



Toward a postmaterialist psychology: Theory, research, and applications

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ABSTRACT

The majority of mainstream psychologists still adopt a materialist stance toward nature. They believe that science is synonymous with materialism; further, they are convinced that the view that mind and consciousness are simply by-products of brain activity is an incontrovertible fact that has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt. This is an incomplete view of what humans are. In this article, we review two categories of empirical evidence that support a shift toward a postmaterialist psychology. The first category of evidence includes mental events that seem to occur outside the spatial confines of the brain, whereas the second category includes mental events that seem to occur when the brain has ceased to function. Taken together, the two bodies of empirical evidence examined here indicate that the idea that the brain creates mind and consciousness is both incomplete and flawed. In the Discussion section, we argue that the transmission hypothesis of the mind-brain relationship can account for all the evidence presented in this article. We also discuss the emerging postmaterialist paradigm and its potential implications for the evolution of psychology.

Accordingly the cases in which inductions from classes of facts altogether different have thus jumped together belong only to the best established theories which the history of science contains.
William Whewell, *The Philosophy of Inductive Sciences*, 1840

1. Introduction

Most scientists ignore that their worldview is based on metaphysical assumptions that were first proposed by Ancient Greek philosophers (Spencer, 2012). These assumptions which, several centuries later, became associated with classical physics, include materialism — the notion that matter is the only reality, i.e. everything in the universe is made up of aggregates of material/physical particles and fields (*the terms ‘materialism’ and ‘physicalism’ are used interchangeably in this article; physicalism is the thesis that everything is physical, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/physicalism/>) — and reductionism, the idea that complex things can be understood by reducing them to the interactions of their parts, or to simpler or more fundamental things such as tiny material particles. Other assumptions include, for instance, determinism, the notion that future states of physical or biological systems can be predicted from current states, and mechanism, the idea that the world works like a machine and can therefore be explained mechanically.

During the 19th century, these assumptions hardened, turned into dogmas, and coalesced into a belief system that came to be known as “scientific materialism” (Burt, 1949; Sheldrake, 2012). This belief system implies that *mind* — the set of mental faculties (e.g. consciousness, perception, thinking, memory, emotions, volition), processes and events, — *consciousness*, the state of being aware of an external object or something within oneself, and all that we subjectively experience (e.g. memories, emotions, intentions, altered states of consciousness, spiritual epiphanies) are identical with or can be reduced to electrical and chemical processes in the brain; mental processes and events are ultimately reducible to the interaction between basic physical elements. In other words, we human beings are nothing but complex biophysical machines and, as a result, our consciousness and personality automatically vanish when we die.

As we will demonstrate here, the scientific materialist framework is completely at loss to explain a wide array of empirical phenomena that are thoroughly examined in this article. For example, if the mind is what the brain does, then how is it possible for people to be fully conscious while they are in a state of clinical death?

Because physics was considered to be the foundation for all natural sciences, a number of early psychologists adopted the worldview of classical physics (i.e. the metaphysical assumptions of scientific materialism) to establish psychology as a legitimate scientific discipline (Walsh, Teo, & Baydala, 2014). However, over a century ago, physicists discovered phenomena, at the atomic level, that could not be explained

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by classical physics. These phenomena led to the development of a new branch of physics called quantum mechanics (QM). QM has invalidated the metaphysical assumptions of scientific materialism. For example, QM has questioned the material foundations of the world by showing that atoms and subatomic particles are not solid objects that categorically exist at definite spatial locations and times. Actually, they show “tendencies to exist,” i.e. atoms and subatomic particles form a world of potentialities within the quantum realm (Heisenberg, 1976).

QM also demonstrated that the particles being observed and the observer — the physicist and the method used for observation — are in some way related. Moreover, the observer's conscious intent appears to influence the results of the observation. Given this phenomenon, some theoretical physicists proposed that the consciousness of the observer is vital to the existence of the physical events being observed, and that mental events, such as intention, can affect the physical world (Stapp, 2011; Wigner, 1967). The results of recent experiments (Radin et al., 2012, 2016) provide support for this interpretation of QM.

Despite the fact that QM invalidated the metaphysical assumptions associated with scientific materialism, mainstream psychologists still adopt a reductive materialist stance of nature and the universe. They firmly believe that science is synonymous with methodological and philosophical materialism; further, they are convinced that the view that mind and consciousness are simply by-products of brain activity is an incontrovertible fact that has been demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt (Dossey, 2015).

We contend that science is, first and foremost, a non-dogmatic, open-minded method of acquiring knowledge about nature through the observation, experimental investigation, and theoretical explanation of phenomena. Its methodology is not synonymous with materialism and should not be committed to any particular beliefs, dogmas, or ideologies (Beauregard et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2012; 2016).

