"Anglo-Saxon" vs. "Latin" Parapsychology: Underlying the Communication Barrier

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Based on interviews of French-speaking researchers, an attempt is made to determine some of the issues which may contribute to communication and collaboration problems in parapsychology. It is argued that these problems reflect broader issues than just language barriers. American parapsychologists are the most "successful" of parapsychologists, in terms of organization, recognition, funding, and social standing. Insofar as they are in a leadership position, they are largely responsible for defining the field's subject matter and methods, as well as qualitative standards for experimentation, journal reports, and PA membership. The situation has contributed to the creation of hierarchical, rather than peer-like, relationships within the field, in which "Anglo-Saxon" parapsychology dominates. This tends to alienate foreign researchers who disagree with some of the priorities or approaches of their American colleagues, and who do not wish to feel inferior to them. It is suggested that, if we truly wish to improve international communication and collaboration, we must come to recognize the socio-economic, cultural and philosophical relativity of our own approach, and thus be more open to divergences in style and philosophy within the field.

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Problem? What problem?

In his JP paper "The language barrier in parapsychology", Alvarado deplores the low level of communication and collaboration in international parapsychology, citing Americans' limited awareness of research or publications in foreign countries, and foreigners' lack of participation in the PA and in Anglo-Saxon psi journals. He proposes several measures to counteract these trends, including the use of travel grants to encourage broader participation in U.S. conventions, and increased efforts to locate and translate foreign publications.

But while focusing largely upon these "formal" measures, Alvarado also cautions that more basic cultural and philosophical issues may obstruct quick and easy solutions. In this context, the opening quotes of his article are quite instructive, as they exemplify the divergence in American vs. European perspectives on the status of international collaboration in the field. J.B.Rhine states that there is "a spirit and vitality in the research that is general and international and in no sense localized" while Tenhaeff darkly observes that "some (English and Americans) seem very chauvinistic and seem to believe that only the researches done in their country are important". Thus, in contrast to Rhine's cheery assessment, Tenhaeff, voicing the point of view of the continent, refers explicitly to "chauvinism" on the part of Anglo-Saxon parapsychologists; he seems to be implying that unfamiliarity with foreign works is based on cultural biases and is, hence, suggestive of darker dynamics than mere ignorance.

My own interactions with a number of Europeans active in contemporary parapsychology suggest that the mood in continental Europe has not changed much in the decades since Tenhaeff's statement. Thus, I think that the "language barrier" is just a facet of the communication problem in parapsychology; indeed, it may be the least significant one. My feeling is that if we seek to address the problem through formal measures alone, without dealing with deeper issues, we might end up reinforcing, rather than resolving, alienation or mutual intolerance.

So in this presentation I would like to analyze some of the conflicts which may underlie the communication barrier. Toward this end, I compare the situations and mentalities of two groups - American vs. French-speaking - in hope that this will also clarify issues dividing broader groups in our field ("Anglo-Saxon" vs. "Latin", or "Northern" vs. "Southern"). I must apologize, in advance, for the stereotyping and "flattening" of individual differences associated with this kind of work. In order to render my communication manageable and relatively clear, I present global trends which inevitably caricaturize reality; I hope to be excused for the multiplicity of exceptions to the trends described.

In order to gain some perspective on the French views, I exchanged with a number of researchers who are specifically familiar with American parapsychology. These exchanges were informal, two-way discussions, in which I first presented the theme of this symposium, and then asked individuals to present their opinions on two questions: what specific issues, if any, might exist between American (or Anglo-Saxon) and French (or Latin) parapsychologists, and what factors or dynamics may underlie these issues.

In all, I was able to exchange with 9 researchers: Pierre Janin, Remy Chauvin, Jean Dierkens, Michel Ange Amorim, Christine Hardy, Jean-Remi Deleage, Francois Favre, Yvonne Duplessis, and Yves Lignon. Given space limitations, I must offer my own synthesis of what they have said, focusing upon a few global areas which, I believe, contribute most to the communication barrier.

