

From Grief to Growth:
Bereavement and Absorption in the Psychomanteum

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Abstract

This study investigated two strategies to induce after death communications on self-reported grief and absorption. The first involved the psychomanteum, a sensory deprivation chamber. The second involved virtual reality (VR) experiences designed to emulate key elements of the chamber. Both interventions involved guided suggestions to experience invisible others, including departed loved ones, spirits, and ghostly sensations. A total of 92 people completed all pre- and post-measures. There were three principal aims for this study. 1) Evaluate the impact of the psychomanteum on grief and absorption pre- and post-intervention; 2) Examine the correlation of absorption and grief pre- and post-intervention; 3) Measure differences in physical chamber and VR on grief and absorption. For Aim 1, a paired samples t-test found a significant effect for absorption pre and post assessments at the level of $p < .001$. No effect was found for grief. Aim 2 was assessed with a Person's r that showed a significant correlation between grief and absorption ($p = .019$). For Aim 3, no significant effect was seen between the physical chamber and the VR experience. Based on a language use analysis, participants exhibited a range of experiences that were characterized as "authentic" and transformative. This innovative approach bridges ancient and advanced technologies.

Keywords: Grief, Bereavement, Virtual Reality, Consciousness, Psychomanteum, Absorption, Well-being

Introduction

When someone we care about dies, it can create a painful aftermath for those who are left behind. Experiences of the bereaved frequently include grief, sadness, and emotional distress, including depression. Some bereavement states may be resolved in a few months or a year or two, while others may continue for decades.

Finding ways of connecting to loved ones is a common goal for those in a state of bereavement. As psychologist, Arthur Hastings (2012) noted: “In such situations the feelings of loss may be punctuated by incidents in which a survivor may feel a sense of the presence of the person who has died” (p. 1). Such after death experiences (ADE) may take the form of a vivid dream in which the deceased appears. For others, the perceived communications may take the form of hearing the voice of the lost loved one or having conversations with him or her. Still others have reported spontaneous and unexpected visions or signs that seem to come from the deceased and which may be experienced by others. In most cases, these are spontaneous occurrences that carry meaning and induce transformative experiences.

Far from being rare experiences, these ostensible communications with invisible others (Luhrmann, 2011, 2020) have been reported by many different people from different social and economic sectors. They have been studied in medical, psychiatric, and parapsychological research and surveys have been conducted cross-culturally. An early survey by Rees (1971), for instance, found that widows and widowers in Wales reported contacts with the deceased by 50% of the widowers and 46% of the widows. A survey by Kalish and Reynolds (1973) of four ethnic communities (African-American, Latino, Japanese-American, and Caucasian) in Los Angeles, reported that 44% claimed to have felt a post death contact. Such experiences have been reported in many countries and locales, including the U. K. (Bennett & Bennett, 2000), India (Osis & Haraldsson, 1977), Iceland (Haraldsson, 1988), the U.S. (Cleiren, 1993; Greeley & Hout, 1999; Klugman, 2006), and Japan (Yamamoto, Okonogi, et al, 1969, 2006). A random telephone survey by Klugman (2006), found the most common mode of contact included dreams, sounds, feeling a presence, and having conversations.

The connection with invisible others supports the Continuing Bonds Theory, a psychological concept that challenges the traditional notion of grief as a process of detachment and closure. Developed by bereavement scholars like Klass, et al (1996; 2018), it suggests that after the death of a loved one, individuals can maintain a lasting connection with the deceased. This theory recognizes that people find comfort and healing in various ways, including cherishing memories, engaging in rituals, and carrying on the relationship in a transformed manner. It acknowledges that the deceased person's influence can persist in the lives of those left behind, allowing for a more flexible and enduring approach to coping with loss.

