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Blind Methodology article to appear in JSE

From: RSchatte@aol.com [Rebecca Keith]
Date: Tue, 3 Feb 1998 16:28:06 EST
Fwd Date: Tue, 03 Feb 1998 18:40:34 -0500
Subject: Blind Methodology article to appear in JSE

>From The Houston Chronicle February 2, 1998

Scientists have trouble keeping their eyes shut

Review issued on 'blind' methodology of research
by Robert Matthews
New Scientist

Parapsychology, widely dismissed as a sloppy pseudoscience, makes far more use of rigorous experimental methods than other scientific disciplines, according to a study of the prevalence of "blind" methodology in research.

Blind techniques were originally designed to stop investigators in clinical trials from affecting the outcome of their experiments. Blinding prevents them from knowing whether a patient has been given the drug or a placebo and from modifying their observations accordingly. but scientists in other fields face a similar temptation to tweak their data, whether deliberately or subconsciously.

Yet according to an analysis of over 1,000 papers, most researchers seem to believe that they are immune to such foibles. The problem is most acute in the "hard" sciences of physics and chemistry, where not one paper surveyed used blind methods.

Medicine also scored badly. The surveyed papers were published in leading journals such as Nature, the Journal of the American Chemical Society, Cell and the Journal of Applied Physics. By far the highest proportion of papers with blind methods appeared in journals favored by parapsychologists -- the Journal of the Society for Psychical Research and the Journal of Parapsychology.

The study, due to appear in the Journal of Scientific Exploration, comes from Rupert Sheldrake, the London-based biologist who has become a controversial figure for his unorthodox scientific beliefs and interest in "fringe" areas.

"Most hard scientists take it for granted that blind techniques are unnecessary in their own field," Sheldrake says. "Parapsychologists, on the other hand, have been constantly subjected to intense scrutiny by skeptics, and this has made them more rigorous."

Physicists and chemists show no signs of tightening up their methods, Sheldrake has found. In a survey of 23 British university physics and chemistry departments, he found only one that taught its students even the basic techniques involved.

"One chemist summed up his attitude to blind methods by saying science was hard enough as it is, without making it worse by not

knowing what you're working on," Sheldrake says.

Tom Fearn, an expert on experimental design at University College in London, says physicists and chemists may have become complacent.

"There is this belief that blind methods are only needed where the subject of the experiment should not know what is happening, or where it's hard to measure the quantity you're interested in objectivity," he says.

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