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“Say From Whence You Owe This Strange Intelligence”: Investigating Explanatory Systems of Spiritualist Mental Mediumship Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Walsh and Vaughan (1993) defined transpersonal experiences as those “in which the sense of identity or self extends beyond (trans) the individual or personal to encompass wider aspects of humankind, life, psyche or cosmos” (p. 203). One population who regularly report such experiences are mediums. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten spiritualist mediums to explore their lived experience, such as how they communicate with the deceased, the meaning of spirit guide phenomena, and the role of mediumship, regardless of the actual ontology of mediumship. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) identified three themes: explanatory systems of mediumship, spirit guides as transcendental beings versus aspects of self, and the purpose of mediumship. These themes illuminated aspects of the mediumistic experience that have implications for an understanding of states of consciousness, transcendence, and the Higher Self.

Keywords: *interpretative phenomenological analysis, mediumship, personality, spirit guides, states of consciousness, transcendence*

Mental mediumship can be defined as the alleged ability to receive information from spirits of the deceased in the form of auditory, visual, or somatic perceptions that are not available to others. Some mediums also report the presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states in the form of spirit guides or controls that help them to relay messages from spirits to their loved ones (Gauld, 1983). Most mental mediums remain focused and conscious when demonstrating mediumship, in contrast to the deep trance state often experienced by trance mediums in which they may lose awareness of their surroundings and take on the mannerisms and personality of the communicating spirit (Braude, 2003). However, many mental mediums may also experience a “slightly dissociated state” (Gauld, p. 25) where their sense of time, space, and self is altered. Mental mediumship is also distinguished from physical mediumship, which ostensibly involves communication with the deceased through physical events in the medium’s vicinity, for example, the occurrence of raps and knocks in response to questions from the medium.

Mediumistic experiences can be classed as a form of transpersonal experience in that mediums’ “sense of identity is transformed beyond the limited boundaries of the ordinary personal self” (Daniels,

2005, p. 81; see also Rock, Beishel, & Cott, 2009, who made a similar claim). For example, they claim to have access to information not ordinarily available to them, experience physical sensations that were associated with the deceased personality (such as bodily aches and pains, sensed changes in height, weight, or posture), and otherwise attribute phenomenal experiences as not their own. Of particular interest are those mediums who report the presence of spirit guides. These are claimed to be discarnate personalities (such as but not exclusively deceased persons) who perform the function of mediating communications between the medium and the deceased. Regardless of whether spirit guides are considered alternate personalities (Flournoy, 1911; Myers, 1902; Sidgwick, 1915) or wholly independent spirit entities, they suggest a personality process that expands or extends beyond the limits of everyday consciousness as conventionally understood.

In addition, mediums reportedly experience an alternate reality that is hidden from ordinary sense experience or consciousness (cf. Roxburgh & Roe, 2013). While some transpersonal psychologists have debated whether so-called *paranormal* phenomena, such as mediumistic experiences, should be considered truly transpersonal (e.g., Rowan, 1993; for a detailed discussion see Daniels, 2005), others have rejected the

distinction, preferring instead to regard both paranormal and transpersonal experiences under the broad spectrum of exceptional human experiences (EHE; Masluk, 2003; Palmer & Braud, 2002; White, 1997). Likewise, Daniels (2005) proposed that psychic experiences—considered to be the lowest of four transpersonal stages (psychic, subtle, causal, nondual) in Wilber's (1995) classification of the transpersonal—could be a gateway to a deeper transpersonal reality. Daniels (2005) similarly classified mediumship phenomena as “transpersonal experiences of a paranormal kind” (p. 48; after Grof, 1988) that go beyond consensual space-time reality, and LeShan (1974) proposed that mediums have an altered epistemology that relates to their perception of alternate realities and their belief that there are ways of knowing and communicating information that transcends the usual barriers of time and space.

Moreover, it is possible that mediumistic experiences act as a stimulus for transformation in the individual that promotes further transpersonal development. For example, White (1993) proposed that experiencers go through some form of transformation and *open inwardly*, which predisposes them to have further experiences. Similarly, research undertaken by Wright (1999) suggested that spontaneous encounters with the deceased tend to open individuals to the reality of psi thus making them more receptive to further psychic impressions. This is consistent with more general findings that belief in and experience of spontaneous extrasensory perception (ESP) are predictors of ESP performance in the laboratory (e.g., Lawrence, 1993).

Therefore, mediums report a range of experiences that are indicative of a transcendent aspect to human existence. They differ from some transpersonal experiences, however, in that they are claimed to be producible to order under the right circumstances and thus provide an excellent opportunity to study their process and purpose. This emphasis on process is best suited to a qualitative approach concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants make sense of their experiences.

Having said this, recent investigations, with some exceptions (see Alvarado, 2010; Menezes & Moreira-Almeida, 2011; Rock et al., 2009; Roxburgh & Roe, 2011), have tended to focus on a proof-oriented approach intended to demonstrate whether or not an explanation of mediumship in terms of discarnate survival is tenable (Beischel & Schwartz, 2007; O'Keeffe & Wiseman, 2005; Robertson & Roy, 2001; Schwartz, Geoffrion, Jain, Lewis, & Russek, 2003), rather than a process

oriented approach that explores the subjective meanings attributed by mediums for their claimed abilities. This research has little to say about the actual experience of mediumship and has been unable to specify necessary or sufficient conditions for its occurrence.

