

Studying Psi in Argentina

A Humanistic Approach at the
Institute of Paranormal Psychology

What images do you think of when you think of a parapsychology laboratory? Probably the first image that comes to mind is a deck of Zener or ESP cards or the dice-throwing devices used in the Rhinean parapsychology research. However, in the early 1920s and 30s, in such European cities as London and Paris, parapsychology laboratories were very similar to Spiritualist centers with mediums as the objects of study. Several decades later, with the PEAR Lab in Princeton, for example, the parapsychologi-

cal laboratory featured electronic equipment to inject “order” into random systems. However, what parapsychology laboratories have in common is their dependence on the research goals of their sponsoring institution.

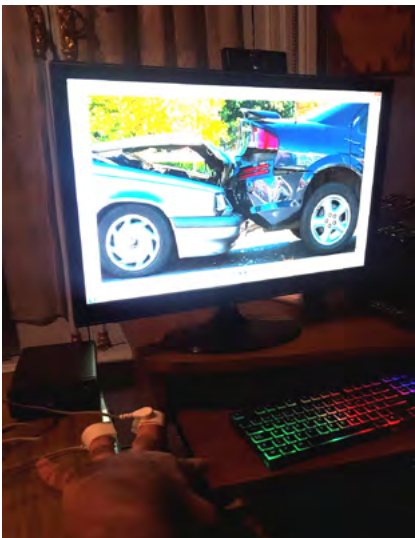
In recent times a great interest has developed in an *experience-oriented parapsychological laboratory* in contrast to a *proof-oriented laboratory*. Being that psi is an “unobservable entity,” it is difficult to think of a technology capable of quantifying its dimensions, which occurs in the study of classical physics. However, much of experimental parapsychology has a *ludic component*;



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that is, it is very similar to practices based on games of chance where the participants attempt to mentally “guess” cards or “move” objects. In short, an experimental laboratory is basically a space for studying human interaction with

devices that evaluate random “deviations,” not unlike a gambling casino. These subjects attempt to demonstrate their psi abilities in ways that can be tested under



controlled conditions, thanks to an original protocol that provides means to examine any given anomaly. The protocol must be designed in such a way that repetitions can be attempted, especially if the initial results are positive.

A laboratory can operate until its funds are exhausted and then can be dismantled. On the other hand, physics or chemistry laboratories can operate in the same space for many years, updating themselves when necessary. Most of the institutions or societies of parapsychology that I know of have two items in common: a conference room and a library. But, only some have laboratories. Why? Most of the laboratories only operate if there is one or several interested parties to conduct the research, whether it is in the lab or in life. So, it is difficult to define a “parapsychology laboratory” because it depends on the purposes and interests of both the researcher and the laboratory’s sponsor. For example, at the beginning of the twentieth century, psychical researchers designed “cabinets” to examine claimant mediums (such as Harry Price in the UK and Rudi Schneider in the Institute Metapsychique International in Paris). Sometimes, research subjects designed laboratories in their own houses, in specially conditioned rooms (such as the one designed by Eugene Osty and his son Marcel). They used their own resources

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or, all too rarely, they obtained subsidies from outside sources. A few researchers were wealthy or came from wealthy families (such as Oliver Lodge or Albert von Schrenck-Notzing).

Argentina is a country with long European-based cultural traditions, and, unlike other Latin American countries, its compass has always pointed toward Berlin or Paris. Argentina’s great scientific leaders were inspired by European culture, fashion, and ways of thinking and acting. In fact, psychical research (or, in French, *metapsychic*) was very influential until the 1940s. At that time, Engineer Fernández contacted J. B. Rhine and introduced statistical models for the analysis of ESP and PK tests in Buenos Aires. Some researchers used these procedures to test mediums working with Argentine spiritualistic societies. Since then, J. Ricardo

Musso, Orlando Canavesio, Naum Kreiman, and Enrique Novillo Pauli, among others, have designed their own parapsychological laboratories. In the 1990s, John Beloff sent a letter to our group stating that after the United States, Argentina is the second country in the Americas with an interest in experimental parapsychology.