Socio-economic constraints upon research

After a year or two in France, one cannot help but feel that French parapsychology is decades behind its counterpart in the U.S.; indeed, it is not clear if it makes sense to refer to a "field" of parapsychology in this country. Recognition of scientific parapsychology is very limited, and external support practically non-existent. Research efforts, involving a few isolated investigators dispersed over the country, are largely self-funded, personal affairs. Little distinction is made between a parapsychologist and psychics, clairvoyants or healers: the term "parapsychologue" can be used liberally by any "practician" who wants to attract clients, and the media further confuse issues by presenting a parapsychologist on the same level with an astrologer, medium, or dowser. Predictably, scientists in various fields tend to dismiss as unimaginable the possibility of serious parapsychological research. The situation is so bad, that the French scientific journal of parapsychology is called "Journal de Recherche en Psychotronique" - "psychtronics" being seen as less provocative a term than "parapsychology".

In short, French parapsychology is confronted with a familiar vicious circle. The field is tainted with negative connotations, due to its lack of internal organization or cohesiveness and its limited means. These negative connotations, in turn, discourage scientists from an open identification with parapsychology, isolate those already active in the field, weaken efforts to organize the field as a distinct discipline, and further remove any chance for funding or respectability.

Why is the situation so "backwards" in France, one of the most developed and progressive countries in Europe? A partial answer, I believe, can be found by considering the socio-economic structure of the French scientific scene. The socialists have been in power for less than a decade, but centralisation has a very long tradition in France, and extends beyond social services, utilities, banks, public transport, etc., reaching into the core of the country's intellectual and scientific activity. The national research organisation, the Centre National de Recherche Scientifique (CNRS), has a hold on all branches of science, both within the university and in other centers, and essentially constitutes a means for controlling the nature and funding of the scientific enterprise.

Centralised political and socio-economic structures have proven to be a handicap for innovative research; they are tradition oriented, discouraging bold advances, initiative and change. For example, the universities and (to a lesser degree) the CNRS operate by a kind of "quota" system, and applying for a position is generally possible only following the retirement of someone from the corresponding post. Even then, approvals must be collected by a seemingly endless review committee, which of course translates into a preference for known quantities, not for newcomers, and certainly not for "strange" topics like parapsychology. It must be recalled that the "rationalist" movement has a very long tradition in France, and is strongly opposed to anything resembling religious, esoteric or occult claims. This is perhaps why efforts to explicitly establish some research within officially approved centers - e.g., the university - have generally met with insurmountable resistance. Remy Chauvin was unable to get an official parapsychology chair established, despite the support of one of the most powerful men in French industry and government. My own attempt to enter the university and the CNRS through the experimental psychology department was unsuccessful. Christine Hardy has some prospects for discreetly establishing some research, in cooperation with some university faculty members; but even if successful, this research would have no immediate access to funds, and would have to remain hidden behind some innocuous-looking departmental "front". Yves Lignon, a math instructor, has succeeded in openly maintaining a small psi laboratory for a

number of years, at the University of Toulouse; however, the laboratory's existence has never been officially approved from the top, and the university's president openly denies its legitimacy. The survival of this lab would appear to be a paranormal feat, but can perhaps be explained by Lignon's extensive relations in the media and a tacit threat of a scandal, should anything happen to him.

What about less "formal", privately funded efforts? Although tax-break measures have been instituted to encourage contributions to non-profit organisations, they are still not truly exploited; the French are not as advanced as the Americans in the fine tradition of donations and humanitarian foundations. Thus, research has been largely self-funded, and, invariably, short-term. Christian Moreau, who had been keenly interested in dream telepathy and psi in psychoanalysis, has long since abandoned parapsychology in favor of psychiatry. Pierre Janin, the inventor of the tychoscope, also left the field to pursue his clinical interests full time. Rene Peoch, who conducted a series of successful anpsi studies with Janin's moving-RNG (the tychoscope), has been progressively forced to abandon the field, and return to his medical practice. Christine Hardy and I, having established a modest laboratory dedicated to computer-RNG research, are feeling the financial pinch, and are wondering how long we can finance our research. Remy Chauvin has managed to get research done, over the years, but he remains quite isolated, and is now forced to act as his own subject in his experiments, due to his remoteness from major centers.

Besides lacking opportunities for conducting research, either within the system or independently of it, French parapsychology also lacks cohesiveness; there is no single organization which well represents the field. The "Institute Metapsychique International" (IMI), once the well-funded and internationally recognized center of psychical research, is broke, and plays practically no role in the field today. GERP, an interdisciplinary reflection group which sustained lively interest in parapsychology throughout the seventies, had to fold. Its livelihood was too closely tied to a couple of individuals and thus could not be sustained once they decided to move on.

