

Psi Research in Brazil

This article traces the development of interest in paranormal phenomena and parapsychology in Brazil in the past half-century, from the conflicts generated by differing religious perspectives, to more recent attempts to carry out serious research in universities.

Introduction

There has been interest in the study of psi experiences in Brazil since the start of the twentieth century, initially mainly among scholars affiliated to religious groups and among the public, which was curious about alleged paranormal powers. In the early decades, the medical establishment treated psi experiences as pathological, regarding so-called 'Spiritist' phenomena as disorders that threatened public health.

A conflict, characterized by anthropologist David Hess as a 'war of words',¹ raged between Catholics and Spiritist followers of Allan Kardec from the 1960s to the mid-1990s. Each side presented its own interpretation of psychical research and parapsychology experiments being carried out in the northern hemisphere in order to support its particular perspective about the reach of human mind and capabilities.

Since the 1990s, scholarly interest in psi has been growing. Psi research started to become established in universities and the religious controversies have cooled.

Beginnings of Psi Research: The 'War of Words'

In the last decades of the nineteenth century groups met to discuss themes relating to Spiritism, the movement founded in France by Allan Kardec. Research into mediums by psychical investigators in Europe and North America inspired similar investigation of Brazilian mediums. However, as Brazil is a strongly Catholic country the burgeoning interest in Spiritism was controversial. The religious establishment felt threatened by African and African-Brazilian mediumistic religions; their practitioners were persecuted and several were arrested.²

During the dictatorship of Getúlio Vargas (1930–1945), the Catholic Church fought Spiritism through its publications and from the pulpit, referring to the findings of psychical research and parapsychology to expose 'Spiritist lies'.³ In the 1950s, the Church carried out an educational campaign against Kardecian Spiritism and Umbanda, a mediumistic Brazilian religion; prominent Catholic authors were Frei Boaventura Kloppenburg⁴ and Álvaro Negromonte.⁵

Spiritist intellectuals such as Carlos Imbassahy⁶ and Deolindo Amorim⁷ fought back, translating northern articles and books on psychical research and parapsychology and giving their own interpretations. An example is [Louisa Rhine's](#) *Hidden Channels of the Mind* (*Canais Ocultos do Espírito*);⁸ the Brazilian edition was

published in the early 1960s with *mente* ('mind') translated as *espírito* ('spirit') throughout.

Oscar Quevedo and Hernani Andrade

The conflict was especially heated in the period 1960–1985, fuelled by television and print media. The chief protagonists were a Spanish Catholic priest, Oscar González Quevedo, who was on a mission to save Brazil from Spiritism – using his knowledge of psychical research and Rhinean parapsychology to argue that Spiritist claims had no basis in fact⁹ – and Hernani Guimarães Andrade, a Spiritist intellectual and engineer. (Andrade used pseudonyms such as KW Goldstein and Lawrence Blacksmith for his more forceful defenses of Spiritism in the Spiritist newspaper *Folha Espírita* – a practice adopted during the earlier period when Spiritism was the target of judicial persecution.)¹⁰

Quevedo and Andrade conducted their quarrel through organizations that each man founded. Andrade's was the Instituto Brasileiro de Pesquisas Psicobiológicas (Brazilian Institute for Psychobiophysics Research – IBPP), founded in 1963 and dedicated especially to the investigation of [poltergeist cases](#), [mediumship](#), [near-death experiences](#), [out-of-body experiences](#) and [reincarnation](#). The IBPP also carried out experimental research on what Andrade termed Modelo Organizador Biológico (Biological Organizer Model – MOB), referring to the spiritual body, and on communication with discarnate spirits by means of electronic devices.¹¹

In 1970, Quevedo founded the Centro Latino-Americano de Parapsicologia (Latin-American Center for Parapsychology - CLAP) in São Paulo. This offered courses and carried out parapsychological case studies; it also offered counselling and treatment of the psychological and physical disturbances that, according to Quevedo's psychopathological view of psi phenomena, were held to be caused by an unbalance of mental energy. Case studies were published in the organization's journal *Revista de Parapsicologia do CLAP*.

