

Media Coverage of Parapsychology and the Prevalence of Irrational Beliefs

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Abstract—Scientific investigation of the paranormal is ignored in France, and it has been suggested that this is the reason for the proliferation of irrational beliefs there. This article examines that thesis. Media coverage of parapsychology in France and the UK are compared. Research in parapsychology is almost completely disregarded by the French media but is well reported by the British media. However, surveys already conducted in France and UK show that irrational belief is as widespread in the UK as it is in France. In France, the dismissal of parapsychological research is real, but this dismissal is not responsible for the proliferation of irrational belief.

Keywords: Parapsychology—media—irrational beliefs

Introduction

Bertrand Méheust (1996, 1997) has pointed out that the study of parapsychology in France is now under a very strong taboo, which is not justified according to scientific criteria (Mousseau, 2003). As a result, existing serious research is ignored, and this leads to the proliferation of cheap literature and programs of much lower quality than a century ago. This state of affairs had actually been forecast by those who studied magnetic somnambulism: “they indeed thought that if magnetic somnambulism wasn’t integrated in the rational thinking of the elite . . . there was a risk that superstition, angels and spirits would return, ending in total unmanageability.”¹ According to Méheust, this is exactly what happened.

Media coverage of parapsychological investigation in France and in the UK is examined in newspapers² and scientific magazines (*New Scientist* and *Pour la Science*). Existing surveys of irrational belief are then used to assess whether irrational belief is in fact correlated with media coverage.

Media Coverage in the UK

Relatively Extensive Coverage

A search among UK newspapers with “parapsychology” as a key word found 46 articles in the last two years. More than 40% are from Scottish newspapers

(although the Scots represent less than 10% of the UK population); almost one quarter occurred during the Edinburgh Science Festival. On the one hand, 46 articles is not very many, as it is about the number of articles for “physiology” in one month, and 10 times less than for “psychology” in the same month. On the other hand, this is a lot compared to the French coverage, where only four articles quoting “parapsychologie” were found for the same two-year period.

New Scientist published 16 articles containing the word “parapsychology” in eight years (1994–2001). This coverage is also relatively extensive compared to the French magazine *Pour la Science*, which had 3 articles containing “parapsychologie” in five years (1996–2000), two of them being only letters.

Thus parapsychology is not absent from the UK mass media. The question then is: Do the articles take into account scientific research in parapsychology? And if they do: What stance do they take regarding paranormal phenomena?

A Significant Scientific Approach

The newspaper articles dealing with parapsychology handle a wide range of completely different issues (Figure 1a).

The “case studies” tried to find rational explanations for some reported paranormal phenomenon (e.g., one-third of these articles present a rational explanation for the Indian rope-trick). The “experiments” described had been conducted by parapsychologists; most of them (73%) were large-scale experiments with volunteers from the public. These two types of articles—two-thirds of the 46 articles—can be considered as taking a scientific approach. The remaining one-third deals with less scientific aspects such as witchcraft or lives of mediums or writers involved in parapsychology.

The 16 *New Scientist* articles deal with a more restricted range of issues: there are reports on experimental work, reviews of a scientist’s work, presentations of new books, a survey on paranormal methodology, and articles of opinion (reaction to other published articles; Figure 1b). The substance of parapsychological research is dealt with directly in the reviews and reports on experimental work, which represent almost one-third of the articles.

Thus, not only is parapsychology featured in the UK mass media, but the scientific exploration of the field appears to get a significant share of that coverage. In order to further appreciate the scientific content of the articles, it is interesting to look at the number and nature of the institutions and researchers quoted.

Scientific Institutions and Researchers Quoted

Institutions and researchers in parapsychology are widely cited, as shown in Figures 2 and 3. The overall proportion of articles making at least one citation of either a researcher or a research unit is 72% in newspapers and 88% in *New Scientist*. However, the coverage focuses on a small number of scientists and institutions:

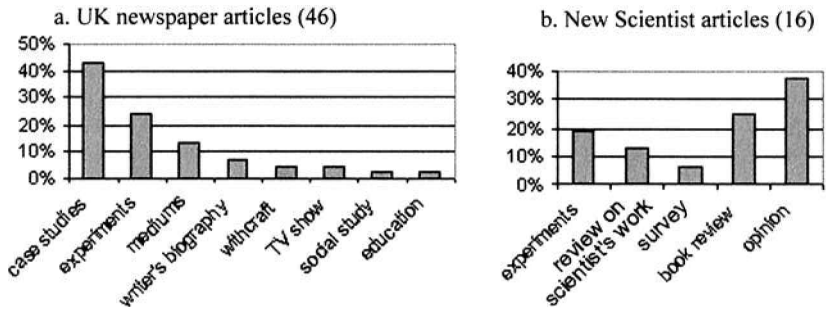


Fig. 1. Nature of UK coverage. Categorization of the 46 UK newspaper articles (1a) and of the 16 *New Scientist* articles (1b).