However, there is a growing body of research that has attempted to explore how mediumship may function, regardless of the actual ontology of mediumship phenomena. For example, Emmons and Emmons (2003) interviewed mediums about their views of the communication process to explore whether there were any practices that triggered a mediumistic state. They found that 40% of mediums entered an altered state before demonstrating mediumship. In addition, mediums also reported meditation, prayer, and diet as important factors in their preparation for communicating with spirits. While it is interesting to learn the variety of practices mediums undertake to trigger communication with spirits, one does not really discover what these practices mean to mediums or how they personally experience the process since Emmons and Emmons (2003) did not include detailed extracts from their interviews. As a consequence there is a gap in understanding of whether mediums feel it is necessary to prepare for communication with spirits or whether there are any commonalities in the accounts of mediums. Likewise, their findings with regard to spirit guide phenomena seem limited to reporting quantifiable data regarding gender and cultural differences of guides rather than reporting how mediums make sense of their experience of spirit guides or their role in the mediumship process. Leonard (2005) can be similarly criticized. He also interviewed mediums, and although he found that 89% had some form of preparatory ritual they undertake before embarking on their mediumship, of which 52% reported meditating before giving a reading, and 52% reported using prayer to connect to the *spirit world*, he conceded that more in-depth interviews might have uncovered important insights into the phenomenology of mediumship and produced richer, more detailed first hand accounts.

In a recent qualitative study, Rock, Beischel, and Schwartz (2008) went some way towards addressing this shortcoming with a thematic analysis of mediums' experiences of discarnate communication. They asked mediums to describe how they experience receiving communication from a discarnate spirit and found seven constituent themes: 1) multi-modal “sensory”

impressions pertaining to the discarnate, 2) visual images of the discarnate in the medium's "mind's eye," 3) "hearing" information from the discarnate in the medium's "mind's ear," 4) feeling discarnates' ailments/causes of death, 5) experience of fragrances associated with the discarnate prior to his or her bodily death, 6) alteration of affect, and 7) empathy. However, it is perhaps not surprising that most of the themes relate to the five senses as Rock et al. (2008) asked mediums to answer the following question, which could be considered leading: "Please describe, in as much detail as possible, how you personally experience receiving communication from a discarnate. How do you receive the information (hear, see, feel)? Describe each of your five senses during a reading" (p. 184).

Nevertheless, these findings have implications for transpersonal psychology in that they hint at a process involving sensory awareness that transcends consensual reality, and enables mediums to be in touch with an extended reality where they can access information hidden from everyday consciousness. Rock et al. (2009) described a thematic analysis of responses from six mediums to two open-ended questions about the subjective experience of mediumistic and psychic readings. Responses to the two questions were analyzed separately, and for mediumship revealed nine themes that reflected the manner in which mediumistic communication was experienced. This study provides a useful insight into the lived experience of participants, but would have benefited from the opportunity to follow up on some of the responses in an interview format. In recent doctoral research, Gilbert (2008) also interviewed mediums to explore how they describe being in contact with spirits and found that they experienced communication with the deceased as something sensuous and embedded within the body, resulting in feelings of connectedness with spirits. However, in this research Gilbert was interested in how mediumship exists as a social phenomenon; as such, the qualitative approach that was adopted was largely discursive focusing on the use of language to explore how mediums account for their experiences.

Consequently, there is a distinct lack of systematic qualitative research investigating the phenomenology of mediumistic experiences. While there have been recent attempts to address this by interviewing mental mediums about their experiences (Emmons & Emmons, 2003; Leonard, 2005), these studies have either

been unsystematic in their design or have not adhered rigorously to formal methods of qualitative analysis, particularly in reducing their findings to quantitative summaries in the form of percentages. Therefore, they have been unable to provide any deep phenomenological insight into mediums' lived experience, and only serve to highlight the need for a more in-depth exploration of mediums' own accounts for the mediumship process as they experience it. Without this, one learns little about how mediums understand their experiences, which may have implications for transpersonal psychology in terms of how states of consciousness, human potential, and personality are understood.

The current study was intended to explore mediums' understanding of mediumship by adopting a systematic qualitative approach that overcomes shortcomings identified in previous research. Specific research questions were: how do mediums perceive their abilities to have originated and developed?² How do mediums explain communication with spirits? What is the nature and role of spirit guides? How do mediums describe and explain the purpose of mediumship? In order to answer these questions the study used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) to explore the experiences of a number of spiritualist mental mediums in the United Kingdom.

Method

In an attempt to gain experiential understanding of the mediumship phenomenon, and as a precursor to designing more formal studies, the authors attended a week long mediumship training course at the Arthur Findlay College, Stansted Hall (for a review of the course see Roxburgh, 2006) and participated in several mediumship demonstrations at spiritualist churches. This increased knowledge of the culture surrounding mediumship and the language used by mediums, which helped to build rapport with participants when conducting interviews.

Semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were used to obtain meaningful information on mediums' experiences and in-depth insights into the process and nature of mediumship as they have the advantage of facilitating empathy and rapport, and allow for unexpected issues to be followed up in "real-time" (Kvale, 1996; Smith, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003). To capture the meaning that mediums attribute to their experiences, transcripts were analysed using IPA (Smith, 1996), which values the nuances and idiosyncrasies of

individual experience. IPA adopts a broad realist ontology by suggesting that what people say has some significance and represents their psychological world (for a recent comprehensive overview of IPA see Smith, Larkin, & Flowers, 2009). In this respect, we were interested in seeking an insider's perspective by giving mediums a voice, recognizing them as experts on their experiences, and acknowledging these experiences within a cultural context; thus we were not concerned with establishing the veridicality of mediumship experiences or testing abilities. Smith et al. (1996) described IPA as sharing family resemblances with other phenomenological approaches, particularly in exploring participants' subjective experiences in their own terms, but being distinct from them in emphasizing the participant's own hermeneutic process and explicitly acknowledging the interpretative role of the analyst in going beyond simple description or synthesis.

