

PANEL: COUNSELING PERSONS WITH EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCES: THE EXAMPLE OF IGPP

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INTRODUCTION: COUNSELING AND MENTAL HYGIENE – THE APPROACH OF THE IGPP

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Since its foundation in the year 1950 by Prof. Hans Bender (1907-1991), the pioneer of German post-war parapsychology, the IGPP has provided the public with an information and counseling service covering the whole spectrum of parapsychology, fringe sciences and anomalistic phenomena. Bender, who had a training in psychology as well as in medicine, had always stressed the necessity that research into paranormal phenomena should also consider psychological and social problems connected with popular forms of spiritism or occultism. Already back in the 1950s, Bender had published several case studies which dealt with what he called spiritistic or mediumistic psychoses (e.g., Bender 1955). Therefore, according to Bender's legacy, the IGPP had always to offer information and psychological help for people who have to cope with occult or paranormal experiences causing them and other emotional distress. In a more general sense, "Mental Hygiene" (or "Psycho Hygiene"), as defined the bylaws of Institute, comprises "the application of medical, psychological and parapsychological findings with regard to diagnostics, counseling, intervention and prevention in connection with those scientific questions and psychosocial problems which derive from or are related to anomalous and/or paranormal phenomena." In order to realize this ambitious programme and after new substantial funds became available, the IGPP started since 1996 in collaboration with the Institute of Psychology of Freiburg University a special research project "Counseling and Help for People Claiming Exceptional Experiences" which was directed between 1998 and 2001 by Dr. Martina Belz-Merk. The goal of the project was to develop, implement and evaluate a special counseling and treatment concept for people who felt distressed or burdened by exceptional experiences (EE). In accordance with current regulations and standards of basic documentation in psychotherapy, a special documentation system ("DOKU") was developed by the research group to record systematically sociodemographic, anamnestic and phenomenon-specific data. Using this documentary system, it was possible for the first time to record continuously and systematically, as well as evaluate statistically, the number of IGPP counseling cases. According to an on-going process of data collection and evaluation, the DOKU System was modified and optimized several times (Belz-Merk, 2002). There exists now a carefully documented data base of counseling

cases which can be used for different research strategies (see the panel contributions by Martina Belz-Merk and Wolfgang Fach). In October 2003, the IGPP team organized for the first time a special seminar on practical and theoretical aspects of counseling persons with EE whose audience were primarily medical and psychological therapists and counselors. The IGPP counseling team consists of trained psychologists with a clinical-therapeutical background; the counselors meet each other on a weekly basis to discuss incoming cases. For clients psychotherapeutic treatment can be offered.

Although the necessity for a specific information and counseling service in the field of parapsychology has been increasingly recognized in the last twenty years, especially among the representatives of scientific parapsychology, as exemplified by the PA community (Solvin, 1995) and other parapsychological organisations, professional counseling services dealing with such experiences are still extremely rare. In Holland, Wim Kramer, trained as a clinical psychologist and parapsychologist, had run in Utrecht between 1986 and 1991 in cooperation with the now defunct Parapsychology Laboratory of Utrecht University his pioneering "Parapsychologisch Adviesburo" (Parapsychological Counseling Center) (for his approach see Kramer, 1993). In 1989, the New York based Parapsychology Foundation had organized in London an international conference on "Psi and Clinical Practice" (later published by Coly & McMahon, 1993). In the same year, Dr. Walter v. Lucadou founded in Freiburg, Germany, his "Parapsychologische Beratungsstelle" (Parapsychological Counseling Center) which was later funded by the state of Baden-Wuerttemberg and became well-known in Germany (for his approach see Lucadou & Poser, 1997). In Argentina, the "Instituto de Psicología Paranormal", run by Alejandro Parra, has organized special discussion groups for people with conflictive psi experiences (Montanelli & Parra, 2000). In 2000, as another promising sign, the American Psychological Association (APA) had published the volume *Varieties of Anomalous Experience* (edited by Cardeña et al.) which tried to integrate psychological and parapsychological findings related to exceptional human experiences into the larger corpus of psychology and behavioural sciences.

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