

ADDRESSING THE SURVIVAL VERSUS PSI DEBATE THROUGH PROCESS-FOCUSED MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT: Over a century of mediumship research concludes that skilled mediums are able to report accurate and specific information about the deceased loved ones (termed discarnates) of living people (termed sitters) during anomalous information reception (AIR); that is, without any prior knowledge about the discarnates or sitters, in the absence of sensory feedback, and without using deceptive means. However, this historical body of proof-focused research does not directly address which parapsychological mechanisms are involved in AIR by mediums. The data, in and of themselves, support multiple hypotheses including the super-psi and psychic reservoir (collectively “psi”) models as well as the survival of consciousness hypothesis (or simply “survival”). However, by restricting research to proof-focused studies, investigators neglect important phenomenological mediumship processes underlying AIR and how those processes might address the survival hypothesis. This process-focused investigation of mediums’ experiences may lead to a better understanding of the source of the information mediums report during AIR. This paper briefly summarizes the results from recent process-focused studies of modern-day, American mental mediums’ experiences during ostensible communication with discarnates. We also suggest areas for future process-focused mediumship studies to more fully address the question at the root of mediumship research: **Is there life after death?**

Keywords: mediumship, survival psi, somatic psi, phenomenology, survival of consciousness, anomalous information reception

Although parapsychological research most often involves the Big Four—telepathy, clairvoyance, precognition, and psychokinesis—with only “an occasional nod toward survival and afterlife topics” (Braud, 2005, p. 40), the continued investigation of the latter issues is pivotal for our understanding of consciousness, the potential of the mind, and the nature of life in general. One of the main methods for scientifically addressing life after death involves studying mediums—individuals who report regular communication with the deceased.

Skilled mediums are able to report information that is both accurate and specific about the deceased loved ones (termed discarnates) of living people (termed sitters¹) using anomalous information reception

¹ Mediums performing readings with proxy sitters provide information for living people who are not present at the reading. Consequently, “sitter” would be more completely defined as a living person who requested a reading from a medium and who has a desire to receive information about one or more deceased people with whom s/he had an emotionally close relationship, irrespective of whether or not s/he is present for or hears the reading as it takes place. Conversely, a “proxy sitter” is a living person who is present for the reading but is not the person for whom the information reported during a reading is intended. A proxy sitter may or may not have knowledge about the absent sitter or the deceased persons contacted during the reading.

(AIR); that is, without any prior knowledge about the discarnates or sitters, in the absence of any sensory feedback, and without using deceptive means (e.g., Beischel & Schwartz, 2007). However, after over a century of research (reviewed by Braude, 2003; Fontana, 2005; Gauld, 1983), mediumship findings en bloc do not directly address which parapsychological mechanisms are involved in AIR by mediums. That is, the data, in and of themselves, support multiple hypotheses including: (a) the survival of consciousness (i.e., life after death; the continued existence, separate from the body, of at least portions of an individual's consciousness or personality after physical death), (b) the psychic reservoir hypothesis (i.e., that all information since the beginning of time is stored somehow and somewhere in the universe and mediums are accessing that cosmic store rather than communicating with the deceased; reviewed in Fontana, 2005), and (c) super-psi (also called super-ESP; discussed in detail in Braude, 2003, and reviewed in Fontana, 2005). Super-psi,² the retrieval of information through telepathy with the living, clairvoyance, and/or precognition, is deemed *super* by its ostensible requirement of "more refined and extensive psychic functioning than we discover in controlled laboratory studies" (Braude, 2003, p. 11). In the super-psi explanation, a medium may receive information through multiple psi processes:

telepathically from the mind of the sitter (even though the latter may not be consciously thinking about the information at the time), telepathically from the minds of people elsewhere, clairvoyantly from the environment, or even precognitively from the future moment when the sitter checks on the facts given in the communications and finds them to be correct. (Fontana, 2005, p. 104)

However, it is important to note that the survival hypothesis also requires some form of psi in order for information to be transferred from the discarnate to the medium. Indeed, either "the medium acquires her knowledge of discarnate minds by telepathically scanning their minds or ... the discarnate person is telepathically sending information to a medium's mind. In either case, living agent telepathy is operative" (Sudduth, 2009, p. 177). Sudduth (2009) terms this "survival psi" and describes it as "a highly refined and efficacious sort of psi functioning ... indistinguishable from the degree or kind of psi required by the super-psi hypothesis" (p. 184).

Because mediums are ostensibly using psi regardless of the source of information—living persons or a cosmic database in the super-psi and psychic reservoir theories, respectively, and deceased persons in the survival hypothesis—in our current discussion of the "survival versus psi debate," we

² Detailed discussions of the controversies surrounding the definitions and assumptions of the super-psi hypothesis can be found in Braude (2003) and Sudduth (2009). The survival and super-psi models are also briefly compared in Irwin and Watt (2007, pp. 143–144).

are using the term “somatic³ psi” to describe telepathy with living persons, clairvoyance (including of a psychic reservoir), and precognition on the part of the medium but not including survival psi.

