



Parapsychology Review

Volume 15, No. 5 Sept.-Oct., 1984

PARAPSYCHOLOGY AS A CAREER

By Rex G. Stanford

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Published bimonthly by the Parapsychology Foundation, Inc., 228 East 71st Street, New York, N.Y. 10021. News items should be addressed to the Editor, Betty Shapin. Subscriptions: U.S. \$9 for one year; \$17 for two years; current year single copies \$1.50, back issues \$2.50. Other countries: \$11 for one year; \$20 for two years. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright 1984 by Parapsychology Foundation, Inc. All rights reserved. ISSN 0031-1804.

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of individuals inquire each year concerning careers in parapsychology. As the author of two previous publications related to parapsychology as a career (Stanford, 1976, 1978), I personally receive between 100 and 200 such inquiries each year, I would estimate, in the form of requests for reprints of those publications. While those publications are still very useful, the time is right for some updating and supplementation of the earlier material. The purpose of the present paper is to provide a very brief overview of the kinds of advice which I would personally give to anyone coming to me to inquire about a career in parapsychology or to anyone who has already embarked upon some training intended to aid in the preparation for such a career. The areas of such career-relevant advice can be considered to include: (a) the kinds of career opportunities which allow one to work in parapsychology; (b) the rewards and costs of working in parapsychology; (c) qualifications for working in this field; (d) proper training for such work and (e) active pursuit of a parapsychological career.

Career Opportunities

Anyone considering a career in this field should recognize at the outset that the opportunities for full-time employment exclusively in parapsychological research are sufficiently few that they are essentially nonexistent. When they occur, they are likely to be positions created, more or less ad hoc, for an individual who was available and promising as a candidate. They are

certainly not positions which are open, available and for which a position notice has been posted. Even the ad hoc positions are extremely rare. Far more realistic are opportunities to do psi research when one has been employed for other or more general reasons, as in a faculty post at some university.

Full-time parapsychological research. This option, as just noted, is far more popular than it is real. There are only a handful of individuals employed in full-time parapsychological research, at a genuinely professional level, in the United States. Such positions are invariably at "centers" and they are sometimes underpaid, committed to work in specific areas and are likely to be very insecure. It is quite unrealistic to plan for a career in parapsychology under the assumption that that career will be spent working in such a center in a full-time capacity as a professional researcher. As an illustration of the stark truth of that statement, I am presently aware of two extraordinarily fine parapsychologists, both of whom have excellent education and experience and who have indisputably moved to the top of their profession, who are unable, at this point in time, to find anything resembling full-time employment, at a proper professional level, in this field. What all of this means in practice is that full-time professional-level psi research is a highly unrealistic career aspiration. Even the very few individuals who

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have seemingly pursued that objective successfully are not, to the best of my knowledge, in highly secure situations.

Part-time involvement in psi research. A substantial number of recognized workers in parapsychology make major contributions to the field while being employed for purposes that are not specifically parapsychological. Positions of this type include faculty positions in a number of the sciences at recognized, accredited universities, usually in programs which award advanced degrees. Occasionally, an individual will be able to make contributions to this field while working in other nonpsi settings, such as in a privately funded laboratory. If one has proper training and if the doctoral research involved in that training is not specifically parapsychological, prospects for such employment—especially for the individual with nonpsi publications in recognized, refereed journals—are reasonably good. What is more, such settings may often favor research productivity and an academic setting is surely one of the most favorable for the pursuit of one's individual research interests. (The drawback, of course, may be an absence of colleagues who have any special interest in psi research, but this circumstance can be somewhat rectified by attempting to visit with other parapsychologists and at psi research centers as often as possible and to attend professional parapsychological conventions.) Clearly, such settings require one to do other things than psi research, such as teaching, research supervision, etc., and research is usually expected or is highly desirable in other areas than just parapsychology. These elements can, however, have some distinct advantages, as will be discussed below. A great advantage of this approach is that it is almost always going to provide better financial advantages and, often, better job security than working at a psi-research center. Fringe benefits are often much better, too.