While such experiences may be spontaneous, various techniques have been developed over the millennia to make contact with invisible others. Ancient cultures throughout history have practiced divination and spirit communication by gazing into reflective surfaces or other tools. These practices often aimed to contact the spirit realm, gain insight, or foretell the future. In ancient Babylonia, diviners and priests used a form of divination called “Extispicy.” This could be conducted by scrying into the livers of sacrificial animals or reflective surfaces such as oil or water. The ancient Egyptians made use of polished bronze or copper mirrors to commune with spirits and receive guidance from those in the afterlife. In ancient Greece, mirrors were used to gain insights from the spirit world through a practice known as “catoptromancy.” Likewise, in ancient Rome, gazing into reflective surfaces was used to gain insights into a range of matters, both public and private. In a similar way, shamanic cultures have used polished objects or

reflective pools to enter a trance like state and commune with the spirits of the natural world. These practices suggest that the experiences of invisible others through scrying or gazing into reflective surface can be enacted through an intentional practice.

To more fully explore the nature of these transpersonal experiences and their psychological impacts, psychiatrist Raymond Moody (1992) began a series of investigations into these ancient practices and how they could be applied in a contemporary clinical setting. He developed a technique that is called the psychomanteum. This procedure is an innovative sensory deprivation approach that invites people to have experiences of consciousness after bodily death, near death experiences, and other anomalous experiences such as apparitions. It makes use of a simple protocol that occurs in a dark, quiet room with a comfortable chair and a slightly illuminated mirror. The mirror is placed slightly above the person's direct line of sight, so that the reflection shows the darkened room with dim candle lighting. This sensory isolation procedure has been shown to trigger sensory experiences that lie outside ordinary awareness. While mainly thought to be subjective in nature, reports by those in the psychomanteum suggest that experiences of invisible others are veridical and carry great personal meaning. These transpersonal experiences offer a unique window into consciousness and how the mind and matter interact.

The procedure has since been adopted by researchers, providing compelling support for experiences of invisible others and their therapeutic benefits. Several experimenters have conducted research to examine psychological, transpersonal, and parapsychological dimensions of altered states of consciousness produced in the psychomanteum (Archangel, 1997; Roll, 2004; Parra, 2011; Root, 2015). Radin and Rebman (1996) noted that psychomanteum participants have reported that the mirror gradually transforms into a window, swirling clouds appear in the window and then intensely vivid visions are seen through the window. On occasion, visions from the 'other side' of the window extend into the psychomanteum itself. These latter, three-dimensional visions, sometimes taking the form of humanoid apparitions, are often described as 'hyper-real', that is, as more intensely real than the reality experienced under ordinary consciousness" (p. 67). The image may be perceived as autonomous and distinct from the viewer and may be accompanied by physical sensations.

Hastings (2002, 2012) conducted a series of studies designed to explore the psychotherapeutic benefit of experiences in the psychomanteum and participants experiencing bereavement were recruited. As noted by Hastings (2012): "apparent contacts similar to spontaneous after-death encounters were reported by 63% of the participants. Repeated measures of bereavement showed reductions in feelings of bereavement with decreases in bereavement correlated positively with increased tendencies toward absorption."

The current study offered a conceptual replication of Hastings (2012) by examining the relationship of absorption and grief in the psychomanteum. In the current study, the physical chamber was compared with one designed for a Virtual Reality (VR) environment. VR has been used to study how the brain is capable of generating a whole independent universe of conscious experiences when it is disconnected from an outside environment. It was predicted that this may enhance the experience for participants.

The term "virtual embodiment" is used to describe the physical process that employs the VR hardware and software to substitute a person's physical body with a virtual one. Virtual embodiment under a variety of conditions may give rise to the subjective illusions of body ownership and agency (Bourdin, et al, 2017), such as near death experiences or out of body experiences. Developers have reported that the virtual technology helps reduce fear of death

(Bourdin, Barberia, et al, 2017). Increased absorption in the experience may lead to a greater chance for the perception of presence to occur in VR and therefore a greater likelihood of subliminal patterns being activated in the study participants, as well as strong emotional reactions through multi-sensory perceptual stimulation (Baños et al., 2004; Baños et al., 2008; Diemer et al., 2015). The visual system and the ability to interpret the surrounding environment is essentially duped into accepting the visual stimuli as real.

