

## BOOK REVIEW

**Experimentelle Parapsychologie: Eine Einführung** [Experimental Parapsychology: An Introduction] by Stefan Schmidt. Würzburg: Ergon, 2014. 159 pp. € 24.00 ISBN 978-3-95650-079-4.

It might be a little bit unusual for a reviewer to have (almost) nothing to criticize about a book, and not to list, at least, minor errors, because a lot of critics see their main function in doing so (the more so as this might point to the ‘real expert’ in the field).

It has been a long time since the last German overview of the actual state of parapsychological research has been published with the intention of informing a broader audience, beyond specific scientific and academic communities. The first one of this kind was written by biologist and philosopher Hans Driesch (*Parapsychologie*, published in 1932), followed by Hans Bender’s *Unser sechster Sinn* (1971), and Walter von Lucadou’s *Psyche und Chaos. Theorien der Parapsychologie* (1995). Hence, the book under review, *Experimentelle Parapsychologie: Eine Einführung* by Stefan Schmidt, continues a small, but long and important, line of tradition.

The author might not quite be unknown to the readership of the *JSE* because he has been doing experimental parapsychological research since the mid-1990s, and has published several articles and books relevant to parapsychology (see <http://prof-stefan-schmidt.info/publikationen>). He is a member of the Parapsychological Association, and the Society for Psychical Research, among others. In 2001, Schmidt received the Gertrud Schmeidler Award for Outstanding Student Contribution to Parapsychology, and in 2004 he chaired the 47<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association in Vienna. Since 2010, he has been assistant professor at the Institute for Transcultural Health Studies of the European University Viadrina in Frankfurt a.O. (Germany), and, since 2012, head of the Academic Section for the Evaluation of Complementary Medicine, as well as of the Center for Meditation, Mindfulness, and Neuroscience Research at the University Medical Center Freiburg (Germany).

The book *Experimentelle Parapsychologie* is based on his Ph.D. dissertation (Schmidt 2002), as well as several articles the author wrote for journals and edited volumes during the last few years (e.g., Schmidt 2015a,b). It appeared as Volume 11 of the monograph series *Grenzüberschreitungen: Beiträge zur wissenschaftlichen Erforschung außergewöhnlicher Erfahr-*

*ungen und Phänomene* [Crossing Frontiers: Contributions to the Scientific Exploration of Exceptional Experiences and Phenomena], edited by Eberhard Bauer and Michael Schetsche on behalf of the Institute for Frontier Areas of Psychology and Mental Health (IGPP) in Freiburg, Germany, and consists of 14 chapters. To begin with an overview of the contents: The first four chapters include a short Introduction, an assessment of the scientific classification of parapsychology (Chapter 2), a brief history of experimental parapsychology (Chapter 3), and methodological basics and particularities (Chapter 4). Chapters 5 through 11 are dedicated to the description of relevant research paradigms, including the respective state of research (results, controversies, etc.). Chapter 12 provides a summary and a short discussion of some specific problems of psi research in general. Chapter 13 describes some issues of process-oriented parapsychological research. The last chapter introduces the most important theoretical models for the explanation of psi effects.

Schmidt interprets his role as a scientist in the sense of an explorer who is keen to explore unknown territory at the frontiers of knowledge, and recommends—as an apt attitude for doing so—a skeptical mind as well as a willingness to tolerate inconsistencies and contradictions (p. 10). He points out that this represents a major challenge for many scientists which leads to a situation in which a researcher in the field of parapsychology runs the risk of disqualification for practicing pseudoscience. Although parapsychological research has existed for 120 years, the situation has not changed much in this regard. This is a well-known fact to most readers of the *JSE*. The crucial point is on the one hand that the subject matter of this research consists of anomalies that seem to contradict our current scientific understanding of the world, and, on the other, that the field of parapsychology lacks a clear definition of the phenomena as well as a generally accepted theoretical model. However, these obstacles didn't prevent parapsychological researchers from doing their homework; they addressed relevant methodological issues in a particularly creative and sophisticated way. Schmidt mentions this point in his historical and methodological chapters. He emphasizes the role of meta-analyses (and the closely related publication bias) for the assessment of the probability and effect size of psi effects, in order to deal with the well-known replication problem.

