

**Speaking of Spirits: Representations and Experiences of the Spirit World in
British Spirit Mediumship**



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Abstract

This thesis has examined some of the features connected to contemporary practises of spirit mediumship, by focusing on how mediums construct and manage their identities, how they interact with outsiders, and how they orientate to and manage the identities of their spirit contacts. It has used observational studies of mediumship in action, in religious and secular contexts, to examine how mediums manage their own identities, interaction with an audience, and the agencies of non corporeal spirit beings. It has also used semi-structured interviews and autobiographies to explore how mediums account for their spiritual experiences, and how they become active practitioners of spirit communication. Using a combined methodological approach that has drawn on Discourse Analysis and grounded theory, this thesis will firstly illustrate the need for sociological research into mediumship before explaining why such a methodological approach has been selected. Analysis will be based on an examination of identities as actively managed and negotiated in talk and text, by examining data from ten observational studies, seventeen interviews, and five autobiographies. The conclusion will reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of such an approach, before suggesting future areas of research, and how this project may be of use to other studies of extraordinary experiences, and society more generally.

Declaration

I hereby acknowledge that material covered in Chapter Four has also formed part of the paper “Discourse and the preconditions of mediumship in stage demonstrations” by Robin Wooffitt and Hannah Gilbert, which appeared in *Mortality* (2008), Volume 13, Issue 3.

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Chapter One

Social science, parapsychology and Western spirit mediumship

1.1 Introduction

Belief in the ability to communicate with spirits of the deceased has been noted since some of the earliest recordings of human society. Perhaps because of the inevitable universality of the death experience, people have continued (and no doubt will continue) to seek and attribute meanings that situate life and death in an intelligible parallel. People are bound to their dead, who symbolise the past as well as providing reference for the imagined and anticipated future. As Harrison (2003) has noted, “culture perpetuates itself through the power of the dead... the awareness of death that defines human nature is inseparable from – indeed it arises from – our awareness that we are not self-authored, that we follow in the footsteps of the dead.” (Harrison, 2003: ix). Belief in spirit worlds, and particularly in the potential for the return of the dead to the world of the living, can mark the presence of such ‘footsteps’ as literally near and possibly accessible. Certain individuals who claim to be able to demonstrate communication with such spirit worlds and with the returning dead orientate to and embody these presences in social ritual and experience.

Spirit mediums are one example of those who claim to be able to communicate with spirits of the deceased, and a variety of different cultures have their own spirit

mediums. They are often considered as religious or spiritual practitioners, and are bound into the social rules and expectations of their society's religious beliefs and practises. The phenomena they produce are vital to their position: to simply claim contact with spirit others is not enough, mediums must *demonstrate* this contact, and embody the dead so that they are recognisable to their audience. Mediumship is concerned with the production of tangible scenarios that give the dead a legible presence (see Beattie & Middleton, 1969). Being able to communicate with the dead is usually reserved only for a few specific individuals who are able to do so because of special personal abilities, and so, while mediumship denotes a social practise, underneath the performances lie a series of private experiences.

It is perhaps useful to distinguish mediumship as a phenomenon that has meaning in both public and private spheres: the practise, i.e. the performance of mediumship (the public); and mediums' own experience of contact with spirits, or, what occurs between the spirit and the medium (the private). The public and private are obviously interlinked, in that experiences of spirit inform the performance of mediumship. But, while we may witness the physicality of mediumship, the internal communication *experience* – what it feels like to be in contact with spirit – is hidden, and the medium ultimately controls what s/he reveals of this.

Mediums' private experiences are also shared with spirit others, who are considered active, independent agents. These relationships – between the medium and the living, and the medium and the dead – are complex, and will be considered

throughout this thesis in regards to how mediums talk about these relationships and the experiences associated with them, and how these relationships may be demonstrated and constructed in mediumship performance. While there are obvious limitations to the extent to which such personal experiences can be translated and shared with others, it is interesting that there is so little literature that has considered mediumistic *experience* as accounted for by mediums themselves, despite a wide collection and array of research into mediumship.

In the Western world the character of the medium is somewhat ambiguous when considering its place within society. Scientific models of knowledge critique the validity of the medium's claims, and posit alternative meanings to its practise¹. The spirit medium is however a recognisable figure in Western popular (and in particular) spiritual culture, and there are a number of spirit mediums practising in Western countries today. The research for this thesis has focused on one of these Western countries: England.

To illustrate the range of issues that will be examined in this thesis, we will briefly consider some verbal and written statements taken from contemporary mediums. The first comes from a contemporary medium who regularly tours Great Britain with large scale mediumship demonstrations:

¹ i.e. that mediums are fraudulent, deluded, etc.

“I am sensitive because I am a medium, and I am a medium because I am sensitive”

Stephen Holbrook (spoken during a live demonstration, 2004)

The second comes from a medium interviewed for this thesis project:

“its [being in contact with spirits] like it’s a lovely feeling because you, you know its you know it you’re not being you, and then as soon as they’ve gone out the room then you’re back to your old self again”

Simon (spoken in an interview, 2004)

The third comes from the autobiography of a well known medium who has had regular television appearances practising his mediumship:

“I am a mental medium, utilizing the gifts of clairsentience and clairvoyance. I usually tell the sitter that I am merely a telephone to the spirit world. Just as we all receive thoughts on a daily basis, I am aware of and sensitive to thought frequencies that the spirit people create and send to my consciousness.”

James Van Praagh (Van Praagh, 1998: 35)

These extracts show that mediumship is not simply about the provision of messages from the dead to the living. A range of issues that go beyond the spirit message are inferred here also: Holbrook mentions a specific personality trait that is connected

to his role as a medium; Simon mentions the sensuous nature of being in contact with spirit as he references his awareness of agency before and after contact is made, and Van Praagh discusses his experiences using metaphor and reference to sensuous feelings that occur during his connection with spirit others. The performance of mediumship is related to the medium's personality; to their biography, their history, their style. Furthermore, mediums are interacting with other agencies who also have their own personalities, biographies, histories, styles, etc. These are discrete and interactive forms of consciousness, although each is bar to particular limitations, particularly the non corporeal constraints of spirit entities. Mediumship is also about the embodiment of spirit experience: the sensations associated with being in contact with a spirit entity. Furthermore, there are a wide range of issues relevant to the practise and experience of mediumship that parallels with everyday experiences of grief, interaction, and spirituality. However, mediumship experiences are not shared by many others, and when mediumship is so closely involved with embodying the dead for *others*, the question as to *how* these experiences are shared becomes particularly relevant. The extracts above introduce some of the metaphors, similes and other descriptive resources drawn upon to convey such unique experiences, such as Simon's description of mediumistic experience as a lovely feeling, and Van Praagh's comparison between his role as a medium, and that of a telephone.

These extracts also illustrate the various ways in which we can learn about mediums and mediumship: at demonstrations of mediumship, through interviews, from their

autobiographies, and from their accounts, anecdotes and recollections. It is important to consider the role that language plays in these areas: it is through description that mediums convey their experiences of spirit contact, through narrative that they will acknowledge key biographical events in the development of their mediumship; through talk that they demonstrate the presence of spirits.

This thesis has taken a sociological approach to studying contemporary spirit mediumship. As will be discussed later in this chapter, studies of Western mediumship are largely dominated by parapsychological and psychical research literatures, which are generally interested in whether or not mediumship can claim any scientific validity and provide evidence of life after death. In such research, the personality of the mediums studied is generally absent, and the ways in which mediumship exists as a social phenomenon has been given little consideration. This needs to be redressed: a significant number of mediums continue to practise and provide services within contemporary society, and an even higher number of individuals seek and may endorse their claims. More recently, media enterprises have enabled a small number of mediums to achieve considerable lucrative success and fame. Mediumship has, through a variety of media outputs such as books, television programmes and films, become a strong presence in contemporary Western society, and whether those exposed will seek to consume, critique or ignore it, the medium is nevertheless a familiar figure.

There are a wide range of questions still left to be answered. This thesis seeks to address some of the issues connected to the practises and experiences of contemporary Western mediums by focusing on two particular research questions: how do mediums embody spirits for their audiences (the public), and, how do mediums account for their experiences of spirit (the private). Key themes that will be discussed here will include presentation of agency, the phenomenology of mediumship, medium biography and its relation to the contemporary practises of mediums, and how spirits are embodied and explained. It will focus on a qualitative, largely discursive approach to these themes, primarily focusing on language, which is the primary vehicle by which these themes are so often expressed, and therefore the most vital and potentially fruitful topic of study.

First, however, it is important to establish the broader intellectual context for this project. I will now provide a brief summary of some of the features of contemporary Western mediumship, illustrating them with a discussion of current representations of mediums, and the popularity and diversity of how mediumship is consumed. For the rest of this chapter I will examine how social scientists have, in the past, explored similar subjects – generally labelled as paranormal – before moving to discuss more recent work that has represented a notable shift in research positions and academic treatment. Lastly, it will look at three examples of recent research into mediumship that have been selected as representative of current trends in types of and approaches to mediumship research, examining their strengths and weaknesses before addressing my own research position and rationale.

1.2 Contemporary Mediumship

There are a number of avenues by which mediumship is both offered and consumed. The character of the medium can be found in both fictional and non-fictional contexts, examples of both of which can receive significant audiences.

There are several ways by which individuals may consume mediumship; from the intimate one-on-one setting of a private sitting to large scale public demonstrations.

As sociological studies of contemporary Western mediumship and its role within society are unfortunately lacking, it is important to describe some of its features. In this section I will identify some of these features by focusing on how mediums are represented in the media, and the popularity of mediumship and its means of consumption.

1.2.1 *Representations*

Contemporary representations of mediums are particularly common in television programmes. Currently, there are a number of non-fictional and fictional mediums appearing in a variety of media sources. Celebrity mediums are generally male, and will typically feature in series of mediumship demonstrations in studios, haunted location investigation programmes, or as part of documentaries focused on mediumship or more general spiritual or paranormal subjects. Many have published autobiographies, which combine details of their own lives as mediums, accounts of

demonstrations and one-to-one sittings, with spiritual philosophies and discussions of mediumship more generally. These autobiographies often sell well.

Claiming to be able to communicate with spirits often places mediums in a position of perceived otherness when compared with the majority of a population, where the ‘normal’ lack such abilities. When we consider the normal in these circumstances, we are also considering the mundane, or the ordinary, which relates to the everyday: precisely the kinds of domains to which spirits do not, or should not, belong². Evans (1984), for example, explains paranormal instances as an intrusion, describing such as an ‘uninvited guest’. Furthermore, spirits are considerably far removed from the human self. It is not just the controversy of their existence, but also the perceived nature of their distance that is so contentious, for example, the fact that they have died and so no longer occupy a human physical form.

When considering a ‘normal’ human self, it is important to bring attention to how that self is shaped and defined. Often, the self exists in a parallel to the perceived selves of others, and the selves of others are often conceptualised as the Other, with a focus being on the Other as a category of difference. The relationship between the self and the Other is complex. Hess’ (1993) understanding of the self is that it is “constituted... by a set of relationships to the Other.” (Hess, 1993: 43), and he points out that this is particularly relevant to discussions about the paranormal. According to Hess (1993), the Other is defined as everything that the self is not, and

² It should be noted, however, that while this is typical of many Western cultures, it is less so in others.

he argues that the differing communities involved in discussion and pursuit of the paranormal (i.e. sceptics, parapsychologists, and New Agers) are situated in an “ideological arena” (Hess, 1993:43) that simultaneously constructs the self and the oppositional Other. We can take the term ‘Other’ to mean that which is distant, or not recognisably similar to the self, with the self referring to an established normality. For example, in his analysis of demonic illness in Sri Lanka, Kapferer notes that such illnesses denote a cultural view of an abnormal and non-social self whereby exorcism is required in order for the individual to regain their normal self through a healing process. The demonic is the Other, which threatens a healthy self. These conceptions of self are dependant on cultural expectations, and the Self is a collective definition of normality (Kapferer, 1979, see also Mead, 1934). This supports an argument that the ordinary self is often seen as separate from other spiritual and non-corporeal entities. Mediums appear as an Other because of significant differences in their behaviour and beliefs, but also because their connection with an Other influence (i.e. spirits). Due to the non corporeal nature of spirit, spirit communication can not be easily translated into understandings of communication based on more mundane interactions. It is hinged not just upon a private experience, but also upon a particular belief system.

Representations of mediums are interesting, then, because they capture this interpretative distance between ‘normal’ self and ‘abnormal’ Other, and often involve one trying to make sense of an other. Representations show the medium in a meaningful position constructed by those seeking to interpret them, and these

interpretations can be both negative and positive. Furthermore, differing negative and positive representations can often be used against the same individual medium, illustrating that the medium as other can be used to both positive and negative effect.

Derek Acorah is perhaps the most famous celebrity medium at this present time, and his presence has received both awe and ridicule from consumers and observers. He is best known for his appearance on the television show *Most Haunted*³, in which a small team of individuals regularly spend a night in an ostensibly haunted location attempting to record paranormal phenomena. His departure from *Most Haunted* was controversial, and it is widely reported that he was encouraged to leave after having providing fictional information during an episode of spirit communication. This fictional information had been planted by the programme's resident parapsychologist, Ciaran O'Keeffe, and referred to a character fabricated by O'Keeffe who was fed as fact to another member of the team. The purpose was to see if Acorah was gaining information from team members, and if he could be caught out with a fictional spirit entity. However, this was not the end of Acorah's career as he soon reappeared, this time in his own show, *Derek Acorah's Ghost Towns*⁴.

³ Acorah was the resident medium on *Most Haunted* from its inception in 2001, until his departure in 2005

⁴ Three series of this were commissioned, although Acorah continues to feature in one-off similarly themed television programmes.

Acorah occupies two opposing representations: the medium as fraud, and the medium as genuine. The antithetical nature of these representations illustrates the still frictional position of the medium in contemporary society. While some believe mediumship to be genuine, and have a number of outlets by which to witness or engage with its demonstration, others are unconvinced (and in some case offended) by such performances. Representations of the medium as fraud seem to be expressed in two main ways: as harsh critique, or as comedic ridicule. Acorah, for example, has been both criticised and ridiculed: his dismissal from *Most Haunted* saw him accused as fraud, while he has also been parodied in a number of comedic sketches⁵, and even listed as one of television's most amusing moments. Critiques of his mediumistic abilities can be aimed as serious complaints, situating him as fraudulently active, while the use of comedic ridicule situates him as fraudulent but pathetic, undermining his validity, and identifying him as inconsequential by making a farce of his mediumship demonstrations.

However, Acorah is also regularly presented as a genuine medium: indeed, his presence on television is generally within a sympathetic framework. This is similar for other mediums featuring in programmes whose topics concern spirit communication and the possibility of post mortem survival: they are situated as potential evidence of real phenomena. These programmes situate the paranormal as possible, and will often favour paranormal explanations for unusual events that occur within these investigations. However, their use of scientific equipment,

⁵ The most famous being a sketch in *Harry Hill's TV Burp*, in which an actor playing Acorah fought with an actor playing Scooby Doo for the title of best TV ghost-hunter.

particularly typical in haunted location investigation programmes, and the inclusion of a parapsychologist or paranormal investigator, whose stance is either sceptical or agnostic, appears as an attempt to ground their investigations by invoking scientific discourse. Whether or not the scientific methods would be acceptable by official scientific models is largely irrelevant when considering *how* such programmes attempt to present themselves as authentic, and demonstrate sensitivity to contemporary cultural expectations of the conduct of valid investigations.

What is interesting about such programmes is that, while they do invoke scientific discourse, the medium is nevertheless maintained as the main instrument of study. While the medium's statements are checked by other members of the team, s/he maintains a central position throughout, and the investigation's main form of data collection is via spirit communication. Furthermore, there seems to be a preference for paranormal explanations amongst team members, and sceptical comments are generally side lined or debated. Therefore, the medium can be identified as a kind of paranormal hero (Hess, 1993), who appears as someone with a commitment to providing evidence of the paranormal. If we look at *Most Haunted*, which is the most famous example of a haunted location investigation programme, we can note that, since its inception in 2001, the vast majority of its team members now endorse belief in the paranormal. While locations are approached from a supposedly agnostic position, nevertheless, tentative paranormal explanations are generally the accepted ones. Therefore, the medium, who has favoured this explanation from the beginning, is, through continually suggesting that the paranormal is real,

empowered by this unwavering representation of authenticity, or as ‘someone who has known all along’ and stuck by their convictions even when met with scepticism. This is where we can see the evidence for their similarity with Hess’ (1993) concept of paranormal hero. While Hess’ analysis focused mainly on a discussion of the roles of fictional psychic practitioners who provide benevolent powers for film protagonists, the significance of a commitment to promoting the paranormal is remarkably similar with real life mediums in programmes such as *Most Haunted*. They are heroic in that they stick by a truth that others may dismiss, continually providing an active service that will reposition the paranormal as truthful. Furthermore, by presenting themselves as an instrument for study (i.e. by allowing their statements to be checked, by working as part of a team) this authenticity is complimented by a modest cooperative nature where they acquiesce to appeasing potential scepticism with self presented humility. Their membership within a team lessens the distance between their otherness, and repeated appearance in a long running programme allows audience members continued exposure to their mediumship performances and, more generally, their character. In studio mediumship demonstrations, the provision of proof is not simply to authenticate the medium, but is used as beneficial to others, particularly the bereaved. This is particularly relevant in that the proof is personal, and it is the witnessed authentication of such information that is also evidential for the wider audience. Certainly, such noble intentions of bringing comfort to the bereaved are generally communicated by mediums, and again, this is particularly evident in studio

demonstrations of mediumship, where mediums demonstrate kindness and compassion alongside their spirit communications.

It is useful to discuss fictional representations of psychic practitioners, and in particular mediums, as there are a number of similar themes. A recent example of the medium as fraud is Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (2000), set in the late 19th century, and revolving around the story of a young woman who, whilst acting as a prison visitor, falls in love with an incarcerated medium. It is unclear, for the majority of the story, whether or not the medium is genuine: indeed, the main character becomes fascinated and is gradually persuaded by her presented abilities. However, the story ends with the medium exposed as fraud after she escapes from prison, ruining the protagonist, and mundane explanations for her behaviour are explained. The medium is, throughout the book, maintained as an Other, even though she becomes the object of the protagonist's affections. Her position (she is incarcerated, therefore separated from society) in the story and to the protagonist, and the mystery surrounding her life (the protagonist knows only what she is told), keeps her at a distance. Even when her incarceration ends, she is not united with the protagonist, but disappears from her social world to somewhere even more mysterious.

Fictional representations of mediums are often positive, even if the medium's otherness makes them originally suspect. Initially, they are often considered



sinister⁶ (in a real sense, or ridiculed as attempting to appear so) by at least one of the main characters (for example, see *Don't Look Now*, *Poltergeist*, *The Others*, *Haunted*, etc.). While they may be distanced from the main protagonists', be it through appearance, social position, ethnicity, etc., nevertheless, they ultimately provide indispensable aid. They fit into Hess' paranormal hero category. Hess (1993) notes that:

“...the paranormal heroes ... tend to be marked as exotic Others... Without the backing of the institutional infrastructure, they become David's facing the paranormal Goliaths, that is, underdog heroes who are set apart from society, do battle with superior paranormal forces, and finally save the social order.” (Hess, 1993: 138).

Hess' analysis includes other kinds of paranormal heroes who may occupy institutional positions, but nevertheless have a problematic position that

⁶ By sinister, this relates often to their appearance (for example, in *The Others*, the child Anne draws the medium as a menacing figure (e.g. jagged hair that sticks out, white staring eyes) compared to the more mundane mother, father and child figures drawn before, and she describes the medium as 'the witch' as we are shown the image she has drawn) or to the setting in which we are introduced to them, which is often dimly lit (for example, the séance in *Haunted* is based on a novel by James Herbert)). Although in this film, the main character, David, has attended this séance in order to expose the medium, we do not initially know that that is his intention when the séance begins, and witness a number of physical phenomena that startle the other members of the séance. During the séance, information that is later relevant to David (the name of the house he later visits where the main of the film is set) is mentioned, but this is not given credibility at the time. The end of the séance, however, returns to the initial sinister atmosphere: after the medium is exposed, and the sinister debunked, the medium begins to pant repeatedly and seems to be reacting to the presence of spirits, which David dismisses, until, as he is leaving, a child's voice (later recognised as the voice of his dead sister Juliet) interrupts and mentions his name. This momentarily returns the sinister, and provides the subtle beginnings for the atmosphere which pervades the rest of the film. It is, by the end of the film, that we realise there was a genuine supernatural presence (Juliet) at this first séance, and, in a similar vein to the films discussed by Hess (1993), David is ultimately punished for his initial scepticism when he becomes involved with malevolent ghosts.

marginalises them from their peers. Mediums are a particular kind of paranormal hero, as they generally lack any support from institutional infrastructures. They often have to work harder to gain the trust and cooperation of the higher status protagonist. Furthermore, they occupy a sphere labelled 'irrational', and are often counter to the protagonists' socially acceptable scientific sensibilities. As Hess (1993) has pointed out, the presumption of scientific explanations in the beginning of unusual experiences is regular, and many films that depict supernatural stories include a gradual transformative sequence whereby the rigidity of science as explanation must be reconstructed to accept the reality of the paranormal. In these cases, the protagonist, on realising that all is not what it seemed, must:

“...reach out to an ethnic Other who is empowered with the paranormal powers that are capable of saving them... although the power of the paranormal hero is equated with the popular, that power can only be an ambivalent concept of the popular in a cinematic tradition aimed at middle-class consumers (predominantly “white”) who identify themselves with the “underdog” but who also distance themselves from social categories “below” them in the social pyramid” (Hess, 1993: 130).

The exoticness mentioned in Hess' concept of the paranormal hero as Other is interesting, as he notes that representations of those aligned with the paranormal often come from a different social, and sometimes cultural, background to the protagonists. The relevance of exoticism is not just that the protagonist and the paranormal hero come from different social settings, but that they often come from

different cultural backgrounds, where the belief systems and practises are hinged upon a way of life that is unfamiliar to the everyday of the protagonist(s). It is more than just their belief in the paranormal that separates the two. However, it is only by overcoming this distance and accepting the world of the paranormal hero that the protagonist can be saved. In a sense, the paranormal is an intrusion into the world of the protagonist (self) that must be reconceptualised. However, where the medium is established as the benevolent paranormal hero, nevertheless, their Otherness is not completely overcome, and they generally return to their own original position when the desired outcome is fulfilled for the protagonist. A cultural transmission of knowledge is achieved, but only to a degree. The protagonists do not become fully immersed in the lifestyle of the paranormal hero, but go back to their own mundane social world, albeit slightly changed.

Interestingly, however, over the last few years a new kind of medium as paranormal hero has been explored whereby the medium is positioned as the main protagonist who occupies a more powerful social position. Also, the paranormal is more fully embraced in the everyday as an aspect of Western culture. The popular series' *Medium* (2005-present) and *The Ghost Whisperer* (2005-present) focus on the experiences and trials of two young, white, attractive female Americans⁷. To my knowledge, mediums have not been commonly represented in this way before. Both series are made in America, and both female leads seem to epitomise typical mainstream cultural characters. While their abilities may be critiqued by other

⁷ Patricia Arquette (*Medium*) and Jennifer Love Hewitt (*The Ghost Whisperer*). Both actresses are well known, and have had a number of roles in popular films over the last two decades.

characters, nevertheless the viewer is assured of their legitimacy through the construction of each programme, and their ongoing repertoire cements their authenticity, which is often reflected in acceptance by other recurring characters. What is interesting about these programmes is that the medium's experiences underpin the features of the programmes' plot. The distance around them as others is greatly diminished due to the fact that they occupy a number of socially recognisable roles, e.g. worker, mother, wife. The audience is woven into the fabric of mediumship by accessing it via the personal protagonist, and yet the detailed mechanics of mediumship (i.e. actual mediumistic encounters) are not always particularly prominent, or appear as visual observances. In these cases it seems that mediumship is an unusual feature put to good use in an otherwise recognisable type of drama: these programmes do not seem to overly function as detailed explorations of mediumship itself, rather it aids a more familiar structure. *Medium*, in particular, works as a crime drama, and bar the fact that the protagonist is a medium, is not all that different from other similarly themed programmes. We can see this with differing effects in recent fictional literature featuring mediums as main protagonists, although the characteristics of the medium differ from book to book (e.g. Mantel, 2004; Slavin, 2007; Stewart, 2004).

In a similar vein, although exploring themes more relevant to mediumship itself, is *Afterlife*, which also began in 2005⁸. This British series is about a middle aged female medium who is the subject of an investigation by a sceptical psychologist.

From the beginning, these programmes depict the medium as someone *genuinely* in

⁸ *Afterlife* ran for two series on ITV1, and was repeated during prime time slots.

contact with spirits: evidence of the spirits can be seen by the viewers (who can see what the medium sees from time to time), and each programme ends with a resolution the medium orchestrates, revealing her initial spiritual interpretation as the correct one. While the psychologist remains sceptical, it is the medium who is the heroine of the piece, battling with the stubbornness of his scepticism. The dialectic between these two characters captures the friction between science and the spiritual.

Although the spirit/science dialectic used in *Afterlife* is biased in favour of the medium, it nevertheless shows and makes recognisable motivations for both sides of the debate, with both characters serving as stereotypical figureheads. When it becomes apparent that the medium is in contact with the psychologist's deceased son (of whom she is trying to pass on messages), we can see that *Afterlife* also broadens its themes to include personal rites of grief and how both spirit and science address it. There is a subtle discussion of bereavement through this relationship, and while the programme is geared mainly toward the medium's involvement in others' ghost experiences, there is a strong underlying indicator that her role is also as an emotional and compassionate grief counsellor.

While *Afterlife* should not be over considered as an example of supportive fiction in the intentional sense – the director, Stephen Volk, has expressed a sceptical stance on the validity of mediumship, and stated that the “...theme throughout *Afterlife* is grief and loss.” (Sutton, 2005:40) – it is interesting to examine the use of

mediumship, in a fictional sense, as something presented as a valid phenomena, and particularly, in the case of *Afterlife*, to explore the dialectical relationship between science and mediumship. That mediumship appears at all is perhaps indicative of its current popularity.

Representations of mediums show that these figures are popular cultural figures. The medium character can be used both as a character in its own right, but also as a representation of other social themes. The number of television programmes that use mediumship as a core feature, both fictional and non-fictional, illustrate that mediumship is considered potentially interesting for the general public. The success of such programmes suggests that such a suggestion is justified. Non-fictional programmes that involve mediumship seem just as, if not more so, popular than fictionalised programmes, and the consumption of this form of media is only one of several means to consume mediumship. Along with these media representations, there are a number of other means whereby individuals can interact more personally with spirit mediums, and consume the phenomena of spirit mediumship either as active participants or observers.

1.2.2 Popularity and consumption of mediumship

Of the variety of ways in which individuals may consume mediumship, these can be broadly separated into secular⁹ and religious settings. The Spiritualism National Union (SNU) list 379 affiliated churches and lyceums¹⁰, and 24 certified mediums. There are likely to be a few mediums associated with each church and lyceum, so the 24 certified mediums individually listed is likely to represent a very small percentage of practising mediums. Furthermore, many mediums are not actively affiliated with a particular Spiritualist group, and the SNU is by no means representative of all Spiritualists. Mediumship is attractive for its personal relativity to individuals, with grounds for reflexivity that enable it to be shaped to fit the desires of a particular group. The religious character of Spiritualist mediumship appeals to some, but not all mediums need orientate to this structure and affiliation. Indeed, many seem not to, choosing instead to practise privately, typically in one to one sessions, which can be face to face, over the phone, at psychic fair stalls, or over the internet. One to one sittings are mainly marketed as a therapeutic enterprise, a tone that runs through both religious and secular settings of mediumship demonstrations. The popularity of mediumship is undoubtedly linked to such reflexivity: it can be used to fit the needs of the medium and potential sitters, and it can occur in public or more private settings. Mediumship demonstrations can also be used for entertainment purposes, such as at parties or meals. The ability to occupy religious, secular, and therapeutic settings is obviously crucial to its success.

⁹ In this instance, secular is used loosely to distinguish non-religious.

¹⁰ As counted on the 29th November, 2007

Secular settings are characterised by the situation or location in which the mediumship demonstration occurs: i.e. in community settings, such as town halls, hotel conference rooms, etc. A lot of private sittings may also be considered as secular depending on whether or not the individual seeking mediumship situates it as a part of a religious pursuit, or the medium in question orientates toward a specific religious method or endorsement.

Religious settings are generally Spiritualist, for Spiritualism is still the main religious community that supports spirit mediumship in the West. Of Spiritualist churches there is one main split; between Spiritualism and Christian Spiritualism. In both instances, mediumship is invoked as part of a religious service, and is performed within a specifically Spiritualist location (i.e. a church, or centre). The main difference between Spiritualism and Christian Spiritualism is the extent to which Spiritualism is affiliated with a broader Christian framework. Christian Spiritualism acknowledges Christ as the son of the God, and retains much of the content of traditional Christian features, often seeming to differ only on its acceptance of mediumship. The most well known organisational group of Christian Spiritualists are the Greater World Sanctuary, founded by the medium Winifred Moyes, who have headquarters in London and Leeds. Spiritualism, however, usually identifies Christ as a medium rather than the son of God, and while God may be mentioned in prayer discourse, there are varying degrees of how much services are geared toward a veneration of God or similar supreme-divine entities.

Spiritualist services involving mediumship demonstrations are often free, although special guest appearances, particular lectures or classes may require a fee. Public secular demonstrations of mediumship however, are generally at least £10-£15 per person. Private interactions can cost more: generally one to one sittings are around £25, and internet phone lines are usually charged around £1.50 per minute. That demonstrations are so widely available undoubtedly demonstrates that it is considered an attractive commodity, and it is unlikely that prices would be as high as they are if individuals were not prepared to meet them. Furthermore, it is worth noting the many touring mediums, who are involved in secular public demonstrations, have increased their ticket prices over the last few years, and their demonstrations are often well attended.¹¹

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that mediumship is a significant feature of Western society: it is sought, consumed, used and debated in a variety of ways. It is furthermore indicative of a wider interest with what is often termed the paranormal, which is equally, if not more, popular. Hauntings and UFO sightings are just two examples of phenomena that seem to function beyond physical laws (although, obviously, this is a typically Western approach, and other non-Western societies often incorporate such phenomena as being related to the natural order), and yet ostensible evidence for such is abundant and often attracts a prolific and dedicated following. The significance of paranormal phenomena, beliefs and experiences, has

¹¹ For example, Stephen Holbrook charged, on average, £10 per ticket in 2004. Tickets are, in 2007, on average, priced between £12-£13.

not gone un-noticed by social scientists, albeit responses to its continual presence have only recently considered the sociological aspects of its continuance and appeal in suitable depth. In the following section, I will examine some of the key themes social scientists have applied to and identified through the study of the paranormal, and show how a significant change in research motivation by recent researchers has offered new insights into the sociological character of such phenomena, beliefs and experiences.

1.3 Social science and the paranormal

In this section I will briefly review and discuss some of the social scientific perspectives and approaches to the study of supposedly paranormal beliefs. The traditional reductionist approaches that have often explained away reports of paranormal experience have, over the last few decades, received considerable critique, and have been challenged by new researchers that seek to explore such experiences and beliefs more agnostically. These latter researchers argue that such are worthy of study in their own right, and should be taken seriously as valid areas of cultural and personal life. Such research has been hugely influential to this project, which also uses individual reports of experience and belief as the source of investigation. Through a discussion of the relevant issues connected to why reductionist approaches are problematic, it is hoped that the benefits of a non-reductionist approach to these experiences will be clear.

The study of experiences deemed paranormal has been an often neglected topic within the social sciences. Early social scientific analysis of belief systems that incorporated spirits and other non-corporeal entities were often linked to theories which worked on the assumption that such beliefs were false or incorrect. Inevitably, such assumptions meant that those studied for their beliefs were inevitably represented as primitive, delusional, stupid or misguided. Non-western communities were sometimes belittled, with their meanings thought representative of Western culture's more humble beginnings. Darwin's (1848) theory about the natural evolution of animal species was soon applied in a similar manner to account for changes in societies' development. With Western culture taking the forefront, belief in spirits was thought indicative of an early stage of such evolution, with beliefs serving specific purposes, which change as societies develop (see Durkheim, 1912; Tylor, 1871; Malinowski, 1948). Progression was equated with technological and scientific advancement, which ultimately discredited spiritual ways of knowing.

Religious beliefs and experiences have often been reduced to symbolism: Durkheim (1912) argued that religion was symbolic of societies' unconscious self worship, while Marx (1843) that religion was the 'opiate of the masses' and propounded as a false consciousness by the ruling bourgeoisie as a means of pacifying and ultimately subduing the proletariat. In a similar vein, Malinowski (1922) identified magic as an attempt to provide a means of control for placating anxiety over unpredictable circumstances. There is a sense that, particularly for these early theorists, Westerners were "...somewhat perplexed by the discovery that to a

savage all is religion, that he perpetually lives in a world of mysticism and ritualism.” (Malinowski, 1948:24).

However, these theories are partly hinged on an assumption that such experiences are false, and therefore must be explainable by reference to more mundane social machinations. Bellah (1970) notes that “...consequential reductionism and symbolic reductionism are expressions of an objective cognitive bias which has dominated Western thought ever since the discovery of scientific method in the seventeenth century. This position asserts that the only valid knowledge is in the form of falsifiable scientific hypotheses” (Bellah, 1970: 92). While the theorisation of religion should not be under valued, it should however be noted that the individuality of experiences, and of how experiences can relate to a religious infrastructure, has often been under examined. The assumption that the only valid knowledge, as Bellah (1970) argues, is via scientific methodologies, shadows the more sophisticated diversity of societies and their ways of living, both in practise and in meaning making.

Similarly, traditionally social scientists have often taken a reductionist position towards claims of what have been termed paranormal experiences or beliefs closer to home. Such claims have generally been explained away in terms of socio structural or socio cultural variables. Again, because scientific models generally revoke the authenticity of paranormal phenomena as genuine, this has been taken as a starting basis of fact for much research. Inevitably, this leads to a research gaze

the looks beyond the experiences reported: the researched are situated as ultimately mistaken or deluded in their interpretation of the paranormal events they report, therefore, the interest of the researcher lies in *why* people would believe in such things, how they might be fooled, and what possible social and psychological benefits may be served.

The marginality hypothesis has been cited by some social scientists as a possible answer to this latter question. Social scientists, whose own research suggested a soundness of the marginality hypothesis, have argued that individuals who believe in and report experiences of paranormal phenomena are more likely to occupy marginal positions within society: belief in the paranormal acts as a means to compensate for their marginal position in society. Wuthnow's (1976) study of belief in astrology is a key example of this approach. The results of his study, conducted in California in the 1970's, suggested that interest and involvement in astrology was highest amongst the socially marginal, i.e. those unable to attain culturally valued goals. These included individuals who were separated, divorced or widowed; the less well educated; the over weight; or members of ethnic minority groups, with each of these categories assumed to be evidential of social marginality. An ethnographic study by Moody (1974) into a satanic coven in San Francisco during the late 1960s- early 1970s, suggested that members were more likely to hold culturally extreme political views or have what were regarded as perverse or undesirable sexual orientations, thereby encouraging an exclusion from mainstream society. He argued that their belief in the occult tenets of the group gave them the

feeling that they had control over their lives, while involvement in its ritualistic activities provided an active social space that would support and legitimate these feelings. Therefore, while outside the group their opinions and beliefs received negative reactions, inside the group they gained allegiance and confirmation. Finally, Warren's (1970) study of people who report UFO sightings argued that these individuals were more likely to occupy socially inconsistent status positions, i.e. come from a socially marginal situation (e.g. ethnic minority background) but occupy a high status position (e.g. work as a doctor). While one position may be culturally valued, the other is problematic. Warren argued that the feelings of tension that arose from the incompatibility of occupying two opposing social statuses predisposed people to interpret anomalous visual phenomena as, in his example, physical craft under the control of intelligent alien beings. These are just three examples of how social scientists have linked belief in and reports of paranormal experiences with categorisations of social marginality, and argued that such experiences work as compensation and comfort (see also Bourque, 1969; Bourque & Back, 1968).

However, there are numerous problems with these studies, and the marginality hypothesis has been strongly critiqued. Firstly, there is in fact a substantial body of literature providing evidence that people who believe in and report paranormal experiences are just as likely to be socially integrated and occupy cultural perceived positions of health and high status (e.g. Emmons & Sobal, 1981; Fox, 1992; Gillen, 1987; Greeley, 1975, 1991; Haraldsson, 1985; Haraldsson & Houtkooper, 1991;

Hartman, 1976; Hay, 1982; Hay & Morissy, 1978; Lynch, 1979; McClenon, 1990, 1994, 2000; Marty, 1970; Nelson, 1975; Rice, 2003; Roe, 2007; Zimmer, 1984, 1985). Greeley (1991) argues that evidence in fact suggests that belief in the paranormal is actually normal. Historically, belief and interest in paranormal phenomena does not seem overly tied to a class divide. For example, Spiritualism (which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), counted a number of socially esteemed figures amongst its membership, and the consumption of and interest in mediumship was popular amongst all classes (Barrow, 1987; Oppenheim, 1985; Owens, 1989, Warner, 2006). Furthermore, there is a strong link between the development of scientific rationalism, and a preceding body of exploration in certain occult traditions (e.g. Gibbons, 2006¹²). The relationship between science and spirit has indeed been frictional, but, as Gibbons has demonstrated, the two traditions have not developed entirely separately. What is important to question is why belief in the paranormal, etc., is considered socially marginal, as the current marginality of such phenomena is perhaps "...the secret of its social function, rather than the badge of its irrelevance." (Gibbons, 2006: 136).

Secondly, there are significant problems inherent in the logic of such theories and approaches. Who decides the criteria upon which others are judged? How could we accurately measure social marginality? Wooffitt (2006) has argued that the way in which marginality is constructed and produced as an analytic concept is problematic. He argues, for example, that Wuthnow offered such a wide definition

¹² Gibbons (2006) explores how occultism has influenced Western culture, and provides a useful critique of how contemporary marginality relates to the position of occultism today.

of what marginality actually is, that it becomes virtually useless as an analytic tool. He also notes that compensation studies rarely offer a clear account of how being socially marginal actually leads to a belief in paranormal phenomena. He also points out that social marginality explanations do not take into account the perspective of the people studied: for example, he cites this following extract from Wuthnow's (1976) study which responds to a query concerning possible involvement of the research informants:

“Even if we had asked people why they were interested in astrology, it isn't clear that the deprived would have recognised it as a coping mechanism.” (Wuthnow, 1976: 163).

Using this quote, Wooffitt argues that such assumptions illustrate the assumed superiority of social scientific accounts over lay or members' accounts, which typifies research that favours social marginality approaches. The research informants have already been categorised as deprived and situated as unable to accurately recognise certain habits and preferences. Again, if we consider scientific explanations as the starting basis for fact, we see the researcher's gaze far over shadows and silences those involved in their research. However, as Wooffitt states, if we ignore people's own accounts of their experiences, we are ultimately overlooking some of the key components of paranormal phenomena as they relate to the people who believe in and claim to have experienced them. Some parapsychologists have advocated a similar approach, for example, Rhea White

criticised parapsychologists for focusing too heavily on experimental research, and has argued for the development of more experience-centred approaches (White, 1985; 1990).

Studies that treat paranormal beliefs and experiences as a form of compensation for social marginality, such as Wuthnow's astrology study, provide little information as to how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences, and how they come to believe in paranormal phenomenon. Again, that belief in the paranormal is ascribed to a social marginal status by many researchers is an important observation in its own right. The shortcomings in these studies seem to aid the need for a more holistic approach to the study of such beliefs and experiences, as simply situating such as evidence of deprivation ignores a much broader range of analytical issues.

As Gibbons states:

“If we speak of alternative spiritualities as marginal, it is to say nothing about their relative importance. They are marginal in that they exist on what is constructed as the margins of Western culture. Which is to say, they are perhaps better described as marginalised then marginal as such.” (Gibbons, 1996:136)

A similar reductionist assumption informs another dominant academic position on paranormal beliefs and experiences: the cultural source hypothesis. The cultural source hypothesis argues that culture creates expectations which have the power to

shape or even cause paranormal experiences. David Hufford, a prominent critic of the cultural source hypothesis, characterises it as a position that takes:

“Reports of anomalous experiences [as]... ‘fictitious products of tradition’ or ‘imaginary subjective experiences shaped by (or occasionally caused) by tradition.’”
(Hufford, 1982: 15)

A form of self-fulfilling prophecy lies as the root of this position. So, misinterpretations of rare, but scientifically explainable phenomena will be informed by traditions of folk belief associated with a particular culture. Also, people experiencing psychotic or hallucinatory episodes will draw upon the practises and beliefs of their culture to characterise and give meaning to their experiences. More generally, people are more likely to mistake something unusual as the product of something supernatural if their culture supports and endorses the reality of supernatural phenomena. It is precisely in culture that individuals find their meanings and explanations.

There is some worth in this approach. Culture can influence so much of our understandings and experiences. It provides part of the vocabulary for the expression of experiences: for example, it is unlikely that a person will explain an experience as a ghost if there is not tradition of ghost narratives and belief in their culture (although, narratives about ghosts are a common feature of most, if not all,

societies). However, the *extent* to which culture informs or even shapes experiences is questionable.

Hufford came to criticise the cultural source hypothesis during his study of Old Hag experiences (Hufford, 1982). Old Hag experiences generally refer to a frightening form of sleep paralysis, which is often accompanied by the sense of a malign presence nearby, or sat on top of the chest of the sleeper. Hufford collected reports of these experiences, believing that they were connected to cultures in which there were strong traditions of and beliefs in such kinds of supernatural assaults. He discovered, however, that people who had no experiences of or exposure to communities that had traditions of Old Hag encounters may still report Old Hag style experiences. Moreover, he found that the incidence of Old Hag experiences seemed constant through the population of Western and non-Western societies. While interpretations of what lays at the root of Old Hag experiences differed from culture to culture, the basic *experiential* components of the experiences – sleep paralysis, sense of malign entity – were remarkably similar. He concluded that it is wrong to assume that such experiences could be explained simply by reference to an experient's culture, and instead argued that there is, at the root of the phenomena, a core set of experiences that are independent of culture. From this important observation, Hufford argued that it is necessary to develop an experience centred approach to at least some kinds of paranormal experiences, an approach which has come to be known as the *experiential source hypothesis*. Hufford's analysis does not tackle the meaning of these experiences: he makes no active

attempt either to endorse or debunk their cause. Rather, he has turned his analytical gaze toward that which is so often over looked: what it is that people actually report.

In a later paper, Hufford (1995) moves toward a more conclusive position by arguing that, just as we can identify core and recurrent features of Old Hag experiences, this suggests that, at their root, is an actual physical experience that may inform cultural traditions. A similar approach can be used for the study of spirits. By studying reports of spirit experiences he notes the following: that the spirit world is taken to be objectively real and qualitatively different from the material world; it is understood that we can interact with the spirit world through particular behaviours, such as prayer, or via spirit visitation; and the spirit world is thought to be populated by independent and agentic beings who do not require physical bodies.

Hufford is important because he argues for an approach in which researchers seek to identify the core aspects of supposedly paranormal experiences. Such an approach is not necessarily seeking to identify the truth of the phenomena, but rather catalogue the components of its experience, and examine its social relevance. It does not assume that people's experiences are merely the reflection of status inconsistency, or tensions relating to social position, or the reflection of powerful cultural themes and beliefs. Moreover, he provides us with a thorough and useful methodological guide. He analyses a collection of accounts, generated in informal

interviews or submitted in written form. He takes these accounts seriously, and does not try to tidy his transcriptions, but rather presents them as pieces of real, actual discourse.

Hufford's work marks an important step in the way that such experiences have been treated and examined in social scientific literature. It opens the door for approaches more grounded in data, and particularly in data gathered from lived experience. It does not undermine its participants, but gives value to their input. These steps have, thankfully, been given further serious consideration by other scholars. McClenon (1994) has used the experiential source hypothesis in cross-cultural studies of what he terms 'wondrous events'. More recently, he has looked at the phenomenology of shamanic healing and related it to the development of religious healing (McClenon, 2006). Swatos & Gissuarson (1997) have looked at Spiritualism in Iceland, and argued that personal experience of spiritual phenomena (for example, experienced in mediumship demonstrations) had an important impact upon the societies' religious social structures and beliefs.

To illustrate shifts in research approaches to the study of paranormal experiences, I will briefly review a few recent publication that follow suitably in the tread of the experiential source hypothesis.

1.3.1 Non reductionist studies of paranormal experiences and beliefs

By taking people seriously, and accepting that Western scientific rationalism should be treated (and examined) both as a cultural way of - and not the only way of - thinking about the world, enables researchers to examine experiences as sociologically real and valid to the people and communities who report them (see McClenon, 1994). Recent work in this line has been contributed to by a number of social scientists. Hume (2007) has recently provided an anthropologically grounded examination of how individuals acquire, and have in the past acquired, altered states of consciousness, examining methods of accessing other realities. By examining a number of the techniques often involved in the acquisition of altered states of consciousness, Hume used such information with a further focus on the sensory experiences often recalled by experiencers. Her work situates this topic amid wider discussions about human consciousness and extraordinary experience. Hume takes her informants seriously, and argues for the importance of studying religion and spirituality in this manner. Her attention to sensuous detail reflects an awareness that the experiential qualities of such experiences have often been lost, or have failed to find a footing in analytical assessments. This approach echoes Stoller (1997) who has argued for a need to redress the assumption that bodies can be understood as text, and to develop research that is able to address and make valid the importance of sensuous experience. His argument comes from problems with research into non-Western communities, where the centrality of text and textual interpretation is absent, but rather prioritises the senses as a means to provide access

to knowledge. This approach introduces another form of critique for reductionist approaches, whose methods are often unreflective of the types of experiences they seek to study, and distinctively Western in their approach to understanding human interaction and experience.

It is not just experiences themselves that have been reconsidered, but the beliefs behind such experiences have also been re-examined. For example, ghosts have recently received notable critical attention from historians. Maxwell-Stuart (2006) has provided a critical history of belief in ghosts, and examined the variety of forms they have been thought to take. His work follows a similar line to Finucane's (1982) earlier critical history of ghost traditions. Davies' (2007) recent examination of ghost traditions argues for the importance of studying such beliefs within their social context. He illustrates how beliefs in ghosts have been negotiated throughout history, linking changes in traditions to the desires of particular social groups, who accommodated or refuted such beliefs depending on wider cosmologies. Davies in particular retains an agnostic position in his work that does not argue for or against the existence of ghosts, but rather demonstrates that beliefs in such are an important facet of our historical social legacy.

Another area of study has been provided by Northcote (2007), who has recently reviewed the politics of beliefs in paranormal phenomena, focusing on factors influencing the contemporary debate on paranormal ideas, and its controversial status. In a similar vein to Hess' (1993) examination of American defenders and

debunkers of paranormal beliefs, he has examined how knowledge is regarded or rejected by certain institutions, or cited as legitimate knowledge by its enthusiasts. His argument focuses on how paranormal beliefs are labelled by defenders and debunkers, arguing that wider discursive practices both construct and inform concepts of what can constitute truth.

Accompanying this shift are new lines of enquiry that ask us to look also at researchers' own experiences. This more reflexive consideration of the researcher is relevant to much wider debates about the process of research, but is particularly relevant to the discussion here due to the number of publications that have sought to explore the role of what is termed 'extraordinary' experiences as reported by researchers. This is particularly relevant to periods of intensive research, namely, ethnographic fieldwork. *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experiences* (Young & Goulet (eds), 1994), for example, not only documents a number of societies in which supposedly paranormal experiences are central to everyday life and belief, but further focuses on the previously tabooed subject of researcher experience. As Fabian has elsewhere suggested: "...there is an ecstatic side to fieldwork which should be counted among the conditions of knowledge production, hence of objectivity". (Fabian, 2001, cited in Goulet & Miller, 2007a: 1). It is through the study of supposedly paranormal experiences that these methodological issues can be actively explored and theoretically examined, particularly when the distance between the researcher and the community may be shortened over such shared experiences.

