

ESSAY / INTERVIEW

Expanding Parapsychology Research: Learnings from a Beneficent Funder

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HIGHLIGHTS

Funding in frontier science is sparse, but some sponsors clearly invest in certain lines of research as the most promising for future discoveries or advancements. This knowledge can help to guide new and established investigators alike.

KEYWORDS

Parapsychology, edge science, funding, phenomenology, bias, Bial, collaboration

Parapsychology is a research field that has received much less funding than other areas of science. For example, more than \$5 billion was spent on mental health research in the United States in 2018. Only about \$2 million was spent on formal parapsychology research that year. The total human and financial resources devoted to parapsychology since 1882 is at best equivalent to the expenditures devoted to fewer than two months of research in conventional psychology in the United States (Utts, 1995).

Charles Tart conducted the last known formal survey of psi funding in 1978 (Tart, 1978). He polled individuals at 14 identifiable parapsychological research laboratories in the United States. The individuals had to be full members of the Parapsychological Association who had been actively working and publishing in the field for at least five years and have at least one part-time colleague to qualify as a laboratory or center. He found that the total funds available per year for all respondents was \$552,000 for the last five years. Tart reports, "While the mean level of year funding was \$42,500, the median level was \$17,000." That is, half the active research laboratories in the United States had yearly research budgets of less than \$17,000. Annual budget funding estimates were \$750,000 for the Mobius project (1979–1980) and SRI (formerly Stanford

Research Institute) during the same period.

An informal discussion of current funding amongst parapsychology colleagues revealed varied funding levels. Smaller academic and nonprofit centers reported about \$40,000 to \$50,000 in annual funding, while larger nonprofits noted annual research budgets of about \$500,000. Many also do not feel comfortable sharing information about their budgets, especially if the information is not already within the public domain. As far as I know, there has been no formal survey of parapsychology funding since Tart's survey. Despite the lack of specific total numbers for current funding, the amounts are much lower than those established for other areas of psychology.

This lack of financial support is critical. Resources for salaries, project expenses, and support staff are difficult to procure and maintain. Funding limitations also reduce the number of people entering the field, even though they may be interested in doing so. It stifles the whole field from expanding. I would even go so far as to say the limited resources can foster competition and a scarcity mentality amongst parapsychology researchers. That is, there is a general sense that there is not enough to go around, and researchers must fight for their own funding. While this is not unique to the parapsychology field, I feel these factors



can only harm the greater efforts of our community.

Why is there such a massive difference in funding between psychology and parapsychology? This is likely self-evident to this audience. Edge science research is still taboo within academia, and funding bodies are few and far between. While stigma remains around mental health disorders, the topic is not so taboo that discussions are blocked and funding is not available. On the contrary, we see billions of dollars funding the effort. In fact, \$3.9 billion was allocated to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and \$1.2 billion to the National Institute of Mental Health in the United States in 2018. This robust funding exists partly because mental health issues do not challenge the materialistic worldview in the way that parapsychology does. Because despite evidence that the phenomena parapsychologists study are common, parapsychology research is still sidelined and seen as taboo (Cardeña, 2015). In my opinion, edge science research is just as critical and worthy as mental health research with as strong an impact on humanity.

So, the natural question is: How do we generate more funds to support our research efforts? Perhaps we can learn more about this from one of the largest foundational funders of parapsychology: Fundação Bial, or in English the Bial Foundation. The Bial Foundation was founded in 1994 by Bial, the leading Portuguese pharmaceutical company. The Bial Foundation was created as an independent non-profit organization to promote scientific development. In 1996, the Bial Foundation began to organize the symposia—an event that brings together the international scientific elite in neuroscience and parapsychology.

Since the Grants for Scientific Research's establishment until the last 2020 Grants' edition, the Bial Foundation has supported 775 projects (452 from 2010–2020), supporting 1,624 researchers from 29 countries. About 50% of these grants involved parapsychology. The maximum funding level per grant was €50,000. One hundred and seventy-five projects are ongoing (Cordeiro et al., 2022).

Bial prides itself on the impact it has created with these grants in the dissemination of their results. These projects resulted in more than 2,000 papers that received approximately 35,000 citations. Of these, 1,606 were published in indexed journals (1,361 in journals with an average impact factor of 4.02, and 282 in journals with an impact factor >5).

