

CAREERS AND EDUCATION IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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We often receive inquiries at the RRC from students who seek information about how to become a parapsychologist. The purpose of this brief essay is to provide some guidelines that will be useful for people with such aspirations.

First, you must ask yourself if you really want to become a parapsychologist, and this requires that you understand what a parapsychologist is and what members of this profession do. Parapsychology is defined as the application of scientific methods to the study of certain kinds of anomalous phenomena, which means that, first and foremost, parapsychologists are scientists. Thus, if you say you want to become a parapsychologist, you are also saying that you want to become a scientist. Most people first become attracted to parapsychology, and this includes most parapsychologists, because of personal psychic experiences they have had, or (as in my case) because they find the topic extremely interesting, exciting, and challenging. A large percentage of the population claims such experiences and interests, but only a small percentage of these folks are suitable to become parapsychologists, because parapsychologists must also have a love of science. In my experience, the majority of people who have a strong interest in psychic phenomena do not have much interest in science. This is perhaps because those who are attracted to the subject matter of parapsychology tend to be “right-brained” (to use the common metaphor) and people who are attracted to science tend to be “left-brained”. I think you need to be at least somewhat left-brained to be a successful parapsychologist, but some accompanying right-brain tendencies won’t hurt and may actually help, as they are the source of much of the creativity that is especially important in a frontier science where the path to achieving its objectives is not as well defined as in the more mature sciences. Also, having had psychic experiences can provide you with some valuable insights into the psi process, but to be a parapsychologist you need to be able to translate those insights into the language of the scientist, or, to continue the metaphor, bridge the gap between the right brain and the left.

It is also good to be a bit on the obsessive-compulsive side. Scientists need to deal with a lot of details, like scores on tests, and be careful that they are precisely correct. If you are impatient about such things and only feel comfortable dealing with the “big picture”, you might find the day-to-day work of the scientist tedious and burdensome. On the other hand, you also need to have a curiosity about the world. A prominent parapsychologist I know likes to describe his motivation for entering the field as a strong desire to figure out how things work. I like to solve puzzles, even in my spare time (e.g., crossword puzzles), and I think puzzle-solving is a good short description of the scientific enterprise. One of the great joys I find in being a parapsychologist is the opportunity to apply these tendencies to such a fascinating and important topic.

Although parapsychologists embrace science, anyone who knows anything about the history of the field knows that we are also in conflict with science. How can this paradox be explained? I like to explain it by drawing on the distinction between *metaphysics* and *epistemology* that I learned in my introductory philosophy course in college.

Metaphysics refers to the nature of reality, and modern science has some definite ideas about this, represented in particular by its almost universal embrace of some form of materialism, the notion that all that exists in the world is matter. One important implication of materialism for parapsychology is that the mind consists entirely of the brain; there is no separate mind or soul that, for example, can survive death. It is true that some scientists can maintain personal beliefs in survival and other religious ideals, but they usually do so by splitting off their scientific and more spiritual selves. Although it is possible to be both a materialist and a parapsychologist, and in fact a minority of parapsychologists are materialists, parapsychology does not insist on materialism, and this is where we part company with the scientific mainstream. The issue is fundamental, and many scientists use parapsychology's countenance of non-materialistic metaphysics as a reason to claim that we are not scientists at all. From a practical perspective, the point is that you do not need to be a materialist to join the parapsychology "club". You are metaphysically free.

Where parapsychology and mainstream science more closely coincide is in the realm of epistemology, which is another term for the philosophy of knowledge -- how we come to know things about the world around us. From the standpoint of science, this means that we use, and demand the use of, the same basic methods used by scientists in other fields, but more importantly in my view, that we embrace science's standards of evidence. By this I mean the standards that must be met if a knowledge claim, such as the reality of psi, is to be accepted. This is a complicated topic, but the basic idea is that evidence must be *objective*, not *subjective*. I like to use the *near-death experience* (NDE) to illustrate this distinction. As you may know, some people who have a close brush with death report having had at the time a vivid internal experience that convinces them survival is real and that their experience provided direct knowledge of the hereafter. To a parapsychologist, this inference is not justified, because it is based on an experience that was subjective. This does not mean that the inference is necessarily wrong, just that we cannot claim to know it is right. Some parapsychologists believe that there is support for the claim that NDEs provide valid evidence of survival, but this conclusion is based on more objective considerations, such as the common elements in NDEs (even across cultures) and the fact that some of the experiences include an ESP component; that is, the person reports factual information previously unknown to them and the validity of which can be independently verified. Many parapsychologists believe that such verifiable real-life experiences of ESP and PK can provide scientifically valid evidence of psi, although the conclusion that they in turn provide good evidence for survival is held much less widely. Most parapsychologists also feel that the evidence from real-life experiences (or *spontaneous cases*, as we officially call them) is not as good as evidence obtained in the laboratory, because the latter provides a better basis for ruling out alternative interpretations such as chance coincidence and acquisition of information through normal sensory channels. Nonetheless, the systematic study of spontaneous cases is an appropriate scientific pursuit for the parapsychologist.

