

From Dessoir to Rhine



ualified historical and sociological perspectives and recontextualizations remind us that, very much like conventional disciplines, the contested science of parapsychology has never been an object existing ‘out there’ in nature, independently of local cultural constraints and individual priorities of its foundational figures. A brief look at the forgotten story of the very coinage of the word *Parapsychologie* by Max Dessoir in Germany, and its Anglicization into ‘parapsychology’ under J. B. Rhine in the United States almost half a century later, may help

encourage such critical self-reflection.

What is this thing called ‘parapsychology’?

When Max Dessoir (1867-1947) suggested the Greco-German term *Parapsychologie* as a name for the rigorously scientific study of reported occult phenomena in late 1880s Berlin, the concrete circumstances differed significantly from those that saw J. B. Rhine’s launch of experimental parapsychology at Duke University in the 1930s. To begin with, at the time of his terminological proposal, the future philosopher-psychologist



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Dessoir was still a student just about to obtain his first doctorate. When Rhine inaugurated his laboratory and the *Journal of Parapsychology* at Duke, on the

other hand, he had been a member of the academic establishment for about a decade as a botanist. Historically far more significant, however, is the fact that Dessoir's coinage occurred at a moment that was critical in the formation of experimental psychology as the modern "science of the soul".

Germany is widely considered as the cradle of modern science professionalization, which did not take place in an academic ivory tower but in the midst of never-ending political turmoil over efforts to bring about a separation of state and church. Aftershocks of the French Revolution spilled over the borders into neighboring countries including Germany, where comparable riots and bloodshed over the political corruption and censorship of the Catholic Church resulted in events like the March Revolution of 1848. Ongoing political tumults significantly informed the famous struggle over materialism in German scientific and medical communities from 1853 (Gregory, 1977) and certainly did not simply end after Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* ("culture war"), which waged against Catholic politics throughout the 1870s (Blackbourn, 1993). To say that the ensuing cultural climate, in which orthodox theology was polemically lumped in and programmatically derided together with practices such as Mesmerism, Spiritualism and fledgling psychical research,

was not exactly conducive or even safe for impartial investigations of occult phenomena would be a dramatic understatement.

All these events significantly shaped agendas for the German project of a secular research university, which quickly became models in the professionalization and secularization of the sciences and universities elsewhere. As historians of science now recognize, these developments were also responsible for the rewriting of history to create the modern myth of the eternal conflict or warfare between science and religion. The struggle of educational reformers in the United States – many of whom were themselves still devoutly religious – to emancipate university curricula from theological censorship in the early twentieth-century was likewise informed by German and European developments. Hence, no history of, say, the rise of Behaviorism in American psychology can ever be complete without a qualified appreciation of the wider cultural and specific institutional contexts of its formation, let alone the overtly ideological agendas of J. B. Watson and other founding figures of Behaviorism (O'Donnell, 1985; Samelson, 1981).

Indeed, J. B. Rhine owed a considerable share of his initial success at Duke to the fact that many other scientists felt Behaviorists and their supporters, who

sought to virtually prohibit talk of "mind" and "consciousness" (let alone "soul") in psychology, were throwing the scientific baby out with the theological bathwater (Mauskopf & McVaugh, 1980). Moreover, Rhine's efforts to professionalize experimental investigations of telepathy, clairvoyance and eventually PK at an American university to stem the tide of Behaviorist materialism were actively supported by one of the country's foremost if somewhat controversial university psychologists, the Scottish-born William McDougall.¹

¹ Before moving to Duke, McDougall had been instrumental in setting up experi-

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In contrast, guarded attempts by young Dessoir and others to extend the boundaries of fledgling German experimental psychology through founding psychological societies in 1886 and 1888 which emulated the work of the Society for Psychical Research in England had faced instant public backlash from the first prominent university psychologists including Wilhelm Wundt and Hugo Münsterberg (Kurzweg, 1976; Sommer, 2012b; 2013a, chapter 4; 2013b). This boundary-work of early psychologists like Wundt and Münsterberg, however, was not motivated by any sympathies with

mental psychology at the University of Oxford and was later appointed head of psychology at Harvard. At Duke, he supported Rhine and served with him as the co-editor of the *Journal of Parapsychology* until McDougall's death in 1938, the year after the journal's inauguration.