I was able to interview the Bial Foundation Chairman Luís Portela to gain insight into parapsychology funding. It may seem sensational that the chairman of a pharmaceutical company is one of the greatest proponents of parapsychology research. How and why did he start funding the field? What are his thoughts on strengthening parapsychology research?



Bial Foundation Chair Dr. Luís Portela

INTERVIEW

Helané: Bial has a rich history. You assumed the presidency of Bial in 1979, and the Bial Foundation was created in 1994. Can you share how and why the Bial Foundation was created?

Luís: In my youth, I decided to become a doctor for two reasons: to enjoy being useful to others and desiring to contribute to humanity's spiritual enlightenment. I, therefore, intended to do research in neurosciences and parapsychology. However, my father passed away at the age of 50, when I was 21, and I felt the need to start working in the family's company—Bial pharmaceutical—while I was still finishing my medical degree.

When I finished my degree, I worked for three years at Porto's central hospital and was a professor of psychophysiology at the University of Porto for six years. At the age of 27, I won a scholarship to do my Ph.D. in psychophysiology at the University of Cambridge. But, given the admiration I had for my grandfather's work, the founder of the company, and my father, his successor, I chose to put aside my medical and research career to dedicate myself to the Bial company, of which I bought the majority of the shares. At that time, I promised myself that, when I had the means for it, I would create the conditions to support some researchers to do what I was giving up doing: research in neurosciences and parapsychology.

At the age of 32, in 1984, we were able to create the Bial Award, mainly to foster clinical research, which continues to this day. In 1994, we invited the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities to join the Bial company to cre-

ate an independent nonprofit institution of public utility that would manage the Bial Award and a Grants program for scientific research, which was accepted. Thus, the Bial Foundation was born and managed by representatives of Bial and the Council of Rectors of Portuguese Universities.

Helané: One of the primary research areas of the Bial Foundation funds is parapsychology. Can you share how and why you decided to include parapsychology as the primary funding focus?

Luís: At the time of the creation of the Bial Foundation, we assessed that, given the available funds, we would not be able to support, at least with some impact, research in the broad domain of health, so we decided, with regard to the grants, to focus on two areas. The representative of the Council of Rectors of the first administration of the Foundation, Professor Nuno Grande, suggested psychophysiology and parapsychology, which surprised me and led me to ask him the reason behind that choice. He said that psychophysiology was the field in which I would have done my Ph.D., and parapsychology was a field of interest of mine. Given that my company was going to fund the Foundation, the Council of Rectors deemed it fair to support the two fields of my interest. I was very touched by that and, obviously, gladly accepted.

Helané: How does the Bial Foundation set the criteria for its funding priorities? How are specific topics, theories, or research designs selected as high-priority vs. low-priority?

Luís: The activity of the Bial Foundation is focused on three programs: 1) three scientific awards, 2) scientific research grants, and 3) a symposium “Behind and Beyond the Brain” conducted every two years. The symposium provides a venue for the public presentation of our grantees’ project results. It also gathers together neuroscientists, university researchers in the field of parapsychology, and other scientists (philosophers, mathematicians, physicists, etc.) to discuss the symposium’s major theme. For example, this year’s theme was the mystery of time.

The final responsibility always belongs to the Board of Directors. However, we have a Scientific Board, composed of 55 scientists from around the world and presided over by the neuroscientist António Damásio, which scientifically supports our offerings. For example, concerning the grants, when it comes to selecting the projects for funding, from among the hundreds of applications, the assessment is, indeed, made by the Scientific Board. As long as the projects fall within psychophysiology or parapsychology, they are selected for their quality. Since 1994, the Bial Foundation has funded 775 projects of scientific research,

of which nearly half are in the field of psychophysiology, and the other half are related to parapsychology, be it on its own or in conjunction with neuroscience. These projects involved more than 1,600 researchers from 29 countries.

Helané: How should researchers think about research hypotheses and designs when engaging with organizations like the Bial Foundation?

