

## Parapsychological Developments in Argentina (1990–1995)

ALEJANDRO PARRA

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**ABSTRACT:** Although Argentina lacks organized attempts to study parapsychological phenomena, some good work is conducted by small groups of researchers. There are also many educational programs, most of which lack official recognition by the Argentinean educational system. Two important conventions that brought together many Iberoamericans were those organized in Buenos Aires by the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal in 1994 and 1996. At this point, one of the main concerns of serious Argentinean parapsychologists is to get information about research conducted in other parts of the world in the hope that the future will bring more resources to develop a scientific parapsychology in this country.

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In Argentina, as in other Latin American countries, parapsychology is a field in a state of flux. On the one hand, Argentina has no homogeneous parapsychological community. There is good work done by some small groups, but they lack resources to reach a higher number of people potentially interested in the subject. This keeps serious activities on a small scale. On the other hand, a great number of charlatans who call themselves "parapsychologists" and what they do "parapsychology" are very active, carrying on practices that are in complete opposition to the scientific approach.

To describe fully the social situation as it exists today, I will describe all the parapsychological work known to me, including that which deserves mention and that which does not. Both types form the social reality of parapsychology in my country. Unfortunately, I know of only a few people who are active now. Their work covers two areas: education and research.

A recent survey conducted by the Argentinean corporation Planificación & Diseño obtained information on belief in psychic phenomena and other topics. Eighty-one percent of the people surveyed believed in astrology and horoscopes, 74% in ESP, 59% in reincarnation, 57% in UFOs, 16% in ghosts, and 11% in Spiritism (Informe Especial, 1992).

Regarding education, many small institutes teach parapsychology. Most of these give short general introductory courses, including discussion of theoretical analyses of psi phenomena and practical issues. But most of them do not follow the classical scientific approach. Although there is no standard educational program, the law in Argentina permits the existence and activity of these institutes even if the degrees they confer have no official recognition. However, in the past Argentina had a Parapsychological Unit as part of the Secretary of Public Health (at the end of the 1940s) and in 1973, President Juan Domingo Perón requested by decree the in-

corporation of parapsychological studies in Argentinean universities (Parra, 1990).

Today, the Argentinean government does not comment in favor of or against parapsychology. In 1993, a project was presented to the legislative body that was a call for caution about so-called "parapsychologists" who promise miraculous healing or all sorts of magical and irrational therapies. This was done with knowledge of the scientific research on the paranormal.

Another project was also undertaken to reform the existing law of freedom of religion, which received partial support from the National Congress. In Article 5, the project says: "Current law will not protect the activities and bodies related to the study of or experimentation on astro-physical, psychic or parapsychological phenomena, divination, astrology, or the spread of purely philosophical, humanistic or spiritualistic ideas or values, nor satanic rituals." However, some groups have attempted to introduce legislation arguing for the recognition of the educational importance of parapsychology (although such groups do not clearly state whether the incorporation of parapsychology into official teaching is necessary, that is, whether the field should be accepted as a separate program of study in the public and private universities).

Another form of educational activity has been the organization of symposia and congresses, which have disseminated information about parapsychology at a popular level. In the last fourteen years there have been hundreds of parapsychological meetings, but most of them are not critical about methodology and limit themselves to a brief superficial presentation of some paranormal topics.

In 1994, our group, the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal [Institute of Paranormal Psychology] or IPP, held the Primer Encuentro Psi: Nuevas Dimensiones en Parapsicología [First Psi Encounter: New Dimensions in Parapsychology], a conference that brought together several researchers to present scientific parapsychology to the general public and to discuss the topic from an interdisciplinary perspective, featuring issues of methodology, general theories, and historical analyses. About 50 people attended the conference (Parra, 1994b).

Psychologist Oscar Barros, from the Laboratorio de Investigaciones Parasensoriales [Laboratory of Parasensory Investigations], presented work conducted at a neuropsychiatric hospital in Buenos Aires with schizophrenic patients and with normal adults, including some blind individuals. The study consisted of the administration of the Max Lüscher test of chromatic perception to subjects and an attempt to test the possible relationship of normal color perception to dermo-optic perception of color and to the subject's mood states. Another paper was presented by Walter Gardini, professor of yoga and comparative religion at the Universidad del Salvador (Buenos Aires) and one of the most prestigious orientalists of the country. He talked about the place of paranormal powers in Patanjali's *Yoga Aphorisms*, one of the most ancient books of Indian culture (Gardini, 1994; see also Gardini, 1993).

