

COMMENTARY

On W. J. Crawford's Studies of Physical Mediumship

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Abstract—These comments are about the context and reception of W. J. Crawford's physical mediumship work. Interestingly, Crawford did not discuss previously relevant work on the subject, nor the conceptual tradition about mediumistic forces discussed by many authors before he published his studies. The latter included ideas to explain phenomena such as telekinesis and materialization. Many writers were skeptical of Crawford's results, while others argued that some of his findings may have been due to what we now call experimenter effects.

Writing about psychical research in the 12th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, philosopher Ferdinand C. S. Schiller (1922:202) wrote that medium

Kathleen Goligher of Belfast . . . and the family circle in which she sat, were exhaustively studied by Dr. W. J. Crawford, a lecturer in mechanical engineering in the local university, who described his conclusions in a series of books: *The Reality of Psychic Phenomena* appeared in 1916, *Experiments in Psychical Science* in 1919, while the third, *The Psychic Structures at the Goligher Circle*, delayed by the author's sudden death, appeared in Feb. 1921. They formed a graduated series, growing more and more sensational in their results, and in the end actually represented as visible facts what had originally been suggested as hypothetical inferences.

While such psychical research work has been mentioned frequently in recent times, including in popular books (e.g., Roach 2005:127–133), I doubt Crawford's books are read by many today. For this reason I welcomed Michael E. Tynn's (2013) recent Essay Review in the *JSE* providing us with a summary of the above-mentioned three books (Crawford 1916, 1919, 1921), and of a fourth one not cited by Schiller (Crawford 1918). Because most modern comments about Crawford's work are centered on the issue of

the reality of the phenomena, I would like to offer some comments about the context of his research and its reception.

Tymn (2013:530) rightly points out that Crawford's books "are lacking in . . . historical detail relative to the Goligher family." I would like to add that Crawford's writings also present another problem for modern readers. That is, he did not place his work in the context of previous work, among it observations of the phenomena of mediums such as D. D. Home (Crookes 1874) and Eusapia Palladino (Morselli 1908), among many others. Crawford's books are limited to his observations and to the results of his tests, and no systematic comparisons were offered in terms of previous findings on the topic.

Crawford also did not connect his work to previous existing theory. He believed that "actual matter [was] temporarily taken from the medium's body and put back at the end of the séance" (Crawford 1916:146). Based on weighing tests of members of the mediumistic circle, including himself, Crawford believed that the loss of ounces of weight in several sitters meant that "*something is being loosened* from the bodies of the members of the circle" (Crawford 1916:150). He also supported the belief in a connection between the medium and the table in some tests in which the weight of the table was added to that of the medium, something described by a writer as "the first quantitative determination in telekinetic science" (Holt 1919:185). While contemporary readers may get the impression from Crawford's writings that such ideas originated with him (something he did not claim), in actuality there was a tradition of concepts of forces and radiations coming out of the medium's bodies (and the sitters') to explain telekinesis and materializations preceding Crawford.

Such ideas of forces related to the body of mediums as agents of physical phenomena were present since the early days of American spiritualism, as seen in books such as *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents* (Rogers 1853) and *Modern Mysteries Explained and Exposed in Four Parts* (Mahan 1855). Similar ideas came from other countries. Russian chemist Aleksandr M. Butlerov stated: "The source of this force . . . proceeds from the ponderable material of the medium. . . . The creation of a force need not be postulated without a corresponding consumption of energy. . . . What happens is but the transference of some living energy emanating from a material body to another body" (Butlerov 1874:281). Later twentieth-century writers, among them Italian psychiatrist Enrico Morselli (1908) and Polish philosopher and psychologist Julian Ochorowicz (1910), continued developing similar ideas (for many other examples see Alvarado 2006 and Alvarado & Nahm 2011).

While Crawford was a relative latecomer to such theoretical concerns, his contributions were important. His case represents an interesting historical

example of process research with physical phenomena. As such, Crawford's work deserves a prominent place in the history of efforts to understand the physical aspects behind telekinesis and materializations.

This was the case with the study of forces involved in table levitation (Crawford 1916, 1919) and with the "flow" of what he called plasma (Crawford 1921). Regarding the latter, Arthur Conan Doyle (1921:292) wrote:

We sometimes call it Psychoplasm in England, Richet named it Ectoplasm, Geley calls it Ideoplasm; but call it what you will, Crawford has shown for all time that it is the substance which is at the base of psychic physical phenomena.

In addition to seeing Crawford's work as an example of the study of mediumistic forces, it is of interest to realize that his results have been discussed in terms of belief in what today we refer to as experimenter effects (Bozzano 1967, Schrenck-Notzing 1921/1972, Sudre 1926). In a 1921 paper about Crawford's work, Albert von Schrenck-Notzing (1921/1972:177) speculated if the materialization process could be the product of the theoretical convictions of the person in charge of the tests, becoming established gradually until it was physically produced through the medium's mind. Ernesto Bozzano speculated that instead of obtaining evidence confirming his ideas about the phenomena, Crawford may have suggested to the medium "to reproduce, with ectoplasmic substance, the tangible example of his own theory" (Bozzano 1967:107; this was an enlarged version of articles first appearing in the late 1920s). Bozzano accepted that the fluidic cantilevers of Crawford were real, but argued that such confirmation of the researcher's ideas did not mean "that the levitation of the table in general took place in such way, but only that the subconscious will of the medium, having received Crawford's verbal suggestion" (Bozzano 1967:107), yielded to the idea. In truth, this was basically a speculation with no evidence in its support. But it provides a fascinating connection with similar ideas from the previous literature about hysteria and hypnosis, not to mention some studies of mental mediums (Alvarado 1991). Ideas such as these show that research programs such as Crawford's fulfilled many functions in the past discourse on psychical research.

