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Transpersonal Psychology and an Agnostic Experiential Exploration of Mediumship and the Ostensible Phenomenon of Life after Death

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This paper presents results of an autoethnographic personal experiential research study of mediumship and the ostensible phenomenon of life after death. The researcher's experiences center on his attempt to make contact with his deceased brother, as part of a doctoral research project. The researcher concludes with a skeptical interpretation of the phenomenon of medium-facilitated communications regarding the deceased; he suggests these are likely to involve cold reading, sensory cues, coincidence, and subjective validation rather than constituting genuine evidence of life after death. The researcher's conclusions leave room for the possibility of a paranormal interpretation, though this is not favored.

Keywords: *mediumship, autoethnography, life after death, agnostic, skeptic, spiritualist, cold reading, paranormal*

In 1975, when I was 24 years old, my mother died unexpectedly. This brought questions about the possibility of life after death into paramount importance for me. Soon after my mother's death I attended a large group lecture by a medium on the topic of life after death, where a few hundred people were present. My skeptical mind could not take seriously the prospect of life after death, but I remembered looking at my mother's dressed up body in the funeral parlor, seeing her outward features resembling her former self, somehow knowing that her real presence was not in that body and sensing that her presence might be somewhere else. The medium had exchanges with several people in the audience, and I recall staring at her very intensely, feeling that our eyes were making contact in a mysterious, energetic way. Sure enough, she then singled me out and said that I had recently received a phone call that was very upsetting to me. I felt my whole body shaking, as I instinctively knew she was referring to the phone call from my uncle a few weeks before, informing me that my mother had died unexpectedly. The call had sent me into shock, guilt, and I was virtually unable to deal with anything for the next few days. The woman sitting next to me, whom I did not know, held my hand to help me regain my composure while the medium spoke to me about this event. I subsequently assimilated the experience and went on with my life.

For some people, the experience of felt knowingness I experienced when seeing my mother's body at the funeral parlor, and when the medium told me about my distressing phone call, might be sufficient evidence of the reality of life after death (Roe & Roxburgh, 2014; Sagan, 1996; Shermer, 2002; Sudduth, 2014; Wilson, 2014). Yet for me the experience felt too subjective to constitute genuine evidence for any such phenomenon. A number of alternative interpretations seemed obvious. The strong feeling that a loved one's presence must be somewhere else may be a common way for those mourning their death to comfort themselves. When I soon afterwards attended the lecture, perhaps the awareness of the medium was captured by my emotional intensity—a phenomenon that can be observed and described neurologically and physiologically (Jamieson & Rock, 2014; Peres, Moreira-Almeida, & Caixeta, 2014). Being told that one recently received a "very upsetting phone call" in a lecture on mediumship is straight out of the skeptic's dictionary of so-called cold readings, in which the body language of the recipient is a primary source of signals that the medium is able to read. Because very different meaning frames can be employed, scientific research on such experiences is complex and not frequently undertaken.

Transpersonal inquiry into the ostensible phenomenon of life after death is an area of study that

embodies tensions between transpersonal psychology as a discipline that considers realms of experience such as mystical, psychic, spiritual, paranormal, extrasensory, psychedelic, religious, transcendental, unitive, and so forth, and one that holds a place in the academy. This situation reflects deeper contentions over what sorts of apparently authentic subjective experiences should be deemed to represent events that can be objectively validated (cf. Krippner & Schroll, 2014).

One of the more condescending remarks one can hear about one's work in the academic social sciences is that it is "not scientific." This kind of criticism has been directed at both humanistic psychology and transpersonal psychology: "Mainstream psychologists, if they have any name recognition at all when asked about the movement, think of humanistic psychology as unscientific, guilty of promoting the cult of narcissism, and a thing of the past" (Taylor & Martin, 2001, p. 25). Although the British Psychological Society has a formal transpersonal section and the UK Council for Psychotherapy recently set up a center for transpersonal psychology, attempts to form a division of the American Psychological Association focused on transpersonal issues were not successful—in part due to concerns that the field was unscientific in nature (Aanstoos, Serlin, & Greening, 2000; Scotton, 1996).