Recently, a new effort toward organizing the field has been undertaken by Marc Michel, a co-worker of Yves Lignon. His "Organisation pour la Recherche en Psychotronique" (ORP) is publishing a scientific parapsychological journal, and has organised a research congress and a number of work sessions. But while these activities are enhancing inter-researcher cooperation and exchange, they largely depend, once again, upon the good will and work of a single individual; they are not sure to survive shifts in his life-situation.

The upper class and all the Rest

In general, then, the socio-economic conditions in France render parapsychology a marginal, poorly organized activity, with researchers facing great difficulties conducting research, or even establishing the legitimacy and desirability of such research. This, in turn, means small budgets, limited opportunity for cooperation and exchange with others in the field, and, given the language barrier, little exposure to contemporary Anglo-Saxon parapsychology.

By comparison to this situation, the socio-economic conditions for American parapsychologists are quite favorable: the field is well organized, enjoys a growing recognition (even by the skeptics), holds regular national and local conventions, involves research activites both in universities and in independent centers, and has concrete, if sometimes shaky, funding opportunities. Similarly - though to a lesser extent - parapsychologists in northern European countries generally have better socio-economic "status" than those in Latin countries.

Of course, French researchers welcome the relative success of American parapsychology; it is a source of hope and encouragement for them, and constitutes a convenient argument for the legitimacy of their own research. At the same time, the higher "social status" of American parapsychologists indirectly introduces communication and collaboration problems, insofar as it encourages hierarchical, rather than peer-like relationships. The dynamic seems reminiscent of that between our field, as a whole, and "establishment science" - only that in the present case it is American parapsychology which is acting as the guardian of scientific purity. Thus the Americans tend to define the field's nature, methods and objectives; inasmuch as they control the PA and the most important journals in the field, they are also in the position of enforcing their point of view. As a result, the French seem forced to choose between adopting the American style of parapsychology, being ignored, or being labeled "marginal".

I've discovered that some French prefer to follow their instincts rather than to feel like subordinates to American parapsychology. As mentioned, the ORP of the Toulouse group has been attempting to promote cooperation and exchange between researchers through a series of "work-sessions". One of the first topics discussed in these sessions was the organization of a European congress (Euro-Psi), which would serve as a launching point for subsequent cooperative research projects. The objective was to eventually establish a trans-European association of psi researchers, which could legitimatize parapsychology after 1992.

In response to this, I suggested that the basis for European cooperation in parapsychology may already exist in the form of the EuroPA. I proposed that the French coordinate their efforts with the members of the EuroPA, and added that, insofar as participation in the EuroPA was restricted to PA members, this would be a good occasion for several French researchers to join the PA. As members of the PA, they could more effectively elicit the cooperation of other European parapsychologists, while at the same time establishing a more prominent French presence in the internationally recognized organization of scientific parapsychology.

I proposed this during two different work sessions, and both times the reactions ranged from cool to hostile. The arguments against my suggestion were at no point clearly phrased or explicated. Rather, from a number of side comments and snide remarks, I gathered that these researchers simply had no desire to join the PA, to adhere to what they perceived as an American (rather than international) organization. Surprisingly, the most negative responses came not from the clinicians or anthropologists, but from those whose work falls most clearly within the Rhinean tradition of experimental parapsychology.

My initial interpretation of all this was that I had stumbled upon a clear cut case of territoriality. I, a foreigner (worse, an American) had invaded the territory of French parapsychologists, and, by suggesting that they join the PA and EuroPA, was challenging their claim to fame as leaders in European parapsychology. I still think this interpretation is partly valid. However, I have since had a rather personal taste of what it's like to be in the shoes of a foreigner seeking to join the PA. This experience made me realize that some tacit criteria underlie the explicit PA admission policies, allowing for discrimination against candidates who come from another culture, and have published works outside the officially sanctioned Anglo-Saxon journals. Insofar as admission to the PA is controlled by a committee largely representative of American parapsychology, it is easy to see how foreigners can come to the view that the PA is in fact an American, rather than international, organization. It is also quite understandable that they would react aggressively when asked to seek PA membership. Why should individuals who consider themselves prominent in their own country risk a humiliating rejection?

