

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Analyzing Mediumistic Mentation

Rock et al. (2008) are to be congratulated for focusing our attention in the Summer issue of the *JSE* on the variety of experiences of mediums. Their work as well as the studies of Barrett (1996) and Emmons and Emmons (2003) represents modern research with the mentations of mental mediums that focuses on aspects other than veridical content. They presented descriptions of the type of sensory imagery experienced by mediums, as well as their feelings and impressions. This work is essential for our understanding of mediumship and I hope that they can continue it. The authors mentioned some ideas for further research and, along these lines, I would like to recommend that future studies could build on observations and analyses reported in the previous literature on the subject, particularly the old psychical research literature, although I realize that recent writings also have relevant information. In what follows I am covering some aspects that may not be the primary concern of Rock et al.

There is much about the variety of sensory modalities and impressions in the autobiographies of mediums, as seen in the writings of Eileen J. Garrett (e.g., Garrett, 1949). Emmons and Emmons (2003) reported an analysis of 122 statements with mediums, 40 of which came from interviews with mediums, and 82 from published accounts. Of 98 cases with information about the modalities of expression, 72% reported having some visual experiences. There were also auditory experiences (66%), and a general group consisting of a variety of intuitive, emotional, and bodily sensations, as well as other experiences (42%). Balfour's (1935) examination of Mrs. Willett's mediumship showed that she had impressions of presences, emotions, and impulses and inhibitions, among other manifestations.

There are many descriptions on record of the varieties of visions some mediums have had. Some of them, such as those D. D. Home had, are evidential, consisting of visions of spirits standing in the séance room with enough details to be recognized by sitters (Coleman, 1868: 37–38). There are, of course, other visual experiences that convey information. But I also find interesting those experiences that consist of non-evidential visions. Examples from the old literature include those seemingly symbolical visions reported by John W. Edmonds in which he saw places and people in a variety of environments (Edmonds & Dexter, 1853), and Andrew Jackson Davis' (1868) descriptions of landscapes and life in the afterworld. Can we assess how often these visions take place in modern mediums? Would it be possible to create a classification of the contents of such visions as a prelude to more systematic research?

In his study of Mrs. Warren Elliott, Saltmarsh (1929) referred to symbols he believed appeared in the medium's statements: "It will be observed that the symbols are . . . what might be called natural symbols, and are based on habitual analogies, either verbal, as for example when the hallucinatory figure coming near to the sitter is taken to mean nearness of relationship, or common forms of speech, as when all black is used as a symbol for worry or sorrow; or else they may be natural pantomime . . ." (Saltmarsh, 1929: 123). A systematic study of symbols used by each medium, and a comparison between mediums, would produce fascinating data. Such analyses need to consider how mediums developed, if they received particular training, or were influenced by particular cultures or concepts.

Other observations that may guide modern research are the records of the mentation produced by Gladys Osborne Leonard (e.g., Radclyffe-Hall & Troubridge, 1919; Thomas, 1928). In some séances she perceived letters instead of names, and the messages came in fragments. This fragmentation of mediumistic messages was noticed by others. Writing about Leonora E. Piper, Oliver Lodge (1890) stated: "In the midst of . . . lucidity a number of mistaken and confused statements are frequently made, having little or no apparent meaning or application" (Lodge, 1890: 443).

I would also like to mention James H. Hyslop's (e.g., 1919) writings about what he referred to as the pictographic process, in which "the communicator manages to elicit in the living subject a sensory phantasm of his thoughts, representing, but not necessarily directly corresponding to, the reality" (Hyslop, 1919: 111). This process, Hyslop believed, could account for all kind of distortions in the communications due to many factors, among them the difficulty in controlling the flow of irrelevant imagery, and the interpretation of images by spirit controls, the medium's subconscious mind, or both. Analyses of mediumistic mentation following Hyslop's model may be productive, both in terms of replicating his observations and supporting or extending his ideas.

Most modern studies are conducted with groups of people. While there is more to do following this approach, I would like to encourage in-depth case studies of specific mediums. Some examples of past detailed studies of single mediums include investigations of Hélène Smith (pseudonym of Catherine Elise Müller; Flournoy, 1900), Leonora Piper (Sidgwick, 1915), Pearl Curran (Prince, 1927), and Eileen Garrett (Progoff, 1964).

We also need a more general research program that focuses on the psychological profile of mediums (e.g., Moreira-Almeida et al., 2007). I was glad to see in Rock et al.'s report that they administered psychological questionnaires such as the NEO Personality Inventory and Tellegen's Absorption Scale, and I am looking forward to their analyses of this data. I wonder if future studies may be able to relate specific patterns or features of mediumistic mentation to psychological variables. An idea, among many, would be to follow Irwin's (1979) study of visual and verbal coding preferences in relation to the modality of spontaneous self-reported ESP experiences. Perhaps we may find that mediumistic mentation

follows the medium's cognitive preference. Interestingly, Hyslop (1919) wrote about one of the mediums he studied: "Mrs. Chenoweth is *par excellence* a visual only and nothing of an audile. Mrs. Chenoweth showed no aptitude for auditory phantasms; it took two or three years of training to elicit any of them to help out the meaning of the visual images, which she received with comparative ease" (Hyslop, 1919: 118).

The above suggestions may be studied in relation to veridical aspects of mentation. But, as important as such veridical aspects are, there is much to do with mentation itself. Just as there are studies in psychology of the content of dreams and imagery separate from ESP, we could study mentation as a psychological phenomenon. This would produce much knowledge about mediumship. Fortunately, and as seen in Rock et al.'s paper, there are contemporary mediums who are willing to assist investigators interested in these matters.

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Proposal for Short List of Best Papers in Parapsychology

I propose a project to assemble a definitive list of “the best published experiments in parapsychology”. Of course it could be revised later as new work comes out, but for now, I suggest that we use the combined wisdom and experience of the SSE community to put together a definitive list of the best papers in the parapsychology field, to be used as a ready resource for when skeptics and colleagues ask to be pointed to “the best evidence”. The papers to be included in this field should ideally be

- extremely well controlled (showing a convincing anomalous effect that is unlikely to be due to errors of experimental protocol or statistical analysis)
- informative (uncovering something interesting and important about the process in question—real, concrete conclusions)
- performed by individuals with rigorous backgrounds in the relevant field and good reputations (preferably also in fields outside of parapsychology)
- published in solid, peer-reviewed journals
- demonstrate to the mainstream community how controlled, scientific approaches can make progress in this field

Such papers are unfortunately scattered widely among the biomedical, psychological, engineering, and social sciences literature, making it difficult for interested people to find the right publications. They are also not indexed in the major databases (such as PubMed). There is a great need to have a ready reference list for colleagues, and to cite in our own papers, of not simply every paper, but a short list of the most impressive studies. Having chosen a list of categories (telepathy, remote viewing, microPK, etc.), SSE members are invited to send me the references (and full-text PDFs, if available) for one or a few such papers in whatever category they know best.

This should include classical studies (e.g., card guessing), but crucially also the latest work combining MRI brain imaging of precognitive tasks, meta-analyses of quantum RNG experiments, etc. Ultimately, it would be most useful to maintain an archive of references (and full-text papers, where possible) to refer to when challenged by open-minded skeptics who want to review the best evidence. It is