Interview schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was designed using guidelines recommended by Smith and Eatough (2006). A copy is included as Appendix A. The schedule was divided into four main topic areas: mediumship background, the process and nature of mediumship, the role of spirit guides, and the purpose of mediumship. Given that observations were initially made in the field of mediumship training and demonstrations, it was possible to avoid jargon and construct questions in a language that mediums would be familiar with. The interview process was treated as a collaborative dialogue with the interview schedule mapping possible ways the discussion might proceed but not being restricted or bound by it. A draft copy of the interview schedule was first shared for comments and feedback with three mediums who were independent of the study and then piloted with one participant, which resulted in minor amendments.

Participants

IPA research seeks to explore in-depth the lived experience of individuals who are a homogeneous group rather than making generalizations that are applicable to all (Smith & Osborn, 2003). In terms of sample size, it is generally agreed that fewer participants examined in greater depth is better than a descriptive analysis of many individuals (Hefferon & Gil-Rodriguez, 2011). Therefore, it was decided that a sample size not exceeding 10 participants would be appropriate to look for convergences and divergences across cases, while at

the same time preserving the idiographic nature of the analysis.

Participants consisted of 10 spiritualist mental mediums who had taken part in a previous survey conducted by the authors (cf. Roxburgh & Roe, 2011) and who had expressed an interest in taking part in an interview study when returning their completed survey. All of the participants were Spiritualist National Union (SNU) registered mediums who had gained either certificate (CSNU) or diploma (DSNU) awards from the SNU for demonstrating mediumship at spiritualist churches. The sample consisted of five males and five females, with ages ranging between 46 and 76 years, who had practiced as a medium for between 9 and 55 years.

Procedure

All participants were sent an information sheet about the study in advance, which emphasized that the interview would be an opportunity to tell their story and express their personal views about mediumship, and that they would not be asked to demonstrate mediumship or prove their claimed ability. Face-to-face interviews were conducted by the first author at a time and place convenient to participants (the authors' university, participants' homes, or participants' local spiritualist church). It was important that participants felt comfortable and able to share their experiences; thus time was spent building rapport in general conversation before recording the interview with the participant's consent. The interviewer reflected on her own experiences at the Arthur Findlay College and stressed that she was open-minded about mediumship, which helped to develop trust and seemed to put participants at ease.

The semi-structured interview schedule was used as a guide rather than a strict set of questions, which allowed participants to talk about their experiences in their own words and on their own terms. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the research at the beginning and end of the interview process.

Ethics

The study followed ethical guidelines outlined by the British Psychological Society (BPS; 2006), and prior ethical approval was given by the authors' university ethics committee. Participants were asked to complete a consent form before starting the interview and were reassured that their identity would be protected. This

included consent for material in their interview to be used in public documents on the condition that all personal details were anonymized. Participants were also reminded that their contribution was completely voluntary and that they were free to stop the interview at anytime or withdraw their data from the study within one month of taking part in the interview.

Reflexivity

Interviews were conducted by the first author, who had previously worked with individuals who had mental health issues. She was aware of the tendency of Western psychiatry to pathologize unusual experiences and for service-users, who reported such experiences, to feel disempowered within the mental health system. Given that mediumship could be compared to dissociative identity disorder (DID; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) by Western psychiatry, it was important to use an approach that considered the medium as expert on their experiences, acknowledged these experiences within a cultural context, and addressed reflexivity (an explicit awareness of personal assumptions, values, and experiences that may have influenced enquiry and interpretation; for a detailed discussion see Shaw, 2010). Also, as the first author was aware of previous literature before she conducted the interviews, this could have influenced her approach to questioning during the interviews and subsequent analysis and interpretation of the data. However, in acknowledgement of this awareness, she was able to make a conscious effort to focus on the present during the interviews and to try to “see” the world as experienced by the participant. When reflecting upon our participation in the mediumship training course, we kept in mind how important it was to be open and non-judgemental when interacting with other individuals on the course in order to gain a true picture of what is involved, and this attitude remained throughout the interview and analytical process. It also cemented the importance of adopting an epistemological position that valued the nuances and idiosyncrasies of individual experience.

Analysis

The flexible guidelines to IPA analysis, as outlined in a number of sources (e.g., Smith & Eatough, 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Willig, 2001), were followed. Each interview was transcribed verbatim using standard transcription principles (Willig, 2001, p. 25). Participants’ identities were protected by assigning a pseudonym and by changing any potential identifying information within

the transcript. In keeping with the IPA tradition, the analysis consisted of close textual readings of participants’ transcripts and a critical understanding based on interpretative activity. A key part of the analysis was to be mindful of how participants’ accounts were similar but also different and to acknowledge these convergences and divergences when identifying and constructing themes.