Starting in the mid-nineties, the Institute of Paranormal Psychology (IPP), located in Buenos Aires, has been researching paranormal/ anomalous events and experiences as its primary focus. The IPP has been recognized as a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) since 2005. The IPP's activities span several categories: education, publications, library resources, workshops and seminars, clinical approaches, supporting independent psi researchers, and conducting experimental research primarily with ESP, macro-PK, and spontaneous PK. Between 1998 and 2018, the Institute secured a dozen grants from the BIAL Foundation in Portugal and other sources, funding research on a variety of phenomena, including ESP in the Ganzfeld, psychometry ("token object") research, psychomanteum research, and psychological and personality correlates of reported anomalous and paranormal experiences.

My own interest in parapsychology began early in the 1970s when I began reading and taking courses with the Argentine pioneers of the

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important aspect of this interest is that my colleagues and I have never thought of the parapsychology laboratory as cold and antiseptic, filled with instruments to measure psychophysiology. On the contrary, we have tried to create an attractive, cordial, and humanistic climate - sort of a Rogerian "person-centered" style of psi laboratory - one focused on the subject rather than on the researcher. Our purpose was to elicit psi under reasonably controlled conditions rather than neurotically obsessing over possible fraud.

For example, Irma Caputo (1931-2020) was our cordial assistant and secretary, conversing at length with both staff and subjects and cooking sweets for



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participants in experiments and those who attended our lectures. Other members of our Institute obtained training in transpersonal psychology and psychoanalysis (i.e., Daniel Gómez Montanelli and Juan Manuel Corbetta) or practiced various forms of spirituality. This diversity contributed to developing a humane and familiar ambiance between our staff and the participants of our studies.

I am convinced that this ambiance is the most important key to the success of any psi test, whether ESP or PK. For example, in a typical ganzfeld experiment, I acted in trials as a psi agent (sender). Some participants told us that telepathy could be seen as an “intrusive signal,” expressing their fears or doubts about the type of experiment where the psi agent and percipient should not have any encounter before the test, leaving them concerned about the motives of the agent. To dispel these fears, we made sure that before each trial (about three hundred trials over three years), both the agent and the percipient would have a friendly conversation, together with the experimenter, so that both could get to know each other. In the same way, numerous investigations of alleged haunting and poltergeist activity that we examined were accompanied by psychologists, counselors, and/or family therapists to alleviate the anguish and fear of the family members who had originally summoned us.

Our ganzfeld and psychomanteum-based studies were also designed to take place in a comfortable, welcoming, and deeply human setting. Very rarely have we paid our participants. They usually volunteered, seeking to understand their own psi experiences. They saw the experiment as a unique opportunity to learn



about ESP, even if these trials were unsuccessful. I remember some reviewers criticized the way the psi experiments were humanized, even going so far as to reject one or two manuscripts in peer-reviewed journals. However, we believe that we needed to find a balance, or “experimental homeostasis,” between an experimental protocol free of sensory cues and employing security measures against fraud. We opted for treating our subjects in a friendly way within a trustworthy, but rigorous, experimental context. We have learned these procedures not only from our own experience in the field (because Argentina has a long tradition in psychoanalysis and humanistic psychology)

but also because we have seen inhumane and unfriendly examples of Argentine parapsychologists who all too often demonstrated distrust and mistreatment toward their participants. In our experience, at least 68% of the participants liked attending more than one type of the psi experiments that we designed. No fee or reward was necessary for either the parapsychology students at the Institute or for the dozens of undergraduate students who volunteered. In fact, we never use the words “experiment” in our calls for volunteers, preferring the term “workshop.” Instead of the term “subject,” we utilize the term “participant.”

Our psychometric studies using “token objects” were conducted in small groups, never in isolation, and often ran for several weeks. We utilized different types of tests and also analyzed psychological correlates using personality tests that our participants enjoyed taking. They also appreciated the feedback at the end of the workshop as well as a goodbye meal. These trials were carefully designed and randomized, including double-blind and triple-blind trials for each participant and the experimenters, so there was no sacrifice to rigor.

