

OBITUARY



GERTRUDE R. SCHMEIDLER

1912–2009

BY RUTH REINSEL

Gertrude R. Schmeidler, who resided for most of her life in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York, passed away in Whittier, California, on March 9, 2009, at the age of 96.

So many words come to mind when thinking of Gertrude: modest and unassuming; soft-spoken, even shy, and hesitant; very polite, always a lady. Even in the most contentious faculty meetings, she never raised her voice, and often played the role of reasonable mediator. She always had time to listen to her students, and always took their ideas seriously. Unlike so many mentors, she never imposed her own research agenda on her students, but allowed them to develop their own ideas. She was one of a kind, and she will be sorely missed.

I had the privilege of doing post-graduate work in parapsychology with Gertrude at the City College of New York. I was by no means her most talented student, and there are others who worked more closely with her than I did. So I offer this appreciation of her life with the realization that others will surely add their own perceptions and fond memories. She was affectionately known to students and colleagues simply as "Gertrude," so I will continue to refer to her in this informal way. Although I knew Gertrude for over 30 years, she never spoke very much about herself. I learned much of what follows from her reminiscences when interviewed by Professor Larry Nyman of City College of New York, who was compiling an oral history

of the psychology department there (Nyman, 1976). She also shared her reflections on her career in parapsychology in an interview with Rosemarie Pilkington (Pilkington, 1987). This obituary will be divided into two major sections; the first is biographical in nature and the second considers her work in both parapsychology and mainstream psychology, with thoughts on her legacy.

BIOGRAPHY

Early Years

Gertrude was born in New York City in 1912. Her father was a lawyer, and her mother was determined that her only child would receive a college education. In high school, she wanted to become a poet. Then she was "tempted" by physics. But in college she chose to major in psychology, because she took a laboratory course that seemed so "easy and fun" and because there were so many unanswered questions and interesting problems where, she felt, one could really make a contribution. I suspect this is also what drew her to parapsychology. She received her BA from Smith College in 1932 and went on to work for a time as a statistician at Worcester State Hospital, living in a dormitory and receiving room and board but no wages. This was during the Depression; she writes that she was glad just to have a job. While in Worcester, she was accepted to the M.A. program at Clark University, emerging one year later with "a strong aversion to rigid old-line behaviorism" (Nyman, 1976). For a while thereafter she did research in the laboratory of Robert Woodworth at Columbia University. She went on to study experimental psychology at Harvard and received her doctorate in 1935.

Most of her early research was in visual perception and memory (for example, Schmeidler, 1939). Gertrude was known for her careful experimental technique. For her dissertation, she told me that she started with two experiments that gave completely opposite results, whereas theory predicted that they should be the same. Then she started out to replicate one experiment and changed one variable at a time, step by step, and finished by replicating the second experiment.

Gertrude was also a careful observer, and she used the opportunities that were at hand. When she was pregnant with her twin sons, she noticed that when she was active, the babies kicked a lot; when she was at rest, so were the babies. She began to keep a formal log and published an article in *Child Development* titled "The Relation of Fetal Activity to the Activity of the Mother" (Schmeidler, 1941).

War Work

Gertrude married Robert Schmeidler in 1937 and they raised four children. She often told the story of how she went to pick up a copy of her

doctoral degree. In those years, when women scholars were less common than they are today, the assistant in the Harvard office was reluctant to give her the diploma, because it was in the name of Gertrude Raffel. Gertrude had a difficult time explaining to her that she was now Gertrude Schmeidler. "I got married, and Schmeidler is my husband's name. Look, he's right over there!" Robert, a chemist, was in the Navy then and was sent overseas after Pearl Harbor. Gertrude was kept busy with the babies during the days, but had too much time on her hands in the evenings. She was lonely and worried about her husband off at war. So she decided to take a long shot; she wrote to Gordon Allport at Harvard University and asked if he had a part-time job for her.