My own motivation to explore the topic of mediumship and the possibility of life after death became very strong after the death of my older brother Fred in 2005. We were very close, and I watched over him throughout his life as he suffered from episodes of mental disturbance. It occurred to me that if there were any possibility for some *bona fide* afterlife presence that could be communicating with living persons, the close connection my brother had always felt towards me would be the most likely way to experience this presence.

It was with a healthy mixture of openness, skepticism, agnosticism, and science that I engaged in qualitative, "personal experiential methods" (McLeod, 2011) to explore the alleged phenomenon of life after death as reflected through the work of self-described mediums. Mediums will refer to *mental mediums*, who purportedly communicate with deceased persons to obtain information for sitters, as opposed to *physical mediums*, who supposedly manifest physical phenomena such as apports (materializing objects from the spirit world), table-tipping, or transfiguration (changing the

form of the medium's features), presumably obtained from an alleged spirit world (see Zammit, 2015; Zammit & Zammit, 2013). In this research, I engaged in autoethnography, heuristic research, and intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2004, 2011; Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2002) to explore mediumship and my attempt to make contact with my brother.

Initial informal qualitative studies of mediumship were conducted toward the end of the 19th century, but essentially disappeared by the middle of the 20th century (Gauld, 1968, 1982; Lawton, 1932; Myers, 1903/1961; Rhine, 1953). The second half of the 20th century was generally dominated by quantitative research, which carried over to research in mediumship and parapsychology as well (Beischel, 2014; Cardeña, Lynn, & Krippner, 2000; Irwin & Watt, 2007). The 21st century has recently seen an advance of interest in qualitative research in mediumship (Harris & Alvarado, 2014; Roxburgh & Roe, 2014); however, such research is generally described in the literature as studying the experiences of mediums and sitters, who, for the most part, are people other than the researcher (see for example Beischel & Schwartz, 2007; Beischel & Rock, 2009; Rock, Beischel, & Schwartz, 2008; Robertson & Roy, 2004; Rock, Beischel, & Cott, 2009; Williams & Arcangel, 2011). What has been described in the context of qualitative research of mediumship may or may not involve actual mediumship sessions, researchers are at times not physically present with the medium, and typically researchers are bringing critical evaluation to the experiential reports of others rather than being able to apply such a perspective to their own first-hand experiences. Therefore, the current study offers a relatively unique perspective on the skill that mediums purport to hold: the ability to communicate with the deceased.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the possibility of life after death as perceived by mediums who purportedly communicate with the deceased, and by a researcher who was agnostic on the matter. Research questions were (1) In what ways do mediums experience the alleged phenomenon of life after death? (2) In what ways does an agnostic researcher experience the alleged phenomenon of life after death through engaging in interviews, workshops, and personal experiential sessions with mediums?

Methods

Autoethnography, heuristic qualitative research, and intuitive inquiry were employed within five cycles of engagement with the topic. Cycles 1 and 2 involved heuristic immersion and incubation; Cycle 3 consisted of semi-structured qualitative interviews, experiential sessions, and classes with self-identified mediums involved with spiritualism through their activities at spiritualist camps in Maine, as well as autoethnographic observations and reflections; Cycle 4 constituted discussion and analysis of the results of Cycle 3 as well as follow-up experiential activities; Cycle 5 completed the project with the researcher's conclusions concerning research questions.

Intuitive inquiry (Anderson, 2004, 2011) provided the five-cycle frame for research, and heuristic research (Moustakas, 1990) is descriptive of the researcher's dynamic stance in relationship with the project: six ongoing cyclical stages of initial engagement, immersion in the topic, incubation so that engagement with the topic can percolate into ordinarily non-conscious domains of the mind, illumination in the form of spontaneously-arising insights, explication of those insights, and creative synthesis of both cognitive and intuitively arising points of information (cf. Sela-Smith, 2002; Meents, 2006). Autoethnography deserves greater attention because it pertains most directly to the actual content of the research.

