CASE STUDY

Early Investigations Into Psychological Oddities

Directions: Read the following case study, then answer the questions that follow.

Introduction

Early psychologists recognized the need for the scientific study of every facet of human behavior. Although they did not have the research tools and the technology of modern psychology, they did attempt to apply the scientific method rigorously to their research.

In the late 1800s the psychological community became embroiled in a debate about psychic phenomena. The Society of Psychical Research was formed in 1882 for the specific purpose of bringing science and psychic phenomena together. The society had two purposes: "... first, to carry on systematic experimentation with hypnotic subjects, mediums, clairvoyants, and others; and, secondly, to collect evidence concerning apparitions, haunted houses, and similar phenomena which are incidentally reported, but which, from their fugitive character, admit of no deliberate control." The society wanted to either debunk these mystical phenomena or find a scientific explanation for their existence.

Hypothesis

William James, a leading psychologist at the time, explained the difficulty of the task facing the Society of Psychical Research when he wrote: "In psychology, physiology, and medicine, wherever a debate between the mystics and the scientifics has been once for all decided, it is the mystics who have usually proved to be right about the *facts*, while the scientifics had the better of it in respect to the theories."

Method

The society faced a difficult task. First, many people who practiced psychic phenomena had no interest in being subjected to rigorous scientific study; they did not see the need. They were also suspicious of intellectuals whose only goal seemed to be to discredit them. The society, led

by Professor Henry Sidgwick, tried to reassure these people. Sidgwick was widely regarded for his impartiality and his unwillingness to draw hasty conclusions. Other members of the society also had reputations for fairness and for honestly seeking answers to seemingly unexplainable phenomenon.

The society's second challenge was to find the financial resources to adequately fund its research. James urged the society to continue even with meager resources. He challenged them to continue to gather facts by conducting extensive interviews with the participants and witnesses in every reported case of psychic phenomenon. He believed that by carefully documenting these cases, the society would eventually have enough evidence to form some type of theory. James expressed his concern as follows: "Its [the Society of Psychical Research] sustainers, therefore, should accustom themselves to the idea that its first duty is simply to exist from year to year and perform this recording function well, though no conclusive results of any sort emerge at first."

For two years, the society focused primarily on thought transference, or telepathy. They studied 30 people who claimed to have the power to identify an object thought of by another person. Although one of the cases, involving two sisters, was found to be a hoax, many other cases could not be explained by random chance or by the deceitful action of the participants.

Another area of research for the society was the phenomenon of hypnotic suggestion. The researchers observed various subjects under hypnotic trances or performing actions as a result of posthypnotic suggestion. Edmund Gurney performed one set of experiments that involved the automatic writing of subjects as a result of posthypnotic suggestion.

"For example, a subject during a trance is told that he will poke the fire in six minutes after waking. On being waked he has no memory of the order, but while he is engaged in conversation his hand is placed on a planchette, [a device that when lightly touched is believed to produce automatic writing] which immediately writes the sentence, 'P., you will poke the fire in six minutes.' Experiments like this, which were repeated in great variety, seem to prove that below the upper consciousness the hypnotic consciousness persists, engrossed with the suggestion and able to express itself through the involuntarily moving hand."

Gurney became the most tireless worker for the society. He also researched witchcraft, apparitions, and mental telepathy. His study of witchcraft involved reviewing the accounts of hundreds of witch trials. He found that there was "no first-hand evidence recorded in the trials except the confessions of the victims themselves; and these, of course, are presumptively due to either torture or hallucination."

His exploration of apparitions and mental telepathy involved collecting about 700 cases of reported experiences. In these experiences, one person would get a mental image of a person in distress. He found many of these cases to be honest reports and concluded that "the mind of the person undergoing the calamity was at that moment able to impress the mind of the percipient [sic] with an hallucination." Further research into this phenomenon in both England and the United States led the society to find that such experiences happen too frequently to be

explained by mere chance. In fact, they calculated that such occurrences happen 440 times more often than can be attributed to chance.

Conclusions

The Society of Psychical Research failed to impress many in the scientific community with its findings. Much of their research is considered crude by modern standards. Their efforts, however, do indicate that they did apply the scientific method consistently. James responded to critics of the society by saying "...most of the would-be critics of the Proceedings have been contented to oppose to [sic] the phenomena recorded the simple presumption that in some way or other the reports *must* be fallacious [false]," He criticized scientists who dismiss things that are not easily explained and categorized simply because they do not fit into the way they think things should be.

The Society of Psychical Research produced a great body of evidence, but developed no concrete theories. The exploration into unexplained phenomena continues to the present. Of all the phenomena explored, only hypnosis has been brought into the mainstream of psychological research and practice. The other areas researched by the society remain in the realm of parapsychology.

Source: James, W. (1897/1956). The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy. New York: Dover Publications, inc., 200_277

Understanding the Case Study

Directions: Answer the following questions in the space provided.

What was the purpose of the Society for Psychical Research?

2. What two reasons are cited for the difficulty of the society's research task?