- The two most cited organizations, both in the newspapers and *New Scientist*, are the Koestler Parapsychology Unit (University of Edinburgh) and the University of Hertfordshire. They account for 77% of the citations in newspapers and 30% of the citations in *New Scientist*.
- Three scientists' names account for 46% and 36% of the names quoted, again in newspapers and in *New Scientist*, respectively.

Thus, even though the existence of scientific institutions and researchers in parapsychology is acknowledged by the media, the coverage is limited. Few names are quoted, even though there are seven institutions in the UK with ongoing research projects, and much more all over the world. Nevertheless, *New Scientist* appears to give a more general account of the research going on worldwide than the newspapers do. The magazine gives a much larger space to non-UK universities, which account for more than half of the quotations, and one of the three most quoted scientists is American (Robert Jahn, Princeton University). It is interesting that the three most mentioned scientists in *New Scientist* are all different from those most mentioned in the newspapers; what are considered "major figures" in the field seems to depend on the point of view: popular or scientific.

In order to get an idea of the general influence of this coverage on public opinion, the main stance taken is analyzed.

A Balance Between Positive and Negative Stance

In Figure 4a, the articles are categorized according to their attitude (positive, negative or neutral) to the possible existence of psi. This kind of classification is obviously partly subjective, yet it is interesting to note that: (1) few articles are totally neutral (22% in the newspapers and no articles in *New Scientist*); and (2) the overall stance is roughly balanced between positive and negative attitudes towards parapsychology.

In *New Scientist*, there is a slight majority of relatively positive articles

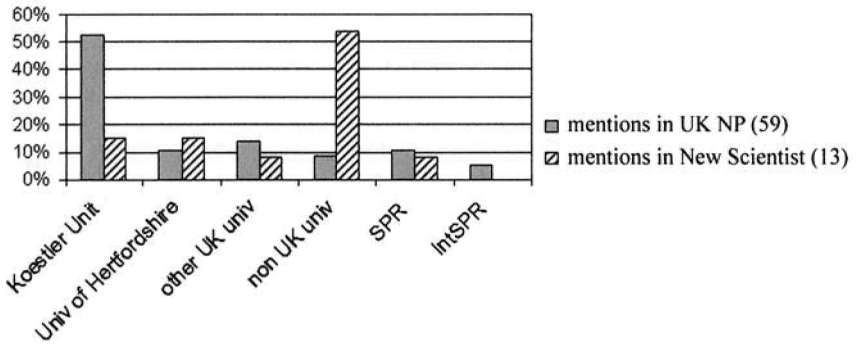


Fig. 2. Nature of scientific institutions cited. Categorization of the 59 mentions found in UK newspaper articles and of the 13 mentions found in *New Scientist* articles. Univ = university; SPR = Society for Psychical Research; IntSPR = International Society for Psychical Research; NP = Newspaper.

(9 positive, 7 negative). In the newspapers (NP), the two stances are overall the same, but quite different for two types of articles (see Figure 4b). Case studies are reported in a mainly negative way (70%), whereas almost two-thirds of the experimental reports take a rather positive stance. The difference may be that the goal of the former is usually to present a rational explanation for so-called paranormal phenomena, whereas most of the latter are trying to recruit volunteers for large-scale planned experiments.

Overall, a large majority of the newspaper articles (63%) do not promote belief in the paranormal; the only reported experimental results (2 cases out of 11) are negative ones.

Rational explanations of parapsychological phenomenon are offered in 13% of all articles (whether in newspapers or in *New Scientist*), but only the *New Scientist* articles present actual evidence for psi (see Figure 4c). This may not be surprising, as the purpose of the science magazine is more restricted to the reporting of scientific news (which usually means positive outcomes) whereas the newspapers have a larger scope including skeptical commentary on paranormal events and the cultivation of a critical “public eye.”