The conflict diminished by the 1990s, as the two men aged.¹² Andrade passed away in 2003, and by 2017 Quevedo had become a virtual recluse. However, some of Andrade's followers have continued IBPP researches, while Quevedo's parapsychology centre continues under the name IPQ, Instituto Padre Quevedo de Parapsicologia (Father Quevedo Institute of Parapsychology).¹³

Quevedo was effectively the face of parapsychology to the Brazilian public, debating frequently on talk shows with those holding different perspectives. He became famous for his catch-phrase 'This does not exist!', in a strong Spanish accent, which he expressed about any Spiritist phenomena or event attributed to discarnate or supernatural beings or forces.

Quevedo conceded that living human beings were capable of obtaining information from the environment and from other minds, and also of influencing matter. However, he insisted that parapsychology proved that those capacities were limited, to two hundred years into the future in the case of precognitive events, and to fifty meters from the body in the case of PK events.¹⁴ Anything beyond those

parameters would be due to divine intervention, thus allowing a role for Christian miracles and prophecies.

Andrade was noted for his rigor in investigations, especially of poltergeist cases, following recommendations by European and North American experts such as Hans Bender, [Guy Lyon Playfair](#), [D Scott Rogo](#) and [William G Roll](#). But he presented very particular interpretations of data collected and facts observed, typically attributing the cause to a being from a fourth dimension, or black magic carried out secretly by a sorcerer or priest of an African or African-Brazilian religion.¹⁵ In many cases, Andrade insisted that veridical information came from discarnate spirits when it might more economically be attributed to ESP among the living.

Artemio Longhi and Marcos Alija Ramos

Other figures also played a significant part. Artemio Longhi created what he called Laudo Parapsicométrico (Parapsychometric Report), a questionnaire that aimed to evaluate the respondent's level of psychic ability. Longhi presented this in television shows, prompting many viewers to apply to see if they had paranormal powers.

Marcos Alija Ramos, a former Catholic priest, maintained that he could emulate the performance of successful subjects in ESP studies carried out at Duke University, making predictions on demand.

Longhi and Ramos engaged in heated public argument, often on television talk shows watched by large audiences. Each tried to convince the public of their conception of parapsychology, presenting courses based on completely different information. Quevedo too was often involved in these discussions.

Albino Aresi

After Quevedo another Catholic priest, Albino Aresi, was probably the most popular and influential 'Catholic parapsychologist' active in Brazil during the 1970s and 1980s. Aresi was not interested in research, but rather viewed parapsychology as a revolutionary method of healing. He wrote books¹⁶ and in 1967 founded the Instituto Mens Sana (Mens Sana Institute) in São Paulo, now known as Clínica Frei Albino Aresi (Frei Albino Aresi Clinic).¹⁷

Aresi formulated a clinical parapsychological method, using electronic devices for measurement and control, which he claimed could heal a range of mental and nervous conditions: stress or fatigue, neuroses, psychoses, schizophrenia, phobias, depression, insomnia, anxiety, asthma, allergies, alcoholism, drug addictions, psychosomatic illnesses, maladjusted personalities, deviations and sexual weakness (impotence, frigidity), learning problems, mental illness in general, and Chagas disease. Aresi died in 1988 and his work has been continued by followers, although none has achieved the same level of prominence.

Pedro Antonio Grisa

In 1984, Pedro Antonio Grisa founded in Florianópolis, Santa Catarina, the Instituto de Parapsicologia e Potencial Psíquico (Institute of Parapsychology and Psychic Potential - IPAPPI), offering 'natural therapies' and 'parapsychology practices', as he terms them.¹⁸ Like Aresi, Grisa has little interest in scientific research, and instead argues that parapsychology be used in a practical way to solve human problems. He believes that psi energy in the subconscious is the cause of ESP and PK phenomena, and that an understanding of these mechanisms can be used to reduce individual suffering, also for practical matters, such as preserving food by mental power. Grisa's system is highly controversial among science-based parapsychologists. Despite this, the IPAPPI currently offers a professional training course and a post-graduation course in partnership with the Universidade do Vale do Itajaí (University of the Itajaí Valley - UNIVALI) and the Centro Universitário de São José (University Center of São José – USJ).

Popular versus Scientific

All these perspectives have in common that they claim to be scientific. But this is disputed by science-based parapsychologists as well as mainstream scientists, even when they are not specifically religious.

More recently, parapsychology has been exploited by New Age writers and practitioners, as an umbrella for a smorgasbord of bizarre subjects and practices. People calling themselves parapsychologists are to be heard on the radio and TV touting their services as psychic healers and clairvoyants, further blurring the distinction between 'psychic' and 'paranormal' on the one hand, and serious scientific parapsychology on the other.

