

## THE RESULTS OF A QUESTIONNAIRE SENT OUT IN 2008 CONCERNING THE PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE OF PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

MELVYN J. WILLIN

---

I DECIDED TO DEVISE a questionnaire (see appendix) about our beloved psychical research after having been inspired by Deborah Blum's book *Ghost Hunters* (2007). It tells of the enormous efforts made by the good and the great of the early S.P.R. to investigate paranormal phenomena in as unbiased (mainly) and thorough way as possible. I wondered what some of our present-day worthies thought of importance concerning the subject and so I made a list of appropriate people, both sceptical and 'believers', devised my questions and sent out my inquiry with a stamped addressed envelope whenever possible. Who was on the list? I promised confidentiality (only one person demanded this), but to avoid possible embarrassment I won't name names. I chose from a range of currently active psychical researchers and parapsychologists as well as a few experts in other fields who have published an interest in the subject. These included Council members of the S.P.R. and vociferous sceptics. Both sexes were included, a wide range of ages and several from abroad. I posted thirty-one questionnaires altogether and received replies as follows:

- 18 replies with varying amounts of detail from a few words to pages.
- 1 reply saying he was too busy to reply.
- 1 reply saying he would reply, but didn't.
- 1 reply saying "read my articles".
- 10 people didn't reply at all.

I was both pleased and disappointed with the response since eighteen positive replies was a good number to receive, but I was surprised that there was no reply from people who are well known and respected in the field. I decided that they must have either been too busy; did not receive the questionnaire; thought the questions below (or beyond) their attention; or in the several examples of people who know me, felt that since it came from me (a guitarist with a pony tail ... what next!) it was not worthy of consideration. Only one mainstream sceptic

replied and I was very pleased that they did. Perhaps the show business activities of some of the sceptics did not allow sufficient time for form filling.

The respondents were fairly unanimous on what should be included/excluded concerning the study of psychical research, including virtually everything that is human-based within the generally accepted realms of psychical research. Exceptions, in two examples, were the findings of astrology and in one case "hard science", which were felt to be not constructive. The last fifty years' improvements included the continued progress of experimental method and the technical support mechanisms therein, and university work, specifically in the UK, was mentioned, as well as the late Ian Stevenson's admirable work in the USA. On the downside it was felt that there were too few studies outside of the laboratory and an increasing trivialisation from television programmes. A certain television celebrity medium was mentioned by name in this context and Bob Morris' work and presence was pined for on the other end of the scale of worthiness.

Suggestions for present improvements were quite varied, but several respondents mentioned the need for more money and proper public and scientific awareness of the subject. Two voices were raised against the continuation of laboratory methods, one saying "don't ape psychology which apes biology", but others called for closer links with other sciences and testing "gifted subjects". As to the next fifty years the hopes and predictions were different. Hopes were for more funding, a further understanding and expansion into other sciences and better techniques being used. Predictions were decidedly gloomy: "no results", "I'm not optimistic", "a decline in universities" were all stated.

I purposely left space for respondents to suggest other questions I might have asked. The issue of money arose again here as well as a need for the S.P.R. to be "relevant". Links with other fields were again mentioned and a need to

redress the problem that the subject is often either trivialised by the commercial media or scorned by academia. One respondent, who I am very grateful to, finished their deliberations with a poem which encouraged me in my belief that the future is not as gloomy as we might think!

**Appendix: Questions regarding psychical research**

1. What should be included/excluded concerning the study of psychical research?
2. In what ways would you say that psychical research has improved/deteriorated in

approximately the last 50 years?

3. In what ways could it be improved at the present time?
4. What do you predict and hope for concerning psychical research during the next 50 years?
5. What important questions do you believe I omitted from this questionnaire and what would be your response to these questions?

I AM GRATEFUL to the respondents who gave their time and thoughts to this venture. It has helped and encouraged me to work even harder at trying to unravel the mysteries that surround us.

---

## SCIENCE OR PSEUDOSCIENCE?

DOUGLAS M. STOKES

---

IT IS THE COMMONLY RECEIVED wisdom among scientific cognoscenti in this day and age that speculations about the nature of the soul do not lead to testable hypotheses and are thus nothing more than metaphysical and pseudoscientific claptrap, unlike the established sciences, which have led to a deep, experimentally-based understanding of the physical world, with physics being the prime exemplar.

“Mysterians” such as Colin McGinn (1999) have even asserted that our primate brains, which have evolved to solve such simple problems as how best to hit an antelope upside the head, will never penetrate the mysteries surrounding the relation of consciousness to the physical world. We simply don’t have, and never will have, the cognitive capacity required to address this problem in McGinn’s view.

Patricia Churchland (2002) has cited split-brain research, in which the communication between the two hemispheres of the brain is disrupted when the corpus callosum (the primary neural fibers connecting the hemispheres) is severed, as refuting the existence of a soul or nonphysical self. Such a soul or self, by being globally aware of brain activity, should be able to bridge the gap created by the callosotomy.

But, in the words of the Isley brothers, just wait a minute! Churchland claims to have falsified the doctrine of the soul. That means that the single soul hypothesis (or at least certain versions of it) is falsifiable, which means that it is empirically testable and hence a scientific

doctrine after all (just one that seems to be false).

Accepting Churchland’s refutation of the single soul hypothesis, I have proposed the existence of multiple souls or centres of consciousness, which I (Stokes, 2007a, 2007b) have called mini-Shins (after the “Shin” or single centre of consciousness proposed by Thouless and Wiesner, 1948). In the somewhat vague version I have proposed, the mini-Shin theory is perhaps untestable. However, our understanding of brain processes is growing rapidly, and it is likely that some creative individual will be able craft a version of the mini-Shin theory that is testable and hence scientific, in much the same way as (Churchland’s version of) the single soul theory is.

Meanwhile, there is considerable upheaval in modern physics over the charge that one of the most fundamental theories in physics, string theory, has no testable implications and is thus pseudoscience (see Wolf, 2006, and Smolin, 2006). Lee Smolin in particular has lamented the fact that an entire generation of physicists have been seduced by this false crown of physical theory and have wasted their careers (and the physics community’s time and money) by emitting what may best be described as, to borrow a phrase from the recently deceased George Carlin (2006), nothing more than brain droppings, devoid of any real scientific content.

So, now, once again I pose the question: “Which is science and which is pseudoscience?”