



This work has been submitted to **NECTAR**, the **Northampton Electronic Collection of Theses and Research**.

Article

Title: Review of 'Education in Parapsychology: Student and Instructor Perspectives' by Harvey Irwin

Creator: Roe, C. A.

Example citation: Roe, C. A. (2014) Review of 'Education in Parapsychology: Student and Instructor Perspectives' by Harvey Irwin. *Journal of Parapsychology*. 78(1), pp. 128-131. 0022-3387.

It is advisable to refer to the publisher's version if you intend to cite from this work.

Version: Published version

<http://nectar.northampton.ac.uk/7043/>



BOOK REVIEWS

EDUCATION IN PARAPSYCHOLOGY: STUDENT AND INSTRUCTOR PERSPECTIVES by Harvey Irwin. Foreword by Nancy Zingrone. Gladesville, NSW, Australia: AIPR Mongraphs, 2013. Pp xv + 106. \$25.00 (paperback). ISBN 978 0 9870772 1 9.

Harvey Irwin has excellent credentials for writing a guide to education in parapsychology, having taught such a programme at the University of New England in Armidale, New South Wales, since the late 1970s (he retired in 2003) and having authored (lately co-authored) the highly influential textbook *An Introduction to Parapsychology*, now in its fifth edition (Irwin & Watt, 2007). Notwithstanding this publication, and one or two others aimed at providing an overview for the student (e.g., French & Stone, 2013; Holt, Simmonds-Moore, Luke, & French, 2012), Irwin is correct in identifying a need to provide accurate and practical guidance for education in parapsychology. This is not only to provide a pathway for the training of the next generation of parapsychologists but also to better educate their “mainstream” peers. Too much time is devoted by parapsychologists to arguing with intractably established sceptics rather than focusing on those whose views have not yet ossified. As Max Planck (1949) famously observed, “A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it” (pp. 33–34). This slim volume is divided into two sections, with Part 1 oriented to the student’s concerns and Part 2 to the tutor’s. Part 1 begins with a chapter on “Misconceptions and preconceptions” that recognises (based in part, it seems, on the author’s personal experience) that prospective students can be drawn to courses in parapsychology with “wildly inaccurate” ideas about what the subject entails, such that they can easily become dismayed on discovering its actual scientifico-mathematical nature. Here Irwin offers a rather narrow definition of parapsychology that privileges the experimental method and the laboratory setting, which may be slightly out of kilter with a discipline that is witnessing a revival of interest in field work and qualitative methods of discovery and analysis. He notes that some phenomena may be included under the banner of parapsychology for political purposes, as a means to undermine credibility by association with dubious phenomena such as crop circles and Bermuda Triangle disappearances. Irwin concedes that their inclusion might be justified on the grounds that they reflect “mysteries” that resist conventional explanation, but this seems unnecessary given parapsychology’s origins in psychical research that clearly set out the scope, as expressed in the inside front cover of the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, “[to investigate] without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit *those faculties of man* [emphasis added], real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis.” Whatever the ultimate explanations of crop circles and the Bermuda Triangle mystery, it seems highly unlikely to expand our understanding of human capabilities. In my view parapsychology should properly distance itself from the kinds of topic that feature in Tobacyk’s *Paranormal Belief Scale* (including astrology and UFOlogy) and thereby deny the relevance of much of the research on correlates of paranormal belief, which has been based on such flimsy measures of superstitiousness. At the same time, Irwin argues against the inclusion of mystical and occult practices such as Tarot, I Ching, and magic in the sense of spell-casting. To be sure no respectable education programme in parapsychology would include any kind of apprenticeship or training in these methods, but insofar as success with these can be interpreted as involving psi they would seem to me to be fair game (indeed, I have collaborated on a number of projects that have used Tarot and I Ching protocols as means of testing for PK, and am currently looking at Pagan spell-casting as a possible form of noncontact healing—Martin, Drennan, & Roe, 2010; Roe, 1994).