These experiences can be deeply transformative, and cause the researcher to cast new reflections on other's experiences (see authors in Young & Goulet, 1994; Goulet & Miller, 2007b; and see also Tedlock, 1991).

These studies illustrate that it is possible to approach paranormal experiences and beliefs so that they are not explained away as responses to disadvantageous social or cultural traditions. Moreover, it is clear that there are an increasing number of researchers in various social science and humanities disciplines developing non-reductionist perspectives on paranormal phenomena. There is an inevitable ethical side to such studies, particularly those whereby the research reflects on their own experiences. While these studies are examining a number of relevant and important issues, they also call into question issues surrounding the use of certain terminologies.

1.3.2 The problem with terminology: From paranormal to extraordinary

A significant part of how we capture and analyse experiences such as those discussed in this thesis, start with the terminologies with which we use to categorise them. To describe something as 'religious', for example, gives the experience a different meaning if compared to describing it as 'spiritual'. An important area of debate connected to the study of such experiences refers to the problems inherent in the application of certain terms that both prefix and describe them. The term supernatural, for example, has been critiqued for its inevitably negative

connotations, and its difficulty as a cross cultural category. The segregation of natural and supernatural simply does not have any real meaning in many societies, and the use of such term can be misrepresentative (e.g. Jindra, 2004; Klass, 1995; Saler, 1977). Apart from the problems in representation, the derogatory nature of terms such as supernatural, which is partly endorsed by reductionist approaches that undermine its validity, can create problems for researchers. Richards (2001) has argued that "...until or unless people in general, or at least scientists, finally accept that "sacred" and "supernatural" are only Western folk categories, people working in the areas of research that have been labelled as "supernatural" or "occult" will have difficult gaining a hearing in scientific circles... "supernatural" is a folk category that has spread with Western civilisation" (Richards, 2001: 17). Indeed, it is only recently that more attention has been given to the ways in which certain academic circles have been prejudice against such studies, precisely because of the dominance of scientific frameworks as a factual base.

A similar argument can be applied to use of the term paranormal. While there are advantages in its use as a term with long standing resonance in popular culture, we should however be cautious of how such associations may over shadow the actual experiences described, and their meaning for the people who report them.

For the rest of this thesis, I have chosen to use the term 'extraordinary experiences', as discussed by Young & Goulet ((eds), 1994), which I feel captures the exceptional nature of the experiences reported by the mediums I interviewed, but does not

belittle their experiences, nor represent them as something abnormal. Indeed, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters, to describe mediumistic experiences as paranormal is ultimately misleading when trying to understand these experiences in connection with the individuals who report them. As this research has been influenced by grounded theory and Discourse Analysis, it seemed important to select a term that, as much as possible, avoids any potential biases. Furthermore, it works as a more neutral term that is in line with the non-reductionist, agnostic research discussed previously.

1.4 Sceptical, spiritual and agnostic studies of mediumship: Psychological research, parapsychology, and conversation analysis

While social scientific research has been extremely influential, the majority of research into Western spirit mediumship is still dominated by parapsychological and psychological researchers. Such researchers have typically adopted an either sceptical or spiritual approach, although new agnostic approaches are slowly beginning to gain attention. While many of these studies are laboratory based, and so are problematic when considering a sociological analysis of mediumship, nevertheless they reveal an important insight into the treatment and study of mediums by scientists, as well as being a reflective part of a historical scientific endeavour to 'secularise the soul' (Cerullo, 1982). These distinctive schools of research (i.e. researchers are sceptical, spiritual or agnostic) also parallel the reductionist versus non-reductionist stances and arguments discussed earlier.

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was established in 1882, by a small group of mainly Cambridge based scholars who wanted to use scientific methods to explore supposedly supernatural phenomena¹³. Members of the SPR devised and executed many experiments on spirit mediums during the late 19th and early 20th century (e.g. Balfour, 1935; Lodge, 1916; Podmore, 1898-9. For a review of such studies, see Gauld, 1982), and prominent members of this society are still actively involved in research into mediumship (e.g. Keen, Ellison & Fontana, 1999; Robertson & Roy, 2001; 2004; Roy & Robertson, 2001).

Right from its inception, there was a recognisable split in the SPR between those who felt mediumship could corroborate scientific claims of proving post-mortem survival, and those who believed demonstrations of mediumship to be fraudulent. The ensuing experiments sometimes converted members from one side to the other, but in many cases cemented initial presumptions, especially when fraud was exposed (see Cerullo, 1982; Gauld, 1982). Many of these scientists were sensitive to the Victorian crisis of faith, and sought answers to the more emotional themes of post-mortem survival, which has been described as the search for the ‘secularisation of the soul’ (Cerullo, 1982).

One of the foremost objectives of the SPR was the pursuit of proof using credible scientific methods. To claim that mediumship was an authentic phenomenon lacked credibility if the researcher was unable to produce corroboratory results that

¹³ For a useful history, see Cerullo, 1982 and Haynes, 1984)

followed an approved scientific formula. The sheer number of medium experiments demonstrates this: it was no good to go purely on a satisfactory message, and researchers employed a number of different techniques to show that more mundane machinations were not the cause of spirit activity. Similarly, if fraud was discovered, it was proven by scientific methods (i.e. mediums were caught in the act using certain techniques to suggest spirit presence). The significance of the connection between mediumship and proof has a particular resonance with researchers in the parapsychological and psychical research field, which differs from social scientists in that proof is the crucial research question. It is the dominance of proof that has shaped the contemporary research climate (see Oppenheim, 1985). Proof becomes the basis for a sceptical or supportive stance, and researchers often claim that their conclusions are based on the proof – and therefore the actual results – of their studies. Proof becomes the means of authenticity needed for their claims, which parallels with mediums' use of proof as evidence. However, what constitutes proof differs between researchers, and forms the basis for much of the debate between sceptics and supporters.

The split between those who endorse mediumship claims, and those who debunk them is as obvious now as it has been in the latter two centuries. To illustrate this I will draw on the work of two contemporary parapsychologists – Richard Wiseman and Gary Schwartz – who illustrate typical themes that differentiate those who debunk and those who support mediumship as an authentic phenomenon. Wiseman and Schwartz are also interesting as representatives of these two sides as they have

been personally involved in a series of rather heated debates as to the questionable validity of each other's approaches. As I will show, there are a number of difficulties in adopting an either sceptical or spiritual position, and through a critique of such studies I hope to show the benefits of adopting an agnostic or neutral position. To illustrate this later point, I will briefly discuss Wooffitt's analysis of the discourse of mediumship, which is a contemporary example of an agnostic approach.

1.4.1 Wiseman and the sceptical perspective

The basis of Wiseman's work lies in experimentation: he has sought to provide an investigative approach to the assessment of mediumship claims (along with other parapsychological topics, such as hauntings). A useful example of this is a paper co-written with Ciaran O'Keeffe (O'Keeffe & Wiseman, 2005) that reported on a study designed to test the validity of mediumship claims. They note that research into mediumship has been persistent, but that results have been mixed. Their own research did not find proof for the authenticity of mediumistic ability, and this is generally the outcome for all of Wiseman's research. While these experiments are significant for those interested in testing mediumship claims, they tell us relatively little about what mediumship is, and strip it of virtually any social relevance. By focusing on the psychology of participants as an explanation for why people believe in mediumship, or how it is that mediums appear convincing, it does not engage with mediums' own experiences or interpretations. Mediums appear here as tools:

they are given only the sparsest identity (a letter), and generally considered only by what they have said, and how this relates to the experiment. Their presence is marginal, and it is the experiment itself that is of major concern. This is true of mediumship defenders also, as we shall see by examining Gary Schwartz later.

It is not uncommon for researchers sceptical of mediumship to adopt a moralistic tone to their research. In the following extract, taken from a book that collates a number of his papers, Wiseman expresses a researcher morality that is used to illuminate otherwise misleading assumptions as to the benevolence of contemporary mediums and psychics:

“Occasionally, people query the need for such research. They argue that most psychics and mediums do little or no harm and merely act as benign counsellors who genuinely try to help their clients. This may well be the case. However, my experiences over the past few years suggest that some psychics can have negative (and, in some cases, disastrous) affect on those they claim to help...” (Wiseman, 1997: 14-15)

In this extract we can identify two main arguments significant to the themes employed by many debunkers when they seek to justify exposing psychics and mediums. Firstly, Wiseman is here seeking to undermine an occasional assumption that psychics and mediums are benign, and secondly, he seeks to elaborate on this by representing mediums and psychics as actively (and therefore actually)

malevolent. This is enforced in the following passages with anecdotes from his experiences of individuals who have actively harmed unsuspecting clients (in one case, he insinuates that one individual actually committed suicide after visiting a medium who told him he would not live beyond the age of 28). The libellous nature of his claims is perhaps unintentional, but his attempts to legitimate the debunking tone of this work constructs the medium as a 'dangerous other'. Firstly, he deconstructs the representation of 'benign other' and replaces benevolence with malevolence, the latter of which he fuels with anecdotes detailing actual instances of harm. Mediums are constructed as being knowingly manipulative, and this works to counter the idea that there is evidence to support mediums claims. This simultaneously sets Wiseman up as a moral academic, whose knowledge can be used to aid and protect his audience from such a threat. This tone echoes in the work of more popularist sceptics, such as James Randi (1988) and Derren Brown (2007).

In Wiseman's work, the use of proof comes from his interpretation of findings, where failure to find evidence for mediumship is used as evidence that it doesn't exist. His use of these findings however, and the ways in which he constructs medium, has larger implications for how they are perceived as actual, practising Others. In this instance, his claims are elaborated with a moralistic argument, but his work neglects an interaction with the individuals he represents.

1.4.2 *Schwartz and the empirical investigation of spirit communication*

Schwartz, like Wiseman, also bases his work on experimental studies of mediums. Unlike Wiseman, however, his results are more positively swayed toward the phenomena of mediumship. He claims that "...mediums know the motto of our laboratory is "let the data speak", whatever the data are – positive or negative, clarifying or confusion". (Schwartz, et al. 2001:18). His research often involves controlled blind conditions, where medium participants are not able to access any visual, auditory or other potential sensory stimuli during the experiment, which takes place in a laboratory. The higher the amount of specific correct information reported by the medium results in a higher likelihood that the experiment will support mediumship as authentic (Schwartz & Russek, 2001). Attempts to control how mediums gain information seems to be paramount to the design of Schwartz's experiments and how he uses his findings as proof, and his focus on the ways in which he reduces bias are crucial to his conclusions (see also Schwartz, et al 2001).

The metaphor of white crows, instigated by William James¹⁴, seems to typify Schwartz's research approach. The search for a white crow (i.e. an instance of genuine spiritual phenomena) has characterised the goal of many psychical and parapsychological researchers hoping to prove life after death (see Moore, 1977). Schwartz argues that if we discover just one authentic case of mediumship, then we must begin to readdress our understanding of mediumship as a valid spiritual

¹⁴ 'In order to disprove the law that all crows are black, it is enough to find one white crow' (James, cited in Schwartz with Simon, 2001). This is discussed in more detail by Moore (1977).

phenomenon with major repercussions for society. In his argument, proof constitutes just one case. The white crow metaphor can also be applied to the defender's desire to convert sceptics. It should be noted that defenders and debunkers are often in conflict with each other, and will regularly attempt to undermine the other by exposing weaknesses in their methodology. The search for a white crow is symbolic of the search for irrefutable evidence: the beacon for the defender's cause.

Another similarity between Schwartz and Wiseman – although to different effect – is that both of these researchers seem to balance their professional and personal selves depending on the context they appear in. The appeal of mediumship research is relevant both to academic and more populist arenas, and it is possible for researchers to communicate in both settings simultaneously. While Wiseman's moralistic stance is related to his alleged need to provide sceptical (or truthful) evidence, Schwartz's self presentation is as someone who has identified the spiritual significance of mediumship, but seeks further to establish himself as a legitimate academic. *The Afterlife Experiments* (Schwartz with Simon, 2001), for example, mixes scientific and spiritual discussion: detailed accounts of experiments are recorded alongside more personal reflections on the spirituality of mediumship. While the book has a spiritual tone, it is nevertheless seeking to establish itself simultaneously as scientific literature. While Schwartz's more academic publications also argue for the likelihood of mediumship as an authentic

phenomena, they appear more grounded in scientific discourse, and do not discuss the social and personal relevance of mediumship authenticity.

While Schwartz mentions individual mediums in *The Afterlife Experiments*, his journal articles refer to them by numbers only: the position of mediums is fundamentally as research tools. We are not really given any information about their lives, or their own interpretations of the research process. The focus of their involvement is on the data they produce, and in constructing it as honest and convincing material. The ways in which findings are presented as proof appears to act as the main tool for this objective. Schwartz's work situates mediums as tools, and the spiritual philosophies he constructs are not overly rooted in the practise of mediumship, but rather, the consequence of proof of post mortem survival.

Both Wiseman and Schwartz use mediumship for a purpose, and the mediums are largely secondary to the over riding question of whether mediumship can provide evidence of post mortem survival: features of mediumistic experience are not discussed. The experiments further take mediumship away from its natural environment, and so do not provide an accurate insight into its sociological position. This is largely due to the focus of the research, which seeks evidence suitable for scientific discourse, and reflects that the main objective of these studies is not really about mediumship, but about proof concerning post mortem survival. This, however, is limited in its ability to provide us with a more holistic understanding of mediumship.

1.4.3 *Discourse, interaction and agnosticism*

Wooffitt's approach is based in sociological studies of language use, and he uses a methodology known as Conversation Analysis. Conversation Analysis, initiated by Harvey Sacks in the 1970's, identifies the importance of communication, and explores it as talk-in-interaction, where participants are seeking to achieve successful, meaningful conversation. Wooffitt is concerned with researching how mediumship works as something actively achieved between the medium and their recipient. One of his most significant findings is the three part turn typical in medium- sitter interaction:

“Turn 1 Psychic: a question/statement that implies a claim about, or knowledge of, the sitter, their circumstances, etc.

Turn 2 Sitter: minimal confirmation/acceptance

Turn 3 Psychic: attribution of the information implied by the question/statement to a paranormal source.” (Wooffitt, 2006: 69)

This three part turn illustrates that mediums are seeking to achieve corroboration from their recipient in order to attribute the information to a spirit source. They need to receive a positive response – i.e. ‘yes’ – in order to proceed to the next turn, which validates the source of their first turn as evidence of an interactive spirit contact who is connected with the recipient. This sequence has been identified by

Wooffitt after studying a series of taped recordings of medium-sitter interaction (Wooffitt, 2000; 2001).

The demonstrations and sittings Wooffitt has analysed come from mediums engaging with sitters as they would typically, not from artificially created situations where mediums are tested in laboratories. The sitters themselves are actual participants, representative of the main consumers of mediumship in contemporary society. As has been argued, the natural livedness of mediumship has often been overlooked by psychical researchers and parapsychologists keen to create an environment that they can control. But this is not how mediumship essentially works: it is a social practise that works within an everyday framework of social life, involving individuals who are motivated by their own personal concerns, rather than the concerns of a researcher. Furthermore, because the focus of Wooffitt's work is on the organisation of communication, his findings can be used with other research projects. Furthermore, Wooffitt has recently (2006) started to examine public demonstrations of mediums: his recent work includes an observational study of the Yorkshire medium Stephen Holbrook¹⁵. This shows that there is still a considerable way to go to gaining a more holistic understanding of spirit mediumship in contemporary society.

In light of the approaches put forward by Wiseman and Schwartz, what is noticeable about Wooffitt's position is the largely agnostic tone of his research.

Wooffitt regularly asserts this stance, arguing that the purpose of his research is not

¹⁵ Further observational studies of Holbrook will also be included in this thesis.

to attempt to illuminate the authenticity of mediumship either way, but rather to explore how the communicative aspects of mediumship are negotiated and achieved, and how the talk-in-interaction between mediums and their participant is structured to convince the latter of the reality of the spirit world. He identifies proof as something that mediums are seeking to establish, rather than judging whether or not they are successful in this pursuit. His focus turns to the social environment in which mediumship is practised, and his analysis is based on actual interactions.

Wooffitt's work raises a new set of questions about mediumship. He has shown that we can study mediumship with an agnostic starting point, and consider it as a valid and worthy research subject in its own right, that may provide data that can be used for other research projects interested in communication. However, like Wiseman and Schwartz, Wooffitt has not considered the individuality of mediums, and likewise, they appear mainly in his work stripped of their own identity. While the observational study of Holbrook provides information about how mediums present themselves in public demonstrations, and Wooffitt makes reference to the biographical information provided there, Holbrook himself had not been consulted, and there is no information about his own mediumistic experiences. There seems to be a considerable gap in literature on mediumship that ignores the individual lives and experiences of mediums. This means their representation is largely in the hands of researchers, but furthermore, that we are lacking insight into the phenomenology of mediumship, and how they themselves might articulate the experiences involved in their demonstrations.

The balance of research into mediumship is remarkably well favoured towards research of an overtly sceptical or supportive nature. The treatment of mediumship is specific and generally un-reflexive: mediumship is treated as a process that should be examined to see how the product (i.e. information provided by the medium) is produced, and/or how this fits into wider scientific models. An alternative agnostic position opens up the treatment of mediumship and argues that its study is relevant to a variety of different research questions and emphasises its role as a social phenomena. What is crucial in understanding the differing approaches to the study of mediumship, is that researchers have had different agendas and intentions when considering mediumship. In some cases, mediumship is the sole focus, and researchers have differed over whether they consider it to necessitate endorsement or debunking. More often, this is entwined with a concern about whether we can prove post mortem survival. In other cases however, it is part of a larger debate that considers either the relevance of such beliefs and practises to individual psychology, and the ways in which individuals are able to persuade or convince. However, these approaches are problematic and the focus on proof or psychology ignores the actual experiences of mediumship. While the agnostic position taken by this thesis does not seek to undermine the credibility of these approaches, it does argue that such a dominance of research interests that move away from mediumship as a social phenomenon has over shadowed its consideration.

1.5 Conclusion

There is a fertile field of research into supposedly paranormal beliefs and extraordinary experiences. More and more researchers are choosing to explore how these beliefs and experiences are meaningful to the people who report them, rather than explaining them away with reference to their supposed function in society.

This thesis seeks to contribute to this new field by choosing to explore mediumship experience as something real and meaningful to contemporary mediums. My research position is in line with an agnostic approach: research is interested in looking at some of the sociological dimensions of mediumship as a social practises and private experience, not whether or not mediumship constitutes proof of post mortem survival. There are a considerable number of Spiritualist churches in Great Britain today, and likely to be an even larger number of mediums practising. Many of these individuals will not be affiliated with the SNU, so it is impossible to provide an accurate figure. However, popular culture has many representations of mediums: in the availability of mediumship as a commodity and form of religious service, to non-fictional programmes that involve contemporary mediums, to fictional books, films, and television, which supports its social relevance. Representations of mediums both in popular culture and in academic literature typically construct the medium as an ‘other’, albeit to different affect.

This thesis does not argue that all mediums are genuine, or that all mediums are fraudulent. Rather, it seeks simply to examine mediums as individuals who report

extraordinary experiences, who should be taken seriously. Also, it argues that their reports are precisely the sort of things we should be studying. It is hoped that this project will demonstrate that research into mediumship does not need to adhere to scientific testing and queries of fraudulent activity, but that a sociological analysis will yield a set of interesting and relevant information about the social dynamics of this facet of human society. There are many studies that have proven that some mediums employ methods that are not evidential of spirit communication, but there are equally a significant number of studies that have not been able to identify and explain the use of fraud. Fraud, as an explanation, is problematic because it is reliant upon researcher expectations, and there is little evidence to corroborate that all mediums are simply using fraudulent methods for all their own gain. Also, it ignores the relevance of how mediumship is accepted by others, and excludes considerations of personal meaning making processes about the authenticity of mediumship from their own experience. It is impossible to assert for certain that all mediums interact with participants using mundane trickery, and a preoccupation with exposing mediumship means that findings are likely to be extremely bias. For non-mediums who feel changed by their experiences of mediumistic experiences, there is thankfully more literature that does not simply seek to identify how they could be deluded by aligning with a scientific starting point¹⁶. Still, there are many questions still unanswered about what mediumship is, how it works, and how it impacts upon and may consequently influence people's live.

¹⁶ The issue of ethics and mediumship, which is another often neglected topic, will be examined in chapter three.

Social science has the potential to remedy this disharmony by trying to explore such experiences and phenomena in their own right, and by promoting them as areas worthy of our consideration. I would argue that this is relevant not only to more general ethical discussions of how we conduct research, but also in regards to the consequences our own understandings have for the way we represent others. As many scholars have recently noted, no researcher is completely free of bias. If we align ourselves with an understanding that perhaps the search for ultimate truths is inevitably problematic, and that all research does not necessarily have to orientate to providing ultimate truths, then perhaps we will be able to ask interesting, socially relevant questions of such experiences and phenomena without unnecessary exploitation and bias.

I have tried to illustrate here that social science provides an alternative way of exploring mediumship, and that, by looking at what mediums say about their lives and experiences, we are granted access to a fascinating area of social and private life that has often been overlooked. There are, however, other social scientific disciplines that have significant contributions to make to a more holistic understanding of spirit mediumship. In the next chapter, I will examine some of the other ways in which researchers have attempted to understand mediumship, focusing on its relevance to anthropologists and Western historians, two disciplines who have contributed a wealth of information about mediumship that has yet to be fully utilised by other mediumship researchers. These studies have been influential in this project as they have shown how mediumship is relevant to the study of other

social issues as well as how new more agnostic and reflexive approaches can be realised and executed. Due to the amount of literature, and the number of different themes that have been addressed, it seemed necessary to separate these bodies of research into two chapters. The rest of this thesis will then deal with the methodology and findings of this project. The third chapter will explain how the data was selected and analysed, arguing in favour of the chosen methodologies and addressing the epistemological and ethical concerns of this project. The first analytical chapter (four) will provide a case study of an observational study, which will serve as an introduction to a number of themes that will be relevant for the following three analytical chapters. Chapter five will contrast the findings from chapter four to data collected from further observational studies in both secular and religious settings. In chapter six the findings from seventeen interviews with mediums around England will be analysed with a focus on the biographical details about early childhood experiences, mediumship development, and accounts of experiences with spirit contacts. Chapter seven will look at some of the issues raised in the prior three analytical chapters through an analysis of recently published medium autobiographies.

Chapter Two

The spirit medium in culture and Western history

2.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I provided a summary of the main features of contemporary mediumship, and identified key issues in some of the social scientific and parapsychological research on extraordinary experiences in general and mediumship in particular. This chapter examines other areas of literature relevant to this thesis - focusing on work by anthropologists, sociologists and historians - to show differences and similarities between Western and non-Western mediumship, to identify some of the historically relevant features of the development of Western mediumship traditions, and to examine how mediumship has been studied in accompaniment with, and shown to be of relevance to, other social areas. An examination of how mediumship developed in the West will be provided, along with a discussion of some of the social themes raised by historical/social studies of mediumship. Finally, I will examine what is still missing from approaches to mediumship, and what this thesis will seek to contribute.

2.2 Anthropological approaches to mediumship

An interest in beliefs about post mortem survival and the ways in which such beliefs are manifest, has long been a popular topic for those studying non-Western societies. The variety of world societies have provided researchers with a plethora of beliefs and traditions. Such research has noted that is common for many social groups to incorporate a spiritual specialist whose role is to mediate between the living and the dead. Extraordinary experiences have been given more credibility as a worthwhile subject area by those who have immersed themselves in different societies, as firsthand experience has illuminated the significance of the extraordinary, and its role in social life. The discipline at the forefront of this line of inquiry has long been anthropology, and its academics remain at the foreground of cross cultural study. Methodologies that have developed to explore other communities intensively (i.e. ethnography) required close observation and participation, and researchers sought to collect data as detailed as possible from the lives of those they researched. This is not to say that they have not differed in their conclusions, theories, and treatments of such subjects, but that their reliance on ethnographic methods enabled and encouraged the collection of data about what people believe, and how these beliefs are expressed. Significantly, they have been able to examine these experiences in an environment where the usual degrees of scepticism expressed in Western culture are often absent, and so have had the opportunity to investigate these experiences as legitimate and influential aspects of community and culture. Such beliefs and experiences were often studied in the

context of wider social formations and cultural practices. Given this focus, and the importance of such experiences in relation to other areas of social life, the tendency toward reductionist explanations seems less applicable. This is not to say, however, that anthropologists have never favoured reductionist explanations; there is in fact a great deal of literature that orientates toward explanations of social marginality.

One subject in particular that has often received such treatment is the phenomena of spirit possession, which will be discussed in more detail later. However, reductionist approaches have often been avoided, particularly in more contemporary research that has been concerned about the ethical implications of explaining away people's experiences and comparing them to Western scientific models. Perhaps this is also partly due to the circumstances in which such research is gathered, and the aim of trying to understand a society as holistically and in as much detail as possible.

The fact that so many societies have ways of maintaining relationships with the dead, and that mediumship is common cross-culturally, surely strengthens its importance as a subject of study. Surprisingly, there have been few volumes dedicated to discussing the phenomenon of mediumship itself, although many ethnographies provide information on the subject locally. Anthropologists engaged in such ethnographic studies have looked at mediumship in connection to broader social subjects, such as memory and the embodiment of history (Lambek, 2002; Sharp, 1992); social change (Elliot, 1951; Sharp, 1992); and political struggles (Lan, 1985). The provision of a corporeal link between the living and the dead can

serve a number of purposes, just as the words of the dead can be tuned to a number of contemporary social themes and desires. Mediums provide a means for the living to have an active bond with their social history as embodied by late ancestors, as well as offering guidance and aid that can be received from spirit beings and the dead in order to influence the present (Lambek, 2002; Sharp, 1992).

Generally, non-Western mediums enter into a trance, whereby they enable themselves to interact with spirits. But mediums are not the only spiritual practitioners who bridge the gap between the living and the dead by entering into trance, or who offer spiritual aid for contemporary troubles. There are many similarities behind the work (and features) of mediums, and that of shamans, witches and sorcerers, topics that have received much more critical attention. However, there are also considerable differences, although a more sophisticated examination of this is beyond the scope of this chapter. Broadly speaking, witchcraft and sorcery are generally more associated with the invocation of spirits and other forces for damaging purposes according to the witch, sorcerer, or their clientele's malevolent desires. Witches and sorcerers are rarely integrated into a community in the same benevolent manner as mediums and shamans. Shamanism bears another significant difference when compared to mediumship: often, the shaman *leaves* his/her body to communicate with spirits in their domain (Stutley, 2003). There are also significant differences in the types of spiritual entities such practitioners communicate with. Shamans communicate with non-human as well as

human spirits, and while this can be true of *some* mediums, there is generally much more emphasis on their connectivity with human spirits.

Another phenomenon that bares similarities with mediumship is spirit possession. Spirit possession has fascinated anthropologists for several decades, seeming “...dramatically and intransigently exotic, unrecognizable.” (Boddy, 1994: 207-208). Psychic practitioners also seem to fit this description when viewed through a Western lens. To describe something as exotic, or, as Boddy puts it ‘unrecognizable’, is to establish a distance between the recognisable self and the unrecognisable Other, with the Other being associated with practises that seem unusual or hidden. This interpretation is certainly important when considering the ways in which such phenomena can be viewed by members of a Western audience, but we must be careful not to over amplify the differences of their experiences. As this project hopes to illustrate, psychic practitioners are common within Western culture, and the figure of the medium, for example, is in fact quite easily recognisable. Information about other cultures is transmitted with increasingly frequency and ease, so the access to such aspects of different cultures is not as seemingly far removed as it has been in the past. However, as discussed previously, it seems inevitable that a degree of distance will exist when common experiences are not shared, and explanations that seek to place such differences in a meaningful position continue to be worthy of academic scrutiny. If we consider spirit possession for a moment, we find a phenomenon that presents an interesting

example of Otherness, not just because of the spiritual beliefs that underlie it, but because of the intensity of its affliction.

The traditional explanation for spirit possession links it with psychological distress: individuals became possessed as a means of dealing with oppression and restrictions to expressions of their suffering (e.g. Freed & Freed, 1990; Lewis, 2003). Behaviour that would normally signify social deviance is excused when under the legitimate premise of possession, with the spirits providing a mask for unsuitable displays and emotions (Boddy, 1989; Lewis, 2003).

Recently, however, the reliance on this explanation for understanding spirit possession has been critiqued, with scholars arguing for more attention to be paid toward what is actually said and done during such events (e.g. Lambek, 1980; Nourse, 1996; Placido, 2001). As Placido (2001) has noted “anthropological analyses [have tended]... to leave unclear... what the spirits and the possessed actually say during possession episodes”. (Placido, 2001: 207). By relying on explanations that represent the possessed by way of their presumed oppression, we over look what spirit possession means for the communities in which is enacted. To what extent the possessed are aware of these assumed feelings of oppression is unclear, and Nourse (1996) has warned of the tendency for representing the possessed as ventriloquists, not just of the spirits, but of the anthropologists who write about them. Lambek (1980) has argued that we must explore spirit possession as a system of communication, calling for researchers to regard it as a kind of text,

and focus on “the product rather than the process of production.” (Lambek, 1980: 323). These arguments are also relevant to studies of mediumship. Again, what is actually *said* by mediums when in contact with spirits is often overlooked, and yet it is precisely *what they say* that is so significant. Furthermore, mediums’ own interpretations and reflections on their abilities often go un-noted and may leave the researcher able to prioritise their own analytic conclusions, for example, by demonstrating a preference for placing mediumship as a productive cog in the macro structure of a society, with preference for the macro structure itself.

When comparing literature on spirit possession and mediumship, it is important to bring certain differences to attention. While they may seem similar phenomena, i.e. both may involve non corporeal spirits entering into the physical corporeal body, there are nevertheless important differences in regards to control and social acceptability. As Firth (1959) and Beattie & Middleton (1969) have noted, mediums are expected to be able to produce intelligible information. This information also has consequences for social action, for example, spirits may provide advice that the living need to understand and adhere to. Even in societies where mediumship and spirit possession are differentiated but exist simultaneously, there is emphasis on the mediums’ ability to control their connection with their spiritual hosts, and, unlike circumstances of spirit possession, this connection is induced by the medium in appropriate situations. While mediumship tends to occur in prior arranged circumstances, spirit possession is more spontaneous, and may be associated with misfortune, such as venturing into a tainted area where malevolent spirits are

thought to dwell. The dead in these instances may appear jealous and hungry for human contact, but they do not usually offer anything from which a community may benefit. Also, it is common for individuals to become possessed by non-human entities, such as demons. In many cases of spirit possession, the spirit is marginalised and individual, seeking a personal union with a human host for selfish reasons. Such spirits seek only the immediate gratification of physical union with a human other, often because they wish to re-experience being inside a living body. Mediums, however, are open to interaction with a variety of spiritual others who in turn seek, or can be persuaded to, offer aid (in the form of knowledge or guidance) to the living community. There is often a sense that such spirits are part of a collective, for example, a lineage of esteemed ancestors. Connectivity with spirit hosts is often short lived, and the connection can be broken when the medium so wishes. This can be less so for spirit possession, where possession may last for an extended period of time of which the host has little or no say over. While both are instances of spiritual connectedness, spirit possession is solitary in its desire for union, whereas mediumship experiences are integrated into the wider community, with the spirit reaching to influence many rather than one.

As Nabokov (2000) has noted in her ethnography of Tamil religious rituals, communities can incorporate connectedness with spirits or deities as positive and negative, and have cosmologies that situate such relationships on a scale according to how integrated and beneficial such unions are. Possession by demons, for example, often requires exorcism, but for those spirits who were connected to the

living in life (i.e. kin relations) a gentler approach may be sought to orientate the dead into a more manageable position to a particular individual. As mediums are able to control their relationship with the dead, and can communicate with and witness such spirits, they can invoke and manage this connection when it is appropriate, and the relationship between mediums and their spirit contacts can be influenced by the medium. In these later instances, the union between the living and the dead is seen as a mingling of self with divine others, and it has a beneficial purpose to the community and for the individual. The self is not powerless in such relationships, and can use such spiritual connectedness for their own personal development. Nabokov's research demonstrates that relationships with the dead find their own forms within different communities, but also that mediumship is associated with benevolent connections between the living and the dead.

In non-Western societies, mediumship commonly exists as part of legitimate religious rituals, in which individuals are able to consult ancestor spirits or spiritual beings for help or advice. Mediumship in the West, by comparison, is peculiar then because of its controversy, the less intrusive nature of spirit contact, and the egalitarian nature of spirit identities. While it is not always esteemed spirits who make contacts with non-Western mediums, this is often the case, and the spirits that communicate in such séances are generally considered as being applicable to a particular social status. Social status has little meaning in Western mediumship, the reasons for which will be explained shortly. While mediumship as possession is by no means a rare occurrence in the West (it is known as 'trance mediumship' or, in

situations where physical phenomena also occurs, as ‘physical mediumship’, or ‘transfiguration mediumship’ if a spirit form materialises with the aid of the medium), it is not as popular nor as accepted now as the form of mediumship known as ‘mental mediumship’, in which mediums retain their individual agency and consciousness throughout their communication, acting as an intermediary between the living and the spirit world by receiving messages from spirit contacts and passing them on to living recipients. Although mediums often say that they are able to experience certain sensations from their spirit contacts, they nevertheless retain their agency and do not enter into a deep trance or altered state of consciousness. This is undoubtedly related to Western culture, and to the historical legacy of mediumship which emerged following the experiences of two teenage girls in 1848.

A comparison of anthropological studies of non-Western mediumship is an important area that has often been overlooked by many Western researchers. To date parapsychology seems to have paid little attention to this body of work: it is seldom mentioned or quoted. Indeed, anthropological studies have generated a prolific amount of literature on mediumship in a variety of cultures that should be of interest to those researching mediumship. However, there is evidence that anthropological insights are slowly filtering into other academic disciplines traditionally more dominant in Western discussions of mediumship. Edge (2005) has argued that a fuller understanding of mediumship requires cross cultural research and insights. A recent Parapsychology Foundation conference on

mediumship¹ saw a number of cross-cultural papers included amongst more traditional parapsychological discussions of Western mediumship. Discussion about future collaborations between parapsychology and anthropology were met with some apprehension, but overall comments seemed to suggest that such a relationship had promising prospects. Elsewhere, other parapsychologists are now calling for a broadening development of their discipline that should include interdisciplinary links (see Wooffitt, 2006, Zingrone, 2002), and there is evidence of cross cultural work by parapsychologists (e.g. Edge, 1993 in Bali and Roney-Dougal, 2006; 2007 in India). This debate is encouraging, however, it is also important to consider Western mediumship in connection with its historical development, as the forms of mediumship practises in contemporary Western societies stem from a distinct series of events and the social climate against which they unfolded.

2.3 The development of Western mediumship

Spirits have always had their place within the Western world, although this presence has been controversial. What spirits are - where they come from, what they want, who they are - has not always been clear, and has often been hotly debated. More recently, as a consequence of scientific rationalism, spirits have been largely stripped of any potential validity, and thought to represent primitive superstitions, serving as motifs of an uneducated past, and because of such have been subject to attempts to oust them from public thought (see Bennett, 1987;

¹ This conference took places between 27-29th January, 2005 in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA.

Davies, 1999; Finucane, 1982; Thomas, 1971). The presumed *impossibility* of spirits can be traced back to early theological writings, such as those of St. Augustine, who sought to demolish any remnants of former pagan beliefs and practises (Joynes, 1997; Schmitt, 1994). However, an authoritative call for the rejection of belief in spirits seems really to have begun in the clerical backlash of Protestantism over Catholicism. Whereas Catholicism had indoctrinated belief in the potential return of the dead as an experiential source for some of its rituals and the reality of purgatory, Protestantism's stance on post mortem survival, and the unchangeable nature of heaven and hell, did not (Finucane, 1982). The absence of purgatory and the dilution of God's active hand in the lives of the living meant that there was no need for action on the part of the living as the fate of the deceased was decided by God and could not be influenced. Once aligned to either heaven or hell, there was little possibility for migration (Bennett, 1987; Finucane, 1982). After the Reformation, with Protestantism established as the official belief system in British society, individuals were "assiduously taught not to take [spirits]... at face value" (Thomas, 1971:590). While Protestantism deemed any evidence of spirits as either demonic manifestations or illusion, scientific rationalism, which eventually replaced Protestantism's official status, simply denied their existence altogether. Explanations of demonic manifestation lessened as the presence of God and the Devil faded with the decline of Christianity's dominance in public spheres of thought and communication. Belief in spirits, as well as other beliefs deemed superstitious, were ridiculed and dismissed. More so, it was felt that such superstitions were a threat to the advancements science was making for the general

public (Davies, 1999). This sentiment is still apparent today, expressed by strident sceptics citing their moral obligation to maintain the advances of science and free the public from their superstitions (see Randi, 1988; Shermer, 1998). However, as Davies (1999) has pointed out, while we can see that secularism and its exclusion of spirits from social acceptability gained authority in public life, it does not mean that belief in spirits dissolved completely. As the experience of death remains as painful and troubling as ever, so too remains a need to find a way of dealing with the issues and experiences its presence raises.

While the official status of ghosts varied over time, belief in the return of the dead has never really diminished. As Pimple (1995) has noted, there is a long standing tradition of belief in ghosts, and of resulting oral histories amongst Western cultures with, in many cases, a claimed experiential basis². As Bennett (1987) states: "...we may read, for example, of ghosts in both Old and New Testaments, find ghost stories in the classics and Icelandic sagas, as well as among communities in modern London. Poltergeist reports come from ancient Egypt and from sixteenth-century Italy, as well as from eighteenth-century London and twentieth-century New York" (Bennett, 1987, p. 23).

Ghostlore traditions circulate in many societies. Belief in ghosts and spirits was apparent not just in the traditions of the newly settled population of America, but could also be found in the religions of African slaves, and of the Native American

² In that the stories were stated to have come from identifiable individuals who had witnessed the phenomena personally

tribes (Nelson, 1969; Schmitt, 2000). Nelson (1969) has argued that the influence of African and Native American belief systems, which incorporated spirit communication, were likely to have had an influence on early ideas about mediumship. However, the influence of other non-spirit related sources and factors should also be taken into account: Spiritualism, the main organised community to evolve around the phenomena of mediumship, “arose from a synthesis of Mesmerism, Swedenborgian cosmology, democratic ideals, supernatural folklore, and a large dose of religious revisionism” (Schmitt, 2000:47). The social, religious and political climate of the late nineteenth century shaped the development of Western mediumship in conjunction with the aftermath of the Fox sisters’ first communications (Moore, 1977; Nelson, 1969; Oppenheim, 1985; Owen, 1990; Pearsall, 1972).

It was an incident occurring on the 31st March, 1848, in the town of Hydesville in New York, that provided the catalyst for the development of Western mediumship. This incident involved two teenage girls – Kate and Margaret (often referred to as Maggie or sometimes as Margaretta) Fox – who, after a series of disturbances involving unexplainable noises in their house, claimed that they were able to communicate with the spirit of a murdered pedlar via a system of raps in response to questions. This spirit claimed responsibility for the preceding disturbances, and informed them that his remains were buried beneath the Fox’s property (Pimple, 1995; Weisberg, 2004). The spirit went on to provide details of his life and death, but also gave accurate information about the current inhabitants of Hydesville, such

as family mortality rates, and the number of children in different families. This knowledge suggested that he was able to observe the daily events of the living, and was not restricted to the Fox family home. If he was able to move with such fluidity, could others? When asked if the spirits of people's departed friends and relatives were still present in the physical world, the spirit replied that they were (Weisberg, 2004).

That *any* deceased individual may be able to return to the physical world was one of the most significant features of the concept of post mortem survival that mediumship endorsed, and formed the crux for subsequent Spiritualist philosophy. Whereas many traditional ghost stories portrayed spirits of the dead as representative of the more tragic and unpleasant moments of a communities' history (such as murder, premature death), the communications provided by the Fox sisters suggested that anyone who had died could return to interact with the living, and that such spirits were not place bound, but able to move amongst their living relatives and observe their daily lives. From here evolved a cosmology that identified spirits as residents in a utopian spirit world, who could travel back to the physical world simply out of a desire to make contact with their living loved ones. Spirits were no longer long dead characters from a communities' past, but beloved kith and kin who sought to stay close to those they had been connected to in life (Finucane, 1982; Pimple, 1995).

The Fox sisters were quickly established into the world of entertainment by the entrepreneur P.T. Barnum, and began performing live demonstrations of spirit communication to paying audiences (Isaacs, 1983). With spirits now thought capable of fluid movement, so too evolved the idea that mediumship could be performed anywhere and at any time (Pimple, 1995). It was not long before demonstrations of spirit communication were replicated by other individuals claiming similar abilities, and the kind of mediumship that the Fox sisters performed in large, well attended halls was supplemented with the more intimate setting of household séances.

Mediumship arrived in Britain in 1851, with the demonstrations of the American Mrs. Hayden. Other American mediums followed, but it was not long before Britain was producing and establishing her own brood of spirit communicators, such as Daniel Dunglas Home and Florence Cook, who attracted much popular interest due to their ability to produce impressive spiritual phenomena. Whereas Florence Cook³ was the subject of a highly publicised exposure⁴ (Owen, 1989), Daniel Dunglas Home appeared to maintain more credibility, and was never openly exposed⁵.

Individuals such as Andrew Jackson Davis and Robert Owen, who used spirit communication as a religious justification for new forms of spirituality and social

³ Cook is perhaps most famously remembered for her involvement and endorsement by the scientist and psychical researcher William Crookes

⁴ Cook was a materialisation medium, who produced a spirit called 'Katie King'. It is generally thought that the striking similarity between Cook and King is best explained as King in fact being Cook in disguise.

⁵ For a critical biography of Hume see Lamont, 1997.

reform, drew on the phenomena produced by the Fox sisters. A philosophical side to demonstrations of mediumship helped encourage the formation of a new religious community. The first Spiritualist Church was established in Keighley, a town in North Yorkshire, in 1852, and similar societies, organisations and centres soon followed suit in towns and cities throughout Great Britain and America. Spirit communication was thought to herald a new spiritual philosophy, and provided justification for social reforms and liberal ideologies (Barrow, 1987; Oppenheim, 1985).

Spiritualism evolved amid a social climate of anxiety and discontent. With the rise in authority of scientific rationalism, many individuals found it difficult to find comfort from the religious faith of their ancestors (Cerullo, 1982). Supposed divine machinations and the involvement of God in daily affairs had been distanced during the Reformation and Enlightenment (Bennett, 1987; Finucane, 1982), and such concepts were now being replaced by observable laws, with individuals encouraged to seek knowledge from proof. While science had numerous positive empowerments, it offered little in the way of comfort in times of hardship and bereavement (Carroll, 1997; Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985). Spiritualist philosophies were aimed at these emotional and theological needs, and yet dismissed the relevance of blind faith. Spiritualists were the first significant religious group that sought to bridge science and religion by offering proof of their beliefs through the demonstration of mediumship (Swatos, 1992; Weinstein, 2003).

They saw themselves as modern citizens who had embraced science, but noted an absence of meaning previously catered for by religion (see Cerullo, 1982)

As mediumship became embraced within a religious framework, so too did the nature of the phenomena it produced extend to other performances. The series' of raps and knockings widened to include a myriad of other physical acts by which the spirit world could be revealed to the living, from the playing of instruments by unseen agents to ectoplasm and full materialisations of spirit forms. From this, the spirit world found further representation and embodiment not just through demonstrations of mediums, but in resulting artefacts from witnesses, such as detailed reports and spirit photography. Demonstrations of mediumship quickly attracted public attention, with many attending either to witness such an incredible new phenomenon, or because they had a personal stake in the possibility of communicating with the dead. Scientists were intrigued as to how such demonstrations could be scientifically possible. Many scientists were never to be convinced, and viewed Spiritualism with cold disdain, publishing exposes of examples of fraud wherever they found them. Others went looking with an open mind, only to be disappointed, and so lent their voices to sceptical discourse. Others still found themselves confounded by the absence of scientific explanations for what they experienced, and so deduced that there must be spiritual forces at work (see Cerullo, 1982; Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985).

The relationship between mediumship and science has been analysed by numerous scholars interested in Spiritualism (see for example, Cerullo, 1982; Hazelgrove, 2000; Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985). Science seems both to have helped and hindered Spiritualism's development, and the place of mediumship in Western culture. On the one hand, Spiritualists and mediums were keen to align themselves with science, and incorporated scientific discourse and motivation in their activities and press. Ideas such as evolution, and technological advances such as the telegraph and electricity, were highly influential, and can be seen interlinked with Spiritualist philosophies (Weinstein, 2003). Spiritualists were keen to gain the acceptance of scientists (and the respectability such alliances would ideally encourage), and praised the involvement of esteemed individuals such as William Crookes, Arthur Conan Doyle, Alfred Russell Wallace and Robert Owen Davis (Cerullo, 1982; Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985). However, many individuals retained a dismissal of Spiritualism, even though they showed a keen and supportive interest in other supernatural phenomena (e.g. O'Donnell 1920, cited in Hazelgrove, 2000). As the number of exposes of fraudulent mediums increased, so did the appeal of Spiritualism as a credible bridge between science and religion weaken.

The role of mediumship as both an article of religious and scientific significance demonstrates the complexity of how mediumship was received and inaugurated, and emphasises the role of individual meaning making. While it has been ostracised by most of the scientific community, Spiritualism nevertheless still asserts itself as a scientific religion. What seems important to consider here is that

orientations toward science, and the use of scientific discourse, have been reinterpreted by Spiritualists who recognise and legitimate it as an authentic knowledge source. The use of science is not only a means for Spiritualists to seek allegiance with a legitimate source of knowledge, but it is also embedded in Spiritualist ideas because it was (and remained) a dominant thread in nineteenth and twentieth century Western society. The developmental nature of this thread (i.e. what constituted science changed over this course of time, and was influenced by a variety of new discoveries and inventions) paralleled with the developmental and explorative nature of mediumship and Spiritualism. The strive for authenticity is also relevant to the manner in which Spiritualist asserts itself as a religion, as the term religion seems to provide firm status for a legitimate spirit group. The use of the term religion in connection with Spiritualism is complicated however, and reflects the friction between Spiritualism and their critique of organised religion. What seems paramount in both cases – science and religion – is that mediums and Spiritualists were seeking authenticity and recognisable references that tied them to prominent and established features of contemporary culture.

The growing number of exposes of fraudulent mediums no doubt dealt several blows to the credibility of Spiritualism, which was balanced so precariously upon its promises of real spiritual phenomena. In 1888, Margaretta Fox claimed that the phenomena produced by herself and her sister Kate had been a hoax, and that the rappings and knockings had been produced by the clicking of a joint in their big toes (Isaacs, 1983; Weisberg, 2004). Although she was later to retract this

statement, considerable, and for some irrevocable, damage had already been done (Weisberg, 2004). The Fox sisters themselves had suffered from the fame that had followed since 1848: both struggled with alcoholism and unhappiness (Weisberg, 2004). The early twentieth century, however, saw a brief upsurge in interest in mediumship. The aftermath of WWI resurrected the role of and need for mediumship with the gravitas of its casualties, many of whom were young men 'in their prime'. It was during this period that mediumship seems to have been consulted more as a therapeutic outlet than an entertaining past time, and was shaped by the needs of those who now sought the services of a medium to ease their grief. This was not to last, and interest did eventually seem to wane. While Hazelgrove (2000) has argued that mediumship was still influential and had become a noticeable part of popular culture between WWI and WWII, many scholars identify the end of WWI as the beginning of a steady decline in interest (Moore, 1977; Oppenheim, 1985) and given the impression that it has faded into obscurity. But Spiritualism as a religious community had now been established, and while the popularity of séances and demonstrations of mediumship dwindled, there has nevertheless remained an active Spiritualist presence.

