‘Forbidden Histories’

Callum E. Cooper interviews **Andreas Sommer** on the importance of historical awareness for psychology.

Could you tell readers about your background, and how your research is relevant to psychology?

I’m a historian of science and medicine studying hidden links between the sciences and the ‘occult’ from the Scientific Revolution to the twentieth century. A major part of my research has been the relationship between psychical research and modern experimental psychology, which emerged together in the late 1800s. I’m mostly interested in important historical developments in this regard that didn’t make the ‘cut’ in official histories of modern psychology.

For example, it’s well known that some of the ‘founders’ of the discipline, such as Gustav T. Fechner and William James, were very interested in alleged psychic phenomena. However, the extent to which they investigated them and collaborated with other researchers is rarely acknowledged. In the case of James, for example, it’s not widely known that his most important collaborator in psychological matters was Frederic W. H. Myers, the British inventor of the word ‘telepathy’.

Did you look at Wilhelm Wundt in Germany, who is also often credited as a ‘founder’ of modern psychology?

Yes, quite extensively. As you know, Wundt was a vocal critic of investigations of spiritualism and other ‘occult’ phenomena such as telepathy. Attacks by Wundt and other early psychologists have often been portrayed as self-evident instances of ‘science’ vanquishing ‘superstition’. But once you engage with the primary sources, the historical facts quickly undermine such interpretations.

For example, Wundt and others (such as G. Stanley Hall in the US) never expressed their misgivings of James and fellow psychical researchers in terms of dispassionate, methodological criticisms. In fact, they often strongly misrepresented their actual positions and methods of investigation.

What’s more, psychological critics like Wundt and Hall made no secret of the strong religious motivations for their hostility to psychical research. It’s often forgotten, for example, that Hall’s original career was that of a minister and preacher. Warnings of supposed dangers of the occult for ‘true religion’ are a recurring topic in the supposedly ‘scientific’ critiques of Hall, Wundt and other psychologists.

I tried to sketch these broader international contexts, for example, in my PhD thesis and a recent chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of William James*.

I’ve introduced my students to your YouTube channel ‘Forbidden Histories’. What do you mean by ‘forbidden’?

‘Forbidden’ may sound a little melodramatic, but it captures what I think is a genuine taboo. There’s a somewhat stubborn refusal of academic orthodoxy and certain science popularisers

to face certain findings of perfectly mainstream history of science, because they don't sit well with the 'naturalistic' self-image of western science and academia. Isaac Newton's systematic studies of alchemy and apocalyptic prophecies may now be more or less considered part of common knowledge. But tell the average scientist that, for example, Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo were all practicing astrologers (who cast horoscopes not just for money as some have claimed, but because they believed in it), and you can be sure of interesting responses.

Moreover, Newton has been called 'the last magician', but this label is misleading because we can see a clear continuity of scientists being quite open-minded about 'magic'. *Physics and Psychics* by Richard Noakes (Cambridge University Press, 2019), for example, has interesting insights about occult preoccupations of British elite physicists beyond the 'usual suspects' William Crookes and Oliver Lodge, including Nobel Laureates J. J. Thomson (the discoverer of the electron) and Lord Rayleigh.

Speaking of big names in physics, it's also not widely known that both Marie and Pierre Curie took a serious interest in the alleged physical phenomena of spiritualism. Pierre in particular was convinced that they were dealing with real and fundamental anomalies. At the same time, the Curies and most other investigators of mediums on the continent were not at all interested in proving the reality of spirits, and they in fact often rejected spiritual or religious interpretations of the ostensible phenomena. The history of science and the modern occult especially in continental Europe has many other examples in store.

Are you saying history clearly demonstrates anomalous cognition as a fact?

I don't think historians should be expected to do the job of scientists, who ought to feel responsible to answer such questions (instead of delegating this responsibility to militantly sceptical stage magicians and other professional debunkers). And as a historian I'm actually not very interested in validating or debunking occult phenomena. I also don't like arguments from authority, along the lines of 'many icons of modern science believed in the paranormal, so you should too' (or similar arguments from the sceptical end of the spectrum).

What I want is to obtain a qualified understanding of *why* scientists have believed as well as disbelieved in the paranormal. This requires looking at the actual methods they employed to investigate the claimed phenomena, and doing justice to the wide range of interpretations.

For example?

Take another icon of modern science, the co-founder of modern evolution Alfred Russel Wallace. He was a devout spiritualist, but looking at his almost absolutely uncritical engagement with mediums, it's clear his scientific eminence alone shouldn't be taken as a voucher for the truth of his spiritualist convictions. At the same time, contemporary criticisms of Wallace's spiritualism, e.g. by the physiologist Edward B. Carpenter, were not particularly 'scientific' either.

Doing history properly also involves an understanding of the actual means by which western academics have come to be accustomed of pigeonholing any belief in parapsychological phenomena as inherently unscientific. Turns out science had actually precious little to with it, which is another somewhat shocking but robust consensus reached by mainstream historians who have investigated this question. (For the British context, see the recent book *The Decline of Magic* by Michael Hunter, a leading historian of Enlightenment science).

In this regard, it's also indispensable to understand crucial political dimensions which have lastingly shaped western perceptions of the phenomena – for example, the role of anti-Catholicism and secular politics during the professionalization of psychology and other university disciplines in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It would be absurd, for example, for a future historian to write a history of, say, early twenty-first-century American climate science failing to mention the active lobbying of climate-change denial by the Republican party. But as far as they are interested in history at all, psychologists typically rely on historical narratives of science-magic relationships which are on this level, and which tell only those parts of the story which fit traditional simplistic 'science vs. superstition' narratives.