Irwin notes that registration onto a parapsychology course might reflect personal tendencies toward magical thinking or religious convictions that variously promote or prohibit psi phenomena. The latter can include belief in forms of materialism that deny psi phenomena in principle. He labels this position skepticism but it could more accurately be termed counteradvocacy, as the former implies doubt rather than denial. Counteradvocates could possibly sign up for a parapsychology course with the aim to debunk the findings or question the adequacy of the

methods, though I suspect a rational debate on either of these would be welcomed by most tutors, who would be relatively confident of their soundness.

Chapter 2 is concerned with students' motivations for studying parapsychology so as to ensure a good fit with content and orientation. The first of these motivations is to understand their own experiences, particularly if they have concerns about their implications; for example, are they morally bound to act on apparent premonitions? Although it is extremely difficult to account for individual experiences after the fact, courses can provide a context that helps normalise them. This is more challenging where the focus is wholly on laboratory studies, and some consideration of more phenomenological approaches—with appropriate critical reflection—would have been welcome. The second motivation for students is to find someone who understands them and their experiences, seeing the tutor as a kind of therapist. Irwin raises the fear that providing evidence (in other contexts) of psychic functioning may then reinforce pathological beliefs and behaviour. Thirdly, students may take the course in the hope that it complements other, more vocational, subjects, such as providing a grounding in the scientific method for nonspecialists. Irwin argues that a premium is to be had if parapsychology is taken as part of a psychology programme that would have already introduced many of the phenomena of social, cognitive and abnormal psychology that overlap with paranormal experience. One could similarly argue for its inclusion as part of a physics programme. The fourth motivation is to become a professional parapsychologist, though this ambition is stymied by the extremely limited job opportunities, and Irwin wisely proposes that at the least graduate studies should include some overlap or have some bearing on more mainstream subjects so as to provide an opportunity to demonstrate one's academic credentials.

Chapter 3 begins by addressing the pros and cons from the student's perspective of the different methods of studying parapsychology. The distinctions may seem quite self-evident to experienced academics but are usefully pointed out for the prospective student. Self-directed reading offers a convenient approach that will reflect the individual's main areas of interest so should be motivating, but because it is unguided there is no guarantee that what is being read is of good quality or is representative of the field. Guided reading lists address this, though such lists tend to be introductory so present less of a challenge to the enthusiast. Community or Adult Education courses have a similar disadvantage and can vary widely in quality (depending on the tutor's training or background) but at least are accessible, generally affordable, and provide the opportunity for support and stimulation from like-minded peers. Study at the bachelor's level would provide more of a challenge and would typically be included in a broader syllabus that could even act to camouflage one's true interests if one is concerned about the effects upon potential employers while still enabling the subject to be studied critically and in some depth. Irwin's advice to students looking to choose a master's or PhD programme also emphasises the need to cover one's tracks. At one level this seems like sensible (if timid) advice that acknowledges the antipathetic climate experienced by some. However, it may actually contribute to that climate by reinforcing the stereotype that there is something unwholesome about parapsychology, and this could act to deter bright, interested students from throwing their hat into the ring. Generally, Irwin's concerns about possible stigmatisation seem overplayed, especially where it can be made clear that parapsychology is the study of anomalous *experience* and so encompasses naturalistic explanations where they are appropriate.

The next section considers how to study parapsychology without a scientific background. The emphasis here is on mathematical competence, but this could be a deterrent to the many who have developed math anxiety; it might be more fruitful for the lay person to concentrate on case studies as a vehicle for exploring the pitfalls of human perception and inference and so develop a more scientific orientation to evaluating evidence that doesn't hinge on mathematical sophistication. This section notes that the principles of the scientific method can be straightforward and intuitive, contrary to the stereotypical view of science as necessarily off-puttingly complex or requiring Einsteinian reasoning powers to be mastered. Educational programmes allow these principles to be more easily grasped through practical demonstrations (as participant, researcher, or both) and Irwin usefully offers advice on how one can gain hands-on experience either as a student or a volunteer.

