

Multifunctional mediums? An exploration of the contemporary social psychological function of mediums and mediumship in the UK

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Aims

The purpose of the project was to explore how individuals understood and approached mediumship within the United Kingdom using qualitative methods and analyses. Mediums have the alleged ability to communicate with the dead (Bartolini et al., 2017; Irwin & Watt, 2007); research focusing on the perspectives of individuals who access mediums is sparse, even though approximately 10% of the UK population (Osborne & Bacon, 2015) regularly engage with mediums, and there have been recent increases in social media dedicated to mediumship. This includes forums, fan pages, discussion boards, and social media ‘psychic mediums’ offering their services through Facebook (Lipscomb, 2019). The study sought to explore this shift and to discuss how and why people seek mediumship services. There have been unspoken ideas that people seek mediumship as ‘entertainment’ or for paranormal services, and some published literature discussing the comforting nature as a form of grief counselling, even if individuals do not always see it that way. As such, the proposed project will explore the under researched perspectives of people who engage with mediums, considering their beliefs, motivations, and their meaning making practices around mediumistic communication with the dead. The overall research question for this study is “what functions does mediumship serve to those who engage with mediums in a contemporary UK context?”. The proposed research consists of two qualitative studies, providing rich in-depth data on the perspectives of those who engage with mediumship. Research on disclosure of paranormal experiences has identified caution when divulging due to fear of judgement and having personal experiences devalued (Beischel, 2019; Hoffman, 1995; Palmer & Braud, 2002; Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016).

Method – Study 1: online qualitative survey

Participants

As a qualitative online survey, a minimum of 30 respondents was considered optimal (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were required to have resided in the UK for at least 5 years, aged over 18 years and had not suffered a recent bereavement (identified as being within the previous six weeks). Recruitment was held online, with social media sites such as Facebook,

Twitter and Reddit being utilised, with specific paranormal- and mediumship-focused pages being included. In total, there were 67 participants, with 40 of those having engaged with the open-ended questions, and therefore being the final sample. Participants were asked to self-identify their gender: men (n=2), women (n=37) and human (n=1). Ages ranged from 21 years to 66 years (mean = 41.5 years). Religious identity was requested, with participants identifying as having none (n=7), Wiccan (n=1), Spiritual or Pagan (n=13), atheist (n=3), agnostic (n=5), Christian/CofE (n=6), Roman Catholic (n=1), Buddhist (n=2) and three who did not answer. Ethnicity or cultural identity was not requested.

Instruments/measures

An online survey consisting of nine open-ended questions and two tick-box questions was hosted on Qualtrics. We asked individuals to explain their first experience with a medium, what their most recent experience was with a medium, how often they visited a medium, how they prefer to engage with a medium, how Covid-19 had affected their engagement with mediums, why they think people visit or engage with mediums, their thoughts about online mediumship services (e.g., social media posts), their thoughts about the accuracy of readings and their thoughts about scepticism towards mediumship. They were also offered the opportunity to outline anything else they wanted to add about mediums and mediumship.

Procedure

Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Faculty Academic Ethics Committee of the first author's institution. Participants were invited to take part via an online advert, and informed that the survey would ask for them to describe their experiences and intentions in their interactions with mediumship. The survey requested for demographic information, such as their age in years, their religious or spiritual identity (if any) and their gender. The participants were able to leave these sections blank if they did not wish to disclose this information. Of the two tick-box questions, the first asked them to choose how they had engaged with or participated in mediumship services, with answers provided of "to communicate with a specific person" and "I am part of a spiritualist church", and an open text-box if they had any other reasons, and the second asked them to identify the ways they had visited a medium or employed mediumship services, such as attending a spiritualist church, online, or a private one-to-one sitting. The text-box questions were to enable quick identification of the various ways the participants had engaged with mediumship. The open-ended questions, amongst others, asked participants to consider their first experience with a

medium, what their most recent visit was about, and why they think other people visit with mediums. Data was downloaded from Qualtrics and reviewed for completeness, with responses that did not go beyond the demographics being discarded. The final data was then analysed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2013). Both authors read and coded the data and identified potential themes separately, then reviewed the data together to find commonalities, with two main themes being identified.