To determine which of these parapsychological hypotheses—survival psi or somatic psi—best accounts for AIR by mediums, further research is needed. This work is important for reasons that are academically important as well as those that are socially relevant. First, an understanding of the process mediums use may aid in determining which mechanisms are at work during the processing of nonlocal, nonsensory information. Second, mediumship research findings provide unique evidence for an issue central to consciousness science: the relationship between the mind/consciousness and the brain. That is, is consciousness (a) a localized product of the brain as theorized by materialist neuroscientists (e.g., Crick & Koch, 2003) or is consciousness (b) nonlocal and mediated, transmitted, transformed, guided, or arbitrated by the brain (e.g., Clarke, 1995)?

In the social arena, this research is significant beyond just addressing society’s growing interest in mediumship and the survival of consciousness. First, mediums may be able to find missing persons or contribute to criminal investigations, but in order for the information mediums provide to be sensibly utilized by society, the processes by which it is acquired need to be better understood. In addition, the information mediums provide may include knowledge or wisdom beneficial to scientific, technological, and/or social progress. Furthermore, scientific evidence for life after death may alleviate the anxiety felt by hospice and end-of-life patients and their families and alter the way allopathic physicians perceive death. Mediumship readings may also be helpful in grief counseling and recovery. Finally, evidence for immortality may affect individual and group behavior. For example, research in Terror Management Theory has found that belief in an afterlife may liberate people from “the compulsion to continually prove our value and the correctness of our beliefs” (Dechesne et al., 2003), an impulse that can manifest in extreme cases as radical actions that defend or propagate the dominance of one’s beliefs, religion, nation, and so on (which provides the individual with the psychological comfort of symbolic immortality). For these academic and socially relevant reasons, the continued investigation of mediumship and how the phenomenon of AIR relates to survival remains important.

The aim of this paper is to discuss how the examination of mediums’ *experiences* during ostensible communication with the deceased adds an important facet to the field of mediumship research and its contribution to our understanding of the survival of consciousness hypothesis. Here, we briefly summarize the results from our recent research on the experiences of modern-day, American mental mediums during mediumship readings

³ Here, the term somatic is used in reference to the physical body of the living client in psychic readings as well as the “body” of information described by the psychic reservoir hypothesis.

and discuss the implications of recent findings for the survival psi versus somatic psi debate. We also formulate suggestions for future mediumship studies intended to more fully address the survival question. However, it may be prudent to first discuss the distinction between proof-focused and process-focused research.

PROOF- VERSUS PROCESS-FOCUSED RESEARCH

The majority of previous and historic mediumship research was *proof*-focused; that is, it tested mediums' claims that they could report accurate information about the deceased. Studies do, of course, exist in which investigators attempted to directly address the survival hypothesis in mediumship research, though these studies were in the minority. For example, in the paper "Linkage Experiments with Mediums," Karlis Osis (1966) described a series of experiments in which "the question of survival after death [was] the problem under investigation" (p. 92). The methods used were designed "to separate information obtained by [telepathy] from living sources from that obtained from the deceased" (p. 92). In these linkage experiments, a chain of individuals is placed between the medium and the sitter in an attempt to "block" telepathy between them. For instance, the sitter "could ask his acquaintance, Jones, to contact an experimenter, Smith, who turns to an assistant, Brown, who then conducts a sitting with [a medium]" (p. 94). However, because we do not understand the limits of somatic psi, introducing even an infinite number of links in a proof-focused study cannot eliminate somatic psi as an explanation for AIR. The results from Osis's study indicated "no significant phenomena" (p. 117).

This use of proxy sitters during mediumship readings to block the flow of information (though usually through "normal" means) is nearly as old as mediumship research itself (e.g., reviewed by Kelly, in press; Schmeidler, 1958; Thomas, 1932–1933; West, 1949). Other theoretical experiments historically suggested as "ideal" in differentiating survival from other explanations for mediums' accuracy involve the retrieval of the combination to a lock (or other code) during a reading that only the discarnate knew; asking the medium to respond to a language (in that language) that the discarnate spoke but that the medium does not (i.e., xenoglossy); obtaining information during a reading from a discarnate unknown to the sitter, medium, or experimenter (i.e., drop-in communicators); and acquiring information that cannot be fully understood until information from another reading is obtained (i.e., cross-correspondence) (Braude, 2003, pp. 283–88; Irwin & Watt, 2007, pp. 138–42). These suggestions involve uncorroborated conjecture about a discarnate's ability and motivation to convey specific information and about a medium's ability to receive and report it; these errors have been previously discussed elsewhere (Beischel, 2007/2008).