Another contribution to the conference was a review of the life and work of engineer José S. Fernández (1893-1967) by Jorge Villanueva (1994). Fernández introduced mathematical procedures for the evaluation of tests of ESP and PK in Latin America. Clinical psychologist Daniel Gómez Montanelli (1994b) presented a paper on so-called extracerebral memory and the research into reincarnation cases of Ian Stevenson. Gómez Montanelli is editor of a serious spiritist journal *Ciencias del Espíritu* [Sciences of the Spirit]. In this periodical, Gómez Montanelli brings together scientific and spiritualistic ideas, following a similar line to that the transpersonal psychology of Stanislav Grof (Gómez Montanelli, 1993, 1994a).

Only two members of the Parapsychological Association participated in the Encuentro Psi: Marcelo Oliva Moyano, an Argentinean psychologist who lives in Brazil and is the Director of the Centro Integrado de Pesquisas do Homen [Integral Center for Research on Man], presented a multivariate analysis of a subject who offers services as a professional psychic. Oliva Moyano found that most of the subject's mentation consisted of ambiguous and stereotypical phrases. Nonetheless, there were some traces of ESP in the reading when the psychic revealed information that the consultant confirmed (Oliva Moyano, 1994).

I presented a review of national and international developments in parapsychology for the period 1989-1994 (Parra, 1994a). Among the topics discussed were meta-analysis, research on areas such as ESP in the Ganzfeld, micro-PK, bio-PK and belief in the paranormal, and other topics such as international communication and the activities of CSCOP (Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal).

In 1996, the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal hosted its second conference on the topic of the contributions of modern psychology to parapsychology, a conference that met about the same time than the Primer Encuentro Iberoamericano de Parapsicología [First Ibero-American Encounter of Parapsychology], a conference that brought together researchers from countries such as Brazil, Cuba, Chile, Puerto Rico, Spain, Venezuela, and other countries. This conference had over 30 papers and several round tables on topics such as neurophysiological studies, the role of parapsychologists, the value of the study of spontaneous cases, and physics and parapsychology (Parra, 1996).

Few institutes offer rigorous educational programs or even a good popular program. Some examples are the course of the Center of Modern Studies, a center of cultural studies, which annually brings 30 to 40 students. This course is divided into a basic and an advanced section covering the basics of parapsychology, its historical development, theory and popular concepts (what we call marginal areas of parapsychology, including survival, healing, psi in animals and plants, and other topics).

Another institute that offers a similar program is the Instituto de Psicología Paranormal. As the requirements of the Institute are strict, it is rare that those who have a casual interest or who are "magical thinkers" on the subject stay in the course. These people are looking for scientific support

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for their superstitious beliefs and do not have a critical interest in the study of parapsychology.

Nonetheless, we have successfully organized a theoretical and experimental training program directed towards health professionals (physicians and psychologists) who have a special interest in parapsychology. I have also had contact with scientists and professionals in many areas who have shown an interest in parapsychology and who want to discriminate between the findings of scientific investigation and the prevalent charlatanism.

Some private institutions have been interested in the serious teaching of parapsychology. This may offer a partial solution to our problems, that is, academic recognition. It is even possible that there may be monetary resources to conduct large-scale research. Another approach would be to seek to become part of a university, an institute, a chair, or a laboratory. The field may also become an academic requirement. But we should remember that at the popular level parapsychologists are not seen as scientists but as healers or as competitors of psychologists and psychiatrists.

In regard to universities, with the death of Enrique Novillo Paulí, the parapsychology institute of the Universidad de El Salvador closed down in 1989. The only university that teaches the subject academically is the Argentinean Universidad John F. Kennedy, where parapsychology has been part of the curriculum of fifth-year psychology students since the 1970s. In 1991, the School of Psychology of the Universidad Nacional Mar del Plata developed a speciality in paranormal psychology.

At the psychology department of Universidad Nacional de Rosario, Mirra Gratero (wife of the late J. Ricardo Musso) teaches aspects of parapsychology as part of scientific methodology in psychology. Musso used to teach this course from the 1970s until his death. The course exposes future psychologists to parapsychology in a university setting.

The Instituto de Psicología Paranormal tries to coordinate a variety of activities, having as its central task the education and training of professionals in parapsychology coupled with general information distribution. This is important because without proper information the field is open to individuals who do not know much about its actual content. The IPP operates as a research center focusing on areas such as the development of procedures to study psi. Its Department of Education organizes conferences and courses. The basic course is directed to those who have no knowledge of the field and touches on three aspects: (a) practical and applied aspects, (b) history, and (c) theory and analysis. The advanced course emphasizes research and education in the field, and the discussion of the scientific objectives of parapsychology. The Institute also has a Department of Documentation that allows students access to a vast bibliography.