The first stage of the process involved familiarization with the data by reading the first transcript several times. Comments were then made in the left side margin with reference to initial representations, interesting points, ideas, and assumptions. Emerging themes were then identified from these comments on the right side margin. These themes were then clustered together according to associations. A main table of themes was developed from the clusters and a directory of phrases that supported the themes was compiled, including identifiers that highlighted the page and line numbers of where the phrase could be found. Analysis of the remaining cases involved reading the transcripts several times and then using this initial table of themes to identify similarities and differences, amplifications, echoes, and contradictions within the responses. Thus, a cyclical approach to reviewing each of the transcripts was implemented, allowing for new themes to emerge together with additional responses, which further articulated the existing themes. After each transcript had been analyzed, a final master table of themes was constructed. This involved consolidating the initial table of themes from the first transcript with any new themes that emerged from the other transcripts. Themes were not selected on the basis of how frequently they occurred in the transcripts but instead on the basis of how well they helped to elucidate other parts of the account and on the “richness of the particular passages that highlight the themes” (Smith & Osborn, 2003, p. 75). However, for a theme to be retained it must have been represented by at least half of the sample of participants.

Reliability and Validity

Several authors have discussed important considerations to take into account when conducting qualitative research that can impact on the quality of the data (see Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Smith, 2011; Yardley, 2000). Of paramount importance in qualitative studies is transparency about the research process, in particular providing a track record of how raw data is transformed into themes so the analytical process is accessible and visible and being open to reframing by

trying out alternate interpretations. These checks and balances were achieved in this study by grounding the themes with examples (extracts from participant transcripts) and by having a dialogue with other IPA researchers in order to assess the validity of themes that emerged. Participants were also given the opportunity to appraise preliminary interpretations and provide suggestions for changes to themes. No participants chose to take this opportunity. Interviewees may be more likely to take this up if on reflection they become concerned about what they have said or how they are being positioned.

Results

Three themes were identified that were of particular relevance to transpersonal psychology: explanatory systems of mediumship, spirit guides as transcendental beings versus aspects of self, and the purpose of mediumship. Two additional themes illuminate the pathways to mediumship and the context within which mediums define themselves as a medium and are reported elsewhere (Roxburgh & Roe, accepted).

Explanatory Systems of Mediumship

This theme focuses on the necessary features that are involved when demonstrating mediumship. Participants reflected on preparing for mediumship demonstration with practices, such as meditation, “stilling the mind,” mental detachment, mental requests, visualization of chakras, putting daily concerns to one side, and pacification. These preparatory techniques seemed to help participants enter a receptive state that encouraged or enabled transpersonal experiences. However, participants also mentioned that it was possible to have these experiences in the absence of any preparation. On these occasions, transpersonal experiences came unbidden in the form of a mystical state or apparition or as a result of a traumatic event. In addition, participants explained how they experienced communication with the deceased as a process involving the senses and symbolic imagery.

The majority of participants described how they engaged in a preparation process, prior to demonstrating their mediumship, which seemed somewhat ritualistic. Preparatory practices included such things as meditation, avoiding alcohol, remaining calm, detaching oneself from everyday concerns, and cleansing the body. As Graham³ stated: “I meditate for 35 minutes to relax me and put me into a deep state, a very aware state but relaxed, and then I have a shower

and I get dressed and then I drive to the church.” Penny described how her preparation starts internally through a process of pacification and mental detachment that also involved mental intent to receive information of relevance to an individual:

Step number one you need to be as calm as you possibly can, despite what may be happening to you in your own life. You need to be distanced emotionally from what might happen. So you need to be calm, collected, and you need to have sent out your mental request, which is saying: “I am not interested in any information except what this person needs and can use.”

However, some participants did not seem to require this preparation or intention in order to see spirits objectively either as visions or solid manifestations that had an independent existence outside the mind (or senses). For example, Mary said that she sees spirits objectively when she is not expecting it: “I think with the objective it happens very quick and easy when you are not really expecting it, maybe sat quietly in your lounge, and suddenly you see someone peep their head round the door.”

Sarah believes that to see spirits objectively “there has to be a manifestation of energy, for that to happen the energy that is required is extreme.” Graham recounted a particular day when his ability to see spirits objectively seemed to suddenly unfold. In the morning he saw his deceased grandfather appear in front of him, “as plain as you are now but he looked kind of sad and grey.” Later in the day he then saw another spirit in the form of a monk who also appeared objectively, “I could hit him in the shoulders, and we hugged and it was like he was solid, he was mortal.” Then in the evening he saw a nun manifest whilst sitting watching the television and it transpired that he had been called upon to become a healer:

Between me and the television I saw a red cross, then I saw that this red cross was on a white background then I saw this white background was actually a female with a white gown on and a red cross, and she said she had come to work healing through me if I was prepared to do it.

The extract below also shows how Penny’s experience seemed to be a spontaneous event, with no apparent triggers or preparation to induce what could be referred to as an altered state of consciousness or mystical state:

At the time I remember we were on the cliffs at (*) where I was dragged up, a little remote village in the middle of nowhere . . . and we were sitting on the cliff quite peacefully, and then suddenly everything became alive, the sea was just alive and throbbing and I could see little creatures swimming in it, the air and the land, and I looked down at this little flower, I remember it was a harebell, a little blue harebell, they grow on the cliffs, and I could actually see a little, a little being in the flower, and it's like everything is pulsating, radiating, alive, but not in the way that you would normally see it, and that was just for one moment, but in that moment, even though I was only seven years old, I understood . . . may be the meaning of . . . life, in that everything is living, everything is the same, and that is where divinity is, if you like.⁴

In addition, some participants commented on how traumatic events, such as bereavement, near death experiences (NDEs), or head injuries could bring about sudden mediumistic abilities. For example, Melissa stated:

People who have had near death experiences or had blows to the head also seem to develop mediumistic abilities and there have been numerous people that I have read about and that I have met who developed spontaneous psychic and/or mediumistic awareness as a result of head injuries.