2.4 Spiritualism and Society

While the literature on contemporary mediumship is generally dominated by scholars from a parapsychology or psychical research background, there have however been a number of thorough historical volumes that had given attention to

the social relevance of Spiritualism and mediumship. While these studies refer to Spiritualism as a part of an historical epoch, some of its themes nevertheless are still relevant for contemporary study. This section will examine some of the themes that have received the attention of historical and sociological scholars. Where appropriate, it will also examine more contemporary research that is in line with these prior findings.

2.4.1 Gender and Class: Philosophy, Marginality and Grief

Mediumship offered – and can still offer - a chance for social mobility. One observation is that women from working class backgrounds could gain entry into upper class spaces, and earn themselves favourable repute by demonstrating an effective ability to provide information (and entertainment) from the spirit world (Owen, 1989). The sensitive feminine was given spiritual importance, and women were thought to be natural mediums due to traits associated with the social stereotype of womanhood and the presumed feminine qualities of spirituality (Owen, 1989). The role of women, and their means of gaining empowerment by acting as mediums or by being part of supportive Spiritualist networks, still seems to be a significant topic for studies of more contemporary Spiritualist groups. Both Skultans (1974) and Haywood (1982) have examined the importance of women in contemporary Spiritualist groups (in Wales and USA respectively).

However, the positive relationship between the preferred feminine and the respected spiritual practitioner was not as straightforward and rewarding as it may at first appear. While the medium was seen as a link to the spirit world, the activities of certain mediums stirred controversial feelings of gender and sexuality (Owen, 1989). Due to the large percentage of mediums being women, many characterisations and representations of mediums played on conflicting notions of femininity as spiritual and the place of women in more mundane society. Images of mediums ranged from figures of feminine pioneers embracing Virgin Mary and Joan of Arc type representations, to eccentric old maids prone to moments of hysteria⁶, degenerates plagued by mental illness⁷, or even sinister figures of vampiric intensity (Hazelgrove, 2000; Owen, 1989). There seems to have been an undercurrent of uneasiness about the social and behavioural boundaries broken by mediums in trances (Owen, 1989). While the spirits may have provided justification for such actions, nevertheless, their physical mannerisms were still uncomfortable. With the dismissal of spirits as genuine agents, this discomfort became more heated and critical: if there were no such things as genuine spirits of the dead, then the medium's exhibitions should be judged by normal social standards of acceptable behaviour or be applicable to psychological theory. Explanations that reflected current changes in medical philosophy were sometimes invoked to – in part – excuse the agency of the medium if they acted inappropriately. As Gutierrez (2003) has pointed out, hysteria was often linked with mediums, perhaps influenced by the growing fields of psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis.

⁶ For an example, see the character Madame Arcanti in Noel Coward's *Blithe Spirit*.

⁷ For an example, see Owen's (1989) discussion of the case of Louisa Lowe.

A link between mediumship and mental health is not necessarily negative. In many non Western cultures mediums are regarded as providing alternative therapy, for example in South American communities (Rogler & Hollingshead, 1961) and Cambodia (Didier, 2005). Again, a focus on women is often apparent in academic treatments of mediumship and mental health. Skultans (1974) has argued that Spiritualist networks offer a particular kind of arena that is well suited for women who use it as a coping mechanism for problems arising from traditional expectations associated with their gender. Skultans' ethnography of a Spiritualist community in a Welsh town argued that mediumship can act as an alternative source for dealing with problems and illnesses, particularly in regards to those of a psychological nature. This argument is similar to those presented by anthropologists concerned with understanding spirit possession, as has been discussed previously.

Historical accounts of mediumship seem to acknowledge the role of marginality as related to mediumship, mainly in regards to class and gender. The Fox sisters, for example, were female and came from a small rural community. By the end of their lives they had married respectable men and been included into a variety of high social status circles (Weisberg, 2004). Other mediums had similar opportunities, and many mediums came from backgrounds that were less privileged than the social groups they became a part of. However, we should be careful in our consideration of the role of marginality here. Women as mediums were significant because they could access power usually restricted in a patriarchal society.

However, this access of power was in no way limited to mediumship, and was sought by a variety of women. While it seems that research shows that mediumship could be useful tool for social migration, there were far more individuals involved than just the mediums themselves. Individuals from privileged positions in Western society were actively involved in the career formation of mediums, and staked their reputations on pronouncing their authenticity. It seems unlikely that so many mediums would have flourished socially without this kind of reception and support. Also, mediumship and Spiritualist philosophy were significantly influential in the development of women's rights movements (Braude, 1989). An overt focus on social marginalisation overlooks the experiential relevance and consequences of mediumistic experiences and events, as well as the ways in which social classes were interlinked through demonstrations and the creation of certain mediums.

It is important to note that we are reliant on the observations and conclusions of historical researchers when identifying social marginality and mediumship. One of the problems with a reliance on the historical record is that what has not been documented cannot be found, and the historical record may be limited or missing potentially significant accounts. To what degree women who became mediums felt social marginalised is unclear. Also, the focus of women and mediumship can overlook its significance for others. Carroll (2000) has argued that the role of men in Spiritualism is equally interesting and important. It may seem that women form the majority of a Spiritualist audience, however, Carroll (2000) argues that the development of Spiritualism was met by as much support from men as it was from

women. He argued that Spiritualism offered a new arena for men also, who, during the Victorian period, were caught in a conflicting world concerning the expectations of manhood. Masculinity was being contested, and while men were encouraged to be the breadwinners and less emotionally expressive, for example, nevertheless the Victorian era itself embraced an aesthetical and performative social extravagance, particularly towards acts of grieving. Death was given significant consideration, and romanticised with elaborate and decorative rituals (Curl, 2001). This was largely a pictorial extravagance as emotional responses to death seemed to lack equal space, and mourning was typically represented in black attire and solemn countenance, particularly for men. Generally, public expressions of grief were not encouraged. Mediumship demonstrations provided an arena where a seemingly miraculous and intimate episode of consolation could be exercised and experienced. This was particularly relevant in the séance room, in which the experience was shared by only a few others of generally close acquaintance who were acknowledging the painful significance of their grief and actively seeking comfort for it. Spiritualist philosophy offered men spiritual guidance in regards to the shape of their masculinity, and provided supportive networks and legitimacy for ways to deal with grief.

Spiritualist philosophy became increasingly influential as Spiritualism developed, and mediumship became part of a wider religious belief system. For the members of the middle class who converted, Spiritualism was seen as a completion to Christianity. Converts from the lower middle and working classes however saw

justification for liberal and socialist ideals in its spiritual equality: what Barrow (1987) terms 'plebeian spiritualism' laid roots for the development of working class Liberalism and socialism (Barrow, 1987). Spiritualist philosophy was also used by women seeking independence and political power (Braude, 1989; Owen, 1990). The egalitarian nature of the spirit world emphasised universal possibilities: anyone who had died could return to communicate, which meant that anyone could receive a message from a departed loved one, and anyone living could go to the spirit world, regardless of their social status. The lack of a powerful hierarchy (typical of Christian institutions) in Spiritualism also emphasised the importance of education, encouraging that knowledge should be available for anyone. Apart from demonstrations of mediumship, Spiritualism also introduced lyceums which created events in which such knowledge could be accessed (Barrow, 1987). Barrow (1987) states that these strands of Spiritualist philosophy encouraged and promoted individuals to acknowledge and assert their concern for lived independence and control over one's own life.

Spiritualism in appeal to the upper classes seems mainly as a form of fashionable entertainment. The literature suggests that most members of the upper classes would not involve themselves with Spiritualism in a religious sense, although that is not strictly the case. The use of séances as after dinner entertainment, and of the prestige gained by those who hosted such in their parlour rooms, gives the impression that, to many members of the upper classes it was the spectacle that was of interest, and the fashionable nature of its popularity (Oppenheim, 1985).

However, individuals from all classes could be united in an interest in mediumship as an aid for coping with grief. While for some mediumship offered religious significance and for others an enjoyable past time, nevertheless, for many it was the assurance they desired that those who they had loved who had died were not lost.

Many of these issues noted by historical considerations of mediumship are also relevant to discussions about contemporary practises of mediumship. Similarly, in the present day, mediumship is usually sought – at least in the first instance - following a significant bereavement. Often, mediumship can offer help when other ways of dealing with grief have failed. For example, the journalist Justine Picardie, who had recently lost her sister to breast cancer, writes:

“The treadmill is supposed to be good therapy... I’ve tried it all since my sister died, in the manner of the sophisticated consumers that I am supposed to be: the gym, bereavement counselling, psychotherapy, anti-depressants, valium, sleeping pills, homeopathic remedies...but still nothing really speaks to me.” (Picardie, 2000: 3-4)

Picardie’s (2000) account focuses on her search for proof of post mortem survival, as she visits a variety of mediums and psychics in the quest for a reconnection with her sister. Her account captures the painful sensuousness of the grieving experience, and provides an example of involvement with mediumship from the perspective of

the bereaved. It also shows that grieving can act as a catalyst for mediumship consultation, which is still as relevant today as it was in the prior two centuries. Bourke (2006) has argued that belief in the spirit world offered "...tens of thousands of bereaved parents, spouses, siblings, and friends... a belief system that comforted them and enabled them to rebuild their lives... [through mediumship] many bereaved people found... *a direct route of their own* to their loved ones in the afterlife." (Bourke, 2006: 60, emphasis added). Ultimately, mediumship offers a unique chance to reaffirm bonds with beloved kith and kin (Goss & Klass, 2005; Walliss, 2001).

2.4.2 *Spiritualism and religion*

While Spiritualism has links with Christian beliefs (incorporating, in places, both pieces of its rituals and philosophies), the Christian Church has retained an often harsh oppositional stance. While some members of the clergy dismissed the beginnings of Spiritualism as a resurrection of 'old superstitions', others saw mediumship as yet another vehicle for demonic forces. The similarities with witchcraft are obvious, and mediums were often treated and discussed in the same manner (Davies, 1999). Communicating with the dead is deemed 'diabolical' here, and while Christian officials may have lost the power they had in earlier centuries, their condemnations have been clear and consistent (Davies, 1999; Thomas, 1971). Pamphlets warning against the 'dangers' of groups such as Spiritualism are still circulated today.

Spiritualism has also voiced a critique of Christianity. Just as mediumship and subsequent Spiritualist philosophies were attractive in accompaniment to social reform, the presence of the egalitarian dead were thought to undermine the totalitarianism of the Bible (Goss & Klass, 2005). The use of proof as opposed to reliance on faith became a figurehead for those who supported mediumship, and while many supporters of mediumship gradually formed a religious community, it nevertheless maintained that it was a *scientific* religion (Swatos, 1990).

Interestingly however, studies have suggested that a high proportion of Spiritualist mediums come from Anglican or Catholic backgrounds (Emmons, 2001; Richard & Adato, 1980⁸). In their samples, Richard & Adato found that Protestant backgrounds were most commonly cited, whereas Emmons (whose study comes over twenty years later) found that most came from Catholic backgrounds, some even jokily describing themselves as ‘recovering Catholics’. Why this is the case is unclear, although Emmons argues that, in comparison with other regions, Catholics are over represented in the area where Lily Dale lies (the north eastern part of the USA), and Roman Catholicism has a higher tolerance for latter-day miracles. It is possible that the difference in results could be due to chance. Emmons also notes that mediums often report a childhood in which “apparitions of relatives or of other spirits sometimes later identified by surprised adults” (Emmons, 2001:74) were common. The Spiritualist environment creates an atmosphere in which such ‘unusual’ experiences can find validation and justification, and provide the

⁸ Both of these studies were conducted in Lily Dale, a Spiritualist town located near Buffalo, New York in the USA

individual with support for their experiences. In other Christian environments this is unlikely, as Emmons notes, due to the Christian belief system and its dogmatic position on such experiences. Childhood and the frequency of 'unusual' experiences may play a key role in the development of mediums; McClenon's (1994) cross-cultural study of psychic practitioners (such as mediums and shamans) found that all of the practitioners interviewed reported a childhood in which unusual experiences were frequent. The acceptance of mediumistic abilities may be a slow process; both Emmons and McClenon note that many individuals reported an initial discouragement from their kith and kin, before finding a sympathetic environment in which their abilities were encouraged. Many contemporary websites of Spiritualist mediums state that they had apparitional experiences at an early age, and there seems to be a high percentage of these apparitions being deceased family members. For example, the UK medium Stephen Holbrook states that one of his first apparitional experiences, during early childhood was of his grandfather, who came and sat at the end of his bed shortly after he had died (Christie, 2000).

Research into apparitional encounters have suggested that a high proportion of these encounters are of close family members; Green & McCreely (1975) found that most apparitional encounters they recorded were of a mother or father, while Bennett & Bennett (2000) have researched widows' apparitions of their deceased husbands.

When discussing Spiritualism as a religious movement, scholars have argued as how best to summarise its organisation, and to what other religious movements it may best compare. Nelson (1969) described Spiritualism as a cult, however Richard

& Adato (1980) have argued that, due to its longevity and level of organisation, it is more like a sect. Spiritualism has always tried to avoid adopting dogma, although has seven principles of which followers should try to follow. Swatos (1990) argues that there is often “a matter of degree of emphasis within a larger system of religious meanings” (Swatos, 1990:471), and, though there are national affiliating bodies, both in Great Britain and America, Spiritualist churches can often be independent networks, with some church’s maintaining their own religious argot in order to maintain group alliance and keep out potentially disruptive outsiders (Zaretsky, 1974). It is difficult to assess Spiritualism as a national collective, although there are Spiritualist churches all over both Great Britain and America. Spiritualist churches seem to operate as social networks that are bonded by basic principles embodied in varying rituals that can be moulded by their members:

“Although there is a written tradition of thought about spiritualism and official doctrine is available at any one of the spiritualist headquarters, its influence at the local level is insignificant. Practise and belief seem to be determined by local needs and inspiration rather than by documentation from a central authority.” (Skultans, 1974:3)

Research has tended not to explore this area, although Zaretsky’s (1974) analysis of Spiritualism in San Francisco is a notable exception. Zaretsky’s research suggests that Spiritualist churches represent a hierarchical organisation that centres on a medium-pastor, who is in complete control of her church and dictates how the

church will be run, what terms will be used, and so. In this case, the church centres as a place for platform performances of mediumship, and can organise ‘circles’ in which other mediums may be trained. Little social activity occurs other than in these ritualised services. Skultans (1974) study of a Spiritualist group in Wales suggests a very different environment in which Spiritualists may support each other therapeutically, and there is “an explicit emphasis on individual inspiration” (Skultans, 1974:3). Individual mediums act as the main guides in these networks, although there is often more than one associated with a church, and organisation seems to focus more on a committee than an individual. Members are thought to be on a ‘journey’, and the network is based on principles that are fluid enough to enable groups to fit for their needs.

2.4.3 *Spiritualism and its influences*

Mediumship is also linked to what has come to be termed the New Age movement, a supposedly more reflexive form of spiritual lifestyle and belief. The ‘New Age’ is a difficult area to neatly categorise, as it consists of many different groups, such as “...past life therapists and crystal healers, earth goddesses and lost civilizations, mantras and gurus, Harmonic Convergence and shamanic voyages, Hollywood ghosts and California channelers, natural medicine and pagan rituals, Shirley MacLaine and Marilyn Ferguson” (Hess, 1993: 3) The term ‘New Age’ has been adopted by many scholars “...for certain contemporary religious Western religious phenomena” (Wood, 2003: 160), although it can be problematic as a term,

due to the tendency for researchers to “...eschew contextualisations in terms of social and cultural environments... and to replicate insider’s accounts that set themselves up as official models” (Wood, 2003: 160). Certainly, insider accounts are important, and groups associated with the New Age movement can in part be characterised by a promotion of individual spirituality. This argument is beyond the scope of this project, however, for the purpose of this chapter it is perhaps best to consider the New Age movement as representing “...a deep interest in alternatives to conventional knowledge and faith.” (Hess, 1993: 3). It is an example of a preference for unchurched spirituality, which has become popular within Western society, and involves a myriad of traditional spiritual practises wielded within new frameworks (Hess, 1993; Wood, 2003). If we consider the importance of the New Age movement as an alternative to “conventional knowledge and faith” (Hess, 1993: 3), it becomes apparent that mediumship fits well into this.

Hess (1993) points out that Spiritualism can be seen as a precursor to the New Age movement, and that the dialectical relationship that it has had with science is indicative and typical of New Age discourse. This is similar, also, for other traditions and practises labelled as ‘occult’ (Gibbons, 2001). While Hess (1993) argues that the relationship between Spiritualism in regards to its influence on the development of the New Age movement should not be over emphasised, he notes that groups such as Theosophy had their roots within Spiritualism. Indeed, Madame Blavatsky, the founder of the Theosophical movement, started out as a medium, before breaking from Spiritualism and drawing on influences from eastern religious

traditions (Bevir, 1994). All of these groups represent the desire to fill in the gaps that people felt were problematic in Christianity, and signify the preference for a more global approach to understanding the world, which draws on other cultural forms of knowledge made more readily available by modernity's increase of cross-cultural contact.

There are distinct similarities between *practises* associated with the New Age movement and Spiritualism, one of the most obvious being New Age Channeling. A comparison between Spiritualism and New Age Channeling has been discussed by Spencer (2001), who has argued that while the act of mediumship (he refers to trance and physical mediumship particularly) is similar to New Age Channeling. New Age Channelers have "... by eschewing materialisations... prevent[ed]... contemporary opponents of the opportunity to stage mass media debunking events." (Spencer, 2001: 357). They are sensitive to the similar concerns that mediums have faced in regard to debunking, and while they behave in ways that are markedly similar to trance and physical mediumship (which has often been a major source of debunking), they nevertheless are able to distort their messages in such a way as to avoid similar sceptical posed problems. There is an absence of the egalitarian, returning dead in New Age Channelling, as channels typically communicate with 'ascended masters' or non-human entities (such as extraterrestrials) who are thought able to provide humanity with useful information in regards to self and collective development (Brown, 1997; Spencer, 2001; Wood, 2001; 2003). This later difference is significant, and eschews, perhaps, the democratic nature of Spiritualist

mediumship that focuses on openness in regard to who may make contact. The purpose of such occasions is the search for divine knowledge, not a reconnection with the dead.

There is evidence to suggest also that, in turn, the New Age movement may have had an influential effect on areas of contemporary Spiritualism. Porter's (1995) study of Spiritualists in North America found that many Spiritualists cited having extraterrestrials as spirit guides. There is, however, little other literature to compare with Porter's research, so it is, for the time being, impossible to judge to what extent Spiritualism is influenced by other such religious and spiritual beliefs and practises, and whether or not her research is specific to North America. However, to explore the reflexivity of mediumship, in particular its appropriation by other groups, seems likely to shed new light on its social relevance. It further demonstrates that it is important to regard mediumship as a social phenomenon in its own right, as well as by considering its links to specific communities.

What is noticeable about the role of mediumship in contemporary Western society is its connection with television, particularly those of a sympathetic nature. As discussed previously, representations of mediums are common in contemporary society, and a majority of these representations portray the medium as a genuine spirit communicator. The 'paranormal' is, like the term New Age, difficult to define as it encompasses a range of phenomena and beliefs. It is often used as a term that undermines the authenticity of the phenomena it applies to, but equally, it seems as

though it has been reclaimed as a term for those with a strong interest. Mediumship is a popular ‘paranormal’ area, and it is likely that popularity of the paranormal has had an influence on its contemporary characteristics, acting as a cultural resource. Programmes like *Most Haunted* orientate toward scientific method and discourse which seeks to legitimate the phenomena they ostensibly record. This also highlights the complexity in regards to the relationship between mediumship and science: while it has suffered because of the scientific community, and it is generally scientific theory that rejects it, nevertheless mediumship is often used in orientation toward science and still seems to seek an affiliation. The paranormal, along with the New Age movement, is often used to attack the assumed rigid dominance of science in contemporary Western society, positioning its claims in opposition. It seems that mediumship operates in groups that acknowledge science both as a help and a hindrance, and have used scientific discourse to suit their purposes. These groups believe that mediumship is a provable phenomena – and therefore scientifically valid – but resist ties to the perceived dogmatic scientific community that have so often attacked them.

2.5 Conclusion

Mediumship has, and continues to be, examined in relation to wider social structures and themes. Historians, anthropologists, and sociologists have demonstrated the historical and sociological relevance of mediumship as a feature of human societies. Studies of Western mediumship have connected it to a number

of other social themes, demonstrating that it is an important and worthwhile topic of study. Mediumship has been explored as part of a religious community, but also as phenomena in its own right that can appeal to a number of different individuals and groups. It has been adopted by Spiritualists, but also other New Age groups, as well individuals seeking evidence of something fashionable, extraordinary, or as a therapeutic aid that enables them to reconnect with their deceased kith and kin. While such research is hugely beneficial and insightful, there is still an absence of discussion on actual mediumistic experiences. In the next chapter I will discuss some of the methodological issues related to the study of extraordinary experiences, before showing how a suitable methodological approach was developed for this project.

Chapter Three

Using combined approaches to study spirit mediumship

3.1 Introduction

The previous two chapters have primarily been concerned with outlining substantive reasons for a sociological analysis of spirit mediumship and mediumship demonstrations. Those discussions touched upon some of the broader methodological issues surrounding the study of a variety of extraordinary experiences. The review of the literature has noted a neglect in the treatment of mediumship from an agnostic and/or sociological perspective, and has argued that more research is needed to contribute to a more holistic and thorough understanding of spirit mediumship. This chapter will explore some of these issues further in relation to the methodological approaches chosen for this study. It will argue that a combined, complementary methodological approach has been considered most appropriate for this project. This chapter will identify why such an approach has been chosen, and the advantages that a combined methodological approach is thought to offer. It will show that data has been gathered from three sources that reflect the private and public (and thereby sociological) dimensions of spirit mediumship: via observational studies of live demonstrations, semi structured interviews, and from mediums' autobiographies. Empirical analysis of these diverse materials will follow a broadly grounded theory approach informed by a discursive

analytical focus on members' sense making practises and ways of accounting for and explaining extraordinary experiences.

Firstly, I will identify further why the study of mediumship requires new methodological approaches, and what areas specifically would benefit from more sociologically focused exploration. I will then show how the research questions formulated for this project have sought to contribute to this goal, before explaining why grounded and discursive approaches have been chosen for the analysis of this project's research interests. Lastly, I will examine some of the epistemological and ethical issues concerning this project, drawing on research experiences of attending mediumship demonstrations, and interviewing mediums.

3.2 The need to study mediumship as social and experiential

As has been argued in the previous chapters, a more reflexive and sociologically orientated approach to the study of extraordinary experiences has been emerging over the last few decades. Scholars have argued that such experiences should be taken more seriously, and that we should look to people's accounts as valuable data in their own right. Previous studies have often sought to explain away extraordinary experiences: for example, much of the research into mediumship has reduced the presence of the experient (medium) to letters or numbers, or used their speech in orientation to experimental frameworks, which largely strips it of its contextual meanings. Such experiments have often taken place in artificial environments, or

involved scholars hypothesising over statistical studies. The lack of research that identifies home environments is problematic for an understanding of how mediumship operates in its natural setting, as is the lack of consideration into what it is that mediums say in the context of their demonstrations.

It is in the context of séances, demonstrations, Spiritualist church services and sittings that mediumship continues to find practise. While mediumship has tried to maintain a scientific dialogue, its functions are not limited to this connection.

Indeed, the consumption of mediumship is aimed toward dealing with the death of loved ones, which is largely forgotten in scientific research literature. As Wooffitt (2006) identifies, mediumship demonstrations are not discrete units of vocal practise, but are dependant upon the interaction of selected recipients. These demonstrations are grounded in social interaction, and are integral to specific social communities and events. Access to mediumship demonstrations in their home environments is vital for a more grounded understanding of mediumship. It needs to be understood as a lived, reflexive phenomena that is enmeshed within particular social settings.

The historian, Stan McMullin, who recently published an historical account of spirit communication in Canada, has shown how a chance discovery of a collection of séance recordings gave him a new, more sensuous insight in the meanings and relevance of the séance:

“...What became clear almost immediately upon listening to the tapes was that the written record of the séance was not the essence of the event. While the content received in a séance was important... the process by which the data arrived was of equal importance. The vocal exchange between entities and sitters drew the participants back to the circle several times a week...The process of confirming the continuance of family ties beyond death appearance to be at least as important as the content. I would not have understood any of this without having had the opportunity to hear the tapes.” (McMullin, 2004: xiii-xiv)

Even though these recordings are essentially historical artefacts, and not recorded when the researcher was present¹, it is clear that they had captured an essence of the livedness of the event that was to be hugely significant to McMullin’s research. Not only did it provide him with a sensuous experience, but it strengthened his understanding of séances as *actual lived phenomena*, and enabled him to understand its function and appeal in new ways. It is clear that the difference between reading write ups of séances, and actually hearing recordings of them, challenged some of McMullin’s preconceptions about the relevance of the séance to those involved. He found that the ‘written records of the séance was not the *essence* of the event’ (McMullin, 2004: xiii, emphasis added), stressing a consideration for the importance of the process. This has so often been underestimated in mediumship literature, and mediumship demonstrations as live sensuous experiences or interactive social processes have not received the critical attention they deserve. As

¹ Meaning that the researcher was not able to experience the physicality of the séance, or be immersed in it in the way that participant observation may have allowed.

McMullin (2004) states, it is not simply about the confirmation of mediumship claims, but the actual experience of being involved in a mediumship demonstration that is in itself highly significant. The impact of the séance recordings for McMullin's research illustrates how important it is to consider the livedness of mediumistic experience, as well as the value of different approaches and data sources.

3.3 Research questions

The literature discussed in the previous chapters has identified not only a shift in academic focus and treatment of mediumship, but also a gap in regards to how such experiences have been studied. While many researchers have argued for examining extraordinary experiences from a non-reductionist, agnostic position, this is still a developing area, and such an approach has not yet been applied to mediumship. While Wooffitt (2000; 2001; 2006) has looked at recordings of mediumship sittings and demonstrations, he has not considered mediumship as related to personal experience, nor how mediums might account for such interaction. The absence of information about what mediums might actually say about their lives and their experiences is problematic for a more grounded understanding of mediumship. Mediums are active participants in particular social activities, but they are also private recipients of extraordinary experiences.

Considering this, the following questions seemed appropriate:

How do mediums present themselves as individuals genuinely in contact with spirit others?

How do they negotiate their own identities in their demonstrations?

How is the presence of spirit others constructed and orientated to by mediums?

How do mediums account for, and attempt to explain their experiences of contact with spirit others?

Due to the lack of literature on mediumistic experience, there was not really much to use in the way of comparison. Wooffitt (2000; 2001; 2002; 2006) has provided a good deal of material connected to the analysis of mediumship interaction, and his work has been used in comparison with my own findings throughout this thesis. However, the lack of literature on mediumistic experience has been ultimately advantageous, as it meant that the data was situated in its own right. Nevertheless, it seemed important to select a methodological approach that would compliment such new findings.

In order to address these research questions, it was decided that three different data sources representative of mediumship as practised in the social world would be used: observations on demonstrations of mediumship, interviews with mediums, and text from mediums' autobiographies. These data sources required different forms of analysis which I will now discuss.

3.4 Data

3.4.1 *Observational Studies*

Data was collected from two main settings: public demonstrations of mediumship, and Divine Services, which form part of the general repertoire of Spiritualist church weekly activities. Five public demonstrations of mediumship were attended; three demonstrations given by the medium Stephen Holbrook, and two given by the medium Simon Peters (see appendix one). Five Spiritualist church services were also observed (see appendix one).

Observations of these demonstrations were recorded via detailed field notes written up shortly after the event, and demonstrations produced around 6 pages of typed notes. Due to the close proximity between researcher and medium in many of the demonstrations, it was not possible to take notes during the events themselves, although, in some cases, brief notes were written into a notebook during the intervals. Field notes recorded the overview of the evening, and focused on specific activities that were relevant to the research.

There are obvious problems with the use of field notes in a study of this kind, particularly in regards to its emphasis on language and interaction. Ideally, recording of these events would be best suited to analysis focused on language. Field notes are reliant upon the researcher's memory, and so will never be able to

record the detail captured on a recording. However, it was not possible for recordings of this kind to be obtained, bar one, as I was not able to seek consent from the demonstrating mediums at each event. There are also ethical difficulties associated with obtaining recordings and gathering information in such public events, which further prevented me from taking notes during the demonstrations. As these events took part in a shared environment, and I was part of a paying audience, it was felt that it would be wise to avoid actions that might make others feel uncomfortable. Mediumship demonstrations often involve sensitive interactions with individuals who are not expecting a researcher to be present. As consent was not able to be obtained from members of the audience, particularly those who became message recipients, it was decided that notes would be written as soon as the demonstration was finished. Also, the focus of writing up field notes during the event would hinder my immersion of the event itself, and it is likely that important details may be missed. I tried to compensate for these difficulties by writing up my field notes as soon as possible after the event, so that the details were still relatively fresh in my memory.

The benefits of using field notes, however, were thought to outweigh the limitations. The use of field notes is a common feature in much social scientific research, and remains one of the more prominent means of data collection in many methodologies, for example, ethnography. Research using field notes have shown that this is a fruitful and detailed means of gaining information about social events, which prioritises an attempt to capture occasions in as much detail as possible. As

an observer participant, the researcher is able to immerse themselves in the event, rather than, for example, focusing entirely on transcripts of spoken interaction which may become estranged from the situation in which they were practised. Having personally attended mediumship demonstrations, I was able to experience these events as sensuous, lived occasions. Furthermore, by focusing on the use of field notes, I was able to identify how spoken interaction was accompanied by non verbal cues and behaviours, and appreciate the event holistically.

I was able to obtain a recording of one of Simon Peters' demonstrations by purchasing a taped recording that was available for sale following the demonstration. However, due to a respect for individual privacy and because permission wasn't granted, no other recordings were available. I decided not to use the transcript from this demonstration due to lack of other access to other recordings by which to compare. As my analysis for the other observational studies came from field notes, it was decided that I should maintain this as consistent throughout my data sources.

3.4.1.1 Analysis

Analysis was focused on three main areas considered important for addressing the research question: how the medium established their identity for their audience; what interaction occurred between the medium and their audience, particularly in

regards to the dialogue occurring between a medium and their selected recipients; and how information about the spirit world was communicated to the audience.

A thematic analysis influenced by Discourse Analysis (hereafter referred to as DA) and grounded theory, which looked particularly at the ways in which talk was organised in these demonstrations, was used in regards to data recorded in my field notes. Prior work by Wooffitt (2006) on the use of language by psychic practitioners, which includes an observational study of Stephen Holbrook, was used as a starting point for relevant themes.

Firstly, information relevant to the three specific areas identified (mediums' establishment of identity; ways in which mediums interacted with their audience; and how information about the spirit world was communicated) was listed for each individual observational study. After writing up each set of field notes, a second copy was prepared for annotation and thematic analysis. On the second copy, information was colour coded according to: information about the medium presented during the demonstration; information provided in the message delivery; and information provided by the medium about their spirit contacts. The information was organised into topic points, for example, reference to religion; reference to personal characteristics; characteristics of spirit contacts, etc. These topic points for each observational study were then compared and contrasted in reference to the point in which they appeared during the event, their frequency, their main features, and differences and similarities between each observational study

were noted. The topics for analysis were decided after this process: the most popular topics being decided upon as most necessary for analysis.

Using these topics, a set of particular analytical themes was established. Analysis looked, firstly, on what had been said during observations and secondly, how this information was interactionally organised. Information that mediums provided about themselves was compared in regards to direct, personal biographical information (which was generally more common in public demonstrations of mediumship, and would be included in introductory speeches) and more implicit references to the self throughout the demonstrations. Analysis considered how such information related to the presentation of self by the medium, but also how it was used in different interactions with the audience, and how the medium related themselves and their abilities to conveying information about the spirit world. The ways in which mediums construct their authenticity was considered as well as the ways in which the selected information was presented in representation of their character.

Interaction with the audience was analysed by looking at the ways in which mediums established prior guidelines for the ways in which interaction should ensue if audience members were selected as recipients, and whether or not these guidelines were adhered to throughout the demonstrations. Analysis also focused on how trouble – i.e. negative responses from selected recipients – was dealt with by the medium concerned. The kinds of information that mediums used during their

interaction with selected recipients was also considered, both in regards to how such kinds of information were used to validate the ostensible spirit contact and how the ostensible spirit contact was characterised and represented by the medium. Prior findings by Wooffitt (2000; 2001; 2006) of the organisational features of mediums and recipients in action were used as a reference for the discussion of some of the topics found within the information gathered in this study.

Information about the spirit world was analysed by firstly, addressing what representations of the spirit world mediums offered, and how this information was interactionally organised.

While analysis was primarily focused on the spoken features of these demonstrations, it also included, where appropriate, visual behaviours used by mediums when performing spirit communication. Consideration was also given as to whether or not these visual behaviours had been suggested and explained in prior speech.

3.4.2 Semi structured Interviews

“...Interviewing has a strong claim to being the most widely used research method.” (Fielding & Thomas, 2001: 123-124). As Kvale (1996) states “...if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk to them?” (Kvale, 1996: 1). The interview context provides a unique chance for the

researcher to delve into the experiences and meanings individuals have and make about their lives. Obviously, observational studies provide a rich, multifaceted context in which the researcher can witness occurrences as they happen, but observational studies are limited in regards to how informants can themselves influence what is interpreted of their lives, their performances and can not, on their own, provide data on people's thoughts and feelings.

Kvale (1996) has examined the role of the interviewer by likening their role to a miner or a traveller. As a miner "...the interviewer digs nuggets of data or meanings out of a subject's pure experiences, unpolluted by any leading questions." (Kvale, 1996: 3) and as a traveller "... [s/he] wanders through the landscape and enters into conversation with the people encountered... [s/he] explore the many domains... as unknown territory or with maps, roaming freely around the territory." (Kvale, 1996: 4). The metaphors of mining or travelling as types of interviewing reflect the ways in which an interviewer is searching for their information: by delving and digging, or by roaming and encountering.

The interview in social research is generally categorised according to its type, and there are three basic types of interview: standardised or structured; semi-standardised or semi-structured; and non-standardised or unstructured interviews (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). These different types of interview are effective for certain researcher goals, but can be problematic for others.

Standardised or structured interviews involve a set list of questions that are used in all interviews, and researchers often hold a piece of paper containing the interview schedule (Fielding & Thomas, 2001). While these are useful for survey research, they have obvious limitations on account of their inflexibility.

Semi-standardised or semi-structured interviews are similar to standardised and structured interviews in that they also include a list of set questions, although the researcher is able to negotiate the organisation of these questions during the interview. This style of interview is particularly useful for when unexpected information presents itself, and so the sequence of the interview can be adjusted in order to maximise the opportunity of new knowledge. It also allows the researcher a degree of flexibility in which they can react to the interview context when appropriate (Fielding & Thomas, 2001).

Non-standardised or un-structured interviews have an even greater degree of flexibility than the prior two kinds of interviews discussed above, and generally mean that the researcher has a list of topics that they wish to cover in the interview, but are able to phrase and sequence these topics in however means they wish during the course of the interview (Fielding & Thomas, 2001), and are regarded more as “guided conversations” (Lofland & Lofland, 1994, cited in Fielding & Thomas, 2001: 124).

While interviews are a valuable means of gaining information, they are nevertheless difficult to execute effectively. A number of variables need to be taken into consideration before, during and after the interview takes place. An interview is not simply about what data says, but is a particular speech event that is moulded by the asking and answering of questions (Mischler, 1986). It is a unique form of interaction, and subject to numerous influences, which researchers and participants may not actively be aware of. Therefore, as a particular kind of interactional event, a number of issues must be considered. Some of these considerations will be discussed later.

While the observational study of mediumship in action allows us to investigate the performative aspects of mediumship, its insight is limited as to what the medium chooses to represent of their own experiences. That is to say, what we can learn from observing mediumship in action is to witness the ways in which mediums construct from their experiences a presence of spirit for others. When observing mediums, it becomes apparent that there are a series of experiences that impact upon how the medium behaves during their demonstration. While the degree to which these experiences may be made available to the researcher is obviously limited, it nevertheless seemed important to consider what kinds of experiences mediums were having during their demonstrations. Although these experiences are largely unavailable to the audience also, and so may seem unnecessary if examining simply the demonstrative context of mediumship, these experiences nevertheless underlie the interaction. If we seek to understand interactions with the spirit world,

we must look at the root of mediumship demonstrations, which are the experiences that inform and influence the subsequent interactions. Mediums do not become mediums over night, and it is not merely a job or role they perform for specific occasions. Rather, mediumship is integral to their identity, and has a huge impact on who they are, their relationships, and how they make sense of the world around them.

One advantage of using interviews to understand mediumistic experiences is that there are already a few comprehensive studies that have sought to examine similarities between the lives of mediums and other psychic practitioners. Emmons & Emmons (2003) used interviews in their study of the lives and experiences of mediums in America², and McClenon (1994) has written about his extensive cross-cultural research that explored the lives of psychic practitioners in different societies, the methodology of which included the use of interviews. These studies have suggested that there may be significant similarities in the ways in which mediums (and other psychic practitioners) are socialised. However, while these studies are useful starting points, they do not address the ways in which mediums account for their experiences. They also do not contain information on British mediums.

Researchers from a DA perspective, however, have argued that the use of interviews can be limited in regards to their usefulness. Houtkoop-Stenstra (2000) has pointed out that researchers have often worked with limited understandings of

² Unfortunately, however, we do not have access to these dialogues in any great detail.

how conversation works, and failed to look at the influence of conversation as an interactional process that influences the kind of data generated. Her work is focused on that of survey researchers, but her argument has resonance for a variety of research involving interaction with informants. As Wooffitt (2005) points out ...

“interview interaction is more formal and constrained than everyday conversation. There may be a restricted range of activities undertaken by participants, and in many kinds of interview one participant sets the agenda.” (Wooffitt, 2005: 172).

Puchtao & Potter (2002) have argued that research involved in researching attitudes and opinions through the use of interviews may encourage results that conclude with an identification of an underlying attitude rather than an examination of how attitudes may be interactionally orientated to. This reflects a problem relevant to other kinds of research concerning what researchers identify as data, and the problems with a traditional neglect of consideration for the processes inherent in generating different kinds of data. Interviews are, in many respects, artificially created instances of conversation that are shaped by the agenda of the researcher, and so not the same as spontaneously occurring conversation in everyday life.

However, the benefits of using interviews are extremely significant, and an awareness of the procedural and interactional dynamics inherent in interviews may enable a more balanced understanding of the subject of study. Interviews are unique in their potential for enabling informants to respond to research questions posed to them, and therefore can enable informants to be involved in the process of research. A wealth of information can be obtained through such consultation that would not be achievable elsewhere. For example, it would be impossible for me to discover

how mediums account for their experiences if I did not engage with them in an interview conversation. Furthermore, even though conversation in interviews is markedly different for a number of reasons to conversation produced spontaneously, this should not undervalue its relevance as a unique occasion where informants can provide information about their own experiences and have an opportunity to interact with the researcher. Information gathered during interviews should not be considered as independent units of information, but as products produced by conscious agents in response to research questions. An awareness of the interactional sensitivity in which interviews occur will surely bolster the subsequent analysis.

3.4.2.1 Interview guide and data collection

Seventeen interviews were conducted for this study. Recipients were contacted in a number of ways: through emails obtained from public websites; through letters or emails addressed to Spiritualist churches or organisations (in some cases, these letters were posted on to notice boards, and mediums contacted me of their own accord); as notices on message boards belonging to online groups whose interests included mediumship; or through recommendation (in which case, a letter or email was sent explaining my research with details of how I could be contacted if the individual was interested in participating). The majority of letters and emails sent met with no response: out of 105 letters and emails, only 25 responses were

received. Of those 25, 8 later declined or did not respond after I tried to arrange an interview.

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the most appropriate forms of interview for this research project, as it allowed for flexibility within the interview context if significant information presented itself. It also strove to avoid a more rigid process of conversation that would hopefully allow for more spontaneous information to be given, and for the interviewee to, in places, guide the conversation.

Prior to conducting the interviews, a series of basic questions were prepared. This was used as the interview guide. The questions used in the interviews were: when did the medium have their first experience of spirit; how they became involved in Spiritualism; what reactions their friends and families had about their becoming a medium; how they felt about how Spiritualism and mediumship were viewed in the media and contemporary society; how they considered their role as a medium; what being in contact with a spirit world was like; what their spirit guides were like and how they received information from them; and what they thought the spirit world itself was like.

In all cases, the medium selected the venue. Basic information was collected: I didn't ask for information about occupation, etc. as the interviews were designed so that information about the medium would be self selected, and it was hoped that

they would discuss what they considered to be important aspects of their biography (for list of interviews, see appendix two).

Most interviews lasted approximately forty minutes. The majority of the interviews were conducted one on one, although in five cases other individuals were present. In cases where other individuals were present, this had been discussed and agreed prior to the interview. In two cases I was accompanied by a colleague who provided transportation, as the location for these interviews was: in one case, difficult to reach via public transport; and in the other the interview took place after a church service when it was late and public transport was not available. In the other three cases, the other individuals present were associated with the medium. In one case, I was interviewing a medium who had been contacted via a member of a paranormal interest group I had inquired with. This interview took place in her home, and, by her choice, he attended along with her housemate. In the two other instances the meetings were in a café and a public house, and the mediums' were accompanied by their partners.

Interviews began with a discussion of the research project, and gave the interviewees a chance to ask any questions they might have had. Anonymity and the right to withdraw their information at any time was discussed and assured. All interviewees were asked, prior to the beginning of the interview, if they consented to a taped recording of the interview, and all agreed. All recordings are stored safely

and securely and have not been shared with any other parties. All interviews were transcribed using a traditional format.

3.4.2.2 Analysis

Coffey & Atkinson (1995) have argued that "...Theories are not added only as a final gloss or justification; they are not thrown over the work as a final garnish. They are drawn on repeatedly as ideas are formulated, tried out, modified, rejected, or polished" (Coffey & Atkinson, 1995, cited in Mason, 2002: 179-180). Analysis of interview data was influenced by Glaser & Strauss' (1967) 'constant comparative method' which encourages researchers to analyse their data by drawing on it directly in order to formulate their theories. This was also thought to complement a discursive approach, which argues similarly that data must inform theory, and that researchers must work to understand how data is constructed, paying attention to the ways in which it is formulated and presented.

The interests of the analysis of my interview data were both to explore biographical details that mediums gave about themselves, and how, when asked, they reflected upon and tried to explain the experiences that they had had of the spirit world. Data was treated as sociologically real, but with an awareness and interest in the ways in which the information was structured and presented during the course of the interview. Obviously, this treatment is influenced by ethnomethodological (see Garfinkel, 1967, Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998) lines of inquiry that seek to illuminate

ways in which individuals seek to make meaning of their lives. The benefit of drawing on Glaser & Strauss' (1967) grounded theory was that data was used, as Mason (2002) has also suggested, in analysis throughout the research process, and its subsequent conclusions. In that way, analysis was informed, principally by the data of this particular research project, which meant that analysis could be grounded in real, observable findings. Due to the lack of literature on mediumship, it would have been impossible to engage in research that sought to test pre-established theories in a coherent and balanced way. I was also conscious of prior research difficulties that have inevitably made many mediums, and the Spiritualist community more generally, wary of researchers and academia.

Taking into consideration the three main analytical themes that have been established from the observational studies – medium identity, interaction with audience, representation of the spirit world – it was decided that, in order to retain a comparative approach, the development of interview questions would be focused broadly within this area. It was decided that the interviews would focus on medium identity and representation of the spirit world, as these seemed to be the areas that would benefit most from interview data. A series of questions was formed to explore these areas. Analysis of interview data was preliminarily divided, firstly, by exploring the details that mediums provided about their lives, and how they came to practise mediumship, and secondly, by the experiential and phenomenological explanations they offered for the kinds of experiences they have. While detail was obtained from their accounts, it was also possible to analyse the structure of their

accounts as data in itself, by looking at the active ways in which they account for the information they gave in an interview.

By using semi-structured interviews, the intended advantage was that mediums would be able to speak about themselves without having to adhere to a strict structure of interaction. Therefore, questions were chosen so that I could investigate the information needed for my particular research questions, but with enough flexibility for mediums to influence the active structure of the interview. However, choosing a semi-structured interview over an un-structured one meant that I could investigate specific topics with all of the mediums I interviewed, and therefore ideally find specific similarities and differences in the way that they chose to answer questions and the kinds of lives and experiences they reported.

After the interviews, I separated the transcripts into two basic sections of data: one relating to medium biography, and one relating to accounts of spirit contact and the phenomenology of spirit contact. These two sections formed the basis of my analytical interest. I firstly assembled a list of the main topics in each interview, for example, at what age mediums had their first spirit experience; when did they start to practise mediumship; what words do they use to describe spirit contact. The topics were then grouped together into categories: details of medium biography; key events linked to development of mediumship; reflection on medium role; phenomenological features of spirit contact; depictions of spirit world. A further list was assembled that looked at moments where mediums seemed to be employing

specific discursive techniques during interview. These were then listed again in conjunction with the information revealed, for example, using an ‘x... and then y’ (see Wooffitt, 1992) in accompaniment with a recollection about an early spirit experience. It was clear, by comparing the interviews, that there were several key topics, and several usages of significant discursive techniques, that a significant number of interviews had in common. It also became clear that there was a similar sequence of events in the life histories provided by mediums in their account. My analysis, therefore, focused on these key analytical themes, but also sought to address the underlying sequential flow of these accounts.

3.4.3 *Autobiographies*

Autobiographies written by mediums have become popular titles often included in the Mind, Body & Spirit section of most mainstream book stores, and celebrity mediums, such as Derek Acorah and John Edwards have had their autobiographies listed among lists of top ten selling paperbacks. They contain a great detail of information about the lives of mediums, and provide the medium with an opportunity to relay information about the spirit world, but also to explain how they came to practise mediumship.

For example, the medium, Derek Acorah (2004) writes:

“My first experience of spirit occurred one day just after Gran called Colin, Barbara and me down for our tea... On this particular day, as I reached the first landing of the staircase, I saw a man I didn’t recognize. ‘Hello, young tyke’, he said as he reached out towards me. It felt as though he ruffled my hair. I was afraid because I thought that there was a stranger in Gran’s house. Never had I reached the bottom of the stairs more quickly. I ran panting into the kitchen, shouting to Gran and my mother that there was a strange man in the house.

My grandmother and my mother hurried up the stairs, only to return a few moments later with bemused expressions on their faces. ‘Tell me what the man looked like’, Gran said. On hearing my description, she reached for a tin in which old family photographs were kept. She took out a photograph and showed it to me.

‘That’s him!’ I shouted. ‘That’s the man on the stairs!’

Gran looked at my mother and said ‘He’s the next! Derek will be the next person in the family to work for spirit.’” (Acorah, 2004: xi-xii)

This short extract gives a wealth of information which not only concerns the biographical details Acorah includes of his first experience of spirit. There are a number of significant features relevant to the ways in which he structures his account, such as how he positions himself at the time of this event, his initial mundane assumptions about what he had seen, and the reactions of his older female relatives. This extract will be discussed further in chapter seven.

It seems worth considering that the increase in numbers and availability of medium autobiographies is likely to be a response to the rise in interest in mediumship more generally. In a similar way that the interviews gave me more of an insight into the lives of the mediums I had been observing, autobiographies give the general public a chance to learn about the mediums they themselves have been observing.

Because of the wealth of information that autobiographies contain, it seems important to include them as sources of data in this study. Autobiographies provide opportunities for mediums to write about their lives and their experiences personally, and so, for a researcher interested in mediumship, these texts provide similar kinds of information accessed in the interviews. Also, because the structures of autobiographies are designed by the medium, they can be analysed as textual accounts constructed to, ideally, achieve specific responses.