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being manipulated in an experiment. A similar aim characterized our recent studies with psychic claimants: mediums, alleged healers, and self-styled dowzers. We found that such participants, in general, are highly convinced of their psi or psi-related abilities, have higher self-esteem, and are often suspicious of taking laboratory tests. Hence, part of our strategy was to invite them to cooperate in constructing our designs, regardless of their beliefs and ideas. When this became clear, at least half of them were willing to participate, mostly because they knew the prestige it would bring to them and because they were comfortable with the tests, many of which had been designed to match the

type and form of their alleged psi ability. Consequently, although the results did not always yield positive results, the participants were tolerant of the type of test and the ensuing results. For example, a recent notable case was our PK study of Ariel F., a young worker who displayed impressive table-turning ability, allegedly by PK, whom we examined over several years. Although these tests could not always be repeated, Ariel felt comfortable with the style of the experiment and understood the rigor of the tests. They fathomed that parapsychology requires those safeguards to be considered a science.

I am convinced that there is no single and unique recipe for a successful psi experiment. In addition to psychological and physical variables, the role of human interaction, the facilitative effect of the experimenter, and various environmental conditions all play important roles. We have even examined psi in the context of the participant’s home, with domestic designs that the participants themselves can practice (such as the *in-home* ganzfeld) through mobile applications and the help of the internet. We also have designed psi tests that can be administered by parents to their children (a design rarely explored by parapsychologists). We have even designed a forthcoming study that will use pregnant women for predicting the sex of their future baby, and we

have designed similar tests combining psi and dowsing.

An important aspect of our work is the protection and preservation of instruments, artifacts, and other devices that have been useful in the past, from old mediumship slates and Mesmerism meters (i.e., Joire's *Sthenometer*) to old Schmidt's RNGs (donated by Helmut himself) and the old Duke University screens and electronic ESP cards used up to the 1970s. This collection is part of our little museum... and almost all of these items are still functional! Our students use these devices for historical and educational purposes, and their enthusiasm is as evident as their interest in continuing the tradition of psi research, which is another important function of the parapsychology library. The IPP has placed great emphasis on the bibliometric classification of parapsychology literature, categorizing by chronology (e.g., nineteenth century to 1940, and from 1940 to the present), by themes (more than thirty of them), and authors. This system carries with it the strict responsibility of yearly updates. Our collection already contains more than 6000 titles and tens of thousands of parapsychological journals, popular magazines, and videos. In addition, since 2006, we have published an *e-bulletin* three times a year as an organ of

diffusion that updates our activities and progress.

Furthermore, I believe that experimental research on ESP and PK has declined in recent years. For example, psi experiments only represent a very small sector of the most recent conventions of the Parapsychological Association. Checking one by one the collections of the three main peer-reviewed journals, such as the *Journal of Parapsychology*, *Journal of the SPR*, *Australian Journal of Parapsychology*, and (perhaps) the *Journal of Scientific Exploration* (leaving aside articles on spontaneous cases, historical studies, paranormal beliefs, and exceptional experiences such as NDE, OBEs or many others), the place occupied by the experimental designs of ESP and PK (the primary psi activities) has significantly decreased between 1999 and 2022 (except for the period of COVID-19). Certainly, although some have disappeared (e.g. *European Journal of Parapsychology*, *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*, the publications of the Parapsychology Foundation, and others in non-English languages), the current ones above mentioned continue to be interested in *experience* as well as the *experiment*. Naturally, this can have many explicable causes; for example, psychology, physics, or medical journals may not accept them,

nor may private (BIAL Foundation is an exception) or academic funding agents, although other agents have shown more interest in "hot topics," such as survival (like BICS and others).

Perhaps the outlook is not always encouraging, but I am convinced of the creativity of our psi scientists. Certainly, very few parapsychologists can make a profound difference. The psi experiment is a somewhat devalued concept in the current era of studying experiences, beliefs, or reviewing the history of parapsychology. Such content may be considered more acceptable, discreet, and comprehensive and generate less resistance than researching the existence of psi, which scoffers consider a "pseudo-entity" and which some parapsychologists consider weak, elusive, and difficult to replicate.

If you are interested in reading the articles in Spanish or English produced by the IPP, you can visit and download them from: <http://www.alipsi.com.ar/articulos-de-investigaciones/>

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