Rachel believed that most people were born with the predisposition to develop mediumistic ability but that traumatic experiences provided some sort of transformative opportunity resulting in individuals "opening up" to mediumship, perhaps reflecting increased proneness or sensitivity to mediumistic experiences:

I think everybody is born with it, it depends whether they want to go forward with it or a person that has an accident, not to them, but deaths, all sorts of things happen to people, I can't really describe, it could be a bad marriage, it could be a death in the family, it could be somebody talking to you and then all of a sudden it opens up to each and everyone but you don't come into spiritualism until you're ready.

When asked about how spirit communication takes place participants talked about sensing, seeing, or hearing spirits. The majority of participants described

how their mediumship depended on all three faculties; however, it seemed as though one or two of these modes were usually more pronounced. For example, Melissa was more clairaudient, stating that she could hear information come and go "like a recording that is on a wonky tape." In addition, some participants discussed how their sense of identity is transformed and how they can feel changes taking place within their personality and their body. This was best represented in the account by Mary:

I work with clairvoyance, clairaudience and clairsentience, sometimes I do see pictures on the screens in my mind, sometimes I do hear voices objectively . . . I hear my name called . . . but mostly I hear thoughts in my head that I know aren't mine . . . and then the one that really works the best, which I feel brings the best evidence when I'm demonstrating on the rostrum is the clairsentience because I feel the personality of the person, I feel the changes in my own personality, I feel as if I've lost a leg, you know, or if I've got heart pains, chest pain, back pain, eye pain, I feel that personality as different to mine.

Although Mary talked about using all three of the above modalities to receive communication from spirits, it was apparent that she considered her ability to "feel" spirit as the most discernible. Mary gave the impression that the physiological nature of this mode made the experience more "real" for her. In addition to noticeable changes within her own body that she attributed to a spirit presence, Mary mentioned how other people observed and commented on these changes, in particular they would say her mannerisms were different, her facial features altered or her personality seemed different, perhaps suggesting that her experience is empathic or beyond the boundaries of ordinary personal self.

In the following extract Sarah also talked about the physiological nature of mediumistic communication. She used the metaphor of energy to make the distinction between a psychic link that is "static" and "dense," and spirit communication that is "vibrant" and "lighter":

If we connect on that psychic level, it's a heavy feeling, it feels quite dense, but when spirits connect and you're working on that spiritual plane it's almost like there is a lightening from a . . . I suppose I can explain it more as a dizzy feeling, it's just all

that much lighter, so to actually explain it it's that simple, but to understand it and follow that through you have to feel it to understand the difference, if you were to do an exercise and feel the energy of somebody sat next to you it's heavier and it's dense and it's weighty, where if then we took you on to communicate with the spirit world, you actually feel as though it is lighter, it's out here and it's vibrant, again if you're working on a psychic level you can feel very static, very grounded, very here, whereas if spirit communicates with you it's lively, it's vibrant, they're alive and the energy doesn't have the physical weightiness of it, so you know if I was doing a sitting I'm generally sort of like this, you know my hands are going, the spirit energy is there but if I was doing a psychic reading I'd probably sit back . . . and again if you see somebody working on the platform and they're a good medium, nine times out of ten they are going to be moving with it, you know because it is light, it is vibrant and it's beautiful and it's standing in this energy, you know when spirit's with you they just haven't got this heaviness that we have in the physical.

In talking about how mediumship “works” there was also the sense that some participants tended to perceive meaning in (what appeared to be unrelated) events. Penny expressed how she thinks memory and associations are used in spirit communication:

Your memory and your associations are used, and that's an important point that most people do not understand, and that's how they communicate with you . . . but this question of memory and association is a big one, it's not really understood, but very often spirit will use my memory, a memory of my own will flash into my head, say for example, my little sister flashed [came to mind] but then considering her situation that she is in at the moment, that would have some relevance to what they wanted to say, it works wonderfully well with spirit communication.

Similarly, Christopher spoke about how spirits communicate with him using symbols and he described how he associates certain events or objects with a particular meaning or message:

They work with symbols with me, so you get to know what these symbols mean, so . . . I've got four

flowers for all the way through the year, so I see snowdrops for January, sort of February, and then daffodils, and then bluebells, and then roses.

Spirit Guides as Transcendental Beings Versus Aspects of Self

Some participants described their spirit guides as aspects of their identity that seemed to expand or extend their sense of self and thus were more this-worldly than other-worldly. Christopher wondered “whether spirit guides are a completely different entity to yourself or whether they are just an aspect of your own soul,” and Mary considers her guides to be aspects of herself:

I know some of the helpers are aspects of my own mind and aspects of my higher mind . . . because I don't believe that time is linear, it is cyclical, so you are who you have always been, you are who you are now, so some aspects of me are there in my consciousness, but some are not even separate . . . it's a very complex subject this, a very complex subject.

In contrast, most of the participants reflected on their spirit guides as being benevolent, mystical entities that were omnipotent or other-worldly. For example, participants talked about spirit guides as though they were real people, as “entities” or “beings” with separate personalities and identities: “I do look upon them as people, and people who have gone into the next life” (Penny).

Melissa and Penny both described their spirit guides as being more highly evolved. Penny talked about guides being wiser: “I look upon them as being a little bit wiser than me,” and as people who were more spiritually developed when alive. Melissa gave her explanation for why so many guides appear to be Native American or religious figures:

I think that they are more people who—this is what they tell us anyway—people who have learnt a lot more, more progressed people, to use religious terminology, probably people who have gone a little bit further along the path . . . more evolved, nicer people, more knowledgeable . . . they do tend to be people who certainly in their last incarnation to this one, which tends to be how they present themselves, they do tend to be people who were on a spiritual path, which is why you get Native Americans, nuns, priests, that sort of thing.