There are, now, several autobiographies of mediums available for purchase from mainstream bookstores and online sellers. This means that autobiographies of this kind presented an easily accessible source of data.

3.4.3.1 Analysis

Autobiographies of mediums are intended as a supplement to the observational and interview studies. Passages from these autobiographies were selected and analysed

after having been found to illustrate specific analytical topics. Prior findings were drawn on to see if similar themes existed in these texts. Ten autobiographies were chosen, nine which were chosen randomly from mainstream bookstores, and one that was recommended by an interview participant. Five autobiographies were used for the analysis chapter, as these provided suitable extracts that were representative of the collection (for a list of books used, see appendix three).

While there are several medium biographies, often authored by family members of close associates, it was decided to focus on mediums own autobiographies, to compliment the interest in how mediums themselves make sense of and account for their experiences. It is, of course, likely that many medium autobiographies are written by ghost writers. This is an important factor to consider, as the product of a ghost writer is likely to be different from that written directly by the medium.

However, ghost written biographies will involve direct participation of the medium him/herself, who will ultimately decide on and provide content, so many of the issues I will be examining in my analysis are also relevant. It is important to consider these texts as appearing as autobiographies to their readership, and that the medium is ultimately in control of how and what is published as their story. While medium biographies undoubtedly contained a good deal of information that would be relevant to this subject, it was thought that, due to issues connected to the way others attempt to represent mediums, such an analysis would be beyond the scope of this project.

The former two data sets – observational studies and interviews – had already provided a range of analytical issues, and the autobiographies were considered in light of these findings to see how information compared. Three lists were drawn up: medium identity; recollections of interactions with audience; representations of spirit contacts and the spirit world. Firstly, a synopsis of each autobiography was drawn up after it had been read, which recorded the basic structure of the book. Secondly, information noted during the reading of the autobiographies was compiled into the corresponding three lists. Topics found that had also been previously raised in analysis of the former two data sets were highlighted. There was a significant number of topics that corresponded over the three data sets, so it was decided that these would form the focus of analysis. Also, topics that appeared in a number of the autobiographies were also considered for analysis.

Content analysis influenced by DA and grounded theory was used to examine the autobiographies. A marked difference between the use of autobiographies as data compared to observational studies and interviews, is that autobiographies are textual sources. While the prior two data sets focused primarily on speech, analysis of the autobiographies was sensitive to the fact that the formulation of these sources is markedly different. The information provided has been edited by the medium author over time, and so it was important to consider the effects of such editing in regards to how the information in the books was presented. The relevance of editing over time is that mediums are able to actively reconsider and reconstruct how they represent themselves, and, because they are using text, are likely to involve some

significantly different techniques. The absence of an actual, interactive audience is also significant, and will influence the kinds of information produced and presented. The context of the book is important, as mediums' content must be structured according to its conventions (for example, in appropriate chapters). Also, autobiographies are motivated by a slightly different concern: to sell, so it is important that the information is presented in an interesting and accessible way, which will influence how that information is tailored to meet such incentives. However, the inclusion of autobiographies was considered appropriate, and as a useful data set that could be compared and contrasted with the observational studies and interviews. The basic objective of the medium is similar: to support the existence of post-mortem survival, and to give access to the personal dimensions of mediumship. Autobiographies are a significant platform in which mediums try and explain their beliefs and experiences to outsiders. The analysis applied for this data set was sensitive to its difference to the prior two data sets used, and so analysed the data with a focus on how mediums present information about themselves and their experiences in a textual context. It should also be noted that DA and grounded theory have not been restricted to speech data, but have also been used in the examination of textual sources.

3.5 Epistemological considerations

This study involves three main data sources, and has selected analytical methods deemed appropriate both to examine the information given and the ways in which that information is constructed and performed. While these data sources have been investigated using different research methods – i.e. observation, interview and the study of texts – they nevertheless parallel each other with the purpose of revealing information about how mediums’ present their identity, how they interact with an audience (be it a live audience at a demonstration, an interviewer, or anticipated readership) and how they present information and embody their spirit contacts. All three sources also contain a wealth of information about the spirit world which has been largely neglected in other studies of Spiritualism and mediumship.

Before starting this research project, I considered Mason’s (2002) question regarding to the choice of epistemological stance: “What might represent knowledge or evidence of the entities, or social ‘reality’ that I wish to investigate?” (Mason, 2002: 205). After deciding that my interests lay within how the spirit world was constructed by mediums through their demonstrations, how mediums present their own identities, and how they interact with their audience, it became apparent that there were other factors relevant to this topic that went beyond focusing purely on demonstrations in action. Mediums are claiming to have actual experiences of the spirit world during demonstrations, and yet access to these experiences is limited by focusing on the product (i.e. the talk used) of such demonstrations. The

lack of literature and prior research into mediumistic experience emphasised a need to look into these experiences more closely.

So, going back to Mason's (2002) question of choosing the relevant epistemology, it was decided to try and investigate how the spirit world is both embodied and experienced by mediums. In practise these two areas are entwined with each other, so it seemed valid to look at both. Also, the ways in which mediums present their own identities, and how they interact with their audience, is also entwined with the orientation toward spirit contacts, so the relevance of this also needs to be addressed and examined. However, investigating these different areas, which produce different kinds of data, and involve different degrees of participation and influence from the researcher, require different methodological approaches. Also, due to the analytical interests of this study and an awareness that the data gathered would be in different research situations, different degrees of methodological focus would be needed that would reflect and accommodate for these differences.

The epistemological stance taken in this project was influenced by approaches that encourage researchers to both reflect on how the data comes to be collected and analysed, but also scrutinise data in guiding their analysis. It is also in line with recent developments in both anthropology and sociology that have re-examined the ways in which spirituality and spiritual experiences have been discussed and represented in literature, and what consequences that has had for our understanding of these experiences and the people who claim to have them. So, rather than

deducing practises such as mediumship as simply symbolic or pathological, it examines them as meaningful and valid occurrences that are real to the people connected to them. Taking this stance and my research objectives into consideration, DA and grounded theory were selected as the means of analysing the data.

3.5.1 Discourse Analysis and Grounded Theory

A significant similarity of both Discourse Analysis and grounded theory is that both approaches arose amid an atmosphere of methodological critique. Key figures involved in the development of these areas noted inherent flaws within existing approaches that often neglected a consideration of not only how data is involved (or lacks involvement) in the creation of sociological theory, but also how researchers come to make specific conclusions about the data they have collected. This parallels with the development of other approaches into (for example) extraordinary experiences which have noted a bias for reductionist explanations and the influence of researcher predispositions (e.g. Young & Goulet (eds) 1994). DA and grounded theory as methodological approaches compliment a research objective that seeks to reassess these often neglected areas of participant involvements and accounts by not only taking extraordinary experiences seriously as valuable data, but as approaches that seem well designed to investigate how such experiences are used in social ritual and recollected in private accounts. One of the key research areas that led to the formation of DA concerned the relationship between science and society.

Traditionally, social scientists had believed that scientific knowledge provided ...“a more or less accurate reflection of objective universal truths, and therefore, ...[was] unaffected by culture, context, the personalities or motivations of the scientists and so on.” (Wooffitt, 2005: 14). This traditional expectation of scientific objectivity is also found in a number of other disciplines, and had been influential in the formation of reductionist theories concerning extraordinary experiences discussed earlier. Considering the role of scientific knowledge in society, Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) found that the production of scientific discourse is sensitive to a number of interactive influences, and that ‘culture, context, the personalities or motivations of the scientists and so on’ actually played a highly significant role in how scientific truths were produced and orientated to in research. For example, they observed that there were significant discrepancies between accounts that were ostensibly looking at the same subject. This critique was found to be relevant to a number of subjects that involved the use of interviews or other discursive sources as data, and DA became applicable for a variety of different kinds of discourse. Rather than identify these sources as discrete units of information, or a means of access into universal truths, they argued that their *production* should be as of as much concern as their conclusions. DA did not have a hugely significant impact upon sociology more generally, although it has been more successful in social psychology. However, the work of Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) raises a number of important concerns that should not be ignored, and bears striking similarities to the objectives of other researchers who have sought to overcome areas of research traditionally neglected.

The development of grounded theory was focused on a critique of sociological theory and its relationship (or lack of) with actual data. This was motivated by a view to reassess the role methodology played in the collection and generation of data and analysis. It was not actively interested in examining the kinds of interactive processes of interest to DA, and its interests go beyond the scope of DA's use of discourse. Rather, it sought to produce a methodology in itself that could improve research. Data is often treated more neutrally, and accepted more at face value than in DA, for example, it is not how scientific knowledge comes to be produced, but the features of it, that are important to grounded theorists. Glaser & Strauss (1967) argued that researchers should involve a constant comparative method along with an explicit coding procedure that is used to generate systematic data. This was particularly relevant to fieldwork. Through the process of constant comparison, analytical categories can be recontextualised into more defined categories, and through this process the researcher is able to further define subcategories. This ideally presents a more grounded and detailed understanding of the data, and highlights relationships between particular categories, and their internal structures. The importance of comparing and contrasting data was thought to be particularly important for this study. As it selected three distinct data sets, there were problems inherent in their compatibility. Each addressed a specific area associated with the mediumship, and so involved different styles of interaction: mediumship in action, individual accounts, and autobiographical texts. However, these data sets were selected because of their significance as subjects closely associated to mediumship, and it was thought that by looking at these three different

areas a more holistic understanding regarding some of the sociological dynamics of mediumship may be achieved. To compliment this, information from different data sets were used in the analysis of one particular data set when relevant, to demonstrate how analysis was maintained as constantly comparative. Furthermore, the data sets are united in the purpose of their production: to explain mediumship to outsiders. By comparing and contrasting the information gathered, I was able to examine what processes of production were common or rare in different areas. The use of the influence of DA helped to tune this comparison of data sets by looking at the mechanisms of production of discourse, and how they were connected to the content produced. Because the content of the information collected was important, and did extend beyond the purely discursive focus of DA, it was felt that a grounded theory approach would compliment one influenced by DA, as the research focus would examine both the process and the content of the data.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Any kind of research requires a consideration of the ethical dimensions inherent in its decisions and processes. As researchers, we are examining the lives of others by collecting information from them but, ultimately, it is the researcher who decides how they will represent that information and construct what they consider to be the reality of what they have discovered. There are several problems with this process, and these problems have, rightly, sparked heated debates over how researchers get what they want, and what they subsequently do with it. An awareness of the ways in

which information is gathered, informants are approached and treated, analysis conducted and findings recorded and presented needs to be addressed at every stage. This section will address these concerns before illustrating how ethics have been considered during this research, drawing on personal experiences that have presented particular dilemmas. As has been discussed previously, the ways in which mediums have structured accounts of their experiences and how they perform their demonstrations has been played an important role in the analysis of data collected for this project. It therefore seems appropriate to address issues connected with the process of this data collection that draw on how the information came to be collected, and what role I, as the researcher, played in this collection.

An obvious ethical dilemma is that the researcher looks at others' lives, and yet it is the researcher who ultimately speaks for them. Some researchers have tried to address this dilemma by recording themselves within the products of their research (see Tedlock, 1991). While a professional distance – often leading to the omission of the researcher from what they ultimately produce from their research - has often been encouraged when producing products of research (Tedlock, 1991), this can create problems in regards to how informants are represented. It can also create problems when considering how conclusions are formulated and information is treated. This has been discussed at length within ethnographic settings, but it has also found expression within ethnomethodological and feminist methodologies that similarly suggest we should pay attention to the research as a whole process, not just the data.

The need to assign anonymity to research participants is important in order to respect a participant's privacy, and is especially relevant when sensitive and personal information is given during the research process. While several of the observational studies were performed covertly, anonymity was given to the mediums performing as well as the recipients involved in recorded interactions, except in the case of public demonstrations, when the mediums were named. It was considered that, due to the fact that these mediums advertise regularly and are charging for their demonstration, that they are public figures, and so information could be included about them. In the case where information was collected from demonstrations but anonymity given to those involved, it was hoped that by ascribing anonymity, those involved in these demonstrations would be suitably protected. It is also worth noting that these demonstrations are public, and, ostensibly, anyone is welcome to attend.

In order to address other ethical concerns, I will now reflect upon the experiences of interviewing mediums, and how I have addressed relevant concerns throughout the research process.

3.6 Reflexivity in researching mediums

The experience of research is unpredictable. It is impossible to predict how, for example, an interview will unfold: what will the interviewee's response to the interviewer and the questions be, what if a question causes offence, how will the setting affect the interview, etc. Situations can arise that may be unexpected, and require, in some cases, a degree of reflexivity in which to address and accommodate for these issues.

Literature on reflexivity and ethnographic research has been repeatedly reassessed and debated, and has been influential in my own preparation and reflection on the research experience. While the methodological approach adopted for this project has not included ethnography in its strictest sense, nevertheless, this particular field has raised a number of important questions that should be taken into account for research of this kind.

In ethnographic, face to face research, aspects of the researcher's identity are impossible to hide. This is obviously a key concern when the researcher is co-habiting with a community for a prolonged period of time. But even in brief encounters with research participants, such as those in interviews, there are certain aspects of self that are on display. For example, while it may be possible to hide or at least play down certain aspects of self identity, there are nevertheless visual and perhaps vocal cues that reveal certain things about the researcher which can not be

disguised or hidden (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). With respect to my experiences on this project, It would have been impossible for me to disguise the fact that I am a twenty something, white female. Participants knew beforehand that I would be a female (from my name), and I had made it clear from my advertisements that I was a PhD student at the University of York, studying mediumship. It was inevitable that, to some degree, these factors would influence the experience of research, and therefore the data collected. However, it was important to include such information when approaching mediums, in order to maintain an honest credential of who I was and why I wanted to interview them, and its inevitable that this would be influential. This meant that certain aspects of my research could not be predetermined; conversations would occur in the moment, as would the relationships and dynamic between myself as the researcher and the mediums I interviewed, as would what, ultimately, was revealed to me during the course of the interview. The consequences of these influences were unexpected, and there were some surprising moments that arose during certain interviews. Some of these consequences were apparent during the interviews themselves, although others became more apparent upon reflection and when the taped interviews were played back. To illustrate, I shall draw upon two main points concerning my own experience of my research. I have decided to discuss these points because they seem important not just to delivering an honest account of the research experience itself, but to note that they have, to some degree, inevitably shaped my understanding of the Spiritualist mediums I have been studying. The two main points relating to the interview experience concern the ways in which the mediums I interviewed seemed

to interpret my character and motivation: these, briefly speaking, relate to some of the mediums inferences that I was on a spiritual journey and the creation of a teacher/pupil power dynamic during the interview.

As Michael Brown, who studied New Age channellers in the United States explains:

“...When I began this research, academic colleagues frequently asked, “why are you studying this”? Many found my interest in channels baffling and in subtle ways contaminating; like others who have studied controversial groups, I was suspected of having gone native. In contrast, channels themselves viewed the project as a stage in my own spiritual growth. A few conjectured that I would follow the lead of other rogue academics who found Western science too restrictive and eventually abandon university positions for new careers as freelance writers, lecturers, or gurus.” (Brown, 1997:x-xi)

During the interviews, a few mediums suggested that, unbeknownst to me, I was involved on my own spiritual journey. They suggested that this was the reason behind my interest in Spiritualism, and while I may consider the subject within the confines of academia at present, I would later come to regard it differently, and on a more personal level. This idea was not pitched as a suggestion so much, rather as something the medium believed would come to pass. For example:

“Because you’re doing this, to you at first it might seem only as something regarding your university work, but that interest always stays with you, and when that time comes as your life becomes a little bit more on an even edge, you’ll find that things will start coming back into your mind.”

In a sense, it seemed as though the medium was trying to bridge the gap between their self and my self with a suggestion that we were on similar paths. My search for knowledge about Spiritualism and mediumship did not, perhaps, seem so different to their own search for spiritual knowledge. There were obvious similarities in what both of us wanted to know; I wanted to know about what the spirit world was like, which was what the mediums themselves were constantly engaged in understanding. Understanding the spirit world is an important goal for mediums, for they must first *understand* the spirit world before they can offer proof of it to others. It is the process of understanding the spirit world, and their place within the network between the living and the dead, that is prominent in their development as mediums. They are shaped by their experiences, but simultaneously seek to understand the meaning of these experiences. The development of mediumship is also a journey of understanding of what lies at the root, or what causes their experiences. Because mediumship is not confined to personal experiences, but is drawn into public educational spheres through demonstrations, mediums are positioned both as students and teachers. They learn about the spirit

world throughout their life, whilst they strive to translate it for others. Likewise, I found myself to be positioned in a similar dualism that could be compared with that of mediums; my role as a researcher was to learn about what the spirit world meant for Spiritualist mediums whilst, ultimately, my challenge was to translate my research for the audience of my work. These interpretations of my actions were difficult, in that it didn't seem an accurate portrayal of my intentions, however, I wanted to respect their right to make such inferences. The way I choose to combat this was by maintaining an honest stance about my interests, and why I was currently engaged in this study.

During the interview, an interesting power dynamic arose that seemed to position the medium as a teacher and myself as a pupil. This power dynamic was undoubtedly encouraged by two main points; my self (i.e. my age, gender) and the style of my questions. Firstly, I was, on average, significantly younger than the mediums I interviewed. It seems worth suggesting that perhaps my age and gender helped to establish me in a less threatening light. This was perhaps also encouraged by the familiarity of the interview setting for the mediums; I was invited into *their* space, or at least – in the example of cafes – it was predominantly not a space that was mine, such as my office or somewhere in the university that was foreign to them but familiar to me. During the interviews, the mediums did not appear to regard me with overt suspicion. Obviously, this is a tenuous claim, as are, arguably, all of my suggestions here due to the fact that I have no access to their thoughts but can only guess or at least draw attention to my own interpretations. It should be

remembered that the study of mediumship has had a long and often problematic legacy for Spiritualism. Many mediums have found themselves represented as fraudulent, and the longevity of this has tainted the respectability and trustworthiness of researchers. Mediums, obviously, are at risk from ill treatment due to the controversial claims that they make. While mediumship may arguably have a stronger positive presence within the media now, it is nevertheless still a controversial subject and can stir intense rebukes. Some of the mediums I spoke to had had negative experiences with seemingly well disposed researchers in the past, which had made them, understandably, suspicious of individuals involved in research. Typically, the interviews would start with a discussion of my research, and the majority of mediums wanted to know *why* I had decided to study mediumship. I felt that this inquiry was crucial both to establishing a suitable environment and relationship in which to conduct the interview, as well as addressing my ethical desires to treat the mediums with respect and authority. I had decided, prior to the interviews, that I would be honest about my interests and my own opinions if asked about them; that is that I have distanced family members who are involved in Spiritualism, although I myself am not (and never have been) a Spiritualist and am undecided as to whether or not I believe in the possible existence of spirits. My involvement in such a research subject is simply because I find it an interesting subject. It seemed important that, wherever possible, my informants were able to know as much about my research and its motivations as possible. I wanted to treat them as individuals I respected – which I did – and to

allow them to have as powerful a position as possible during the course of the interview.

The nature of my questioning was structured so as to discover what the spirit world was like from the mediums' point of view. By asking questions such as "what is it like to be in contact with spirit" and "what is the spirit world like", the medium is positioned as the source of knowledge. Because this project is not concerned with assessing the validity of the medium's claims, the questions were designed in mind to access accounts as true to the medium's opinions and ideas as possible. That a teacher/pupil power dynamic arose was perhaps inevitable when the style of questioning may have positioned the mediums as figures of knowledge, and my self as a seeker of such knowledge.

Four mediums made reference to a spirit connected to me who had become present during the interview. In one case, this resulted in a prolonged dialogue in which the medium explained that my grandmother had come into the room, and had messages to pass on to me. This was unexpected. I decided to respond to his questions honestly, and respectfully. Again, this creates an interesting power dynamic, for I had been drawn out of the research environment and into one in which the medium ultimately creates and is in control of. I experienced a degree of vulnerability where reference to a deceased family member is made, therefore orientating to a more personal aspect of self that I had not intended to reveal. It is similar to the dynamic of teacher/pupil in that the medium is trying to position me as the recipient of

spiritual information. It is possible that this kind of interaction was an attempt by the medium to assert their authenticity as a medium, but it provided me with first hand experience of medium-sitter interaction.

Due to the unexpectedness of these issues that occurred during the interview, it was impossible to plan for or attempt to accommodate them. However, the research experiences raised a set of methodological considerations that I will reflect on further in chapter eight to consider how these could be influential in future research projects.

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has addressed how observational studies, interviews and medium autobiographies have been used to investigate how the spirit world is experienced and embodied by British Spiritualist mediums. It is hoped that suitable data sources and means of analysis have been selected by which to study this subject in an intensive and ethical manner. I have discussed the epistemological advantages for using these different data sources, and argued why specific kinds of analysis have been used in order to best address the research questions of this project. Different data sources have been selected, not just because it was thought that they would be beneficial to the research questions, but because two of them reflect the main outlets of mediumship performance in contemporary society, while the other gave me a unique access to engage in a dialogue with practising mediums. Further, I

have discussed how ethical consideration was given to those involved in this project, and made reference to some of the research experiences had during the interviews that I feel provide a setting for the following four chapters, which will now explore the results of this study.

Chapter Four

Issues in the presentations of mediumship: A case study

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce and discuss some of the features related to the demonstration of mediumship. By comparing and contrasting different mediumship demonstrations, in both religious and secular settings, I hope to highlight some of the ways in which mediums are able to represent and construct the presence of spirit contacts. Due to the largely inaccessible nature of spirit beings by non-mediums, it is essential that the medium be able to orientate to suitable authentic seeming spirit contacts in order for their demonstration to be taken seriously. Before such comparative work can take place, it seems useful to begin this exploration by firstly using a case study. This will enable a discussion of some of the key themes involved with mediumship demonstration that can later be compared and contrasted. This chapter will therefore look at a series of mediumship demonstrations (staged in secular environments associated with consumerist entertainment¹) from one particular medium: Stephen Holbrook. Holbrook was chosen as he is a popular touring medium who regularly appears in York, and so attending his demonstrations was easier due to their close proximity.

¹ For example, multi purpose places that will host a variety of different events, such as hotel conferences rooms, village/town halls, theatres, etc.

The demonstrations exhibited by Holbrook are done so largely outside of a Spiritualist context (they take place in secular settings and do not overly orientate toward Spiritualist philosophy), and audience members must pay in order to attend these sessions. Such demonstrations represent a popular means of mediumship consumption which are interesting for several reasons: such demonstrations are, arguably, one of the most (currently) popular means of consumption of spirit communication²; they are largely devoid of religious connotations, though can be enmeshed within a broader and more individually centred spiritual framework; consumption is usually focused on one particular medium who can amass popularity based on the perceived efficiency of their performance³; and such demonstrations are related to spirit communication as entertainment as well as a meaningful and cathartic therapeutic encounter.

How individuals manage themselves in social settings where they are the central figure of focus for a significantly sized audience has been studied by a number of researchers interested in the study of discourse. Areas of research have included political speeches (Atkinson, 1984a, 1984b; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1986), and the sales routines of market traders (Clark and Pinch, 1986, 1988; Pinch and Clark, 1986). While these are obviously more mundane examples, they show that such forms of interaction can and should be studied as interactive events where individuals may employ a range of implicit techniques in order to generate a desired outcome. It further emphasises that what people say should not be considered

² Along with private one-to-one sittings or parties.

³ i.e. popularity of an individual medium may be connected to consumer's favourable response via recommendation, or their exposure through media representations.

purely as discrete units of information, but within the context of the procedures by which they are actively formulated.

This chapter will firstly explain how the data for this chapter was collected before detailing a typical Holbrook demonstration. It will then focus on three main analytic subjects: how the medium constructs their own identity, how he interacts with his audience, and how he constructs spirit identities and orientates to the presence of the spirit world.

4.1.1 Data collection

Three observational studies were conducted at three of Holbrook's performances: The venues (for a list, see appendix one) are typical of the range of places Holbrook generally chooses for his demonstrations – i.e. hotel function rooms and community centres – and are further typical of locations for similar kinds of demonstrations by other touring mediums.

A few notes were written during the interval, but detailed field notes were written up directly after the event. It was considered to have been inappropriate to have attempted to write notes during the event itself, as I was sat in an audience, members of which may have been uncomfortable with such activity. Also, paying too much attention on writing field notes may have meant that I missed important details of the demonstration itself, and therefore had a fragmented experience of it.

On each occasion, I took a seat towards the back and to one side of the venue, as this was that was thought to provide the best observational position. Unfortunately, for ethical reasons, I was not able to gain any recordings of the demonstrations I attended, so have had to rely on my field notes.

4.2 Stephen Holbrook

Stephen Holbrook is a medium from Yorkshire who was previously (and apparently until recently) employed as a hairdresser. Holbrook states that his first experience of spirit was during his childhood, when he was woken in the night to find an apparition of his grandfather stood at the end of his bed. This was later confirmed as a visitation from spirit by a telephone call revealing that his grandfather had died during the night. It was not, however, until early adulthood that Holbrook began to practise mediumship, and therefore find significance to this encounter, and his early experiences are recounted as a source of discomfort. Following a covert recommendation by a doctor that he visit a local Spiritualist church, Holbrook subsequently found a legitimating context for his abilities and so began to develop as a medium. Often billed as one of Great Britain's "most accurate mediums", his demonstrations now charge around £13 per ticket⁴, and are generally well attended. Judging from responses to a question regarding prior attendance as observed during his demonstration, I would estimate that just under half of the audience are likely to have been to one of Holbrook's demonstrations (or have visited another medium) before.

⁴ In 2004, tickets were around £10, so have risen by £3 in the last 3-4 years.

Holbrook has a website⁵ that is regularly updated with information concerning his public appearances, access to associated merchandise (such as books), as well as information about his life and a brief summary of what to expect during a demonstration. He spends most of the year touring extensively around Great Britain⁶, and has had the occasional international date. Recently, he has been included in a cruise holiday deal, whereby his mediumship is included as the entertainment in an otherwise standard cruise trip, giving clientele the chance for access to public and more intimate (i.e. one-on-one) demonstrations of mediumship.

Holbrook has been the subject of three biographies authored by an associate who regularly introduces Holbrook at his demonstrations (Christie, 2000; 2002; 2006). Another recently published book, *One Moment in Time*, has been written by a colleague whose deceased daughter ostensibly delivered messages to her and her husband⁷ via Holbrook (Prior, 2006).

The vast number of demonstrations that Holbrook hosts, along with his involvement in several other media avenues, show that he is a prime example of a popular contemporary medium. There are not many other mediums likely to have gained such lucrative success via mediumship demonstration, and most of those are involved (or have been involved) in television programmes. Involvement in television is something Holbrook claims to have resisted. His popularity seems

⁵ <http://www.steveholbrook.co.uk>

⁶ For example, in February-March 2008 alone, he lists 39 dates for venues around the country.

⁷ Both of whom work for Holbrook.

based on local and website based advertising, and word of mouth, which suggest that, even without television connections, mediums are still able to command significant audiences.

4.2.1 A typical Holbrook demonstration (The Moat House Hotel, York, 7th March, 2004)

This event took place in a medium sized conference room in a city centre hotel. Seating was arranged in rows with an aisle in the middle; tickets were collected at the door, alongside which was a table containing a raffle for a local hospice. Approximately 60 people were present in the audience, most of whom were women, although a significant number of men were present. Individuals attended mainly in couples, or small groups. While there were several small groups of women among the audience members, all of the men seem to have attended with women, and there did not appear to be any all male groups. A large percentage of audience members seemed to be in the 25-35 or 50+ age range.

Holbrook's performance was structured around three main areas: introductory remarks (which lasted, on average, around fifteen minutes), spirit messages (two slots which were separated by a twenty minute interval), and closing remarks (which lasted around five minutes). I will take each of these in turn.

4.2.2.1 Introductory remarks

After a brief introduction from James Christie (Holbrook's biographer and associate), during which Holbrook was already present on stage, Holbrook began the evening with an introduction. After welcoming the audience, he asked if there were any members of the audience who had not been to see a medium before. Approximately half of the audience raised their hands.

Holbrook then estimated that the majority of his audience would hold at least some kind of religious belief, which was most likely to be Christianity based. He characterised the degree of such religious commitment by suggesting that such audience members would 'go to weddings, christenings, funerals, etc', although their actual religious observance was likely to be weak. Holbrook then stated that, according to a lot of Christians, he has been considered as 'in league with the devil'. He dismissed this as a 'ridiculous' suggestion.

Holbrook described the key differences between orthodox Christianity and the Spiritualist religion, emphasising that the former relies on blind faith, whereas the latter seeks to offer proof of its key teachings. This meant that in times of bereavement Spiritualism has an advantage: whereas Christianity can only claim that there is continued life beyond bodily death, Spiritualism can, via demonstration of spirit contact, offer proof. He acknowledged that Spiritualism is, however, a

religion, motioning to the presence of Spiritualist churches around the country, activity of which also includes weddings and funerals.

Holbrook then described his earlier life, and personality. Claiming that, while he left school with little in the way of formal qualifications, he graduated with a 'degree in sensitivity'. He illustrated this point by revealing that that he used to cry at sentimental films (and televisions programmes) such as *Bambi* and *Little House on the Prairie*, a trait he said he thought he would grow out of. He claimed that his sensitivity is connected to his abilities as a medium: 'I am sensitive because I am a medium, and I am a medium because I am sensitive'. Holbrook emphasised, however, that in many respects he is not different from the rest of the audience, in that he smokes, drinks, has worked in a full-time day job (as a hairdresser), and is married with children.

Holbrook then described a feature of his mediumship by warning that his left hand becomes crooked and discoloured during the demonstration, which is caused by his connection to one of his spirit guides, who, in life, had had a deformed hand.

He then offered a humorous caricature of individuals who attend his demonstrations, stating that there are typically three types of people:

'A - gentlemen sat with their arms folded, thinking 'give me a message if you dare'.

B - ladies sitting there thinking 'if he speaks to me, I'll just die!'

C - individuals thinking 'come on mum!'

Holbrook explained that he would start by giving a specific piece of information (usually a date, or reference to someone who had died at a specific time), and if that meant something to someone, they were to put one of their hands into the air. He stressed that he only wanted to hear two words from his recipients - yes or no - because he wanted to limit the possibility that recipients would inadvertently disclose too much information. However, he stressed that he needed to hear 'yes' or 'no' so that he could maintain the connection with the spirit world. He warned that if recipients did not say 'yes' or 'no' to relevant information quickly enough, the connection with the spirit world would be lost, and the spirit of their loved one would 'go to the back of the queue'. This would mean that audience members might lose the chance of receiving a spirit message. He then acknowledged that many of their loved ones were there waiting already.

Holbrook then explained some aspects of the mechanics of his relationship with the spirits. He stated that he heard information from the spirit world, but that he had no visual contact: he was unable to see 'little lights dangling above your head', a feature he stated was often claimed by mediums who work in spiritualist churches. The auditory nature of his contact with spirits was cited as the reason why he

requested that audience members raise their hands if he provided information which was relevant to them

He stated that he understood that people were likely to get upset, and that they should not be alarmed if he turned away, which he does because seeing people become emotional can cause him to do so also. He then stated that he realised that faces can give a lot away and he did not want to read into people's expressions.

Holbrook explained that time has no meaning for the spirit world, and so, if someone had 'lost their mother 20 years ago', she could be there, just as likely as someone who had passed over into spirit that week: 'we are governed by time down here, but it is not the same for the spirit world'.

The transition from prefatory remarks to the delivery of messages from the spirits was marked in several ways. Holbrook took a series of deep breaths, and turned his gaze to the floor, before offering his first piece of information for a potential recipient.

4.2.2.2 Illustrative message sequences

In this section I have selected three of the message sequences from the demonstration. These are typical messages in terms of content, audience response and delivery structure.

(i)

Holbrook started his delivery of messages with 'someone's husband who passed over, January, February of this year'. After some seconds, a woman raised her hand. Holbrook then asked when her husband died, to which she replied 'in March'. Holbrook then commented, in a humorous tone 'January, February, March' as if to imply that he was practically correct. He then asked the recipient if her husband passed suddenly, to which she replied 'yes'. He then referred to her need for healing, saying 'you've been feeling washed out, yes?' to which she replied 'yes.' Holbrook then stated that that her husband was involved in her healing: he asked 'do you feel that tingling sensation on your arms?' and then claimed that this sensation was caused by her husband. He went on to say that her husband had felt her kiss him on the lips after he'd died. Holbrook then asked the identity of who the person sitting next to her was, and she revealed that it was her daughter. He asked about 'someone called John?' and a man sat next to the daughter answered that it was his father. Holbrook then asks what relations that is to the daughter, to which she replied that 'John is my father-in-law'. Holbrook then stated to the recipient's daughter that her father-in-law is present also, and that he has met her father in the spirit world. Holbrook then motioned back toward the first recipient, stating that her husband had heard her talking about certain things, which showed that 'he's still with you'. Holbrook then asked her a question which did not make sense to her. This was

taken by Holbrook as the cue to move on to a new message: he said 'thank you, God bless you' and moved on to the next message sequence and a new recipient.

(ii)

Holbrook stated a date, the 23rd of February, and asked 'why is this date significant?' Two people raised their hands. He turned to a woman in the left side of the audience. It was established that the woman's mother died on this date. Holbrook reports that 'She says "I bet you never thought you'd hear me through a medium."' The participant seems to have laughed a little at this remark. Holbrook went on to state that he understood that the recipient was very distressed when she died, and that she had secretly prayed for her suffering to end. He claimed that the spirit thanked her for that. He stated that she (the mother) was not in any pain anymore. He mentioned a baby which had been a miscarriage, and asked if the recipient's mother had had a miscarriage, to which the recipient replied with 'yes'. He stated that the spirit of her mother had brought the baby with her. Holbrook then asked 'who's Pat?' to which the recipient replied that she is her sister. He asked if she is in the spirit world, which is also confirmed by the recipient. Holbrook then reported that 'Pat is quite a gobby one; says you'd probably have expected her to do all the talking, but she wanted to let your mother talk to you. They are together in the spirit world'. He then referred to a tingling on the recipient's cheek, which he claimed to be caused by the spirit of her mother. By this stage the recipient was distressed and crying. Holbrook asked her to relax, telling her that 'it's okay', and not to get upset. He assured her that her mother and sister are with her. He

concluded this sequence by saying that the recipient has been having strange experiences, on the basis of which she has thought that she may be psychic. The sequence was terminated with 'thank you, God bless you.'

(iii)

Holbrook stated that he 'has' (that is, is in contact with the spirit of) someone who had committed suicide. One individual raised her hand, and when asked what her relation was to this spirit was, she revealed it was her brother, who had committed suicide recently. Holbrook reported that her brother said that the suicide was a mistake, and that if 'he had known', he would not have done it. He (the spirit) stressed that there was nothing that they could have done to prevent it, so not to blame themselves. Holbrook went on to mention something about a £1000, stating that the spirit had heard her talking about it. He also mentioned 'something about' slippers.

This was obviously quite a traumatic experience for the recipient: she was crying and her sobs could be heard quite clearly. Holbrook asked her to relax on numerous occasions. Throughout this message sequence, Holbrook was less humorous and jovial. Holbrook then stated that the tingling she could feel down her arms was her brother's spirit. The sequence ended with a phrase similar to those used to terminate other sequences described in this section.

4.2.2.3 Closing activities

Over the course of the evening Holbrook engaged in 10 message sequences. After the last message had been delivered, Holbrook offered some brief closing remarks: he thanked the audience for attending, stated that it was clear that people's loved ones enjoy a post-mortem spirit existence, and are still involved in various ways with living friends and relatives left behind, and wished everyone a safe trip home.

4.3 Analysis

This analytical discussion will be organised around three analytic themes, which relate to and are enmeshed within the various activities and organisational features of the demonstration: the identity of the medium, the interaction between the medium and the audience, and the activities and properties of the spirits and the spirit world.

4.3.1 *Medium identity*

As Goffman states (1959) individuals must establish and maintain certain self impressions that will balance with the presentation of self that they wish to exhibit to their audience. Holbrook is an unusual situation, in that one of the main impressions he wishes to impress upon his audience concerns a subject that does not

align with more officialised scientific explanations of mortality. There are a number of ways in which Holbrook manages his self presentation. At each of the three demonstrations observed, Holbrook shared certain details about his life with his audience: biographical details and anecdotes; some information concerning his spiritual beliefs; the experiences related to his development as a medium; and some of the experiential features of his contact with spirits. Such information generally appeared in the introduction, but also came intermittently throughout. Generally, in the latter stages of the demonstrations, personal information about Holbrook was told in accompaniment to an explanation about spirit communication.

These details construct his identity and correspond to ways of relating to his audience: as an ordinary individual with mundane⁸ traits and vices, but also as someone with an extraordinary ability whose role requires certain characteristics. Analysis of his demonstration suggests that there are three basic personas Holbrook seeks to establish: mundane; sensitive; and authoritative. The more mundane aspects of his character present him as a lively character who is nevertheless honest and down to earth. However, he also orientates to having a sensitive (and therefore empathic) nature, which is associated with his identity as a medium. He further seeks to manage an appropriate authoritative presence: as someone who will lead the demonstration so that it keeps within the appropriate structure, orchestrate the interaction between the living and the dead, and ultimately inform his audience (and ideally convince them) as to the existence of a spirit world. His authoritative

⁸ In this instance, I used mundane to signify aspects of his character that are not *explicitly* connected to his identity as a medium.

identity is mainly maintained through his use of instruction and occasional curbing, which will be discussed later. This authoritative identity, however, is paralleled with his sensitivity and empathy, and he regularly manoeuvres between expressions of sympathy and expressions of authority. These are consistently negotiated throughout the demonstration, and used for different affect.

By sharing information about himself which relate to more mundane aspects of his character, it is likely that Holbrook is trying to establish a particular kind of rapport with his audience. For example, he notes that he has a family, he drinks, and smokes, and has had a regular full time job, things which are likely to be held in common (or at least are identifiable as regular or mundane characteristics), with many members of his audience. This asserts that he is 'like them' in many aspects. This rapport also seems designed to reduce the distance of self and other. As has been discussed earlier, the properties of mediumship are likely to characterise a medium as an exotic other, as the experiences of spirit connected with the practise of mediumship are shared by a minor few. What is interesting in Holbrook's case is that potential exoticness is perhaps less likely due to the similarity in age and ethnicity with his audience. The establishment of shared characteristics work further to lessen this difference by emphasising mundane similarities and building rapport with his audience.

Obviously, Holbrook is ultimately in control of what information he shares with his audience. If we look at the information he reveals in his introduction, we can see

him sharing mundane traits that other members of the audience are likely to share. Interestingly though, some of these traits are likely to mark him as a potentially 'colourful' character. To admit that he likes to smoke and drink suggests a mild form of deviance. In fact, on one occasion, Holbrook could be seen drinking a glass of red wine prior to the beginning of the demonstration. This, however, took place only when the venue included a bar, and the demonstration included a twenty minute interval where audience members were encouraged to visit the bar also. The inclusion of an interval where audience members could buy alcohol marks the event as entertainment, but evidence of his own drinking also emphasised a relaxed nature of the demonstration's setting: consumption of alcohol is often associated with leisure time or as part of an entertainment event. Also, that he can be seen drinking a glass of red wine corroborates his claim of 'liking a drink', and emphasises his mildly deviant character, as it is not common place for individuals heading an event to be seen drinking alcohol. This acts as a slight buffer to an establishment of authoritative identity, although does not undermine his credibility as the key figure in the events of the setting, which is preserved by his presentation of identity throughout the evening, and the significance of his mediumistic ability. Rather, the significance of his drinking a glass of red wine could be seen as a means of lessening the distance between himself and his audience, and presenting him as an approachable figure.

By drawing on mundane characteristics, it seems that Holbrook is attempting to do 'being ordinary'. As Sacks (1984) has shown, appearing ordinary is a common feature in everyday interaction: individuals often seek to appear ordinary.

“Among the ways you go about doing “being an ordinary person” is to spend your time in usual ways, having usual thoughts, usual interests, so that all you have to do to be an ordinary person in the evening is turn on the TV set. Now, the trick is to see that it is not that it *happens* that you are doing what lots of ordinary people are doing, but that you know that the way to “having a usual evening”, for anybody, is to do that.” (Sacks, 1984: 415)

By referring to his engagements and association with ordinary, mundane activities, Holbrook is demonstrating that he knows what ordinary pastimes are, and that he does ordinary things. In Holbrook's case, this is particularly important. His use of doing ordinary in this manner attempts to create an affinity of sorts with his audience by showing an awareness of ordinary things that they share. His mention of these traits is not used to undermine the extraordinariness of his abilities, rather, it works to make him more accessible. It portrays him as someone who does ordinary things as well as someone with extraordinary abilities. Drinking a glass of red wine is also a way of doing 'being ordinary', i.e. engaging in a recognisably 'ordinary' activity. Again, this is not to undermine its extraordinariness per se, but to make it accessible to his audience who – considering that at least half are supposedly unfamiliar with mediumship demonstrations – are likely to have

reservations and expectations about what a demonstration of mediumship will be like. Due to the personal involvement of his audience (i.e. the selected recipients), it is important that members are able to feel competent enough to interact in such an environment, and so these methods of de-exoticising, or lessening the distance between self and other, means that his mediumship brings contact with spirits into an arena where Holbrook can soothe and negotiate potential anxieties.

It is also possible that by drawing on ordinary but colourful characteristics Holbrook is performing role distance (Goffman, 1959) whereby he is trying to distance himself from the extraordinary associations of his role as a medium, and his role as someone involved with bereavement. In regards to how he presents himself as ordinary, it seems likely that this form of self presentation works to accentuate the extraordinariness of his *abilities*, and counter potential stereotypical assumptions. By presenting himself as largely ordinary, he is able to affiliate with his audience, so by performing this kind of role distance he is able to distance himself from problematic assumptions. In the latter instance, however, his self presentation as a colourful character seems frictional when considering what it is he does, and who he interacts with as a medium. The kind of role distance performed reflects the dual appeal of demonstration of this kind: as genuine searches for spirit messages or as entertainment. Holbrook must be able to maintain the sincerity of his work, for example, by reacting in a sensitive way (i.e. he meets reactions of grief with sympathy, and will respond to his audience in a gentle or soothing manner) but also make it entertaining, for example, by using humorous comments

and anecdotes. However, his use of humour seems strategic, as will be discussed later.

Some of the mundane details of his life could also be seen to emphasise his authenticity as a medium. For example, in a later demonstration, Holbrook comments that he 'calls a spade a spade'. This saying refers to the desire to be straight forward, to comment upon things as they are, and can be associated with someone being described as 'down to earth' or realistic. This saying performs two specific functions. Firstly Holbrook is using a recognisable saying that is socially relevant, as it is a saying associated with the area in which he is practising. His audience are likely to understand what it means, which also establishes rapport through the use of a recognisable example. Secondly, this particular saying references both an action and character of authenticity: to say that something is what it is, but also, to be an honest and down to earth character. Typically, individuals described as 'calling a spade a spade' are thought to be matter of fact and to the point, and not prone to exaggeration. By using this saying Holbrook is orientating toward an honest character: he sees and comments upon things as they are. Considering the controversial nature of his claims, honesty is perhaps one of the most important characteristics a medium may seek to establish. Claiming to be someone who 'calls a spade a spade' further works to set the scene for his behaviour as a medium, and creates the expectation that he will comment upon things as they are, and therefore infers he will repeat information from the spirit world accurately, and without censorship, gloss or elaboration.

Holbrook's methods of doing 'being ordinary' work to present him as an approachable and authentic individual. However, while he presents himself as ordinary, he also orientates toward characteristics that are favourable to his role as a medium. For example, depicting himself as too colourful a character may be problematic for his role as a medium. It is important for Holbrook to establish a more serious persona, so that the mundane characteristics of honesty and authenticity can compliment his mediumship. As the main reason for the event is his mediumship, it is important that Holbrook is able to present an appropriate presence as a medium. While he may be able to 'do being ordinary' in many respects, the emphasis on his identity as a medium needs to be negotiated in a favourable manner, and the distance between the medium and his audience needs to be orientated toward one of empathy and one that emphasises the positive attributes of his abilities. For example, he reveals information about himself that does not necessarily correspond to extraordinary traits in themselves, but are nevertheless unusual traits for a middle aged male to claim. Significantly, Holbrook describes himself as sensitive, which he relates to his role as a medium. While he claims that he thought this is something that he would grow out of, the relationship between sensitivity and mediumship, and the fact that he is still sensitive, illustrates that he had a predisposition for mediumship, and so is 'naturally gifted'. He states that, while he left school without any formal qualifications, he graduated with a "degree in sensitivity". Furthermore, he reveals that he used to cry at films and television programmes like *Bambi* and *Little House on the Prairie*, both of which are examples of overtly sentimental fiction. These are both interesting examples for

Holbrook to select, as neither are contemporary⁹, but are yet likely to correspond to his and many members' of his audience's earlier experiences of film and television. Furthermore, *Bambi* in particular is iconic as a 'tearjerker film', and it is likely that members of the audience are able to identify the specific stimuli that would have prompted someone sensitive to cry. Both are also examples that are concerned with family, and both involve traumatic scenes where family bonds are tested and reaffirmed. *Bambi* in particular deals with a particularly painful familial bereavement: that of the sudden loss of a mother by a young child. It portrays the hopelessness and anxiety of such a significant bereavement, but it also gradually shows how such can be overcome. Furthermore, for Holbrook to admit to crying at *Bambi* is likely to suggest that he is sensitive to grief and loss.

Both *Bambi* and *Little House on the Prairie* can be seen to relate to some of the key aspects of spirit communication: there is a subtle, underlying spirituality to *Bambi* concerning family and the ongoing cyclical nature of life and death, and *Little House on the Prairie* regularly emphasises the importance of family and the strength and love of familial relationships. As we will examine in more detail later, the vast majority of messages delivered during these demonstrations relate to close kith and kin, so it seems likely that these examples may tap into expectations and hopes that audience members may have for potential reunion with individuals they have loved and grieved for. The use of these examples also works to show that Holbrook can be moved by others, and is sensitive to grief and loss. This is

⁹ *Bambi* was released in 1942, and *Little House on the Prairie* was first broadcast between 1974-1983, being repeated in Britain on a terrestrial channel regularly during the late 80's-early 90's.

something he mentions more explicitly later in his introduction when explaining that other's distress can make him tearful, and that he may have to turn away during messages for this reason. Not only does this prepare an expectation of him to be kindly empathic, but it also prevents potential misinterpretation for his actions during messages.

While it is culturally unusual for middle aged men to openly describe themselves as being sensitive, this does work to build another kind of affinity with his audience: by sharing vulnerable information about himself. However, it is a form of managed vulnerability because these self descriptions are selected by Holbrook: he chooses to share this information with his audience. Through this information, he is able to achieve a sympathetic affiliation with his audience (by appearing to trust them with this sensitive information), but he is also revealing a crucial aspect of his medium character: empathy. He recognises and reacts sensitively to depictions of grief and loss, even when represented in a fictional format. He is constructing himself as a suitably attractive medium that members of the audience would feel comfortable talking to, and trusting with their own vulnerability (i.e. their grief). Holbrook's sensitivity works in a number of ways: it is vulnerable information because it relates to a typically non-masculine quality¹⁰, but it also establishes him as an empathic individual sensitive to the needs of others. While Holbrook also works to establish himself as an authentic medium, it is important to remember that his orientating to a sensitive character is also significant. While it creates an expectation that he will be

¹⁰ The association of masculinity with displaying emotional strength is still a common expectation in Western society, and it is unusual for a man to openly state that he has cried at such sentimental films and television programmes.

sympathetic to others distress, there is always the possibility that being sensitive supports his claims for authenticity, in that sensitive people are less likely to be liars because they are able to understand the emotions of others. This demonstrated understanding and sensitive nature, coupled with his work as a spirit communicator, suggests that he also knows how to respond appropriately.

