

Prescribing for Parapsychology: Note on J. B. Rhine's Writings in the *Journal of Parapsychology*

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Abstract: In addition to his experimental research program exploring ESP and psychokinesis, J. B. Rhine influenced parapsychology through a variety of non-research papers appearing in the *Journal of Parapsychology*. Founded in 1937, the journal carried a variety of Rhine's prescriptions for parapsychology. This included commentaries designed to set research priorities and discussions of aspects of the field such as the use of spontaneous cases, the importance of scientific methodology, and the subject matter of parapsychology. Part of Rhine's writings may be conceptualized as boundary work, particularly his attempts to separate parapsychology from other areas.

Key words: ESP, Journal of Parapsychology, parapsychology, PK, Rhine.

INTRODUCTION

There is a large body of literature that makes clear that the function of scientific journals goes beyond mere reporting of research findings and conceptual discussions (e.g., Gross, Harmon, & Raidy, 2002; Meadows, 1980). The scientific article, like other forms of writing, serves to defend particular methodological and conceptual approaches, thus helping to shape science (e.g., Bazerman & Paradis, 1991). Such guiding, or shaping influences can be seen in many parapsychology journals and magazines (Alvarado, Biondi, & Kramer, 2006).

One way in which individuals have attempted to influence fields, as has happened in parapsychology, is through the frequent publication of views prescribing theory, methodology, or other topics. This has been the case in the past of individuals such as James H. Hyslop and W. H. C. Tenhaeff (Alvarado, Biondi, & Kramer, 2006). During the nineteenth-century William James published several book reviews defending psychical research in nineteenth-century issues of the *Psychological Review* (Alvarado, 2009). Another case in point, and the topic of this paper,

concerns J. B. Rhine's prescriptive articles published in the *Journal of Parapsychology (JP)*. What follows is not a detailed study of the topic, or Rhine's influence. My comments are meant to bring to the attention of interested readers this neglected dimension of the writings of Rhine.

THE *JOURNAL OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY*

Joseph Banks Rhine (1895-1980) became known in the 1930s for his experimental research program.¹ This program, as seen in Rhine's monograph *Extra-Sensory Perception* (1934a), consisted mainly of card-guessing tests for ESP (see also Rhine, 1934b, 1937). But there were also experiments to test for psychokinesis (PK, e.g., Rhine & Rhine, 1943).² After the publication of the 1934 monograph the research received much publicity. American newspapers had headlines such as "Mathematical Proof Claimed for Existence of Telepathy" (Washington Post, 1936). Reports published in the *New York Times* by science journalist Waldemar Kaempffert (e.g., 1937) chronicled developments at Rhine's laboratory. This research brought many controversies, particularly with American psychologists such as Chester E. Kellogg (1937), John L. Kennedy (1939), and Hans Rogosin (1938) (for overviews see Mauskopf & McVaugh, 1980; and Pratt et al., 1940).

First published in 1937, the *JP* was printed by Duke University Press, and edited by William McDougall and Joseph Banks Rhine, with Charles E. Stuart as Assistant Editor. The journal, which is still in print, has gone through many editorial teams and publishers, and has always been considered one of the most important periodicals in the modern history of parapsychology.³ In fact, the *JP* has been described as "one of the vehicles through which J. B. Rhine and his associates at Duke University articulated their experimental research program" (Alvarado, Biondi, & Kramer, 2006, pp. 74-75).

¹ For information about the life and work of Rhine see Berger (1988), Brian (1982), Mauskopf and McVaugh (1980), and Rao (1982).

² Rhine (1937, 1947b) summarized much of the work in popular books. An overview of the Duke PK work appears in L. E. Rhine (1970).

³ On the *JP* see Alvarado, Biondi, and Kramer (2006, pp. 73-75), Broughton (1987), and Mauskopf (1987).

RHINE'S GUIDING EFFORTS IN THE *JOURNAL OF PARAPSYCHOLOGY*

The *JP* had an important role for the redefinition of parapsychology as an experimental science, mainly in the English-language world. This was accomplished through publishing mainly laboratory work. Table 1 presents a selection of the experimental papers published in the *JP* in its first decade of publication. Following trends in American psychology, the content of the journal showed many studies of phenomena in relation to other variables.

Table 1

Examples of Experimental Papers in the First Decade of Publication of the *Journal of Parapsychology*, 1937-1947

Reference	Topic
Bond (1937)	ESP tests with retarded children
Kubis and Rouke (1937)	ESP tests with twins
Price and Pegram (1937)	ESP tests with blind subjects
Rhine (1938)	Precognition tests
Shulman (1938)	ESP tests with psychotics
Pratt and Woodruff (1939)	ESP tests with different size targets
Birge and Rhine (1942)	ESP tests with a medium
Foster (1943)	ESP tests with American Indian children
Gibson, Gibson and Rhine (1944)	PK tests with mechanical throw of dice
Averill and Rhine (1945)	PK tests and alcohol consumption
Humphrey (1945)	ESP tests and intelligence
Stuart, Humphrey, and McMahan (1947)	ESP and personality variables

In addition to the development of an experimental approach, the *JP* was also J. B. Rhine's way of providing his own sense of order in the field by setting research priorities, defining appropriate subject matter, relating parapsychology to other areas of knowledge, and educating its readership. Rhine (1977) wrote years later that the journal was a "major instrument in the development of a general acquaintance with the field, available to all those who approached it for whatever purpose or need" (p. 99).