As well as speaking about how spirit guides were highly evolved, participants also mentioned that their guides had specialized skills and abilities. As Penny stated: “I personally think there are different teachers for different purposes, you know like specialists, like we have here in the living world, I think there are specialists, there are probably specialists on communicating information on certain subjects.”

Sarah’s comment about the omniscient nature of spirit guides suggests that she attributed skills and abilities to an external source:

I know the times that I have asked for help it’s been specific stuff, you know, I’m hopeless at maths, I’m going to need to do this, somebody from the spirit world that is good with figures come and help me with this and I used to do, in my material everyday job, for 27 years, I used to do accounts and I was rubbish at it so at the end of the year when I was doing all the end of year stuff I used to have to say, you know, hopefully somebody would come along that maybe was an accountant and then I used to look at all the forms and think “Oh yeah, that’s that and that’s that and that’s that” and it would all come together.

Participants also spoke about being aware of certain guides since birth and that their role was to ensure no harm came to the medium. Samuel said guides were “like Guardian angels, they are there from birth to death.” Sarah reflected on an experience where her guide intervened to prevent an accident, which is reminiscent of accounts by individuals, usually in danger, who have heard an “inner voice:”

On one occasion I can remember my husband was driving down the road and I just heard my guide’s voice say “Pull in” and my husband immediately pulled in and as he pulled in this big lorry came round the bend and if he hadn’t have pulled in we would have been hurt, so at that stage I know my guide was aware of what was happening and came and stood in to protect us and that has happened a couple of times, so I do think they are there to protect us.

The Purpose of Mediumistic Communication: Mediumship as Counselling

In accounting for their experiences, participants described the purpose of mediumship as therapeutic support. Graham stated that:

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It gives a lot of comfort to people if they know that their mothers, fathers, aunties, uncles are alive and well in the spirit realm, and that they are also looking out for them while they are here on the Earth plane.

Melissa expressed her belief that counselling is involved in mediumship and mentioned she had studied bereavement counselling: “A little bit of, if you like, bereavement counselling is involved in it, which is why I studied that.”

But in order to provide comfort and reassurance, the information has to convince the individual that the message has come from their deceased loved one. As such, participants reflected on how they had searched for evidence that would validate their own mediumship ability as well as seeking evidence that would prove they were communicating with spirits. James and Samuel talked about the importance of obtaining evidence that will establish who they are talking to in spirit. In this respect, evidential information seems to serve the purpose of giving hope to individuals by reinforcing the belief that there is survival after death and that bonds do continue:

When I’m given a message . . . first of all I’ll establish who I’ve got, I’ll give some evidence for that person, a description, something about what they look like, something that was going on around them when they were on the earth, perhaps some birth dates or some names around and then something that is happening to that person they are giving the message to now. (James)

I’m trying to prove that I’m with this person, so you know if I’ve got Uncle Tom and you’ve got Uncle Tom in spirit then it’s fine, but let me have enough information to prove they’re the Uncle Tom with this person and not that person, so I can build up information. (Samuel)

Discussion

Themes generated from participants’ accounts have highlighted a number of phenomenological aspects to the lived experience of mediumship, which will now be discussed in relation to the wider literature and positioned in a theoretical context. When reflecting on how they prepared for mediumship, there seemed to be similarities in mediums’ reported practices (e.g.,

mental detachment, meditation) with techniques for attaining transpersonal potentials. For example, Walsh and Vaughan (1993) discussed six components of transcendence: (1) ethics (essential discipline for training the mind), (2) concentration (attentional training), (3) emotional transformation (acceptance of negative emotions and the cultivation of compassion and equanimity), (4) redirection of motivation (concern for others), (5) refinement of awareness (mindfulness), and (6) cultivation of wisdom (accepting mundane or painful aspects of life). Of particular importance to participants in this study are the first two components: training the mind and concentration. These components closely resemble participants' preparatory practices involving stilling the mind and relaxation and enable mediums to enter a receptive state that is optimal for transpersonal experience. This was best exemplified by Penny who stated: "Step number one you need to be as calm as you possibly can, despite what may be happening to you in your own life. You need to be distanced emotionally from what might happen."

Likewise, there were similarities between mediums' practices and methods that have been proposed to promote significant results with psi-conductive states (cf. Braud, 1975; Honorton, 1977; Roe, 2009) and in ESP tests (cf. White, 1964), such as relaxation, engaging the conscious mind, and making a demand for a positive outcome. Braud proposed that there are seven characteristics of a psi-conductive state: (1) being physically relaxed, (2) having reduced physical arousal or activation, such as in meditative states, (3) reduced sensory input and processing (based on Honorton's noise reduction model), (4) increased awareness of internal processes, feelings, and images (including dreams and fantasy), (5) psi increases with (*receptive mode*) right hemisphere functioning and decreases with (*action mode*) left hemisphere functioning, (6) having an altered view of the nature of the world (e.g., belief in psi), and (7) psi must be momentarily important (e.g., psychic healing). Similarly, Honorton (1977) reviewed over 80 studies involving procedures for inducing internal attention states that enhanced psi functioning, concluding that meditation, hypnosis, relaxation, and sensory deprivation (e.g., ganzfeld stimulation) all helped to reduce internal and external "noise" that would ordinarily inhibit the detection of psi. In addition, these findings are in accord with interviews conducted by Emmons and Emmons (2003) who found modern mediums reported entering

an altered state of consciousness before demonstrating mediumship.

