Introduction: How to Become a Scientist When Your Field Does Not Exist

At the close of the 1920s it seemed extremely unlikely that psychical research would ever be endorsed by a university, let alone that resources would be granted to hire full-time faculty researchers, furnish laboratories, and even teach graduate students. Yet, this was about to happen. In the early 1930s the young psychology department at Duke University, North Carolina, would be home to a new set of experimental trials, conducted mainly by Joseph Banks Rhine (1895–1980), a botanist who had turned his interest to psychical phenomena a few years earlier. Rhine's research at Duke grew into a full-blown research programme in what was about to be called parapsychology. By the end of the 1930s it would have its own peer-reviewed journals, and produce its own PhDs. For the first time, psychical researchers could call themselves professionals.

Keeping in mind the fragmentation of the 1920s, seeing no essential agreement among psychical researchers and a gradually more justified scepticism from academic psychology, this development looks very surprising indeed. How could it happen? While historical accounts of modern professional parapsychology typically start with Rhine as the founder, I suggest that we can only understand the establishment of parapsychology by looking at the activities of his supervisor, William McDougall. As I will argue in this chapter, it was McDougall who laid the foundations for the professionalisation of psychical
research. How did he do it? Before we can start to answer this question we must be clear about what the challenge consisted in to begin with.

There were primarily two problems barring psychical research from becoming a professionalised discipline in the 1920s. The first of these was the “science internal” challenge that concerned us at length in the previous chapter: no compelling evidence, acquired with sound methods and capable of replication by others, had come to light after two generations of research. Even the best scientific reasons for giving the field attention were whimsical, elusive, and open to dispute. I have described this situation as a non-paradigmatic state: psychical research lacked a paradigm that made progressive “normal science” possible. The lack of a paradigm in this sense was a serious problem for anyone who wished to argue that psychical research belonged in the university.

The second challenge faced by psychical research was of an external character. The very production of paradigms entails more than just establishing some internally consistent rational component: it also entails a social process embedded in a larger cultural context. To be effective, paradigms in the narrow sense must be shared by a community; while appeals to reason and good arguments will no doubt be important in the discourses that result in the acceptance or rejection of specific paradigms, the process in which that happens is itself essentially social. In these processes the narrow sense of “paradigm” links up with the second, broader sense identified by Kuhn: paradigms as a set of shared beliefs, attitudes, and worldviews. Linking these points together, psychical research needed to show not only that it possessed an internally consistent rationality, but also that it had a legitimate space within this broader structure of scientific, philosophical, cultural, and even political, concerns. It had to be justified by a broader socio-cultural paradigm. I argue that it is on this external level, rather than on the internal level of the discipline’s “rationality”, that we must look for an explanation of psychical research’s eventual professionalisation.

Any discipline seeking professionalisation needs to successfully manage two sets of social strategies. On the one hand, the successful professionaliser must differentiate his or her field from competitors and answer to possible

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1 I first put forward this argument in an article published in the Journal for the History of the Behavioral Sciences in 2010: see Asprem, ‘A Nice Arrangement of Heterodoxologies’. The second section of the chapter is built on that article.
3 I.e. as authoritative exempla to be followed in scientific “puzzle-solving”, as explained in the previous chapter.