Autoethnography was developed in the last few decades of the 20th century, largely through the efforts of sociologist Carolyn Ellis (2009). The method has been formally described as the "autobiographical and narrative inquiry that self-consciously explores the interplay of introspective, personally engaged self-reflections with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation" (Chang, 2008, p. 46). Autoethnography focuses on the social dynamics and the context within which the researcher is investigating. However, unlike strict ethnographic research, autoethnography places significant weight upon the researcher's feelings, thoughts, perspectives, experiences, reflections, insights, and personal stories. Also, this method often involves a high level of personal vulnerability and exposure on the part of the researcher, by revealing emotional or private aspects of themselves (Chang, 2008; Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004, 2009; Muncy, 2010; Short, Turner, & Grant, 2013). Although Hunter (2009a, 2009b) did not use the term

autoethnography (instead, he used the term "experiential ethnography method"), his description of the value of including his own experiences in investigating ostensible spirit mediumship is highly relevant:

In an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the experiential component of séance practice at the Bristol Spirit Lodge, I participated fully in séances and mediumship development circles It was important for my investigation that I expose myself to elements of experiencing that would simply go unnoticed from a purely observational perspective. I wanted to "feel" what it was like to sit in séance The experiential ethnography method essentially bridges the gap between the theoretical interpretations, social and parapsychological components of spirit mediumship—it gives access to the elements that the more traditional approaches miss out on. (Hunter, 2009b, pp. 10, 12)

Hunter was greatly influenced by the writings of Edith Turner (1993, 1998, 2006) in regard to participating in ritual performance to contact the alleged spirit world.

Personalized qualitative research methods such as intuitive inquiry, heuristic research, and autoethnography often fall prey to accusations of being unscientific from mainstream academia, yet disallowing the personal experiences of a researcher creates an obstacle to careful examination of authentic subjective experiences that may be of value in the complex process of attempting to understand whether some event capable of validation might be reflected in such accounts—especially when dealing with experiences that are farther from conventional cognition and deeper into what the psychoanalytic tradition refers to as dynamic potentials: the subtle affective and symbolic processes of the whole embodied person (cf. Washburn, 2003).

Participants

Participants were nine self-identified mediums with at least five years' experience working in this field. Four male and five female participants were drawn from the Temple Heights Spiritual Camp (Maine) brochures for 2009 or 2010. Males ranged in age from 47 to 62, with an average age of 55.5; females ranged from 47 to 71, with an average age of 54.6.

Data Collection

Data collection with these mediums consisted of a audio-taped interview followed by the researcher's participation in one audio-taped experiential session

with each medium. Experiential work was limited to a single session with each medium in order to avoid being unduly influenced by development of personal relationship. The interview questionnaire consisted of the following structured questions:

1. Please describe your beliefs regarding the existence of an afterlife.
2. Describe your earliest experiences that were significant to you in regard to your beliefs in life after death.
3. Describe the ways in which you receive communications from spiritual entities.
4. Describe significant experiences that you have had in regard to obtaining information for your clients in regard to psychic connections or afterlife communications.
5. Describe your experiences with receiving support in the community in regard to your beliefs in life after death; and your related professional activities.
6. Describe the reactions from your family and friends in regard to your beliefs in life after death and your related professional activities.
7. Describe your ideas and interest in scientific explanations that are consistent with your beliefs in life after death.
8. Describe any other aspects of your work in the field of psychic or afterlife communications that have meaning for you.

An example of follow-up sub-questions that were particularly relevant to the autoethnographic component of my research was the following sub-questions to question no. 3:

- A. How do you differentiate between bona fide and after-death communications and psychic communications that do not pertain to the afterlife?
- B. How do you know that what you perceive as psychic or after-death communications are not in actuality products of your own imagination?

Audio tapes of interviews and experiential sessions were transcribed and served as the primary data for the study.

Data Analysis

The interviews with mediums were transcribed and analyzed using thematic content analysis; the detailed

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results of this analysis have been reported elsewhere (Benjamin, 2012a). In accordance with heuristic research and intuitive inquiry methods, the analysis of data regarding the experience of the researcher was not a formal, external process; instead, it consisted of repeated listening to audio recordings of the interviews and sessions with mediums, assimilating the information into my own personal experience, and observed how this information supported, refuted, or otherwise changed my opinions regarding the work of mediums, and the frame through which I understood my own encounters with their work. The results that were obtained for this portion of the research were therefore reflected in my own attitudes and beliefs as a result of this systematic engagement.