Most previous—especially recent—mediumship research has been primarily concerned with empirically demonstrating a particular and replicable effect (i.e., AIR by mediums) without specifically addressing the survival hypothesis. For example, in their paper “Results of the Application of the Robertson-Roy Protocol [RRP] to a Series of Experiments with Mediums and Participants,” the third in a series, Roy and Robertson (2004) describe the RRP as a “practical, repeatable, and useful procedure in assessing the ability of mediums to transmit relevant information to recipients” (p. 18). Researchers O’Keefe and Wiseman (2005) also claimed to have developed “a practical, straightforward, and methodologically sound way of testing [mediums’] claims” (p. 175). Indeed, the “primary purpose” of the first author (JB)’s own previous research “was to acquire novel evidence concerning the possibility that accurate information about a sitter’s deceased loved ones could be reliably obtained from research mediums under highly controlled experimental conditions that effectively eliminated conventional (classical) explanations” (Beischel & Schwartz, 2007, p. 24). All of these studies were primarily concerned with gathering evidence (either for or against) the claims of AIR that mediums make, and none directly addressed the survival hypothesis.

This type of proof-focused research alone discounts the mediums’ *actual experiences* of communication with the deceased. Several authors have noted the importance of these types of experiences. Cardena, Lynn, and Krippner (2000) propose that “some anomalous experiences may have much to offer science in terms of clarifying its current boundaries and identifying how psychology, the neurosciences, and the social sciences can join hands to explain [the variety] of life” (p. 10). In addition, in his book *Exploring Unseen Worlds*, George William Barnard (1997) describes how William James “insists that mystical experiences are more than simply an amalgam of physiological, psychological, or sociological factors” (p. 18). Barnard expresses that, for James, anomalous cognitive states such as mystical experiences “are important sources of data on the existence of realms of reality or dimensions of consciousness that exceed (even while interpenetrating) our everyday ‘natural’ reality or our typical waking consciousness” (p. 18). Thus, the evaluation of mediums’ experiences may be important for our understanding of the boundaries of science and reality.

Proof-focused mediumship research fails to examine the phenomenological processes employed by mediums during AIR and how those processes might address the survival hypothesis. Phenomenology “is a term that refers to a philosophy, a research approach, and, in a more general way, the study of experience” (Pekala & Cardena, 2000, p. 59). The phenomenological investigator engages in *process*-focused research investigating “the way things are experienced by the experiencer, and ... how events are integrated into a dynamic, meaningful experience” (Hanson & Klimo, 1998, p. 286). With this type of analysis, the researcher is

able to identify the essential aspects of the experience under investigation (Fischer, 1998). Previous phenomenological research has investigated, for example, the experience of meditation (Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994), being unconditionally loved (Matsu-Pissot, 1998), and shamanic-like journeying (Rock, 2006). It is noteworthy that process-focused research may be qualitative (e.g., Gifford-May & Thompson, 1994) or quantitative (e.g., Pekala, 1991), and numerous scholars argue that these two approaches are reconcilable and may inform one another (e.g., Abussabha & Woelfel, 2003; Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Crawford, Weever, Rutter, Sensky, & Tyrer, 2002; Foss & Ellefsen, 2002). Process-focused investigations of mediums' phenomenology during mediumship and psychic readings may aid in defining the source(s) of information for each.

Any future proof-focused research in the absence of a process-focused component may continue to provide support for AIR, but it will also continue to overlook addressing the survival hypothesis and go on failing to differentiate between survival and the other parapsychological explanations. By combining mediums' reports that they are communicating directly with the deceased; their alleged ability to differentiate between that communication and their use of telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition; and experimental evidence that the mediums' two experiences are in fact different under controlled conditions, it may be possible to arrive at an empirically driven distinction between survival versus super-psi or the psychic reservoir (collectively "somatic psi").⁴ Thus, the integration of proof-focused research working to better establish AIR with process-focused studies addressing mediums' experiences of communication with the deceased will begin to provide a more complete picture of both AIR and the possibility of life after death.

RECENT PROCESS-FOCUSED MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH

To date and to the best of our knowledge, there has been no published systematic research addressing modern-day, "nondenominational," American mental⁵ mediums' phenomenology pertaining to AIR. It is nonetheless important to recognize that numerous—arguably unsystematic—qualitative studies were conducted during the first

⁴ It is, of course, possible that if, for example, mediumship readings and psychic readings are associated with different phenomenological effects, then this may not be the result of the percipient accessing different information sources (i.e., discarnates versus living persons, respectively). Indeed, it is plausible that the phenomenological differences are due to, for instance, demand characteristics, false memory impressions, and the percipient's different expectations.

⁵ Mental mediumship (also called "clairvoyant" mediumship) "occurs in a conscious and focused waking state" (Buhrman, 1997, p. 13). In contrast, during trance mediumship, which involves an "unconsciousness of surroundings," "the normal personality is ... completely dispossessed by the intruding intelligence" and the medium "retains little or no recollection of what has been said or done in her 'absence'" (Gauld, 1983, p. 29).

half of the twentieth century⁶ and that several investigations of mediums' experiences "from within a variety of academic disciplines" (Cousins, 2008, p. 334) have since then been reported (e.g., Emmons, 2000). Below, we briefly summarize the results from our recent process-focused investigations.