On the whole, rational explanations as well as psi evidence are offered, allowing us to say that the overall coverage in the UK gives a balanced overview of the complexity of psi issues. To summarize, the UK press does deal with scientific aspects of paranormal phenomena: There is regular coverage over the years, and two-thirds of the articles have a scientific approach. They tend to dismiss the spectacular (especially in the case studies) as tricks, but do report that “more serious” research is being done. The public is informed of the existence of a scientific community: most of the time, scientists are quoted and references made to authoritative bodies. Admittedly, only a restricted sample gets publicity, and research outside the UK is under-represented, but people can “get the idea” that something scientific is going on. Those interested in getting

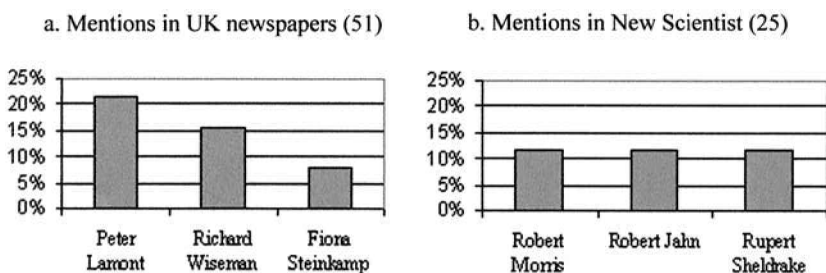


Fig. 3. Researchers cited. Proportion of the mentions found in UK newspaper articles (3a) and in *New Scientist* articles (3b) for the three most quoted researchers.

more details on experiments and results can find these in the scientific magazine, *New Scientist*, where many experiments are described and results are discussed. Positive evidence of psi is reported, but it is not taken for granted, since negative views are also found: The coverage is quite balanced.

Coverage in the French Media

Very Poor Coverage

The situation in France is very different. There were so few newspaper articles dealing with parapsychology during the past two years—only four articles—that the search was extended back to 1990 to get enough material to analyze (17 articles). As for French scientific magazines, the coverage is hardly better. A search in *Pour la Science* from 1996 to 2000, with “parapsychologie” as a key word, returned three articles, and four if we include the old French term “Métapsychique”: a letter that gives reference to Méheust’s article mentioned above (Nordon, 1997), critical reactions published in response to it (Debusshere & Klein, 1997) and Méheust’s answer (1997); there is also an historical article that uses the word “parapsychologie” only once. No reference to any current parapsychological research has been found whatsoever. This reflects the general situation described by Yves Lignon³ (2002): “The main scientific magazines adopt a rationalist stance but without an aggressive or polemic tone. *Sciences et Vie* is an exception. In the fifties it was very open to parapsychology and then went through a period of militant rationalism.”

Lack of Scientific Approach

Of the 17 articles found, almost half deal with belief in parapsychology within the French population, the origin of such belief and possible ‘bad’ consequences (“social study” on paranormal beliefs in Figure 5a). Even though 5 (29%) of the articles mention that experiments have been carried out (“experiments” in Figure 5a), none actually report those experiments. The other articles are book reviews, an opinion piece and a biography of Arthur Koestler.

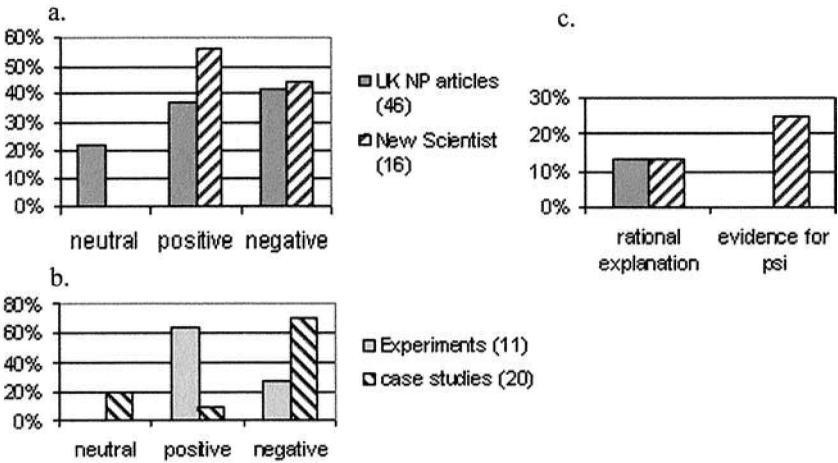


Fig. 4. Attitude of UK coverage to psi. 4a = UK attitude to the existence of psi; 4b = Attitude of the scientific articles in UK newspapers; 4c = Type of explanation given in UK coverage; NP = Newspaper.

