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HEADLINE: A Stepchild Of Science Starts to Win Friends

HIGHLIGHT:

Parapsychology, often linked with the occult and mystical, is sparking new debate. Skeptics debunk the subject, but believers want more research.

BODY:

Slowly but steadily, parapsychology is edging toward scientific respectability after years of lurking on the fringes.

New and carefully controlled research into extrasensory perception, clairvoyance, telepathy and other psychic phenomena is being carried out by government, the military, medicine and academia. The findings, some contend, promise to reveal a vast, unrealized potential within the human mind.

"It is hazardous to make predications in this field, but I believe we are on the verge of discoveries at the outer fringes of scientific knowledge that may completely alter our notions of the mind's capabilities," says Willis Harman of the Stanford Research Institute in California.

Possible applications of psychic ability, advocates say, range from techniques in warfare and crime detection to predictions of new archaeological discoveries, promising investments and likely energy sources.

Burden of proof. Traditionally a "far out" pursuit, parapsychology still gets a cool reception from the scientific establishment. Philip H. Abelson, editor of the authoritative journal *Science*, agrees that parapsychological research has improved markedly, but he is dubious about the results.

"These extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence," he contends. "Findings that question the basic laws of nature must be subjected to rigorous scientific scrutiny, and must be able to be duplicated by impartial investigators. Until then, many scientists will remain unconvinced."

This continuing disagreement flows out of differing views of the processes and capacities of the human mind.

Many scholars see the subconscious as a deep reservoir of acquired information and insights that surface at times, creating an impression of para-normal activity because of the large gaps in precise and verified knowledge about the nature of the mind, consciousness and the nervous system.

Parapsychologists argue that their research proves the ability of humans to reach beyond conscious limits of communication by tapping submerged powers of the subconscious.

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That notion is a stumbling block for many, says Norma Bowles, co-author of a recent survey of parapsychology Psi Search. She says: "To contemplate that we may be able to mentally 'fish' into the future and the past at will - or that brain - is such a troubling concept to traditional Western thought that it may block our acceptance of a development that may be as significant as our discovery of atomic energy."

Parapsychology's cause has been furthered recently by accounts of psychic abilities in some individuals.

In the past, such traits have been given a variety of descriptions: deja vu, mind reading, sixth sense, premonition and mind over matter.

Now, reputable researchers insist, recent experiments have taken psychic events out of the realm of the unlikely and into the probable. Among them:

*Experimenters at the Maimonides Medical Center in New York City claim repeated success for mental telepathy in transmitting images and thoughts between widely separated individuals. Some results, they say, defy chance by a ratio of 100 billion to 1.

*At the University of California, investigators found a woman who, they said, could perceive computer-generated, five-digit numbers that had been concealed from her.

*Long-term projects at Duke University and at the Foundation for Research on the Nature of Man in Durham, N.C., indicate that many persons seem to be able to predict future events with startling accuracy.

Such findings, backers of parapsychology say, are often duplicated in the everyday life of ordinary Americans.

Dreams come true. Researchers have come across accounts of individuals who suddenly voiced a great sense of unease about a relative or friends, only to learn later that the person had been injured, killed or placed in great danger. Others relate vivid dreams that are later re-created in real life.

Rex Stanford, research director of the Center for Parapsychological Research in Austin, Tex., theorizes that most people unconsciously use their psychic abilities to scan the world around them, tuning in to individuals and events that are important to them.

"The person who unexpectedly meets someone he especially wants to see, or gets a phone call from a distant friend he had just thought about, or even someone who always seems to find a parking place no matter how crowded the streets - these things may be more than just leading a charmed life," Stanford says. Such happenings, he contends, may be proof that psychic abilities are innate to humans, but may have been repressed by overdependence on the five perceived senses - touch, taste, smell, sight and hearing.

Even in an age of skepticism, interest remains high in a subject that has fascinated people since the beginning of recorded history.

A Gallup Poll released in June found that 51 percent of U.S. adults believe in extrasensory perception. Among persons with some college education, belief

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in ESP rises to 64 percent.

