Parapsychology Foundation’s 2005 International Conference

“The Study of Mediumship: Interdisciplinary Perspectives:”

Summary Comments

Carlos S. Alvarado

The purpose of this conference was to provide a forum to discuss mediumship from different conceptual and disciplinary perspectives. For this reason we scheduled the following presentations:

**Historical Notes on the Role of Mediums in Spiritualism, Psychical Research and Psychology**
Carlos S. Alvarado, Ph.D. (Parapsychology Foundation)

**Anomalous Identity Experiences: Mediumship, Spirit Possession, and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID, MPD)**
Etzel Cardeña, Ph.D. (University of Texas Pan-American)

**Are Mediumship and Science Compatible?**
Jesús Soto Espinosa, Ph.D. (Confederación Espiritista de Puerto Rico)

**Reflections on the Physiology of Mediumship**
Ruth Reinsel, Ph.D. (The NeuroPsience Laboratory)

**Mediumship and Survival**
Emily W. Kelly, Ph.D. (University of Virginia)

**Survival is in the Details: Emerging Evidence for Discarnate Intention from Mediumship Research**
Gary E. Schwartz, Ph.D. and Julie Beischel, Ph.D. (Human Energy Systems Laboratory)

**Mental Health and Healing Process in Puerto Rican Spiritism**
Joan Koss-Chioino, Ph.D. (George Washington University)
They See Dead People: Working with Psychics and Mediums in Spontaneous Case Investigations
Loyd Auerbach, M.S. (Office of Paranormal Investigations)

Mediumship in the Balinese Context
Hoyt Edge, Ph.D. (Rollins College)

Incorporating Roles: The Psychosocial Dimension of the Embodiment of Spirits among Umbanda Mediums
Wellington Zangari, Ph.D. (University of São Paulo)

Mediumship and Creativity
Michael Grosso, Ph.D. (University of Virginia)

While we recognize that we have not covered all relevant topics or issues, I think it is fair to say that the conference has been successful in showing the varied aspects of the topic at hand.

Several of the papers illustrated the variety of phenomena mediums can and have produced. Carlos Alvarado reminded us of the difference between mental and physical mediumship, and Ruth Reinsel discussed some physiological phenomena mediums have shown in the past, such as changes in pulse and breathing rate. While Emily Kelly and Gary Schwartz and Julie Beischel focused on veridical phenomena suggestive of survival of death in the case of particular individuals, the presentations of Hoyt Edge and Wellington Zangari had different perspectives. The Balinese and Brazilian mediums discussed in the conference do not seem to be concerned in the main with the presentation of evidence of survival of death, or even veridical statements. For the most part, the spirits channeled were not deceased family members or friends, but supposed entities such as gods and ancestral spirits.

Following on a long established tradition in anthropology, Hoyt Edge and Joan Koss reminded us that the function of mediums in the modern world goes beyond providing evidence for survival of death or parapsychological functioning in any case. Mediums also provide meaning and healing, depending on the cultural context in which they operate.
Another major topic of the papers presented was the psychology of mediumship. Alvarado reminded us of the long history of ideas in which mediumistic phenomena have been related to different conceptions of the subconscious mind. Etzel Cardeña saw mediumship as a particular attempt to express or assert self-identity. Furthermore, he saw mediumship as possibly related to, but at the same time different from, other experiences such as dissociative identity disorder. The latter point reminds me of past attempts to unify human experience such as Frederic W.H. Myers’ system of subliminal psychology.

While Ruth Reinsel speculated on the role of the nervous system in mediumship, Joan Koss reminded us of the efficacy of Puerto Rican mediums as psychotherapists. She proposed that their success, like other forms of psychotherapy, depended on the regulation of emotions through the interaction between the client and the medium.

In his paper on Umbanda mediums Wellington Zangari not only mentioned social roles, but also made interesting observations on the role of group beliefs and dynamics as variables that may shape the manifestation of mediumship. This brings to mind the comments William James made in the first volume of *The Principles of Psychology* on the influence of beliefs and expectations on mediumistic communications.

Another important psychological view of mediumship was Michael Grosso’s discussion of the different ways in which creativity could be related to mediumship. The examples he presented reminded me of what physiologist Charles Richet referred to as the “talents of the unconscious.” Grosso does much to illustrate how some subconscious manifestations can transcend the productions of the conscious mind. Considerations such as his, and those of Joan Koss, should form part of the growing movement of positive psychology.

However, the study of mediumship as a veridical phenomena following on spiritualism and parapsychology is a very important approach as well. Regardless of the existential, social or psychological functions performed by the medium it is important to study the verifiability of mediumistic statements. Acceptance of the role of the medium as a producer of veridical phenomena has direct implications for the empirical exploration of the concepts of survival of bodily death, and for ideas about the nature of the mind and of humankind in general.
Several of the papers presented explored aspects of these issues. Emily Kelly focused on the importance of past work from the psychical research literature, such as the use of proxy sittings. Current work with a medium was reported by Gary Schwartz and Julie Beischel. The transcripts of the messages they presented are a reminder of the successes, ambiguities, and surprises of mediumistic messages. Furthermore, Loyd Auerbach gave us a glimpse into the veridical mediumistic insights offered by mediums working in haunting investigations.

While the anthropological and psychological views of mediums may be seen to oppose spiritualistic and parapsychological views, this is not necessarily the case. The social and psychological functions of mediumship do not necessarily negate its possible parapsychological aspects. As human phenomena one should expect that veridical mediumship may also be related to non-parapsychological processes. I am saying this not only in terms of the use of cognitive and physiological resources of the organism (as Grosso argued with creativity and Reinsel discussed with the workings of the nervous system), but also in terms of expressions of the self and of particular cosmologies, as mentioned by Cardeña and Edge. Unfortunately, because of training and interest, we usually focus on mediumship from particular points of view to the neglect of other views.

Something should also be said about the healing aspects of mediumship. While some presenters discussed mediums as research subjects (and I am aware none of them wanted to reduce them to this single dimension), others such as Koss, Auerbach and Soto saw mediumship as a helping profession. Current popular interest for mediumship is not only due to concern for spirituality, belief in the beyond, or scientific reasons, but also for the basic need to be healed either of body, mind or spirit, in such cases as bereavement due to the loss of a loved one.

The presenters in this conference have all helped us realize not only how complex mediumship is, but also how much we need to do in the future to continue to explore this important topic. In keeping with the philosophy of previous conferences hosted by the Parapsychology Foundation since 1953, it is my hope that such discussions as we have had here will help us chart our future explorations with the awareness that interdisciplinary and multi-conceptual views enrich our understanding of this fascinating and important phenomenon.