One concrete way the scientist applies the scientific epistemology is to cultivate an attitude of skepticism. I do not mean by this the attitude of many critics of parapsychology, which is not true skepticism but rather an overly credulous attitude toward their own pet interpretations of psychic phenomena. What I do mean is approaching any knowledge claim with an initial attitude of doubt, to play “devil’s advocate” until you are sure that you have ruled out as best you can all the alternative explanations of what you observed and what others have reported.

The purpose of this digression is to make the point that parapsychologists are not as free epistemologically as they are metaphysically. We are expected to adhere to the basic principles of scientific method and base our conclusions on scientific standards of evidence, but adherence to the scientific epistemology need not apply to the rest of one’s life. It is okay to have personal beliefs about psi even if they are based on less than adequate scientific evidence, as well as to practice, say, a spiritual or mental discipline, so long as these beliefs and practices do not interfere with our scientific judgments. It is rather like mainstream scientists splitting off their scientific and religious selves, as discussed above.

Finally, a parapsychologist sometimes needs a thick skin. As mentioned above, many mainstream scientists not only reject the claim that psi is real, but they are openly hostile to anyone who disagrees with them about it or even takes psi seriously. This is particularly true in psychology, which is the mainstream discipline most closely related to parapsychology. One implication of this fact is that involvement with parapsychology may bias scientists, particularly in academic institutions, from hiring you (or admitting you to their graduate school). In other words, such involvement might limit your opportunities for employment in mainstream disciplines. However, this attitude is not universal, and qualified parapsychologists who want mainstream jobs usually manage to find them. One reason why parapsychologists often seek jobs in the mainstream is that employment opportunities in parapsychology are extremely limited. This is partly because funding in parapsychology is limited, and also because it has not been well integrated into mainstream universities and research laboratories. I find that most parapsychologists have a bit of the rebel in them, and this helps buffer them against the controversy one brings upon oneself with this career choice.

If you still want to be a parapsychologist after reading the above and you have the aptitude, attitudes and values needed for success in a scientific career, then it is time to consider what concrete steps you need to take to become a parapsychologist. This involves primarily education. To begin with, you should plan to get an advanced degree, at least a Masters and preferably a Doctorate. But even in undergraduate school you should plan to take courses that are relevant to parapsychology. As noted above, psychology is probably the most relevant field to parapsychology, but the field is so interdisciplinary that many other fields are relevant as well. Foremost among these I would place physics, anthropology, sociology, biology, philosophy, and history. Choose as your major the field that you find most interesting and congenial based on your experience in the introductory course. What most parapsychologists end up doing is

studying psi by applying the concepts and methods used in their mainstream field of study. For instance people trained in anthropology might study psychic beliefs and practices of people in “primitive” cultures, whereas someone trained in philosophy might study the implications of psi for the mind/body problem. However, regardless of the field you choose for your major, I would suggest that you take some psychology courses, particularly experimental psychology, tests and measurements, and statistics. The reason for this is that parapsychology borrows its research methods primarily from psychology, and you will need familiarity with these methods regardless of what approach to the subject matter you finally adopt, including specialization in the study of spontaneous cases. If you decide to major in psychology, I would recommend that in addition to the method courses, you take courses in cognitive psychology, abnormal psychology, and physiological psychology.

If you are fortunate enough to attend an accredited college or university that offers a good undergraduate course in parapsychology, you of course should take that as well. However, you will not be able to major in parapsychology. Likewise, you will not be able to get a graduate degree in parapsychology at a standard university. However, there are such places where you can get a doctorate in psychology with a specialization in parapsychology. Foremost among these is the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, where a distinguished senior parapsychologist, Dr. Caroline Watt, heads the parapsychology program. Several graduates of this program, as well as their own students, have obtained appointments at other British universities where similar doctorates can be obtained, although Edinburgh remains the most prestigious choice. Unfortunately, such specializations are not available in other Western countries, although you may be able to find a professor who will supervise a thesis or dissertation in parapsychology. In one respect it is advantageous to get your doctorate in a mainstream discipline, as it will increase the marketability of your degree when seeking a mainstream job, which many parapsychologists have to do at some point in their careers.

Another option for people who wish to study in the U.S. are non-residential universities. The one we are most familiar with is Saybrook Institute, which is based in California. Saybrook has awarded Ph.D.s to students who have specialized in parapsychology. These programs allow you to do your studies at home, with guidance both from professors employed by the school and by local scholars in your area of interest. Students only make occasional visits to the home base of the Institute. These programs can provide a good education, but they do not have the prestige of the more traditional universities and that may put you at a relative disadvantage in competing for high-level mainstream jobs. Some have yet to achieve accreditation, although Saybrook has. Their main advantage is that they give you a great deal of flexibility in designing a personalized course of study, and many of their graduates have gone on to enjoy fulfilling and productive careers.

In conclusion, it should be obvious that parapsychology as a career is not for everyone, but the field continually needs people who can provide new blood, new energy, and new ideas. So if you are one of those select few for whom this career choice makes sense, we want to do everything we can to support your journey. Remember that even if you are

not fortunate enough to get a full-time job in parapsychology, you can still make a contribution on a part-time basis, mixing parapsychology with your other income-earning pursuits; indeed, this is how many if not most parapsychologists operate today. But even to make a part-time contribution, you need the kinds of training and personal qualities outlined in this essay. Good luck in whatever path you choose!