Aims

There were three principal aims for this study. 1) Evaluate the impact of the psychomantium on grief and absorption pre- and post-intervention; 2) Examine the correlation of absorption and grief pre- and post-intervention; 3) Measure differences in physical chamber and VR on grief and absorption.

Methods

Participants

A total of 108 participants (e.g., adults aged 18-85) were recruited for the study through various recruitment methods, including-online advertisements and community outreach. They were recruited based on their experiences of bereavement over the loss of a loved one, or more general interest in transpersonal experiences. Persons volunteering for the study were given a screening interview that asked about the individual who died, and screened to exclude persons if they reported being diagnosed or hospitalized with a major mental or physical illness. Participants were usually asked to wait six months after a death before going through the research process and that it began no more than five years in the past. Accepted participants received a digital package containing a consent form, the pre-questionnaire, and the assessments. To reduce risks to the participants that may be triggered in the grief experience, they were provided with the phone number for the local mental health hotline; no such experiences were reported.

Facilitators

The study was carried out in collaboration with 10 graduate students at the lead author's university and with researchers from the NeuroMeditation Institute. They were required to be in a masters or PHD program or to have at least a MFP license.

Design

The study utilized a repeated measures design with two conditions: the psychomanteum chamber condition and the Virtual Reality condition.

Psychomanteum Chamber

The chamber was a darkened room covered in black velvet cloth. A mirror was angled towards the ceiling and placed before the participant and a battery powered candle provided a slight illumination into the mirror.

VR Experiences

Two virtual reality experiences were designed for the study: a tethered condition that connected the headset and the computer and the Oculus unthethered condition. Both conditions offered a 360-degree immersive experience. In the tethered condition, participants experienced a virtual avatar that led them into the mirror and invited them to engage with invisible others. In the Oculus condition, participants were immersed in an experience of a flowing stream near sunset. Due to COVID restrictions, most sessions were conducted using the Oculus, as it allowed

data collection while maintaining social distancing protocols. The guided imagery was the same for all conditions, inviting the participants to engage their creative imagination and engage with departed loved ones.

Procedure

The experimental sessions lasted approximately 25 minutes each. Participants were seated in a comfortable chair. For the VR experience, they were fitted with the appropriate VR headset for the corresponding experience. A guided imagery audio sound track was played through headphones or the Oculus headset, inviting participants to utilize their creative imagination to open themselves to potential contact with departed loved ones. The audio and visual experience gradually transitioned into wispy clouds, and participants were informed that they would be their own guide for the remainder of the session, with the experimenter's voice returning at the end.

Data Collection

At the end of both the chamber and VR sessions, each participant underwent a debriefing process. They were asked to complete a short battery of assessments, engaged in a recorded interview with the facilitator, and write a short response to two mortality salience prompts. The language data from the interviews were transcribed using AI software. All language data were coded using language use analysis software (Pennebaker, et al, 2015) and qualitative thematic analysis. The process involved six stages.

Stage 1: Initial Pre-questionnaires

Before beginning the session, participants completed an initial pre-questionnaire that assessed their feelings and reactions related to the bereavement experience. This questionnaire included a Likert scale to rate the intensities of 20 effects of bereavement. They also completed the Tellegen Absorption Scale (Tellegen, et al, 1974).

Stage 2: Initial Interview

Upon arrival at the research facility, participants were interviewed in a consultation room by a facilitator. The facilitator encouraged participants to discuss memories, feelings, and intentions related to the bereavement process. The facilitators employed active listening and empathic questioning techniques to facilitate participants' remembrance and expression. In some cases the participants filled out the assessments before arriving while in other sessions they filled out the assessments at the research facility.