To combat this, parapsychologists have created professional associations to promote a science-based view of psychic phenomena. It remains difficult to establish psi research as a field of scholarly study in accredited Brazilian universities, which have been put off by the image of parapsychology as based on religious or esoteric beliefs. However, some success has been achieved, particularly in recent years.

Scientific and Educational Activities

Impartial information about psi research carried out in the US, Europe and the Soviet Union was available in Brazil from the 1970s, with well-written articles appearing in the popular press, for instance about the experimental work being done by the Rhines at Duke University. The public was fascinated by claims of [psychokinetic phenomena](#) in relation to [Uri Geller](#), and Brazilians claiming similar spoon-bending powers often appeared on TV. This attracted some interest from academic researchers, and despite the unfavourable climate, new opportunities for the study of psi opened up in universities, with organized conferences and courses that boosted interest in the field.

The institutes founded by Quevedo and Andrade also contributed to raising awareness. Andrade's IBPP was involved with non-accredited undergraduate and graduate courses in a Spiritist college in the South of Brazil. Quevedo's CLAP,

although radically opposed to experimentation, carried out field research and organized parapsychology courses in confessional colleges and schools.

Key Individuals and Non-University Organizations

There are a great many groups involved in psi research in Brazil, of varying sizes, interests, and levels of scientific rigour. Here we describe some of the more significant ones.

Instituto Pernambucano de Pesquisas Psicobiofísicas

In 1973 in the Northeast of Brazil, a non-academic institution, the Instituto Pernambucano de Pesquisas Psicobiofísicas (Institute of Psychobiophysics Research of Pernambuco - IPPP)¹⁹ was founded by Valter da Rosa Borges, initially following a Spiritist approach. However, it became more scientific after rubbing shoulders with other groups in Brazil and abroad, its members carrying out field research and reporting case studies. The institute promotes courses and international conferences. Students and members have published monographs, and it has seen several editions of its *Anuário de Parapsicologia* (Parapsychology Yearbook).

Centro Universitário Bezerra de Menezes – UNIBEM

Founded as a Spiritist college in 1985 in Curitiba, Paraná, in the South of Brazil, the Faculdade de Ciências Bio-Psíquicas do Paraná (now Centro Universitário Bezerra de Menezes – UNIBEM),²⁰ started to offer a non-accredited course of specialization in studies of consciousness, focusing on parapsychology. In 2000 it started an undergraduate course. In the 1990s, the Spiritist emphasis gave way to a more scientific approach, thanks to the influence of Joe de Assis Garcia (currently not active in the field) and contact with Brazilian and foreign institutions and researchers. Other key figures include Vera Lúcia O'Reilly Cabral Barrionuevo, the pioneer of [ganzfeld](#) experiments in Brazil, and Tarcísio Roberto Pallú – who together founded a Center for the Study of Dreams and published the journal *Fator Psi* – and also Ileana Rebecca Uba and Luiz Henrique Cardoso.

UNIBEM contributed significantly towards the development of psi research in Brazil. A former student, Ricardo Eppinger, earned his PhD at the [Koestler Parapsychology Unit](#) of the University of Edinburgh, with a dissertation comparing psi performance in dreams and ganzfeld (he is thought now to have left the field).

Fabio Eduardo Silva, another former UNIBEM student, worked to maintain a scientific approach, creating a well-structured laboratory for ganzfeld experiments, funded by Portugal's [Bial Foundation](#). Between 2002 and 2011, Fabio Silva organized seven conferences, bringing together researchers from Brazil and abroad. Following his departure, activity declined as a result of funding problems and low demand, although it has recently again started a non-accredited course.

University-Based Individuals and Courses

In the late 1980s and 1990s, some other accredited universities supported parapsychological meetings and courses, although the latter were non-accredited.

Konrad Lindmeier, University São Francisco (Rio de Janeiro)

The University São Francisco offered parapsychological courses thanks to the efforts of Konrad Lindmeier, a German Franciscan priest and Jungian psychologist. Lindmeier studied parapsychology with Hans Bender in Germany and worked at CLAP with Quevedo for twenty years. He followed a more scientific approach than Quevedo, and after leaving CLAP carried out experimental studies using tarot cards to test ESP. His PhD research was on ESP and neurological anomalies.