Even though the nature of the phenomena remains puzzling, it is possible to categorize them. In most cases, such categorizations include theoretical presuppositions and reflect the individual approach of the person who structures the field. It is therefore not surprising that the subcategories of the field can vary quite considerably in different books on parapsychology.

A main problem lies in the often existing possibility that one and the same phenomenon can be interpreted as clairvoyance, psychokinesis, or precognition. Schmidt circumvents this difficulty by structuring the field with regard to established experimental paradigms, although he titled some of his chapters with commonly used psi terminology. In Chapter 5, Schmidt describes the *Ganzfeld* technique, presents the results, and discusses five meta-analyses that have been carried out so far. He points toward the problem that the method of meta-analysis, contrary to the initial hope, does not provide unambiguous results because many small decisions have to be made during the procedure. Chapter 6 is dedicated to the *remote viewing* research paradigm which has some similarities to the Ganzfeld technique but relies almost exclusively on gifted subjects. The following chapter introduces experiments that are commonly subsumed under the label *precognition experiments* (forced-choice, free-response). Schmidt focusses on three important versions: the card-guessing studies (with Zener cards) invented by J. B. Rhine, the presentiment studies introduced by Dean Radin, and the retroactive experiments developed by Daryl Bem. In this context, he refers to the controversy that has been provoked by the results, and mainly by the fact that they have been published in the highly respected *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Chapter 8 addresses experiments with *dream telepathy*, and especially the so-called Maimonides experiments (conducted at the Maimonides Medical Center in Brooklyn during the years 1966–1972). In contrast to this rather short overview, the two following chapters on *remote staring detection* and *DMILS* (*direct mental interaction of living systems*) experiments are relatively comprehensive. This is hardly surprising, since Schmidt and his research group themselves have conducted studies with these techniques. However, the author uses his own experience with the staring detection paradigm to discuss exemplary particular methodological aspects as well as the permanent development and improvement of experimental designs. In the DMILS chapter, he outlines the short history of this research paradigm, which is characterized by the fact that paranormal interaction is measured by physiological and behavior-related data. He presents three forms of experiments: EDA-DMILS, Remote Staring, and Attention Focusing Facilitation Experiment (AFFE), and discusses the results of three meta-analyses in this field. The last chapter on experimental paradigms is dedicated to *psychokinesis*, starting with the early tossing dice experiment series at Duke University, followed by two paragraphs on micro-PK using random event generators (REGs). The author then presents the results of meta-analyses, and points finally to the *Global Consciousness Project*.

Chapter 12 provides a synopsis of the (impressive) results of the

reviewed meta-analyses in different fields of experimental parapsychological research, and considers the implications of these small effect sizes as well as the replication problem.

While Chapters 5–12 are mainly proof-orientated (does psi exist?), Chapter 13 deals with issues of process-orientated parapsychological research considering moderating variables. Schmidt selects two psychological (personality traits, experimenter effect) and two physical (sidereal time, fluctuations of the geomagnetic field) variables that can be offered as possible candidates. Finally, he discusses different attempts to explain the well-known decline effect.

The last chapter of the book provides a useful supplement to the empirical part: an overview of theories of parapsychology. Although many such theories exist (cf Stokes 1987, 1997), they can be categorized into several groups. The author focuses on three threads of theories: (1) theories of unconscious psi perception (PMIR, DAT, FST), (2) theories analogous to quantum mechanical processes (MPI, GQT), and (3) a theory of the restoration of time symmetry (CIRTS). He succeeds in summarizing these theories in an understandable manner in a few pages.

This method of presentation applies to the whole book. Schmidt writes about complicated issues in a clear and didactically sophisticated way. The book is well-balanced and gives an excellent overview of the current state of experimental parapsychological research. The author does not ignore weak points and problems, and he remains cautious in his conclusions. However, he points decidedly to the undeniable anomalies: “In the data of parapsychological experiments irregularities can be found which could not be explained by chance; little is known about the nature of these irregularities” (p. 103, translation by G. M.).

The only thing I have to complain about is a small bias in weighting the individual chapters. The chapter on dream telepathy, for example, only consists of three pages compared with the 16-page chapter on staring detection. Some of the given references are not the most up-to-date (however, this does not apply to the presentation of results). In short, I would have wished for another 20 pages, and it would still have remained a short and easily readable book. And moreover, I would wish for an English translation because this well-written, well-informed, and concise introduction to the field of experimental parapsychology deserves a larger readership.



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