Scientific Institutions and Researchers Cited

Consistent with the lack of experimental reports, only a very small number of organizations are mentioned: the (French) “Institut Métapsychique International” and the Parapsychology Unit at Edinburgh are each cited once. Only two scientists, both working in France, are cited, again once each: Mario Varvoglis and Yves Lignon. 82% of the French articles that mention parapsychology make no reference to universities or scientists.

A Negative Stance

The attitude to the existence of psi is more negative than in the UK newspapers (Figure 5b; compare Figure 4a). The majority of the French articles are skeptical about the possible existence of genuine psi phenomena. The whole issue seems irrelevant as only one article suggests some rational explanation that might account for them.

To summarize: The French newspaper coverage is very poor. Some articles mention the existence of experiments, yet without reporting them. The majority of the articles dismiss paranormal phenomena, and most of them mention no researchers or institutions. Almost half of the articles mentioning parapsychology deal with beliefs in the paranormal. French scientific magazines provide no more information regarding scientific research in parapsychology. Thus, the only sources of information regarding psi phenomena in France are the Internet, TV, books and popular magazines, where there is obviously a huge selection to be made. This perfectly reflects the situation described in *Le Monde* (1993)⁴: “One of the paradoxes of modernity is that the new means of

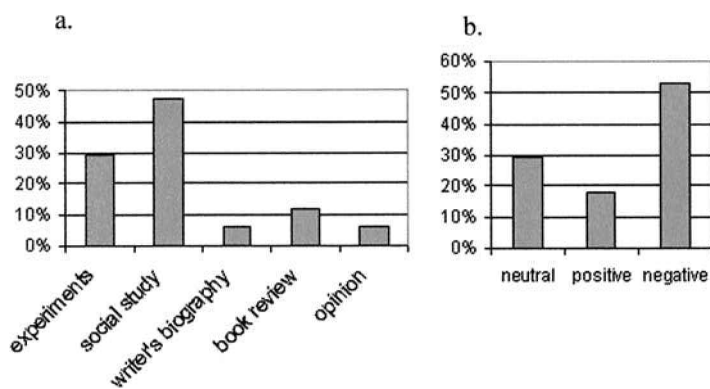


Fig. 5. Nature of French coverage. 5a = Categorization of the 17 French articles; 5b = Attitude of French newspapers to the existence of psi; NP = Newspaper.

communication given by scientific research, the television, the Minitel, audio tapes, videotapes etc . . . are used to foster a massive diffusion of obscurantism.”

UK and France Compared

The UK and France present two contrasting situations: one where scientific research in parapsychology is acknowledged and addressed, at least partly; the other where it is widely ignored. This provides a good opportunity to check whether this has any impact on public belief in paranormal phenomena. Is Méheust right? In other words is the following assessment, made by Yves Lignon (1993), true?

I have to repeat that it is by informing the public about this reality [psi research] and showing that the scientific community doesn't reject everything but on the contrary manage to sort out the good things that we will have the irrational withdraw.⁵

If this is true, then surveys should find irrational belief to be weaker in the UK than it is in France.

Irrational Belief

Many surveys of irrational belief have been conducted in France and the UK. Some recent results are shown in Table 1.

The hypothesis that irrational belief is negatively correlated with coverage of parapsychological research is contrary to the evidence of these surveys. The trend even seems to be in the opposite direction. Old traditional beliefs are held more in the UK, where the media cover recent scientific investigations, than in France where recent parapsychological research is not generally disseminated. The existence of ghosts or actual communication with the dead has never been demonstrated by parapsychologists, yet those beliefs are widespread among the UK population; whereas beliefs about subjects where evidence has been

TABLE 1
Surveys of Paranormal Beliefs

	UK	France ^c
PSI		
Power of psychics	67% ^a , 28% ^b	24%
Telepathy	54% ^b	55%
Psychic healing	32% ^b	55%
Precognitive dreams	30% ^b	35%
Spirit		
Ghosts	57% ^a , 40% ^b	11%
Communication with the dead	More than 50% ^a	21%
Others		
Astrology	38% ^b	46%

^a *Consumer Analysis Group* (2002).

^b MORI (1998).

^c SOFRES (1993).

gathered scientifically (telepathy, precognitive dreams, psychic healing) is, if anything, more widespread in France, where the research is not generally reported. Belief in “spirits,” which seems especially favored by the British, is far from being the prevalent scientific hypothesis to account for paranormal phenomena. Scotland enjoys better coverage than England about scientific research in parapsychology, yet the 2002 UK survey showed that Scots are also more likely to cancel their plans after listening to a psychic (26% of Scots versus 16% in the whole UK population).