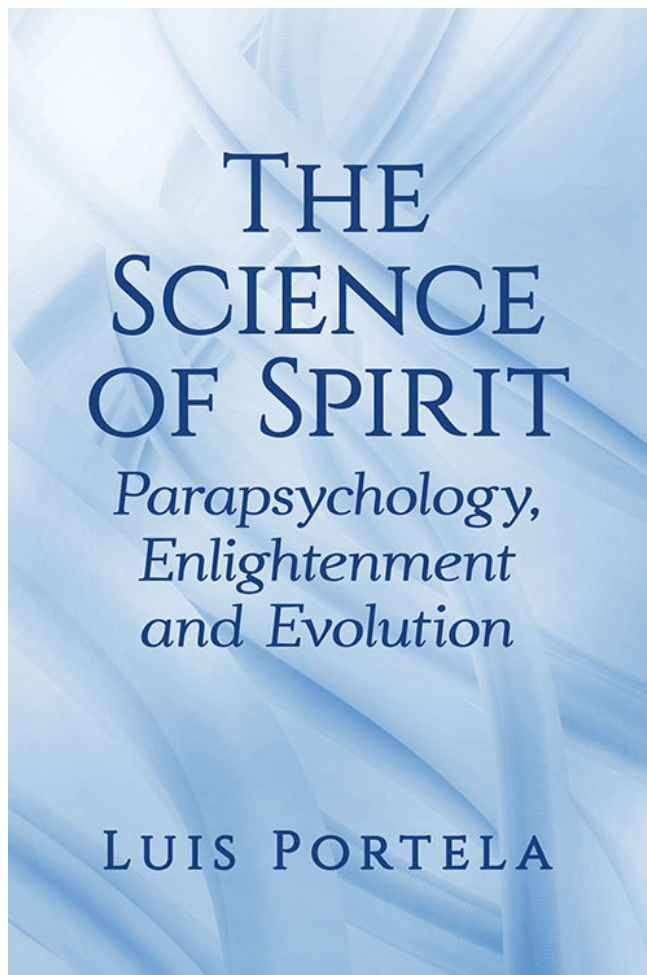
Luís: The Bial Foundation has a 100% patronage approach: It neither asks anything from its awardees and grant holders nor accepts anything from them. We want science to be done in complete freedom, without our interference, only with our financial support. As such, what we expect from our applicants is that they submit high-quality work, leaving the selection of the best to the independent jury of each of the three awards and our Scientific Board for the grants.

I believe that the applicants should focus, above all, on the intrinsic and scientific quality of their projects. I admit that is an important exercise for researchers in the parapsychology field because in the past, unfortunately, the investigation was not always carried out under the rigor of the scientific method, which is crucial for the credibility of the area.

Helané: Knowing you have a deep appreciation for these topics, as evidenced by your recently published *The Science of Spirit: Parapsychology, Enlightenment and Evolution*, what do you think are the most important research priorities for these domains?

Luís: I believe that during the 20th century, humanity has made a brilliant path in scientific and technological research, which allowed human beings today to know a lot more about themselves and the environment that surrounds them in comparison to a hundred years ago. However, unfortunately, parapsychological phenomena and consciousness have not been studied so much, which, in my opinion, led to a great imbalance. People became intoxicated with the study and mastery of matter, developing a hyper-materialist perspective, and [not] relegating the universal values and the urge to be, and seeking to be the best version of themselves [to a high importance]. Today’s world shows great imbalances, be it social, environmental, economic, financial, etc.

As such, I believe that it is important, during the 21st century, to invest in scientific research of parapsychological phenomenon and the spiritual dimension in order to enlighten humanity. In my understanding, this research should not be done to demonstrate that this is correct or that it is false. It should be done only in search of the truth for truth’s sake. I am convinced that, sooner or later, sci-



ence will demonstrate that some phenomena described since antiquity as miraculous or mysterious are purely false. But, I am also convinced that science will demonstrate the veracity of some other phenomena, discovering the scientific explanation and, probably, finding certain types of energy or energy use not yet known, the knowledge of which may allow a better individual and collective performance, as well as a greater inner balance, also at the individual and collective levels.

Helané: For the readers who have not yet read your book, could you briefly summarize your philosophy and insights about the role of exceptional human experiences (and notably psi phenomena) in human evolution and mainstream consciousness?

Luís: In this book, I aimed to show interesting results of scientific research in parapsychology, conducted in North American and European universities in the last decades that still are not very well-known. And then, cross those findings with the traditional knowledge from the field of spirituality while trying to give some clues focused on the advantage of each person trying to know themselves bet-

ter and make their life path in a responsible and successful way.