By engaging in these forms of managed vulnerability, Holbrook endeavours to establish himself as a trusty intermediary. Bereavement is an intensely painful experience, and those suffering from the death of a loved one are often seen as particularly vulnerable. The involvement of money in interactions with the bereaved can be controversial due to the perceived fragility of the bereaved. Mediums are often perceived as callous charlatans who manipulate the bereaved for lucrative gain. However, Holbrook's use of managed vulnerability works against this: by constructing himself as someone honest, and deeply empathic, he creates a particular compassionate image. If we remember that much of Holbrook's introductory speech works to set the tone of the evening, and instruct potential recipients in regards to their place within the demonstration, all of these elements work together to ensure a successful demonstration. He establishes an identity that is suitable for interaction of a sensitive nature. This is endorsed throughout his demonstration by Holbrook's continual attempts to soothe and relax distressed recipients during message interaction; he acts in a sympathetic and caring manner, building on and reinforcing the sensitive identity established in his introductory speech.

While Holbrook is largely successful, and devotes a significant amount of time building an approachable persona that would be attractive to his audience, he is also concerned with establishing himself as the key guiding figure in this event. It is through his interaction with his audience that Holbrook demonstrates an authorial identity. While sympathy and empathy are important, nevertheless, Holbrook is also responsible for successfully integrating the active dynamics of spirit communication, thereby successfully providing evidence of and comfort from the spirit world. For example, he delivers concise instructions in his introductory speech as to how potential recipients should interact in order for message deliveries to be successful, which I will now analyse in more detail next.

4.3.2 *Audience interaction*

Mediumship demonstrations are not hinged solely upon the actions and discourse of mediums' themselves, but further involve a sensitive period of interaction between the medium and their audience. As I will examine, mediums are reliant upon acceptance from their selected recipients in order to perform spirit communication successfully. It is useful to identify the delivery of messages from spirit as a process guided by the medium, but ultimately meaningless without input from selected recipients. Evidence cannot be established if recipients do not legitimise their proposed spirit contacts. Mediums do not simply reel off a list of messages to various members of their audience, and it is unlikely that Holbrook, for example,

would try and establish his identity in such ways as has been discussed earlier if this was so. His need to build a particular rapport with his audience is vital to his ability to provide authentic spirit messages, for spirit messages must be authenticated by others if they are to appear genuine. While audience participation may be minimal, spirit messages *must be acknowledged by a recipient* in order for delivery to proceed.

Furthermore, selected recipients must respond in a specific way in order for message delivery to be successful. In his introductory speech, Holbrook provides explicit instructions for his potential recipients on how to behave during the message delivery phase of the demonstration. While these are not issued as demands per se, he identifies that if spirits are not acknowledged by the appropriate recipient they will be lost, which places a considerable degree of responsibility on those who are potentially selected. It is easy to imagine how significant this instruction may be: if, as we can assume, most people attend demonstrations to establish a reconnection with their deceased kith and kin, then it is likely that they will want to make sure that they are receptive to any possibilities for a message. In this context, then, the claim that it is possible to lose a link with a spirit works as a powerful device to ensure the maximum responsiveness from the audience, in that it increases the likelihood that people will may be more inclined to look for personal relevance of any information to avoid missing out on the chance of a message of their own.

Holbrook firstly requests that recipients should respond verbally if information he passes on from his spirit contacts is relevant to them. Non verbal responses, even if they are positive, are by themselves insufficient forms of response. Secondly, he tells his audience what to say if they think the information he is providing is relevant: they are to answer yes or no only. By using language to acknowledge a spirit message, this not only gives the medium a definitive response, but also signals to the rest of the audience that this spirit has been identified, therefore signifying authenticity. However, if a recipient shares too much information with the medium – and the audience – too quickly, this may limit the impact of the medium’s commandeering of the message. By stating that he is seeking only yes/no answers ensures that the contribution of the audience is minimal. Ultimately, a medium wants to provide enough information by him/herself unaided so as to preserve the extraordinariness of how s/he came to receive such information. It is by providing accurate information that could, seemingly, only come from a paranormal source that makes mediumship so distinctive. Also, it is important that the recipient leaves convinced that the information provided could only have been done so by their own deceased kith and kin. Again, this highlights why it is so important for Holbrook to establish rapport with his audience during his introductory speech: so that his audience members are prepared to participate with information about their personal lives. The emphasis on minimal but distinct audience participation is something that Holbrook orientates to throughout the night, though it is not always the case that recipients answer with only yes/no answers and he does not always

revoke extra information. In some cases, it may undermine Holbrook's integrity as a compassionate medium if he were constantly curbing his audience's responses.

There is another important way in which the medium orientates toward preserving the extraordinariness of his sources: this involves actively attributing information to a spirit contact *after* the message has been accepted. In his analysis of the sequential organisation of psychic-sitter interaction Wooffitt (2006), identified a three turn structure, the third turn of which provided the psychic/medium with the opportunity to attribute now confirmed information to a spirit source. These turns are as follows:

“Turn 1 Psychic: a question/statement which implies a claim about, or knowledge of, the sitter, their circumstances, etc.

Turn 2 Sitter: minimal confirmation/acceptance

Turn 3 Psychic: attribution of the information implied by the question/statement to a paranormal source.” (Wooffitt, 2006:69)

Wooffitt has argued that that the instruction to provide only yes or no answers is interactionally strategic in that it facilitates the earliest onset of the attributive third turn, thereby minimising the length of time between an implied claim about the sitter and its attribution to a spirit source. If a selected recipient does not accept the first turn, then the medium is in danger of losing the authenticity of its spirit source. Due to the non-corporeal and hidden nature of spirit contacts, and the fact that

Holbrook is ostensibly the only person who can experience them, it is essential that the medium is able to gain recognition from his selected recipient so that spirits are believed to be present even if invisible.

While a positive response for audience members is sought by the medium, the structure of recipient selection means that Holbrook is able to manoeuvre away from rejection responses to a recipient who might provide a better chance for a positive second turn. By introducing a vague statement – such as a date or name – Holbrook invites any potential recipients to select themselves. Vague statements, however, are not necessarily convincing enough as spirit messages, due to their applicability to a large number of people. However, the use of vague statements, such as a date or name, initially gives Holbrook access to a large number of potential recipients who can then be eliminated until one individual who is able to confirm most if not all information can be selected. Holbrook's authenticity is assured by the acceptance of several first turns, for the more information he is able to secure, the more authentic he is likely to appear. This is based on the assumption that several pieces of information that are all relevant to one individual, which the medium ostensibly has had no prior contact with, is more likely to be attributable to a spirit source than chance guesswork. To attribute the information to a spirit source too early may be problematic if rejected by the recipient. By resisting this attribution until enough acceptance has been secured by the recipient, Holbrook is able to credit the spirit with factual accepted information, rather than unsubstantiated comment.

At one point during his introductory remarks Holbrook raised the issue of the audience's religious observance and affiliation. He did this casually, claiming that he assumed most of the audience were in some small measure religious, and probably Christian. Immediately after, though, he observed that some (unidentified) people will take the position that mediumship is in some ways unnatural or perverse, a position he captured by attributing to these unnamed others the belief that he and other mediums are 'in league with the devil'. This kind of remark is now associated with more extreme and older, traditional branches of Christianity, and not likely to be an opinion that members of his audience would hold, even if they did identify as, to some degree, Christian. It also works as a form of managed vulnerability, in that Holbrook is sharing information connected to problems he has had with others opinion. By making this remark, Holbrook is perhaps trying to establish a rapport with his audience whereby they are united in ridicule at an extremist and out dated sentiment. This point was dismissed without much consideration, and he then made some remarks on the broader differences between organised religion and Spiritualism.

While Holbrook can be seen as a promoter of Spiritualism, he does not spend a lot of time doing so. The purpose of the event is not overtly concerned with trying to convert audience members to Spiritualism, but rather to the validity of post mortem survival. This is also reflected by the fact that these demonstrations are individually orientated, and not overly enmeshed within wider religious contexts. Holbrook's

introductory work seems primarily aimed toward easing his audience into the reality of spirit presence. By making a link between Spiritualism and Christianity, however, he both appeals to a similar sense of spirituality (that it is not connected to outdated traditionalism), as well as constructing Spiritualism as an organisation that is aware of Christianity's weaknesses, but not so dissimilar as Christianity in regards to its organisation. While this is not to undermine Spiritualism's strengths, this could nevertheless be seen as another means to de-exoticise it. It may work as a response to potential prejudices' against Spiritualism, that may side line it as alternative and 'wacky'. It may also work in regards to the presentation of his own identity: by identifying as a Spiritualist, it is important that his audience have an appropriate understanding of what he means by this term. There is a risk that by identifying members of his audience as Christian associated, and yet critiquing members of this organisation, that this may be received as offensive. However, because it motions toward only one significant aspect of Christian theology – i.e. the belief that mediumship would be demonic – that is not typical of the wider community, he is able to avoid any offense. Furthermore, it is unlikely that individuals who believed that mediumship is a demonic practise would attend such demonstrations. Also, his comment reflects a reflexive opinion of his audience, whereby he does not discredit their Christianity, but critiques an extremist viewpoint they are unlikely to sympathise with, and yet recognise that others hold such opinion. This section however, both gives the audience information about Holbrook, but also establishes an acknowledgement that he and his audience have similar views. Also, one of the central features of Christianity is the belief in post

mortem survival. Therefore, by referencing Christianity in his introductory speech, he is orientating toward a worldview that has some similarities with the cosmology he is attempting to represent: that there is life after death.

4.3.3 *Construction of spirit identity*

Specific information about the spirit world is seldom given explicitly: Holbrook does not provide a concise, detailed explanation about what the spirit world is like. However, the more that we examine Holbrook's discourse, the more we can identify the subtler ways in which he orientates to and constructs¹¹ spirit presences. Analysis of Holbrook's demonstrations suggests that he constructs spirits as: socially organised; ultimately motivated by a strong desire for communication with their relevant living kith and kin; are individual active agents who have largely retained (or, at least are able to invoke the memory of) their living personalities; are fluid in regards to movement and able to return to the physical world when they choose; are able to make occasional sensuous contact with non mediums, and to affect things in the physical world.

One of Holbrook's first motions towards beginning his delivery of messages from spirit is to acknowledge that the spirits are 'queuing' nearby. This is interesting and important for several reasons. Firstly, he is motioning towards their *actual* presence: the spirits are there, in the room, with the audience. Also, in order to have a queue

¹¹ The use of the term 'construct' is not meant to suggest that Holbrook is lying, but rather asserts that how the audience understand the presence of spirit rests upon the ways in which he orientates to them, so that he constructs their presence for his audience through what he says and does on stage.

you would need to have more than one spirit, so by motioning toward the existence of a queue suggests that there are several spirits present who are seeking communication. A queue has a purpose, and in this case it regards a desire to communicate with the medium, and therefore with relevant members of the audience. While spirits, due to the suggested nature of their existence, are obviously presenting evidence of post mortem survival, this does not seem their main motivation. They do not queue up to communicate with a medium solely in order to convince the audience en masse of post mortem survival, rather, this is part of the main concern of the medium who needs to establish their own credibility. Spirits want to make contact with their relevant living kith and kin to remind them of their ongoing affections.

Secondly, by describing their presence as being organised in a queue orientates towards their being socially organised. Furthermore, it has been suggested elsewhere (see Fox, 2004) that queuing is something particular to British culture, and so, in this context, to describe the spirits as being in a queue identifies them as engaging in cultural as well as social behaviour. As I will argue further later, characterisations of spirit regularly orientate to their living personalities, and these personalities are often enmeshed within such social and cultural behaviours. Queuing is an obvious example of this. The queue also suggests that spirits have an awareness of, and indeed orientate toward, certain moral dimensions and expectations, such as waiting for one's appropriate turn. Interestingly, at certain points during the demonstration Holbrook suggests that some spirits may try to

‘push through’, but this seems likely to emphasise their desire for communication, and stress its importance. Holbrook will, however, curb these attempts, as well as at other points during message delivery where spirits appear to have become over zealous in certain ways of communicating, particularly when this concerns impressing sensuous feelings of how they died. In these cases, the spirits seem to obey Holbrook’s requests. For the most part spirits themselves seem to orientate to an organised structure: not only do they wait their turn in regards to message delivery, but they will wait until Holbrook has finished his introduction and has acknowledged that it is now time for message delivery to begin. This again suggests that spirits can identify when it is appropriate for them to communicate to Holbrook, and that they are sensitive to the structure of his performance.

They may be anxious to make contact, and perhaps over enthusiastic, but they ultimately respect the social conventions of waiting for your turn.

Curbing over enthusiastic spirits is also related to emphasising a spirit’s personality, and is usually used to humorous affect. For example, Holbrook may make a humorous criticism regarding certain traits, such as stubbornness or rudeness.

Laughter from the audience in these instances is prompted by the mediums’ tone. Jefferson (1984) has argued that it is important for recipients of trouble-tellers to be brought to laughter, and she argues that trouble-tellers are able to orientate toward receiving this response by the use of buffers and time-outs. In these instances, it is clear to the recipient that it is appropriate for them to be brought to laughter. In the example of laughter and mediumship, despite the overall serious nature of the

event, Holbrook is able to bring his audience to laughter through the use of a buffer, for example, a humorous criticism about an otherwise intense experience. The use of humour in this way is generally affectionate, and establishes a rapport with his audience based on affectionate memory and experience of difficult (but excused) characteristics. This is perhaps more relevant to the rapport between medium and recipient, rather than spirit and medium or spirits and recipient, and reinforces Holbrook's lively character and the entertainment atmosphere of the event. That spirits are jovial also reinforces that they are alright, and not suffering. However, it also animates the activity of spirits, and represents them as enthusiastic for the chance to communicate.

While Holbrook claims to only be able to experience spirit audibly, his actions suggest that his experiences may actually be more varied. This is difficult to assert, however, due to the reliance on Holbrook's performance as access to his experience of spirit. However, it seems that Holbrook's experiences of spirit are underlying sensuous in nature. For example, the way in which individuals died is often recounted (and ostensibly experienced) by Holbrook in order to affirm spirit identity. This seems to be something that spirits regularly communicate. Holbrook will mention sensuous impressions, particularly in regard to *how* an individual died: for example, he will mention he *feels* a tightness or pressure in his chest which he may attribute to his spirit contact having died of a heart attack. Often, he begins by explaining what he is feeling, before moving on to an interpretation. This is advantageous in that certain feelings are then allowed multiple potential causes.

Spirit messages, as has been noted previously, tend to adhere to a three turn structure (Wooffitt, 2006). These turns may be repeated throughout message deliveries, but direct attributions to a spirit contact do not occur until a recipient has accepted and legitimatised the spirit that Holbrook claims to be in contact with. It is after the second turn has successfully been completed that Holbrook will draw on the spirit's characteristics. This is generally done by mentioning anecdotes, particular mannerisms, sayings, etc. Holbrook becomes more animated toward the end of message delivery, and it is clear that this reinforces his lively character: he has shown that he can be compassionate and sympathetic, and his use of humour orientates toward the entertainment atmosphere of the event. Humour is not used to insult recipients; rather, it is used as a buffer or as a distraction from unhappiness or expressions of grief, such as crying. During these points, he is also likely to repeat his desire to 'call a spade a spade', particularly if he has said something that may be perceived as inappropriate considering the circumstance. This legitimates his honest persona. However, potentially controversial points are almost always answerable to the spirit, and he stresses that he is merely passing on the message as he has experienced it. It is through humour that he is able to animate his contacts for the audience, and furthermore constructs their current contentment. While spirits may seem concerned for their living kith and kin, particularly if they are struggling with grief, they are generally cited as being blissfully content in the spirit world. The main motivation behind their communication is to assure their loved ones that they have passed into the spirit world, that they are OK (which is particularly relevant if

they had suffered from a painful illness prior to their death¹²) and that they love them. This leads to the therapeutic basis of the evening, for while such demonstrations may provide a cathartic outlet for grief, the reassurance of post mortem survival covertly suggests that the living need to get on with their lives and should be assured that they have not completely lost their dead, and that they will ultimately be reunited.

Another interesting aspect of Holbrook's presentation of spirit characteristics concerns the spirit's ability to make sensuous contact with their living kith and kin. If we look at the message sequences mentioned previously, we find in all cases that Holbrook attributes a sensuous experience had by the recipient to a spirit source. This will occur toward the end of the message, and is only attributed to a spirit source once the recipient has acknowledged that they are experiencing what Holbrook suggests. This is hugely significant. Firstly, it adds a new experiential dimension to the demonstration. The attribution of a spirit to a sensuous experience provides a physical and more intimately personal point of contact. It reinforces Holbrook's delivery of a spirit message by creating a sensory point of reference for the recipient, .i.e. that their spirit contacts are, literally, near to them. It may also serve as an additional means of evidence for the recipient that Holbrook is genuinely in contact with spirits. Secondly, as we can see in the first message sequence, sensuous spirit contact can be made in connection with the spirit's desire to offer healing, and reinforced that they are actively benevolently inclined toward

¹² A significant proportion of spirit contacts are cited as having suffered from an illness or serious and long suffering medical ailment, such as cancer or heart problems, prior to their passing, and the recipient often seems to have played a primary caring role during this period.

the living. As I will discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the connection between spirits and healing is very common within messages, particularly in a Spiritualist context. The desire for spirits to offer healing can be interpreted both as expressions of affection and concern, but ultimately as expressions of awareness. It is the spirits who communicate to Holbrook that his recipients are in need of healing. In this way, Holbrook is orientating to an awareness that spirits have of their recipient's suffering, and their responses to it. Again, this constructs spirits as aware of the ongoing lives of the living, and as responsive to such content.

Sensuous experience also imbues the demonstration with not only a more personal connection between the spirit and their recipient, but also with something more tangible. Demonstrations of this kind locate and give access to spirits, for the most part, through dialogue. There are no physical apparitions or phenomena to enchant and provide definitive identifiable stimuli for the audience, and so Holbrook is crucial to the establishment of spirit presence. For the most part, this is done via speech, but there are a few notable physical representations he employs that serve as signs to the audience of spirit presence. Firstly, he will occasionally turn his gaze toward the ground as though listening to someone, and direct his speech toward an unseen presence. Holbrook is engaging in a form of one-on-one way communication that will be familiar to the audience, and shows that he is giving the spirit his full attention (and therefore taking it seriously). Though there is no tangible presence the audience can see, Holbrook's behaviour orientates toward it. Secondly, Holbrook manifests a physical feature of his spirit guide throughout the

delivery of spirit messages: his left hand becomes curled and appears disfigured, which he attributes to a disfigurement his spirit guide had in life. Holbrook pre-warns the audience that this will happen, so when his hand becomes curled, it is a clear visual cue that spirits are now present. He sets an expectation that is then provided for by a tangible sign.

These descriptions of spirit life present a particular reality, which suggests that spirit existence bears striking similarities with that of the living. While they may be more fluid in regards to their movement (i.e. they do not need physical bodies by which to travel), nevertheless they retain aspects of their earthly personality, and seem to conform to recognisably social behaviours.

4.4 Conclusion

The settings for Holbrook's demonstrations are important. That they occur in largely secular settings that are well known and have a capacity for a relatively large number of individuals gives access to quite a wide range of the population who might be interested in mediumship demonstrations, but deterred by an accompanying religious framework. The tone of Holbrook's demonstrations is complex, and while he trades in entertainment – emphasised by the use of humour, certain details he shares with his audience, the consumption of alcohol – there is nevertheless a spiritual and therapeutic undertone to his work. While Holbrook orientates to a Spiritualist (and therefore religious) affiliation, his work is seemingly

not of a religious nature. This will become more apparent when these demonstrations are contrasted with those which occur as part of Spiritualist church services. However, to construct Holbrook's demonstrations as *entirely* secular also seems misleading, as he clearly orientates to theological concerns, and the nature of his work is bound to a particular cosmology (i.e. belief in a spirit world and active spirit entities).

The focus of Holbrook's demonstrations is to provide a unique opportunity for individuals to reconnect with their deceased kith and kin, and for him to be able to demonstrate his mediumship convincingly. As I have discussed, there are a number of ways in which he orientates to this. He seems concerned with presenting himself as an ordinary individual who has extraordinary abilities, the latter of which correspond to both a sensitive but also authorial persona. His means of creating an ordinary but sensitive and, where appropriate authoritative, identity seems to work to make him appear approachable, sensitive and trustworthy. He guides the demonstration, but is constantly reliant upon positive confirmation from selected recipients, and so his interaction is attuned to this. Spirits are constructed as socially aware and retaining of their living personalities. They are motivated by a similar desire to make contact with their living kith and kin, and offer expressions of affection, concern and awareness. While Holbrook is seldom explicit in revealing information about the spirit world, he nevertheless orientates to specific characteristics as he represents his spirit contacts for the audience, and provides a few subtle visual cues as to their presence.

This case study illustrates that mediumship is a social phenomena, whereby spirits are constructed as social beings, and the medium is reliant upon and orchestrates particular kinds of social interaction with his audience. However, by focusing on one medium alone limits the extent to which these themes can be analysed and understood. Therefore, the themes discussed in this chapter will now be analysed further in the next chapter by making comparisons to another medium who engages in large public demonstrations. This will then be compared and contrasted with data collected from a number of typical Spiritualist Divine Services, which provide one of the main Spiritualist contexts for demonstrations of mediumship.

Chapter Five

Presentations of mediumship in large scale public demonstrations and Spiritualist church services

5.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, using a case study of one particular medium – Stephen Holbrook – I have identified some of ways in which mediumship demonstrations involve a negotiation of the mediums' identity, analysed some features of interaction with an audience, and considered how mediums represent and orientate toward spirit presence. Following on from this examination, this chapter will now explore these analytical themes in more detail by comparing Holbrook's demonstration to another touring medium, and to mediumship performed within a Spiritualist context. Through such a comparison, we can identify some of the common structural similarities between different mediumship demonstrations, as well as significant differences, related to mediums' individuality and the context in which demonstrations takes place.

Firstly, I will examine the demonstrations of another Yorkshire based touring medium, Simon Peters, before comparing his demonstrations to those of Holbrook. Secondly, I will examine a typical Spiritualist Divine Service in which two mediums were involved in a demonstration that was itself enmeshed with a larger religious ritual. Finally, all of these studies will be compared and contrasted.

5.1.1 *Simon Peters*

The structure of Simon Peters' demonstration is similar to Stephen Holbrook's. It followed the same pattern of events: introduction, messages and closing speech. In order to avoid unnecessary repetition, I will briefly present the main features of a typical Peters' demonstration. Analysis will focus on key themes relevant to Peters' demonstration, before exploring the significant similarities and differences with a comparison to Holbrook's demonstrations.

5.1.2 *A typical Simon Peters demonstration: The Royal York Hotel, 9th May, 2004*

This event took place in a large hotel room. Seating was arranged in rows with an aisle down the middle, facing a small area at the front of the room in front of a stage; tickets were collected to the rear of the room. There were approximately 60 people present, a large percentage of whom were women. Audience members generally fitted into two age groups; 30-40 and 50+. Most people attended in groups or in couples.

5.1.2.1 Introductory remarks

Simon Peters' introductory speech began with a welcome, before he inquired as to how many of his audience had been to a demonstration of mediumship before. Less than half of the audience raised their hands. He then offered instructions by which to guide his audience in subsequent interaction; such as, when he gave a piece of information, anyone to whom it appears relevant should raise their hand in the air and answer clearly yes or no to his questions. Their clarity in answering 'yes' or 'no', he emphasised, is important because it maintained a connection with spirit; without it, the connection will be lost.

Peters then went on to give a brief biographical account of how he came into mediumship; that he had had experiences of spirit as a young child and that these experiences were problematic, that he had been exorcised and subsequently did not have experiences of spirit for a long time (and in fact had denounced belief in spirit). He trained as a hypnotherapist, during which time he became aware, once more, of his mediumistic abilities. Peters reported a persistency on behalf of the spirit world in regards to encouraging him to pay attention to his mediumistic abilities. He recounted, in detail, an incidence in which he was plagued by 'messages' concerning one of his clients (who had been recently widowed) which he eventually felt compelled to pass on. These messages were acknowledged and confirmed by his client. He began formally practising mediumship shortly

afterward, and, following an appearance on *Most Haunted Live* and encouragement by Derek Acorah, began to tour with demonstrations of his mediumship.

Peters began his message sequences by announcing that he would establish a connection with spirit. This took several moments, during which time his gaze fell to the floor and he began to pace back and forth. The beginning of the messages came when he stopped, raised his head, and stated a date. This date was repeated several times, and he appealed to individuals who could accept to it to raise their hand and do so.

Two messages have been selected as typical examples of the content and structure of Peters' messages.

5.1.2.2 Illustrative messages sequences

(i)

After a brief, quiet 'dialogue' with what appears to his spirit guide, Peters stated that he had a 'father energy' with him, who had had cancer but had actually died from multi organ failure following problems with an operation. He paced up and down – an activity he claimed enabled him to build up the necessary energy by which to maintain a connection with spirit – before going on to motion toward the stomach area. A woman toward the back of the hall raised her hand, to which Peters

asked if the information made sense to her, and was met with an affirmative reply. Peters asked this recipient if the spirit was her father, to which she replied with a “yes”. She was about to add further information, but was stopped by Peters. Peters stated that the spirit told him about that he had had bowel cancer, to which the recipient responded that he had. Peters then stated that the spirit would have been in hospital for two weeks, to which the recipient responded that her father had, in fact, died two weeks ago. Peters stated that the spirit was making him feel ‘two weeks and a bit’, and he now realised that he must have meant it was two weeks and a bit ago. He offered sympathy to the recipient by repeating “this is your dad?” and by saying “bless you” in a low toned voice. He stated that there had been three individuals who had wished him to get better, to which she stated “yes”. Peters then went on to state that her father had died of a lung infection, of which he struggled to pronounce. Someone in the audience said “stafflocockus”, which was met with appreciation from the medium before he repeated it, laughing at his inability to pronounce that particular word, and encouraging the recipient to check up on that because that would be her validation. Peters talked about how her father had passed to spirit, and that he was still very weak. He mentioned that the spirit had been messing with light bulbs connected to the recipient, to which the recipient answered that he had been “messing with her emotions” before he died, although Peters insisted that he meant messing with light bulbs in particular, and she should ask the other two people connected to her because that will serve as their validation. Peters stated that the spirit wished to send his love, and made a reference to a tingling feeling that the recipient could feel on her back, which was attributed to her father.

The recipient asked if she could ask her father one question, to which Peters replied that she could. The recipient wanted to ask “why”, however, this was met by Peters shaking one of his index fingers, and the recipient reasoned that this must mean she was not meant to know. Peters ended the message sequence by asking the recipient if she could leave her father’s love with her, ending with “God bless”.

(ii)

Peters began this message sequence by speaking to his spirit guide, repeating information and assuring that he would pass on that information. He then stated that he had a ‘mother’ energy who would have been in a wheelchair because of water retention in her legs, and chronic circulation. He motioned toward the middle of the audience, suggesting that he expected the recipient would be located in that area. It was eventually accepted by a woman who was sat in the middle of the audience. Peters stated that the spirit was an aunt, which he reasoned was because the spirit was located above but to the side which usually signifies someone who is like a mother, but is not. He reaffirmed the information about a wheelchair, water retention and chronic circulation. The recipient responded that it was her mother, not her aunt. Peters stood by his initial observation of the spirit being to the side, and stated that it must mean that her mother was somehow incapable of showing the amount of emotion that was wished from her. The recipient responded that her mother could sometimes show affection, but not all the time, to which Peters replied that it is like his mother. He argued, in regards to how he had presented the spirit

that it was “well... what she is making me feel”. He asked two years and the wheelchair meant. The recipient didn’t answer, so Peters repeated that the spirit was mentioning two years of intensive wheelchair treatment. The recipient claimed she didn’t know what this could mean. Peters stated that she might not be the right recipient, before asking why April is significant. The recipient stated that April was her birthday month. Peters stated the number six, asking the audience – “come on now people, am I with this lady or someone else, I know what I’m hearing.” After a long pause, Peters’ stated that the spirit is talking about a heart issue, to which the recipient replied that her mother did have a heart condition. Peters stated that the sixth must be significant, and that she would need to think about the relevance of this date. He stated the spirit was stubborn, to which the recipient agreed. He assured the recipient that any negativity is taken away when individuals pass into the spirit world, and that God would not allow individuals to move into the spirit world until they understood why things have happened. He ended the message by asking to leave her with her mother’s love, because it was difficult. He assured the recipient that she no longer needed a wheelchair. He then stated that he is asked her how she passed, but that he received no response. He ends the message sequence “thank you, God bless you.”

5.1.2.3 Closing remarks

Peters' closing to the demonstration came quickly after the last message (which had been ended with the typical 'bless you'), and was heralded by a long pause. He made reference to Simon and Peter, the two main spirit guides who work with him, stating that he uses the name 'Simon Peters' to "honour them".

Peters then went on to explain that it is difficult for his spirit guides to bring all the energy needed for mediumship together in one person so they can pass on messages from spirit, and that there are a queue of spirits on the other side. He expressed a hope that those who had not received a message that evening, who – like he *did* – didn't believe his claims, will eventually receive a message, so that they will understand that everyone's spirit goes on into the "higher dimension" with God.

Peters' then went on to express a sadness regarding some of the people who claim to be mediums, but who are not. He quickly attributed these words to his spirit guides: "they are not mediums", later suggesting that this information must be relevant for someone in the audience.

Peters' then assured the audience that the spirits of people's loved ones, regardless of how they died or what kind of person they are, have passed over to the other side, and that everyone, eventually, goes to heaven. He talked briefly about reincarnation, arguing that life is, ultimately, concerned with learning wisdom.

Peters' ended the evening by offering private readings to those who live in his native town of York, although emphasised that he would need a group of at least 12 individuals at a time in order to be able to build up enough energy by which to make contact with spirit. He then wished the audience well – “god bless you all” – and that he hoped people would join him for his next demonstration. He was met with applause from the audience, and ended with “thank you”.

5.2 Analysis

5.2.1 The identity of the medium

Something significant about Peters' identity is how he presents himself in conjunction with his spirit guides. The fact that he uses a pseudonym made up from the names of two of his spirit guides perhaps serves as an apt metaphorical illustration of how his own personal identity is linked to the agency of his guides by his mediumistic abilities. During his demonstrations, Peters' often motions toward the presence of his spirit guides, either by directing speech to them, or by attributing parts of his own speech to their authorship. The image created is that Peters, as a medium, is quite clearly someone in juxtaposition with the spirit world; they impact upon and influence him. His own agency however, remains at a degree of distance from the agency of his spirit contacts and spirit guides throughout his demonstration. For example, he does not enter into a trance so that a spirit may

enter his body and speak through him. He does not claim to become possessed by his spirit contacts, asserting his role as an interpreter of the information he receives, and therefore acting as an intermediary. This retention of personal agency is apparent through his behaviour and speech; while there are times in which he attributes *direct* parts of his speech to spirit contacts, this is rare and limited to only small sentence parts, often taking the form of reported speech. For example, he makes a potentially controversial comment about the integrity of other mediums, saying that “they are not mediums.” He then explains that this is from a spirit source, and not his own personal opinion. The significance of attributing this to a spirit source reduces his own role in producing a potentially controversial comment (i.e., *he didn't actually say this*), whilst maintaining an impression of the spirit world as populated by entities conscious and possessing of their own thoughts.

The attribution of this comment to a spirit source gives it authority, as it comes from one of his spirit guides who is represented as having sacred and prioritised knowledge, i.e., they are in a position of authority in regards to the authenticity of mediums. Also, this comment acts as a warranted complaint. Widdicome & Wooffitt (1989) have shown that individuals from certain subcultures anticipate stereotypical complaints based on interpretations about their membership by non-members. By demonstrating an awareness of how outsiders may perceive and apply negative associations to group, they are able to counteract this by building a “description... [that] displays... [their] tacit awareness that a slightly amended formulation of the same activity... could furnish very different sets of inferences

about events.” (Widdicome & Wooffitt, 1989, cited in Wooffitt, 1992: 43). This is relevant to a discussion of mediumship, as mediums have often received critique from outsiders. So, by using a legitimate and authoritative voice – the spirit – to make a complaint about *some* mediums means that Peters is able to suggest to his audience that there is a difference between authentic and fraudulent mediums, thereby demonstrating an awareness of outsider complaint, but providing an “amended formulation of the same activity”. In regards to the medium’s identity, Peters is able to make a comment which may work to bolster his attempt to appear authentic as well as compensating for potential insult by citing a spirit as the source of the comment.

In regards to his agency in connection with the agency of spirits, Peters demonstrates that he is faithful in his passing on of the information and advice given, but further presents that there is a difference between what he and they say. Also, the fact that this information is cited as being relevant for a member of the audience identifies it as a meaningful comment. The comment gains authority through its association with a purpose, and is used as educational tool on behalf of the spirit world. Therefore, even though it maybe controversial, it has a purpose, and has been selected to educate.

Peters offers his audiences quite a lot of personal information. He works (or did when he started his touring) as a hypnotherapist, is married and lives in York. He experienced spirit in childhood, but received hostile reactions – including two

exorcisms – and so suppressed his mediumistic abilities and experiences. Later in life, he was repeatedly contacted by the late husband of one of his patients with a message which he, after several sessions, revealed. His patient was reputedly amazed by this information, and could understand and accept it, thus validating his mediumship. Some interesting points arise from including this kind of biographical information in his demonstrations. Firstly, it gives the audience some insight into important features of his own personal identity. There is an element of managed vulnerability in which he reflects on what must have been quite traumatic events from his past; having to suppress his spiritual experiences and being exorcised. He is, in a sense, presenting himself to be someone who is familiar with difficulties. There is a suggestion of stamina and perseverance; if, even though he was criticised by family and friends to the result of being exorcised, he is still prepared to demonstrate mediumship, then this function as a kind of validation for his mediumistic abilities and his dedication to the spirit world. It could be argued that, if he wasn't serious, why would he have continued to claim to be a medium after experiencing such hostile reactions? To be someone that overcomes such hardships may be likely to win favour, especially when we consider British culture and its preference for those who strive to overcome life's obstacles. Giving the audience information about his experiences also suggests that he has faced these aspects of his past and moved on, suggesting strength of character. It also emphasises the importance of his mediumship, and that, even though he chose to suppress his spiritual experiences and therefore neglect the spirit world, they have nevertheless continued to interact with him. It also works to further authenticate his mediumship,

by showing that he is familiar with negative reactions, taken some time out, but found that he retained a connection with the spirit world.

Mediums are looking to help ease suffering, particularly the pain of bereavement. That Peters is a hypnotherapist reinforces an identity as someone involved in the caring industry, and someone familiar with therapeutic encounters. Not only does this suggest that he will have a compassionate and sympathetic nature (qualities ideal for both a medium and a hypnotherapist), but also that he has experience from working with people who are suffering. Being a hypnotherapist is also interesting because, while it promotes him as someone who works in the caring industry, it does not necessarily associate him with more established medical professionals, such as psychiatrists or psychologists. The problem with established medical professionals here is that they can be connected with a medicalised hierarchy who hold fixed secular models of diagnosis and cure. Spirituality is usually absent: someone visiting a psychiatrist, for example, who claims to believe in the return of a deceased relative, is more likely to have their experiences explained as the product of a grieving mind rather than as a legitimate spiritual encounter (but see West, 2004). Hypnotherapists, on the other hand, are not tied to such secular models, and can be considered as more reflexive. They are generally categorised with the 'alternative medicine' subculture. Mediumship, as a means of grief counselling, can also be associated with this subculture, so his identity as a hypnotherapist shows that he is someone familiar with and affiliated to this more spiritually sympathetic subculture.

5.2.2 *The medium's interaction with the audience*

Despite attempts to present himself as a likable and approachable individual (for example by being humorous through the use of jokes about misunderstandings of spirit information, and by being sympathetic and compassionate with reference to his career as a hypnotherapist and by having a soothing tone when recipients become upset), Peters does not appear to have an easy relationship with his audience. He employs certain techniques to try and smooth over troubles in the interaction. This illustrates that, while techniques may be employed by mediums to establish a favourable rapport with their audience, an atmosphere of unconvinced discontent may nevertheless arise, and these techniques may not always be entirely successful.

Examples of this in Peters' demonstrations included several instances where his suggestions were met with direct disagreement or confusion. This puts Peters in a difficult situation. Generally he would maintain the validity of the information either by asking recipients to check it at a later date, or by redelivering the information until it was accepted or another recipient was selected. This latter technique is what Wooffitt (2006) describes as a revised knowledge claim, a technique often employed by mediums in times of interactional trouble. When met with a lack of response from the recipient, Peters will slightly alter or restructure the information so that it retains its basic components, but gives more scope for sought

acceptance. The basis for the need to revise such knowledge is placed with the recipient. This emphasises his authoritative persona, in that he does not undermine the validity of his claims, rather, he cites the recipients' memory as the reason for why his claims are not confirmed. In times where trouble occurred following the first turn of his message delivery sequence, eventual acceptance was usually marked with a humorous comment. This tended to involve a reference to confusion over exact details, and reasons for his misunderstanding. Peters does not debate the authenticity of the spirits at any time; in fact, the blame for trouble in the interaction is placed with recipients. This is reinforced by his suggestions that spirits not accepted will move on and be replaced by the next in line. Obviously, this puts pressure on audience members who would be keen to avoid unknowingly rejecting a spirit who had come to communicate with them. However, this also works to keep Peters' validity intact; he and the spirit world are honest, it is the audience who are, at the time, unaware or simply mistaken. In cases where information is redelivered and accepted, confusion is attributed to the fact that spirit communication is not like every day communication amongst the living; Peters is not always aware of how messages relate to his audience. This latter strategy lessens the emphasis on recipient fallacy whilst maintaining Peters' authenticity as a medium.

In a later demonstration, Peters included an exact time, such 21.30 or 05.17, which he attributed either to the last earthly contact between the recipient and the spirit, or the time of passing. This method is useful in that it potentially strengthens the message sequence by including information that is precise and ostensibly something

the medium couldn't know unless in contact with a spirit source. This kind of information is useful for mediums to use to promote their authenticity. It is also the kind of information that recipients may not remember offhand, so this gives Peters an increased opportunity to cite the recipient's memory as the reason the information isn't accepted. Even if the time is rejected, Peters explains that what the spirit considers to be the time of passing may differ from that recorded by the living, because the spirit may linger for a short period after biological death. This kind of information is difficult for the recipient to refute, and so works to preserve Peters' authenticity during the demonstration.

5.2.3 *The spirits and the spirit world in the demonstration*

One of Peters' main methods of orientating toward the presence of the spirit world is by directing his speech toward an invisible entity. This is often accompanied by turning his face to the side and slightly downward, giving the impression that he is listening intently to an unseen presence. He could also be heard to say "yes, I will" repeatedly after a few moments of silence, therefore presenting himself as someone who is acknowledging information received from another source. This presentation of dialogue sometimes involved several such responses from Peters, and could last up to a minute. Such behaviour is usually exhibited prior to the delivery of a specific piece of information, and the initiation of a message sequence. This method of self presentation orientates toward a proximal presence of spirits – they are close enough for him to hear them – but also shows him as someone who is receiving and

processing the information, before replying positively to his spirit contacts: he is being obedient. Furthermore, that he is taking time to receive and process the information given to him is significant: it presents him as someone who is behaving considerately in regards to how he gathers and prepares information ready for a message delivery. The presentation of such dialogue also provides the audience with a clear cue that the medium is gathering information, and therefore will shortly be ready to begin the delivery of spirit messages.

Peters' spirit guides feature quite prominently in his demonstration. On several occasions, he makes mention of them, either as the original authors of certain claims or by asking them to aid weak spirits. It is suggested that Peters' spirit guides are stronger when compared to other spirit contacts; they act as helpers who use their own energy to accompany other spirits wishing to communicate with the audience. Their presence seems to be established as consistent, as though they act as overseers who aid other spirits who come forward to communicate through Peters. By attributing certain claims to them – such as, a critique of charlatan mediums – Peters establishes them as possessing a certain degree of authority; they are knowledgeable and powerful presences in the spirit world, and they are aware of the ongoing lives of the living, for example, they know when individuals are claiming to be mediums fraudulently. By using the names of two of his spirit guides, as has been argued earlier, we see Peters presenting himself as someone who is respectful and receptive of knowledge and guidance from the spirit world. This could also be

seen to emphasise the authority and importance of his spirit guides in regards to spirit communication.

Peters also uses a series of sensuous features, such as mannerisms and direct reported speech, in accompaniment with information such as dates, names and places. This will be discussed in more detail in the following section, as it works in a remarkably similar way to Holbrook.

5.3 Stephen Holbrook and Simon Peters: Public demonstrations of mediumship compared

The analysis will now draw on the previous discussion of these two mediums, and compare features of their demonstration. As done previously, the analysis will focus on three key categories: the medium's identity, the medium's interaction with their audience, and how the spirits and the spirit world are implicated in the social and physical setting of these demonstrations.

5.3.1 The identity of the medium

Both of the mediums observed were male. Male mediums are now quite common: the majority of mediums (judging by the advertisements in popular magazines and newspapers), who tour giving public demonstrations of their mediumship are males, and in Spiritualism more generally there is a strong presence of male mediums. It is

possible that being male presents an initial hurdle for individual self presentations of mediumship. Certainly, popular traditional stereotypes of mediumship have tended to present mediums as female, and studies that have focused on mediumship and femininity have given the impression that female mediums were a vast majority (Braude, 1989; Owens, 1990). Traditional notions of femininity have thought mediumship well suited to females because of their sensitive, emotional and empathic 'innate' nature (Owens, 1990). This perceived 'innateness' has proved advantageous for female mediums in the past and present, as they have been able to use these stereotypes, and accentuate their femininity as a key component of their mediumship (see Haywood, 1983; Owen, 1989; Skultans, 1974). If the ideal medium character, then, has feminine qualities, how can males present themselves as suitable mediums? If we consider Holbrook and Peters, and the ways in which they have presented themselves during their mediumship demonstrations – particularly in their opening remarks – there seems to be some evidence to suggest that they are actively seeking to over-ride potential expectations that may be made based on their gender. In Western society, as in most societies, men are expected to be emotionally harder and more restrained than women. These qualities, however, would be unsuitable for mediums. Both Holbrook and Peters work to establish themselves as 'sensitive' males. Holbrook directly describes himself as 'sensitive', which he claims is an integral part of his mediumship. He also draws on emotional reactions to sentimental media as well as to his audiences' suffering: he presents himself as someone who is genuinely moved by 'sensitive' stimuli, not someone who is aloof and unresponsive. This does not seem intended to undermine his

masculinity per se, rather, to present himself as someone with qualities suitable for a medium. In a similar vein, Peters' shares sensitive biographical information with his audience, as well as explaining that he also works as a hypnotherapist, which works to establish him as someone who cares for people and works to alleviate suffering. He, like Holbrook, reacts in a sympathetic manner toward his audience's distress, by adopting a soothing tone. However, Holbrook appears to give more attention to the development of a sensitive persona: he directly talks about being sensitive in his introductory speech, and states that he is likely to become upset at the sight of other's distress. This sets up an expectation of his sensitive character for his audience that can be reinforced by his behaviour during message delivery, for example, by demonstrating that he is moved by other's distress (which he does).

Both Holbrook and Peters position themselves as having an uncomfortable relationship with Christianity. Holbrook claims that he has been described as 'being in league with the devil' while Peters claims he was exorcised during his youth. Both of these anecdotes are in line with an extreme version of Christian theology. The use of Christian maltreatment, however, is used to slightly different affect. Holbrook reports his experiences with a jovial tone, while Peters recalls his more seriously. Obviously, to be described as 'in league with the devil' is very different from the experience of being exorcised. What is worth mentioning here is that both mediums, in their own way, are critiquing Christianity and its opinion of mediumistic phenomena with the use of personal anecdotes. However, Holbrook is also using Christianity in comparison with Spiritualism, as a way of de-exoticising

and legitimating Spiritualism as a valid religious group, by explaining the similarities in structure between Christian and Spiritualist rituals and organisation. Peters does not invoke Spiritualism in the way that Holbrook does; indeed, when he does comment upon spiritual philosophy he does so by drawing on beliefs that are not officially part of official Spiritualist beliefs; such as reincarnation. When discussing spiritual philosophy, it seems that Peters' guides act as the repository of spiritual knowledge. This is furthered by the significant presence of more advanced spirits, namely his spirit guides Simon and Peter, that have adopted a position of caring and instructive authority during Peters' demonstration: Peters states that they help other spirits to communicate, and he also shows that they provide critical comment. Furthermore, Peters directly cites them as the source of his knowledge. If we contrast this with Holbrook, we can see a more direct affiliation with Spiritualism: he talks about the role Spiritualism has played in his development as a medium, and identifies that the spiritual philosophy he discusses is Spiritualist. Furthermore, he also talks about Spiritualism as a religion, identifying it as an organisation that he supports and is a part of. Peters does not involve Spiritualism in the same way, focusing instead on more spirit authored philosophies.

5.3.2 *The medium's interaction with the audience*

It is clear that Stephen Holbrook receives a larger audience than Simon Peters. This could be due to the fact that Holbrook has been demonstrating for longer than Peters, and therefore has had more time to build up a fan base. He has also

developed other media output, such as three biographies¹, through which he can attract further attention. While both are advertised with similar endorsements, such as being Britain's most evidential medium, it is Holbrook who seems to have gained more popularity. Holbrook's efficiency in obtaining positive responses for recipients is notable in comparison with Peters; Peters seems to struggle more with his audience's cooperation. This is apparent by the number of negative responses he receives from selected participants, and the lack of cooperation with his attempts to deal with claims which have not been confirmed.

Both mediums work to establish themselves not only as authentic mediums, but as mediums able to deliver specific information that could not be easily translated from one audience member to the next. It is likely that they are conscious of the common critique that the medium's messages are based on highly general information, so it seems worth considering that both mediums are consciously trying to demonstrate to their audience that they are good, evidential mediums.

Both Holbrook and Peters set up guidelines regarding audience interaction for potential participants. This both instructs potential recipients as to how to communicate appropriately with the medium if they should be selected, but also acts as a means to authenticate the information given by mediums as coming from a paranormal source, and not from information unconsciously given by their living recipients. This works as specific proof: by making it clear, in the beginning, that

¹ According to his website, <http://www.steveholbrook.co.uk>

recipients should only give minimal responses it means that mediums must produce information that is convincingly relevant. At least half of their audience members have not been to see a medium before, so guidelines indoctrinate them into the framework of spirit communication, but also give the mediums a chance to present themselves as honest recipients of information from spirits. The audience members who have not been before are, arguably, there to be convinced that mediumship is a genuine phenomena. Therefore, this preliminary display of how they receive information, and an attempt to lessen input from their audience, works to construct their identity appropriately. This is further reinforced by reprimands given by mediums to recipients who give more information than they should. Even though this is not strictly adhered to throughout the demonstration, particularly in times of trouble where negotiation is needed, the use of preliminary guidelines identifies spirits as the sole official knowledge providers beforehand.

5.3.3 *The spirits and the spirit world in the demonstration*

Holbrook and Peters orientate toward the interactive presence of spirits and build upon such presence in similar ways. Both mediums orientate toward the presence of spirit by directing parts of their talk toward invisible agents. This is almost always accompanied with a slight turn away from their audience, as though they were listening to someone nearby. This works as an additional visual cue in that it identifies that spirits are present, but it further locates their presence to specific spaces. Audience members can imagine that an unseen presence is located in a

definitive spot near to the medium. Such visual cues also work to display the medium as someone who is paying attention to the spirit world.