Results

With regard to the ways that mediums experience the alleged phenomenon of life after death, it is possible to note briefly that despite the considerable variability of responses to the interview questions, there were many common threads. In particular, these included a high degree of certainty in their beliefs in an afterlife, the fact that Spiritualism was very important to them as a source of community support for their professional activities as mediums, and their common descriptions of receiving afterlife communications in visual, feeling/sensing, and hearing forms.

Without exception, what was described by mediums in their interviews as “detailed and accurate” information obtained about the deceased was not something I experienced in my subsequent experiential sessions. At the end of a lengthy and critical, if personal, engagement with mediumship, I lean toward the skeptic perspective of explaining the phenomenon—that it is the product of creative imagination, subjective validation (a tendency to believe that apparently meaningful events are true; Carroll, 2005), environmental influence, and placebo effect. I cannot completely rule out the possibility of some kind of spiritual intelligence to explain the formation of the universe, and perhaps if this is the case then it is not impossible that there is some kind of spirit world. However, even if such a world exists, the mediums with whom I engaged did not appear to have access to information about the deceased beyond what they might obtain from more mundane sources.

In order to convey the process by which I came to this conclusion, I will share a several anecdotes from the research engagement with mediums. The first two

of these occurred in formal mediumship session with two of the mediums encountered at the Temple Heights Spiritual Camp. The third relates to an internationally known medium from New Zealand.

The first medium I engaged professionally conveyed to me that the way she worked was to initially ask people to give the name of a deceased person they wanted to make contact with. I could hardly believe what I was hearing, as I knew that any skeptic worth his/her skepticism would tear this apart as a blatant case of cold reading mixed with subjective validation. I decided to cut my losses and give the medium the information she requested, telling her my brother's name. She immediately asked me if it was a father or son for me, and I told her it was my brother. I wished I could walk out of the room without having to pay anything, but I knew it was too late for this. The medium proceeded to talk about the different images she was seeing and picking up from my brother, about his concern for my heart, his difficulty in breathing, his impatience, and so forth. It was all hit or miss, some things clicking more than others, but nothing felt anywhere close to a genuine connection with my brother.

Then the medium started portraying smoking cigarettes in a very rapid and animated way, saying how much my brother enjoyed smoking. Even though I knew how common this was to say, I allowed her communications to go through me in its impact, and I conveyed to the medium that this was the most significant thing she had communicated to me about my brother. I told her about the major effect upon me of the "tobacco and brother" image that a medium in training at the Spiritualist camp had conveyed to me, and the ice was broken between us. The medium was dramatically acting out my brother smoking cigarettes, putting her hands back and forth to her mouth, and saying how she felt all jittery and very impatient. Yes, this reminded me of my brother, and though I corrected her that my brother smoked cigars and not cigarettes, I could not help but feel the emotional effect upon me of how she was portraying this, even though my rational mind was telling me that this was nothing more than a skilled medium playing on the suggestibility of my vulnerable state.

In a subsequent session with a different medium, I felt that everything I was discussing with this medium fell into the territory of intuition or intuitive counseling, but that there were no messages from the dead. Then it

happened. With little over five minutes left in our hour and a half session, out of the clear blue sky the medium said something to the effect that she was getting a strong image of tobacco and smoking. I encouraged her to continue and she said that she had initially gotten this image from me as soon as she put down the phone after our phone conversation a few days ago, that the smoking was probably not from me but from someone in my family line—perhaps a father or grandfather, and that she was surprised to have gotten this image as she does not smoke and rarely gets images of smoking. This was enough for me. For the third time, I had heard about smoking and tobacco from a medium. I know fully well the skeptics' perspective to all of this; that it is nothing more than a medium saying something that has a universal appeal to people, that my reaction was a perfect example of subjective validation. Be that as it may, I once again felt the personal impact, and I briefly discussed this with the medium as I made my transition to end the session.

As I analyzed these two episodes regarding my brother, smoking, and tobacco, I recalled my longtime atheist geographer friend Mike's informal mathematical calculations to explain this from a skeptical perspective. He said that in his opinion it was probably extremely common for a medium to remark about a brother as well as about tobacco, calculating that there might be about a 1 in 4 chance for this to occur. When I countered that this combination had not been conveyed to me in any of my ten formal individual sessions with mediums, or additional two informal sessions with mediums, Mike calmly replied that it made mathematical sense that this would occur once in 12 or 13 sessions. When I thought about it in this way, these experiences seemed much less compelling as evidence for the authenticity of the claims of mediums. In fact, my experiences with the first eight mediums were unconvincing.

