

Hankering for the Past¹⁰

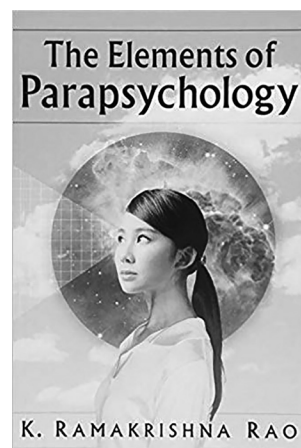
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A Review of
The Elements of Parapsychology,
by K. Ramakrishna Rao.

Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2017. Pp. 346. ISBN: 978-4766-7122-2. \$35.00.

K. Ramakrishna Rao has been an influential figure in parapsychology for over 50 years (notably as Director of The Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man, subsequently the Rhine Research Centre, as President of the Parapsychological Association, and as Editor of this *Journal* for 18 years). He is well placed to write a book intended “to bring awareness of the importance of scientific study of psychic phenomena” (p. 3). His professional life encompasses the enormous transitions that have taken place in the scientific study of psi from the era of Rhinean card guessing to modern day approaches that focus on altered states of consciousness and unconscious processes as a means to more accurately model real-world experiences. Unfortunately, his latest book gives the impression that this transition never took place, being deeply entrenched in nostalgia for those earlier times.



Rao writes authoritatively and very engagingly. He is strongest when offering an opinion about how best to understand psi phenomena and the implications such understandings have for our notions of consciousness. But he is much less strong when he gives an account of that research, rarely straying from studies that are 40 or more years old. He justifies this by saying “we limit ourselves ... to the original studies and their early confirmation without referring to the more recent research unless it warrants its mention in the light of new developments” (p. 145) but this is not a successful strategy. The naive reader would be forgiven for thinking that card guessing and dice rolling were still *de rigueur* in parapsychological research, and they would have very little appreciation for important lines of contemporary research. To illustrate, of 754 references listed at the end of the book, 275 (36%) are from the 1960s or earlier. Although that number might reflect coverage of an extended period that runs into the 19th century, the

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decade of the 1970s has 198 references (26% of the total). For the 1980s this figure is 93 (12%), for the 1990s it is 79 (10%); moving to the current century, the numbers are just 70 (9%) for the 2000s and 39 (5%) for the 2010s. Correlating frequency against time period gives a perfect association by Spearman's rho. In explanation, Rao notes (pp. 283-284) that he has not attended a PA convention since 1993 and allowed his PA membership to lapse in 1995, so that his is an "outsider's look" at the field, albeit one — he claims — that is still "very much familiar with what is going on" (p. 284). The data suggest otherwise.

The book comprises 9 chapters, starting with "Background and Beginnings". Here he describes "the psychologist's predicament," the dilemma of wishing to work within a materialist paradigm in order to demonstrate phenomena that might fundamentally be nonmaterial in nature. In this he follows Rhine in defining parapsychology as the study of phenomena that quintessentially include a nonphysical component, "Inasmuch as psi phenomena are unconstrained by time/space variables and are known to be unrelated to our sensory and motor functions, they suggest the existence of a nonphysical mind which can exchange energy and interact with a physical body" (p. 32). Nevertheless, he still commits to the scientific method as the most appropriate way to study such phenomena: "the rules that govern the investigation of parapsychological phenomena are necessarily the same as those that govern other natural sciences" (p. 36). He acknowledges the potential for paradox in these two assertions, which lead to "vexatious questions ... [that] have no easy answers" (p. 37).

Chapter 2, "Concepts and Methods", traces the history of parapsychology and provides a whistle-stop tour through the various approaches to data collection, before wrestling with the issue of whether such practices count as "science". Chapter 3 is entitled "Accumulating Evidence" and is concerned with why psi claims remain controversial despite over a century of mounting evidence. Rao considers the standard objections and rightly eschews calls for a "conclusive experiment" on philosophical grounds, but nevertheless regards Schmidt's REG experiments as coming close to this requirement. I was disappointed that a chapter on "Accumulating Evidence" did not consider reviews of a number of key paradigms in parapsychology (such as those covered in Broderick and Goertzel, 2015 or Cardeña, Palmer and Marcusson-Clavertz, 2015), nor introduce the concept of meta-analysis. In chapter 4, "Problems of Replication and Application", Rao distinguishes between replication on demand and statistical replication and illustrates the latter with examples from REG and ganzfeld work. These descriptions highlight another concern I have in that I am not sure for whom the book is intended. Rao assumes too much prior knowledge of the general reader such that these very brief accounts will be unfathomable (the ganzfeld as a method is not described until a later chapter), while at the same time there is not enough here that is original to appeal to the informed reader.