ontological materialism, and in the case of Wundt and others, not even by a merely methodological pre-Behaviorist reductionism or positivism – quite on the contrary. Wundt in particular (and to a considerable extent Münsterberg and others in the United States) fought a passionate polemical war on a double front, i.e. against “superstition” and widespread belief in the occult on the one hand, and the materialism perceived in a growing reductionist and positivist trend in psychology on the other (Sommer, 2013a, chapter 4; forthcoming).

Not to be outdone, Rhine's Anglicization of Dessoir's original coinage into “parapsychology” as the chosen banner for his program of research might tempt us to assume at least a basic common ground in both men's visions for the scope and methods of parapsychological science. Yet, a quick comparison of actual circumstances and career trajectories again reveals a different picture. For example, we certainly have good reasons for associating Rhine's name with the beginning professionalization of a distinctly laboratory-based and quantitative approach to ESP and (later) PK within mainstream academia. In comparison to Rhine's experimental output, however, the volume of Dessoir's experimental work was rather meagre and limited to early and comparably informal experiments in telepathy, which,

moreover, were soon forgotten and tacitly denied by himself.²

Unlike Rhine, Dessoir was moreover deeply involved in the psychology of hypnosis and other experimental routes then taken by psychologists particularly in France, but also by William James in the US and the latter's collaborators in the SPR in England. Whereas present-day psychologists writing the history of their discipline tend to assume German-style physiological psychology was the only viable brand of psychological experimentation from the start, the exploration of divisions of the self in pathological and non-pathological samples through hypnosis and related techniques was in fact an alternative many psychologists thought scientifically far more promising than the reaction-time tests of physiological psychology (Ellenberger, 1970; Gauld, 1992; Sommer, 2013a, chapter 3). Dessoir's own involvement in this competing branch of experimental psychology – which closely overlapped with research into telepathy and other parapsychological

² Dessoir backpedalled around the same time as Pierre Janet, a founding figure of modern psychology in France, regarding his own parapsychological experiments. On Janet's amnesia regarding his rather spectacular findings, see Evrard, Pratte, & Cardena (2018). Dessoir was an admirer of Janet and likely corresponded with him, and his own falling in line with orthodoxy might have been inspired by Janet.



phenomena – is testified by some of his early publications which are somewhat better remembered today than his published telepathic experiments, i.e. a bibliography of international research on hypnotism (Dessoir, 1888) and his classical study of the ‘double-ego’ (Dessoir, 1890).

Key phrases like *divisions of the self* and *double ego* might tempt us here to dwell on a somewhat bizarre circumstance not widely known among parapsychologists: Dessoir publicly introduced the word *Parapsychologie* in a critical response to an article written by a certain Ludwig Brunn, who was programmatically hostile to psychical research and proposed a psychopathological framework to interpret reports of occult phenomena as evidence for mental degeneration – and who in fact was none than Dessoir himself, using a pseudonym (Brunn, 1889; Dessoir, 1889; for details see Sommer, 2013b).

Following a short phase during which he completely fell in line with his alter ego “Brunn”, Dessoir would maintain an overwhelmingly skeptical stance for the remainder of his career as a mainstream philosopher. While he somewhat waxed and waned in his views on telepathy, up to shortly before his death, he remained openly skepti-

(Left) Max Dessoir, inventor of the German term *Parapsychologie*.