Stage 3: Psychomanteum Chamber or VR Experience

Participants were led to a room where they were seated in a recliner chair and encouraged to relax. The psychomanteum experience was provided either through the use of an illuminated mirror in a sensory deprivation chamber or through a VR headset, depending on the condition. A guided meditation was played through headphones to enhance the altered state. Participants were instructed to gaze at the reflective surface (or VR environment), adjust the lighting to their comfort, and reflect on their feelings, memories, and thoughts about the deceased. The facilitator remained in an adjacent room but was available if needed.

Stage 4: Post Interview

After 25 minutes, the facilitator led the participant back to the consultation room. The facilitator prompted the participant to discuss their experience and how it had affected them. A set of predefined questions were used as prompts for the recorded interviews.

Stage 5: Post-questionnaire

Participants completed a post-questionnaire that assessed their experiences during the psychomanteum and VR sessions. They also repeated the Likert scale of bereavement-related feelings and the TAS. Initially, participants could fill out the post assessments from home and return them to the research team, but later they were asked to complete them at the culmination of the study, due to poor compliance.

Measures

The Tellegen Absorption Scale

Changes in the sense of embodiment were measured across conditions and in a pretest-posttest design using The Tellegen Absorption Scale (TAS; Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). The TAS indicates a person's fluidity of internal and external perceptual boundaries in areas such as imagery, synesthesia, intuitive senses, and absorbed attention. It was hypothesized that a higher score on the TAS would correlate with a reduction in bereavement and that there would be a significant difference in these correlations in the physical chamber and VR conditions.

Bereavement Scale

The effects on bereavement were measured by changes in the ratings of 20 items taken from previous research (Hastings, et al., 2002), using a Likert scale of 1–7, with 7 indicating the most intense level. Five of these included sentences referring to reactions over time in the pre and follow-up questionnaires. Fifteen brief items were repeated in all three questionnaires. Of the 20 items, 16 assessed distressful emotional conditions, such as grief, sadness, and anger. Four assessed positive effects, such as love and peace, for which a 7 rating indicates a positive emotional state.

Personal Information Form

Each participant completed a short information form including demographic information, such as age, sex, etc.

Language Analysis

Each participant was asked to engage in a short writing exercise and to respond to a brief interview following the psychomanteum experience. This language data was analyzed for thematic content focusing specifically on the types of imagery that the participants reported. The Language Use Analysis (Pennebaker, et al, 2015) was used to identify themes that were subjected to the qualitative analysis.

Experiential Process

In crafting the experience, it was hoped that researchers could retain individualized support and personal attention in the experience. In attempting to create a facilitative experience, several steps incorporated (a) remembering the deceased with memories, thoughts, and mementos of the person; (b) activating the feelings of loss, longing, and other emotions of grief; (c) awareness of unfinished issues and connections; and (d) nonverbal levels of feeling.

Two VR experiences were designed, one tethered to a computer and one accessed through a self-contained VR headset (the Oculus Quest). In the tethered condition, the experience was of a virtual avatar who passed through a veil, sat in a chair and then went out of

their avatar body and through a mirror. In the Oculus Quest version, there was an experience of a reflective stream near sunset. Most of the sessions made use of the Oculus Quest as it had more freedom and allowed data to be collected during COVID.

The guided imagery was designed to induce a trance like state in the chamber and VR conditions. The audio track invited participant to utilize their creative imagination to open themselves to potential contact with invisible others. In time the visual and audio experience faded into wispy clouds and the participant was told that they will be their own guide and that the experimenter's voice will return when the session was over. At the end of both the chamber and the VR sessions, each participant was debriefed. They were asked to complete the battery of assessments, engage in a recorded interview with the facilitator, and to write a short response to two mortality salience prompts (Rosenblatt, et al. 1989). The language data was transcribed using an AI application and run through the language use analysis software (Pennebaker, et al 2015).

