

Walter Whately Carington

Walter Whately Carington (1892–1947) was a British psychical researcher who pioneered the use of quantitative methods based on word association tests in the investigation of mediumship.



Life and Career

Walter Whately Carington was born Walter Whately Smith in 1892 in London. He was educated at Eton and Cambridge, where he studied science. He joined the Royal Flying Corps during World War I and became an experienced pilot, but was badly injured after a forced landing. He returned to Cambridge to undertake scientific research into the psychogalvanic reflex, which led to the publication in 1922 of his book *The Measurement of Emotion*.^[1]

After a period living in the Netherlands, where he met his future wife, he returned to England and took up residence in Cornwall. There he devoted his life to psychical research, turning his back on a conventional academic career.

He changed his name from Smith to Carington in 1933, adopting a modified spelling of the name of the region in Normandy (Carenton) where his family originated.

Psychical Research

In December 1916 Carington had sittings with the mental medium [Gladys Leonard](#). He sat twice with Kathleen Goligher, a physical medium, in Belfast, the first time being convinced that the phenomena were genuine, the second time noting a 'conspicuous and startling deterioration' that suggested to him that on this occasion they were produced fraudulently.^[2]

He became a member of the Society for Psychical Research and was appointed to its governing council in 1920, also joining its investigation of the materialization medium Martha Beraud (Eva C.)^[3] In the same year he published *The Foundations of Spiritualism*, which contained a summary of the existing arguments in favour of survival of consciousness after death. He also founded and edited the journal *Psychic Research Quarterly* (later re-named *Psyche*).

Carington soon became dissatisfied with the qualitative methods that psychical researchers had been using to investigate mediums since the nineteenth century, arguing that a quantitative approach based on statistics would be more rigorously scientific. He proposed a word-association test, which some time later he applied to Leonard, Eileen Garrett and [Rudi Schneider](#) (see below).^[4] He also conducted experiments in precognitive guessing of the throw of dice, considering that low scoring – which was as likely to occur as high scoring – was equally anomalous in

departing from the chance mean, a phenomenon that was later recognized as ‘psi missing’.^[5]

In 1940 he was awarded a Perrott Studentship in Psychical Research and a short time later a Leverhulme Research Grant.

Quantitative Study of Trance Personalities

Between 1934 and 1936 Carington carried out tests with mediums in which he applied Jung’s word association tests, both in a state of normal waking consciousness and also in trance states.^[6] The aim was to try to discern whether the ‘control’ personalities who spoke during trance were discarnate beings, as they represented themselves, or secondary personalities of the mediums, as was believed by sceptics and some researchers. Responses from the trance personalities were analyzed for reaction times and physiological reflexes, and these were compared to those for the medium during a normal state. Carington concluded that, with regard to Eileen Garret and her control ‘Uvani’, and Gladys Leonard and her control ‘Feda’, the controls were secondary personalities.

As a later SPR commentator described in relation to Leonard,

Carington discovered that the results given by Feda and Mrs Leonard were neither what one would expect from testing two different persons nor what one would normally get from testing the same person twice. Superficially their patterns were grossly dissimilar, but they were related to each other – that is, negatively correlated. Where the normal Mrs Leonard tended to give a long reaction time, the entranced Mrs Leonard gave a short one, and vice versa. In other words Feda and Mrs Leonard were not independent individuals; they were complementary characters. The result is in keeping with the theory that Feda is a dramatization of the medium’s own subconscious trends. It is very difficult to reconcile these findings with a Spiritualistic interpretation.^[7]

Other researchers recognized the potential importance of Carington’s qualitative method, while doubting that his knowledge of statistical applications was sufficient for his findings to be trusted. For instance, Robert Thouless made a detailed analysis, praising ‘a brilliantly designed experimental plan which well displayed Whately Carington’s gifts of boldness and originality’^[8] but pointing out significant errors.^[9] The Cambridge philosopher CD Broad agreed, writing that Carington’s ideas and methods were ‘essentially sound’ but that ‘serious fallacies’ in his statistical analysis meant that ‘very little can be confidently accepted of [his] conclusions.’^[10]

Telepathy

Carington’s experimental work on the association of ideas led to the formation of a theory of telepathy, in which individual minds are linked by subconscious associations, or ‘psychons’. As he further speculated in his book *Telepathy: An Outline of Its Facts, Theory, and Implications*, such a group mind, in which images are held in common, might be the basis of telepathic contact.^[11]

In experiments on paranormal cognition of drawings he found a degree of displacement that appeared to indicate precognitive and retrocognitive effects.^[12]

Views On Survival

In *Telepathy*, in the words of a reviewer, Carington 'suggests that disintegration of the psychon system after death is possible but not very likely, and he considers it more probable that from an initially dream-like state after death there will be a process of integration and more complete adjustment to the new conditions'.^[13]

Just prior to his death, Carington set down his views on the survival of the mind:

I should like to make it clear that, speaking within a few days of my probable death, my views on Survival are substantially those set out in the relevant section of my book *Telepathy*. That is to say: it is my firm intellectual conviction that Conscious Existence does not terminate with the death of the body, though the form it takes is unlikely, in my judgement, to be closely similar to any of those commonly accepted.^[14]

Works

Books

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Correspondence (1945). *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* 33, 130-31.

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West, D.J. (1954). *Psychical Research Today*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co.

Endnotes

Footnotes

1. ^ Carrington (1922).

2. ^ Nicol (1946–49), 202.
3. ^ Salter (1946–49), 197.
4. ^ Salter (1946–49), 198.
5. ^ Carington (1935a), 86-104, 117-8, 158-67.
6. ^ Carington (1934, 1935b, 1936).
7. ^ West (1954), 60.
8. ^ Thouless (1946–49), 199.
9. ^ Thouless (1936–37), 223.
10. ^ Broad (1962), 268-69.
11. ^ Thouless (1945), 275-76.
12. ^ Carington (1940; 1941; 1942–45).
13. ^ Thouless (1945), 276
14. ^ Carington (1947).