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cal of PK and clairvoyance, and he categorically rejected evidence for precognition *a priori* on philosophical grounds (Dessoir, 1931, 1947). Moreover, apart from co-founding the short-lived Berlin Society for Experimental Psychology as a young man in 1888, Dessoir’s efforts to help advance parapsychological research institutionally were practically non-existent. Indeed, the role occupied by Dessoir soon after joining the ranks of mainstream academics was that of a self-appointed public educator of the German people, who did not distinguish rigorous parapsychological research from uncritical occult ideologies, and thus moved in far closer proximity to programmatic debunkers than actual investigators (Sommer, 2013a, chapters 3 & 4).³

³ On contemporary gatekeepers of German science and medicine see, e.g., Wolffram (2006) and Sommer (2012a; 2013a, chapter 4).

If there was something Dessoir had in common with Rhine, it was this rejection of popular beliefs and practices, particularly Spiritualism. Another misgiving he shared with Rhine concerned the physical phenomena of mediumship, which were studied by researchers like Charles Richet and Albert von Schrenck-Notzing in non- if not anti-Spiritualist contexts. It is therefore interesting that while both Dessoir and Rhine were outspoken skeptics of physical mediumship, it was particularly this kind of research that attracted the interest and public support of major German-language intellectuals such as the philosopher Traugott Konstantin Oesterreich, the philosopher-biologist Hans Driesch and the fervently materialistic psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler. In fact, it seems the first German-language monograph carrying *Parapsychologie* in its title was a pamphlet by Oesterreich with a strong focus on research in the physical phenomena of mediumship, which he thought were scientifically established beyond reasonable doubt (Oesterreich, 1921).

Dessoir himself reminded a broader audience of his coinage for the first time in 30 years after the fact (prior to the publication of his article “Die Parapsychologie” in 1889, Dessoir had announced his neologism in a letter in 1887, see Sommer, 2013b). This was in the preface to the first edition of

(Right) Hans Bender, the pioneering German post-war parapsychologist who included evaluations of astrology in his research program.

his best-selling skeptical survey of parapsychological research and popular occult movements – neglecting, perhaps unsurprisingly, to acknowledge the original contexts of the coinage and to mention his alter ego “Ludwig Brunn”.⁴ Following Dessoir’s reminder in 1917, and Oesterreich’s booklet in 1921, the oldest German psychological research periodical, *Psychische Studien* (founded in 1874), changed its name to *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie* (*Journal for Parapsychology*) in 1926. Eight years later, Hans Driesch published *Parapsychologie. Die Wissenschaft von den “okkulten” Erscheinungen. Methodik und Theorie* (*Parapsychology. The Science of “Occult” Phenomena. Methodology and Theory*), the first methodological textbook of parapsychological science (Driesch, 1932). Although Theodore Besterman at the London SPR translated Driesch’s book as *Psychical Research. The Science of the Super-Normal* in the following year, it was its original German title that inspired the choice of Driesch’s admirer Rhine

⁴ Interestingly, Dessoir’s preface also included an acknowledgement to Oesterreich who was then still dismissive of physical mediumship, having just recently declared its phenomena to comprise of nothing but fraud (Oesterreich, 1916, p. 414).



to adopt “parapsychology” as the name for his efforts to professionalize predominantly lab-based and quantitative experimental research in the United States – notwithstanding the fact that Driesch’s own methodological recommendations and inclusion of research questions were far broader and more inclusive than Rhine’s.

“Border areas of psychology” in Germany

As far as I can tell, neither Oesterreich nor Driesch or Rhine were aware of the telling circumstances of Dessoir’s coinage of *Parapsychologie* in response to an article published by his ultra-orthodox alter ego, Ludwig Brunn – who in effect was young Dessoir virtually engaging in boundary-work against himself. The German psychologist and physician Hans Bender (1907-1991), whose foundation of an independent parapsychological research institute in 1950 and appointment in 1954 to a chair of “border areas of psychology” at Freiburg University would secure greater temporary academic recognition of German parapsychology than any previous efforts, seemed likewise uninterested in the history of the term *Parapsychologie*, which he adopted as a label for his own work.