This was not a mechanical process, but required careful facilitation and respect for the person participating. The intention of the carefully sequenced protocol was to create an opportunity for a state of mind that allowed a shift in perception, feelings, thoughts, and behavior, and which came in response to the participant's own unique needs. Following the work of Hastings (2012), the study was based on a model of Continuing Bonds (Klass, et al, 1996, 2018), in which the person experiencing bereavement acknowledges that the relationship will be different, but can continue despite the death of the loved one.

Results

Of the 108 participants initially enrolled in the study, 92 completed all data collection. Only complete data sets were used for data analysis. Ages ranged from 18-91.

Data from the study were analyzed using a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Thematic analysis was conducted on a set of questions and prompts. Language use analysis was performed to explore expressions of emotions and personal identity.

Aim 1 was tested using a paired samples t-test. A significant effect was found for absorption pre and post assessments at the level of $p < .001$. No effect was found for bereavement across the study, which suggests that something besides grief may have been part of the participants experiences as it relates to absorption. Supporting this, a Person's r was performed to analyze Aim 2; this showed a significant correlation between bereavement and absorption ($p < .019$). For Aim 3, no significant effect was seen between the physical chamber and the VR experience. This suggests that the two conditions led to experiences that are isomorphic and supports the interchangeability of the approaches.

Upon completion of each session, participants were asked a series of questions designed to encourage reflection on the workings of their thoughts during the process. For example, "Did you think this experience was meaningful?" Based on each response, a range of possible follow-up questions were asked, including: "Why was the experience meaningful? Did you feel a connection to someone or something? How do you know that it was a connection? What emotions did you feel? Did you experience any sensations? Tell me more about your experience." Journaling involved two prompts: "What do you think will happen to your own body when you face death?" and "what are the emotions that the thought of your death arouses in you?"

All language data was prepared for analysis by transcribing the interviews using AI. All questions from the experimenter were eliminated to avoid bias. Journaling and interview responses were combined for the language use analysis. This included a thematic analysis and a word use analysis.

Many participants felt connections to loved ones who have passed. For example, “I grew up with my grandma and we lived together. We were very close. She passed away 15 years ago. I became sad, but this wasn’t the only time.” For the majority of participants, the experiences of invisible others involved various sensory modalities. For some there were visual sensations. Others reported olfactory experiences that triggered memories of their grandparent’s home or home of another departed loved one. For others, there were experiences of voices or other auditory effects.

Responses ranged from “I will become worm food” (ID13), to “I think my body will know exactly what to do. I have watched so many people die. I have literally watched, seen their energy kind of beautifully and gently move through, out, and up out of their physical form. And then It just slowly turns off. It makes its way through the last of its physical functioning and, um, then rest. Yes. Celebratory” (ID34).

Many participants appeared to be at peace with the idea of death and responded accordingly: “I’m very accepting of death. I don’t have fear around it. I just want to make sure that I live as fully as possible. The fear, if any, around dying is to make the best use of the time that I have. Death itself doesn’t bother me” (ID15).

Making use of the Language Use Analysis software, the most used code was that of “authentic.” This involves unfiltered language and suggests the participant’s true feelings, thoughts and emotions. This was reflected in high scores for positive emotions, which suggest the inward experience of the participants. As was reflected in the Absorption data, many people reported a deep sense of emersion in their experiences. When asked if the experience meet their expectations or intentions,” they replied in the affirmative. “Oh, I think it exceeded my expectations. I think that I expected, you know what, I don’t know what I expected. Now that I think about it. I expected to have some sort of visualization experience. That’s what I signed on for, I think. But the idea that I could be transported was not on my expectation list. “

Discussion

While the psychomanteum is a unique and relatively obscure concept in the field of psychology, it sheds light on our understanding of the human psyche, spirituality and interconnectedness. It can be used as a tool for personal healing, as people seek to integrate their grief and loss through a perceived communication with deceased loved ones. It offers potential insights to people as they seek answers to profound existential questions. This quest for meaning is a shared aspect of human experience.