I assume that the Earth functions as a world school, where we come to learn what we can with each passing day. In this school, we have plenty of opportunities to evolve that appear, as long as we are attentive and open to learning. To learn with everything and everyone: with the best, trying to follow their good examples, and with the worst, identifying their mistakes and trying not to repeat them.

In that sense, it is appropriate to steer our attention away from having and showing, and focus on being better every day, fixing our mistakes, and developing a path of self-perfection, which can be a source of great satisfaction, a reason for happiness. This dimension brings happiness much greater than the mere overstimulation of the senses so often sought by most people.

Helané: What do you think are the breakthrough areas that hold the most promise for advancing scientific theory?

Luís: I have the conviction that knowledge or wisdom is achieved through combining the efforts between multiple fields, from philosophy to physics, from medicine to psychology, and from biology to parapsychology. For this reason, at the Bial Foundation, we have fostered support for multidisciplinary projects. But, as I said, I think that parapsychology currently deserves a greater investment due to the fact that it was significantly less studied and developed during the 20th century. In the field of parapsychology, maybe it is important to study and clarify all aspects of its topic areas. We would try not to leave any grey areas, whatever the topic may concern.

But I also have the conviction that in research, it is very important to always maintain the rigor of the scientific method in a comprehensive, holistic way. Simultaneously, we can also consider direct experiments that are less objective but are still statistically demonstrated to be significant. And maybe even more important, that the research is conducted with authenticity, simplicity, detachment, and a strong sense of utility.

However, I deem important the work developed at the University of Virginia by the Division of Perceptual Studies (DOPS), the study of supposed past lives, which deserves special attention—work that has been confirmed and conducted by a significant number of researchers from other North American and European universities. Using rigorous scientific methods, the supposed past lives of a few thousand individuals have been documented from accounts related by children. The continuity of this work seems important to me. To continue researching how past lives are possible and developing scientific explanations for it. I think that physicists and philosophers should combine

their efforts with parapsychologists to further study reincarnation.

Helané: The Bial Foundation is one of the few foundations that fund this work. Why do you think there are so few organizations that support this work?

Luís: Parapsychology and consciousness have not been trending. The huge scientific investments and the enormous scientific and technological success of the 20th century created a perspective very focused on having, materiality, and consumption. The aspects more connected to being, universal values, spirituality, and parapsychology were left behind. Add to that the fact that, during the first half of the 20th century, some people discredited the field of parapsychology by fabricating or falsifying results and fraud on the part of participants. It is still a field hard to study due to the fact that many of the phenomena are spontaneous and sometimes unconscious, making them difficult to reproduce in a laboratory.

But the surge in the last decades of many researchers in North American and European universities conducting serious and profound work indicates that conditions are being created for the development of the field (Tucker, 2008). As such, various institutions giving financial support to the field have been arising as well.

Helané: How would you describe the role of funding in this research domain in terms of blocking or supporting continued progress in this area? For example, does the lack of funding provide an obstacle for research in this area?

Luís: I learned many years ago that the characteristic that really differentiates a scientific research project is its quality. A project with high quality ends up being carried out with more or less difficulties, but it is carried out. Of course, funding is important. If the funding chances are higher, it will be better for the project. Thus, I think a significant increase in funding is desirable for a strong and, if possible, rapid development of parapsychology. Not indiscriminate funding. An increase of funding opportunities directed to the development of projects of quality.

Helané: What role do you think taboos play in funding's availability? What strategies do you think are most effective for breaking through these barriers?

Luís: History shows us that the existence of taboos has always hindered scientific progress. But it also shows us that with patience, intelligence, honesty, and persistence, taboos have always been surpassed and science has always progressed. I have the profound conviction that it will be the same in the parapsychology field, as long as the

researchers focus positively on the design of quality projects. The quality of the projects and the good results they may produce will be the best way to gain credibility for the field, attracting more and better researchers and attracting more and important funders.

Helané: Many researchers avoid pursuing careers in this area because of a lack of funding (or taboos). What advice would you give them? And what do you think are the most important things to consider for the future success of parapsychological research?