This is perhaps particularly

ironic since Dessoir himself would almost certainly have targeted Bender as an object of his boundary-work had he lived to witness Bender’s rise and enormous public appeal. After all, Bender included the full range of Rhinean, lab-based psi research in his work, and he also conducted field research of spontaneous manifestations of parapsychological phenomena – gaining public fame and notoriety particularly as an investigator of poltergeist disturbances, such as the famous Rosenheim case.

Informed by Carl Gustav Jung’s concept of synchronicity and related ideas developed in the famous dialogue between Jung and quantum theorist Wolfgang Pauli, Bender applied this wider framework to his own interpretations of psi phenomena. Bender himself corresponded and met with Jung (Schellinger, Wittmann, & Anton, 2019), and it was his embrace of Jungian psychophysical ontology that led him to include a new area of research in his parapsychological work that no doubt would additionally have outraged Dessoir: empirical evaluations of astrology. In fact, the first volume of Bender’s journal, the *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie und Grenzgebiete der Psychologie* (*Journal for Parapsychology and Border Areas of Psychology*) sported a reprint of an astrological study by Jung with added correspondence between

Jung and Bender (Jung, 1957/58), followed by a related statistical evaluation of astrology by a researcher from Bender’s institute (Müller, 1957/58), and the first part of an article by famed French astrologer Michel Gauquelin (1957/58).

To be sure, Bender’s inclusion of astrology as a field of empirical research was a radical break with research traditions as inaugurated by the SPR and later Rhine and his “school”. Individual representatives of parapsychological research may occasionally have maintained a clandestine interest in astrology, but it never played

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a practical nor theoretical role in the canonical literature. On the contrary, if we find references to astrology, they are often of a disparaging and dismissive kind. Eminent Boston psychical researcher Walter Franklin Prince, for example, once juxtaposed the scientific rigor of his own discipline with "the absurdities of astrology" (Prince, 1930, p. 12), very much in the same way your average professional "skeptical"

does away with the whole discipline of parapsychology, i.e. with little more than a snort of derision. This casual boundary-work by Prince occurred of all places in his book *The Enchanted Boundary*, which documents the typically irrational behavior and arguments of otherwise intelligent past and contemporary critics of psychical research.⁵

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⁵ Prince's image of a boundary was a professedly polemical device, and though his book is a prime source for students of histories of demarcation there is no immediate link with Gieryn (1983)'s sociological concept of "boundary-work".

only did Bender routinely warn of the dangers for mental health posed by uncritical and excessive practices of automatic writing and other mediumistic techniques, but he even proposed a novel psychopathological entity in this regard, the "mediumistic psychosis" (Bender, 1959).

Crucial in this context was Bender's strategic amalgamation of empirical work with a proactive public engagement program under the banner of "Psychohygiene" ("mental hygiene"), which had the professed aim of protecting the public of the dangers of "superstition" by distilling information about the findings of parapsychology with a focus on psi of the living rather than the survival hypothesis. At first glance, Bender's mission in the service of "mental hygiene" may appear identical with Dessoir's own priorities as a *Volksaufklärer* or enlightener of the people in that its ultimate aim was instructing the public of what to believe. The decisive difference being, however, that Bender's goal was to popularize what he thought were correct *interpretations* of supposed and real psi phenomena in Spiritualist and occult practice in a campaign battling "superstition" (thereby enlisting much needed state and mainstream academic support for psi research), whereas Dessoir's mission was the discouragement of the public's belief in actual

parapsychological occurrences altogether.

Boundaries of parapsychology

Around the time of Bender's retirement in 1975, however, traditional research into the question of survival had begun to be revived by figures such as psychologists Karlis Osis at the American SPR and his collaborator Erlendur Haraldsson of the University of Reykjavik in Iceland. Most significantly, Canadian-born psychiatrist Ian Stevenson (1918-2007) had succeeded in 1969 to begin install a research group dedicated to survival research at the University of Virginia, a top-tier American school. Apart from working in traditional areas such as the assessment of mental mediumship and veridical hallucinations, Stevenson was also an early investigator of near-death experiences, and he importantly extended the scope of traditional survival research by pioneering investigations of claimed memories of previous lives occurring spontaneously in young children.