The time came when I had completed all my interviews and sittings with mediums, with the exception of one certified medium in the University of Virginia research with mediums project. He lived in New Zealand, had an international reputation, and had appeared on radio and television. I had been in e-mail contact with this medium, and I originally referred to him as Medium W; he later chose to reveal his identity as Reverend Steve Hermann. Whereas I had used letter designations from A through H for my previous eight mediums, I chose the letter W to

designate this medium, in the hope that he would be my “White Crow” medium just in the nick of time, where the White Crow designation was based upon William James’ (1896) popular and witty description pertaining to his work with mediums: “In order to disprove the law that all crows are black, it is enough to find one white crow.” In short, while I made every effort to remain neutral and agnostic, I could not help hoping that this medium would transmit some personal and meaningful information about my brother.

In my particular case, it would have had real impact on me if a medium were to convey to me that my brother had spent much of his life in and out of mental hospitals, or that he had taken me to many Broadway shows in New York City when I was a kid, or that he had described my partner Dorothy as “the lovely Dorothy” the first time he met her, soon before he died; any such information would give me an uncanny sense that there might be credence in the notion that my brother still had some kind of presence.

As part of my research, I enrolled in a mediumship development class with Reverend Hermann. In that class, as Reverend Hermann was standing was standing right next to me making the assertion that mediums convey detailed and accurate information in their readings. Suddenly he looked straight at me and gave a particular example of this kind of communication from mediums; his example was “Uncle Fred.” This was an immediate shock to my system as it brought back my brother Fred to me, as my brother had always been “Uncle Fred” or “Uncle Freddy” to my son Jeremy. I felt the same way I had previously felt when another participant medium had said “Uncle Fred and cigars” for a similar kind of example in my previous mediumship development class I concluded that this was most likely just a “coincidence,” as “Uncle Fred” was probably a common type of example used to convey how particular information is obtained as a medium.

I was soon paired off with a woman for a mutual reading in which each person was initially instructed to say to their partner whatever came to them through their senses of smell and taste. The first word my partner said to me was, “cigars.” Once again I felt the impact of my brother Fred coming to me. The association between my brother and tobacco was how this inquiry started for me, with medium-in-training 3 years earlier in this same room at Temple Heights. That experience had a tremendously moving effect on me and had kept me open to the possibility of afterlife communications from

mediums during the 3 subsequent years, in spite of all my disappointments in the subsequent formal individual sessions with mediums for this dissertation research.

Finally I had my individual experiential session with Reverend Hermann. He held my hands to begin with, to help him feel a connection to me. When I forced myself to convey to him halfway through the session that nothing he was saying had much personal impact on me, and that I needed to feel a connection with a deceased person to feel open to the spirit world that he was describing, Reverend Hermann took my hands again and said he would try to make this connection for me. He soon went off on a tangent that was far removed from anything that felt authentic to me, and I tried once more to convey to him what I needed and wanted, even offering to tell him about the coincidental but seemingly meaningful example he had happened to use in his morning workshop that had such strong impact on me. There were actually three or four times that I interrupted Reverend Hermann and conveyed to him how lacking his communications had been for me, and expressing a desire for more personal information that I could relate to. To his credit, he did not want to hear the information that I offered, and I knew that I was going far past the boundaries of agnostic skepticism by offering to feed the medium information. By now I had lost my neutral stance, and I wanted so much to believe that Reverend Hermann could be my White Crow Medium; in addition, I truly wanted to attend his follow-up psychic workshop. However, I also knew that what was really happening was that in my estimation Reverend Hermann was failing—in spite of all his eloquence and worldwide fame as a medium.

Then suddenly, after my last interruption, Reverend Hermann blurted out something about “Uncle Fred,” and I perked up and immediately asked him to say more about what came to him about this. The Reverend proceeded to say something about “Havana cigars,” and how this person was very fussy about his cigars and liked his cigars to be of the best quality (yes my brother was quite fussy about his cigars and went through much pains to obtain his Robert Burns Tiparillos). But Reverend Hermann went back to his more generic and removed communications that quickly lost meaning and interest for me. The Reverend returned to the same kind of philosophical communications, now focusing up how my wanting specific information from the spirit world as a researcher was not helpful to me.