In the present article, we examine various lines of evidence that support an emerging shift toward a postmaterialist psychology (Beauregard et al., 2014; Schwartz, 2012; 2016). As the postmaterialist paradigm is inclusive of matter, which is seen as a core constituent of the universe, postmaterialist psychology does not reject the empirical observations and great value of psychology's achievements realized up until now within a materialist framework.

The first section of this article provides a brief historical context for the scientific study of the empirical evidence we will be discussing. The second section examines the various lines of evidence that support a shift toward a postmaterialist psychology. Generally speaking, we have identified two categories in which to group these lines of evidence:

Category I contains evidence for which a materialist explanation, though commonly presented, is less parsimonious than a postmaterialist explanation. This category includes phenomena suggesting that mind is not limited to space or time.

Category II contains evidence that is outrightly rejected by materialist theories of the mind, but is supportive of a postmaterialist perspective. This evidence is related to mental events occurring when the brain is not functioning in a way that is thought by contemporary neuroscientific models to support consciousness. In line with QM, the substantial body of evidence examined here indicates that scientific materialism is incomplete and, therefore, obsolete.

In the third section of this article, we examine the implications of the evidence presented as well as hypotheses for the mind-brain relationship and basic types of postmaterialist theories. Lastly, in the fourth section, we present the emerging postmaterialist paradigm and discuss its potential impact for psychology.

The reader not familiar with emerging postmaterialist science may find this evidence challenging and controversial. This is unavoidable. In the spirit of open, evidence-based science, we review this extensive evidence with the hope that it will raise questions, stimulate debate, and advance the science of psychology accordingly.

2. Precursors of postmaterialism in psychology

While the term postmaterialism is new, taking what we are referring to as a postmaterialist perspective in psychological science is as old as the field itself. Indeed, there have been, and continue to be, certain subfields of psychology (e.g. psychology of religion and spirituality, transpersonal psychology) that could potentially be classified as postmaterialist in that they investigate or describe phenomena that cannot be accommodated within the materialist paradigm. These phenomena generally involve psychological processes that transcend the assumed boundaries of time and/or space, or point to consciousness existing independent of a functioning brain: for instance, spiritual experiences can occur while experiencers are in a state of clinical death. While the history of these subfields is both long and complex, and sprinkled with controversy, we will briefly describe how they have contributed to the emergence of postmaterialist science.

2.1. Parapsychology

Some of the most respected and influential psychologists held a non-materialist view. For instance, the “Father of American Psychology,” Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James, was one of the founders of parapsychology (“para” is an ancient Greek word meaning beyond, or beside; this field of study is also called psychical research or psi research). James and other psychologists, such as James H. Hyslop and William McDougall, attempted to connect psychology with psychic phenomena. Psychical research officially began in the 1880s with the formation of the Society for Psychical Research in London England and, in 1885, the American Society for Psychical Research began in Boston with the assistance of James. The term parapsychology was not adopted until the 1930s.

William James and the founders of parapsychology were pioneers of mediumship research (see Gauld, 1983). They thought that investigating the information reported by mediums — individuals who report experiencing communication with deceased persons — could test the survival of consciousness hypothesis (the continued existence, separate from the physical body, of an individual's consciousness or personality after physical death).

In the 1930s, Joseph Banks Rhine — a botanist who had studied psychology —, along with his associate Karl Zener, — professor of psychology and chairman of the department of psychology at Duke University —, developed a statistical system of testing for extrasensory perception (ESP) that involved subjects guessing what symbol, out of five possible symbols, would appear when going through a special deck of cards designed for this purpose. A percentage of correct guesses (or hits) significantly above 20% was judged as higher than chance and indicative of psychic ability. Rhine stated in his first book, *Extra Sensory Perception* (1934), that after 90,000 trials, he felt ESP is “an actual and demonstrable occurrence” (Rhine, 1934).

Since the Rhine experiments, numerous researchers have successfully replicated psi experiments and generated convincing meta-analyses, including those of presentiment (Mossbridge, Tressoldi, & Utts, 2012) and mental interactions with random number generators (RNGs) (Radin & Nelson, 1989). The results of these experiments will be discussed in the second section of this article.

The uncovering of cases of fraudulent mediums, at the beginning of the 20th century, may have inhibited the progression of parapsychology as a field. Fraud is a problem within all fields of science, however, and when it is present within a research area that has enormous implications, it can rapidly contaminate the entire field. It is also noteworthy that today's mediumship research is rigorous and stands up to such scrutiny, with researchers conducting triple blind protocols, thereby greatly strengthening their results compared to past mediumship experiments (e.g. Beischel & Schwartz, 2007; Beischel, Boccuzzi, Biuso, & Rock, 2015).

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