In contrast, there were also occasions where participants stated that they had experienced spontaneous experiences without the need for preparation. These often occurred in childhood and signalled sensitivity to mediumistic or spiritual phenomena. One participant described what has been referred to in the introduction as an EHE (White, 1997). EHEs have been proposed to serve a transformative process in the experient, but that this depends on how the individual integrates the experience into their biographical narrative (e.g., Wilde & Murray, 2009). Some participants also mentioned that mediumistic experiences could occur after traumatic events, such as bereavement or near-death experiences. This finding echoes previous studies with individuals in the general population who have also reported contact with the deceased after bereavement (cf. Keen, Murray, & Payne, 2013).

In addition to describing features that were involved in preparing for mediumship, participants also discussed the form in which ostensible discarnate communication was experienced. One participant, Sarah, used the metaphor of energy to make the distinction between psychic and mediumistic communication. Williams, Evans, and Skinner (2003) have explored energy metaphors in the discourses of two psychics, a healer, and an aura reader and reported that energy could refer to physical sensations, entities, or information. This was mirrored in the current study as Sarah referred to psychic communication in relation to physical sensations (a feeling that was "static" and "dense") and to spirit entities in mediumship communication (using terms, such as "vibrant" and "lighter"). In addition, she also explained how energy was needed to produce a manifestation of spirit that could be seen objectively. Differences in the way mediumship and psychic readings are described have also been found by Rock et al. (2009); for example, as well as finding similarities in that multimodal, visual, auditory, tactile, and "just knowing" themes were facets of both mediumship and psychic reading experiences, they also found, that, inter alia, the mediumship reading required a *verificatory sign* to confirm that contact with a spirit communicator had been established. Gilbert (2008) also found mediums experienced communication with the deceased as something sensuous and embedded within the body. Mediums stated that spirit communicators were able

to physically impress upon them the sensations that the spirit had before passing over, reflecting the sense of connectedness that mediums feel with spirit as well as acting as confirmation for the recipient that the medium was in contact with whom they claimed to be. This was something that was evident in the current study when participants discussed the importance of taking time to verify who they were in communication with before going on to convey information that was intended to provide comfort to sitters.

Most participants explained that mediumship depended on multiple modes of communication (hearing, seeing, and sensing information), which echoes findings from a recent thematic analysis (Rock et al., 2008). However, it also seemed as though one or two of these modes were more pronounced; for example, one participant, Melissa, said that she was more clairaudient, stating that she could hear information come and go “like a recording that is on a wonky tape.”

Other participants highlighted the importance of making associations, memory imagery, and symbolism in the communication process. For example, Penny described how a memory of a person or event would flash into her consciousness, which she then interpreted as being significant in the life of the person for whom she was giving a mediumship reading. Similarly, Garrett (1949) described the process of communication as one involving images and symbols that needed interpretation, and Emmons and Emmons (2003) reported that mediums who receive communication as a visual image often have *psychic dictionaries* in which various symbols represent certain information. Thus, if one considered the mediumship process as involving anomalous information transfer, these findings may mean that mediums have learned—perhaps through regular introspection and appraisal of their internal imagery—how to distinguish between mediumistic impressions and normal sensory input (or memory images), or how to elaborate on minimal information. Such a belief fits with memory models of psi that suggest an individual’s own memory traces play a role in the anomalous transmission of information (see Broughton, 2006, for a recent review).

In terms of spirit guide phenomena, participants described many supernatural and mystical features that suggested they perceived them as advanced transcendental beings. One participant spoke about the protector role of spirit guides and described an occasion where she believed her spirit guide had intervened to prevent an

accident. This description of spirit guides seems similar in nature to the concept of an *Inner Self Helper* (ISH); a term used by Allison (1980) to describe a supposedly higher (or dissociated) part of the personality that helps individuals with a diagnosis of DID⁵ and can supposedly utilize paranormal abilities (cf. Van de Castle, 1993).

Table 1 identifies similarities and differences between the concepts of spirit guide and ISH. For instance, neither has the capacity for hate, since both claim to feel only love. This relates to classifications of spirits into “higher” and “lower” orders as discussed by Van Dusen (1973, as cited in Richard & Adato, 1980) who noted individuals to report lower-order spirits, which correspond to disturbances of the unconscious (Freud’s *id*), and higher-order spirits, which signify the supportive, healing, and symbolic nature of Jung’s collective unconscious. Comstock (1991) pointed out that Allison was influenced by the work of Milton Erickson, who regarded the unconscious as an inner source of wisdom, and Assagioli, the founder of the Psychosynthesis movement, who viewed individuals to have several sub-personalities, but only one true self known as the *Higher Self*. Thus, it is sometimes claimed that an ISH is present in all individuals and that latent possibilities may exist within us all (Allison, 1980; Comstock, 1991).

Lastly, when discussing the purpose of mediumship, several participants mentioned that it provided therapeutic support for bereaved individuals. Participants emphasized the importance of giving hope and comfort to individuals by obtaining evidential information to prove that deceased loved ones are still around in spirit form. These findings are consistent with an ethnographic study of contemporary Spiritualism conducted by Walliss (2001), which found that mediumship demonstrations at Spiritualist churches consisted of advice and support as well as evidence of survival. In addition, Harwood (1977) suggested that spiritualists operate as therapists to individuals who are going through periods of transition, and Roe (1998; Roe & Roxburgh, 2013) has discussed the counselling benefits of attending a psychic reading.

