon Neppe (in absentia) presented work relating subjective paranormal experience to dysfunction in that part of the brain known as the temporal lobe. Stuart Wilson, of the University of Edinburgh, displayed a poster on the topic of “psi and the cognitive unconscious”. Fiona Steinkampf had a large poster on her experiments with precognition. Chris Roe—editor of *The Paranormal Review*—had a huge display having to do with his computerized psi greyhound races, some testing ESP and others PK (if these are really different, which I doubt). And there were literally dozens more posters too many to summarize.

Faces were put to people who were previously only names or email addresses, and while old contacts were renewed, new potential colleagues sprang up. This is the purpose of that great melting pot which is the academic conference. The Bial Foundation is to be commended for its financial support of so many diverse researchers, and for bringing so many of them together in their bi-annual Symposium, one researcher at least from as far away as Australia.

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