Rewards and Costs

Since parapsychology presently has no widely recognized or clearly demonstrable practical applications—at least insofar as the scientific and busi-

ness communities are concerned—it is not surprising that the financial rewards for psi research are not great. Indeed, they are definitely substandard for the most part. However, it is not the hope of great financial reward which attracts workers to this very difficult and scientifically controversial field. One of my own guesses is that at least one of the factors which attracts workers to parapsychology is the possibility that psi phenomena, if real, will, when subjected to scientific study, provide some highly meaningful answers to perennial problems related to mind-body issues and, perhaps, even to questions about so-called spiritual realities. Another possibility is that some investigators are excited about the possibility of practical applications of ostensible psi phenomena in areas such as healing, medicine and, even, espionage. (We must recognize, however, that there are presently no published demonstrations that psi phenomena can be regularly and reliably used for such practical applications. But it may be the very challenge of such possibilities which draws some individuals to psi research.) For some persons, such as myself, it is the possibility of scientific solutions to the problems posed by certain communication anomalies which is of central importance; for others, it will surely be the practical possibilities. Either prospect or both may attract the individual worker. Either prospect, too, will likely prove challenging and difficult—if past history is any indication—and the very difficulties of this field may attract certain adventurous souls. What is very important for the individual contemplating a career in this field is that he or she recognize that the obstacles which have not dissolved in the face of 100 years of dedicated research—albeit by only a handful of underfunded individuals—will not likely disappear rapidly even if this embattled field should obtain enough funding to upgrade its efforts and its number of workers considerably. In short, if one's hope in entering this field is to make a quick "break-through," one may be disappointed in a psi-research career. Indeed, one of the most frustrating elements to anyone with a scientific mentality—and an awareness of how matters progress

in most sciences—who enters parapsychology is the inability of any given, individual worker to point toward an assured, replicated finding which allows him or her to say, "Here is what my research has clearly shown about (say) extrasensory function and my findings have been replicated by others, including those originally skeptical concerning my hypothesis." This is the current state of affairs and it is to be hoped that it will change. It is, nevertheless, a long standing reality which should be confronted by anyone planning to enter parapsychology in the hope of actually making a contribution to scientific knowledge. In this regard, I would suggest that work in this field could be much more rewarding if researchers in planning their psi studies would also be sure that the study addressed some meaningful, relevant nonpsi problems. It is good to be able to feel that, since one is a scientist, one is actually accomplishing the objective to which all scientists aspire, the positive advancement of knowledge. Such an approach might also make research funding considerably easier and it might even prove the key to solving some specifically parapsychological problems. Sometimes the solution to certain nonpsi problems may be necessary or, at least, very helpful to the solution of psi-research problems. Regrettably, too few psi researchers have, historically speaking, planned their work so that it will have values in nonpsi areas. There are indications, however, that this historical trend is now changing.

Qualifications of Workers

Being interested in so-called psi phenomena is not, of itself, a reason for thinking that one should consider parapsychology as a career. What is more important is a personal sense of excitement about the prospect of applying the scientific method to the solution of the problems posed by such anomalous events. In short, one must see the observations termed "psi events" as constituting an interesting scientific problem area, one to which the methods of science can be meaningfully applied. In my own judgment, individuals are poorly suited to a parapsychological career if their chief aspira-

tion in engaging in psi research is to "overthrow the paradigm"—as some have put it—rather than to apply the methods of science and see where that application leads. Stated otherwise, the foremost qualification for being a parapsychologist is being imbued with a true spirit of scientific inquiry. Generally speaking, such an individual has a strong interest in the broad sphere of scientific inquiry, an interest which extends far beyond the borders of traditional parapsychology into several of the more traditional areas of scientific inquiry. Also, accuracy and truthfulness are central traits of scientific character.

Anyone who wishes a career in parapsychology should be able to write fairly concisely and clearly. Written communication is an essential of scientific discourse. Ideally, too, a parapsychologist should possess at least some natural ability to cope with mathematical concepts and operations, since mathematics is a major tool in every science. In parapsychology even the investigator of spontaneous cases will find ample opportunity for the use of statistical methods and, conceivably, other mathematical tools.