Method – Study 2: interviews

Participants

As an interview study, it was hoped to recruit approximately 30 participants to provide in-depth responses to explore their understanding and experiences of seeking mediumship services. Participants were required to have resided in the UK for at least 5 years, aged over 18 years and had not suffered a recent bereavement (identified as being within the previous six weeks). Recruitment was held online, with social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter and Reddit being utilised, with specific paranormal- and mediumship-focused pages being included. Recruitment was open for a total of three months, with repeat adverts being placed where possible. The researchers had considered the possible barriers to recruitment of the assumption that research is inherently sceptical (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016), which was somewhat proven with some of the comments left on the SPR advert for the study suggesting we were looking to discredit mediumship and James' psychologist profile of being a critical social psychologist being identified as a "problem". This probably hindered the recruitment more than we had considered. In total, 12 individuals responded to the adverts, with seven being eligible and five of those participated in the one-to-one interviews held on MS Teams and Zoom. The five ineligible individuals were not interviewed due to their location being outside of the UK. The eligible and interviewed participants were asked to self-identify their gender: men (n=1) and women (n=4).

Instruments/measures

The study utilised a semi-structured interview schedule to discuss mediumship experiences with participants. Participants were asked about themselves, what they thought a medium was and how this might differ from the "usual" understanding of mediumship, what inspired their first interaction or visit with a medium, what inspired additional visits and interactions, what has been the most rewarding interaction, what their most recent visit had been and how it different from the previous one, whether the pandemic had changed anything, how people in

their life felt about mediumship, why they think others interact with mediums, if and how they would recommend a medium, what others should know about mediums, how they are portrayed in the media and how to tell if a medium is “genuine” or not. Interviews were held on MS Teams or Zoom, based on the participants’ preference.

Procedure

The interview design was employed to allow participants to speak to an individual, rather than disclose their experiences online through the survey. Bouchard (2016) had previously explored anonymity and online studies and outlined issues with building rapport which may impact data generation. It transpired in the interviews that some people were hesitant in initially reaching out in fear of being judged for their belief and their engagement with mediums. Once the interview started however, most participants felt more at ease. Each interview was recorded, either via MS Teams or Zoom, and the recordings sent to Fingertips (a BCU-approved transcription service) for full transcription. Interviews varied in length, with the shortest interview at 35 minutes and 42 seconds and the longest interview at 98 minutes and 16 seconds. The average interview length was approximately 52 minutes. The interview data has been subjected to inductive Thematic Analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns across the datasets. Inductive was chosen to be authentic to the participant viewpoints, with researcher positions and disciplinary knowledge being used to shape the analysis further. The data will also be analysed using hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 2016) and discourse analysis (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2017), as the participant sample was low, but yielded interesting and useful data that would still be useful for dissemination. The decision to employ diverse analyses is based on researcher expertise, as well as hoping to provide in-depth and robust evidence for the motivations that individuals hold for engaging with mediums. Interview data can be successfully analysed using multiple analyses (Willig, 2013) due to its flexibility. TA will allow for patterns of meaning to be shown, whereas hermeneutic phenomenology will illustrate interpretations of experience based on social, cultural and historical understanding (van Manen, 2016) and discourse analysis will explore the role of language, power/knowledge, and sociocultural discourses (Mills, 2006) in how people construct the functions of medium

Ethics

The project was submitted and approved by the Birmingham City University Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FAEC). All participants received the invitation to participate

and the consent form. For Study 1 this was hosted online via Qualtrics. Participants were informed of their rights to participate where they could withdraw at any time without penalty and also request their data to be withdrawn after participation. They were provided with a debrief screen with additional contact information and signposted to help and support services should they need them. For Study 2, the invitation to participate was held online via Qualtrics and participants could either leave their contact details for the researcher to reach out or could contact the researchers themselves. Three participant left contact details (email addresses) and two reached out to the researcher (DE) specifically. Consent forms were sent prior to the interview taking place. All interviews were recorded and participants were reminded verbally of their right to participate and that the interview would be audio recorded. Participants were sent the debrief after the interview ended. None of the participant withdrew their data or showed any signs of being uncomfortable. One participant requested their transcript but did not add or retract any data.

