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## Introduction to Special Topic Section: Parapsychology

Sean Avila Saiter  
*Burlington College*

Glenn Hartelius  
*California Institute of Integral Studies, San Francisco, CA, USA*

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## Introduction to Special Topic Section: Parapsychology

Parapsychology could be defined as those aspects of psychology that are marginalized for the simple reason that they are not congruent with a mechanical materialist model of mind implicit within much of mainstream psychology. To orthodox believers in this sort of materialism, parapsychological phenomena are necessarily the product of experimental errors magnified by the wishful thinking of uncritical researchers. From a transpersonal perspective, such critiques seem as if they might be based in an irrational attachment to certain philosophical assumptions about the nature of reality. An empirical attitude follows the evidence where it leads with both curiosity and skepticism, and greets challenges to its own fundamental assumptions with an openness to dialogue and reconsideration. Parapsychology has risen admirably to the challenge of pursuing exceptional human experiences with both experimental rigor and openness of mind, and in this way has set an example that is worthy of emulation.

There is significant overlap between parapsychology and transpersonal psychology, since many of the phenomena studied by parapsychologists are related in some way to spirituality. Precognition, telepathy, clairvoyance, and psychokinesis are experiences reported by and about mystics and spiritual adepts, while apparitional experiences, near-death experiences, and experiences suggestive of reincarnation are frequently interpreted as having spiritual significance. Parapsychologists tend to view these phenomena separate from their spiritual context, whereas transpersonal researchers are more likely to be interested also in how such experiences relate to spirituality as an aspect of human functioning.

The issue of relationship between parapsychology and transpersonal scholarship is the topic of the first paper, by MacDonald and Friedman, entitled *Transpersonal Psychology, Parapsychology, and Neurobiology: Clarifying their Relations*. The authors

suggest that nebulosity and lack of consistency in scientific constructs within transpersonal psychology and parapsychology have contributed to the lack of rigor and clarity in both fields. They examine ways in which transpersonal psychology and parapsychology are more alike than dissimilar in their goals, suggesting that both might find common ground through neurobiology.

The next paper, by Dein, considers what its title suggests: *Mental Health and the Paranormal*. He points to the rather remarkable fact that, despite the frequent denigration of paranormal experiences as some departure from soundness of mind, there is little research examining the relationship between mental health and such beliefs and experiences. He cites evidence that paranormal experiences are widespread within the general population, then examines the relationship of these to psychopathology in a number of areas including psi and the unconscious, dissociation and fantasy proneness, schizotypy, transliminality and reality monitoring, child abuse, reasoning and information processing and transpersonal psychology. He concludes that there is no evidence that paranormal experiences, or belief in such experiences, is pathological per se, despite the fact that some paranormal experiences can mimic symptoms of psychosis, and that such experiences may trigger psychopathology or may also occur in the mentally ill. For this reason, it is important to be aware of the inherent differences between genuine paranormal experiences in a healthy individual and in someone who is clinically ill.

Following is a clinically-oriented paper by De Foe, titled with the practical question: *How Should Therapists Respond to Client Accounts of Out-of-Body Experience?* Despite the fact that nearly 10% of the population has had an out-of-body experience (OBE) at least once in their lifetime, few therapists have an adequate or confident sense of how to approach or treat a client who reports such an experience. DeFoe distinguishes OBEs from dissociation, autoscopy, and near-death experiences, all of which can be confused by a therapist unaware of what makes them different. After clarifying the nature of the OBE, DeFoe proposes two clinical approaches can be utilized in such cases: person-centered dialogue, and guided visualization. With the former, the therapist works to create an open and welcoming environment in order for the client to feel that he or she can talk freely about an experience that is often misunderstood or ignored. Similarly, guided

visualization coupled with normalization through psychoeducation about what OBEs are and are not can assist the client to reintegrate such experience(s) in ways that allow meaningful spiritual interpretations.

Reincarnation, a topic of interest to both parapsychology and transpersonal psychology, is the topic of Slavovitski's paper, which asks, *Is the Reincarnation Hypothesis Advanced by Stevenson for Spontaneous Past-life Experiences Relevant for the Understanding of the Ontology of Past-life Phenomena?* The author undertakes a careful, critical, and thorough review of the relevant literature, then concludes that the past-life hypothesis is, in fact, the most complete and parsimonious one that has been advanced to explain these experiences.

Finally, Luke's paper on *Psychoactive Substances and Paranormal Phenomena: A Comprehensive Review*, delivers on its title and provides an excellent overview of literature in the parapsychology field that relates to psychedelic experiences—chiefly drug-induced experiences of extrasensory perception, OBEs, and NDEs. This extensive paper brings together research not only from the fields of parapsychology and transpersonal studies, but also anthropology, ethnobotany, phytochemistry, psychiatry, psychotherapy, psychopharmacology, and neurobiology, and should serve as an invaluable resource for research in this interdisciplinary area of study.

This collection of contemporary works in parapsychology is timely and relevant. It reflects the ways in which the field has evolved and adapted to not only the demands of a dominant worldview that is threatened by psi phenomena but also to the steadily evolving field of transpersonal studies. We hope that you are inspired and moved.

*Sean Avila Saiter, Special Topic Editor*  
Burlington College

*Glenn Hartelius, Editor*  
Sofia University