Finally, but very important, the parapsychologist, like any scientist, must have a strong desire for care and precision in every aspect of the work. Without this, all else will be in vain. Typically, a careful individual gives full attention to what is done in the first place, but, additionally, such an individual checks it once more to insure that it is done correctly. A careful individual *cares* about correctness, accuracy and precision. If an individual finds that such "obsessiveness" is alien to his or her own personality, he or she had better develop it with training or steer clear of research entirely.

Training

Proper training is absolutely essential for any scientific career. In most scientific areas this is accomplished by taking the Ph.D. degree in that field and, sometimes, this is supplemented by postdoctoral training. Because there are essentially no full-time careers available in parapsychology and because there are no scientifically dem-

onstrated practical applications for our scientific findings in parapsychology, there are no universities with doctoral programs in parapsychology—and, under the circumstances, that is exactly the way it should be. What accrediting agency would wish to give its stamp of approval to a program which prepared individuals for nonexistent careers? Nor is it realistic to believe that this circumstance will change in anything resembling the near future.

How, then, does one obtain proper training to work in parapsychology? Circumstances are not as bleak as they might at first appear. The first requirement of training to do good parapsychological research is good scientific training. Such training can be had by undertaking the Ph.D. degree in any scientific area of one's choosing at a respectable university. By working there under a scientist of some distinction, one will be trained in the basics of scientific thinking and will have advanced preparation in some specific area, the area of the dissertation topic. With this approach it is well to take the doctorate and to do one's doctoral research in an area which has potential relevance, substantively or methodologically, to psi research—but *not* on a parapsychological topic, since that would label you as a "parapsychologist" and greatly reduce your job opportunities. The specifically parapsychological part of one's training should be very actively pursued, either interlarded with or subsequent to the doctoral training just mentioned. One could, and probably should, spend a summer in the training program offered at the Institute for Parapsychology in Durham, North Carolina. One could also, with profit, spend some time at one of the parapsychological research centers as a trainee. Anyone pursuing a career in this field should develop a substantial personal library of scholarly works in this and related fields and this should include subscriptions to several of the leading psi-research journals.

The rationale for the above approach to developing a career in parapsychology is fully explained in earlier publications (Stanford, 1976, 1978). Adherence to the above advice should

optimize one's chances of obtaining work, following the doctorate, in a university or other research-oriented setting. Note, however, that an intrinsic part of this advice is that an individual conduct substantial research *outside* of parapsychology, even while in graduate school—research that should be published in respected, refereed journals—and should continue to conduct and report such nonpsi research after obtaining the initial employment subsequent to taking the doctorate. This will both help to insure that you will have work in a suitable setting for your professional advancement and will make it easier for you to be taken seriously when you publish or discuss work in parapsychology. Having some reputation in a solid, accepted scientific area outside parapsychology will greatly benefit your career and it will very likely cause you to be taken more seriously even within parapsychology. It should also aid in successfully obtaining tenure, if you enter academia. Some experienced workers in this field would probably advise that you should keep your psi-related interests in abeyance until after tenure. Partly on grounds of honesty and partly because you would not want to team up with a herd of strident goats (psi skeptics), such expediency might not, however, be to one's own best interests. Nevertheless, I would suggest that an individual seeking tenure in most university settings had better have substantial publications outside of parapsychology—especially so if he or she is known to be interested in psi research. Also, if you plan to follow the above advice against doing psi research in your graduate work and in your dissertation, mention of your interest in parapsychological research at the time of your application to graduate school might, conservatively speaking, have no advantages for you.

