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NEWS

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'Spooky science,' but underline the science

Parapsychology conference follows standard academic rigours

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 The Daily News


Psychologist John Palmer is chairing a conference in parapsychology this weekend.

Quietly, almost unobtrusively, more than 100 scientists and authors will descend upon Halifax's Holiday Inn this weekend. Most are psychologists, and the second-largest group is of physicists. They're here to present papers, share discoveries and network. They come from around the globe; half of them are American, and the other half are from across Europe, Latin America, Russia, even Japan.

They're here for the 50th Annual Parapsychological Association Convention.

"When people hear about a parapsychology conference, they probably have in their minds a thing like ghostbusting," said Dean Radin, past association president and a PhD in psychology.

If those people were to attend the convention, they'd be in for a surprise.

"The conference is a regular scientific and scholarly conference. So if you're not used to that sort of thing, you'd probably find it boring."

Parapsychology is the scientific study of interactions between or among living organisms, mostly people, that can't be explained by known principles of physics. Telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition are just a few of the phenomena that fall under this umbrella.

The Parapsychological Association itself is a professional organization founded in 1957 by J.B. Rhine, a pioneer in the field who created the Parapsychology Lab at Duke University.

Most of the 250 members are scientists with standard credentials.

"What distinguishes us is the metaphysics," conference chair John Palmer said. "We're not necessarily committed to materialism: the idea that there's no soul or mind, only matter. The standards of evidence are the same."

Palmer is a psychologist by training (he once taught at McGill University) who became interested in parapsychology during high school.

It wasn't because of any profound personal experience. As with many scientists in this field, it's not close encounters of the third kind that leads him on - it's plain old curiosity.

"Science is good at studying a lot of things, but not everything," Radin said.

"Through science, we're able to demonstrate that these effects are real."

If you're thinking "spooky science," underline the science. Scientists working in this field use accepted scientific methods to gain a proven explanation for unexplained phenomena.

When Dean Radin studies pre-sentiment activity, for example, his measurement techniques are the same as that of any other psychologist. When subjects are shown slides of different images, he measures electrodermal changes in their body. The only difference is that he studies signs of change in the body before the slide is shown.

No Canadians are attending the convention this year.

"In North America, there's a different social climate when it comes to unusual topics," Radin said. "We're talking more about the sociology of academics rather than personal interest. There's plenty of personal interest among scientists in the U.S., but it's not very safe to talk about this from an academic standpoint. There's a taboo."

The nature of that taboo is interesting.

"A lot of what drives it is the appearance that it lends credibility to religion," Palmer said. "There's quite a bit of sympathy for atheism in mainstream science."

The conference starts today at the Holiday Inn on Robie Street, and continues until Sunday. The event is open to the public for a registration fee.

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