Chapter 5 concerns process oriented work and looks to relate psi experiences to other variables, though the first section actually shows what psi is *not* related to (distance, time, target system complexity). Unsurprisingly, these suggest to Rao that the operation of psi is aperceptual. Jim Carpenter's First Sight Theory is mentioned in this respect, but disappointingly not elaborated upon. Although some positive associations are identified (e.g., with extraversion, cortical alpha), no attempt is made to interpret or synthesize them in a way that would cast light on mechanism or function. Some subsections (animal psi, global consciousness project) did not seem consistent with the chapter theme.

Chapter 6 is devoted to the problem of psi missing. Rao refers to the elusiveness of psi as “legendary” (p. 170) and points to the non-replicability of results, despite having spent time earlier arguing for the comparability of statistical replication in parapsychology with other social sciences (a view with which I concur—see Roe, 2016a). He devotes quite a lot of space to psi missing and to differential effects but this hotchpotch of study outcomes only shows that differential performance occurs rather than suggesting any systematicity to such effects (beyond perhaps reflecting participant preferences). Nevertheless this remains a promising avenue for further research.

Chapter 7 deals with the experimenter effect, which Rao dichotomizes (p. 196) into genuine psi effects and artifactual problems of experimenter incompetence or unreliability. Although he acknowledges the extensive work that documents psychosocial experimenter effects in the tradition of Robert Rosenthal, he doesn’t consider this as a serious alternative (for a contrary view, see Roe, 2016b). Whatever their cause, experimenter effects confound scientific progress because they hinder replication, obscure subtle IV-DV relationships in the data, and provide ammunition to skeptics who wish to dismiss the evidence, so that “without a proper understanding of the experimenter, psi research is unlikely to advance much further than merely accumulating more data favoring the existence of cognitive anomalies” (p. 196). Again the effect is illustrated through a number of card guessing studies from the 1930s with only a short postscript that refers to more recent work. Understandably he relates the experimenter effect to nonintentional psi, and this is explored briefly. Rao offers a very useful flowchart (p. 218) to capture the different forms of experimenter effect that might be found in parapsychology.

In chapter 8, “Explanatory Quagmire,” Rao focuses on the issue of how best to make sense of the findings of parapsychology. He takes the indifference of psi to physical parameters as indicative of its nature as irreducible to constructs found in Newtonian physics. He refers to von Lucadou’s model of pragmatic information as an alternative conceptualization, but this treatment is so brief as to be unintelligible to the interested lay person. A number of other theories are considered and rejected before he turns to a nondual approach in which our perceived separateness is seen as illusory, and psi is a function of our true collective nature. Surprisingly, the global consciousness project is cited as an example of this collective mind; but here the cause of collective coherence is typically an objective event (such as 9/11 or a royal wedding) with the EGG data reflecting the extended effects of that mundane coherence rather than suggesting a paranormal cause of it. A better example might have been Sheldrake’s studies of morphic resonance, but these go unmentioned. In concluding the chapter, Rao returns to his commitment to the scientific method and the need for empirically testable predictions from theory. How this might be possible for the more mystical models of psi remains to be seen.

The final chapter, “The Unsettled State: Postscript to Sixty Years in Parapsychology,” explores the connections between Western psychical research and classical Indian thought. This autobiographical segment divides Rao’s career into three stages, representing preparation, active participation and advancement, and finally reminiscence and review. The style is warm and personal and works well to contextualize Rao’s thinking about historical, empirical and theoretical issues in parapsychology. His account of the effects of the Levy scandal and his appointment as Director of the FRNM were particularly valuable, especially his bemoaning the privileging of statistical significance and scientific respectability over personal meaning and relevance that continued under his watch.

To sum up, there are certainly some positives to this book: Rao writes elegantly and knowledgeably about the material that he includes and makes a persuasive case for the validity of the evidence for psi. However, the significant negative that prevents me from recommending it is the heavy skew in Rao's coverage of material that privileges work from half a decade ago over more recent advances. This gives the impression that the book is a historical treatment of a moribund subject; Rao appears to have come to bury parapsychology rather than praise it.

References

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