The *JP* gave Rhine an opportunity to publicize his ideas and to dictate the direction of future research. For the first ten years of its existence Rhine authored 52 (29%) of the published papers ($N = 181$). Out of these, Rhine was the sole author of 20 (39%), first author of 10 (19%), and second or third author of 22 (42%).⁴ Such use of *JP* pages allowed Rhine many opportunities to shape the field by continuously expressing his opinions and offering prescriptions about a variety of research and professional issues.

In his earlier writings, Rhine suggested the best ways to coin parapsychological terms (1945b), and the proper use of spontaneous cases (1948). Regarding the latter, Rhine wrote:

Such material can help us to initiate new experimental approaches, not any longer to establish psi, but to find out more about what it is and how it operates. And once we abandon all interest in using these experiences as evidence of psi capacities, we have available a wealth of case data which would otherwise be ignored In any right view of the matter, a spontaneous case can serve to contribute a hypothesis, raise a question, or furnish a possible insight, but it cannot go far beyond this point. (p. 232)

These ideas developed in the context of disagreements with a previous tradition, followed by members of the Society for Psychical Research, among others, that used cases as evidence for the existence of psychic phenomena (for an overview see Alvarado, 1996). Such disagreement not only reflected Rhine's redefinition of parapsychology as an experimental science, but represented an attempt both to separate his work from the previous psychical research tradition, and to raise (or promote) the laboratory over the use of case studies.

In addition, Rhine discussed other issues such as the practical application of psi (Rhine, 1945a). While open to the issue, Rhine concluded that "until we can either get these abilities more under conscious control or find an unconscious mode of response that utilizes them successfully, we cannot take the idea of applied parapsychology very seriously" (p. 79).

Other discussions were about the application of scientific methodology to parapsychology (Rhine, 1947a, 1954). Regarding protests against the use of statistics, Rhine (1954) argued that "if the results are to be

⁴ These figures were obtained from a data base created by Nancy L. Zingrone (1988). The question of whether Rhine's influence was good for the field or not depends on our current views about proper methodology and research approaches, and is not the point of this short paper. Certainly more detailed studies could be done comparing the *JP* with other parapsychology journals.

of scientific importance, there must be careful evaluation of the role of chance,” and added that “it is surely time now for all unscientific opposition to the use of measurement to be dropped once and for all from discussion” (p. 77). In making these statements Rhine was defending his quantitative research program against his critics. This included individuals such as Jan Ehrenwald (1947) and G. N. M. Tyrrell (1946) who argued that the quantitative approach was too limiting in a field such as parapsychology. They advocated the use of qualitative analyses of phenomena such as ESP.

Several years later we find Rhine (1972) worried about “confusion about the scope and territory of psi research” (p. 171), and consequently attempting to control and define the actual subject matter of parapsychology. One example was interest in Kirlian photography. During the 1970s there was much interest about this electrophotographic technique and its possible relevance for parapsychology. This was clear in the writings of popular writers (Ostrander & Schroeder, 1970), and others (Krippner & Rubin, 1973). In his attempt to guard the boundaries of parapsychology Rhine (1972) wrote: “The fact is that no matter how interesting this Kirlian photo effect may be (or what may be conjectured about it), it has not been reliably reported to have anything to do with psi. Like a hundred other things it may one day be found to have some technical application to psi research, but as of now it is nothing on which to get sidetracked” (p. 171). While Kirlian photography continued to have its supporters, others were closer to Rhine when they affirmed that empirical work had shown that there was nothing paranormal in this electrophotographic technique (Burton, Joines & Stevens, 1975).

In the same article Rhine separated parapsychology from astrology. In reply to someone who argued that astrological effects were extrasensorimotor (ESM), Rhine wrote that “the definition of psi does not say all ESM effects on a person are psi phenomena; if it did the definition would embrace, for example, all the terrestrial or other influences on the organism that do not directly reach the sense organs (e.g., gravitation effects)” (p. 172). Instead, psi phenomena, Rhine insisted, are “defined as the ESM interaction of the living organism with its environment,” the important issue being that “parapsychology considers its behavioural exchange to show a self-directing (or purposive) agency that is distinct from inanimate physical interaction” (p. 172).