The reader should also bear in mind that in both academia and at reputable research laboratories the job market is fiercely competitive. This means that both the quality of your training and where you obtained it can be important factors. For this reason I question the wisdom of obtaining a doctorate through a nonresidential pro-

gram. Established universities with a full complement of in-house, carefully selected faculty are the best assurance of quality training, especially when such a program is professionally recognized for its quality of training in a particular area. A few individuals have gone to nonresidential programs and obtained their doctorates with parapsychological dissertations. For reasons discussed above and elsewhere (Stanford, 1976, 1978), this may not be the most effective way of obtaining employment, even in a parapsychology laboratory. For similar reasons, it may not be advantageous for students to spend time taking a master's degree with a parapsychological emphasis. Such a degree might not, in my considered judgment, serve the student to advantage as part of his or her record in entering a Ph.D. program at many universities (whatever advantages such an interim degree might have on other accounts). The reason is simply that entry into good doctoral programs is quite competitive and in many departments a parapsychological reputation could be a liability. Nor would a parapsychological degree necessarily help in obtaining employment after the doctorate, in many traditional settings. Whether we like it or not, the label "parapsychologist" is likely to make one a scientific pariah.

The above represents my own best advice regarding training. Certain other parapsychologists might disagree. Perhaps no one approach is best for everyone.

As for what areas are best for the doctoral work if one wishes to engage in psi research, that probably depends very much upon the interests and emphases of the individual. Parapsychology, by its nature, is an interdisciplinary area and individuals from many disciplines have made very important contributions. (This, incidentally, includes not only scientists, but philosophers, as well.) It might be desirable, however, to have at least some basic courses in behavioral science, since psi research is concerned with behaving organisms and since such appearances of regularity as exist in our data seem

mainly to reflect psychological factors. Courses in philosophy, anthropology and religion might also be of special value.

Pursuing a Parapsychological Career

By this time the reader should be well aware that there are potentially great advantages to pursuing one's psi-research interests in the context of a career which includes substantial contributions to nonpsi areas of investigation. Many of those advantages have been stated or suggested earlier. There are, however, major reasons for suggesting this approach other than simply pragmatic advantages for the individual. Parapsychology tends to be a peculiarly insular field and researchers are often insulated from the larger scientific community—which is sometimes critical, harsh and even grossly unfair to psi research interests—because of their being employed by parapsychology "centers." In many ways that makes for an easier professional existence. From the short-term perspective it is understandable. From the long-term perspective of advancing parapsychology as a science, however, it may not be the best strategy. It is very easy for those outside parapsychology to develop gross misperceptions of our character as scientists and our personal interests and research philosophies when they have little contact with us. James Alcock, for example, in his recent critical book on parapsychology (1981) feels that parapsychology makes little contact with the larger body of scientific knowledge and even opines that most of us are largely uninterested in science other than parapsychology. If individuals desiring to engage in psi research followed the kinds of advice given above, including working in settings not exclusively devoted to psi research, the chances are excellent that psi researchers would benefit from the increased contact with the work and thinking of other scientists and that the perception of psi researchers by other scientists would become more realistic. This entire process would be optimized if we were also contributing to nonpsi areas in our own

research. We would thereby shatter any preconceptions of ourselves as scientific freaks who cannot function in the realm of "normal science." We would gain personal satisfactions from promoting scientific knowledge in areas where progress is easier than in psi research and we would often find that our discoveries in those areas would be of value to our psi studies.

With careful and realistic planning a career is possible which will allow contributions to knowledge both in psi and nonpsi areas and which will thereby have special value both for advancing the interests of parapsychology as a science and ourselves as professional scientists. We should not need to be professional martyrs in order to advance psi research. Indeed, if we become professional martyrs, it may be difficult to advance psi research. The scary fact is that we already have far too many young people holding the Ph.D. with a parapsychological dissertation who cannot find employment at anything resembling their professional level, and we have far too many leaders in psi research who have desperately to hunt for employment every two or three years and who have often to settle for far less than they are worth, both professionally and financially. This is not a desirable state of affairs, either for the individuals involved or for the advancement of parapsychology as a science. It is possible that psi research poses intrinsic professional risks, but it seems plausible that those risks can be minimized through the approach outlined above. Then, perhaps, the impossible dream can find a foothold in reality.

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