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Citation for published version:

Watt, C 2022, 'On being a (white, middle class) woman in parapsychology', *Journal of Anomalistics*, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 280-285. <https://doi.org/10.23793/zfa.2022.280>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.23793/zfa.2022.280](https://doi.org/10.23793/zfa.2022.280)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

Journal of Anomalistics

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On Being a (White, Middle-Class) Woman in Parapsychology

CAROLINE WATT¹

Abstract – In this paper the author provides a personal perspective on the theme of women in parapsychology. She reflects on her journey in academia, from being the first in her farming family to go to university, to joining the University of Edinburgh in 1986 as Research Assistant to the first Koestler Professor Robert Morris, to her current position as the second holder of the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology. Equality of opportunity is complex, and the author has benefitted greatly from the privileges of being white and middle-class, and of having an open-minded boss (indeed, she speculates that parapsychologists may be particularly open-minded). At the same time, she has experienced gender-related obstacles in her career, including periods of maternity leave, and disproportionate responsibility for dependants and housekeeping. The latter challenges have mostly been managed with part-time working. Perhaps as a consequence, progression to more senior academic positions (notably being promoted to the Koestler Chair in 2016 aged almost 54) has been slow relative to male colleagues. Studies of the profile of UK academics indicate that this is a typical experience for many female researchers. But the same data also show that other less privileged groups are even more poorly represented in academia, most notably black people. In 1994 Rhea White memorably highlighted the advantages of taking a feminist approach to parapsychology. This paper concludes by suggesting that parapsychological research – the questions that we ask, the methods that we employ, and what we learn as a result – will benefit from an even more inclusive academy.

Keywords: Feminist – feminism – decolonizing – decolonization – parapsychology – equal opportunity

Über das Dasein als (weiße, bürgerliche) Frau in der Parapsychologie

Zusammenfassung – In diesem Beitrag gibt die Autorin eine persönliche Perspektive auf das Thema Frauen in der Parapsychologie. Sie blickt auf ihren akademischen Werdegang zurück, angefangen damit, dass sie die erste in ihrer Bauernfamilie war, die eine Universität besuchte, bis hin zu ihrem Eintritt in die University of Edinburgh im Jahr 1986 als Forschungsassistentin des ersten Koestler-Professors Robert Morris und zu ihrer derzeitigen Position als zweite Inhaberin des Koestler-

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Lehrstuhls für Parapsychologie. Chancengleichheit ist ein komplexes Thema, und die Autorin hat in hohem Maße von den Privilegien profitiert, weiß zu sein, zur Mittelschicht zu gehören und einen aufgeschlossenen Chef zu haben (tatsächlich vermutet sie, dass Parapsychologen besonders aufgeschlossen sein könnten). Gleichzeitig ist sie in ihrer Karriere auf geschlechtsspezifische Hindernisse gestoßen, darunter Zeiten des Mutterschaftsurlaubs und eine unverhältnismäßig große Verantwortung für Familienangehörige und den Haushalt. Die letztgenannten Herausforderungen wurden größtenteils mit Teilzeitarbeit bewältigt. Vielleicht als Folge davon war der Aufstieg in höhere akademische Positionen (insbesondere die Beförderung auf den Koestler-Lehrstuhl im Jahr 2016 im Alter von fast 54 Jahren) im Vergleich zu männlichen Kollegen langsam. Studien zum Profil britischer Akademiker zeigen, dass dies eine typische Erfahrung für viele Forscherinnen ist. Dieselben Daten zeigen aber auch, dass andere, weniger privilegierte Gruppen in der akademischen Welt noch schlechter vertreten sind, insbesondere Schwarze. Rhea White hat 1994 die Vorteile eines feministischen Ansatzes in der Parapsychologie hervorgehoben. Dieser Beitrag schließt mit dem Vorschlag, dass die parapsychologische Forschung – die Fragen, die wir stellen, die Methoden, die wir anwenden, und die Erkenntnisse, die wir daraus ziehen – von einer noch stärker integrativen Hochschulsituation profitieren wird.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Feministin – Feminismus – Entkolonialisierung – Dekolonialisierung – Parapsychologie – Chancengleichheit

When the editors kindly invited me to contribute to this special issue on women in parapsychology, I was flattered but replied that I felt unqualified because I had not conducted any research on this topic. So how could I make a meaningful contribution? This argument was insufficient to get me off the hook, because the editors felt that folk would be interested in my personal perspective and lived experience as a woman in parapsychology. Also (me and my big mouth) I had previously written on the topic when reviewing the proceedings of the Parapsychology Foundation's landmark *Women in Parapsychology* meeting (Watt, 1996). So, begging your indulgence dear reader, here we are. As the title suggest, it's not all about gender.

