

UNDER THE PARANORMAL CURVE: COMPARING PSYCHOLOGY
RESEARCH METHODS TO PARAPSYCHOLOGICAL POPULAR
'SCIENCE'

By Eric Charles Prichard. Nova. 2022. 90 pp. £60.10.
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The author of this slim (but expensive) volume speculates in the brief preface that potential readers might be students on a research methods course or else individuals who are simply curious about the topic. However, the main content of the book appears to be squarely aimed at the former. Although the book would certainly have something to offer the curious general reader, the discussion of topics within its pages is generally too superficial to be satisfying. I suspect that the author's aim was to produce an introductory text on research methods that was a bit more interesting than the average book on this topic. Let's face it, although research methodology is undoubtedly a really important topic, most books on the topic are not exactly page-turners. In contrast, this book is generally an easy and enjoyable read (with the exception of Chapter 6, "An optional recap of statistics").

The author's approach to paranormal topics is very similar to my own. Although he is now a sceptic regarding such claims, as a teenager he was very much a believer, largely as a result of watching sensationalistic and uncritical TV programmes about ghost hunters and aliens. Through science, he learned to ask the crucial question that is at the heart of scepticism: 'What is the actual evidence for these alleged phenomena?' His aim in this book is to explore the relationship between science and belief.

Throughout the book, the author adopts a respectful approach towards paranormal claims. Each chapter begins with a short vignette featuring Bill and Stan. Bill and Stan are both bright chaps with an interest in paranormal claims, but their attitudes differ. Bill, based upon William James, represents the thoughtful believer, in contrast to the more sceptical approach of Stan, based upon G. Stanley Hall. The first chapter opens with a general discussion of the nature of science, followed by further exploration of the approaches to the paranormal taken by James and Hall.

One of the main reasons that I feel this book is aimed more at students doing a research methods course rather than the general reader is that each chapter (except the final one) concludes with a suggestion for a "lab-based activity" to

provide the reader with some hands-on experience. For Chapter 1, this is a small-scale investigation of horoscopes and confirmation bias (no stats required!).

Chapter 2 discusses the nature of evidence, contrasting the importance of observation and measurement in psychology with the reliance on anecdotal evidence often seen with respect to paranormal claims. This criticism has some validity when levelled against the popular ‘science’ featured in TV programmes dealing with ghost hunters, as discussed by the author. However, it certainly would not apply to laboratory-based parapsychology. Nevertheless, the chapter does raise some interesting issues regarding the nature of truly scientific evidence. The lab-based activity suggested at the end of this chapter is based upon the unreliability of eyewitness testimony using the post-event misinformation technique. This technique, pioneered by Elizabeth Loftus, demonstrates that memory for witnessed events can be distorted by the presentation of misinformation after that event has taken place.

Chapter 3 focuses on the concept of correlation as well as describing our tendency to sometimes perceive correlations that are not really there. This tendency is discussed with respect to outbreaks of mass hysteria and UFO flaps. The suggested lab-based activity at the end of this chapter is to test for a correlation between paranormal belief and another variable of psychological interest, such as magical thinking.

Chapter 4 moves on to discuss experimental methods that, when properly applied, allow one to go beyond mere correlation and towards the establishment of causal relationships. The importance of proper controls is emphasized in order to minimize the chances of drawing faulty conclusions from one’s data. Two examples of the poor application of controls are described: the investigation of Uri Geller’s alleged psychic powers by Targ and Puthoff (1974) at Stanford Research Institute and Bem’s (2011) controversial series of studies investigating precognition. Importantly, the author also includes some discussion of the replication crisis in psychology and its implications for parapsychology. The lab-based activity at the end of this chapter is a demonstration of just how easy it can be to obtain spuriously significant results if one engages in questionable research practices.

The penultimate chapter of the book is a brief discussion of the ethics of watching paranormal programmes. The author admits that such programmes can indeed be entertaining, but also contain a great deal of misinformation. He suggests that training in scientific scepticism might help viewers to enjoy such programmes as entertainment whilst appreciating that they may leave a lot to be desired in terms of their veracity. The lab-based activity suggested at the end of this chapter is to critically evaluate one such programme. The final chapter, “An optional recap of statistics”, is, in the author’s words, “a somewhat dense chapter”. I suspect many readers would choose to skip it.

Although I enjoyed reading this book, I do not think that, on its own, it would provide a thorough enough grounding in research methodology to students

studying this important topic. Similarly, it is generally too superficial to provide a thorough critique of parapsychology, given its focus on ‘popular’ paranormal science as opposed to the more rigorous laboratory-based approach. Although it might be useful as a background text for students on a research methods course, at almost a dollar per page, I doubt many of them would be able to afford it.

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