As a result of this experience I did not attend Reverend Hermann's follow-up psychic workshop. The fact that he finally came out saying "Uncle Fred" and followed it up with "Havana cigars" could be explained as mere coincidence or by the triggering of his memory (perhaps unconscious) of what he might have overheard from his morning workshop, mixed with associations of cigars with uncles, and perhaps stimulated by my repeated intensive requests for more personal information about my brother. I came to the conclusion that this event did not warrant interpretation as a personalized afterlife communication from or about my brother.

Reverend Hermann was not my White Crow; in fact, I have found no White Crows in my research with mediums. This was not what I wanted to end up feeling and concluding from the researcher-based experiential component of my research, but this was my truth. In my exploration of communications from the deceased through mediums I had to admit that I did not experience much of anything to make the alleged phenomenon of life after death more real to me. Whatever I have experienced can be easily explained by the typical arguments of skeptics.

This is not to suggest that the alleged afterlife communications of the participant mediums who were involved in this research are intentionally fraudulent. The results of my research lend weight to an interpretation that mediums likely rely on sensory cues, subjective evaluation, generic statements, and subjective validation of coincidence, as well as sociocognitive and fantasy proneness (Wilson & Barber, 1983) factors. A second possible interpretation is that some form of psychic communication occurs between the medium and the person receiving the reading. However, further research of the same type as the present inquiry is needed—both with mediums involved in spiritualism and with independent mediums—in order to establish an experiential basis of knowledge in this elusive realm of inquiry. The negative findings of this research does not mean that there is no afterlife, nor that there are no spiritualist mediums who are capable of authentic communications with the deceased in some sort of spirit world. But it does mean that I have not experienced this for myself in the course of this research.

Limitations and Delimitations

The sample size for this study was small and not representative of any demographic. Eight of the nine participants lived in Maine, and their opinions

and skills may have been limited or shaped by this context; similarities cannot be assumed with mediums in different parts of the world where mediumship has been more assimilated, such as in Brazil, Western Africa, and Vietnam. The mediums chosen were all influenced significantly by belief in the veracity of life after death. This fact could result in the researcher being swayed to adopt the beliefs of the spiritualist community, if only to gain the trust or approval of participants. Similar risks are likely present to many researchers in psychology, sociology, or anthropology (Hunter, 2009a, 2009b; Krippner & Schroll, 2014; Lawton, 1932; Myers, 1903/1961).

In addition, this study involved qualitative research, the value of which is continuously debated in mainstream social science (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Robson, 2002). A number of authors have utilized alternative terms to those of positivist quantitative terminology in order to describe the validity of their findings, such as trustworthiness, credibility, authenticity, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (cf. e.g., Creswell, 2007). However, the issues of validity and generalizability remain a limitation in this research and in qualitative research in general.

The problem of validity becomes more pronounced when a researcher utilizes his/her own experiences as a primary source of research data, as is the case in autoethnographic research. As with any other qualitative research methodology, autoethnography does not include experimental statistical assumptions or controls (Camic, Rhodes, & Yardley, 2003; Creswell, 2007; Robson, 2002), and in addition is intrinsically altered by the personal experiences of the researcher as part of the research. Using myself as an agnostic investigator means that the study could not be successfully replicated without involving different subjective experiences from other researchers; results might differ even if I were to attempt replication at a future time. Also, the fact that my conclusions are exploratory in nature speak to the subjective aspect of this study.

There are also ethical issues involved in using an autoethnographic method, which are commonly experienced by autoethnographic researchers in general (Ellis, 2009; Muncey, 2010; Short, Turner, & Grant, 2013). As Ellis (2009) has conveyed in the context of relational ethics, the issue of utilizing one's experience as part of research can easily become entangled in the

ethical dilemma of respecting the privacy of others versus truthfully describing one's experiences. In my mediumship research, I took precautions to refer to my participant mediums anonymously by letter names: Medium A, Medium B, and so forth, except in the case of one participant who chose to have his name revealed in the research results. I conducted semi-structured interviews and participated in experiential sessions with them, as has been described. Despite this, the descriptions that emerged from my experiential research with these mediums likely did not effectively preserve their anonymity from anyone who knew them well, including people who regularly attended mediumship sessions at Temple Heights Spiritual Camp in Maine where I did the bulk of my research. Although this research was approved by the Institutional Review Board of an accredited university, the thorny question of relational ethics in ethnographic research was not fully resolved in my own mind.