Currently I am privileged to be the second person to hold the Koestler Chair of Parapsychology at the University of Edinburgh. (The first was of course Robert L. Morris.) So how did I end up here? I was born in 1962 into a farming family in Scotland, the eldest of five children. While we were landowners so would be regarded as middle-class, everyone in the family manually laboured on the farm, especially my father. My sisters and I worked to earn and save money. My brothers were paid too but they were also in training to inherit the family business, whereas the girls would find their own way in the world. Perhaps this was a case where our gender paradoxically worked in our favour, as my sisters and I were therefore motivated to study and work hard to support ourselves.

In these formative years I have my mother (a person with dyslexia) to thank for feeding my voracious appetite for reading. I was educated at state schools, then was first in my family to go

to University – this was at St Andrews where I studied psychology. In my final year I chose to do my dissertation on sex role stereotyping and the concept of androgyny, under the supervision of fledgling social psychologist Dr Margie Wetherell. I had always been painfully aware of how girls' lives can be blighted by sex role stereotypes, something that still pains me on an almost daily basis (don't get me started ...). So I guess you could call me a feminist. Margie – also a feminist – went on to be a prominent researcher in discursive psychology, though my project was questionnaire-based and used quantitative methods. Already I was starting to follow a scientific path that Rhea White and many other scholars have characterized as androcentric (White, 1994).

I took my final degree exams in 1984, the same year that the press were reporting Edinburgh University's interest in the bequest of Arthur and Cynthia Koestler to support parapsychological research at a British University. Incredibly, given what later transpired, our exam paper on 'Contemporary Issues in Psychology' included the following question:

Arthur Koestler left half a million pounds to found a Chair of Parapsychology. Imagine that you succeed in the application to be the first Professor of Parapsychology at Edinburgh. In what way, if at all, would your research programme draw on methods, techniques, ideas and theories from other areas in psychology?

Yes reader, I opted to answer that question. I had always been curious about the paranormal although at that point in my life I'd had just one notable anomalous experience. This was when I was about 7 years old. I was happily running along a strip of grass in dappled sunlight under some trees and ... it's difficult to put into words, but I sort of felt that I flew out of my body for a few moments. Looking back, I suppose it was a kind of transcendent experience. It felt awesome and I tried to elicit the experience again by running repeatedly along the same patch of ground. But it only happened that one time. Later, as a teenager, my introduction to parapsychology came through books such as Lyall Watson's *Supernature* and Arthur Koestler's *The Roots of Coincidence*.

After I graduated, I took a shorthand and typing course so I could work as a temp secretary and pay the rent while I decided on my next steps. I kept an eye on the newspapers (no internet in those days!) and when the press reported that Bob Morris had been appointed as the new Koestler Professor, I speculatively sent him a carefully typed letter. I had secretarial skills, but also a psychology degree and an interest in parapsychology – could I be of any assistance? After some delay (Bob was still in Pittsburgh when I wrote), two powerful things happened to me. First, I received a hand-written reply from Bob inviting me to meet him and his colleagues once he was settled in Edinburgh (at this time John Beloff was retiring but still involved with supervising his PhD students Deborah Delaney and Julie Milton). In the rest of my career when dealing with unsolicited letters I have tried to remember Bob's encouraging response. Second, in his letter Bob addressed me as 'Ms' – way ahead of the times in Scotland at least. Both of these struck me as a sign of liberal

thinking which I think characterizes not only Bob but also many parapsychologists – after all, they have to be somewhat independent-minded to get into parapsychology in the first place.

When I eventually met Bob in his office at Edinburgh University, I explained to him somewhat apologetically that while I found the subject fascinating and could see lots of connections between it and my education in psychology, I had no strongly held personal beliefs about the paranormal. I told Bob about my childhood anomalous experience, and – typically for him – he put an encouraging spin on it, saying that I had acted like a scientist in trying to repeat the event. He appreciated my relatively neutral stance, saying that it could be disadvantageous to set out as a researcher with a particular model of the paranormal in mind. To cut a long story short, Bob eventually advertised for a research assistant, I applied and was appointed in 1986. (My parents must have been relieved to see my university education finally being put to good use, and I'm still a fast touch-typist!)

Returning to the theme of this special issue: While my first personal contact with academic parapsychologists was with two males in senior posts, the only two parapsychology PhD students at Edinburgh were both female. The new and surely terribly busy professor had gone out of his way to be encouraging *and* called me 'Ms'. So this brings me to my first point – that generally I don't think parapsychology has a particular problem with a lack of encouragement of women to enter the field. In part this could be because many more females than males choose to study psychology, a subject that is often a natural precursor for parapsychology. And – huge speculation on my part – it could also be because parapsychologists are more open to violating social norms.