A former President of the PA, Stevenson left the Association in 1986 as a result of his misgivings that it "admitted members who were not properly credentialed" (Matlock, 2020). From my own correspondence with Stevenson in the 1990s I'm also aware of his

deep concerns over systematic fraud which he was convinced was committed by certain contemporary American Spiritualist mediums, and over the inaction in response to such fraud by Spiritualist churches and communities. Stevenson was no doubt concerned about demarcations between scientific psi research and popular occult belief with its often-unsavory entanglements. However, there are reasons to think that opposition by various PA members to Stevenson's focus on research outside the laboratory may also have contributed to his resign (on Stevenson's methodological pluralism, see, e.g., the special issue of the *Journal of Scientific Exploration*, vol. 22, no. 1, 2008, with articles dedicated to Stevenson, as well as essays in Kelly, 2013). Indeed, another former PA President, philosopher Stephen Braude, has repeatedly criticized an attitude then prominent among parapsychologists, according to which only strictly lab-based and quantitative psi research can be truly 'scientific' (e.g. Braude, 1997, chapter 1).

After his departure from the PA, Stevenson increasingly dedicated his energies to the Society for Scientific Exploration (SSE), of which he was a founding member. Readers of the SSE's *Journal of Scientific Exploration* already know that while it has included psychical research and quanti-

tative parapsychology, articles published in the *Journal* have gone considerably beyond the scope of traditional psi research. With its embrace of explorations of all sorts of reported anomalies shunned by professionalized mainstream science – ranging from strange geological effects to cryptozoology and UFOlogy – the SSE still has strong overlaps in membership with the SPR and PA. Germany's closest equivalent of the SSE is the Gesellschaft für Anomalistik (Society of Anomalistics), whose current director, psychologist Gerhard Mayer, is based in Hans Bender's still existing institute in Freiburg, from where Mayer also edits the Gesellschaft's *Zeitschrift für Anomalistik*. One of Mayer's re-

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search interests is astrology, and it is probably fitting that Stephen Braude, to my knowledge the first representative of American parapsychology to voice interest in astrology (Braude, 2007, chapter 8), is the current editor of the *JSE* (though unlike Bender, neither Mayer nor Braude employ or propagate Jungian concepts).

Conclusion

Today, the PA is marked by a stronger metaphysical and methodological pluralism than ever in its relatively short but fascinating history. This has been well documented in previous *Mindfield* special issues, e.g. on methodological pluralism (issue 1, 2018) and on the next generation of investigators (issue 3 for 2019). Some current prominent PA members continue to express strongly physicalist and even materialist views in line with Richet and the popular self-image of twentieth-century Western academic

mainstream culture, while others have pioneered the academic study of spiritual and religious experiences in the tradition began by William James. In 2008, for example, the first winner of the PA Honorton Integrative Contributions Award (awarded in recognition of efforts of promoting psi research within mainstream science) was Charles Tart, who is regarded a major figure in the history of modern parapsychology as well as a founder of modern transpersonal psychology, i.e. the empirical and therapeutic exploration of altered states and spiritual experiences.

Another past PA President and Honorton Award winner is Etzel Cardeña, who as you know was an editor of the PA's *Journal of Parapsychology*. Apart from managing to get a recent overview of psi research published in the *American Psychologist* (Cardeña, 2018), he was also the lead editor of the important volume *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* (Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2014), whose two editions were published by the American Psychological Association. While the *Varieties* are concerned with the clinical rather than evidential status of certain parapsychological experiences, they again go way beyond traditional psi research categories by including not only relatively new fields such as near-death experiences and past life memories, but, for example, "alien abduction

experiences" – a topic which I suspect not many "old school" PA or SPR members would feel comfortable touching as an empirical problem.

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