Such delimitation of the field was the subject matter of a paper about the handling of untestable hypotheses such as mind to mind transference of thought (telepathy), the idea that something gets out of the body in OBEs, claims of spirit communication of different sorts, and retro-PK (Rhine, 1974b). Rhine called for a recognition of the impossibility of testing these claims due to alternate explanations that the research methods used could not address. He stated in the abstract of the paper the purpose of his

comments: “The author’s aim is to get parapsychology out of its long and wasted preoccupation with unsolvable questions without necessarily dismissing them with finality” (p. 137).

Such opinions about the study of survival of death and phenomena such as out-of-body experiences were not shared by some, as seen in the work of Hornell Hart (Hart, 1954, 1959), who believed that the topics could and should be studied, and that they had implications for the idea that consciousness existed separate from the physical body. Later students of the survival problem did not follow Rhine, as seen in research on phenomena such as death-bed visions (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977) and claims of children that remembered previous lives (Stevenson, 1975).

Another topic addressed by Rhine (1974a) was the problem of experimenter fraud and the reliability of experimental results. He wrote:

The general point . . . is that in a developing research field, the methods themselves are always on trial from the first. *If we have to argue* over the adequacy of the design or the trustworthiness of the experimenter (or the subject) it is wise to back up and improve the method before advancing further or expecting really firm credence from fellow scientists. The emphasis has to be on the tightening of security. (p. 110)

He proposed several strategies to enhance the credibility of work. This included reminding readers of previous work done in his laboratory involving the use of independent records, a set of which was given to a second experimenter to be checked. He also mentioned work using two experimenters responsible for different procedural tasks, but who checked the results together.

Another suggestion offered by Rhine to address the issue of deception was paying attention to the “signs of psi,” or specific features of the subject’s performances. This included psi missing and decline effects, which he believed “could serve as evidence against experimenter deception when it was discovered later by another analyst” (p. 113). Such signs were seen by Rhine as hidden indicators of the presence of psi in the data unlikely to be faked.

To make replication a truly collective effort of workers in the field Rhine also suggested to improve exchanges of “information and even visits with other research workers, loans of equipment, [and] subjects . . .” (p. 116). In addition, he suggested researchers should make more efforts to relate the work to a larger perspective. As Rhine (1974a) wrote about this:

When the immediate experiment is a recognized start on a long-view objective, it carries added assurance, security, and magnitude of

purpose because of this larger perspective. The greater the problem to which the experiment makes a relevant approach, the more conviction the results are likely to carry. Moreover, the more closely the immediate project relates to already established territory, either within parapsychology itself or other branches of science, the more substantial and well-based it appears and the more trust it inspires in the credibility of the experimenter. The growing interrelations in the emergent picture of the nature of psi rank high in the building of a requisite overall confidence. This, of course, is the long-view answer to all the doubts about the field of parapsychology. (p. 118)

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In addition to his experimental reports, Rhine wrote extensively about how parapsychology should be conducted, and what topics were worthy of investigation. My point has not been to discuss if Rhine was 'right' or 'wrong', but rather to identify a topic in his writings that has not received much attention before. Further work needs to be conducted about Rhine's actual influence on the field—not a key issue of this short paper. In fact, there were many that did not follow his prescriptions. This is clear from a cursory reading of journals other than the *JP*. For example, regardless of Rhine's (1948) views about the limits of case investigations, several researchers in the modern period continued these studies along evidential lines (e.g., Hart, 1954; Nicol & Nicol, 1958).⁵ Similarly, Rhine's (1974b) view of survival of bodily death as an untestable issue did not detain some from pursuing the problem (e.g., Osis & Haraldsson, 1977; Stevenson, 1975).

Rhine, like previous workers in the field, tried to chart the course of the field by dispensing his advice, his approval and disapproval, as he sought to shape parapsychology according to his views and priorities. Particularly noticeable were his prescriptive writings about the experimental approach in which he recommended laboratory research over other research approaches, such as case studies. Moreover, with the exception of his emphasis on experimentation, his role was similar to that of other researchers (such as Hyslop and Tenhaeff) who used their writings to attempt to influence others (see Alvarado, Biondi & Kramer, 2006).

Some of Rhine's writings can also be seen as examples of boundary work that represented an attempt to defend the field because it set

⁵ For the work of Stevenson, and brief comments about other work with spontaneous cases, see Alvarado and Zingrone (2008).

parapsychology apart from other areas perceived to be less scientific or respectable.⁶ The *JP* allowed Rhine to reach, and presumably, influence others in the field. But his work in this area was also done through books (e.g. Rhine, 1937, 1947b), as well as through articles in the journals of other disciplines, and in newspapers and magazines (e.g., Rhine, 1935, 1955). Rhine deserves to be remembered as more than a defender of experimental approaches in parapsychology. Like many other leaders in various disciplines, his contributions include his attempts both to guide and define his field of study.

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⁶ On boundary work see Gieryn (1983, 1999). For a discussion of the topic in terms of popularization, an area in which Rhine (e.g., 1937, 1947b) also engaged, see Myers (2003).

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