The ways that spirit presences are characterised is similar in both Holbrook and Peters' demonstrations. The discourse of sensuous features, such as mannerisms, accents and references to feelings associated with the spirit at their time of passing both act as a further means to establish who the spirit presence is, but also animate spirit beings for the audience. These characterisations refer, primarily, to the character of the spirit in life, but that they are invoked in this setting establishes that these characteristics linger, in some way, after death. It further presents spirits as agents who are identifiable, and not the distanced ghosts and spectres typical of Western folklore and ghost stories. Spirits are individuals who were living; they are characters that have populated the lives of the audience, and are returning so that a continuation of bonds (see Walliss, 2001) can be reinstated. They represent a personal past.

A continuation of bonds (Walliss, 2001) is further reinforced by the acknowledgement of physical sensations ostensibly experienced by recipients during message sequences. Spirits are brought closer to the audience, by being able to make their presence known physically, not just through communication with a medium. Mediums also make reference to occurrences in which unusual activity is attributed to a spirit source. This gives an impression that spirits have a continued role in the lives of the living. This means that, while bonds can be reconnected in

the context of mediumship demonstrations, there are nevertheless spaces created in the framework of the lives of the recipients where these connections can be reinforced. Not only are mediums proving that there is life after death, but they are suggesting that this connection between the living and the dead continues outside of the demonstration. Spirits are able to return, at will, even if mediums are not present. Experiences attributed to a spirit source means that recipients can subsequently reflect on these experiences with a different understanding of their cause, and the on going relationship between the living and the dead.

Both mediums give clear indications that spirits are organised into social activities, such as waiting and queuing, which presents the audience with a clear illustration of how the spirit world is organised. These concepts work to animate demonstrations with clear images the audience can grasp. While both mediums build an impression that spirits are consistently present in essence, they nevertheless display that spirits can congregate in queues and seem to be aware of when it is appropriate to communicate, i.e. when the demonstration starts, thus demonstrating an awareness of cultural norms. The mediums engage in clear pre-message sequence behaviour, such as pausing with their attention turned away from the audience or by pacing. It demonstrates that, though spirits are present throughout, they interact with the medium when it is appropriate for the message delivery to begin.

Both Holbrook and Peters invoke the presence of their spirit guides. Holbrook displays this by changing the shape of his hand to resemble a deformity that he has

previously attributed to the source of his spirit guide. He draws attention to this in his introductory remarks, and so, by changing the shape of his hands, audience members can see a visual motif of his spirit guide's influence and presence during the demonstration. Peters makes direct mention to his spirit guides, by attributing claims to them, and by asking for their help during message sequences. In both contexts, the mediums present a clear picture of spiritual beings, who are different from those communicating to selected recipients, and seem to present them as overseers who aid the process of mediumship demonstrations.

5.4 Divine Church Services

5.4.1 General Features

A Spiritualist Divine Service almost always occurs on a Sunday, and will generally begin around 7 o'clock in the evening. It is unclear why they are referred to as Divine Services. A service will usually last between 1 ½ to 2 hours. Divine Services are usually taken by different mediums each week; a few of these will be local mediums associated with the church, although there are often demonstrations of mediumship from mediums from other churches. In regard to the latter, these mediums seem to have been selected to demonstrate, by the church, on account of their impressive abilities. All churches will include hymn books, which will be placed on the chairs prior to the beginning of the service.

The attendance at Divine Services differs from church to church (and, presumably, it will differ depending on which mediums are demonstrating), although this observational study suggested that the average number is between 15 and 20. Individuals usually attend in couples or small groups, although it is not uncommon to see solitary individuals. There are usually considerable gaps of space between each group or individual's seat.

At the front of the church is either a raised platform or table where the church's president and medium will address the congregation. Typically, Divine Services are structured in four main parts; the church president's introduction (which will often include a hymn), the medium's address (which will include prayers and hymns), the mediumship demonstration, followed by closing remarks from the church president.

The church president's introduction generally lasts only a few minutes. The purpose of this introduction is to introduce the medium, and lead the congregation in a hymn. When the church president's introduction is finished, he or she will beckon to the medium, and position themselves to the side.

The medium usually starts with what may be classified as a lecture. This lecture invokes features of contemporary society with Spiritualist philosophy, usually by addressing problems that exist in regards to how individuals lead their lives. Topics that have been covered in services visited during this observational study included the prevalence of technological communication (such as a reliance on mobile phone

texting) over actual talk, negative feelings toward others, the lack of positive action and the break down of family relationships. Lectures seem to be exploring and emphasising the importance and beauty of Spiritualist philosophy as well as observing problems of contemporary society that Spiritualism seeks to remedy. There are explicit religious references used in these lectures, although the emphasis in God differs depending on the church and the medium who is demonstrating. It is important to mention here that there are differences between churches as to how a concept of God fits into their belief system. Some churches, particularly those that consider themselves to be 'Christian Spiritualists', consider God to be a supreme being, and view Jesus Christ in the same regard as other Christians, while other churches view God in a similar though less hierarchical position but do not consider Jesus Christ as an object of worship. While Jesus Christ is often regarded as an important spiritual figure, he is not conceived of as the son of God, but rather as a talented medium or spiritual individual.

What differentiates Spiritualists from other Christian groups concerns the nature of their belief in the afterlife and relations between the living and the dead, the emphasis on personal responsibility, a reluctance for strict dogmatic moral codes, and of their perceived structure of the spirit world. It is difficult to consider belief in the spirit world as corresponding to a uniform belief system, because again this differs from church to church, and from medium to medium. Generally, most seem to agree that the spirit world is divided into different planes, and that individuals progress according to their own spiritual development. Many Spiritualists believe

that, ultimately, all individuals will eventually progress to the highest plane and become connected with God.

Closing remarks from church presidents are generally concerned with events and news related to the church, along with a note of appreciation for the medium.

Mediums will generally engage in five or six messages during a Divine Service. I have selected two examples of message sequences from the same Divine Service (taken by a female medium, that took place in a Derby Spiritualist Church, on the 11th January, 2004) that I consider to be typical of such demonstrations.

5.4.2 *Illustrative message sequences*

(i)

This message sequence was one of the last of this particular medium's repertoire. The medium motioned to a man sat at the back of the hall, asking "can I go to you John?" The man replied with a yes, and the medium then went on to say "you would know someone by the name of Edna, the name Edna means something to you." The man replied with a yes. The mediums stated that the spirit, Edna, was always in her slippers, and that she wished to send her regards to the recipient. The recipient replied with an "OK, yes, thank you," to which the medium smiled and ended the sequence with a "Thank you, and God bless you".

(ii)

This message sequence occurred in the beginning of this particular medium's repertoire. The medium motioned towards two women who were sat on the right hand side of the audience near the front. She stated that she had "a gentleman figure here who used to smoke a lot" and would be recognized as a chain smoker, with a connection to motorbikes that the medium was uncertain if that was connected with how the spirit passed over. She asked these recipients if this information meant anything to them. The woman on the right was unsure of this, stating that she could think of someone who smoked, and someone who rode a motorcycle, but that they were not the same person. The medium was adamant that both pieces of information applied to the same individual, and repeated the information concerning smoking and motorbikes. She then leant forward slightly, mimicking as though holding a cigarette. The two women talked amongst themselves quietly, before one was audibly heard to have asked the other "who do you think that could be?" The medium again reinforced her point, and one of the women then said "ah, yes, I know who you mean now." There was a little laughter from the medium, recipients and the congregation. The medium then stated that "he just wanted to send his love" and ends the message sequence with "God bless you".

5.5 Analysis

The repertoire of Divine Services will feature a variety of mediums (though each individual service will usually involve only one medium). This means that it is difficult to analyse the identity of mediums in Divine Services in comparison with public demonstrations. For the purpose of this chapter, I will draw on two of the mediums I have observed during this study with notes as to how their identity is constructed during their demonstration. I will call these mediums, pseudonymously, Glenda and Toby.

5.5.1 *The identity of the mediums*

5.5.1.1 Glenda

Glenda is a middle aged woman who is associated with one of two Spiritualist churches in Derby. Her preceding lecture emphasised the importance of Spiritualist philosophy and encouraged individuals to re-examine their lives in the light of its principals. Her gentle critique of modern social attitudes is directed at the audience, but she illustrates her points with personal anecdotes that seem to serve both to align herself with the audience in regards to fallibility, but also to act as a positive example. For example, she talked about unwanted presents she had received for Christmas that she will give to a charity shop. There are two messages here that Glenda is trying to express: lack of gratitude and recycling. Firstly, by talking about

her dislike for certain presents, she is presenting herself as someone who is ungrateful for what she has received. However, the scenario she presents – that she had received things she knows she will never use/wear – seems to be intended as an example others could relate to, and works a means to establish rapport with her audience over a recognisable example. Indeed, she seems to be trying to show that she has experiences in common with her audience by using questions in her lecture, such as “and you know it’s not the right size...” This scenario has been selected as a shared example, by which she can recount an anecdote to accompany a message to which members of the congregation can relate. The message she is trying to deliver concerns unintentional ingratitude. This is, however, something we should critique. This sides her with, but also work to instruct, the audience.

Glenda’s anecdote about taking unwanted clothes to charity shops is to emphasise the important of recycling. By stating this example, which she does so in an implicit way (i.e. “the charity shop are going to do well by me” rather than “I am going to take these things to a charity shop”), she is setting herself up as an example of someone who is both aware of charitable behaviour and behaves in a charitable way. This presents her as someone engaging in behaviour that is in accordance with Spiritualist philosophy, but does so as if such behaviour is standard for her.

Glenda seems to establish an interesting layer of authority to her identity, while simultaneously presenting herself as someone clearly not dissimilar from her audience. The purpose of her lecture is instructive in regards to Spiritualist

philosophy; she wants her audience to reflect upon the content of her lecture and act accordingly in order to maintain these philosophical principles. However, she makes several references to “Father God” in a manner that is submissive: she leads the audience in prayers to “Father God”, asking, on behalf of herself and of her audience, for his guidance and aid in their lives, and “Father God” is presented as a figure that all are submissive too, in a manner that is similar to other examples of Christian worship.

As a medium, Glenda establishes herself as uncompromising in regard to the information she presents. At times of trouble, she reinforces her information until it is accepted.

5.5.1.2 Toby

Toby is a young medium who is associated with a small Spiritualist church in a Manchester suburb. This particular Spiritualist church is housed in a renovated hall, which is located a couple of metres away from the main road that leads from the train station through the suburb. The congregation of this church are mainly middle aged women, who attend in small groups. There are several young males associated with the church committee however, one of which is Toby.

On the night observed, Toby gave a demonstration in place of another medium, who had been unable to attend on that particular evening. It is apparent that Toby is well

known to the congregation. He makes a joke about how they will have to settle for him, and this was met with affectionate laughter from the audience.

Toby's behaviour during message sequences established him with a low level of authority; he seems to present himself modestly and with humorous comment about how he experiences the spirit world. He does not reveal much personal information about himself during the demonstration, but rather his time is focused on message sequences. This will be discussed in more detail below.

5.5.2 *The medium's interaction with the audience*

Glenda and Toby's relationship with their audience is very similar in that their audiences were accommodating and favourable. Toby's reception seemed affectionate: recipients would interact with him by making jokes in times of trouble, such as when a message was not confirmed, and by seeming eager to fit the information to relevant individuals connected to them who had passed over. In both cases, recipients seem keen to maintain a connection with the medium, and so with the spirits they are in contact with. Even when information is tenuous, they are more likely to accept it, or at least try and place it within a reasonable reference that they can accept. Trouble during interaction is usually remedied by eventual recipient acceptance, and recipients often seem keen to give positive feedback: messages will be negotiated between medium and recipient until confirmation and corroboration is achieved.

While both mediums state prior to message sequences that they want only 'yes' or 'no' answers, this is rarely enforced. Messages that were not met with confirmation from the selected recipient are usually pacified with humour, with misunderstandings joked about. These jokes usually receive laughter from other audience members. This was more common with Toby's demonstration, and may reflect the characteristics of his particular audience and their relationship to him. Indeed, there were more audience members at Toby's demonstration, and more talk beforehand amongst themselves.

It is suggested during the demonstrations that mediums receive only partial amounts of information from spirit contacts, such as names, dates or unusual words, and that it is not always apparent to them how this information is intended as evidence for their recipients. There is an affectionate regard for spirits, and humour seems directed at confusion on behalf of the medium as a result of how they experience spirit, rather than as evidence of the medium's fallibility. The mediums are regarded with appreciative cooperation, and audience members interact with them positively.

As has been noted, it is apparent that Toby is well known to the congregation. This is similar for Glenda, who addresses certain members of her audience by their first name when they are selected. Due to the small number of congregational members, and the regularity with which mediums will demonstrate at the churches with which they are affiliated, such a degree of familiarity is inevitable. Unfortunately, there is

little research that explores the relationship between mediums and audiences in specific churches. However, from this observational study, it seems worth suggesting that it seems as though both mediums and their audiences are actively working together to achieve successful message sequences, and audience members appear particularly keen to receive a meaningful message. This impression is furthered by the lack of hostility and the eagerness of audience members to react positively in times of trouble during their interaction. Mediums seem to be respected by their audience members, both by the ways in which they are introduced by a member of the church committee, but also by the ways recipients interact with them during message sequences.

5.5.3 *The spirits and the spirit world in the demonstration*

Both Glenda and Toby reveal the presence of the spirit world via information. They do not do so explicitly, and do not explain prior to their demonstrations how it is that they experience their connection with spirit, or what the spirit world is like.

Neither Glenda nor Toby seem to engage in any particular pre sequence behaviour that would suggest they are making contact or preparing themselves for their demonstration. During their demonstration, their own individual agency does not seem to be compromised by their connection with spirit contacts, although it appears that information from spirit is experienced sensuously, such as an awareness of the sensuousness of illness experienced by the spirit at their time of

passing. In other words, spirits impress upon mediums in a sensuous manner. For example, during one message sequence, Glenda leant forward, posing with an imaginary cigarette. She states that the spirit she is in contact with was a smoker, and that he would stand in such a way. This information is given to her as an impression: she explains that the spirit is ‘making her feel like he would stand like this’. This gives the audience a visual suggestion as to the characteristics of the spirit, as well as its use of extra information to convince the recipient of the identity of the spirit.

The spirits – as individual agents – are established via a series of traits that are communicated to mediums along with the messages intended for their recipients. These traits are used to build an impression of what the spirit was like as an active, living agent. These traits work not only to build upon this impression, but also to convince selected recipients that the medium is in touch with a spirit of someone who is known to them.

5.6 Religious and Secular Spaces: Comparative Analysis between Public Demonstrations and Divine Services

One of the main differences between mediumship demonstrations in religious and secular spaces is the influence and importance of Spiritualist philosophy. This relates also to why it is that individuals attend different settings of demonstrations of mediumship, and why they are be more likely to attend public demonstrations

over church services. Public demonstrations, such as those performed by Stephen Holbrook and Simon Peters, do not seem overly concerned with promoting Spiritualism. This is not to say that Spiritualism is absent from these demonstrations; Holbrook in particular talks about Spiritualism, describes himself as a Spiritualist, and encourages his audience to attend Spiritualist churches. However, Spiritualist philosophy does not seem to underpin the evening: it does not hold such a central presence when compared to mediums demonstrating in Divine Services that speak much more explicitly about it. Walliss (2001) has suggested that many individuals who attend Spiritualist churches on a regular basis do so not for the therapeutic benefits of proving life after death, but because they are interested in Spiritualist philosophy, and enjoy the social relationships formed with other members of the congregation. It is, of course, impossible to understand individual motivations for attending demonstrations of mediumship based on an observational study. However, we can perhaps hypothesise certain points based on the content of such demonstrations.

Firstly, it seems, perhaps, rather strange that a significantly higher number of individuals attend public demonstrations, which cost, on average £10, when it is likely that there will be a Spiritualist church near to where they live, where they could attend a demonstration of mediumship free of charge. Stage demonstrations are also more infrequent, coming around, on average, twice a year to the same venue. An obvious explanation for this seems to be that individuals who attend public demonstrations of mediumship are not looking to become Spiritualists.

Attending public demonstrations of mediumship is not, for the audience member, likely to be an act of worship or stage in their spiritual development, but rather, it is a chance for reconnection with deceased loved ones. It is also likely that, simply, public demonstrations are better advertised than Spiritualist churches, and individuals would have to know where a Spiritualist church was, information of which is not necessarily readily available.

Obviously, where money is involved in mediumship demonstrations, the demonstration itself becomes an apparent commodity. The issue of charging is controversial among Spiritualists and mediums, where a sentiment exists that mediumship is regarded as a gift, and should not be used for financial gain. However, there is also the view that individuals need to make money, and more mundane forms of employment may lessen the amount of time that mediums can use to serve the spirit world. This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. It needs mentioning here, however, for the inclusion of money – i.e., the buying tickets before the event (usually on the night) – is a significant part of public demonstrations, but is largely absent from Divine Services. Mediumship is simultaneously a role of spiritual significance, but also a form of employment. The medium is both a paid spiritual specialist and bereavement counsellor. These two terms are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but may be considered as a dualistic part of the medium's role and purpose.

The use of humour during demonstrations of mediumship has been observed in both religious and secular contexts. In both cases, humour seems to occur when selected recipients are unable to accept information given to them by the medium. Humour is used to buffer difficulties (Jefferson, 1984), and audience laughter is encouraged by the mediums' reaction. The use of humour here also undermines the significance of the difficulty in that it can be made light of or laughed off. Difficulties are also often associated with confusion on behalf of how the medium is able to portray or convey information in an intelligible and understandable way for their selected recipient. Humour is also used by different mediums through the use of jokes or humorous comments in their introductory remarks. It could be argued that humour may act as a way of lightening or buffering the atmosphere in which bereavement is acknowledged and dealt with; perhaps not just for the recipient concerned, but also for other audience members. This is, obviously, difficult terrain, and there may be circumstances in which the use of humour might be considered inappropriate, such as when someone is crying. However, humour tends to be restricted to certain points during the interaction, and occurs usually at times of trouble or toward the end of a message sequence. The use of humour suggests that demonstrations of mediumship are intended as forms of entertainment, or as a means to lighten the intensity of an event that deals with grief. This seems appropriate for both public demonstrations and Divine Services.

There are many similarities between all of the mediums observed in regards to how they set themselves up as authentic mediums, and how they create impressions of

what the spirits are like. Their spirit contacts retain impressions of characteristics that they had when they were living. Drawing on these characteristics not only works to establish an image of the spirit the medium is in contact with, but it also acts as a means of proving that the spirit is who the medium is seeking to claim that they are. Mediums are also likely to suggest that recipients are aware of physical sensations which are attributed to a spirit source. Throughout demonstrations, mediums are engaged in creating an impression of spirit presence that shares the space of the living. By making reference to physical sensations they suggest a fluidity by which spirits are able to actually touch recipients and further prove their existence in that space. Further references attributing spirit causes to unusual occurrences the recipient has recently experienced reinforce that the relationship between the living and the dead is consistent and can be experienced in a variety of settings, regardless of whether a medium is present or not. This is also true of occasions when mediums refer to activities that their recipients have recently engaged with, claiming that they received this information from spirit sources who are able to continually observe their living kith and kin. This is one of Spiritualism's key concepts: that the dead return to observe the lives of the living. The importance is in the continuation of these relationships, and this is perhaps most obviously manifest by the continuing love and affection that the spirits show for their living kith and kin. Messages of love occur at the end of message sequences, and could be seen as what all messages during such demonstrations are trying to emphasise, with evidence used to secure that this message is meaningful. However, there is little to no research in the ways in which mediums encourage this

belief in the return of the dead as spirits as an actual reality, but reference to physical sensation is an important method by which to achieve this, and has been observed in several of these observational studies. This suggests that mediums are seeking to reconnect the living with their deceased kith and kin not only in the context of their demonstration, but more generally, and in a way that means that, outside of the demonstrative context, individuals have situations in which they can revisit and find further evidence for claims of post mortem survival.

Is there a difference between individual motivation when we compare secular and religious settings of spirit communication? I would argue that the importance of proving the medium's authenticity is not as primary in Divine Services as it is in the public demonstrations of Stephen Holbrook and Simon Peters. If we consider instances during message sequences when confirmation is not given by a recipient, there is a significant difference between the reactions of recipients in public demonstrations and Divine Services. For example, if we look at trouble during Simon Peters' demonstration, we find that selected recipients will, generally, not try to assist Peters in the ways the congregational members in Divine Services will do. This is apparent in the silence that Peters receives when information is unaccepted, compared with the negotiation that occurs in Divine Services. This could be explained by the relationship that is built between mediums and Spiritualists who are part of the same church: they know each other. It could also corroborate Walliss' (2001) argument that individuals who repeatedly visit Spiritualist churches are doing so out of interest in Spiritualist philosophy and maintaining social

networks with other Spiritualists, rather than principally seeking proof of life after death.

5.7 Conclusion

Obviously, demonstrations of mediumship reflect the individual characteristic of the medium performing. What is interesting to note, however, are the generic ways in which mediums seek to present themselves as legitimate practitioners in contact with an authentic spirit world, and how they orientate towards the presence of interactive and socially aware independent agents.

These last two chapters have explored the features of demonstrations of mediumship observed for this research project. They have identified key themes from both the content and structure of these demonstrations, and analysed how mediums construct their identity, how mediums interact with their audiences, and how information about the spirit world is communicated. Demonstrations of mediumship were selected from both religious and secular contexts, and subsequently analysed by paying attention to themes relevant to specific settings and also relevant in comparison.

This study has so far found that mediums have specific ways in establishing both their own identities, and those of the spirits in which they are in contact with.

Identity work seems crucial in these demonstrations, with mediums seeking to

achieve an identity that constructs them as honest, compassionate and sympathetic. It is also crucial in regards to how they create a sense of spirit presence, how they animate their spirit contacts, and how they attempt to convince audience members of the authenticity of these spirit contacts, as well as of themselves as genuine mediums.

Interaction with audience members seems far less problematic in religious contexts, although there is evidence to suggest that particular mediums may be less likely to receive positive negotiation. There is often trouble in interactions, but differences in the way that trouble is responded to by recipients and dealt with by the medium.

The use of humour seems, mainly, to occur during these times.

Information about the spirit world is often introduced implicitly, although in secular demonstrations of mediumship certain insights are provided in introductory speeches. However, while this information is implicit, mediums work to present evidence that they are genuinely in contact with the spirit world, and a significant amount of implicit information is revealed through this work.

It is important to note that the ways in which mediums are seen to negotiate, represent and interact with spirit others has an ostensible experiential basis.

However, due to the nature of these observational studies, information about this contact, and how mediums themselves conceive of the spirit world, is unavailable.

Issues regarding identity, interaction and the negotiation of spirit presences are

interlinked, and the private aspects of mediumistic experiences play a significant role in how these activities come to be managed in public spaces. It seems necessary to therefore consider how mediums account for these private experiences that are situated as the driving forces behind these public demonstrations. In the next chapter, I will examine these experiences more closely, by drawing on interviews with mediums and their accounts of these experiences and their lives.

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Chapter Six

Mediums' accounts of identity and experiences

6.1 Introduction

In the previous two chapters it has been argued that a significant part of mediumship demonstrations are influenced by particular aspects of the mediums' own identity. Demonstrations are guided by the individual medium, and while they may follow a basic framework, the actual medium demonstrating spirit communication at a given time is responsible for the content and experiential quality of the event. Formulating and managing specific identities is done throughout the demonstration, and alongside this, mediums must also construct and manage the specific identities of their spirit contacts.

Generally, researchers have not entered into dialogue with mediums, which has left a considerable void in the literature on personal experience. They have often been viewed with suspicion or ignored by parapsychologists, but even in the existing sociological literatures, researcher attention has generally been more interested in those who seek to consume mediumship demonstrations (Haywood, 1985; Skultans, 1974; Walliss, 2001) or via the use of questionnaires or literature analysis' to establish similarities between certain biographical factors, such as religion and occupation (Emmons & Emmons, 2003; Richard & Adato, 1982). Subsequently, there is little detailed research into mediumship biography, or their experiences of

spirit on a day to day basis. This is, nevertheless, an important topic to study, as it is precisely these themes which underpin mediumship demonstrations, and are therefore worthy of further investigation. If we look at the research gathered by Emmons & Emmons (2003) we can find an awareness that mediums talk about their early lives, how they became a medium, and what it is like to be in contact with spirit. While this study contains a wealth of summarised information on various aspects of mediumship, there is often a shortage of intensive analysis, and extracts from accounts, be they textual or conversational, are absent. The information about mediumship is treated to a thematic analysis which, while presenting a good summary of their findings, does not give us access into how mediums' structure their accounts.

This chapter will examine the biographical and experiential information gathered from seventeen semi-structured interviews conducted with practising mediums living in England. It will look at how identities are formulated within the interview context, and will focus on how mediums account for the role of experience in their early life history, how they become mediums, how they view their contemporary roles, and how they describe being in contact with spirits

6.2 Identity

Identities are constructed and managed in the moment: they occur within the actual exchange of talk, and are not static or fixed concrete aspects of being (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998, eds). As Holstein & Gubrium (1992) have argued, meaning is actively and socially created, and will be managed in the context of the interview. What it means to be an interview participant changes during its course. This is relevant also for the interviewer, as discussed in chapter three.

This section will analyse the ways in which mediums position their identity in relation to the interview questions and situation, and will explore what kinds of identities they seek to establish, and how this may be achieved. There are two key areas that I wish to discuss: the role of early childhood experiences, and how individuals come to realise that they have mediumistic abilities and so go on to develop and later practise mediumship.

6.2.1 *Early experiences*

Firstly, here is an extract recalling a childhood apparitional experience:

6.1.1 [Andrew, male]

1 I: when did you have your first experience of spirit?
2 M: I always remember lying in bed one night and being
3 woken up and seeing a figure come through my bedroom
4 to the bedroom window and then just walk back again.
5 It felt very very peaceful, but I thought, uh, that's
6 strange though, and distanced it.

Firstly, use of the term 'always' is significant, and seems to emphasise both the significance and lucidity of this experience. 'I can always remember' suggests that the experience is significant to Andrew: his use of 'always' as a prefixing term stresses its *consistency* as something he can remember. It suggests that this memory has remained embedded in his life history, and can be easily recalled in the current day: it is an experience that has retained its significance. Also, 'I always remember' suggests that the experience may have been recalled previously. Had the individual stated 'I remember lying in bed one night', it may be that this memory was being invoked for the purpose of the interview. However, the use of the term 'always' suggests that it has been recalled previously, he *can always remember* it, which signals it as an experience that has left a lasting impression. This, again, emphasises its importance.

The use of the term 'always' is also significant in establishing a consistency to Andrew's identity. He has *always* been aware of something else, and his early memories of such are something that he can *always* remember. The emphasis that the use of 'always' provides here is that his awareness and experiences are important. In this sense, the use of 'always' is an example of an extreme case formulation (Pomerantz, 1986). Extreme case formulations are often employed to influence anticipated judgements. To claim that one is able to communicate with spirits is often considered controversial or foolish, so it is likely that individuals will anticipate a sceptical response. The use of an extreme case formulation is employed to emphasise the point being made. Here, 'always' is used to suggest that these memories and feelings are significant. Andrew's use of the term 'always' in these extracts is similar to the use of always in extracts from young people affiliated with specific subcultures (in this cases, subcultures associated with rock music) recorded by Widdicombe & Wooffitt (1995). In these extracts, the use of always precedes as description of a particular affiliation or interest (the examples given as feeling comfortable in jeans, and liking horror stories) that link them to a particular subculture. They argue that "...by characterising their preferences and so on as 'always' existing, they suggest that these preceded sub cultural affiliation." (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995: 144). What Andrew seems to be doing here is demonstrating that these experiences, and his awareness, preceded his affiliation with mediumship (indeed, he did not come to consider himself as a medium until in his forties). The vagueness with which he recalls his awareness is interesting

because it seems to resist conformity to spiritual philosophies typically associated with the practise of mediumship, whereby such experiences would be attributed to spirits and the spirit world. This will be discussed in more detail shortly.

The use of 'I remember lying in bed one night' followed by an account of an apparitional experience is an example a what Wooffitt (1992) describes as an 'x and then y' moment. Wooffitt (1992) found that individuals recounting paranormal experiences were likely to position the revealed presence of the paranormal as something that has interrupted an otherwise normal event. So, in Andrew's example, 'I remember lying bed one night' (x) is an ordinary activity into which a paranormal apparition appeared (y). The significance of using an ordinary event (x) as the situation of the paranormal experience situates that an experience of the paranormal was not expected: it was an otherwise ordinary event. This preserves its authenticity as a paranormal experience, as it was something unexpected and therefore the individual was not predisposed to experiencing it. Also, the significance of its interruption of the ordinary suggests that Andrew was surprised by it: this is reinforced by his recollection that he thought it was 'strange'. The use of this memory, as constructed in Andrew's account, is not merely the provision of an account of seeing a figure in a bedroom, but is also structured amid his thoughts and feelings of that time. Andrew recounts that it felt 'very very peaceful': the use of 'very very' stresses the emotional benevolence of the experience. Experiences of ghosts have often been expressed within a discourse of fear: ghosts are frightening because they are unexpected (or, to use Evans' (1982) metaphor, 'uninvited

guests'), or because they should not (according to scientific models) appear. Also, a wide range of fictionalised (and in many cases ostensibly non-fictionalised) depictions of ghosts with malevolent desires and characteristics can be found in numerous facets of popular culture. However, Andrew's description of the experience as being peaceful presents a state opposite to that of threat or fear, thereby distinguishing the experience as benevolent. Also, the significance of remembering the experience as peaceful is connected to his everyday understanding of its past significance, and demonstrates a benevolent understanding of the spirit world and their interaction with the world of the living. This is observable in other areas of Andrew's interview, for example:

6.1.2 [Andrew, male]

1 I think I've always felt that there's been something
2 there which I've never really been able to describe..
3 I've never really been into describing a character or
4 but its been a something, um, and its been something
5 friendly, so its been something else, maybe
6 otherworldly, but at the same time in the world, but
7 its been very very friendly, so it has been, in that
8 sense, a spirit force or presence.

In this extract we can again find use of the term 'always', but also 'very very'. If we look at the latter part of this extract firstly, we see that 'very very' is used to prefix his description of 'friendly' in a similar manner as 'peaceful' was prefixed by 'very

very' in the previous extract. The use of the term 'friendly' occurs twice, again emphasising the benevolent sensuous quality of his experiences. Andrew is constructing his experiences as positive, and the use of the term 'friendly' suggests that what he is experiencing is interpreted by him as having a 'friendly' intention. To describe something as 'friendly' is interesting, because it invokes a sense of relating. Interestingly, it is shortly after his use of friendly that Andrew does in fact use the explanation of 'spirit force or presence', so his construction of this experience orientates to a definite something that he has described as friendly. This suggests an interpretation of implied intention, i.e. he interprets the spirit force or presence's reaction to him as being positive.

While he orientates toward a definite spirit presence, Andrew's depiction of such a presence is vague. In this extract, the use of such vagueness is useful as it undermines a predisposition or knowledge about the experience he had as a child, and preserves the significance of it as an 'x...and then y' moment (Wooffitt, 1992). Andrew's vagueness, and the fact that he does not discuss the spirit world explicitly, is further implicitly justified by claiming that he has 'never really been into describing a character'. Again, this establishes a consistency for his identity as someone whose vague descriptions are typical of his ongoing character. It gives the impression of individuality, but also positions these experiences as unexpected: he did not, at the time, really know what they were, so this suggests that he is accounting for them as he experienced them, i.e. as something out of the ordinary that he did not really understand. This is a particular feature of the self he is

recollecting in this account: he did not, initially, attribute his experiences and feelings as evidence that he was a medium.

Avoiding direct knowledge of phenomena is commonly found in accounts of paranormal events. Wooffitt (1992) found that:

“...speakers claiming to have had an anomalous experience cannot be seen too readily to accept the existence of the phenomenon they believe they have encountered. Naming the phenomenon at the start of the account could be taken as a sign of a speaker’s knowledge of and interest in the phenomenon. This in turn could support the inference that the experience was a product of the perceptual set resulting from accumulated knowledge, or simply a manifestation of a wish-fulfilment to have a direct contact with the phenomena... Evidence of such personal commitment can invite sceptical responses about the personal credibility of a speakers and the experience they claim to have had.” (Wooffitt, 1992:)

Andrew constructs his identity, in these early extracts, as someone who had a vague awareness of ‘something’, but did not have any firm beliefs or understandings at the time. His orientation to a vague awareness situates his identity as someone without prior assumptions or expectations, going against a sceptical assumption of accumulated knowledge or wish fulfilment. There is another way that he does this. Let’s go back to the first extract taken from Andrew’s interview, and focus on the last two lines:

6.1.1 [Andrew, male]

5 It felt very very peaceful, but I thought, uh, that's
6 strange though, and distanced it.

While Andrew has established the benevolent quality of this early experience, his account also includes a recollection of how this early experience was interpreted, and what reaction it met from Andrew. It could be anticipated that someone claiming to be a medium would recognise such an experience as evidence of the spirit world, and furthermore use such to corroborate their position. It may also imply that they had a predisposition for paranormal experiences. However, Andrew's initial response was that what he had experienced was 'strange', and the use of 'strange' here works to affirm that it was something he recognised was out of the ordinary. Furthermore, he 'distanced' this experience. This is interesting, because although Andrew has constructed an awareness of spiritual forces and presences as a consistent part of his identity, he is nevertheless here displaying having had an estrangement from these experiences. Rather than integrate this experience into his childhood identity, he chose to 'distance' it. This is particularly important in understanding both his early relationship with such an experience and his eventual development as a medium (which will be discussed in more detail shortly): he did not initially interpret these experiences as evidence of his ability to communicate with spirits. In fact, he ignored their relevance (he 'distanced it'), considering them as 'strange'. This is also an example of doing 'being ordinary' (Sacks, 1984) in that Andrew is showing that he responded to an unusual

experience in an ordinary way, i.e. he recognised it was strange and resisted it.

Andrew's explanation of 'distancing' his early experience suggests that he did not share it with others. Experiencing and/or believing in such phenomena can be met with a mixture of responses from family and peers. For example, if we look at the following extract, we can see how the term 'always' is used to emphasise the importance of a consistent belief in life after death, but also reveals how other people's reactions to such beliefs were interpreted:

6.2.1 [Rachel, female]

1 I can always remember knowing that there was life
2 after death because people used to say that think,
3 being a small child, people used to think that that
4 was very quaint...

The use of 'always' is linked both to a consistency of belief, but also to an awareness of other's interpretations of personal beliefs. The memory recalled here is positioned amid a recollection of how her experiences were dismissed by others because of her childhood. The use of 'because' situates her 'always remembering' as connected to reactions from others that labelled such beliefs as 'quaint' and due to her being a 'small child'. She can always remember this belief in life after death because of the reaction from other people. However, her repair of 'say to think' on line two is interesting, as it situates the reaction from saying to thinking (and therefore, from one specific action to inferred thought which could manifest itself in

other actions) suggesting that Rachel interpreted such an opinion as a consistent feature of what other people thought. It is also possible that her recollection of people thinking that her belief in life after death was quaint because she was a small child orientates to an awareness that her beliefs were patronised and not taken seriously because of her immaturity. But also, it seems that she associates belief in life after death as something that others thought small children believed in. However, she revokes an affiliation of belief in life after death with immaturity by maintaining that these beliefs are part of her contemporary identity. This demonstrates that even though Rachel has experienced critique from others, she has remained convinced of life after death, thus prioritising her own experiences. Furthermore, this presents her as someone who is not swayed by the opinions of others, and that these beliefs have been strengthened in the presence of others' critique. So, in this extract Rachel is demonstrating an awareness of how other people considered her beliefs, but subsequently her use of this recollection in conjunction with her contemporary identity reveals that the consistency of her belief has remained. Her use of 'used to think' emphasises this, by suggesting that they may now think differently (indeed, Rachel reported that her mother has since accepted her daughter's mediumistic ability), and that she was right, even as a small child.

This extract can also be seen as an indicator of how individuals have interpreted their identity in connection with others. Rachel identifies that her belief in life after death was not taken seriously, and that this signalled a difference between her and

others. The recollection that people thought such beliefs were quaint, and associated with her immaturity, situates Rachel as someone who felt patronised and not taken seriously. However, these beliefs have proved a consistent part of identity which – considering that she is now a practising medium – has since found legitimation.

A feeling of being different from others because of their experiences and beliefs was often recalled by other mediums. However, feelings of being different were also located as having more mundane explanations, an example of which can be found in the following extract:

6.3.1 [Simon, male]

1 I was always different as a child, I suppose, because
2 I was brought up in a very in a farming community so
3 it was all very much village-fied, and so I was
4 always a bit older than all the rest of the kids,
5 and my attitude, I got on well with older people not
6 younger people and you know I'd like, I used to go
7 into the woods, I loved my own space and I was quite
8 happy with nature and things like that so I never
9 really was fitted in, lets put it that way, and I
10 suppose its hard to say that but you know I didn't
11 have a lot of friends like I say wi-with friends, and
12 I wasn't into sport and you know the usual things I
13 was very sensitive...

The medium quoted in the above extract, a male in his late forties, makes reference to having grown up in a small, agricultural community, which restricted his access to others of his own age during his childhood. This is reinforced by recollecting a disinterest in typical childhood interests and pursuits, such as sport. The use of 'always' situates his awareness of being different as consistent: his feelings of being different were ongoing concerns. The medium seems also to suggest that – by using an example of 'sport' and describing himself as 'sensitive' – he situates his difference in regards to male peers in particular. Masculinity is conventionally associated with displays of hardness, strength and emotional control (Gilmore, 1983; Whitehead, 2003). However, sensitivity seems an important quality for mediums to claim. As discussed in chapter four, the male mediums Stephen Holbrook and Simon Peters often present themselves as being 'sensitive' during their opening speeches. It is interesting that, in this extract, the medium's self descriptive use of being sensitive seems to be used not simply as a personal disposition, but also forms part of explaining his difference to others. Simon does not simply claim that he felt different, but grounds these feelings in anecdotal details and dispositions.

Most mediums in this study came from backgrounds where their families had no prior knowledge or interest in mediumship. Some mentioned having had mothers who they recalled as having had spiritual experiences, but these individuals did not seem to play a significant role in regards to their own development as mediums.

Feelings of being different were mentioned by many mediums, and their early experiences were usually kept private, sometimes at the insistence of a family member whom they had decided to confide in, but often because of their anticipation of scepticism and ridicule.

These early experiences would almost always occur when the medium was alone. We find an example of this in the following extract. This extract is from a unique interview because this particular medium, Janet, comes from a lineage of mediums (only two mediums claimed they were part of a lineage of maternal mediumship).

6.4.1 [Janet, female]

1 All our family, all the females... down the female line
2 [were mediums]. So its, its nice when, when you're
3 nurtured, as well with that. Its been a bonus... I
4 suppose right from being really tiny, its something
5 that, people have always talked to me, and looked
6 after me as well bizarrely enough, you know like, if
7 my mum went out, I mean, from being really tiny... as
8 soon as she closed the door, and the house would fill
9 up, so I'd be supposedly on my own, but the room was
10 full of people that would be there and just look
11 after me while she came back, and as soon as the door
12 was closed behind her, they appeared, so I had loads
13 of friends!

Again, we can find the use of the term 'always', this time referring to the consistency of her propensity for spirit communication. Experiencing others talking to her is a consistent feature of Janet's biography, and is an ongoing and repetitive personal experience. What is interesting about this particular extract, however, is that the medium describes not only a benevolent relationship with spirits, but that they became visible when her mother had left and she was alone. Even though her family had a nurturing affect in regard to her experiences, she did not experience contact with spirit beings while they were present.

While her female family members are described as having 'nurtured' her abilities, the spirits who became visible to her were also nurturing in their approach: they spoke to her, and cared for her; they were her friends. These descriptive terms construct her experiences as powerfully positive, as well as situating her relationship with spirits as kind and friendly: she describes the spirits as friends, and they seem part of a privately experienced kith and kin network.

These early experiences of spirits are obviously, in Janet's case, an ongoing part of her history. However, Janet did not actively begin to practise mediumship until much later. She recounted that it took her a while to develop a strong connection with spirit whereby she was able to actively communicate with and understand them. While she had such experiences since early childhood, her *mediumship* needed to be developed.

Mediums did not identify themselves as mediums based on these early experiences. Often these experiences were a source of bewilderment, or something from which the medium estranged themselves. Their importance seems to have become more paramount in light of later events, and it is only after a transformative period that individuals began to identify themselves as medium

According to McClenon (1994), there seems a tendency for psychic practitioners (such as mediums) to have had a history of spiritual experiences stemming back to early childhood. These early experiences "...stimulate a belief in spirits, souls, life after death, and anomalous capacities" (McClenon, 1994: 93), and can be considered the starting points for eventual careers involved with the practice and demonstration of spiritual (or, as McClenon puts, it 'wondrous') phenomena. This seemed typical of contemporary British mediums also; thirteen of the seventeen mediums interviewed reported the onset of spirit experience as rooted in early childhood. However, while these experiences are undoubtedly connected to the eventual development of their mediumship, they do not serve as a straightforward precursor: often these early experiences are doubted or dismissed until later in life. Also, early experiences do not explain spontaneous cases where individuals found that they were able to (or had the ability to) communicate with spirits later in life and seemingly out of nowhere. The sample of this study was not large enough to explore this in depth, although it is interesting to note that Erlendur Haraldsson (2004) found that 40% of the mediums he interviewed in Iceland claimed their

discovery of mediumistic abilities to have been spontaneous. This is obviously an area that requires further research. What is important, however, is that the accounts suggest that early experiences did not automatically lead individuals into the practise of mediumship.

6.2.2 *Transformation*

In this section I am going to look at three extracts that show how three individuals, who are now practising mediums, began to accept that they had mediumistic abilities.

In this first extract, Eleanor uses certain forms of stake inoculation (Potter, 1996) to emphasise that 'being psychic' (another extrasensory facet she has along with her mediumship) is something that she realised after finding that she can do various things associated with tarot. It was not something she had initially assumed, despite having had similar experiences in the past. This can be seen in the way that she orientates to certain experiences as transformative in their own right, and not simply as linked to a series of similar events that eventually led her to make such a conclusion.

6.5.1 [Eleanor, female]

1 because I went to evening classes at Milton Keynes
2 college, moved around every such a lot about every
3 two years we moved house and then we moved back to
4 Luton and there were evening classes for tarot. I
5 went to those and he said right this week we'll do
6 blah blah blah, and I thought I can do that, and then
7 he said we'll do so and do, and I thought, I can do
8 that as well, so having said that I didn't realise I
9 was psychic if you see what I mean, I'd always
10 thought I was different, put it that way, and what
11 happened I could always smell this perfume, no matter
12 where I was it would suddenly it would be the same
13 perfume or it could be freesias I don't really know
14 what it was but it was a perfume, a ladies perfumey
15 smell and I could always smell that from a very young
16 age, and I used to walk my dogs a lot out in the
17 fields so whether it cornfields I got that smell,
18 whether it's a green field I got the smell, I'd look
19 over fences to see if there was a bunch of flowers or
20 a tree or something on the other side, so I got that...

Eleanor's use of stake inoculation here can be seen when she claims 'I didn't realise I was psychic'. The claim that she did not realise she was psychic follows her

account of a visit to a tarot class in Milton Keynes. This use of stake inoculation may work against an assumption that, if she visited a class that was based on the study of an esoteric subject, then it may be that she had some prior interest or investment (stake), and therefore prior belief. Due to a class being associated with learning, it may also be likely that she anticipates the assumption that she was looking to develop her abilities. However, by stating that she did not know she was psychic works to undermine such anticipated assumptions, thereby prioritising that this was something that she discovered as a result of her experiences in the class. It constructs the class as something she had attended simply out of interest, not because she believed she was psychic.

Similarly, she employs stake inoculation when recounting her experiences of a particular 'perfumey smell'. It is likely that, by describing it as 'perfumey', which is linked to a mundane origin, the assumption would be that someone's actual perfume was the cause of the smell. However, by describing the smell as 'perfumey' rather than as perfume, she orientates to the use of 'perfume' as a similarity, although does not attribute this as the cause of the smell. Her vagueness has a specific function here, as it orientates toward something distinct and recognisable, but does not actively affiliated with a set description that would imply understanding. Similarly, this is elaborated by the consistency of her experiencing this scent: she could smell it in a variety of settings, even when there were other powerful smells around (the example she uses are cornfields and green fields). Finally, she recounts that she tried to look for a rational source to account for the smell. Wooffitt (1992) finds a

similar use of seeking a rational source for unusual experiences when he analysed the account of a medium who recalled being able to hear a particular tune. Rather than attribute the source of this to a paranormal source in the first instance, she details a number of rational searches for a mundane source before claiming paranormal causation. Eleanor seems to do this also, and it is also interesting that this smell seems to have been a part of otherwise mundane activities, such as walking her dogs out in fields, thus working as an example of ‘x... and then y’ (Wooffitt, 1992) in that she is reporting that she was engaging in ordinary activities into which something extraordinary occurred.

Eleanor’s extract demonstrates a typical means of how mediums account for unusual experiences, and parallels also with Wooffitt’s (1992) analysis of lay people’s paranormal experiences. A rational explanation is generally sought in the first instance, but the consistency and on going nature of the experience eventually leads the individual to accept that it may have a spiritual explanation. Also, again, we see that Eleanor is constructing herself as someone who had no prior belief that she had psychic abilities.

What Eleanor is doing here is to demonstrate that she had no prior belief in having psychic abilities, which emphasises that it was series of experiences that led her to believe that she had psychic abilities. In the following extract, we can see another example of a medium who believes in mediumship because of experiences at a specific event:

6.6.1 [Paul, male]

1 I: When did you have your first experience of spirit?

2 M: I got into mediumship through my mother always
3 claimed to see things and hear things. And, I, I
4 really didn't pay that much attention to it, always
5 thought that everybody's parents were a bit cranky,
6 and that happened to be hers, you know. Um, and it
7 was not until um my father in law died, and he was my
8 drinking partner and we were just mates, you know,
9 um, and I really wanted to get a message for my wife
10 because she was absolutely devastated, and my mother
11 persuaded me to go the spiritualist church and uh I
12 just happened to be lucky and very fortunate to see a
13 man called Gordon Higginson... and he was an amazing
14 medium, and I walked into his demonstration an open
15 minded observer, no more than that, but walked out a
16 spiritualist, and it had a-an amazing effect on me,
17 um, and so I started to go to the local spiritualist
18 church and on a number of occasions I was told by a
19 medium that I would do the work myself, but I had no
20 idea how or what or whatever, so I actually made a
21 decision to go to awareness classes at the church and
22 things started to happen straight away

There are two key points in this extract that are important for understanding how Paul became a medium; firstly, he uses stake inoculation by orientating to an initial critical stance regarding mediumship (despite his background as someone who is familiar with the phenomena), and secondly, the explanation he provides regarding his conversion and acceptance of the reality of the spirit world, which in turn leads to his development as a medium.

As stated previously, Paul seems to present his first experience with mediumship as the result of having a mother who can 'see and hear things'. However, he does not report that his mother was a medium, rather, simply that she could 'see and hear things'. It is interesting that he firstly seems to estrange himself from his mother's claims, reporting that he initially thought she was 'a bit cranky'. However, he does not construct his mother as being particularly unusual, because he orientates her 'crankiness' to a general assumption that everybody's parents had something 'a bit cranky' about them. It is suggested that his mother's experiences seem to have gained significance following his conversion, as he uses this information early in his account, and if we look at. To state that he believed that 'everyone's parents were a bit cranky, and that just happened to be hers' while not distinguishing her as being particularly unusual, nevertheless orientates him as someone who did not endorse the claim at the time. It is interesting that he introduces information about his mother 'always claiming to see and hear things' at the beginning of the interview, which he states this is how he got into mediumship. However, this might

suggest that he has a vested interest and potentially prior disposition toward an acceptance of mediumship. His description of thinking his mother was a 'bit cranky' is an instance of stake inoculation, as he is dismissing the significance of having a mother who 'saw and heard things': at the time, he thought she was 'a bit cranky', and so he had no vested interest in mediumship based on these experiences during his early life. Also, describing his mother as someone who 'saw and heard things' is usefully vague: he does not cite her as a medium, but as someone who had vague experiences of seeing and hearing unusual things. Again, this could be seen as an example of stake inoculation, but it also suggests that his mother may have had mediumistic experiences, but was not a practising medium. This distances him from an affiliation with a community connected to mediumship, and therefore a previously informed position regarding mediumship. This is particularly important when considering how he came to practise mediumship.