Of course, it is possible to defend the need for strict criteria for PA membership, as well as the more general need for strong leadership (hence, "hierarchical" relationships) within the field. Given differences in recognition, in numbers, and in funding, it could be argued that American parapsychology is, de facto, the leader in the field. Money translates into improved research conditions, better equipment, more talent, more extensive exchanges with other

scientists, and so forth. Consequently, one could say that, like it or not, the Americans have outstripped other researchers in competence and authority, and have the responsibility of promoting the field as they see fit; in the interest of the field's progress they must exclude those who don't measure up to the defined standards.

Needless to say, these kind of arguments are hardly apt to promote communication and collaboration. More importantly, they underestimate the cultural relativity involved in our perceptions of "competence" and "progress". The criteria as to what constitutes valid and significant psi research, and, hence, as to who is and who isn't a "good" parapsychologist, are not universally agreed upon. To the extent to which French researchers view the priorities in a way different from the Americans, they are bound to resent the message that the "American model" is the only one acceptable. But the issues here clearly transcend socio-economic considerations, and touch upon much thornier cultural, psychological and philosophical divergences.

Cultural and psychological issues

I mentioned earlier that heavy, centralized bureaucracies in France may impede the evolution of scientific inquiry and research. However, complementary to this bureaucracy, French society is characterized by a tremendous individualism. People are in an informal but permanent struggle against the establishment, and will go to great lengths to "beat the system", even when they don't have to.

This anti-conformism is also apparent in the intellectual scene; passion and expressiveness pervades the entire culture, and not just the arts. Of course, when it comes to science, much is necessarily built upon the modest and persistent work of technicians and specialists. And, as everywhere else in the world, most scientists are conservative in nature and suspicious of upstarts. Yet, the French pride themselves above all as creators, not as technicians or specialists; the image of the free thinker is far more of an inspiration than that of the systematic scientist. This is particularly true now, as the "New Age" vogue has pulled a number of scientists from their conventional tasks and thrust them into Kuhnian shifts and currents.

Apart from the centrality of individualism and creativity in French culture, also of relevance is the trait of ethnocentricism. Like in other mediterranean countries, nationalistic pride is pronounced; the French do not take kindly to the idea that they may be playing second fiddle to someone else. Of course, their self-image as independent and superior was challenged by the enormous economic power and

political influence of the U.S. in post-war Europe. But along with other European civilizations, the French have increasingly sought to distance themselves from complete loyalty to the U.S., and reaffirm their distinct identity. This tendency has been reinforced by the anti-conformist and anti-authoritarian sentiments described above, since the U.S. has often been perceived as an over-dominating economic and military force.

What does all this have to do with communication and cooperation problems in parapsychology? I think that a number of our problems within the field may have little to do with parapsychology per se, and be strictly related to such cultural issues. The traits of our culture rub off on all of us, and, inevitably, affect the kinds of relationships we sustain with those from other cultures.

For example, the individualist and anti-conformist traits of the French imply a desire to remain free, distinct, and unclassifiable - and, hence, a resistance toward invitations to join groups and organizations. Such cultural traits may have been one of the main reasons why the French have had difficulty organizing parapsychology in their own country. Coupled with the slightly paranoid sentiments vis-a-vis American chauvinism (or imperialism), these traits probably induce considerable psychological blocks vis-a-vis organizations such as the PA. But additionally, individualist and anti-conformist feelings could also lead to resistance toward methods, rules and standards "imported" from American parapsychology - especially when these seem out of sync with Latin values and traits.

American parapsychologists spend much energy organizing the field, defining its subject matter and standardizing research methods and reporting styles. A good chunk of their time may also be spent on formal budget proposals, annual reports, or public-relations activities (including, responding to irresponsible critics). All these activities move the field toward planned and systematic, rather than spontaneous or improvisational research programmes. It is a trend which is entirely justified, inasmuch as the goal is to render parapsychology more "professional", and thus more apt to be welcomed by the scientific establishment. But it is a trend which has its price, as well; in other cultures, researchers may see little reason to orient themselves in the same direction. The contingencies and constraints are not the same for those who work in isolation, without budget proposals, annual reports, or Csicops axing the doors down. There may therefore be little concern with standardization, replicability, or other marks of professionalism. The feeling might be that, when it comes to psi research, the top priority is to creatively explore new directions - even at the risk of committing errors or wandering down some blind paths.