This research evaluated the experiences of certified research mediums (CRMs); that is, participants screened over several months using an intensive multi-step screening and testing procedure (described briefly at <http://www.windbridge.org/mediums.htm> and in detail in Beischel, 2007/2008). These CRMs remain conscious and aware during readings, and their abilities to report accurate and specific information have been repeatedly demonstrated under controlled conditions in the laboratory. Thus, the sample of participants in our research is not representative of claimant mediums in general or of the extensively observed historical trance and physical mediums, but rather of modern-day, American mental mediums whose abilities have been documented.

One recent process-focused study conducted by Rock and Beischel (2008) aimed to *quantify* the phenomenological differences that arose psychologically during a discarnate reading task versus a control task. It is important to note that this study was not concerned with whether any phenomenological differences were a result of variations in the source of the information (i.e., a discarnate versus a living person), but rather whether phenomenological differences arose psychologically as a result of different task demands. Rock and Beischel administered seven CRMs⁷ counter-balanced sequences of a discarnate reading and control condition. The discarnate reading condition consisted of a phone reading including questions about a target discarnate in which only a blinded medium and a blinded experimenter were on the phone. The control condition consisted of a phone conversation between the medium and the same experimenter in which the medium was asked similar questions regarding a living person s/he (i.e., the medium) knew. Mediums' phenomenology during each condition was retrospectively assessed using the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI; Pekala, 1991), a questionnaire designed to quantify different phenomenological elements associated with exposure to a particular stimulus condition.

It was found that the CRMs provided scores for the reading condition that were significantly higher than those for the control condition with

⁶ Schouten (1994) states: "The first extensive studies of verbal statements of mediums appeared about 100 years ago in the publications of the British and American psychical research societies. These studies were purely descriptive. Hundreds of pages were devoted to transcripts of readings of mediums and discussions of interpretations and the validity of the mediums' statements ... The subjective estimation of the significance of data became less acceptable and was gradually replaced by the application of quantitative and statistical evaluations" (pp. 222–223).

⁷ The participants in this study ranged in age from 43 to 54 years (mean = 46.71, SEM = 1.77, median = 44, SD = 4.68) and included six females and one male.

regard to phenomenological elements including Negative Affect, Altered Experience (e.g., alterations in time sense, body image, and perceptions of objects in the external world), and Altered State of Awareness (i.e., one's subjective sense of an unusual state of consciousness). In contrast, the discarnate reading condition scored significantly *lower* than the control condition with regard to: Self-Awareness, Volitional Control, and Memory. Consequently, Rock and Beischel's (2008) quantitative findings allow one to more fully appreciate the phenomenological processes associated with mediumship readings for discarnates.

The results also begin to make reference to the CRMs' experience of the discarnates as autonomous beings. For example, the finding of lower volitional control during the reading condition leads us toward a better understanding of the CRMs' experience of ostensible discarnate communication. Granted, the CRMs were not blinded to the conditions in this study and Rock and Beischel were not making claims beyond the phenomenological differences that arose psychologically according to the task demands of the reading and control condition.

In a subsequent process-focused study, Rock, Beischel, and Cott (in press) began to specifically address the source of the information CRMs receive by *qualitatively* investigating CRMs' experiences of purported communication with discarnates as compared to their experiences during psychic readings for the living in which somatic psi (i.e., telepathy, clairvoyance, and/or precognition, be it "super" or not) was ostensibly used. Six CRMs⁸ were e-mailed two open-ended questions in counter-balanced sequences that requested detailed descriptions of the phenomenological effects of: (1) mediumship readings and (2) psychic readings. A thematic analysis using various principles of phenomenological methodology yielded the comprehensive constituent themes and representative verbatim comments from participants regarding mediumship and psychic reading experiences displayed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

A comparative analysis of the essential aspects of mediumship readings versus psychic readings revealed several similarities. The *multimodal, visual, auditory, tactile*, and "*just knowing*" themes were considered essential aspects of both the mediumship reading and psychic reading experiences, and the extracted significant statements that constituted these themes are similar. One significant difference, however, is that psychic reading themes tended to pertain primarily to the individual client, whereas mediumship reading themes pertained to the discarnate, the sitter, and other friends and relatives of the discarnate. Indeed, as one CRM stated: "In a psychic reading, the information that comes through usually has to do with life issues and often does not continually make references back to family members."

⁸ The participants in this study ranged in age from 44 to 56 years (mean = 48.63, SEM = 1.96, SD = 4.81) and included five females and one male.

