Introduction

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, psychical researchers converted hotel rooms, clubrooms and private residences into experimental spaces. Using those props available, a card or dining table, a piece of dark cloth strung up to act as a medium cabinet, the physical environment in which psychical researchers examined mediums did not differ significantly from those domestic spaces adapted for spiritualist séances. While other nascent sciences, including experimental psychology, had established themselves in laboratories and universities by the dawn of the twentieth century, psychical research's experimental setting had remained largely indistinguishable from that of spiritualism. In order to differentiate themselves from the spiritualists, psychical researchers, like their contemporaries in the emergent human sciences, engaged in a process of sanitisation. By mimicking the methodologies and principles of established sciences, including physics, biology and psychology, psychical researchers were able to distance themselves from spiritualism and promote their discipline as a new experimental science. This boundary-work, the purpose of which was to bolster the scientific credentials of psychical research and ultimately to gain it a place within the German university system, was manifest in three significant changes that occurred during the first decades of the twentieth century. First, was the retirement of terms such as 'psychical research' and 'scientific occultism' in favour of the word 'parapsychology', second was a new concentration on the physical phenomena of mediumship, and third was the transfer of this enterprise from the clubrooms and parlours in which the study of the paranormal had undergone its genesis, into purpose-built laboratories.

The similarity between the venues utilised by psychical researchers and spiritualists was not the only difficulty faced by those with a scientific interest in the paranormal; a problem of differentiation existed also in terms of their experimental material. Psychical researchers were dependent for their supply of experimental subjects, that is, mediums, upon spiritualist home
circles where psychic talent tended to be fostered and developed. The maturation of mediums within the spiritualist paradigm, however, proved problematic for those researchers eager to institute rigid scientific controls during experiments. Mediums, more familiar with the informal and religious atmosphere of domestic séances, often seemed unable to perform without the props of spiritualism: including the circle, created by participants joining hands; music, provided either by a music box or instrumentalist; and the medium cabinet, a curtain or more permanent structure erected in a corner of the séance room in order to shelter the entranced medium. Mediums also frequently complained that the sceptical stance and invasive methods adopted by psychical researchers inhibited their production of paranormal phenomena, the generation of which they contended were dependent on an atmosphere of trust and belief. The difficulties presented by mediums as experimental subjects, their insistence on certain physical conditions and props and their reticence about the rigorous application of the scientific method, served to further distance psychical researchers from the ideal represented by laboratories in the physical and psychological sciences. The inability of these researchers to modify mediums’ behaviour aligned them once again with the spiritualists and occultists from whom they strove consistently to divorce themselves. It was apparent in this situation, as one observer complained, that so long as the study of mediumship continued to develop outside of a laboratory environment, psychical researchers would be forced to live with their mediums’ spiritualist baggage.

The laboratory erected by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing in his palatial Munich residence was an attempt to resolve those methodological problems arising from the scientific study of mediumship. The transfer of this enterprise into purpose-built laboratories, the design of which paid homage to laboratories in both the physical and psychological sciences, differentiated psychical research from experimentation in the spiritualist context. For Schrenck-Notzing it also signified an important step in psychical research’s evolution from a pseudo-science, indistinguishable from spiritualism, into a legitimate scientific endeavour. He wrote in this regard, ‘modern spiritism has the same relation to the future science of mediumistic process as astrology did to astronomy or alchemy to chemistry.’ Experimentation in this context enabled psychical researchers to manipulate and control mediums in a manner that was not possible in the séance room. Schrenck-Notzing’s laboratory, replete with stereoscopic cameras, sphygmograph and specialist lighting, as well as a medium cabinet, was a hybridisation of spiritualist and scientific space that posed less of a threat to its psychologically fragile subjects than those laboratories found in the hard sciences. Situated on Munich’s Karolinenplatz, it was host to hundreds of