Conclusion

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten mediums to explore their understanding of the mediumship process and were analysed using IPA. Participants discussed explanatory systems of mediumship, such as prominent modes of

Inner Self Helper/Alter

(Allison, 1980)

Prime directive of the ISH is to keep the patient alive until his/her Life Plan is completed

Has no date of origin; has always been present

Can only feel love; has no capacity for hate

Has awareness of and belief in God

Teaches person how to live and move forward properly

Co-therapist

Knows about the patient and can predict short term future

No personal sense of gender identity

Talks intellectually, prefers to answer questions, gives enigmatic instruction

Avoids using slang

Is aware of patient's past lifetimes

Spirit Guide

(Roxburgh, 2010)^c

Can intervene to prevent accidents
Protector status

Participants tend to report spirit guides as being present from birth

Reported as having infinite benevolence

Can be religious figures or on a spiritual path

Teaches and guides

Not stated

Some participants stated the purpose of mediumship is to "prophesise"

Often reports gender (in some cases does not)

Inspirational or philosophical speakers

Not stated

Not stated

Table 1. Similarities and Differences Between the Inner Self Helper and Spirit guides

communication and how they believe mediumship operates. They also reflected on the transcendental features of spirit guides and described the purpose of mediumship as therapeutic support. While these findings could be argued to support a structural view of transpersonal theory in that mediumistic experiences seem to remain at the psychic level of transpersonal experience (Wilber, 1995), participants deeply value their experiences at this level, which they interpret as providing access to a wider reality in which information is communicated that can be of assistance to others. As such, they perhaps would not view the other levels of subtle, causal, and nondual consciousness as necessarily more privileged. In addition, the presence of spirit guides with transcendental qualities could be viewed as an aspect of mediumistic experience that enables individuals to get in touch with their higher unconscious in order to make contact with their Higher Self. It may be fruitful in future research to investigate the spirit guide phenomenon in more depth. As a final point, this paper

has highlighted that mediumship is a legitimate focus for transpersonal research as findings have identified a set of experiences that are interpreted by mediums in terms of an expanded view of the nature of reality and identity. Given this, it would be interesting to explore whether reported experiences differ for mediums who do not consider themselves spiritualists or at least are rather more secular. Another area that warrants further investigation is the phenomenology of mediumship from the sitters' perspective, which has received relatively little attention within transpersonal psychology or psychical research thus far.

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Notes

1. This manuscript contains data used in a doctoral thesis (Roxburgh, 2010) and a book chapter (Roxburgh & Roe, 2013).
2. Note that this research question and the themes derived from it are discussed elsewhere (Roxburgh & Roe, accepted)
3. All participants have been assigned pseudonyms.
4. Transcription notes: Ellipsis (...) in the participants' quotes means there was a pause, and round brackets with an asterick (*) indicate that personal information has been removed.
5. It should be noted that the concept of DID (previously labelled multiple personality disorder) has been debated by Spanos (1994) who argued

that the diagnosis is culturally-specific, with cases mainly confined to the United States, and that alter personalities are socially constructed in hypnotic and therapeutic settings. Furthermore, Van de Castle (1993) reported results of a survey, which found some therapists viewed the ISH as iatrogenic, whereas others viewed them as mystical entities, and that this depended on their own ideological orientation.

6. Taken from doctoral research involving a content analysis and interviews with mediums.

Appendix A

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

A: Introduction

- 1) Do you have any questions about the research I am doing?
- 2) How long have you been a medium?
- 3) Where do you demonstrate your mediumship now?

B: Mediumship Background

- 4) Can you tell me how you became a medium?

Prompts:

How did you discover your ability?

When did you know you were a medium?

How do you think your ability developed?

In your opinion who can become a medium?

- 5) In your opinion were there any personal experiences that were happening in your life when you realized you were a medium?
- 6) How do you feel about the idea that mediumship is inherited?
- 7) In your opinion what is the role of the family in mediumship?

Prompts:

How did your family react to your mediumistic abilities?

Is anyone in your family mediumistic?

- 8) Can you tell me about your experiences of attending a Spiritualist Church?

Prompts:

What are your experiences of spiritualism in mediumship?

C: Process and Nature of Mediumship

- 9) In your own words can you talk me through what would happen at a typical mediumship session? (Demonstration/Sitting)

Prompts:

How do you prepare for mediumship?
How do you prepare to communicate?
Is there anything you do before you demonstrate?
Physically? Mentally? Emotionally? Practically?
How do you feel when you are demonstrating mediumship?
Any changes in the way you feel?

- 10) In your own words could you describe how a spirit communicates with you?

Prompts:

How does mediumship work?
How do you know when a communication has finished?

- 11) How do you decide when and who communicates?
12) Can you tell me how you know you are communicating with a spirit?

Prompts:

Do you experience the spirit as something internal or external to yourself?

D: Role of Spirit Guides

- 13) In your own words, could you tell me about your spirit guide(s)?

Prompts:

Can you tell me about how you discovered your guide?
In your opinion what is their role in your mediumship?
If more than one, why several?
How do they communicate with you?
What is it like to experience a spirit guide?
In your opinion does a medium choose a spirit guide or does a spirit guide choose a medium?

E: Purpose of Mediumship

- 14) What do you think is the purpose of mediumship?
15) What kind of messages typically come through?
16) Can you tell me about your experiences of the clients' (sitter's) reactions to the information or messages received?

Prompts:

How does the client/sitter make sense of the messages/information?
How do they react?

- 17) In your opinion can spirits attach themselves to people?

Prompts:

Do you think evil spirits can possess vulnerable people?
What is your opinion on the beliefs of the Spirit Release Foundation?

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