TABLE 1
 COMPREHENSIVE CONSTITUENT THEMES AND VERBATIM COMMENTS
 FOR MEDIUMSHIP EXPERIENCES

Comprehensive constituent themes	Verbatim comments
(1) Verificatory “signs” of contact with the discarnate	<i>Another really exciting communication I have with the deceased is hearing high pitched kind of rings or whines. I have asked for communication and suddenly hear inside my ears, a high ringing sound. I am thrilled to know this is contact.</i>
(2) Partial “merging” with the discarnate	<i>It almost feels like my energy is “merging” (often referred to as “blending”) with the energy of the discarnate. Sometimes it feels like being in two places at the same time.</i>
(3) Apparent independence of the discarnate from the medium	<i>Now you would think being a medium I would want to look and connect with them sitting on the edge of my bed. What really happens is they startle me which makes me freak out!</i>
(4) Multiple modalities functioning simultaneously (e.g., auditory and olfactory)	<i>In mediumship readings, communication comes through in a variety of ways, and often it is a combination of methods that go beyond the normal senses.</i>
(5-8) Visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory imagery pertaining to the discarnate and their loved-ones	<p><i>I often see in my spiritual vision, symbols such as a favorite piece of jewelry.</i></p> <p><i>I have also heard music inside me for a favorite song the deceased person loved. I have “heard” piano music in my ears or in my mind and had that identified by the sitter.</i></p> <p><i>I will also go through feelings of how they passed. If a heart attack my heart will beat really fast, drowning I will get lots of fluid in my throat.</i></p> <p><i>I have smelled violets and then found out Violet was the deceased person’s name for the sitter.</i></p>

Comprehensive constituent themes	Verbatim comments
(9) The experience of “just knowing” (i.e., the spontaneous manifestation of knowledge about, or connected to, a discarnate without the medium experiencing its acquisition).	<i>It is just “knowing.” When this happens, it is always correct, and can even surprise me. In some cases I just look at them and start saying names and giving validations in rapid fire sequence.</i>

TABLE 2
 COMPREHENSIVE CONSTITUENT THEMES AND VERBATIM COMMENTS
 FOR PSYCHIC READING EXPERIENCES

Comprehensive constituent themes	Verbatim comments
(1) Multiple modalities functioning simultaneously	<i>All the above aspects of psychic ability overlap during a reading so that one minute I may be seeing something in my mind’s eye while seconds later, I might be feeling something or hearing something.</i>
(2-4) Visual, auditory, and tactile information pertaining to the client	<p><i>I may see beautiful colors in the aura or deep red angry colors or even black if there is a health issue.</i></p> <p><i>I also have been able to hear things like blood coursing through the veins or circulatory system of a person.</i></p> <p><i>My hands are sensitive, and I experience the physical feeling of touching a spirit form which is the living person’s spirit. I also use my hands to detect health issues in the spirit form. So I can feel cancer with my hands or the clothes someone is wearing, or their hair. This touch and feel kind of thing is communicated back to me spiritually.</i></p>
(5) Empathy with the client	<i>As soon as I hear them say hello I can tell if they are skeptical, open, excited and happy, nervous, sad ... I can feel their energy, therefore, know what they are feeling.</i>

Comprehensive constituent themes	Verbatim comments
(6) The experience of “just knowing”	<i>I may just suddenly “know” something without any rational explanation.</i>
(7) Ostensible precognition	<i>...a psychic reading is like reading a book, which represents your aura and energy field that contains past, present, and future information.</i>

The similarities between psychic and mediumship experiences are not entirely surprising considering that mediums, in fact, must be employing similar techniques in both discarnate and psychic readings, albeit to receive information from ostensibly different sources. That is, in a psychic reading, the medium uses telepathy to acquire information from the living client’s mind, and during a discarnate reading, s/he also uses telepathy to seemingly receive information from the discarnate’s mind.⁹ In addition, just as the target is “sent” from the sender to the receiver during telepathy studies, the information reported in mediumship readings may be “sent” from the discarnate to the medium. Thus, the two experiences may indeed appear similar even if the two sources are different. Similarities are also apparent between the *empathy* theme of the psychic readings and the *partial “merging”* theme of the mediumship readings; that is, both themes included an experience of the target’s emotions (i.e., the client and the discarnate, respectively). However, it may be noted that during mediumship readings, CRMs tended to strongly *experience* the discarnate’s emotions, whereas during psychic readings, CRMs were merely *aware* of the client’s emotions.

There are, however, several themes that emerged during the mediumship analysis but were absent from the psychic readings analysis (i.e., the *olfactory*, *verificatory “sign,”* and *independence* themes). The finding that these themes were not considered essential aspects of the psychic reading experience is due, at least in part, to the fact that the target entity during psychic readings was a living person rather than a discarnate. For example, the CRMs clearly did not require a verificatory sign of contact from the living client who had solicited the psychic reading. In contrast, the nebulous nature of ostensible discarnate communication calls for corroborative evidence that contact has been established. Furthermore, the *independence* theme may have surfaced during the mediumship analysis and not the psychic analysis simply because it is obvious that the living clients of psychics are independent from the psychics themselves.