Results and Discussion

Study 1

Two main themes were identified on the survey data relating to negotiating accuracy and scepticism and navigating legitimate versus illegitimate mediumship. The findings suggest that believers understand how their belief in mediumship is viewed by others, primarily sceptics, and that there are difficulties in determining who is a real medium.

Both themes demonstrated contradictory opinions between and within participants; whilst they considered accuracy to be an important part of the mediumship visit there was a fine line of what would be accepted: if the information *sounded* truthful then it would be accepted, but information that was deemed too specific that it did not sound truthful, then it would be rejected. Whilst full accuracy was accepted as unlikely, the participants still wanted something that was specific to them or that only they could interpret as being meaningful. Participants were concerned with scepticism and how to navigate and reconcile the fact that some mediums are known or considered to be 'pretending'. It was documented by some participants that they were aware of cold reading tactics but offered opposing views of how sitters can access readers who are 'legitimate' mediums. Legitimacy was discussed in a variety and conflicting ways; one participant specifically suggested that individuals should be able to recognise a good medium from a liar, without outlining how exactly this practice could be performed. Some individuals pointed out illegitimate ways of accessing information

from sitters, such as using cold reading, hot reading or fishing techniques, and that more people should be informed or aware of how individuals do this.

Overall, the findings suggested that within the mediumship-sitting community, there are some considerations that could be out there to help individuals seeking mediumship services in spotting someone who is 'genuine' with their readings than those who are not. The study overall identified that the flexibility of mediumship has only contributed to this complex understanding of it and how and why people seek it out.

Study 2

Themes identified within the interview data relate to significant life and mediumship experiences with loved ones, managing scepticism from non-believers, and the personal touch is necessary for a successful sitting. All the participants expressed desires to see mediums on a one-to-one basis and to have a private reading, rather than it being in public. They all also outlined specific events that occurred that led them to seek mediums out (primarily the death of a loved one) and that the accurate readings they received made them go to more. They also had their own ideas of legitimacy of readings, with some identifying individuals who are high-profile not necessarily being what they consider as legitimate. One participant demonstrated more conspiracy-theory aspects of believing in mediumship, and another was a minor celebrity/personality within their local area who had spoken about mediumship to their followers/listeners. Further analysis will be performed using phenomenology and discourse analysis to gain a better understanding of the data acquired and how to best publish this for a wider audience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The intricacies of mediumship should be considered as future research directions. Mediumship is a multifaceted area with cultural, religious, and geographical location, as well as complex dynamics involving scepticism, legitimacy, and accuracy. The interested individuals we had to turn down were from outside the UK and demonstrated a keenness to have their opinions considered. Future research could take this into account and we suggest that cross-cultural and cross-religious perspectives could be considered further, as exploring how different cultures and religious beliefs influence people's perceptions and understanding of mediumship could develop knowledge further. This could be considered by including mediums from various backgrounds and how they adapt their practices and how individuals from different cultural and religious backgrounds interpret mediumship experiences.

Geographical Location being identified as a factor as mediumship is practiced and understood in different regions or countries and exploring these could provide a broader perspective for why people seek out mediumship services than just as Westernised viewpoint. Scepticism and Legitimacy was a key aspect in both the survey and interview data, whereby we suggest the negotiation of scepticism and the perception of legitimacy in mediumship interactions could be explored from both a sitter and reader perspective.

Table highlighting the differences between expected and achieved output indicators

Expected and achieved output indicators (number of actions)

Output indicators	Expected (according to application)	Achieved
PhD thesis		
Master's thesis		
Organization of seminar or conference		
Book		
Book chapter		
Conference presentation	1	0
Conference paper		
Journal article	3	0
Other (specify)	1	0

Notes:

List of publications