It is also possible that participant mediums may have been influenced by my role as an academic researcher. As a researcher I disclosed that I was engaged in doctoral research, and that the results of this work would be published. Consequently, the mediums I worked with perceived me in an academic context, and the taping of interviews further reinforced the perception that I was conducting a formal study of mediumship, and not merely an ordinary client wanting to make contact with a deceased loved one. One medium openly acknowledged that my role as a researcher influenced the mediumship work.

The research was delimited to a single interview with each medium, and a single session—though in some cases I also attended workshops taught by the participant mediums. This is in contrast to the somewhat comparable research of Hunter (2009a, 2009b). Hunter investigated mediumship and the concept of an afterlife using a context and methodology similar to mine, and he conducted his research through sessions with mediums at a spiritualist lodge. However, he engaged with his mediums two or three times a week for an extended period of time. Hunter was far more sympathetic to the communications he witnessed from mediums than I have been, and concluding that these spirit communications were genuine. It is possible that Hunter was swayed from neutrality in his research process, a phenomenon which may also have led a number of initially skeptical paranormal investigators of mediumship in the late

19th and early 20th centuries to become converted in their perspectives on the *bona fide* nature of afterlife communications of mediums (Gauld, 1968, 1982). Although immersion in one's research topic and environment is at the root of autoethnography and other researcher-based experiential research methodologies, a delicate balance also needs to be maintained so that the researcher does not become unduly influenced by, in this case, the participant mediums, or by personal desires for affirmation of an afterlife. Nevertheless, the strict delimiting of the engagement with each medium may have negatively effected the accuracy of the results.

A final limitation of the research is that I as researcher did not maintain uniformly my agnostic stance on the phenomenon of communication with the deceased. There were times when my desire to have information about, or communication with, my dead brother overcame my intention to remain neutral. It should be noted that some researchers studying mediumship and the alleged phenomenon of life after death may already believe in the veracity of the mediumship phenomenon, and may be seeking to scientifically establish this in the world of academia. This perception was reinforced for me at a 2014 conference on the afterlife, where I learned that a prominent afterlife researcher allegedly investigating life after death communications, already privately and secretly believed in the authenticity of these communications—a stance that may compromise legitimate scientific research. From my own perspective, I retain an intention to remain agnostic, open-minded, and constructively skeptical.

Conclusion

I will conclude by going back to what William James described in his vision of radical empiricism, as conveyed by Broad and Anderson (1998):

Any and all sources of evidence, ways of knowing, and ways of working with and expressing knowledge, findings, and conclusions can be brought to bear on the issues being researched—There is an epistemological stance of what William James (1912/1976) called *radical empiricism*—a stance that excludes anything that is not directly experienced but includes *everything* that is directly experienced, by anyone involved in the research effort. Thus, the research participants' subjective experiences and self-perceptions are treated as valid data, as are the experiences and perceptions of the investigator. There

is an important place for intuitive, tacit, and direct knowing; for various arational ways of processing information; and for a variety of forms of creative expression in conducting and communicating research (p. 241)

I agree with James' conception of radical empiricism as a prime example of scientific research in an extended capacity, and clearly James' concept would include autoethnography and other researcher-based experiential research methodologies. However, the balance of true scientific openness with constructive skepticism and agnosticism is necessary to warrant the inclusion of these research methodologies as legitimate forms of scientific inquiry. I did not seek the conclusions I have come to in regard to favoring the skeptical perspective on mediumship. This is simply where my experiential research has led me, and if I ever am led to different conclusions in further study, I will not hesitate to publish these conclusions as well.

Note

1. This is an adaptation of dissertation research (Benjamin, 2012b) that has also been published as a book (Benjamin, 2014a), and in partial form elsewhere (Benjamin, 2012b, 2014c).

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