⁹ We use the term “mind” here in a general sense to refer to the discarnate’s ostensible survived consciousness. We are not making claims that a discarnate mind is identical to a living mind.

Finally, the finding that the *precognition* theme was an essential aspect of the psychic reading experience but not the mediumship reading experience emphasizes their different functions. That is, the function of a psychic reading includes conveying to the living client information regarding future events, whereas the function of a mediumship reading is to facilitate discarnate-sitter communication.

These process-focused findings suggest that CRMs have the ability to differentiate between ostensible discarnate communication and their use of somatic psi during psychic readings. Indeed, one CRM succinctly made the following distinction: “a psychic reading is like reading a book ... and a mediumship reading is like seeing a play.” Thus, further research is required to better understand the differences that occur in CRMs’ phenomenology during mediumship and psychic readings.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF PROCESS-FOCUSED MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH FOR THE SURVIVAL PSI VERSUS SOMATIC PSI DEBATE

As previously stated, historically, parapsychological researchers have been unable to discern whether the accurate and specific information that mediums report comes from the deceased in the afterlife (i.e., survival psi) or instead arises from mediums’ use of telepathy, clairvoyance, and/or precognition (i.e., somatic psi). By simply asking mediums about the source of their information, however, it becomes apparent that they experience information arising from those two sources as quite different and easily discernable.

The first study described briefly above (Rock & Beischel, 2008) provided us with a general understanding of mediums’ experiences during a mediumship reading task (i.e., ostensible communication with the deceased) versus their experiences during a control task. The finding of lower volitional control during the reading condition speaks to a medium’s experiences of a discarnate as a separate individual communicating with him/her. This finding supports the idea that during a mediumship reading, the information “comes in” to the medium rather than the medium “reaching out” to acquire the information.

The second study summarized above (Rock, et al., in press) serves as an important first step in specifically addressing the survival psi versus somatic psi debate through process-focused research. Specifically, the presence of the comprehensive constituent theme “apparent independence of the discarnate from the medium” begins to directly address the differences between CRMs’ experiences during mediumship conditions and situations in which information is acquired from the proposed psychic reservoir. The CRMs experience discarnate-based information as coming from independent, volitional beings separate from themselves and not as knowledge obtained from a dormant, inert source.

It is also noteworthy that CRMs are apparently engaged in *super* (somatic)-psi (i.e., retrieving information through more extensive than “normal” clairvoyance, precognition, and/or telepathy with the living) during “regular” psychic readings. Namely, the thematic analysis of mediums’ experiences during psychic readings revealed that they receive visual, auditory, and tactile information pertaining to the client; that is, they ostensibly use telepathy and/or clairvoyance to acquire information from the living. The analysis also included their use of reported precognition. However, in the CRMs’ descriptions of communication with discarnates, the precognition theme was not present. Granted, this may simply be because it is not possible to report precognitive information about a deceased person’s actions in the future either because the consciousness no longer exists (i.e., the survival hypothesis is false) or because of the nebulous nature of the afterlife and our access to it as physically-based beings. As one CRM stated: “One cannot predict the future of a discarnate; unless of course, we’d like to predict what they are going to be doing ‘in the afterlife’—a concept that is totally subjective and completely unverifiable.” Regardless, the presence of precognition in one condition and not the other does raise an interesting issue worthy of further investigation as it reveals a specific distinction between mediumship and psychic readings.

In addition, the similarities discovered between the CRMs’ experiences during mediumship and psychic readings may relate to the CRMs’ regular reported contact with “spirit guides,” “angels,” discarnates known to them, and similar “friendly” ethereal entities. If, for example, the auditory information associated with the living client during a psychic reading is acquired through communication with other-worldly beings, the mediums’ experiences might be similar under the two conditions (i.e., discarnate and psychic readings) as the sources are relatively analogous. Though this may be speculative, it is important to entertain all possible explanations for similarities and differences when comparing mediums’ experiences during mediumship and psychic readings. Accounting for overlap between the two experiences is essential to our understanding of either.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that the source of information reported during mediumship readings may in fact include combinations of all three proposed parapsychological hypotheses (i.e., survival, super-psi, and psychic reservoir). Indeed, the existence of psi abilities and/or the presence of a cosmic store of information do not preclude the possibility of the survival of consciousness or the capacity of mediums to communicate with the deceased. In the future, a closer systematic examination of the processes mediums use to acquire information—by both mediums and researchers—will lead to a more complete understanding of the source of the anomalous information reported during mediumship readings. In the next section, we propose a future study that may allow researchers to achieve this objective.