Of course, to the extent to which American parapsychology is "calling the shots", the French (or Latin) parapsychologist is bound to be penalized for not following; inevitably, this leads to a widening of the communication gap. An example here is provided by Remy Chauvin, who several years back submitted an article to the JP, reporting apparent PK effects upon water congelation. Given the centrality of water to living organisms, Chauvin considered this a potentially important finding, worthy of replication and further investigation. However, it seems that the JP did not appreciate the "manual" measurement techniques used, and wondered why computer-controlled data collection and data processing had not been adopted instead. To Chauvin, who had spent many months devising his apparatus and collecting results, this demand for computer-control seemed excessive and irrelevant; not everybody is equally able to utilize computers, and the latter are by no means necessary for good research. He ended up publishing the article in the JSPR.

In my interviews with Chauvin and some other French researchers, I had the impression that there is a growing rebelliousness vis-a-vis the American criteria for good psi research, or acceptable reporting styles; there is a desire to find approaches involving complementary values and priorities. These feelings were of interest to me, because they reminded me of similar feelings which underlie a movement called "Latin management". As described to me by a well-known business consultant, it is an attempt to gear French managerial styles away from the dominant Anglo-Saxon or American models, and to cultivate styles which are more consistent with mediterranean values and traditions. I thus wonder whether some of the communication issues in parapsychology are part of a larger development - the emergence of a "Latin science", emphasizing individuality expressiveness, personal implication, and human interaction, rather than standardization, detachment, objectivity, and formal means for regulating exchanges.

A paradigm conflict?

Since the writings of Kuhn, we have become increasingly sensitized to the central role of tacit motives, beliefs and conceptual frameworks in scientific research. Such tacit factors define the questions we consider meaningful or significant, the tools and procedures we utilize to address them, and the responses we are likely to find. When frameworks with different ontological or epistemological premises collide, then the minimum we can expect is a lack of communication and collaboration between the groups involved.

One of the most obvious obstacles to collaboration in parapsychology is the metaphysical "split" between

interactionist-dualism and monism. Many, if not most American parapsychologists are tacitly or explicitly committed to dualism. Even recent theories, inspired by quantum physics, retain a distinction between the observing consciousness and matter. By contrast, the French, who have been struggling to rid themselves of their cartesian heritage, are generally hostile toward dualistic concepts, and much more prone toward monistic worldviews - whether materialistic or idealistic in nature. Thus, in seeking to explain psi phenomena, they are more likely than Americans to use concepts often found in the East or in Russian parapsychology (like "bio-fields" or "bioplasma") and to explore the possibility of detecting "psi-energies".

Inevitably, of course, the differing worldviews lead to clashes. To many Europeans and Russians, dualism seems reactionary, like a left-over from the days of spiritualism. On the other hand, to most American parapsychologists, concepts like "psi energies", and the work associated with these concepts, seem rather "marginal". But the two views do not have equal opportunities of expression; while research consistent with the dualistic viewpoint receives much coverage, some feel that the Americans are prone to ignore work which is more consistent with a monistic view. Yvonne Duplessis, for example, complains that her work on dermo-optic perception did not receive the attention it deserved, even though it is conspicuously relevant to a substantial amount of psi research (i.e., clairvoyance tasks with sealed envelopes). When Carroll Nash sought to explore protocols analogous to her own, he concluded that his results pointed to something other than psi phenomena; the results were "too good" to be based upon psi. Perhaps this is true. But to those who assume that psi is a subtle physical energy, rather than a "pure" mental phenomenon, this attitude seems incomprehensible. It translates to abandoning a promising research lead, in favor of pre-established assumptions about the nature of psi; and it also implies the perpetuation of parapsychology's isolation from "normal" science.