In Chapter 4 he considers the various benefits of formal study, including that it can cultivate an appreciation of the (socio-political) complexities of conducting research on controversial topics. It can also provide a more solid knowledge base from which to be a consumer of the exaggerated claims (both pro and con) that are typical of the media and popular literature. The laudable assertion (p. 47) that paranormal claims should be evaluated on the adequacy of the empirical evidence seems to contradict his initial point that evidence is only part of a broader socio-political schema (which seems a more accurate description of how science is actually practised). The third benefit he identifies is an appreciation of how science works, and this seems to be an attempt to reconcile benefits

one and two. He draws attention to the fuzzy nature of science and the general dominance of theory over observation in the natural sciences that parapsychology seeks to emulate. The latter obviously suffers in such comparisons, but this may be because the comparison is inappropriate. Parapsychology seems to share more with other social sciences, which also have an ambivalent relationship with theory, reflecting in part the complexity of a subject matter that includes sentient organisms with their own intentions and expectations that create a myriad of additional extraneous factors. Parapsychology seems to be especially susceptible to such expectancy effects so that demands, for example, for replication on demand, seem excruciatingly naive. As an antidote to this potential doom and gloom, Irwin ends this chapter with a final section on “discovering the joys of being a parapsychologist” that promotes the opportunity to explore such a rich and diverse subject that, at least potentially, has something fundamental to say about the human condition.

Part 2 of the book focuses on instructor perspectives and is slightly shorter than Part 1, consisting of just three chapters. The first of these is likely to prove of most benefit (particularly to the nonspecialist academic looking to develop an interest in parapsychology) and explores the issues in designing a parapsychology course. Alternative ways of delineating the topic are explored, with an emphasis on research that utilises the experimental method and is organised around the triumvirate of ESP, PK, and survival (with perhaps an additional consideration of factors affecting paranormal belief). There is a nice symmetry here with earlier chapters, in that the discussion of how topics are demarcated shows an awareness of the need to be sympathetic to student expectations. Nevertheless, in the next section Irwin considers the need to maintain academic standards in the face of student demands for the popular or sensational. This is not a trivial issue in a time when even university-based courses use student assessments as part of the metric by which programmes are evaluated and university national league tables are produced. Mitigating against this pandering to *vox populi* is the need to meet learning outcomes often set at a national level that expect a degree of scholarship and critical thinking as indicators of academic quality.

In the next section Irwin offers a philosophy of teaching and learning, drawing a distinction between the more traditional teacher-centred approaches and more modern student-centred approaches. The former are typically didactic, as in a formal lecture, and are mainly focused on conveying prespecified information identified by the lecturer. The latter approach encourages individual exploration and self-discovery in which the teacher becomes facilitator. Politically, the latter has tended to supersede the former, but in practice the two approaches tend to be used complementarily, with more didactic teaching providing the platform (and setting boundaries) for personalised exploration. Of course the structure and method of delivery of a programme depends on its aims and objectives. In the next section Irwin considers these and makes some suggestions for how they might be framed. Next he looks at the context for the course, particularly in identifying opportunities to capitalise on overlap with other subject areas (such as the psychology of perception and memory), not only to build on that prior learning but also to affirm the relevance of parapsychology for what might be the student’s primary or vocational interest. Even where the student might have career aspirations in parapsychology, as already discussed, it is important to show how this work is relevant to more mainstream concerns.