This section is closely connected to the Agencia Latinoamericana de Información Psi [Latin American Agency of Psi Information]. Similar to Rhea White's now defunct Parapsychology Sources of Information Center, the agency was created to offer bibliographical information to those interested in parapsychology. The agency is the first information center for

Spanish speakers and has over one thousand references on parapsychology and other topics. It is fully computerized and has a library with works in several languages as well as audio-visual material. Some of this material is in Spanish or has Spanish-language subtitles. More recently, we have used a database system that allows us to find references by author title, topic, and year. Our purpose is to spread information about the field among Latin Americans free of charge. In addition, we plan to publish annual guides of these references.

The publication and editing of parapsychological literature is basic for the diffusion of work in the field. For this reason, our journal, *Revista Argentina de Psicología Paranormal* [Argentinean Journal of Paranormal Psychology] is directly related to the work of the IPP and publishes papers reporting the work of the most prestigious parapsychologists in our country and from other parts of the world.

Regarding specialized publications, there are three important ones in Argentina. Our *Revista Argentina de Psicología Paranormal* is both a popular and a scientific journal, which has been published since 1990. It includes reports of original research, reviews of recent studies, book reviews, and sections for correspondence, commentaries, and national and international news. It also has summaries of papers both in English and Spanish. The journal has a wide circulation, and we have exchanges with about 40 parapsychological publications from around the world.

Another journal, *Cuadernos de Parapsicología*, has been edited by Naum Kreiman since 1963. In recent years the content of this journal has been limited to translations of papers published in American journals and has a limited circulation. However, some recent issues have included reports of original experimental work.

Finally, we have *Ciencias del Espiritu*, a serious spiritist periodical which has been published since 1993.

As for recent research, there are few parapsychology laboratories or research groups in Argentina. Nonetheless, many independent investigators conduct research. One of these is the engineer and agronomist Ivan T. Lépes, who has conducted ESP studies with the fly *Drosophila melanogaster*. The research consisted of observing the behavior of a colony of flies bred for the purpose and trying to see if they could transmit through ESP information about the physical conditions of their surroundings (Lépes, 1992; Lépes & Argibay, 1994).

Juan Carlos Argybay has obtained the approval of the National Council of Scientific and Technical Research to carry on large-scale research to be conducted by students of general psychology. The experiment consists of selecting 150 subjects (out of 800) and asking them to fill out questionnaires on extroversion, neuroticism, and beliefs so as to explore the relationship of these variables to ESP.

The Instituto Argentino de Psicofísica [Argentinean Institute of Psychobiophysics] was founded in the 1940s by Raúl Drubich. It has conducted research on ESP with mediums of spiritist organizations, on hyp-

nosis, as well as a study on psychic healing. In the latter project, the researchers found that the patients treated by the healers showed considerable improvement, and 17% of them were totally cured (Drubich, Drubich, & Forneris, 1991).

Naum Kreiman's Instituto de Parapsicología has recently published several ESP experiments, including a Ganzfeld study that obtained chance results (Kreiman, 1996, 1997; Kreiman, Gimeno, & Tullio, 1996).

Our research includes that of the Laboratorio de Investigaciones Parasensuales (Laboratory of Parasensory Investigations), where exploratory studies have been conducted with "bioenergy," the Kirlian effect, and dermo-optic perception (Barros & Zarza, 1994). This laboratory has a variety of instruments to measure psychophysiological and environmental variables in relation to psychic phenomena.

We are aware that the future of parapsychology depends on our work and on continued cooperation with other colleagues with common interests, who are in a minority. From our perspective, we want to concentrate on the exchange of information regarding the field from any part of the world. We are also convinced that eventually we will reach one of our main objectives: to bring together all of those who have a serious outlook so as to form a parapsychological community with a common goal. This is not an easy country in which to reach such goals. We are currently passing through a profound monetary crisis. But we feel optimistic regarding the future of parapsychology in Argentina because we have three valuable weapons to use to fight against all our possible enemies (including lack of money): vocation, a relentless spirit, and a sense of responsibility. These may not be scientific tools as such, but they are very useful in dealing with any task and with life itself.

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- Instituto de Psicología Paranormal  
Sala 2015  
(1137) Capital Federal  
Buenos Aires, Argentina  
email: rapp@par.psiconet & rapp@sicoar.com