Luís: I think my previous answers demonstrate the importance I give to the qualitative aspect of the projects, which, in my opinion, should aim to be truly useful to humanity. Either in neurosciences or parapsychology, I think there is still much ignorance waiting to be solved. It shouldn't be hard to create truly interesting and useful projects. We will need patience, intelligence, honesty, and persistence to conduct the projects with pleasure and, that way, achieve important results.

In scientific research, as in any other activity, it is always important not to focus on the difficulties but rather on the solutions. Always use the power of positive thinking and a constructive attitude. And so, we verify that what is deemed as impossible is solely what is very difficult to accomplish. The path there may be worrisome and require effort, but, in return, it also gives enormous satisfaction to conduct and, above all, to conclude. The satisfaction extends to those who support it, namely those who fund it. Maybe the hardest things to accomplish are the most beautiful and the ones that give greater happiness to those who conduct them and those who support them.

COMMENTS

Dr. Portela's personal interest was what inspired the relatively large funding from the Bial Foundation in parapsychology, rather than a general trend. As Dr. Portela himself chose not to pursue his dream as a researcher in parapsychology, he was happy to be able to channel the profits from his company—the Bial Foundation—into the field. I also know that this support meets resistance. If you've ever had the pleasure of attending the Bial conferences, you know that it is an often divisive audience of parapsychology researchers and mainstream clinicians and researchers, many of whom find parapsychology research unacceptable. This is evident from the questions and often public criticism of the parapsychology talks. I appreciate Dr. Portela's courage to fund and promote parapsychology despite these obstacles. Perhaps the Bial Foundation's considerable parapsychology research and scholarship

funding will embolden other funders who are covertly interested in such topics. Perhaps the recent funding effort by Robert Bigelow for survival research is a harbinger of increased funding to come.

I do believe the tide is turning. Since I started in this field seven years ago, I have already seen a significant shift of the taboo. More of the general public are willing to talk about parapsychology topics openly. Numerous scientists in and out of academia are becoming interested, especially with the developments in quantum physics and cosmology and growing conversations about the non-local nature of consciousness and potential theories for consciousness as fundamental. Rising interest in the therapeutic benefits of contemplative practices and psychedelics adds to the swell.

Perhaps our field could foster increased collaboration and a more coherent front, so researchers in this field are well-poised to take advantage of funding opportunities that develop. For example, could multiple researchers collaborate on larger grants? Following Dr. Portela's advice for impeccable research methods, could more methods and analysis techniques be formalized into guidelines or structured protocols? Could scientific review become a norm? For example, the Koestler Parapsychology Unit provides excellent service to the field with its pre-registration process, including a very thoughtful scientific review by Jim Kennedy. Could we support or expand these efforts?

Furthermore, like the cases of Dr. Portela and Mr. Bigelow, parapsychology funding is often initiated by individuals who have had personal experiences that inspire them to support the work. Could direct experiences be provided so that more individuals could witness vetted individuals who can demonstrate such phenomena? I have found direct experience in concert with scientific evidence to be the most effective way to sway worldviews about parapsychology. The scientific evidence only goes so far if one has not experienced it; the direct experience without the rigorously collected data can be dismissed. The synergy between the two is potent.

Finally, I believe there is some personal work that we must embark on to clear past trauma many have experienced in this field. I imagine the majority of those reading this have faced some level of prejudice and blatant bias,

especially around funding and paper submission. For some, this discrimination has even threatened their livelihoods. It can be challenging to be positive in the face of continued rejection. Could we support each other to release any individual or collective trauma our field holds for being the tabooed underdog? Can we shake off the continued rejections for paper submissions, etc.? Can we unapologetically stand for the work that we do? Picture standing with pride and confidence that edge science is a well-respected, valid, and impactful scientific field full of incredible scholars and researchers doing rigorous science.

Envision a world with many Dr. Portelas and Mr. Bigelows with abundant resources for all researchers already in the field, as well as those wanting to join. Picture dedicated chairs and departments established at multiple universities and institutes worldwide. Imagine a thriving scientific community of researchers and scholars supporting each other to conduct rigorous work, expanding our knowledge on edge science phenomena. Yes, I am the eternal optimist and hope this optimism infects you. The tide is turning. It must. The benefits we will reap are literally beyond our imagination.

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