Chapter 6 reviews the practicalities of teaching parapsychology. First Irwin tackles the delicate issue of an academic who has been teaching more mainstream topics for some time and who now applies to include a parapsychology element to the curriculum. Some objections to such an application can be overcome by acknowledging the subject’s controversial nature and the need to study it scientifically, and by noting its popular interest so that it provides an ideal vehicle for developing critical thinking skills among a large and enthusiastic cohort. In discussing teaching materials he encourages the sharing of good practice and of resources (including audiovisual aids). In the UK this has been an aim of a special interest group for anomalistic psychology and parapsychology within the Higher Education Academy, but this could, as Irwin suggests, be done under the auspices of the Parapsychological Association.

He devotes another section to student misconceptions, but although this focuses on practical aspects it does seem repetitive of earlier coverage. Among these is the possibility that students become dismayed by the emphasis on methodology and statistics which might appear “excessively pedantic” (p. 81) but, as he explains, is essential if the conclusions we reach and the recommendations we give to the general public are to be trusted. Similarly there may be a mismatch between the findings in the research literature and the student’s own experience. This can be a source of tension, but I have found that it can be managed productively if students are encouraged to enter into a reciprocal relationship where “academic research” provides the lens through which they critically evaluate their own beliefs and experiences, and their own beliefs and experiences are used as the lens through which they eval-

uate the validity of “academic research”. Similarly, Irwin goes on to argue for the importance of taking a practical approach so long as the demands placed on students are in step with their skill development—it wouldn’t be sensible to have them working as independent researchers on projects until they have gained a lot of experience of the principles and pitfalls of research. Again, many of the suggestions in this section seem sensible but unsurprising, though of course they might be much less obvious to someone just starting out as an educator in parapsychology.

In a final chapter, attention is turned to management issues, and Irwin reasonably argues that there should be some mechanism in place to establish and maintain standards, and the Parapsychological Association is brought to task for not providing this. He asserts, “the Parapsychological Association, as the professional body representing the interests of scientific parapsychology, should take on the responsibility of approving parapsychology courses that demonstrate due academic rigor” (p. 93).

The PA website does provide links to university-based educational opportunities in parapsychology around the world but stops short of endorsing these or conducting any kind of appraisal of standards. There may be difficulties in making such recommendations, particularly if any omissions are legally challenged, but these should not be insurmountable if there are clear criteria that have to be met before a course can be recommended (e.g., that a proportion of tutors are full members of the PA, that the university is nationally accredited, etc.). Irwin adds requirements for tutors to have a PhD and have published in parapsychology to demonstrate methodological competence, but both are included in the criteria for full membership of the PA so are already covered in the above. He goes on to suggest a certification system for instructors administered by the PA, but it seems more practicable to make the course the unit of assessment. Given the lack of consensus as to the core phenomena of parapsychology (textbook coverage apart), Irwin rightly eschews any assessment based on the curriculum.

In summary, this is a useful addition to the educator’s library, filled with common sense and helpful tips that would be of particular use to the early career parapsychologist who is looking to develop a teaching profile. The book mainly reflects Irwin’s experience of teaching for many years, so it does not have an exhaustive reference list but does include 74 publications that give a sound introduction to education in parapsychology.

References

- French, C., & Stone, A. (2013). *Anomalistic psychology: Exploring paranormal belief and experience*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holt, N., Simmonds-Moore, C., Luke, D., & French, C. (2012). *Anomalistic psychology*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Irwin, H. J., & Watt, C. A. (2007). *An introduction to parapsychology* (5th ed.). Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Martin, H., Drennan, S., & Roe, C. A., (2010). Effects of participant and target system lability upon PK performance using an I Ching task [abstract]. *Abstracts of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 53rd Annual Convention and The Incorporated Society for Psychical Research 32nd Annual Convention*, 23.
- Planck, M. (1949). *Scientific autobiography and other papers* (F. Gaynor, trans.). New York: Philosophical Library.
- Roe, C. A. (1994). Subjects’ evaluations of a tarot reading. *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 37th Annual Convention*, 323–334.

CHRIS A. ROE

*Psychology Division
University of Northampton
Park Campus
Northampton NN2 7AL, UK
chris.roe@northampton.ac.uk*