Much can also be said about the reception of Crawford's work, a topic I cannot do justice to here but that is important to understand the impact of his work and the development of psychical research. There were many writings about Crawford's work in scholarly publications such as the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* (Dingwall 1922) and the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (Prince 1919), not to mention many

general reviews in *Popular Science Monthly* (Anonymous 1921), *Current Opinion* (Anonymous 1922), *Unpartizan Review* (Holt 1919), and *The Weekly Review* (Jastrow 1920a).

Crawford had his supporters. One commentator stated:

It appears to be scientifically as well as morally impossible that Miss Kathleen Goligher, the young medium through whom various interesting physical phenomena are obtained, tricks or cheats in any way. (Kingsford 1920:260)

Charles Richet (1922:522) wrote about the “admirable tests of Crawford, which singularly illuminate the causes and the mechanism of telekinesis.” Parts of Crawford’s (1916, 1919, 1921) main books were translated into French by René Sudre (Crawford 1923), showing the high esteem Sudre had for the works. Particularly interesting was the previously mentioned essay by Schrenck-Notzing (1921/1972) in which he mentioned several methodological innovations introduced by Crawford and in which he noticed similarities between the materialization phenomena and physiological reactions of Goligher and the medium Eva C.

But there were also many critiques based on the possibility of fraud and on faulty methodology or conditions of observation (e.g., Beadnell 1920). Morton Prince (1919:360) stated:

Crawford assumes the veridity of the phenomena and therefore the lack of need of precaution against unconscious fraud. From his point of view he is probably justified in his method of experimenting. But it cannot be expected that this assumption will be accepted by an outsider as valid.

Eric J. Dingwall (1922) considered that Crawford’s reports lacked important information and presented various problems, but nonetheless he affirmed that they were “the most important contributions towards the study of telekinesis” (p. 150) that had appeared up to the moment of the author’s death. More negative were Joseph Jastrow’s (1920a) comments, who assumed everything was fraudulent. He wrote attempting to ridicule Crawford:

Professor Crawford, the engineer, in the daytime believes in gravity and the parallelogram of forces; but once a week, at evening in the séance-room when Miss Goligher, the medium, joins the society of the balances and cantilevers, gravity yields in deference to a psychic lady, and the parallelogram of forces finds its occupation temporarily gone. The two orders of thinking keep house together in many minds, just because the mental housekeeping is so commonly loose and irregular and impressionistic—and does so

much on the credit basis—that the incongruity escapes notice. There is no monthly censor to give notice that the account is overdrawn; an intellectual clearing-house is not a popular institution. (Jastrow 1920a:42)

There are other factors that contributed to the creation of negative suspicions about Crawford's work. It did not help that Crawford committed suicide in 1920. Regardless of his assurance that his decline was not due to his psychic work (Deland 1920, Gow in Crawford 1921:v), others implied after his death that there was a connection (e.g., Jastrow 1920b).

Another problem was that, in spite of other reports positive toward the phenomena independent of Crawford (e.g., Barrett 1919), some of them published after Crawford's death (e.g., Stephenson 1936), the negative report of physicist Edmund Edward Fournier d'Albe (1922) tarnished the medium's reputation. Fournier d'Albe had séances with the Goligher Circle after Crawford's death and suspected fraud. However, only on one occasion did he report a direct observation of possible fraud. In a séance held in July of 1921 Fournier d'Albe said that a small stool was levitated and

I saw against the dim red background of the wall the stool held by KG's [Kathleen Goligher's] foot and portion of leg . . . The phenomenon was repeated. Again I saw the procedure . . . (Fournier d'Albe 1922:34)

As is usual in psychical research, the report was criticized on several grounds (Dingwall 1923, McKenzie 1923). But no one seems to remember these counter critiques today. Dingwall (1923) was not convinced by the observation of fraud and was disappointed about the lack of details and tests in Fournier d'Albe's report. In his words:

It ought to have been perfectly easy to devise experiments which would have exposed completely the true nature of the phenomena and which could have been put into operation without the circle being in the least aware of what was occurring. Thus ample proof could have been given and the matter placed beyond any doubt. As it is, the gravest doubt exists whether the circle is in reality the gang of frauds that Dr. Fournier would have us believe. A critical and detailed examination of his book is valueless. It is as useless as any critical examination of Dr. Crawford's work in the past. The facts are not given. (Dingwall 1923:23)

To summarize, Tymn's review will help modern readers to become aware of Crawford's fascinating efforts to understand the workings of physical mediumship. Similarly, I hope that my brief comments will assist those readers in seeing these developments in a more general context.

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