THE FUTURE OF PROCESS-FOCUSED MEDIUMSHIP RESEARCH
CONCERNING THE SURVIVAL PSI VERSUS SOMATIC PSI DEBATE

As stated above, proof-focused mediumship data alone cannot distinguish between the survival psi and somatic psi hypotheses. Mediums, however, claim that they are able to make that distinction based on the nature of their experiences. Future studies aimed at distinguishing between survival psi and somatic psi might include a modified version of Rock and Beischel's (2008) experimental design in which CRMs complete the PCI concerning their experiences during different stimulus conditions: (1) a mediumship reading for a deceased target, (2) a psychic reading for a living target, and (3) a control condition in which no use of somatic psi or discarnate communication is requested. For the first two conditions, the first name of the target would be provided to the CRM but s/he and the participating experimenter would be kept blind to all other details about the targets, specifically whether each target is deceased or living. This may address whether the underlying phenomenological processes associated with discarnate communication are quantitatively different from those used during somatic psi (i.e., telepathy, clairvoyance, and/or precognition).

It would also be useful to standardize the question set across conditions (e.g., not including questions about the cause of death), which would serve to eliminate phenomenological differences due to differential task demands. In addition, this study could include a placebo or "sham" reading condition, whereby mediums are blinded to the fact that they are instructed to communicate with a fabricated, rather than a factual, target. However, if the blind is compromised and the medium determines that the target has been fabricated, then the source of this determination could include telepathy with the living (e.g., the experimenter) or communication with a factual discarnate that is presumably knowledgeable regarding the sham reading condition. Indeed, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to control for which skills or abilities a medium is using to acquire information. It is also possible that if the blind is *not* broken, this may be due to the medium communicating with a mischievous factual discarnate who is masquerading as the fabricated discarnate.

Including a sham condition in the design would be advantageous if the mediums' phenomenology associated with the sham condition is significantly different compared to, for example, the mediumship reading; this, then, may be due to differences between the informational sources (i.e., fictional versus deceased). However, if similarities in phenomenology are seen between the sham condition and *either* the psychic reading condition *or* the discarnate communication condition, due to the blinding issues stated above, this result would not aid in discriminating between somatic psi and survival psi as it is not possible to determine the source of information (i.e., friendly or mischievous discarnate, telepathy or super-psi, other,

etc.) acquired during the sham condition. Consequently, the “slippery” dynamics of mediumship and the unknown limits of either form of psi make any attempt at blinding the medium to the reading condition problematic. In addition, ethical issues arise regarding asking the participants to “open up” to a sham discarnate; because the source of information obtained during AIR is unknown, opening up without a “known” entity with which to communicate may not be psychologically or spiritually safe.

In the future, researchers may wish to forego the sham condition and simply blind the mediums to whether a target individual is alive or deceased and provide instructions requesting that the mediums do not enlist the assistance of entities besides target discarnates during the readings. Differences discovered under these conditions may allow for the further discrimination between mediums’ experiences of survival psi and somatic psi.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

Although previous evidence for AIR alone cannot differentiate between survival and psi, by adding (1) mediums’ spontaneous reports that they are communicating directly with the deceased as well as (2) their alleged ability to differentiate between that communication and their use of somatic psi, and including (3) experimental evidence that the two experiences are in fact different under controlled conditions, it may be possible to arrive at an empirically driven distinction between survival psi and somatic psi. Issues (1) and (2) were addressed by Rock et al. (in press) and may assist researchers in identifying the phenomenology of ostensible communication with discarnates versus the phenomenology of somatic psi. Furthermore, Rock and Beischel (2008) indicated how a modified experimental design may allow researchers to address (3), which may assist in determining the source of the information mediums receive. This determination will, in turn, bring the field closer to addressing the question at the root of mediumship research: Is there life after death?

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¹⁰ Investigating these differences in the future may also include using non-phenomenologically based methods such as electroencephalography (EEG), functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), and/or physiological monitoring of participants during psychic and mediumship experiences.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Portions of the research described were supported by the Peter Hayes Fund.

