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Thematic Analysis of Mediums' Experiences

Recent investigations into mental mediumship have tended to use a proof-oriented approach (e.g., Beischel & Schwartz, 2007; O'Keeffe & Wiseman, 2005; Robertson & Roy, 2001) intended to demonstrate whether an explanation in terms of discarnate survival is tenable. Consequently, there is a distinct shortage of systematic qualitative studies that have explored the process and nature of mediumistic experiences. The relatively few studies that have gathered qualitative data (e.g., Emmons & Emmons, 2003; Leonard, 2005), for example by interviewing practising mediums, have been unsystematic in their design or have not adhered rigorously to formal methods of qualitative analysis, particularly in reducing their findings to quantitative summaries in the form of percentages. Thus, they have been unable to provide any deep phenomenological insight into mediums' lived experiences, and only serve to highlight the need for a more in-depth exploration of mediums' own accounts of their path to becoming a medium and their understanding of the mediumship process as they experience it.

It is against this backdrop that we welcome Rock, Beischel, and Schwartz's (2008) contribution to our understanding of the mediumship process. In reporting on a thematic analysis of mediums' experiences, Rock et al. should be praised for recruiting practising mental mediums, for adhering to guidelines for good

qualitative research (cf. Elliott et al., 1999), such as providing quotes to ground their themes in participants' accounts, and for conducting checks of the credibility of their themes with participants.

Unfortunately, there are a number of shortcomings to the study design they adopted, which severely constrain the validity of the claims they make concerning their data. We should like to briefly outline those shortcomings here in the hope that those interested in taking a qualitative approach might avoid those errors.

First, an important step in qualitative data collection is to ensure that participants feel empowered to give a full and candid account of their experience safe in the knowledge that theirs is a privileged perspective relative to the researcher's and that their personal impressions rather than some abstract "right" or "wrong" answers are of most interest. In order to fulfill this, interviews are often considered to be the most exemplary method of data collection as the researcher has the opportunity to establish rapport with participants (cf. Kvale, 1996; Morse, 1994; Smith, 1995; Willig, 2001). Unfortunately, by conducting their data collection in the form of an email, which was essentially an Internet questionnaire survey, Rock et al. have eschewed these important checks and balances and so they undermine their claim to validity for their data. It is acknowledged that other methods of data collection are increasingly being used in qualitative research due to the increase in Internet-mediated communication; for example, Mulveen and Hepworth (2006) explored individuals' experiences of participating in a pro-anorexia Internet site and Murray (2004) used semi-structured email interviews and email discussion groups to investigate the embodiment of artificial limbs. However, there is every possibility that participants in the Rock et al. study might have felt encouraged to give "appropriate" responses given the heavy emphasis on "qualifying" as an "integrative research medium" by virtue of achieving certain targets, including giving two email and two phone readings and in particular requiring participants to have read Schwartz's own book on mediumship, *The Afterlife Experiments*. This seems to us very likely to impose upon the participants clear definitions of what can and what cannot be considered legitimate in the context of describing authentic mediumistic experiences and *modus operandi*. In this respect, they could be regarded as anathema to qualitative approaches that have their roots in phenomenological inquiry, which aims to gain insight into the psychological and social world of the individuals of interest, and rightly values participants as experts on their own life experiences (cf. Giorgi, 1995; Smith & Osborn, 2003), unfettered by the researcher's own beliefs or expectations.

Another advantage of direct interactions with participants is that it allows the researcher to tailor the interview to reflect the participants' values and emphases (Smith, 1995)—it is common with semi-structured or unstructured interviews for the interviewer to reorganise the set of questions, adding or removing elements in response to the participants. This was not possible with Rock et al.'s favoured method of data collection, which severely constrains the range of topics that the participant could consider to be legitimate in that context.

In coming to the specific questions asked of participants in this study we are disappointed to note that much of their analysis seems to be derived from

straightforward answers to just one fairly direct question. With thematic analysis it is more likely that valid themes will emerge if questions are framed in a non-leading, open manner, following a 'funnelling' format in which participants are encouraged to share their beliefs, perceptions, and experiences with as little prompting as possible before probing more specific queries (cf. Smith & Osborn, 2003). Furthermore, it is essential in qualitative research to include detailed excerpts from participants' accounts that allow the reader to appraise how the themes have been developed and to allow the experiences of participants to be represented in their own words. Although Rock et al. include original quotations from participants, the majority are merely 'sound-bites' of one sentence or less, which do not provide any context for the mediums' experiences or allow the reader to conceptualize their own interpretations.

Finally, our reading of Rock et al.'s reflections on the limitations of their study design suggests to us that they have yet to fully embrace a qualitative approach to their research questions. Issues of experimental control and validity of the participants' claims to mediumship are singularly unimportant within a qualitative framework and would not be classed as limitations; rather, such a method promises to give an insight into the participants' lived experiences by providing them with an opportunity to articulate that perspective in their own words and on their own terms. In this respect, it is disappointing that Rock et al. propose that future research could use the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory to "quantify the intensity and pattern of phenomenological elements experienced by a medium," which in our opinion, would serve to restrict mediums' expression of their experiences rather than give them a voice.

In summary, although we commend Rock et al.'s intention to address an omission in the mediumship literature by setting out to explore mediums' experiences, there are several methodological shortcomings that seem to restrict the informativeness of the findings. In our view, the study is disappointing in its ability to resonate with the reader and does little to clarify or expand our understanding of mediumship. It seems pertinent to address these issues in any future research with mediums where the focus is on the phenomenology of their experiences.

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Is There Madness in Our Mediumship Methods? A Response to Roxburgh and Roe

The comments formulated by Roxburgh and Roe (2009) seem to be leveling two primary criticisms at Rock, Beischel, and Schwartz (2008): (1) Rock et al.’s methodology compromises the validity of the data and (2) Rock et al. “have yet to fully embrace a qualitative approach to their research questions.” Each of these attempted criticisms will be discussed in turn.

Criticism 1: Validity of Findings

Roxburgh and Roe have attempted to identify various ostensible methodological limitations of the study by Rock et al. (2008), which they suggest “severely constrain the validity of the claims they make concerning their data.” For example, Roxburgh and Roe specifically lament the fact that Rock et al. did not collect data using face-to-face interviews. This lamentation seems somewhat redundant in light of the fact that Rock et al. have already discussed this methodological issue in the original peer-reviewed work. Nevertheless, the important concern is whether the method of data collection used by Rock et al. compromised the