When she received his affirmative response, Gertrude moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and joined a group of social psychologists around the country working to improve civilian morale. She called this her "War Work." This is how Gertrude became a propaganda specialist funded by the Department of Defense! This work resulted in two papers she coauthored with Gordon Allport, one in *Psychological Bulletin* (Allport & Schmeidler, 1943) and the other in the *Journal of Social Psychology* (Schmeidler & Allport, 1944).

Influence of Gardner Murphy

After the war, Gertrude was greatly influenced by Gardner Murphy whom she met at Harvard, though she had actually met him years earlier at Columbia and had a discussion with him about psychical research. Murphy was known for his keen intelligence and critical mind, and had an encyclopedic knowledge of multiple fields. He had been educated at Yale and Harvard, and received his PhD in Psychology from Columbia in 1923. Murphy was simultaneously an eminent psychologist and a leading parapsychologist. He became President of the Society for Psychical Research in 1949—one of only three Americans to hold that post up to that time. In this, he followed in the footsteps of another Harvard psychical researcher, William James. Later in his life, Murphy was elected President of the American Society for Psychical Research. Murphy devoted an enormous amount of his time to the ASPR—approximately half time, without pay. Gertrude would later follow him in that role.

During Gertrude's first summer in Cambridge in 1942, she audited a seminar with Gardner Murphy on psychical research. At first she planned to attend only one lecture, as she felt that would be enough to be sure there was really nothing to it. But the first lecture was so fascinating, she returned for another, and then another. And before long she was hooked. At that time, Murphy was the holder of the Hodgson Fellowship in Psychical Research at Harvard. He had taken the position with the explicit understanding that he would be the "midwife," or "idea man" but would supervise the work of others to do the actual research. Soon, Murphy offered Gertrude research

funds to do an experiment on ESP. This first experiment was the birth of the "sheep/goat effect." Three papers followed in *JASPR* (Schmeidler, 1943a, 1943b, 1945).

A paper on the sheep/goat effect, coauthored with Murphy, was published in the *Journal of Experimental Psychology* (Schmeidler & Murphy, 1946). As of 2009, only one other paper on the sheep/goat effect and ESP scores has been published in the mainstream literature (Schmeidler, 1966).

The City College Years

Educated at Harvard, and having worked early in her career with two of the most illustrious psychologists in America, Gertrude began her teaching career at City College of New York, then known as "the poor man's Harvard." For over a century, City College was famous for the excellent education it provided free of charge to poor and middle-class urban students (tuition was free until 1976). City College drew the brightest young students in New York, most of whom were the first in their families to attend university (Traub, 1995). City College boasts nine recipients of the Nobel Prize among its alumni.

When Gardner Murphy, recently elected President of the prestigious American Psychological Association, came to the City College to found and chair its Department of Psychology, he invited Gertrude to teach some courses on introductory psychology on a part-time basis. Within a few years she became a full-time faculty member and moved on to teaching courses on perception and experimental psychology. For six years, she directed the M.A. program in psychology and supervised numerous students in their research.

In the 1970's, another kind of social experiment began at City College. Though located in the center of Harlem, the College did not reflect the diversity of the surrounding community. Both faculty and students were predominantly white. Responding to student protests against the low number of African Americans and Puerto Ricans it enrolled, City College began a policy of open admissions in 1970. Any student who graduated from a New York City high school would be automatically accepted into City College. It is generally acknowledged that the academic quality of City College went downhill sharply after that (Traub, 1995). The decline was not really evident in the graduate programs, but it was very marked for its undergraduate education. CCNY became the butt of jokes about students who were functionally illiterate and who were hopelessly unprepared for higher education. City College was no longer spoken of in the same breath as its downtown neighbors, Columbia and New York University.