André Percia de Carvalho, University Estácio de Sá (Rio de Janeiro)

Activities at the University Estácio de Sá, were organized by André Percia de Carvalho, whose field work focused mainly on poltergeist phenomena.²¹ He co-authored a book about dreams with [Stanley Krippner](#),²² and taught courses, lectured and organized seminars throughout the 1990s (he is thought now to have retired from the field.)

Lourdes Oberg, University Veiga de Almeida (Rio de Janeiro)

In the mid-1990s, the University Veiga Almeida offered an accredited course on the relationship between parapsychology and other sciences, coordinated by psychologist Lourdes Oberg.

Associação Brasileira de Parapsicologia

Earlier, also in Rio de Janeiro, a non-accredited postgraduate course was promoted by the Associação Brasileira de Parapsicologia (Brazilian Association of Parapsychology – ABRAP), and the Federação Brasileira de Parapsicologia (Brazilian Federation of Parapsychology – FEBRAP) in partnership with the Sociedade Universitária Augusto Motta (University Society Augusto Motta).

ECLIPSY / Inter Psi

In the late 1980s and 1990s, courses were offered in São Paulo at the University São Judas and the University Anhembi Morumbi. They were organized by Instituto de Pesquisas Científicas em Parapsicologia (Institute for Scientific Research in Parapsychology – ECLIPSY), which started as an informal group founded by Wellington Zangari, a former collaborator with Quevedo, and by Paulo Costamilan and Rodolfo Teixeira, joined in 1991 by Fatima Machado. Its parapsychology conferences were attended by researchers from around the country, providing the field with new contact opportunities.

In 1995 ECLIPSY was renamed Inter Psi, emphasizing an interdisciplinary perspective. Its leaders – [Wellington Zangari](#) and [Fatima Machado](#) – worked to establish links with foreign research organizations, becoming members of the [Parapsychological Association](#) (PA) and encouraging other Brazilian psi researchers to do so. This led to some productive partnerships.²³

Having been based for ten years (1999–2009) in the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Inter Psi has been run from the Institute of Psychology at the University of São Paulo (USP), opening new opportunities for scientific psi research and

education and marking a change of perspective by including studies of anomalistic psychology.[24](#)

Alexander Moreira-Almeida, NUPES

Another important psi research center is Núcleo de Pesquisa em Espiritualidade e Saúde (Research Center in Spirituality and Health – NUPES) at the Federal University of Juiz de Fora.[25](#) It was founded by [Alexander Moreira-Almeida](#), a psychiatrist whose areas of study are paranormal phenomena, health, mental disorders, the mind-body problem, religion, mediumship and spirituality.

Scholarly Studies and Activities

The growing recognition of psi research as a legitimate academic discipline in Brazil has been helped by post-graduate work, with doctoral dissertations drawing attention to the study of anomalistic psychology and psi experiences.

Adelaide Peters Lessa

In 1972, the first PhD dissertation on a parapsychological subject was presented at the Institute for Psychology, University of São Paulo. Adelaide Peters Lessa conducted a [precognition](#) experiment with participants from different religious groups.[26](#) Her course included an internship at what is now the [Rhine Research Center](#), in Durham, North Carolina, USA, where her work was supervised by [Joseph Banks Rhine](#). She subsequently left the field, but her dissertation was published as a book, providing a good quality source for information about parapsychology.

Alexander Moreira-Almeida's Study of Mediumship

Moreira-Almeida's 2004 dissertation, presented at the University of São Paulo's Medicine School, investigated Kardecian Spiritist mediums by means of qualitative interviews and psychiatric questionnaires.[27](#) He found mediums to have a high social-educational level, a low prevalence rate of minor psychiatric symptoms and a reasonable level of social adjustment, leading him to conclude that the mediumistic trance is not a dissociative identity disorder. This is considered a key work, questioning the pathological view of psi and religious phenomena, and is often cited by Spiritist associations. Moreira-Almeida subsequently founded a prominent research group at the University of Juiz de Fora.

Wellington Zangari and Fatima Regina Machado

In his master dissertation, presented in the postgraduate program of science of religion at the Pontifical Catholic University in São Paulo (PUC-SP) in 1996,[28](#) Wellington Zangari discussed the importance of paranormal experiences for the construction of religion, particularly [Kardecist Spiritism](#) and Catholicism.