The psychomanteum experience may vary across cultures, reflecting the influence of cultural beliefs and practices. Examining these variations can contribute to an understanding of how different societies approach and integrate experiences related to the afterlife or spiritual dimensions. This cultural diversity can be linked to discussions about global consciousness, emphasizing the need for intercultural dialogue and understanding. It speaks to a shared phenomenon of mystical or transcendent experiences within the psychomanteum, such as feeling a sense of unity or interconnectedness, that can be tied to discussions of global consciousness. These experiences are part of a broader human narrative where people sometimes describe a

sense of unity with the cosmos or all living beings (Vieten, et al, 2006). The psychomanteum can be considered as part of the broader tapestry of human experiences and beliefs related to the afterlife, the mysteries of existence, and the search for meaning. In this way, discussions of the psychomanteum can be integrated into conversations about interconnectedness, empathy, and the shared human experience that contributes to global consciousness.

The transpersonal experiences reported in the psychomanteum can be transformative and may have powerful potentials for aiding people in their times of suffering. Rather than finding a need to get over the loss, the Continuing Bonds Theory (Klauss, et al, 2018; 2026) suggests that finding ways to sustain a connection with the departed can be therapeutic. Further, developing ways to reproduce these experiences opens a door for systematic research and therapy. This study offers a highly innovative approach to bereavement and the application of the psychomanteum to health and healing.

The task in the creation of the psychomanteum VR experiences is accessing-states of consciousness through internal neural integration changes; this could be an Out of Body Experience (OBE), or a Near Death Experience (NDE) (Bourdin et al, 2017). It can be achieved by co-locating the virtual body with the participant's real body and therefore providing a match between the visual and proprioceptive information perceived by the participant (Slater et al, 2010). Both the psychomanteum and VR may offer a useful direction for future research in transpersonal psychology. Likewise, they may be useful tools for creativity, management, and mind/body healing, as people are encouraged to engage their creative imagination in order to achieve their intentions through self-reflection and personal inquiry.

The experience of connecting with invisible others offers a way of framing collective consciousness. Rather than viewing our experience as isolated beings, we can begin to see ourselves as part of an interconnected world that transcends both space and time. Luhrmann (2011; 2020) offers a theory of mind that draws on the intersection of culture, belief systems, and spiritual experiences. Recognizing that subjective experiences differ in different contexts, Luhrmann's work suggests that experiencing invisible others offers a kind of permeability between the inner and outer worlds and between subjective and objective experiences. How people interpret their mental experiences may be situated in specific cultural settings and perceptions. Different cultures may experience global consciousness in different ways, based on their worldviews and meaning systems.

Considering the prevalence of experiences of invisible others in diverse cultures may shed light on how people from different cultural backgrounds may come together in a sense of global interconnectedness and appreciation for diverse worldviews as they engage in their own spiritual experiences. (Schlitz, 2015; Schlitz, et al, 2014). Understanding how individuals are situated in diverse culture frameworks may help people to perceive and relate to one another and the world, leading to shared values, empathy, and global well-being. In this way, the psychomanteum offers a useful tool that can bring this awareness to people. In the context of the VR experience, this makes an awareness of interconnectedness something that is scalable and replicable in ways that can be called upon on demand (Anderson, et al, 1971; Bailenson, 2018) and applied in various settings. Direct experiences of invisible others offer a gateway to shared understanding of our place on earth at this unique moment in human history and of our connection to those who have gone before us.

Many of the participants in this study felt that they wanted more time in the psychomanteum. They expressed an interest in gaining greater depth and insight. As such, future research will focus on examining talent (absorption) and training (repeated exposure to the VR

experience) to gain further understanding of the potential applications of the psychomanteum in clinical applications (Glantz, et al, 2003), transpersonal psychology, and consciousness studies.

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