And as for Gertrude, I believe that as she became more and more deeply involved in parapsychology, she became more and more isolated from her colleagues in the psychology department. When the City College joined several other colleges to form the City University of New York, she

was at first denied a position on the doctoral faculty in psychology. It seems clear that this was because of her activity in parapsychology. She appealed the decision, pointing out that the research methods she used were the same ones used in other areas of psychology. In addition, she had published several books, and the journals in which her research was published were peer-reviewed. Even if the other faculty members did not agree with her research topic, they could not deny her the academic freedom to pursue it. Her argument was successful and she was eventually appointed to the doctoral faculty at the City University of New York.

Still, her older colleagues at CCNY began to retire, and the newer faculty had a much more physiological bent. They were not sympathetic to Gertrude's research interests, and some actively discouraged their students from studying with Gertrude. She was left teaching the masters students and the lower level graduate courses. Some students even complained when she inserted too much parapsychology into these general courses on research methods. She did, however, have the opportunity to teach the occasional course on parapsychology and altered states of consciousness, which I remember as highlights of my graduate years. When she came to the age of retirement in the mid-1980s and they began a search for someone to replace her, the psychology department made it clear they were not interested in hiring another parapsychologist. They felt neuropsychology was the direction the department should be moving in, and they hired someone with that background. So parapsychology was effectively dead at CCNY. I believe I was the last student to work with Gertrude on a psi-related project.

SCIENTIFIC WORK IN PSYCHOLOGY AND PARAPSYCHOLOGY

Of course, we remember Gertrude here because of her work in parapsychology. She served our field well. Gertrude was present at the founding meeting of the Parapsychological Association (PA) and served as its first vice-president from 1957 to 1958. She went on to become President of the PA in 1959, and again in 1971. She was later President of the American Society for Psychical Research from 1981 to 1985. Gertrude's research papers are stored at Duke University along with those of J. B. Rhine.

In some ways, Gertrude was very much in the mainstream of the psychology of her time. She coauthored a book titled *Freshman Rorschachs and College Performance* (Schmeidler, Nelson, & Bristol, 1959), whereas today the emphasis would be on SAT scores. She applied her knowledge of projective techniques and personality theory to her work in parapsychology. For example, she provided interpretations of Rorschachs and other projective tests taken by poltergeist families and paranormal percipients for several published studies (e.g., Maher & Schmeidler, 1975).

Gertrude also published five books on parapsychology. Three were collections of articles by others (Schmeidler, 1969, 1974, 1976) and

two were original works (Schmeidler, 1988; Schmeidler & McConnell, 1958). All her books endeavored to draw relations between psychic function and other areas of theory and experiment. She sought to show that parapsychology is not a field that exists in isolation from other fields of science or social science. In my opinion, the most notable is her last book. Although it did not get much attention from mainstream psychology, it is surely worth the attention of anybody in this audience. Her thesis is that psi is a psychological process; it functions in the same way, and obeys the same laws, as any other psychological process. Her writing is so clear you can almost hear the sound of her voice, and her insights are fresh and still valuable. Her evidence is so comprehensive, and so well presented, that one can't help but be convinced that psi is a natural, psychological function.

In contrast to how research is done today, when it is common to see at least half a dozen names on a paper, Gertrude worked alone more often than not. She was the sole author on most of her papers in parapsychology. About a third were coauthored with a student, and these appear to have been the result of a student research project. Again, in contrast to how things are done today, she kept her projects elegantly simple. Most of her studies had just one dependent variable—an ESP score—and at most two or three other variables, usually including a personality correlate. The data were often analyzed just with a simple *t* test, but nothing more complicated than a 2 x 2 ANOVA. Remember, this was in the days before personal computers. Statistics were done by hand with pencil and paper. Several times I remember Gertrude showing me a data analysis in her tiny handwriting, on the back of an envelope! One of her sons grew up to become a statistician, and he was a great help to her in her work.