The key catalyst that leads to his eventual acceptance of mediumship comes after the death of his father in law, who he further illustrates as a 'mate'. This reveals an attachment that is significant in that it establishes that the death of this individual was meaningful to him. The relationship between someone and their father-in-law is potentially ambiguous: such an attachment does not necessarily infer an obvious relationship. By describing his late father in law as a mate, Paul is demonstrating that this relationship was friendly.

His motivation concerning a mediumship demonstration is initially critical. He

situates himself as someone without a prior investment by stating that his mother *persuaded* him to go, and that his main motivation concerned getting a message for his wife. This orientation implies critique because it denies a personal investment, but it does not express extreme scepticism, as it would be unlikely that, if he was adamantly sceptical, he would seek spirit messages for his distraught wife.

However, it is important in that it signifies that he was not an *active believer*, and that his subsequent conversion was a response to witnessing a demonstration he found convincing. Paul is presenting himself as someone whose conversion to Spiritualism came about because he *experienced* evidence of the existence of the spirit world, and his orientation to an initial critical stance emphasises the importance and legitimacy of the actual event that prompted his conversion. This is reiterated when he provides the following summary: ‘I walked into his demonstration an open minded observer, no more than that, but walked out a spiritualist’. Again, this constructs that he places great importance on this demonstration, and that its experience has a powerful affect on him. It also prompted him to become involved with a Spiritualist church, and it was there that he was told by a medium that he also had mediumistic abilities. This is an interesting means by which Paul is both resisting and affiliating to a particular membership categorisation: being a Spiritualist. His initial resistance strengthens his contemporary affiliation because of the assumptions associated with having prior interest to such communities. As Widdicombe (1998) has argued, membership affiliation can imply conformity, and therefore loss of individuality. In Paul’s account, establishing himself as a rational individual who is convinced on the

weight of his own experiences is crucial to his account, so initial resistance works to present him as being without prior attachment to Spiritualist at the time of these events. His stake was not with the Spiritualist community, but this is group he decided to join after a specific experience. His later affiliation also strengthens his experience by suggesting that it was powerful enough to change his mind and lead him to self identify as a Spiritualist.

All of the mediums interviewed for this study claim that it was another medium who was the first to suggest that they had mediumistic abilities, and that this was important. Even in Janet's case, who had grown up as part of a lineage of mediums, it was other who initially characterised her as having mediumistic abilities.

Typically, mediums recounted that an already established medium would approach them, usually in a Spiritualist church or group, and tell them that they had such abilities and that they needed to develop them. In the following extract, taken from Simon's interview, we can see an example of this:

6.3.2 [Simon, male]

1 I didn't come into it until I was in my forties so
2 I'm not really come from any spiritual um family or
3 anything like that. I was going through a very
4 difficult patch in my life because I'd moved from
5 London back to Lincolnshire where I come from...I'd
6 left all my friends behind, so someone suggested
7 going to the spiritualist church. And, um I though

8 well yes, but no one would go with me because I
9 wouldn't go on my own because it was something that
10 was new to me. I'd experienced a couple of things in
11 London, but nothing that really sparked me off, I
12 thought, well that's interesting, it was just a laff
13 at that time. And I eventually did go to our local
14 spiritualist church which is [in Lincolnshire] and um, I
15 used to sit there and I used to think they'd throw me
16 out because I used to laff, I used to giggle at
17 everything that went wrong because I didn't
18 understand it you know you used to get speakers there
19 and you used to you know I used to think well that's
20 a load of rubbish because I really didn't understand
21 it but it was just a night to go out and a meeting
22 people and then I went um I met I linked up with two
23 friends there and they said well come to another
24 church with us and I went to that church and the
25 medium there she gave me a message which I didn't
26 understand, I'll be honest with you, and then she
27 said went away she said I've got to come back to you
28 because you're very spiritually aware you should
29 develop. Of course that was I thought well no that's
30 not going to happen, and afterwards I found out that
31 she came from the um town that I'd just moved into

32 well I've just out the village, just outside and um
33 she said come and see me and um I said yes ok and I
34 thought well I've got away with that. She gave me her
35 telephone number, and then I was in the market one
36 day and because I was unemployed at this time because
37 I'd changed over and I wasn't working and she said
38 are you going to come and see me, and she made a date
39 for me and she lived near um in a mobile home in a
40 caravan park and I went to see her and that's how it
41 started, she just explained a bit about the guides
42 and how its d-uhm went on and she said go and sit
43 home and meditate, which I did, because I live in an
44 old farm house which has got a lot of character to
45 it, I was on my own and um there was one bedroom that
46 I could never sleep in, it was a weird bedroom, I sat
47 there and meditated and it all just happened from day
48 one. Within a week I was doing what I'm doing now
49 which she found a bit unbelievable because she
50 wouldn't accept it at first so I had to go and see
51 her she asked me she did a test on me and she said
52 yes you can do it.

There is obviously a lot going on in this extract: I will focus on the demonstrative use of stake inoculation to justify Simon's current position as a medium. Simon is

rather unusual in regards to typical reports of mediumship development periods, because, once he had accepted himself as a medium and made a recognised contact with the spirit world, he was ‘within a week... doing what [he is]... doing now [i.e., practising mediumship]’. We can see this also in his recollection of the other medium’s initial scepticism regarding how quick he had mastered his mediumship: the development of mediumship is not usually a rapid process.

The key catalyst to Simon’s becoming a medium was the recognition of this already established medium regarding his as yet unrealised abilities. Previously, Simon has orientated himself with a prior stake in mediumship: he is someone not overly interested in mediumship; he had started going to Spiritualist churches for social reasons, and initially, despite having had a few experiences earlier in his life, found it amusing. These characterisations all work to establish his then identity as playful and without prior investment. Early spiritual experiences are not given any overt significance; it is impossible to ascertain whether or not this is an accurate interpretation, but what can be understood from this extract is that Simon himself does not seem to prioritise them, dismissing them as ‘nothing that sparked [him]... off’. While he is familiar with extraordinary experiences, he does not claim to have a prior stake or investment in them. The use of their ‘not sparking him off’ is significant because it suggests that they did not have active influence in his everyday life: he was not changed by them. This again, prioritises the significance of the events that led to his eventual development as a medium. It is interesting to note that his recollection of finding these preliminary experiences of Spiritualism as

amusing are quickly coupled with current day beliefs: 'I *used* to giggle at everything that went wrong *because I didn't understand it* [i.e., at the time]' (own emphasis added). This emphasises his initial critique, but draws also on his current state, so he does not intentionally undermine his current Spiritualist beliefs, but rather locates his lack of understanding as the reason he did not identify these early experiences as significant. It also shows how the historical self can be drafted alongside the contemporary self in accounts that ask the individual to recall their past, particularly when discussing individual change and transformation.

His orientation as someone who was critical of mediumship emphasises further the importance of the already established medium's insistence on his own abilities that lead to his eventual acceptance and transformation. Because he 'didn't understand it' at the time, meant that a transformative episode was important in establishing mediumship in his active world view: the event of being recognised by and eventually accepted the recognition of an already experienced medium, and his decision to pay attention to the possibility of spirit interaction is what changed him. However, this acceptance of having mediumistic abilities was not something that followed smoothly: Simon recalls that throughout this process he was sceptical; he did not follow her up straight away, but it was after a coincidence that he eventually accepted her invitation. Throughout this extract Simon is employing stake inoculation to present himself as someone who was *genuinely* converted because of his experiences. He was ordinary, displayed sceptical (i.e. ordinary) reactions throughout the process until he discovered their meaning and significance for

himself.

The influence of another medium is significant. Why would mediums mention another individual as a catalyst for the eventual development of their own mediumship? It seems that there are two main obvious advantages for this inclusion: firstly, it situates a conclusion of mediumship as externally placed, i.e. it was not the individual who decided that they were a medium, but other people. This works against being seen to have a predisposition or stake. They are not solely relying on their own personal experiences or attributing social significance to them, rather, this is done externally by a figure of knowledgeable authority. Secondly, it legitimates their mediumship by noting that it was another medium – and therefore an already legitimatised figure – who recognised and corroborated them: they were actively accepted by the Spiritualist community. This latter point may be particularly important for understanding how mediums come to be accepted, and how they themselves feel valid as legitimate mediums in existing groups where mediumship has already found safe ground and supportive practise.

Many mediums have had experiences of spirit since their early years, but generally do not come to regard themselves as mediums until much later in life. These early experiences are generally unexpected and feature as part of the medium's private world. Spirits appear when the individual is alone, and mediums seem sensitive to anticipated scepticism during these times resulting in a reluctance to share their experiences, and a sceptical reaction to the meaning of their experiences also.

There are a number of reasons why individuals find themselves in settings where mediumship is practised, though they construct their initial stance as critical or sceptical. This emphasises the importance of particular events as convincing and genuine. Mediums claim to be ordinary people to whom something genuinely extraordinary has occurred, and it is through experience and the acknowledge of legitimate authorities that they come to actively believe in the spirit world. Individuals generally start to 'become' mediums because their as yet unrealised mediumistic abilities are recognised by an already established medium. This recognition legitimates these past experiences, and is generally the catalyst for their eventual development, at the end of which they emerge as someone who both accepts that they are a medium, and so go on to practise it publicly.

6.3 Experience

There are a variety of ways by which mediums can experience spirit. These different ways are related to the five physical senses, such as visual or auditory capacities. In many cases mediums are able to experience spirit in a variety of ways, although it is not uncommon for mediums to be able to experience spirit through only one capacity. I will examine three extracts from mediums to illustrate how ways of experiencing contact with spirit beings have been explained, drawing on two mediums who are able to experience spirit in a variety of ways. Firstly, Janet states that:

6.4.2 [Janet, female]

1 Its as though the right hand side of me head works,
2 the left hand side doesn't. So, if I'm having
3 conversation, its as though that side of me face has
4 been taken away, me brain, and if its to do with
5 channelling, I can even point to areas of me brain
6 that actually I can feel working at that time... so its
7 more to do with, like if I'm talking to spirit its
8 more like somewhere in this angle [points to top right hand side
9 of her skull] but further down, about an inch, an inch and a
10 half into it, and its as though I can feel a light
11 going on, and its like a really faint like buzzing,
12 vibrating in certain parts that I can feel, um, if
13 its something to do with like a channelling of energy
14 then it seems to be that they're outside me, I'm like
15 within their body but its more like I've got a helmet
16 on... so there's different areas that I can feel
17 working, I don't feel as though I'm drifting away or
18 I'm not here anymore... I'm always conscious I'm part
19 of it... I'm quite incidental to it, people can see me
20 but in actual fact they're aware of this other
21 presence as opposed to being me, I'm quite ordinary
22 and blended into the background... its just I can feel

23 a different part of me brain that's kicking in with
24 it.

Janet's description of what it is like to be in contact with spirits is located not just as something sensuous, but as embedded within the body. Mentioning changes in areas such as the brain situates spirit communication with a technical and/or medical basis: it is something that actually manipulates, and, perhaps more importantly, can be experienced via bodily processes. This may work to ward off claims of mere misperception or self delusion by locating the experience as something physical. The emphasis on the body may also work to construct the experience as something internal: she does not experience visions of external beings, but rather feels that different parts of her body are working, and that her connectedness with spirit is based upon this.

A common feature of Janet's account is her use of simile, for example: 'its like a really faint like buzzing vibrating...'; 'like a channelling of energy...'; 'like I've got a helmet on...'. Using similes in this way positions the experience in metaphorical or comparative terms: these descriptions do not capture the experience itself, but position it as similar to something of which she can explain. It also positions the experience within a particular relationship between the interview and the interviewee: Janet's use of similies constructs her experiences using language that I would understand.

Capturing sensuousness is very difficult, and yet the sensuous quality of being in communication with spirits seems an important facet of mediumistic experience. Unfortunately, it has generally been over looked by many researchers. Another example of how spirit communication can be experienced sensuously can be seen in this following extract. Although Nicholas often practises trance mediumship, he is also able to practise mental mediumship, and is explaining what such a form of contact is like here:

6.7.1 [Nicholas, male]

1 when you get certain people link with you, they very
2 often bring with them the feelings that they had when
3 they were on the earth, for example, you know, um,
4 they might have had a particular complaint, you know,
5 they might have had cancer or heart trouble, and they
6 can give you um, you know, they can express how they
7 felt, you can pick up those feelings, you know, which
8 is a good way of, it's a good way of giving evidence
9 to somebody because if you can say you look I've got
10 such and such a person, I'm getting this pain, did
11 they pass with heart trouble, they usually say yes,
12 you know, so it confirms that, so they very often, if
13 you work clairsentiently, which I do a great deal,
14 you sense everything about the person and that can
15 the way=their mannerisms, they might=they might have

16 a particular way of talking, even swearing for
17 example, they might have uh, they might like to
18 drink, they might have been alcoholics, they might
19 have been anything, and you can= and you, you, they
20 convey that to you, you pick up that, you take on
21 those feelings very often, um, for a short time while
22 you're linking with them.

The sensuousness recorded in Nicholas' extract is based upon physical sensations: Nicholas' experiences are based upon physical sensations that the spirit had before passing over. Again, these depictions locate his experiences in a language that both the interviewer and interviewee can relate to. However, it also positions his experiences in regards to the agency of the spirits he is in connection with. This is an important feature of spirit communication: spirits demonstrate their lived individuality when communicating with mediums in order to become recognisable for the intended living recipients of their message. This extract is instructive: Nicholas is linking his experience with his demonstrations. By describing how he feels when in contact with spirit, he is positioning these experiences within a description of his demonstrations, whereby his experiences become justification for what he says during a demonstration.

Nicholas presents spirit agents as able to physically impress upon mediums during these demonstrations: 'you take on those feelings very often, um, for a short time while you're linking with them'. Nicholas is sensuously joined with his spirit

contacts during his demonstrations, but, when he claims that this is only for ‘a short time’, and only ‘while you’re linking with them’ he is further demonstrating the longevity of these experiences, and limiting them to the demonstrative context. The physical sensations he experiences from his spirit contacts have a purpose: they act as information that he can use to identify who they were to the right recipient.

In this next extract, taken from Simon’s interview, we can see how Simon’s agency is positioned in relation to both his spirit contacts and his clientele:

6.3.3 [Simon, male]

1 Um, when I uh, I do a sitting I means its before I
2 start a sitting I get nothing, I’m not, I’m my normal
3 self I’m just Simon, I just get on with the normal
4 things, but as soon as someone comes into the room
5 its like having an energy force. Its like being
6 charged up, its not, you don’t um you just kind of,
7 you’re not (1.3) sorry its someone’s just=someone’s
8 trying to help me up there, just trying to say
9 explain it properly because I do rabbit on, um, how
10 it works is you’re kind of cut off from the world,
11 present day things and so your time is devoted to the
12 person you’re with, you’re in their world from that
13 on, so you know, you=your=you become part of their
14 family become part of their lives because that’s what

15 you're there for, so what goes on around you you're
16 not aware I mean, so you could have all sort of
17 things going on and not aware of anything once that
18 once you're in that frame of mind and its like a
19 surge of energy, I don't get flashes like you know
20 some people say well how do you know, especially when
21 you're doing a demonstration how=when you got two or
22 three hundred people how'd you, you don't, some
23 people say, well I see a light bulb, I don't, I just
24 get told what to say and I just go, usually they say
25 talk to that lady in the green there and then you'll
26 open with something that they can associate like a
27 family birthday or an anniversary or a connection
28 with someone in spirit, and then once you've got your
29 link then they start, they just seem to kind of take
30 over, its like it's a lovely feeling because you=you
31 know its you know it you're not being you, and then
32 as soon as they've gone out the room then you're back
33 to your old self again.

By stating that, before he does a sitting, he is his normal self, suggests that contact with spirits is not Simon in a normal state. Indeed, he states that after the sitting is finished he is back to his old self again, which again orientates his contact with spirits as a change to his normal state.

Simon distances himself from other mediums, by mentioning actions that some do that he doesn't. This is interesting, because it may be that this reinforces his dedication to the spirits, and his obedience: i.e., 'I just get told what to say'. This obedience is also apparent earlier in the extract, when he alludes to the presence of spirit during the interview:

sorry its someone's just=someone's trying to help me up there, just trying to say explain it properly because I do rabbit on, um, how it works is you're kind of cut off from

This is interesting because, even though he claims he is 'back to his old self' when a sitting is over, and the interview is not a sitting, nevertheless he orientates to the presence of spirit who are able to influence his speech. Furthermore, their role is constructed as benevolent: they are trying to help him out.

Sittings are located as benevolent: Simon characterises his experiences as 'lovely', and stresses his connection with his clientele, and that they are the sole focus of his attention. This alignment and consideration for his clientele find further mention in this next extract from his interview:

6.3.4 [Simon, male]

1 how it works is you're kind of cut off from the
2 world, present day things and so your time is devoted
3 to the person you're with, you're in their world from
4 that on, so you know, you=your=you become part of
5 their family become part of their lives because
6 that's what you're there for, so what goes on around
7 you you're not aware I mean, so you could have all
8 sort of things going on and not aware of anything
9 once that once you're in that frame of mind and its
10 like a surge of energy

Connectedness with spirit can create a certain level of connectedness with recipients. The use of 'you're kind of cut off from the world' prioritises the role of the recipient to Simon. By describing that 'you become part of their family' suggests quite an intense level of connectedness, and constructs the experience as emotional. These descriptions also orientate Simon as someone who is compassionate: he is focused in sittings, and has an intimate connection because that is what the situation requires. It could be that these descriptions work against anticipated scepticism about the ways in which mediums manipulate the bereaved, so by constructing himself as 'devoted to the person' situates his role as someone who is compassionate.

If we consider connectedness with spirit contact, it is important to mention that the

most intensive form of this involves the medium going into a trance like state. During this time the spirit being directly entwines their agency with the medium, and the medium acts as a temporary host through the spirit can directly communicate to others. Nicholas explains this experience as:

6.7.2 [Nicholas, male]

1 When I'm working with trance, I have one guide that
2 works through me, uh, whose name is Grey Cloud, and
3 I, when when he links with me I go very deep. Where I
4 go to, I don't know, where my consciousness goes to I
5 don't know, I'm not aware of anything about me at
6 all, I'm just him, and the feelings I get with that
7 is uh one of great love for everyone, wanting to
8 communicate with them and truth to people, and
9 wanting to embrace everyone as a new audience with
10 that feeling of love and there's absolutely nothing
11 to worry about, and I feel in total command of the
12 audience, total command of the situation.

Trance mediums, generally, are unable to recall what their bodies have said during trance sessions. During trance mediumship, individuals are temporarily consciously displaced, and unable to remember what they have said or done during these demonstrations. There is a separation of consciousness, by which the agency of the medium is temporarily replaced by the agency of the spirit being. The medium's

physical presence is simply to act as a conduit for a spiritual entity. However, Nicholas is, as we have seen in other extracts, orientating to the benevolence of this kind of experience. The construction of this experience situates such forms of connectedness as very positive, and that the feelings associated with it are of 'love', and that Nicholas is able to experience this in connection with his audience also by proxy of Grey Cloud. Nicholas' agency is overshadowed by that of Grey Cloud's during these trance episodes: 'I'm not aware of anything about me at all, I'm just him...' The estrangement of the medium's own agency as replaced by that of the spirit, as depicted here by Nicholas, emphasises the authenticity and responsibility of the spirit. Grey Cloud is responsible for what Nicholas says and does during these episodes, and the way he recalls this reinforces this by stating his conscious absence and yet he is still able to gain access to sensuous experiences via a connectivity to Grey Cloud's agency.

The relationship between a medium and their spirit contact when in trance seems complex, and the following occurrence of repair seems to illustrate this. If we look at the next extract, also from Nicholas, we can observe that the medium is quick to repair the use of the word 'we' to 'he', thereby, omitting their own presence from the situation they were describing:

6.7.3 [Nicholas, male]

- 1 We were as=he was asked in fact, Grey Cloud was asked
- 2 a question once.

While the question was directed to the physical body of the medium, the medium's own individual agency was not meant to be involved in the dialogue. By repairing the use of the word 'we' to 'he', the medium removes himself from the significance of the interaction: Grey Cloud was asked a question, not Nicholas. It is Grey Cloud's presence that is important, and his spiritual agency as the author of the messages gives the messages themselves spiritual significance. This repair reinforces Grey Cloud's agency by quickly removing the implied agency of the medium in 'we'.

Generally, mediumistic experiences are regarded as positive; they are constructed as 'experiences of love' or simply 'lovely feelings'. While pain can also be involved in these connections with spirit, particularly pain in regards to physical sensations that the spirit experienced prior to their 'passing over' to the spirit world, these sensations are seen as additional to the translation process rather than as painful experiences in themselves, and mediums do not seem resentful of this: they serve as another mode of information that will convince the recipient of the spirit's identity. Pain is used in these contexts simply as information, for the spirit world is typically characterised as having an absence of pain. These explanations can ease recipients; particularly if they have witnessed a loved one endure a considerable amount of suffering prior to their death. Mediums do not seem to dwell on or give overt significance to experiences of pain, other than as a means of providing information for a sitter. They did not express any particular discomfort or upset as a result in the interviews. Many mediums explain that they are able to control such experiences by

asking the spirit to lessen such physical sensations, and these physical sensations are also terminated when spirit contact is.

Being in contact with spirits is not something this is easy for mediums to explain.

Nicolas states that:

6.7.4 [Nicholas, male]

1 it's a totally different feeling, when you try to
2 describe to somebody what its like to be attuned to
3 another mind or another group of minds, its very
4 difficult to put into words, but it is, it is an
5 enjoyable experiences overall

Being in contact with spirit beings is a unique form of connectedness that does not parallel with other everyday relationships. Due to the non corporeal nature of spirit beings, their fluidity allows for a particular kind of active, *felt* connectedness with the living medium. In trance mediumship, the spirit being becomes a part of the medium. In mental mediumship this is less intensive, however, connectedness is still active and felt, as the spirit impresses upon the medium, both physically and psychologically. Spirits are sensuous presences, and it is this sensuousness that particularly characterises how mediums experience contact with them.

Mediumistic experiences are reported as being difficult to conceptualise. Many mediums found it difficult to put into words what it is like to be in contact with

spirits. However, the following extracts show that spirits impress upon the body, and communicate with as much sensuous as factual information. The role of the medium, in the public sphere, is to be able to interpret what they are experiencing into meaningful discourse, so that a recipient to whom the spirit in question is connected can recognise and accept the authenticity of their contact. However, the way in which the medium experiences the spirit is underlyingly private, and it is only through language that outsiders have any insight into what is actually being experienced.

Contact with spirit raises interesting questions about both how mediums conceptualise sensuous experience, but also how they regard their identity in relation to that of the spirits with which they communicate. There are varying degrees of how closely connected mediums feel with the spirits they communicate with. In trance mediumship, this connectedness is at its most intense, but even in some forms of mental mediumship the closeness of the presence of a spirit, and its ability to impress upon the body, suggests a unique sense of being in relation to others. As Simon states, when his session is finished and the contact with spirit diminishes, he feels back to his old self again.

6.4 Conclusion

The use of interviews allows for the personal to be given consideration, and using mediums as the main data source gives access into these otherwise private worlds. This study has found that, although mediums were usually already experiencing evidence of spirit as children, these experiences were usually unpredictable, uncontrollable and left the individual often unsure about what they meant. Without the experience, it is very unlikely that mediums would believe in the spirit world with such conviction. This study's findings support Hufford's (1982) experiential source hypothesis, which argued against a traditional cultural source hypothesis which would dictate cultural expectations as responsible for spiritual experience. Mediums work to rationalise how they came to spiritual conclusions by essentially arguing that, due to the nature of their experiences, it is impossible to explain them as anything other than evidence of the spirit world. This process is not just key to how mediums presented themselves as mediums, but also played a crucial role in their development as mediums, and how their mediumship was incorporated into their personal identity. The relevance of others as a means of recontextualising their experiences, and gaining entry into mediumship practising communities, was also highly significant.

An often over looked dimension to understanding mediumistic experience is its underlying sensuousness. It is difficult for mediums to explain what it is like to be in contact with spirit, and they often employ comparative techniques, such as

similes. During contact with spirit beings, mediums can experience a unique connectedness with a spirit being whereby their own agency is actively aware of the presence of others, and part of that connection involves sensuous impressions that influence the otherwise mundane physical capacities of the medium.

Obviously, this study's analysis is based on the interview of seventeen mediums in England alone. This is a tiny percentage of (what I would anticipate to be) the actual number of people who claim to be mediums living in this country, as well as in other parts of Great Britain. There are also a significant number of mediums in other westernised areas, such as the USA, Canada and Iceland, and, of course, there are mediums established in a vast number of non-western societies. Due to the lack of other studies that have explored the livedness of mediumship by exploring individual accounts and biographies, it is impossible to assess how common or relevant some of the themes noted in this analysis might be when considering mediums more cross-culturally.

In the next chapter, I will examine some of these issues in the context of medium autobiographies. Considering the artificiality of the interview context, it seems necessary to look at products containing information about mediumship that are produced by the mediums themselves, and orientated to telling their story, and instructing others as the reality of the spirit world.

Chapter Seven

Identity, development and spirit experience in mediums' autobiographies

7.1 Introduction

In the last three chapters, I have examined some of the ways in which mediums represent and construct their own identity, interact with audience members, orientate toward an interactive presence of agents from the spirit world, and in interview reflect upon and account for their mediumistic experiences. These chapters have identified and explored a number of discursive features concerned with constructing and negotiating an interactive, non-corporeal spirit world, and their own identities as experiencers and practitioners of spirit communication. Both of these explorations have focused upon speech, and how mediums actively construct ostensible spirit entities and their own identities in the moment of demonstration and interview. But what about more reflective expressions of these experiences that may be edited and tailored over time? How might these experiences be recounted in textual sources? Autobiographies of spiritual experiences are not uncommon, and this method of self expression seems particular to Western culture, making it relevant to an understanding of how Western individuals make sense of and explore their spirituality. For example, Kliever's (1986) examination of accounts of individual spiritual pilgrimages has noted that in non-Western cultures such stories were "...enshrined within mythic tales..." rather than existing (as they do in Western culture) as "...self-consciously autobiographical [in] form and content."

(Kliever, 1986: 104). He further explains that in many societies, personal experience was often eclipsed by these mythic, traditional (and therefore previously established) tales, and so the individual's own spiritual pilgrimage experience became etched into traditions which had dominance over how pilgrimage was expressed. The significance of the West in regards to how accounts of spiritual pilgrimage are detached from a wider social context and placed into individual autobiography concerns the personalisation and privatisation of religion. He argues that "... the great over-arching systems of religious belief and practice of the past have lost their monopoly on reality definition and personality formation." (Kliever, 1986: 104). Individuals are now able to craft their own stories and "...assemble their own personal systems of ultimate significance." (Kliever, 1986: 104). This is relevant to Western spirit mediumship as it developed following the ebb of religious authority, when individual spirituality and meaning making were prioritised over strict religious dogma, and provides a plethora of platforms for the discussion and encouragement of individual spiritual progress and the power of personal experience. Individuals' own experiences lay at the heart of understanding, and the community perpetuates itself through demonstrations of individually orientated proof and verification. It is in autobiography that we have access to how these understandings are formulated and how a career in mediumship, for example, can be explained and justified.

Autobiographies by mediums, particularly well known mediums, are prominent features of the growing Mind, Body, Spirit sections in a number of bookstores.

Over the last decade there has been a significant increase in the number and availability of such books (Wooffitt, 2006), which is likely to be related to the rise in popularity and increasing number of television programmes connected with mediumship demonstrations. Medium autobiographies provide a unique source of data for the study of mediumship, particularly in regards to how mediums communicate information about their experiences of the spirit world, but also their other life experiences and opinions. Medium autobiographies are popular commodities for individuals interested in mediumship, providing mediums with a personalised arena for scripted self presentations. The information that is included in such textual sources is important, because it is information that the medium has specifically selected to share. Due to their growing prominence within mainstream book stores, and the fact that so many mediums have published their own autobiographies, this data source is not only relevant to the subject of this doctoral project, but representative of a significant feature of contemporary mediumship expression and consumption. It is perhaps hardly surprising that medium autobiographies should be so popular: mediumship remains, regardless of how controversial, a fascinating and dramatic subject area, and the life of a medium is sufficiently exotic to differ from that of the average person. The ongoing controversy of mediumship perhaps even strengthens their appeal.

Drawing from five medium autobiographies, this chapter will examine how medium identities are formulated and negotiated within autobiographies. It will examine how mediums account for their experiences as legitimate, meaningful encounters

and how they attempt to make such unique experiences understandable for their audiences. It will also examine the kinds of information about the spirit world that are revealed in these texts, and consider how past encountered spirit entities are characterised in line with the medium's own experience. Relevant similarities with the kinds of biographical details discussed in the previous chapter will be mentioned where relevant.

Five autobiographies were selected as key examples of a wider range of literature, as the themes and topics identified were found to be similar in other sources. It was decided to focus on five to enable a more thorough analysis. It should be noted that medium biographies have not been analysed here. These are often authored by associates of the medium, and so are subject to a range of different textual techniques. While these sources undoubtedly contain a wealth of information that would be relevant to this subject area, it was decided to omit these other kinds of sources as the focus of this project has looked at mediums' *own* representations, and it was felt that to explore sources authored by associates would be beyond the scope of this chapter.

7.2 Medium autobiography

While subjects being likely to arrange their autobiography in a “conscious and usually highly selective fashion” (Angrosino, 1976: 134) will herald certain disadvantages when considering autobiography as a source of data, this intentional style of scripting of one’s history can also offer significant advantages. For mediums, an often marginalised collective of individuals united by their unique ability to interact with spirit entities, the autobiography gives rare access to textual power through which they can tell their side of the story. For the purpose of this study, the publication of such books gives the researcher an opportunity to see how such individuals seek to make sense of and present these unusual experiences for those who are unlikely to have had similar, but may share an interest in the phenomena reported. Indeed, the phenomena reported are considered relevant for non-mediums. As Angrosino (1976) has stated:

“Despite the self conscious uses to which a writer may put his or her own autobiography, he or she will be aiming the storm at members of his or her own group primarily, and hence will play upon common themes that unite the “extraordinary” figure with his or her audience.” (Angrosino, 1976: 135)

Mediums must negotiate this gap between their experiences and their audience in order to make interaction between these two parties – the medium and their audience – meaningful. It is essential that spirit entities are made believable for an

audience in order for spirit communication to be successful. This is relevant for autobiographies also: mediums must make their story convincing so as to establish a favourable rapport with their readership. The autobiographies studied, as well as including information about the mediums' own individual lives, are also interested in establishing the spirit world as something real and influential.

Medium autobiographies differ slightly in regards to how prominent this educational incentive features: some are more *centred* on an individual medium's life, while others are more *centred* on promoting a particular spiritual philosophy. The latter may contain transcripts of past demonstrations or sessions, or sections that explain how certain aspects of mediumship works. The former are my primary concern, due to the relevance of how mediums make sense of and account for their experiences. The latter, however, have been included because they offer a significant source of data regarding how the spirit world is explained and made meaningful for an audience.

The following analysis will focus upon the following key topics to show how autobiographies construct information on medium identity, experience and constructions of the spirit world: childhood and early spirit experiences; their mediumistic development; explanations and reflections on mediumistic experience; and how spirits may be recorded with reference to their own words. This chapter will further show how anecdotes are used in line with these aims, and will analyse a typical anecdote and show how it may accomplish such tasks.

7.3 Identity

Interviews with mediums have suggested that the negotiation of spirit presences in both public and private spheres is interlinked: it is in public, external verifications of private (and often disorganised) experiences as genuine instances of contact with spirits that provides the catalyst for a career in mediumship. Similarly, once the medium has accepted their experiences are genuine and that these abilities have a place in specific social arenas, they must take on the role of making spirit presences intelligibly present for a lay public. Mediums often reflect upon these experiences with a degree of self critique¹, but without undermining the validity of a real and interactive spirit world. They stress their own ordinariness and potential for mistake despite accepting that they have extraordinary abilities.

A number of narrative scholars have identified a structure or coding scheme in regard to how narratives are organised. Bruner (1990), Labov (1972), Labov & Waletzky (1967), and Ochs & Capps (2001) all identify the influence of meaningful circumstances in their theories of narrative structure. Ochs & Capps (2001), for example, have stressed the role of an unexpected event, and subsequent responses and actions as being crucial to the components of a narrative. This is obviously relevant to medium narrative, as mediums seem to identify their initial spirit experiences as being unexpected, and it is their subsequent responses and actions to this (.i.e. becoming a medium) that are crucial to their biography. However, this

¹ In that, they do not simply take their mediumistic abilities for granted, but orientate toward a period of time whereby their experiences are legitimated by others and developed before accepted as genuine mediumistic experience.

application of components to narrative structure may overlook the way in which earlier experiences are subsequently interwoven into a contemporary position. In the case of mediums, while these early spirit experiences are often unexpected, it is important to consider that being a medium will re-categorise their meaning. This does not mean that their accounts will not reflect upon these past experiences with reference to their responses of that time, but that an understanding of the structure of such narratives requires the researchers to take in to account that their contemporary position prescribes these experiences new meanings, and that the use of reflecting on these past experiences has a purpose in their narratives. As Benwell & Stokoe (2006) point out, problems inherent with trying to establish a structure or pattern for narrative structure can actually result in many narratives simply fitting the idealised criteria such scholars have established. They stress the importance in considering how narratives are established and managed as key to understanding the complexity and interactive-ness of not just the narrative as a final source of data, but how it comes into being.

In the following analysis, I will examine how mediums orientate toward early experiences of spirit and how a meaningful sense of what they are, and what they mean, comes to be established. The main focus of such work concerns reflection on the presence and negotiation of such experiences in childhood, and how the medium comes to believe in and act upon their mediumistic abilities.

7.3.1 *Childhood*

All of the autobiographies studied contained a significant section on mediums' early lives, which is typical of many other autobiographies. However, recollections of childhood in medium autobiographies can be useful or necessary for a number of reasons other than a simple retelling of a mediums' history. The first extract I will look at comes from one of the autobiographies by the medium Derek Acorah, in which he details his first encounter with spirit. This extract features at the beginning of this autobiography:

“As a small child I lived with my mother and my elder brother and sister at the home of my grandmother in Bootle, Liverpool... My first experience of spirit occurred one day just after Gran had called Colin, Barbara and me down for our tea. Being the youngest of the three, and with much shorter legs, I was always the last to arrive downstairs. On this particular day, as I reached the first landing of the staircase, I saw a man I didn't recognize. 'Hello, young tyke', he said as he reached out toward me. It felt as though he had ruffled my hair. I was afraid because I thought that there was a stranger in Gran's house. Never had I reached the bottom of the stairs more quickly. I ran panting into the kitchen, shouting to Gran and my mother that there was a strange man in the house.” (Acorah, 2004: xi)

While Acorah does not mention his specific age, he describes himself as having been a 'small child' at the time of this event. The experience itself is embedded

within more mundane detail: i.e. aspects of his family life as a small child. If we were to look at this extract alone, it would not be obvious that this is a report of a spirit encounter: rather, Acorah seems simply to be describing something out of the ordinary amid his ordinary world. The event is located as an early memory, although one that is represented with clarity: he is able to recall particular details and even reported speech from this event. It is impossible to ascertain to what extent Acorah is actually able to remember these events in the way reported, but judging the ostensible accuracy of such a recollection is not necessary for this analysis. What is interesting is that, by recording this memory with such detail suggests that it is meaningful to him, and can be vividly recollected.

If we take the extract in context, it shows, firstly, that he has had experiences of spirit since early childhood, something (as has been discussed earlier) that seems typical of medium biography (see also Emmons, 1999; Emmons & Emmons, 2003; McClenon, 1994). Secondly, by recalling that he was a small child orientates him toward an (ideally) innocent predisposition: indeed, he has further positioned himself as the youngest child in the household, and emphasises his smallness with reference to having 'shorter legs' and always being 'the last to arrive downstairs'. Being a small child infers a degree of naivety and lack of knowledge, which provides Acorah with a useful resource in establishing the experience's authenticity: as a small child, he has no prior presumptions or expectations because he has a limited amount of experiences. However, it is also possible that being a small child may infer being more likely to have an overactive imagination. It is

possible that had Acorah reported this experience as being a spirit encounter because, as a small child that was what he took his experience to be, then the authenticity of this experience as a genuine spirit encounter may appear more questionable. Not only because of the association of childhood with imagination², but child naivety itself may infer that what he took for a spirit encounter actually has a more mundane explanation. If we look at the way in which he describes what happened, we can see that his account is structured on factual observations, but there are two subtle signposts that signal his contemporary position: he states that he ‘thought’ there was a stranger in the house, and that it ‘felt’ as though this individual had ‘ruffled’ his hair. We will return to these points later.

While he has provided an account of this incidence as being his first experience of spirit, it is clear from the construction of this extract that this was not his understanding of the event at the time. Acorah recalls that his first conclusion is mundane, and focused on an assumption that there is something wrong with an otherwise routine activity: there is someone he does not recognise in the house. This assumption seems applicable to Evans’ (1984) description of the paranormal as being similar to the presence of an ‘uninvited guest’: in this instance, it is a stranger in the familial home. This early experience, therefore, is reported as a noticeable disruption of the normal.

² There is considerable amount of literature that has identified growing up with a loss of spirituality, and asserts childhood as more favourable receptive to spiritual experience (see Hay, 2004).

Acorah's quickness to report his experience again emphasises his youth and innocence: he reports what he has seen straight away to his mother and grandmother, who are obviously the figures of authority in his household³. His assumptions are mundane: he reports that there is a stranger in the house, not that he has experienced something paranormal. The response from his grandmother is interesting, and undoubtedly crucial to Acorah's later medium development:

“On hearing my description, she [his grandmother] reached for a tin in which old family photographs were kept. She took out a photograph and showed it to me. ‘That’s him!’ I shouted. ‘That’s the man on the stairs!’ Gran looked at my mother and said, ‘He’s next! Derek will be the next person in the family to work for spirit’... Gran gently explained to me that the man I had seen on the stairs was not in fact a stranger but my grandfather, who had passed to the world of spirit as the result of an accident three years before I was born.” (Acorah, 2004: xii)

The explanation provided for this experience is done so by an authority figure – Acorah's grandmother – and is provided with little hesitation. She authenticates his experience, which also undermines assumptions that his immaturity may have led to him to imagine a strange presence. The identification of the stranger is significant, for not only does it categorise and give meaning to Acorah's experience as being a genuine spirit encounter, but it personalises it by invoking kin relations. Rather than being an uninvited guest, the stranger is in fact revealed as a deceased member of the family. Citing deceased family members in this way does not seem to be

³ He has already asserted that he lived with his mother and siblings in his grandmother's house.

unusual: mediums reporting that their early spirit encounters were with deceased family members can be found in several other medium autobiographies (e.g. Holbrook cited in Christie, 2000; Osborne-Thomason, 2002; Stokes, 1998). Family members are interesting as early figures of spirit encounters in that they can be verified either by the experient, or potentially by the kin of the experient.

Furthermore, the encounter could be perceived to have a motivation that parallels with reasons for spirit communication provided at mediumship demonstrations: that spirits return to visit their living kith and kin, to show affection and pass on messages of enduring love. The purpose of the encounter, then, is that the spirit has made contact because they know the recipient, which could encourage a belief that spirits are interactive, conscious agents with recognisable desires and motivations (i.e. that they want to visit their loved ones). If we look at what Acorah actually reports of his encounter, his description also tells us a little about the ways in which spirits can interact: Acorah recalls that the spirit spoke and ostensibly touched him. This demonstrates the sensuous and interactive nature of spirits, and while his description of this early encounter is relevant to his biography ad hoc, it is also explanatory in revealing information about the nature of spirit contact. For example, by addressing Acorah as a 'young tyke' suggests that the spirit is acknowledging him in a familiar and playfully affectionate manner. The later verification that the spirit is Acorah's grandfather gives enough reason as to why the spirit may wish to regard Acorah in this manner, but it also demonstrates not only that spirits recognise their living kith and kin, but that they can interact with them in a humorous or personable way: Acorah's late grandfather is demonstrating

familiarity. In these extracts Acorah is implicitly revealing information about the spirit world, but he does so in the form of reporting the facts of his experience.

Not all mediums, however, reveal that their early experiences of spirits were of deceased family members. Indeed, there are certain problems with the citing of family members in that, while they are identifiable to the experient at the time, they may appear questionable in regards to their authenticity when reported to others. However, in Acorah's case, he is able to avoid such inferences: the spirit he encountered had died three years before he was born, so it would not have been possible that he would have recognised the figure as his grandfather. We know he didn't recognise him because he initially refers to him as a stranger. Also, that he mentions his grandmother retrieving a tin of family photos, inside of which was one of his grandfather, suggests that these images were hidden, so it would be unlikely that Acorah could have seen an image of his late grandfather on display in the house. This emphasises the importance of the grandmother's validation. She not only validates his experience, but uses it to infer that this is evidence that he will 'work for spirit'. I will return to this point shortly.

Doris Stokes experienced a similar kind of legitimacy from her father upon reporting an early apparitional experience. In this experience, she saw the spirit of a boy who had just been killed, walking beside his own corpse (which had been badly burned following a fire), that was being carried off on a stretcher:

“But father, I gasped, he isn’t dead’. My father looked impatient. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. He was burnt to death.’ I shook my head, ‘No daddy he wasn’t. I saw him.’ And my father paused and stared at me, a strange expression on his face. His eyes didn’t leave mine. Then he said softly ‘Did you Doll? Did you really see him?’ ‘Yes I did Dad,’ I insisted, ‘he was walking right beside them.’ ” (Stokes, 1998: 6-7)

In this extract, her father’s first response is to rebuke her claim, which he cites as ‘ridiculous’. Her father’s response seems to have interpreted Stokes’ initial statement as being one of disbelief or a reluctance to accept that the boy had actually died. His reported speech, therefore, articulates what had happened to the boy: he was ‘burnt to death’. The emphasis on the boy having been burnt to death is interesting, as the corpse would have been disfigured and probably unrecognisable. That he was recognisable to her, and that he was viewable along with his corpse, tells her audience something about the spirit world: that his spirit would not appear burnt and is distinctive from his physical body. Her father’s initial disbelief softens upon Stokes’ insistence that she saw the spirit of the dead boy which she marks as ‘walking beside them’ thereby distinguishing his spirit from his corpse. Her father’s response is constructed as having taken her seriously: though initially sceptical, Stokes’ insistence and distinction of what she actually saw gains her a more accepting response. Her description of how he paused and stared at her intently emphasises this serious regard. The use of the affectionate term ‘Doll’ is interesting: again, it emphasises his acceptance. That she reports him as saying this softly, and

that she replies to him using the term 'Dad' rather the more formal 'father' as she had previously, presents the dialogue as likely to be gentler in tone. This is contrasted with her mother's opposite response:

"It was all too much for mum. 'That girl will be in a mental home before she's finished,' she snapped, 'and you encourage her in these silly notions Sam'. (Stokes, 1998: 7)

It is interesting that Stokes refers to her mother's description of her as 'that girl', especially when contrasted with her father's more personalised and affectionate 'Doll'. Her mother's use of 'that girl' undermines their familial relationship by appearing nondescript and hostile, particularly as Stokes' recalls her mother as having 'snapped' the words. To describe her daughter as 'that girl' creates a distance between her identity as a daughter, and her identity as 'that girl'. The accusation that she will be in a 'mental home' firmly establishes that she regards her daughter's experience as delusional, but also as threatening, and with the potential for unpleasant consequences. Stokes' inclusion of this dialogue, aside from reporting a past event that reflects her relationship with her parents, demonstrates that she is aware, and has had experience, of different reactions to reports of spirit experience.

These recollections of early experiences do not mention the individual's mediumistic identity. The term 'medium' is not used, and the experiences do not

reflect the nature of spirit communication that these individuals would come to practice. As has been discussed in the previous chapters, there are distinctive events that lead an individual to accept that they have mediumistic abilities, and decide to practice spirit communication.

7.3.2 *Becoming a medium*

As was typical with data collected from the interviews, the autobiographies studied revealed that mediums expressed an initial lack of interest or were uncertain about their early spirit encounters. The catalyst that inevitably leads them toward becoming a medium refers to a distinctive transitional period, which is usually facilitated by another individual who recognises their as yet untapped potential. Other people's provision of validity to experiences is hugely significant. As has been discussed earlier, mediums construct their experiences as being consistently socially validated, and they represent their own conclusions as – initially – secondary to others. Acorah's example is interesting, as his experiences are legitimated at the time of his first encounter, and by close family members. Many mediums have expressed that they received (or anticipated receiving) hostile or dismissive reactions from close family members and friends, typical of Stokes' mother's remarks. This may seem a likely explanation as to why early experiences may be troublesome for the experient. However, even in cases such as Acorah's where family members are supportive, the medium is not necessarily convinced of their own abilities at the time. In Acorah's case however, it is unclear as to whether

or not he accepted, at that time, that he had had a genuine spirit encounter or whether he was simply not interested in having mediumistic abilities, as this extract demonstrates:

“I looked from my grandmother to my mother, not understanding what they were talking about... ‘In time, when you are older, Derek,’ she said ‘you will see many people who have passed on to the next life. You will work with the people in the spirit world and will help many people on your life’s pathway’. I soon put all this to the back of my mind, but occasionally over the next few years I would recall the incident and question my grandmother about this ‘world of spirit’... ‘But I want to be a footballer,’ I would tell her. ‘I don’t want to be a “gook”!’ Gran would smile knowingly. All she would say was ‘We ‘ll see’.” (Acorah, 2004: xii)

Firstly, we can see that he identifies a lack of understanding even after his grandmother’s explanation, which corroborates his childish naivety and reinforces that he was not knowledgeable about spirit communication prior to this first encounter. By reporting his grandmother’s speech, Acorah uses her voice to suggest that his contemporary abilities were present from an early age, but that he would not come to realise and release their potential until later in life. This is made explicit, in that he reports his grandmother as having said that he would see and work for spirit ‘in time’, and when he is older. Because this is a medium autobiography, and because we know he is now well established as a medium, his grandmother’s past prediction is proven in the present: she was right, because he does now work for

spirit. Acorah uses her words to identify that his abilities were predestined, but without orientating toward his own presumptions.

It is also noticeable that his grandmother's explanation is focused on how Acorah will help people through the use of his contact with the spirit world. This aspect of his mediumistic destiny socialises Acorah's experiences into a future social role, and provides an expectation that he will fulfil. The influence of helping people has gravitas when associated with destiny in this way: it gives his abilities a social purpose, and it is unlikely that he would report that it was predicted that he would have such abilities, be able to help others, but didn't.