In his doctorate in psychology at USP (2003),[29](#) Zangari analyzed possession mediumship in Umbanda, a Brazilian religion, and what it means to be a medium from the point of view of mediums themselves. He evaluated the medium's narratives from a psychosocial perspective, using the role theory proposed by

Swedish psychologist Hjalmar Sunden. His model of mediumship is being used by other Brazilian researchers to understand various religious manifestations in general, as well as those relating to mediums.

In post-doctoral research at the University of São Paulo, Zangari (2004–2006) analyzed precognitive capacities in mediums, carrying out an experiment that used the precognitive habituation technique formulated by American psychologist and parapsychologist [Daryl Bem](#). No significant results were found with regard the existence of precognitive abilities.³⁰

In her master thesis presented in the postgraduate program of Science of Religion at PUC-SP in 1996, Fatima Regina Machado discussed the misuse of parapsychology in favor of religious interests in the country.³¹ In her first PhD dissertation (2003)³² in communication and semiotics, also at PUC-SP, she studied the language status (function and meaning) of poltergeist phenomena/experiences from two semiotic points of view.

In her second PhD dissertation (2009),³³ in psychology at the Institute for Psychology at USP, Machado surveyed psi-related anomalous experiences (ESP and PK) in Brazil in daily life and their association with beliefs, attitudes and well-being. She elaborated a questionnaire, Questionário de Prevalência e Relevância de Psi (Questionnaire of Prevalence and Relevance of Psi – Q-PRP) based on [John Palmer](#)'s 1979 ESP survey,³⁴ amplifying the number and range of respondents to ensure the sample did not consist solely of students. The prevalence of psi experiences – the number of respondents who reported having had one or more ESP and/or PK experiences in the course of their lives – was 82.9%, surprisingly high compared with other national populations, in which the figure is typically around 50% or 60%.

Machado and Zangari's academic research has helped to establish their laboratory Inter Psi in the academy, and have inspired other researches, as has happened also with Moreira-Almeida's work in relation to NUPES. It is noteworthy that all three won research opportunities from government agencies, as have some of their students and/or members of their research groups. Another important step forward has been the offer of undergraduate and postgraduate courses in anomalistic psychology at the University of São Paulo since 2012, with psi research present in the course program.

Confluence of Interests

Currently in Brazil there is a confluence of interests concerning parapsychology/psi research, anomalistic psychology and psychology of religion that has boosted the production of articles, book chapters and academic research. Several studies are in progress on anomalous experiences, especially extrasensory perception, psychokinesis, out-of-body experiences, near-death experiences, [contact with extraterrestrial beings](#), and mediumistic experiences.

Mediumship studies is a good exemplar of the fruitful relationship between those research fields, as an area that has dimensions both of anomalous and religious

experience, and that also permits evaluations of individuals who claim to manifest it and the religious groups in which it is practised.[35](#)

The data gathered by mediumship studies helps to develop criteria for differential diagnosis between healthy and pathological anomalous experiences; this is especially relevant in Brazil, where the pathological view of anomalous phenomena remains strong. Studies have investigated mediums' cognitive functions and personality characteristics,[36](#) psychodynamics of mediumship,[37](#) psychosocial aspects,[38](#) biopsychosocial perspectives,[39](#) mental health variables associated with mediumship,[40](#) and neurophysiological aspects.[41](#) They also include experimental evaluations of ontological hypotheses, that is, the study of the nature of existence or reality of paranormal phenomena.[42](#)

Conclusion

There has been a great advance in the study of psi phenomena and other anomalous experiences in Brazil in the last two decades. Besides local efforts, researchers in Brazil have benefited from the support of researchers in other countries, such as [Stanley Krippner](#), [Nancy L. Zingrone](#) and [Carlos S. Alvarado](#), and of the [Parapsychology Foundation](#), through the generous collaboration of Lisette Coly and Eileen Coly.

However, the terms *parapsychology* and *psi research* are less in evidence than before. The strategy of adopting the perspective of *anomalous psychology* has helped win greater acceptance within the academic psychological and medical communities in Brazil, opening up new opportunities for scientific studies. The high prevalence of psi experiences in Brazil has attracted the attention of some foreign researchers. New study groups are being created; joint research activities are being established with foreign researchers and groups; and the training of researchers in Brazil is improving – all of which points to a promising future for the scholarly studies in the country.

Fatima Regina Machado and Wellington Zangari

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Endnotes

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