



From text to self : the interplay of criticism and response in the history of parapsychology

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Abstract

The thesis examines the history of criticism and response in scientific parapsychology by bringing together the tools of history, rhetoric of science, and discursive psychology to examine texts generated in the heat of controversy. Previous analyses of the controversy at hand have been conducted by historians and sociologists of science, focusing on the professionalisation of the discipline, its philosophical and religious underpinnings, efforts of individual actors in the history of the community, and on the social forces which constrict and restrict both the internal substantive progress of the field and its external relations with the wider scientific community. The present study narrows the problem domain from the English-language literature ---- an extensive database of over 1500 books and articles ---- to the following: (1) a brief history of the development of the field in the U. K. and the U. S. that includes a survey of previous reviews of the controversy; (2) a specific controversy that extended over a 10-year period in the mid-twentieth century; and (3) a solicited debate on parapsychology with two target articles, 48 commentaries, and 3 responses published in Behavioral and Brain Sciences. The thesis is comprised of eight chapters. In Chapter 1, the goals and methods of the thesis are described, previous considerations of controversy and closure in science studies are reviewed, the notion of closure is discussed, and the thesis content is described. In Chapter 2, a brief history of the field is provided which emphasises the broad structure and content of the field rather than specific methodology, results, or theory. In Chapter 3, previous reviews of the controversy are examined to provide a sense of the controversy terrain and to examine the extent to which what Gilbert and Mulkey (1984) have called "contingent" and "empiricist" repertoires have been used in criticisms and response. In Chapter 4, case studies on parapsychology that appeared in the science studies literature are reviewed. Rhetoric of science is introduced as a domain from which analytic tools for the present research are drawn. In Chapter 5, a case study tests the hypothesis that differences in style and structure in the two volumes that bracket the most important controversy in the history of American experimental parapsychology may have contributed to the scope and persistence of the controversy. The controversy extended from 1934 to 1944, beginning with the publication of the monograph Extra-sensory Perception (Rhine, 1934) and ending with the publication of Extrasensory Perception After Sixty Years (Pratt, Rhine, Smith, Stuart & Greenwood, 1940). In Chapter 6, I justify a turn towards the methodology of discourse analysis by reviewing both the antecedents of modern discursive psychology, and methods that are currently in use. I also review Mulkey's (1985) *The Word and The World* as a prelude to the case study in the next chapter. In Chapter 7, a subset of the methods available in discourse analysis, particularly the concepts of formulation, category entitlement and footing are used to analyse a target article, 48 commentaries and two responses to the commentaries that center on James Alcock's contentions that parapsychology is the search for the soul and that dualism as a philosophical position is incommensurate with science. I show how Alcock's use of the contingent repertoire in characterising science practise in parapsychology undermines his authority as a scientific interlocutor, and obscures, to some extent, the substantive message he intended his target article to carry. Chapter 8 concludes the thesis by restating the findings of the three methods used, examining the limited use of the methods in this thesis and outlining what a more extended study with the same and/or related materials would look like, while describing other potentially fruitful research that might be done. How these methods should and may contribute to science practise in parapsychology is also discussed with a particular emphasis on the multidisciplinary nature of the discipline and the need for a more complete reflexivity.

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The parapsychology experiments at Duke evoked much criticism from academics and others who challenged the concepts and evidence of ESP. One such criticism was that subjects were simply cheating. Illusionist Milbourne Christopher wrote years later that he felt "there are at least a dozen ways a subject who wished to cheat under the conditions Rhine described could deceive the investigator". [24] According to Christopher, Rhine did take precautions against cheating in response to criticisms of his methods, but once he did, he was unable to find the same high scores reported in earlier Reader Response Criticism wholly repudiated all these notions; instead, it focuses on the systematic examination of the aspects of the text that arouse, shape, and guide a reader's response (for instance, Aristotelian Catharsis/ Brechtian alienation effect". Being both a reception aesthetic and a reception history, Reader Response criticism examines how readers realize the potentials of a text and how readings change over the course of history; it believes that although the the reader fills in the gaps, the author's intentional acts impose restrictions and conditions. In the later phase of Fish's career, his theories evolve into a form of criticism that rejects the author's intentionally and place meaning solely within the arena of those receiving the text. Parapsychology. Definitions. History. Evidence for ESP. Variables associated with ESP. The chamber shielded them from electromagnetic waves in the range between X rays and waves of one kilometer, and attenuated both longer and shorter waves. [SeeRadiation.] Distance. Mrs. Stewart's results, no worse at two hundred miles than at a few feet from the target, are typical of what has been found in other comparisons, with distances varied up to about four thousand miles. Target size. A corollary of the absence of distance effects (with terrestrial orders of magnitude) is that size of target should be unimportant; this was found by Pratt and Woodruff (1939), who tested the same subject