Another issue which may act as a divisive force in the field is the very ancient and persistent confrontation between two epistemological frameworks: empiricism and rationalism. The empiricist approximates truth by accumulating more and more data, relying upon these to diminish the "interference" of erroneous ideas and conceptions; his preoccupation with methodological purity and replication reflects this search for "hard facts". By contrast, the rationalist seeks to approximate truth by constructing increasingly compelling theoretical structures. His focus is upon formal systems or semantics, and he is preoccuppied far more with the coherence of thought than its correspondence with data.

In the U.S., parapsychology is clearly rooted in the empiricist tradition. Rhinean methods have been inspired

largely by behaviorism, and thus, indirectly, by positivism - both extreme expressions of the empiricist tradition. And parapsychology in the U.S. continues to be modeled largely after experimental psychology, emphasizing systematic data collection and methodological purity and showing restraint in modelization and theorizing. Similarly, the trend toward atheoretical terminology, (e.g., references to "anomalies", rather than psi) reflects the data-orientation of American parapsychology.

By contrast, French parapsychologists, while certainly empiricists, are nevertheless operating within a culture with a long rationalist tradition. Positivism has never been warmly received in France, and it is unlikely that a purely behavioristic approach to psi phenomena could ever really take roots there. Not surprisingly, the concept of an atheoretical "anomaly" is nearly intolerable; it seems preferable to start out with some theoretical framework from the outset, and view the facts as part of a meaningful grid. The intellectual climate is such as to encourage ambitious theories, and innovative conceptual efforts; it is less important that these be based on many facts, than that they be internally coherent and consistent with their own premises.

This divergence in epistemological outlooks between Americans and French could help clarify - though by no means resolve - some disagreements regarding methods and research priorities. American parapsychologists' preoccupation with polished experimental protocols and near-perfect controls are consistent with the empiricist goal of seeking out "pure" data - facts which are so elementary and certain that they cannot be said to be distorted by subjective opinion or error. It is assumed that only such hard data can persuade the skeptics of the reality of psi.

On the other hand, in the rationalist tradition, there can be no such thing as elementary data, independent of premises and frameworks. Data are not ends in themselves, but only means intended to ascertain or clarify an existing theory or model. An "anomaly", even if well-demonstrated, is uninteresting if not embedded in a conceptual context which lends it meaning. From this point of view, methodological sophistication, assuring data purity, though laudable in terms of public relations (i.e., skeptics), is not the most important priority. At this point, those influenced by rationalist perspectives feel that there is no need for more experimental "hard data"; what is needed is the integration of all available clues in search of an understanding of the nature of psi.

The climate in the U.S. is such as to encourage specialization, well-controlled laboratory research, and a good yield of "solid" data - even if the effects observed are near the

vanishing point. The climate in France, on the other hand, is likely to reinforce theoretical, phenomenological or field work, and a courting after risky "macro" effects - through studies with gifted subjects, clinical case studies, anthropological and ethological investigations, and so on.

There is little doubt that the experimental approach is more likely to gain us favors with hard-headed scientific audiences, and an entry into establishment science; the earlier mentioned successes of American parapsychologists attest to this. However, the more adventurous approaches have their own appeal. It may be these which, in some wild chase over the landscape, will unveil the true forms behind the walls of data, and satisfy our thirst for meaning.

Conclusion

We are all drawn to the ideas of communication and collaboration. Communication implies enrichment, expansion of knowledge, broadening of vision; collaboration suggests the warmth of shared creativity, and promises levels of achievement beyond the reach of isolated individuals. In our field, especially, plagued as it is by chronic funding problems and endless battles for recognition, communication and collaboration are necessities, not just luxuries. But neither communication nor collaboration "just happen", automatically; they must be actively pursued and reinforced. This is especially true when geographical, linguistic, political, cultural, or philosophical factors obscure and obstruct sharing and interchange.

I think it is clear, at this point, that differences in parapsychology are inevitable and that, at this stage in the development of the field, we cannot specify priorities, objectives and methods which are universally preferable over other ones. Our criteria for "good science" reflect specific assumptions and values, which in turn may be culturally bound, or the result of a particular historical tradition. Consequently, in reflecting upon how better to communicate, it is important we appreciate the relativity of our own perspective, and develope a tolerance for, and respect of, differences. Once we accept that all approaches probably have some strengths, and some weaknesses, we may begin to exchange more freely and make room for collaboration. After all, to work together, we don't really need to speak the same language; we just need to understand what the other is saying.