Acorah states he 'soon put all this to the back of [his] mind', although acknowledges that he did 'occasionally' consider what his grandmother had said, and asked her about the spirit world. This suggests that he did not (or did not want to) consider the relevance of his experience to have any significant importance during this time: he states that he 'soon' put it to the back of his mind, which suggests that he quickly dismissed it. However, his reference to 'occasionally' considering it acts as a means of repair over this dismissal, which could be interpreted as a rejection of his experience, and a rejection of the spirit world. An occasional reconsideration relays an ongoing interest in the spirit world, albeit with some reluctance. This reluctance is apparent by Acorah's protestation that he wanted to be a footballer, and not a 'gook'. The term 'gook' works as a humorous device because of Acorah's contemporary position as a medium. He is able to

employ humour and reveal these initial dismissals of his experience because we know he is now a practising medium. The authenticity of the spirit world remains intact, and these recollections show how past experiences can be re-examined and re-contextualised. By positioning himself as initially dismissive, it also emphasises the significance of Acorah's mediumship, in that he was destined to become a medium, it was not something he actively appears to have chosen. His initial concerns were more mundane, and again, this initial dismissiveness positions Acorah as someone ordinary who eventually accepts and so develops extraordinary abilities. It further prioritises the importance of spirit experiences themselves: it is through experience that the spirit world is able to make contact with individuals, but furthermore it is the experience that identifies the individual as a medium, it is not a pre-existing structure or role they self select.

If we go back to Doris Stokes' autobiography, we can find a similar initial dismissive description, this time regarding Spiritualism. What is interesting about this extract is that Stokes identifies that she was initially sceptical and cites someone else as the primary reason for visiting a Spiritualist church, rather than because of her own curiosity:

“So one day when he found me weeping over some baby clothes of John Michael's, he suggested we go to the Spiritualist Church... ‘Even if it does nothing else love, it might give us peace of mind,’ he said. Secretly I doubted it. I thought I'd seen enough of spiritualism and I wasn't impressed. On the other hand John needed

some sort of help that I wasn't able to give. Then again, in my grief my thoughts always went to those strange appearances of my father. I was quite certain I'd seen him and as added proof, I knew that what he'd said had come true – but he was dead. I couldn't understand it, but the more I puzzled over it the more the hope grew – if my father was somewhere near, then surely John Michael must be too.” (Stokes, 1998: 73)

In this extract Stokes is explaining her initial attendance at a Spiritualist Church as being motivated by a concern for her husband. This is a similar kind of justification as provided by Paul in the previous chapter, who stated that his first attendance at a Spiritualist mediumship demonstration was out of concern for his wife who had recently lost her father. At the time, Stokes and her husband are mourning the recent loss of their young son, John Michael. It is interesting that Stokes seems to suggest that her husband's desire to visit a Spiritualist Church seems partly motivated by his own response to her grief, and in wanting to find some kind of 'peace of mind'. Attendance at a Spiritualist Church, then, is one possible option for this goal. Stokes' initial reservations are clear though: she orientates toward an initial scepticism, which motions that, at that time, she is unaffiliated with the Spiritualist movement: in fact, she further states that she thought she'd 'seen enough of spiritualism and... wasn't impressed'. Not only does the initial scepticism suggest her as someone who is later 'converted' at least to a strong belief in mediumship (and we know this because her contemporary position in the autobiography is as a practising medium) on the strength of particular encounters,

but it also identifies her as someone who requires convincing: she is not predisposed to believe in the paranormal. Indeed, throughout her autobiography, Stokes makes reference to mediumship demonstrations she believed to be fraud, so she shows that she knows the difference between legitimate and fraudulent mediumistic practices, and is not convinced on the weight of suggestion alone.

The use of scepticism in this instance can be used, as Potter (1996) argues, to try to assure the existence of certain events in the world. He uses the example of someone who reports having seen a flying saucer: by claiming to have been previously sceptical: this “buttresses” (Potter, 1996: 104) a claim about a potentially controversial event. The impact of a ‘conversion’ experience as crucial to an eventual acceptance and belief in mediumship runs through many medium narratives, and focuses the importance of *experience* as key to meaning making, not that mediumship itself is something they orientate toward because of pre-existing Spiritualist sympathies. This is different to a pre-existing belief in post mortem survival, which is often represented as more fluid: indeed, there is a significant difference between believing in life after death and believing that you are able to contact the dead, and can do so in a social setting. We can see here that, while Stokes is initially sceptical about Spiritualism, she is simultaneously admitting to a belief in post mortem survival, with reference to apparitional experiences of her deceased father. This is interesting, as she is identifying a belief, and yet resisting affiliation to a community that shares her belief. I would argue that this is another example of how mediums construct the importance of their experiences as hugely

significant to their development as mediums: not only do they become mediums, but they also enter into a community which then fixes their prior belief in post mortem survival to a particular cosmology and belief system. However, their roles as practising mediums require socialisation, and they themselves require convincing that the community and their own abilities are legitimate. The use of this recollection of initial scepticism toward Spiritualism and not necessarily post mortem survival emphasises the individuality of the medium, and how it is their own experiences that have lead them to accept that they themselves have mediumistic abilities. It does not suggest a rejection of the spirit world, but rather shows a scepticism over an already established belief system. While other key individuals are crucial to their self acceptance as mediums, it seems that this initial scepticism helps to present them as ordinary individuals to whom something extraordinary has happened. Even in her grief, Stokes does not present herself as someone who is predisposed to accepting Spiritualism, but someone who is critically conscious of past experiences and demonstrates evidence of her own critical faculties of what is authentic and what is fraud.

The need for social validation, not only for spirit messages, but also for the mediums themselves in connection to their abilities is important, and seems to figure largely in accounts of their own personal meaning making. In this next extract taken from the autobiography of James Van Praagh, a popular television medium, he reports an acknowledgement of mediumistic potential in a way that

bears similarities with Derek Acorah's experience, but his acknowledgement comes from someone unrelated:

"Near the end of the session, Brian said, "You know James, you are very mediumistic. The spirit people are telling me that one day you will give readings like this to other people. The spirits are planning to use you." I wasn't sure how to respond to this pronouncement. After all, my goals were in a completely different direction. I wasn't ready for my life to take a 180-degree turn. With some nervousness, I replied "I have enough trouble understanding the living. Why would I want to start talking to the dead?" Brian simply smiled and calmly assured me, "One day you will". (Van Praagh, 1998: 22)

Being acknowledged by a family member may be significant because of the proximity of the relationship, and the dynamics of trust that may be inferred there. However, acknowledgement by someone more unconnected also carries significance in the recognition of mediumistic ability, as such individuals may have lesser degrees of vested interest. Why would they acknowledge you as having mediumistic potential? How would they know if you are unfamiliar to them? Before we proceed with an analysis of this extract, it should be mentioned that this was not the first time someone had identified Van Praagh as having psychic abilities. As a child, he recalls a teacher to whom he gave a message about her son who, unbeknownst to her, had been involved in an accident but was not seriously injured. This was later certified by the teacher, who told Van Praagh that he had a special

gift, but that he should be cautious as to who he shared it with. What is significant about this anecdote, in comparison with the extract at which I will now look, is that Van Praagh does not seem to bestow the same level of significance as he does with Brian's pronouncement. While he is grateful for his teacher's acceptance and acknowledges it in retrospect, her legitimation is not presented as a preceding catalyst to his eventual development as a medium. While she acknowledges he has psychic *ability*, she does not suggest that he will be a medium, or will work for spirit.

In this extract, not only does Brian acknowledge Van Praagh as a potential medium, but he also incorporates a prediction that Van Praagh will 'one day' work as a medium, as the 'spirits are planning to use' him. This bears obvious similarities with Acorah's autobiographical extracts, in that mediumship is something identified with a future purpose. This also tells us something interesting about the spirit world, in that they – we can infer from Brian's statements – can not only predict future events, but can actually, to an extent, shape the destinies of particular individuals if they intend for them to work as mediums. Obviously, if the spirits have already decided Van Praagh will work as a medium, this suggests that he is preordained to be linked to a spiritual cause. Brian has also identified spirits as the source of his claim, which reinforces its spiritual significance, but it also serves as an example of a spirit message that is later validated, as Van Praagh does eventually become a medium. This spiritual destiny could be identified as a consistency in his narrative

identity, although it is not one that he acknowledges and actively incorporates until later in life.

Van Praagh's initial position is again similar to Acorah's. He notes that he was not in a position where mediumship seemed a probable outcome: he suggests that it was even counterbalanced to his current position. This works to identify Van Praagh as someone who does not have a prior investment in mediumship, rather, he eventually accepts his mediumistic potential after a series of conformational events.

7.4 How mediumship works

Becoming established as a medium – accepting that they have mediumistic abilities, and that these abilities can be used for a social purpose – also entails the establishment of a particular belief system that embellishes post mortem survival, and situates it within a meaningful cosmology. As many medium autobiographies involve a discussion of how mediumship works, and how spirit entities interact with mediums, analysis will now look at how mediums explain and discuss their experiences in conjunction with a specific understanding of how their abilities fit in with the way the world works. Again, this is something that they have specific insight into, and so seek to enlighten others to their understandings.

As has been discussed in previous chapters, different mediums express different means of experiencing spirit. There was a surprising small amount of description

given to the actual experience of being in contact with spirits in medium autobiographies. While mediums will recount several instances of spirit communication, they do not seem to go into detail about what it feels like to be in contact with spirit, so it was difficult to contrast information on this subject with information gathered in interviews. What was more common, however, was an instructive style of explaining how mediumship works. I will now examine two discussions of how mediumship works, one of which is taken from James Van Praagh's autobiography, and the other is taken from a book of transcribed trance lectures which were annotated with personal reflections and accompanying anecdotal information by the medium author and his co-author (his wife), who was also present during these demonstration. This book included a section written by the medium about trance mediumship (and it is from this section that the extract is taken).

In this first instance, Van Praagh states that:

“A medium is able to become completely receptive to the higher frequencies or energies on which spirit people vibrate. Hence, the mind of a spirit melds or impresses itself on the superconscious mind of a medium. From there, the message goes into the conscious mind, and a medium reveals what a spirit is thinking or feeling.” (Van Praagh, 1998: 31)

The terminologies that Van Praagh employs here bare striking similarities with more general scientific and psychological discourse. Firstly, he talks about ‘frequencies’ and ‘energies’, and describes spirit contact more in terms of a procedure than a sensuous experience. Regardless of whether or not his use of such terms qualifies description as scientific is largely irrelevant: what is interesting here is that he uses such terminologies in his description. It is possible that this an example of what Fairclough has termed a ‘hybridisation of discourse’ (Fairclough, 1992: 199), whereby barriers distinguishing specific areas of discourse, such as politics, economics, are being breached, allowing for the influence of other forms of discourse to filter into and inevitably alter (see also Askehave, 2004). However, scientific discourse has long been entwined with mediumship philosophy: those who took mediumship to have religious significance often sought the application of scientific methodologies to aid its explanation and authenticity. This influence of scientific discourse on the development of mediumship and associated spiritualist philosophies has been well documented (e.g. Porter, 2005; Weinstein, 2004). Porter (2005) has described the influence of ‘paradoxical positivism’ upon spiritualist religious discourse, arguing that spiritualists reinterpreted and rescaled scientific discourse in order to accommodate and endorse the phenomena of mediumship. That many spiritualists were aware of, and indeed in tuned to, science has been documented elsewhere (e.g. Cerullo, 1982; Hazelgrove, 2000; Oppenheim, 1985), but Porter specifically identifies that, while spiritualists adhered to an acceptance of the authority of scientific ways of thinking, Spiritualism nevertheless “...paradoxically reifie[d] science as the path to truth while disputing scientific

conclusions that deny the spiritual realm” (Porter, 2005:2). Science was used *vis a vis* the spiritual realm, and would have little capital for Spiritualists if the two could not be suitably bridged. If we go back to Van Praagh’s extract, we can see scientific terms used *vis a vis* an explanation of how mediumship works. The use of scientific terms could also be interpreted as a means of legitimating a potentially controversial subject, as well as indicating the ways in mediums conceptualise the phenomena of spirit communication.

The influence of psychological discourse should also be noted. Psychological discourse has often been used in opposition to medium classifications. As Lieberman (2004) has illustrated in her exploration of how certain intrusive spiritual encounters were explained under new psychological terminologies, such as fugue, the rise of psychological discourse (which was developing at roughly the same time as mediumship) became popular as a form of diagnosis, thus transforming the spiritual experience or phenomena into a discrete scientific category. Hazelgrove (2000) and Guiterrez (2003) have identified how medical discourse was able to re-categorise and pathologise such experiences, by classifying mediums as hysterical, delusional, or suffering from specific conditions, such as multiple personality disorder. The experience of mediumship becomes abnormal, but it is explainable under the umbrella of such classifications. However, psychological debates have shared similar interests with medium (and Spiritualist) concerns, such as the idea of a mind-body split and the nature of consciousness. It was precisely the idea that something could be separate from the body that blended well with mediumship

philosophy, and offered the potential for aiding an explanatory model of mediumship. Again, however, they needed to bond with scientific authority: it was crucial that these debates found a scientific basis for discussion. Oppenheim (1985) has argued "...as the accomplishments of science demanded ever greater respect from the Victorian public, that the authoritative answers could only lie in the concrete explorations of the physical sciences." (Oppenheim, 1985: 5). So, psychological discourse as a form of discourse anchored by scientific authenticity, could provide another mode for exploring concepts about mind-body that would incorporate a spiritual realm. If we look at Van Praagh's extract, his use of the 'superconscious' and 'conscious' mind of the medium shows obvious parallels with Freudian and Jungian concepts. Obviously, psychological discourse has changed significantly since the nineteenth century, so it is interesting that a contemporary medium like Van Praagh should cite the work of psychologists from a previous era. His use of more specific theoretical psychological terms as opposed to more medicalised psychological terms is perhaps significant. Medicalised psychology has little space for spirituality, but Freudian and Jungian psychology both stem from psychologists who were interested in, and in certain ways sympathetic to, a discussion of spirituality. They also have a significant degree of authority, even if their presence in mainstream science may be more controversial. It is likely that such discourse is selected because it is recognisable, and because it serves a metaphorical purpose, with its role as metaphor illustrating that here is a significant difference between conscious states. By using the terms 'superconscious' and

‘conscious’, Van Praagh is able to make a distinction between two discrete states of consciousness by invoking psychological terminologies.

In this next extract, we can see a similar manner in which scientific and psychological discourse seems influential in how the author has chosen to explain how mediumship works:

“All that happens when a medium is entranced by someone from the spirit dimensions is that a *mental* link is established that allows a thought flow to occur from one mind to another. There is no displacement of bodies (although this *can* happen if required, particularly in physical mediumship) just a linking of one mind to another, one spirit to another. The fact that this takes place at all is due to several factors, the most important of which is the ability of the medium to attune with the spirit helpers and the law of attraction which draws the two parties together. No one can force communication to occur or ‘call up’ any spirit person in the vain hope that they will manifest to order. The only reason that the spirit world communicate with a medium is because they choose to. Nothing and no one can in any way force the issue.” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2005: 215, emphasis in original)

In this extract, the medium is positioning the workings of mediumship as, firstly, in an explanation that incorporates scientific discourse, for example ‘the *law* of attraction’; and secondly, he attributes choice and motivation to spirit contacts as crucial to the success of such communications.

The use of scientific discourse in this extract is enmeshed within the description of how mediumship works, i.e. the logistics of what happens during a trance mediumship session. It should be noted that the section that this extract comes from also includes figures and diagrams relating to changes in brainwave patterns during trance mediumship, so it seems clear that this medium is trying to incorporate a scientific language by which to express and ground his ideas. Again, whether or not this qualifies as legitimate science is not our concern here, but it is important to note that the medium is orientating toward this as an acceptable and official method of explanation. It is interesting that his explanation begins with ‘all that happens’, which suggests that how mediumship works is underlying simplistic, and understandable as a process. This simplicity is emphasised by the use of ‘just a linking...’ and by the medium noting what does *not* happen. As this extract comes from a section designed to educate others as to how they might develop their own trance mediumship abilities, this tone of explanation reflects its educational purpose: trance mediumship is not over complicated but grounded in a distinctive process where the mind of a spirit merges with the mind of a medium. By asserting the process of mediumship as something that is understandable also parallels and appeals to scientific discourse in that it conveys that we can – if we have the appropriate knowledge – understand how mediumship works. The use of the term ‘law of attraction’ is interesting because it appeals to a presumably specific scientific law that also applies to other activities. To mention a law of ‘attraction’ also suggests that there is a naturalness inherent in such contact: that the mind of

spirit and the mind of a medium may be attracted toward each other suggests that their unity is natural because it is possible, and because the act itself may be subject to external forces. Furthermore, spirit communication can be explained by scientific laws, and is therefore relevant to science and deserving of a scientific language.

In this extract we can also identify information about the spirit world as concerning spirit motivation and supremacy: the medium cites spirits as crucial to the success of trance mediumship. So, while individuals may develop trance medium abilities, it is ultimately up to the spirits as to whether or not such endeavours will be successful. This ultimate authority of spirits explains why some trance mediumship may be unsuccessful by providing a explanation where spirits have choice, but also that that choice is responsible for failed trance mediumship, rather than the act of trance mediumship itself (i.e., it is fraud).

7.5 Anecdotes

Medium autobiographies are full of anecdotes, usually concerning past sittings. These anecdotes allow the medium an opportunity to promote their authenticity, but also demonstrate the mediums' sensitivity to and appreciation of individuals they have given readings to. They further provide the reader with access to actual events that have been significant in the medium's life. That anecdotes are generally connected with mediumship demonstrations is perhaps unsurprising, but their prominent inclusion merits further attention.

I have selected the following extract as it is typical of the structure by which many of the anecdotes concerning past mediumship encounters take form. In the following extract, we find the use of a particular anecdote demonstrates a number of uses. It concerns a former client of the medium Derek Acorah – Julie – who had suffered from school bullying, and was finding it difficult to make friends. At the time of her visit to Acorah, she is described as being “...a very lonely girl.” (Acorah, 2006: 176)

“...She visited my office to see whether I could tell her she had anything to look forward to in her life. I was happy to be able to tell her that she had lots of good things to look forward to, but she had to do a little work for herself. A few months later Julie wrote to me to thank me for the reading that I had conducted for her. She told me that on the day she visited me she was as close to ending it all as she could possibly get. ‘You helped me through Derek,’ she said. ‘You told me that I was not alone and that I should ask for help from the world of spirit and they would answer’. Julie told me that she had gone home from my office and later that night had gone to bed and begun to dream. In her dream she had seen Sarah [a deceased friend of Julie’s who had been a significant supportive influence in her earlier life]. She told Julie that she knew how hard a time she was having but that she was there to help her. Whenever Julie thought that she was not going to make it, Sarah would be right there beside her. When Julie woke she knew that she had not just had a

dream. She felt different – more optimistic... Since that day Julie has not looked back... Her future is bright.” (Acorah, 2006: 176-177)

This anecdote represents an episode in Acorah’s life where his information was proven to be accurate, and furthermore, provided a great aid to its recipient.

Anecdotes such as these authenticate the medium without necessarily appearing as explicit self promotion: the proof is in the outcome of the story. There are several specific features here that function as evidential support for Acorah’s abilities, and also reveal implicit information about the spirit world. Firstly, it identifies a client who is suffering and has come to see Acorah to try and ascertain if her life will improve. While it does not concern a medium sitting per se, the use of a spirit encounter is significant. Secondly, its use of reported speech shows appreciation for Acorah, both legitimating his abilities and acknowledging him as a benevolent aid. It also shows Acorah being supported by a spirit, who appears to Julie in a dream. Thirdly, it constructs the spirit world as aware of the living’s suffering and continually benevolently inclined (i.e. they continue to offer support). I will take each of these three points in turn.

Firstly, that the anecdote concerns a client who is suffering, and has identified Acorah as a potential source of aid, places Acorah in a position of responsibility. While it identifies him as someone who others would seek help from, how he responds to this is important. It assigns him a therapeutic position, and, because the outcome of the anecdote is complimentary, he is able to appear successful in this

role. It is via reported speech that Acorah is able to confirm that he has been successful. Rather than simply reporting the event in his own words, he uses Julie's voice to legitimate his abilities, and furthermore, acknowledges that he has been a significantly benevolent aid that enabled her to improve her situation. Interestingly, the use of actual reported speech concerns Julie's acknowledgement of his help: in this instance, he is able to firmly assert the authorship of his endorsement as coming from someone else. The rest of the account sees Acorah reporting what Julie has told him, so that the information appears as though he is simply relaying what she has communicated to him. By doing this, Acorah is also able to include his own response to her follow up, and demonstrate a supportive character that is 'happy' when things work out for his clientele. Julie's validation is important for Acorah's credibility: she has acknowledged that what he told her proved accurate. Also, her eventual acceptance of his message is positioned as crucial to the positive outcome in her mind. This positions Acorah in a position of power whereby acceptance of his message reaps reward: this kind of position is not uncommon in contemporary Western culture, where a repertoire of self help programmes and books exist that encourage individuals to conform to a particular way of life in order to be generally successful, be it in regards to losing weight, looking younger, property development, etc. For Acorah's position to be maintained however, it must be acknowledged that he was correct, and his message, and its benevolent impact, must be corroborated.

The influence of the spirit of a deceased friend is interesting in this anecdote, as it suggests that, not only does Acorah offer benevolent aid to his clientele, but the spirit world are also benevolently inclined toward their living kith and kin, and can intervene in times of hardship. They are also continually motivated to aid the living and spirit contact need not be restricted to solitary events: Acorah orientates toward the consistent presence of the spirit when needed, as Julie knows that her friend will always be there when she needs her.

The spirit, Sarah, also works to corroborate Acorah, as she emphasises his message. Acorah acknowledges this, and he identifies her as an aid to securing that Julie is able to follow his advice. Julie's experience of her deceased friend is established as fact: Acorah states that she knew it was not a dream (which may threaten its authenticity as a genuine spirit encounter), and that she had had a genuine encounter with the spirit of her friend. The legitimacy of the spirit seems in part connected to the legitimacy of the message. It is established that Acorah was correct before the details of the events are explained, so the spirit encounter is structured amid an explanation that follows a confirmation.

7.6 The spirit world in spirit words

While medium autobiographies are hinged upon the individual medium, and are heavily eschewed with details about their life and their experiences, they are nevertheless also poised as educational tools. Most mediums seem to orientate

toward a purpose larger than their own self-expression, which parallels with the purpose of mediumship. In some places, information about the spirit world is explicit: Van Praagh's (1998) autobiography, for example, contains a number of clearly marked sections that explicitly list information about mediumship, how to develop mediumistic abilities yourself, information about grieving (and appropriate ways of dealing with grief). However, more often these messages are interwoven more implicitly with personal narrative. Information about the spirit world can be revealed through anecdotes, for example, where we find the spirits being referenced with note to their motivations, intentions, and in some cases, actual reported speech (see also Wooffitt, in press; Wooffitt & Allistone, forthcoming). The spirits depicted in medium autobiographies are not constructed as inanimate entities, but rather are imbued with a range of recognisably social characteristics. They can be mischievous, concerned, affectionate, and mediums can allude toward their having distinct motivations and desires, from being choosy over whether or not they want to communicate with a medium to being frustrated if a means of communication is not available. Furthermore, they can communicate – and appear to do so regularly – with words, or at least are able to communicate in a way that a medium can translate into language.

In a previous chapter, I have examined how metaphors can be used by mediums to explain their experiences and understandings of spirit communication. As we have already established that spirits are recorded as being able to communicate with words, it is important that we consider what it is that they actually say to mediums.

One of the main areas that mediums use explanations or reported speech from spirits, concerns messages or teachings that the spirits wish to impart. These are often full of metaphor.

As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) have argued, metaphors play a vital role in our understanding of the many facets of physical and social experience. They are significant aspect of communication, and are strewn within much of everyday dialogue. Though long considered the product of and relevant only to fictional discourse, metaphors actually underpin much of daily discourse, and can both structure our conceptual systems of understanding, but can also give new meaning and understanding to experience. It is to this latter point that the following discussion of the use of metaphor in medium autobiography is particularly relevant.

I will now look at three extracts that provide information about the spirit world using metaphor: the first extract concerns information provided by a spirit to a medium, the second refers to the recollection of a dream experience where the medium interacted with spirit entities in a spirit environment, and the third comes from the transcript of a trance session where a spirit is channelled through a medium.

Firstly:

“I was once given a definitive description by a mischievous spirit of exactly how mediumship works. I was roundly told off and warned not to get big-headed, since spirits regarded us psychics as nothing more than working telephone boxes. Most people are like broken-down telephone boxes: no communication is available. Spirits are always relieved to find an available medium to make the connection. After all, there is nothing more frustrating than wanting to phone a friend or loved one when the phone box doesn’t work or has been vandalised”. (Osborne-Thomason, 2002: 46)

To claim that this was a ‘definitive description’ suggests its ostensible importance and accuracy. That this information was provided by a ‘mischievous spirit’ potentially undermines this due to the inferred probability that a ‘mischievous spirit’ may have less than honourable intentions. However, reference to a ‘mischievous spirit’ as the author of this explanation sets the tone for the later content. In this extract we can see that there is a slight air of ridicule in the information provided: it is marked by personal comment, such as a critique of mediums with the warning not to get too big-headed, and a comparison of their significance to telephone boxes. In contrast to the extracts discussed earlier that were concerned with how mediumship works, we find these earlier extracts appear much more neutral in tone when compared with Osborne-Thomason’s description. What she suggests about the spirit world here is that spirits have personality: they can be mischievous, and express opinion. The use of a critique of mediums in this extract may work to establish the information as more authentic, as Osborne-

Thomason is recording information that undermines her potential authority. Why would she include a critique of her standing as a medium if such critique didn't actually come from a spirit source? It is also likely that these kinds of comments can be used for humorous affect with an understandable but unusual comparison (i.e. mediums like are telephone boxes).

An explanation of spirit communication, however, is delivered via metaphor. The metaphor Osborne-Thomason invokes here is technological: there is a comparison with telephone boxes and telephone communication. As Weinstein (2004) has noted, there is a significant presence of technological discourse in understandings of mediumship. If we consider, for example, that Margaret Fox apparently described spirit messages as a 'spiritual telegraph' (cited in Weinstein, 2004), the technological comparison is obviously apparent. Weinstein further argued that "spirit mediumship [was a]... nineteenth-century technology of vision that clearly dramatizes the problems with the representation and credibility of the human body in an increasingly mechanistic world. It explores how the animate and inanimate can be understood together, how the strange and familiar, the local and the foreign, relate to one another." (Weinstein, 2004: 137). I would argue that this same technology of vision is still applicable to contemporary discourses of spirit mediumship, and seeks to provide the same bridge between the animate and inanimate, strange and familiar, and local and foreign, or the self and Other. The role of metaphor serves as one means of establishing such a bridge: it provides a meaningful representation for something largely inanimate, strange, foreign and

inaccessible to the general public by grounding it in something animate, familiar, local and accessible. A telephone box, for example, is something corporeal, something animate, and telephone communication is an activity equally familiar, local and accessible as a common means of everyday interaction. As has been discussed previously, metaphor can function as an explanatory tool: as a means of providing a familiar basis by which the medium can express knowledge about the spirit world. Considering the uniqueness of their experiences, it seems that metaphor provides a useful comparison by trying to capture the experience in a familiar language that bridges the inanimate world of the medium and their spirit experiences, to the animate world of their audience.

In Osborne-Thomason's extract, she is not only comparing mediumship to being like telephone communication, but is also using the metaphor to illustrate an ethical dimension to the process of mediumship: mediums provide spirits with a much desired outlet so that they can make contact with their kith and kin, and this has significance not just for the living, but for the dead. They want to make contact with the living. This imbues spirits with a distinctive and recognisable set of emotions: they desire to make contact, to communicate, and can become greatly frustrated when this is made difficult.

In this next extract, we find metaphor is used by a spirit to a slightly different affect:

“I have to talk to you as an earthling. Your soul needs the tears. Think of a flower; it cannot bloom and it cannot survive without rain. It cannot blossom out into its full beauty without the sun. So think, if you can, of that divine part of you in your earthly body and when you have tragedy and tears, think of them as rain falling to feed it, and then when the joyous times come, when something beautiful happens and your heart is full of joy, then that is the sun that is nurturing that fragile flower.”

(Stokes, 1998: 221)

The spirit is clearly articulating that he desires to communicate with Stokes in a way that is meaningful to her: as an earthling. The use of metaphor in this extract is both illustrative and explanatory. It provides Stokes with a comparative reference for the content of the message her spirit contact is trying to convey, but it also provides a divine justification for her sadness: “your soul needs the tears”. The metaphor used here relates to natural discourse, with the needs of the soul compared to the requirements of other living things, such as flowers. It also connects experiences that impact upon the soul as being similar to elements impacting upon a flower. The spirit Stokes is reporting is trying to bridge Stokes’ identity as an ‘earthling’ while also providing information which acknowledges that she also has a ‘divine part’ which is inside of her ‘earthly body’. The role of metaphor in this extract works, as Lakoff & Johnson (2003) would suggest, by providing a conceptual structure for a specific spiritual message. The comparison to the soul as a flower, and to the impact of the elements as impact of experiences upon the soul, takes the latter ineffable concept and provides it with a tangible representation.

In the third extract, the channelled spirit is addressing his audience at the beginning of a trance lecture:

“I am pleased that I have been able to have crossed the ocean of being to weigh anchor once more in the harbour of your understanding minds... As I have said on numerous occasions, the delivery of truth to the eager mind is like manna from heaven. For just as the physical form needs food to sustain it, so the mind needs questions and answers to bring it into a deeper understanding of what it is initially in itself and in its divine links with the great spirit in order that it too can be sustain and invigorated.” (Goodwin & Goodwin, 2005:185)

This extract is particularly interesting, because it is cited as coming directly from a spirit contact via trance mediumship. This extract contains several metaphors and similes, which again fix the workings of the spirit world with comparisons made to more recognisable areas of everyday life. The initial metaphor provided here is again natural, but specifically connected to the sea: the spirit considers the ‘ocean of being’, and makes a comparison between his own agency as being like that of a vessel that will ‘weigh anchor’ in the ‘harbour’ minds of his audience. This metaphor provides a tangible representation – a conceptual structure – for something ineffable. But it also expresses an awareness of intent, not just by the spirit, but of the audience. By acknowledging an ‘ocean of being’ suggests vastness, which in turn suggests that the spirit has travelled a significant distance to be able to

communicate with his audience. This is further justified by a direct comparison where intellectual needs are contrasted with physical needs. Reference to the 'harbour' minds of the audience is interesting in conjunction with the spirit 'weigh[ing] anchor' as this suggests a connectivity whereby the spirit has travelled to his waiting 'harbour' audience.

It is interesting that spirits use metaphor, and seem to do so in a similar way to many of the mediums observed during demonstrations and interviewed as a means to explain their unusual experiences. The use of metaphor seems mainly focused on conveying information about something that may not be easily recognisable or understandable to the recipient, whether it is the spirit to a medium, or the medium to a non-medium. The relevance of spirit cited metaphors in medium biography is that mediums can use these metaphors to offer new references of meaning for their readership. Spirit cited metaphors have added significance because of the authority of the spirit world as the ultimate source of understanding. Medium autobiographies never debate the existence of the spirit world: it remains an unchallenged source of authority, and so these spiritual messages can be situated as teachings from an authoritative source.

7.7 Conclusion

Autobiographies are yet another vehicle by which mediums can provide information to a lay public about the spirit world. But they are more than this, for autobiographies are also a unique opportunity for a medium to express themselves and write about their experiences. Similar themes have arisen through an analysis of medium autobiographies that parallel with earlier analysis of live demonstrations and semi structure interviews. Mediums still seek to present themselves as ordinary individuals who become mediums based on the relevance of personal experience and external verification. Anecdotes are particularly important as a means of verifying the mediums' abilities without appearing as self promotion, as the use of another's acknowledgement and corroboration can be recorded via reported speech.

Autobiographies also work as educational tools, and there are various ways in which mediums ground their explanations of how mediumship works. References to scientific, psychological and technological discourse all seem to aid such explanations by aligning with an accepted means of authoritative discourse. The use of metaphor is also a useful explanatory device, and helps to ground ineffable concepts in tangible representations. Direct reported speech from spirits often seems to use metaphor to communicate spiritual messages or explanations to mediums in an understandable language that will also be accessible for the mediums' audience.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This project has undertaken a sociological approach to contemporary Western mediumship by focusing on spirit mediums practising in England. It has observed a number of mediumship demonstrations in both secular and religious contexts, and gathered biographical information about how mediums account for their experiences through interviews and published autobiographies.

In this chapter I will firstly present a summary of the findings of this project, before considering the methodological advantages and disadvantages of how this study has been conducted. I will suggest areas where this study could be improved, and consider other areas of study that would contribute to a more detailed understanding of spirit mediumship, and of which this study could compliment. Finally, I will reflect upon some of the broader implications raised by this study, considering how it may be of use to future research, what epistemological and ethical issues it has raised, and how these findings might be used in the future.

8.2 Summary of Findings

Mediumistic experience relates not just to the social activity of spirit mediumship - of how the living are reconnected with the dead - but lies at the core of how certain individuals make sense of unusual experiences and go on to become active practitioners of spirit communication. The relationship between the private and the public is often interlinked, as mediums must consistently make their unique experiences meaningful to others who have not had similar experiences. More than this, the experiences they claim are often considered controversial in Western society to the point where their validity is often undermined. In order to be successful, mediums must work against strict scientific-atheist frameworks of understanding mortality and provide legitimate examples of their claims of post mortem survival.

While experiences of spirit can make individuals feel ostracised from their wider community, it is through others that these experiences begin to take root within a framework of meaning. Mediums often report an initial ambiguity about their early experiences, and do not regard them as evidential of mediumistic ability at the time that they occur. This emphasises their self presentation as ordinary individuals to whom something extraordinary occurs: they do not actively seek their mediumistic experiences, but often find it a difficult and frictional area of their early lives. These experiences are recounted as unexpected, and are not necessarily typical of the kinds of experiences they will use when they become practising mediums. Largely,

however, these experiences are represented as benevolent, a quality that persists through their accounts of more recent spirit experiences.

It is the identification of their abilities by another, usually an already established medium, that generally provides the catalyst for a transformative period where a medium identity is negotiated, in development circles, and finally accepted. The role of external validation is important, and will remain so throughout their lives. This is also related to the role of experience, which is considered key to meaning making and understanding.

Experiences of spirit are ultimately sensuous in nature. Mediums may differ in how they exactly experience spirit, but generally these experiences are related to the five physical senses. Information is often conveyed as impressions, or as images, and many mediums have stated that they must try and interpret these images to make them meaningful during spirit communication. In situations where mediums make mistakes – i.e. where a recipient does not provide confirmation for information given – there are particular strategies that mediums can employ during demonstrations that help to smooth this over. Typically, this will involve identifying problems with the recipient, such as memory recall, and mediums will encourage recipients to check the information at a later date. However, lack of confirmation from a selected recipient can also be interpreted by the medium as evidence that they have got the wrong recipient, and so will redeliver the information to another recipient until confirmation is achieved. Mediums do not leave messages

undelivered unless they are not able to secure any positive responses from any members of their audience, but even in these cases, the presence of a legitimate spirit is not questioned: rather, the fault is placed with the audience members for not acknowledging, as it will be assumed that there is a suitable recipient who has simply not realised the message is intended for them. This however rarely happens, and mediums emphasise the importance of making contact if a message contains information they can relate to, at the risk of losing a potential spirit message if ignored.

Spirits are constructed as having recognisable social characteristics. They are reported as engaging in a number of recognisably social behaviours, such as queuing, and orientate to an awareness of the social rules of the demonstration settings, such as waiting until it is appropriate to make contact with the medium. Further than this, during spirit messages mediums allude toward their personalities, and will employ various ways of animating their contacts for their audiences. In interviews and autobiographies, spirits are also depicted as having social characteristics, and can communicate through speech in certain situations, defining clear motivations are characteristics. The spirit contacts reported by mediums are recognisable, and attributed as having an ongoing interest in and ability to observe the lives of the living.

Medium identities are formulated and managed in both demonstrations and in more reflective sources, such as in interview and in autobiography. The interview context

bore an interesting parallel with mediumship demonstrations, in that, in both instances, the medium's purpose is to communicate and make intelligible the presence of a non corporeal spirit world that their audience does not have access to. Mediums are not passive ventriloquists, but active agents, who construct and negotiate their own identities, and those of their spirit contacts when they demonstrate their mediumship, and will also do so when asked to reflect upon and account for their experiences.

8.3 Methodological Reflection

The phenomena of mediumship is both consumed and expressed in a number of ways, and so it seemed important that a study which sought to investigate mediumship sociologically should be aware of this diversity. Using three distinctive data sets enabled access into more than one aspect of spirit communication, and hopefully succeeded in providing the project with a more balanced insight into this contemporary spiritual practice. It is possible that, while a largely discursive approach enabled an exploration of the data on a suitably micro level, nevertheless, this kind of analysis may have been neglectful of mediumship's relationship to wider social contexts. This, however, has been done elsewhere, although it is an area that would benefit from further development. It would have been problematic for an analysis influenced by Discourse Analysis and grounded theory to try and identify mediumship within wider social contexts. The relevance of using the data to guide the analysis was not just due to the influence of grounded theory, but

further reflected that there was very little other data of its kind with which to compare. In a way this was advantageous, as I was able to approach the data without expectations or preconceptions. However, for a more thorough understanding of mediumship, a larger sample would be needed.

I did not really take into consideration the active agency of the audience members at public demonstrations aside from acknowledging that they play an important role in mediumship as interaction. It would no doubt be useful to interview and use questionnaires for audience members, both of public demonstrations and church services, to try and identify what their motivations for attending and experiences of previous demonstrations were. This may also be useful for compiling information on audience characteristics, and may allow for insight into how messages may affect individual's lives, and whether they feel more connected to their dead in the future. It may also be useful as a means to assess how affective mediumship demonstrations are, and what subsequent impact this has on individual understandings of post mortem survival. Research into this area will add to research into mediumship by showing how effective it is in achieving the goals it sets out to achieve, and whether it can successfully convince individuals of post mortem survival. It would also be interesting to try and ascertain how many people go repeatedly to large scale public demonstrations, and whether any then go on to become affiliated with Spiritualist churches or centres.

While it was thought that the three different data sets would compliment each other, and largely they did appear so, there were some disadvantages. It is possible that using interviews along with observational studies may have led me to interpret and analyse the observational data in a way that may differ if compared to a study using just observational studies. When considering continuity, it may have been better to select mediums that I could both interview and observe: indeed, this would seem like an important area to consider for future research. Also, it would have been more fruitful to have had more access to recordings of demonstrations, though this was not largely possible for this study due to ethical reasons and problems with availability. It seems that if future studies in this area were to be more longitudinal, this may have significant advantages, not just for the amount of data collected, but for the chance to build a good rapport with research participants. Long term ethnographic research would also be useful, enabling the researcher to gain a more thorough and immersive experience of mediumship. It is also worth considering participation at mediumship development classes as a new way of exploring how mediums, particularly if the researcher could join a new intake of fledgling mediums, are taught to make sense of their experiences and use them in a social setting. Participation in development circles may give the researchers a more rounded understanding of the development process, which this study has not really considered in great detail. Ethnographic research would also enable researchers to build a rapport with mediums, and may, if the researcher chose to be honest about their research intentions, provide certain ethical advantages. As this study has shown, mediums are often cautious about becoming involved in academic research,

and future studies must give attention to how best to work with this, and be respectful of it. Rapport is essential in projects of this kind, but longitudinal studies may be particularly advantageous, not just for building up rapport, but also for the researcher to be able to reflexively interact with their participants to find new ways of examining mediumship. Longitudinal studies may also give mediums the opportunity to become more involved with research, particularly if researchers would be prepared to engage in ongoing dialogues. Indeed, for future research projects this would seem a useful venture, not only as way to further knowledge about mediumship, but as a way of addressing particular ethical issues concerning representation. These are particularly relevant to mediums, who have often been represented in a negative fashion by particular researchers without much opportunity to reply. While some mediums, particularly those that have gained recent celebrity status, may have more access to comment, this does not reflect the position of the majority of mediums.

The interviews could have been conducted differently. Problems arose when mediums were asked how it felt to be in contact with spirits, and many struggled to find appropriate words that would express these unusual experiences. While this provided an interesting dynamic that was useful to the analysis on one hand, it may be possible to find other ways of gaining this information. Different questions may have provided better access, but having a more unstructured form of interview may also have enabled mediums to talk about their lives and experiences differently. It is worth considering methodologies that may enable mediums to talk about their lives

and experiences outside of the interview context, such as by keeping a diary, or by experiential sampling whereby mediums could use palm pilots to describe experiences they were having in the moment. When considering the sensuous quality of the experiences reported, methodologies that may be able to acknowledge and analyse this would be useful.

As there is still relatively little research into spirit mediumship, there are a number of areas that require further research. While this project provides information on some of the issues connected to spirit mediumship, it is nevertheless a comparatively small study. A larger scale study that was able to interview and observe a larger number of mediums may prove more insightful. Also, this study has neglected a number of other areas where mediumship is situated. For example, it does not consider séances, although these have been hugely influential in the past. The reason for this was due to access: séances are not generally well publicised, and mediums that I interviewed who would admit to taking séances stressed they would only allow certain individuals whom they knew and could trust to be present. Again, perhaps a longitudinal or ethnographic study may help with this, both through the building of better rapport, but also by increasing the chances of being able to find out about the role of séances for contemporary mediumship.

This project has also not looked in detail at trance mediumship. Again, this is an area that is often surrounded with secrecy, and some mediums who confessed to doing so nevertheless stated that they only do so under very specific circumstances

and in the presence of only highly select individuals. However, while trance mediumship is not as popular as mental mediumship, it does occur and should be taken into consideration. Again, longitudinal and ethnographic studies are likely to increase the chance of being able to explore this phenomena.

The use of mediums in supposedly haunted house locations has gained in popularity, particularly over the last decade, and this is an area that would benefit from a similar style of research. In these investigations, mediums must represent and embody spiritual presences from a variety of historical periods, and yet conform to the scientifically influenced structure that members of these investigations generally orientate toward. In many ways, this form of mediums demonstration is peculiar, as it often involves malevolent spirits and is not connected to aiding reconnection between the living and the dead. Sociological research into this area is needed, which may in turn shed new light on the mediumship demonstrations discussed here, and illustrate further mediumship's ability to be reflexive to fit new contexts.

Considering the vast literature on non-Western form of mediumship, it would be fruitful to explore how new cross-cultural approaches to mediumship might be developed. A few studies have attempted to compare cultures concerning extraordinary experience, most notably McClenon (1994), but this is still an under developed field. The prevalence of mediumship in a wide range of societies warrants its consideration. There is a great deal of information, often ethnographic

in nature, available in various literatures, but new ways of engaging with this material so that it may serve comparative purposes would be needed. This should be done so alongside new research, as there is still a noticeable absence of mediums' accounts from other communities. This would undoubtedly aid the findings of this study.

8.4 Research contribution

While not to discredit the literature on mediumship within parapsychological and psychical research studies, their dominance over how mediumship is studied, interpreted and represented needs to be redressed. Mediumship is relevant for a wide range of questions that go beyond the confines of the survival debate. It is hoped that this study will be of use for other approaches to the study of mediumship, that should take its sociological and experiential dimensions seriously (see also Roxburgh, 2007; Wrightson, 2007).

Its cross cultural relevance surely merits its as an important topic of study alone, but it should also be noted that Western spirit mediumship has proved reflexive and accommodating of the twenty first century, and its wide, varied availability is reflected by the number of its consumers. Mediumship has social relevance in its own right, but it is also relevant to other studies. Previous studies have shown how it is relevant to understandings about class, gender, religion, science, grief, and experience. Often these have taken a historical approach, so there is a need for more

contemporary research that will consider mediumship in relation to wider social contexts. Further more though, the structure of the accounts studied here are likely to bare similarities with other studies of accounts, for example, some of the data reported here is surely relevant to studies of how individuals ascribe meaning (or have meaning ascribed) to unusual experiences. Mediumship accounts may also provide a valuable source of data for those studying the use of simile and metaphor as a way of explaining experiences that are difficult to translate for those who have not had similar experiences. It may be advantageous to include data from medium in accounts in wider studies, as it would emphasise the usefulness of such accounts as meaningful forms of data and interaction, not suspicious claims that should be explained away.

The sensuousness of the experiences reported by mediums warrants further consideration, and may require new methods of exploration. As Stoller (1998) and Hume (2007) have argued, we need to develop new ways of interacting and understanding the body and experience that do not reduce such things to text that can be read and analysed as such. Due to the uniqueness of mediumistic experience, it seems like an ideal subject for developing such new methods of inquiry.

There are some interesting ethical issues connected to this research project that may be relevant to others where unexpected dynamics arise. They coincide particularly with the growing field of how researchers should both consider themselves during the course of their research, but also how they can negotiate their own presence

within the produce of their research, and the consequences of this. I had discussed some of my own research experiences in chapter three, as I felt they were relevant to a project that identified that process is key to how identities are formulated in conversation and text. Not only does such research look at the importance of process rather than just product, but, because these experiences concerned how mediums reacted to and made sense of my own identity, I felt it was important to note that this had happened. While I have maintained an awareness of the dynamic of the interview process as relevant to the kinds of data I collected, and how the accounts were formed, my experiences did not really feature in the analytical chapters. I feel this is something that could be considered in more detail, not just as an insight into mediums interacting with researchers, but in how we can consider and reflect upon the self in research more generally.

8.5 Conclusion

While there are still many areas connected to mediumship that would undoubtedly benefit from further research, this project has tried to provide a small step toward taking mediums' accounts seriously as access to vital information about mediumistic experience. It has treated mediumship as a social phenomena, which therefore warrants consideration of the ways in which interaction occurs, and has sought to find further meaning by talking to mediums about their experiences. The accounts of their experiences are fascinating and relate to a search for meaning grounded in experience, and to the transformation of private unexpected

experiences to the use of such experiences in controlled social settings for particular therapeutic and educational purposes. The findings from this project have hopefully identified that it has relevance for a wide range of other areas of both social and private life.

Appendix One

Observational Studies

Stephen Holbrook Performances

Garforth, Hilton Hotel, 23rd November, 2003

York, Moat House Hotel, 7th March, 2004

Selby, Community Centre, 24th November, 2006

Simon Peters Performances

York, Royal York Hotel, 9th May 2004

York, The Novotel, 26th April, 2006

Spiritualist Church Divine Service

Derby: Derby Spiritualist Church (11th January, 2004)

Billingham: Billingham Spiritualist Church (16th December, 2004)

Durham: Durham Spiritualist Church (13th February, 2005)

Birmingham: Harborne Healing Centre (14th May, 2005)

Manchester: Irlam Spiritualist Church (16th May, 2005)

Appendix Two

Interviews

NB: Ages have been averaged to protect identity of informants.

Research Instrument was a small audio cassette tape recorder.

30th October, 2004

Male medium, early fifties

11 am

York, Spiritualist Church

16th December, 2004

Female medium, early sixties

8.30 pm

Billingham, Spiritualist Church

3rd March, 2005

Male medium, early fifties

2.30pm

Leeds, interviewee's home

10th March, 2005

Male medium, early fifties

3pm

Tadcaster, interviewee's home

16th March, 2005

Male and Female mediums (married couple), early fifties

1.30pm

Scarborough, interviewee's home

22nd March, 2005

Female medium, late forties

11am

Sheffield, fast food restaurant

22nd March, 2005
Female medium, late thirties
2pm
Sheffield, café

30th March, 2005
Female medium, early sixties
Chesterfield, interviewee's home

1st April, 2005
Male medium, late fifties
11am
Nottingham, hotel bar

BB (female) 13th May, 2005
Female medium, mid fifties
12pm
Nottingham village hall

14th May, 2005
Male medium, mid fifties
5.30pm
Birmingham, Healing Centre

16th May, 2005
Male medium, late twenties
6pm
Manchester, Spiritualist Centre

26th May, 2005
Male medium, early fifties
11.30pm
Hull, office

29th July, 2005
Male medium, late forties
2pm
Whitley Bay, Spiritualist Church

10th October, 2005
Female medium, late forties
11am
York, interviewee's office

21st November, 2005
Male medium, late thirties
6.30pm
Sheffield, public house

26th January, 2006
Female medium, early forties
11.30am
Shipley, interviewee's home

Appendix Three

List of autobiographies

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