Thirty-seven percent of adults believe in precognition - the ability to foretell future events - while 30 percent believe in déjà vu - the feeling of having experienced a place or event at an earlier time.

One result of such widespread beliefs is a continuing spate of sensationalist articles, books and movies about the paranormal, most of which serve to titillate rather than inform, in the opinion of serious psychic researchers.

However, since J.B. Rhine began his pioneering work in the field at Duke University more than 40 years ago, research in parapsychology has been going on among a small group of scientists who maintain traditional standards of scientific proof.

"In the past, psychic research has been sandwiched between a general public that is overcredulous and a scientific community that is overly dubious," contends Edward Kelly, a parapsychology researcher at Duke. "As a result, most legitimate parapsychologists have become so sensitive about reckless use of their data that they are reluctant to make any broad claims on their findings."

Into the mainstream. Now, such authoritative bodies as the Smithsonian Institution and the California Museum of Science and Industry are promoting credible information on the subject. One Smithsonian traveling exhibit called "Psi Search" - based on the book of the same name - has been seen by more than 2 million Americans in the last 2 1/2 years. A growing number of colleges, including the University of Southern California and Iowa State University, offer parapsychology seminars as a result of increased interest.

Advocates of psychic research contend that it holds promise of practical applications in education, business, health care, national security and the arts. They assert that the U.S. is not devoting enough resources to studies in parapsychology, and that Soviet-bloc psychic explorations are far ahead of American work in the field.

Soviet weapon? Some authorities believe there are ominous implications for the intelligence community. A recently declassified document of the Defense Intelligence Agency that examined Russian capabilities in parapsychology cites repeated examples of individuals who allegedly can will objects into motion, and "psychotronic" generators that store psychic energy.

The report, some of which sounds like science fiction from an undisciplined imagination, speculates that Soviet research may someday enable the Russians to perceive paranormally the contents of top-secret U.S. documents, psychically influence the thoughts of U.S. military leaders and even cause the instant death of any U.S. official or the disabling of military equipment, including spacecraft.

Guarding secrets. Last year the Soviet Union deported Robert C. Toth, a Los Angeles Times correspondent, after he had been given a paper on parapsychology by a Russian scientist. All formal Western contact with Soviet parapsychologist ended in 1972, when the Russian government classified research being done in the field.

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U.S. government officials will not reveal the extent of research being conducted into the military aspects of parapsychology, but Stanford Research Institute scientists are continuing research into the area in conjunction with government agencies.

These researchers say that in 1975, working with two well-known psychics, they demonstrated the possibility of clairvoyant spying. They relate how a psychic described in remarkable detail a secret, underground U.S. military installation. Another individual, given geographic coordinates of a South Indian Ocean island, reportedly made a fairly accurate sketch of a location on the island.

"Funding of U.S. parapsychological research averages about half a million dollars annually, and that is mostly private money spread through 14 laboratories," says Charles Tart, a noted parapsychologist at the University of California at Davis who has studied Soviet research in the field. Tart says Russia spends the equivalent of 50 million dollars each year, using hundreds of top scientists and seriously exploring parapsychology's military applications.

Nonetheless, parapsychology is finding the road to acceptance a rocky one.

Scientific journals almost never publish reports of psychic research, though the Parapsychological Association has been affiliated with the American Association for the Advancement of Science since 1969.

Moreover, a number of scientists, educators and writers formed the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal last year to debunk parapsychology. The committee contends that the current vogue for unexplained happenings may "break down society's critical judgment, and may also jeopardize our resistance to new and unforeseen forms of tyranny."

Such arguments over the validity of parapsychology seem likely to remain unresolved for into the future.

GRAPHIC: Picture 1, Woman in parapsychology experiment undergoes test for extrasensory perception. Psi Search Institute, courtesy of George R. Clovie; Picture 2, Louisa and J. B. Rhine, creators of modern techniques for researching psychic abilities. Foundation for Research on Nature of Man.; Picture 3, University of California parapsychologist Charles Tart and card-guessing test. Courtesy of Oakland Tribunal

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