Why do you think is this important to present-day psychologists?

Evidence matters not only in science, and history can't be just a free-for-all. Scientists should have an intrinsic interest in getting at least their basic historical facts straight.

Looking at the past and presence of psychology, you get a strong sense that popularizers of the discipline have often tried promoting the public and scientific image of their discipline by intentionally disavowing any positive links to the occult. Like every science, psychology needs its popularizers, but even popular writings can and should be fact-based.

There's also been a strong tendency by 'sceptical' psychologists to explain belief in the paranormal in terms of biases and wishful thinking. The other side of the coin – e.g. primordial fears of the unknown and other reasons that may bias us toward categorical *disbelief* – is never really addressed. I think such a one-sided focus is hair-raisingly simplistic, especially when adopted by psychologists. Being aware of the passionate hostility which has characterized many supposedly 'scientific' responses to psychical research, I think work in the 'psychology of paranormal belief' requires a more rigorously symmetrical perspective.

Finally, I think there's also a need to face certain rather unsavoury aspects of battles against the 'occult' by past psychologists like Wundt, Hall, Joseph Jastrow and others. These and other psychologists were vocal in their views that any tendency toward occult belief was a clear-cut indication of mental degeneration. Viewed as morbid throwbacks into past stages of mental evolution, belief in the paranormal was held to be characteristic of the 'lower races', and therefore considered as evidence of degeneration when appearing in the 'superior' ones.

Do you think there may be other clinical lessons to learn from history?

Yes, and as the humanities are increasingly being starved out of the universities, I think if they want to survive, historians actually need to stress the 'cash value' of their research for improving the human condition.

I think it goes without saying that belief in the paranormal is not good or healthy for everyone. Still, since about the 1970s there's also been a growing body of research suggesting that for many people certain exceptional experiences can be an important coping resource. Think, for example, of the literature on 'hallucinations of widowhood' or clinical trials showing the success of therapeutic treatments based on the psychedelic induction of 'mystical' experiences. However, the insight that unusual experiences can have therapeutic value is hardly new.

At a time when other psychologists and medics often pathologized occult and mystical experiences wholesale, William James stressed the constructive clinical and social functions of some of them. (Despite the fact that James was not very religious himself and far from convinced of, say, life after death.) Yet, James's appeals to the scientific and medical communities of his day fell largely on deaf ears, and it took almost a century until western clinicians began developing more nuanced and patient-centred approaches to exceptional experiences and mental health.

The damage through misdiagnosis and overmedication of patients reporting certain extraordinary but not necessarily pathological experiences may be hard to assess quantitively, but it has been real. It is also a reminder that medical training is often grounded in absolute cultural presuppositions, including the assumption that scientific, medical and psychological knowledge steadily grows in a more or less linear fashion, and that science is inherently self-correcting. Mainstream studies in the history of science and medicine show that this is not necessarily the case, especially concerning empirical approaches towards some of the most fundamental human questions.

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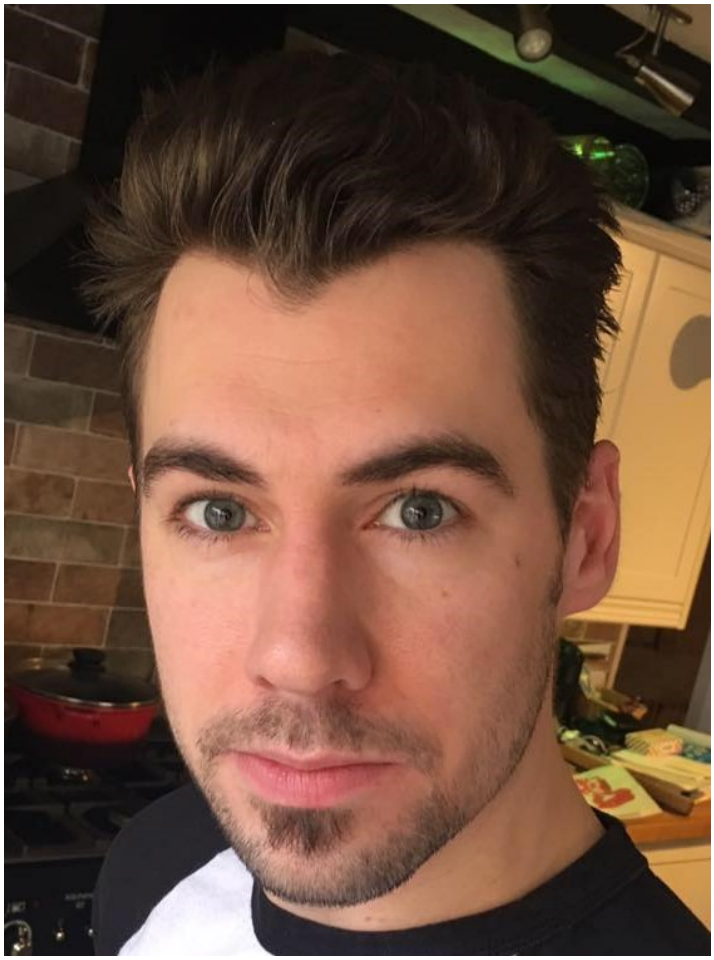

Andreas Sommer, PhD, is a historian of science and medicine with a background in philosophy and psychology. After holding various research posts at the University of Cambridge, he is now an independent scholar.

Der Spiritismus.

Eine sogenannte

Wissenschaftliche Frage.

Offener Brief

an

Herrn Prof. Dr. Hermann Ulrici

in Halle

von

W. Wundt,

Professor in Leipzig.

Leipzig,

Verlag von Wilhelm Engelmann.

1879.

William James, at a slate-writing séance.