ABSTRACTS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Spanish

SOBRE EL DEBATE DE SOBREVIVENCIA VERSUS PSI A TRAVÉS DE ÉNFASIS EN LA INVESTIGACIÓN DE PROCESO DE LA MEDIUMNIDAD

RESUMEN: Más de un siglo de investigación concluye que médiums talentosos pueden presentar información certera y específica sobre seres queridos que han muerto (llamados desencarnados) relacionados a personas vivas (llamados asistentes) durante la recepción de información anómala (RIA); esto es, sin tener conocimientos previos sobre los desencarnados o los asistentes, en ausencia de información sensorial, y sin en uso de decepción. Sin embargo, la investigación histórica que ha enfatizado la prueba no ha sido enfocada hacia cuales mecanismos parapsicológicos están involucrados en la RIA con médiums. Los datos de por si apoyan hipótesis múltiples que incluyen los modelos super-psi y la reserva psíquica (“psi” colectivo) al igual que la hipótesis de la sobrevivencia de la conciencia (o simplemente “sobrevivencia”). Sin embargo, al limitar la investigación a estudios que enfatizan prueba, los investigadores han ignorado importantes procesos fenomenológicos de mediumnidad subyacentes a la RIA y como estos procesos pueden estar relacionados a la hipótesis de la sobrevivencia. La investigación de las experiencias de los médiums enfatizando proceso podría llevar a un mejor entendimiento de la fuente de información de los médiums durante la RIA. Este artículo resume brevemente los resultados de estudios recientes enfatizando proceso, las experiencias de médiums mentales americanos durante supuesta comunicación con desencarnados. También sugerimos areas para futuros estudios enfatizando el proceso para considerar de forma más completa la pregunta básica de la investigación de médiums: ¿Hay una vida después de la muerte?

French

REGLER LE DEBAT SURVIVALISTE VERSUS PSI A TRAVERS LA RECHERCHE ORIENTEE SUR LES PROCESSUS DE LA MEDIUMNITE

RESUME: Plus d'un siècle de recherche sur la médiumnité a conclu que des médiums doués étaient capables de rapporter des informations précises et spécifiques à propos des proches décédés (appelés désincarnés) et des personnes vivantes (appelées séanciers) au moyen d'une réception anormale d'information (AIR); c'est-à-dire sans aucune connaissance antérieure sur les désincarnés ou les séanciers, en l'absence de feedback sensorial, et sans utiliser des moyens frauduleux. Cependant, le corpus historique de recherche orientée vers la preuve ne permet pas de savoir quels mécanismes parapsychologiques sont impliqués dans les AIR par des médiums. Les données en elles-mêmes permettent de soutenir de multiples hypothèses dont les modèles (dits « psi ») du super-psi et du réservoir psychique aussi bien que l'hypothèse de la survie de la conscience (dit simplement « survivaliste »). Toutefois, en restreignant la recherche aux études orientées vers la preuve, les chercheurs ont négligé d'importants processus de la phénoménologie médiumnique sous-jacent à l'AIR, ainsi que la façon dont ces processus puissent renvoyer à l'hypothèse de la survie. L'investigation orientée vers les processus des expériences des médiums pourrait mener à une meilleure compréhension de la source de l'information que les médiums rapportent durant l'AIR. Cet article résume brièvement les résultats de récentes études orientées vers les processus avec des médiums mentaux de l'Amérique contemporaine durant d'apparentes expériences de communication avec des désincarnés. Nous suggérons également des zones à explorer dans les futures études médiumniques orientées vers les processus pour mieux régler la question à la source de la recherche médiumnique : y a-t-il une vie après la mort ?

German

ZUR BEHANDLUNG DER ÜBERLEBENS- VERSUS PSI-DEBATTE MITTELS DER PROZESSORIENTIERTEN FORSCHUNG MIT MEDIEN

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Eine mehr als hundertjährige Geschichte der Erforschung der Medialität ist zum Schluß gekommen, daß begabte Medien in der Lage seien, genaue und spezifische Angaben über verstorbene Angehörige (als „Jenseitige“ bezeichnet) lebender Personen (als „Sitzungsteilnehmer“ bezeichnet) mittels einer anomalen Informations-Rezeption (AIR) zu machen, das heißt ohne vorheriges Wissen über die Jenseitigen oder Sitzungsteilnehmer, beim Fehlen eines sensorischen Feedback und ohne die Verwendung von Täuschungstechniken. Dieses historisch gewonnene Material eines beweisorientierten Forschungszugangs schliesst jedoch nicht die Frage ein, welche Rolle parapsychologische Mechanismen bei der AIR seitens der Medien spielen. Die Datenlage an und für sich genommen läßt mehrfache Hypothesen zu – einschließlich des Super-Psi-Modells und des

Modells eines parapsychischen Reservoirs (zusammengefaßt als "Psi") wie auch die Hypothese vom Fortleben des Bewusstseins (einfach „Überleben“ genannt). Wenn die Forschung auf beweisorientierte Untersuchungen begrenzt wird, werden von den Untersuchern jedoch wichtige Prozesse der Phänomenologie der Medialität vernachlässigt, die der AIR zugrundeliegen und wie diese Prozesse mit der Überlebenshypothese in Beziehung stehen. Diese prozeßorientierte Untersuchung medialer Erfahrungen könnte zu einem besseren Verständnis des Ursprungs der Information führen, über die Medien während der AIR berichten. Der Artikel fasst kurz die Ergebnisse prozeßorientierter Untersuchungen der Erfahrungen moderner amerikanischer Medien während derer scheinbaren Kommunikation mit Jenseitigen zusammen. Wir schlagen auch Forschungsgebiete für künftige prozeßorientierte Untersuchungen mit Medien vor, um die Frage umfassender zu behandeln, die der Forschung mit Medien zugrunde liegt, nämlich: Gibt es ein Leben nach dem Tod?