Evidently Samuel Johnson was right regarding the existence of ghosts: “All argument is against it; but all belief is for it” (Boswell, 1791).

Conclusion

The widespread assumption, illustrated by Méheust (1996), that irrational belief would decrease if paranormal research findings were widely disseminated, is not supported by the evidence. In the UK, paranormal research is conducted in seven universities and is reported in newspapers and the popular-science magazine *New Scientist*; yet irrational thinking is still common in Britain.

If anything, the actual correlation appears to be the opposite to what is assumed. Five SOFRES polls (the last one dating from November 2000) highlighted:

one of the paradoxes . . . is that interest in science is positively correlated to the level of belief in parascience. . . . Similarly, the population which has a very poor knowledge of science is on the average less credulous than the population which has a very good knowledge of science. The polls also reveal that parascience did not develop in reaction to or against scientific institutions.⁶

(Le Monde, 2001)

The last statement contradicts another common assumption, that paranormal belief bespeaks a rejection of science. It seems to correlate neither with an awareness of the limits of science nor with knowledge of scientific parapsychological research. This is similar to a conclusion reached in regard to religious belief in the Victorian period (Lamont, 2002)⁷: “The majority of the world . . . will always believe, not according to [scientific] evidence at all, but simply as their previous habits of thought lead them to think.”

One may well ask, what intellectual benefit science has been for the average human being. Unlike our ancestors, we have known for a long time that mankind is not at the centre of the universe. Has that knowledge taken us further? Has it fundamentally changed our way of thinking? The answer may not be straightforward. One quarter of the European population still believes that the sun goes round the earth, (EORG, 2001), and a significant section of the American population rejects the theory of evolution. Is there any popular interest in science apart from the technological advances it provides? The answer of our materialistic world tends more and more to be, “No.” And the rational answer may actually be, “There isn’t any, except for the fun that, somehow, a few among us get in exerting our intelligence towards a better understanding of the world.” If some are keen to investigate something that is beyond our current understanding and that is unlikely to provide practical applications in the short term, surely these are no reasons to discourage them.

Nevertheless, I agree with Bertrand Méheust: the “*Métapsychique*”⁸ issue is relevant. As for the question, “Why do people believe weird things?”—this obviously remains unanswered. If the answer has nothing to do with cultural knowledge, then what is the nature of belief?

Notes

¹ “en effet, ils pensaient que si l’on refusait d’intégrer dans la pensée rationnelle haut de gamme les faits étranges du somnambulisme magnétique . . . on risquait de provoquer un retour de la superstition, de voir revenir les anges et les esprits, et d’aller ainsi au-devant d’une situation incontrôlable.”

² 70 UK and 30 French newspapers chosen from the Lexis-Nexis database. Details are in Marie-Catherine Mousseau, “Science, research into the paranormal, and irrational belief: what is the link?”; Master’s Thesis in Science Communication, Dublin City University, 2002, and can be supplied by the author on request.

³ “Les grandes revues de vulgarisation scientifique adoptent le plus souvent des positions “rationnalistes” mais généralement sans agressivité ni ton polémique. “Science et Vie” est un cas particulier: dans les années 50 la revue était très ouverte à la parapsychologie puis elle a connu une longue période de militantisme “rationnaliste” exacerbé.”

⁴ “Un des paradoxes de la modernité est que les nouveaux moyens de communication issus de la recherche scientifique et technique la télévision, le

Minitel, les cassettes audio, vidéo, etc. sont mis au service d'une diffusion de masse de l'obscurantisme.”

⁵ “Etforcem'estdoncderépéterque'esteninformantlepublicsurcetteréalitédonc montrant que la communauté scientifique ne rejette pas tout mais que, bien au contraire, elle cherche et réussit à faire le tri qui l'on fera reculer l'irrationnel.”

⁶ “Un des paradoxes . . . est que l'intérêt pour la science est corrélé positivement au degré de croyance aux parasciences. . . . De même, la frange de la population ayant un degré de connaissances scientifiques très faible est en moyenne moins crédule que celle ayant un niveau de connaissance très bon. Les sondages révèlent aussi que les parasciences ne se sont pas développées en réaction ou contre l'institution scientifique.”

⁷ This referred to religious belief, but is also a good assessment of the nature of belief in general (and paranormal belief in particular).

⁸ Old term for parapsychology.

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