BUT, compared to men, women in parapsychology (like women in any job) tend to have greater obstacles to overcome to progress in their jobs. This means more fall by the wayside, or are delayed in their career progression because they have career breaks or are working part-time so it takes longer to build a strong CV. In my own case, I married, had a total of about seven months of maternity leave when I was breast-feeding my two sons, and then worked part-time for several years because I took on the greater share of childcare and domestic tasks while my then-husband worked full-time. I was fortunate that I had a supportive boss and employer and could adjust my working hours and keep my job. Indeed with Bob's encouragement I was able to take a part-time PhD whilst still working and then got promoted to Research Fellow (huh, it's only just struck me that *Fellow* is a gendered term!).

I gradually strengthened my research, teaching and leadership profile and took on more senior roles, some instead of Bob who sadly died in 2004. Nevertheless I did not reach the highest grade – Professor – until 2016, when I was almost 54 years old. I did not lack aspiration – I had tried for promotion to Prof a few years before. But my CV was not strong enough first time round. My academic profile was subsequently strengthened in part by winning the Perrott-Warrick Senior Researcher award in 2010, and I am so grateful to Professor Bernard Carr and the Perrott-

Warrick committee for this vote of confidence. I succeeded in my second application for promotion and was honoured to become the second Koestler Professor at Edinburgh. More recently, I took on increased caring responsibilities for an ill family member, and returned to working part-time.

So that's how *my* academic career progressed. While I believe there is no shortage of women in parapsychology overall, my admittedly limited experience is that there are proportionately fewer female parapsychologists in senior positions compared to males. For eight years I have been the only female parapsychologist on the Bial Foundation Symposium's Organising Committee. We try to ensure good representation of female speakers at the Symposium, but especially in a small field like parapsychology this can be difficult to achieve. A similar trend is seen in Bial Foundation's Scientific Board which judges grant applications, in which I am one of eight female researchers amongst the 55 Board members. I believe this is because there are fewer senior female researchers to choose from. This trend that I have only anecdotally observed mirrors the findings of more systematic research in the UK. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) reports that the proportion of female academic staff in 2010/11 was 42.2%, but only 19.8% of professors were female (HESA, 2012). Studies investigating this disparity (e.g., Ward 2001) show that, *even controlling for factors such as career breaks and publication history*, male academics are more likely to end up in senior positions than female academics. (Partly, researchers conclude, this is due to male academics being more likely to move to a different university for a new job, compared to female academics; Ward 2001.)

Thus far I have been writing about gender equality issues. But, as Rhea White so powerfully reminded us (White, 1994), gender also affects the questions we ask and the way we go about our research. Looking back on my career doing research and publishing mostly in experimental parapsychology, I can see how I internalized what White characterized as the dominant androcentric approach to research in parapsychology: doing studies where we attempted to control variables and objectively measure psi. The research that was getting published in leading journals followed this model. The research that was getting funded followed this model. Our universities' psychology departments also implicitly taught students to value this approach above others – and still do. I was not unaware of this bias at the time (see Watt, 1996). But more recently, as UK academics are encouraged to 'decolonize the curriculum' (e.g. Hack, 2020), increasingly White's call for fresh perspectives resonates. And this brings me to my final point.

Although more than 50% of the world's population is female I think we have to be mindful of the limitations that could accompany an overly narrow focus on gender as a potential barrier to participation in parapsychology and academia. While I've personally experienced gender-related challenges in my life, I've also benefitted from the considerable advantages of being white, middle class, English-speaking, and having a family and school that encouraged me into higher education and financial independence. When I look around at parapsychology conferences, I see men and

women who mostly look and sound like me (except with less of a Scottish accent, Brian Millar excepted!). Again this is just an anecdotal observation, but data from HESA backs it up. Taking ethnicity as a timely example, only 1.6% of UK all UK academic staff are black (7.9% are Asian), and 0.5% of UK university professors are black (HESA, 2012). This issue clearly goes far beyond parapsychology. Rhea White argued for the benefits of a feminist approach to parapsychology (White, 1994). Extending her argument, we must ask ourselves: to what degree does parapsychology's rather narrow researcher profile constrain the questions we pose and the way we do our research?

The women of my mother's background and generation tended not to have their own careers, or gave them up to become housewives when they married. In my generation, women in most westernized countries are in paid employment but still do the lion's share of unpaid labour. Women continue to be under-represented in academia compared to men. But other insidious inequalities also exist. Black people are even more under-represented compared to white people. Working class people are disempowered compared to middle class people. Older people are under-represented. People with visible and invisible disabilities face barriers. The voices of people who do not speak English are less easily heard. In this wider sense, most of academia, including parapsychology, suffers from a lack of diversity. If we can open the academy to a wider range of people, ultimately our understanding of paranormal beliefs and experiences will benefit from the more diverse perspectives and approaches that these individuals will bring to their work.

Acknowledgement

My grateful thanks to Prof Emerita Deborah Delaney for her helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

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