No matter what your area of interest in parapsychology, you will probably find that Gertrude has written on the topic. So much of our field rests on her early work that it can truly be said that she helped to lay the foundations of parapsychology as a scientific enterprise. If we look in more detail at Gertrude's oeuvre, it is spread over 6 decades (see attached bibliography). A large proportion of her publications in mainstream journals were actually on topics related to psychic functioning. So in total, her work in parapsychology far outnumbers her papers in conventional psychology.

MENTOR

Gertrude ran an informal meeting once a week, and all students were welcome, whatever their rank or area of study. Usually the meeting focused on some student's research project, and Gertrude would invite the group to offer advice on research methods. Her own advice was usually the most cogent. Sometimes she would bring a letter she had received and

ask the group's advice on how to answer it. I remember on one occasion, she read a letter from a young woman who said that she and her lover had held a séance at the grave of Elvis Presley and believed that his spirit had communicated with them. We were all at a loss for how to answer that one!

Gertrude was always so very patient. No matter how silly the question, she would nod and agree that it was a very interesting problem. Then she would say something like, "But perhaps you could think of it another way," and go on to reframe the discussion into something so much more sophisticated. I remember so many occasions when a student would come in all excited about some harebrained theory, and Gertrude would listen patiently, with a slightly distressed look on her face, while she lit a new cigarette. Then she would say, ever so gently, "But how would you TEST that?"—and that was usually the end of the discussion.

Gertrude grew as a researcher through her students. Some students were interested in imagery or mood or creativity, and the research that Gertrude supervised resulted in several papers. One of her students, Larry Lewis, was interested in EEG alpha biofeedback, and this resulted in several papers with Gertrude on the role of feedback on psi performance. Her papers on brain function were coauthored with Michaelleen Maher. Maher was also a film maker, so the opportunity arose to film parapsychologists as they read their papers at a PA conference. The soundtracks were removed, and the films were viewed and rated by undergraduates for aspects of nonverbal communication. This became the groundbreaking work on the experimenter effect in parapsychology—psi conducive experimenters could be identified by their posture, gestures, and facial expressions (Schmeidler & Maher, 1981).

Ultimately, Gertrude's legacy must rest with her students. I had hoped to be able to present some numbers of the students that Gertrude mentored over the years for the MA and the PhD degrees. Unfortunately these statistics were not available from the doctoral program in psychology at CUNY. A new generation of faculty does not remember Gertrude, who retired over 25 years ago. It will be up to this group to keep her memory alive.

Gertrude's doctoral students who went on to contribute to parapsychology include Michaelleen C. Maher, Janet L. Mitchell, and Nancy Sondow. Maher conducted her dissertation research on cerebral laterality and psi, and is well known for her haunting investigations, a meta-analysis of which appeared in the *JP* (Maher, 1999). Mitchell is best known for her out-of-body research with psychic Ingo Swann. She later published two books, including an influential handbook on OBEs (Mitchell, 1989). Sondow published a fascinating paper on precognitive dreaming (Sondow, 1988) and did ganzfeld research with Chuck Honorton. Like Gertrude and Gardner Murphy before her, Sondow has held the position of President of the American Society for Psychical Research since 1993.

With one or two notable exceptions, most of Schmeidler's students have not continued to do active research in the field of parapsychology.

Academic and research opportunities have been few to nonexistent. Time spent earning a living in other fields inevitably detracts from time available for research in parapsychology. I don't think this is Gertrude's fault; she always advised her students to develop other skills that would be useful in the academic job market. But one can criticize parapsychology in general for not being able to support talented young investigators. Indeed, any field that cannot provide employment for its young researchers will soon find itself without any researchers at all.

LEGACY

Gertrude proved her commitment to supporting young investigators when she donated funds to establish the Award for Outstanding Student Contribution to Parapsychology, which the PA named after her. So far, 10 young parapsychologists have received this award. In a way, this is a continuation of the encouragement that Gardner Murphy had shown to her in her early days. Perhaps one of these young investigators will prove to be another Gertrude Schmeidler.

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