

PANEL: PERSPECTIVES IN THE STUDY OF MEDIUMSHIP

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ON TRANCES AND SPIRIT COMMUNICATORS: RESEARCH IDEAS FROM THE OLD LITERATURE

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There are many aspects of mediumship we can study from the psychological perspective. This includes consideration of cognitive, psychosocial, and psychopathological variables. I will discuss the topic using suggestions and observations from the old psychical research literature.

To this day we do not understand the nature and functions of trance. There is much to do with the stages and depth of trance. Cesare Lombroso (1909) argued that the most striking physical phenomena with Eusapia Palladino took place in the deepest trance. Eleanor Sidgwick (1915) documented the existence of stages of trance and the variety of phenomena accompanying Mrs. Piper's mentation. Just as modern parapsychologists have studied ESP in relation to aspects of altered states of consciousness (e.g., depth, changes in sense of time and body image) we may study psi in mediums in relation to specific features of trance.

There is also much to do regarding the imagery obtained in mediumistic mentation. We may attempt to replicate James H. Hyslop's (e.g., 1919) studies of the role of visual imagery, and its distortions, on the generation of veridical and non-veridical mentation. There are probably many individual differences in the content of the mediumistic mentation. But regardless if the mentation shows common patterns or not it would be worthwhile to explore the flow of imagery, its symbolism, and salient features such as the repeated use of specific images in veridical messages, as documented by Charles Drayton Thomas (1939) in his study of Gladys Osborne Leonard.

Also important is the psychosocial study of the content of mediumistic statements and the development of trance personalities. Williams James (1890) emphasized that the *Zeitgeist* was influential on mediumistic productions. The writings and studies of Théodore Flournoy (1900, 1911), Pierre Lebedzinski (1924), and René Sudre (1926) show the importance of indirect suggestions, beliefs and demand characteristics on the development of trance personalities and the stories of the communicators. Most of the previous discussions have been theoretical and after the fact, but there is much to do to induce or manipulate specific ideas to explore the plasticity of the medium's psychological resources. These manipulations could involve the production of psi effects such as communications from the living. Positive results would place ESP explanations of mediumship on empirical footing.

We also need to return to the old question of the relationship of mediumship to psychopathology. In the old days the psychopathological nature of mediumship was defended both by those skeptical of its psi components, such as Pierre Janet (1889), and those that believed in psi aspects such as physical phenomena (e.g., Morselli, 1908). Some mediums seem to show unstable behaviors or a tendency towards instability. Perhaps we should study the issue considering Joseph Maxwell's (1903/1905) suggestion that the nervous system of mediums is liable to many changes and fluctuations that do not necessary become pathological. This is consistent with some contemporary ideas of schizotypy that postulate that some people are more creative or hallucinatory than others due to differences in the inhibitory mechanisms of the nervous system. Assuming this is the case with mediums we should expect to find more adjustment and productive use of mediumistic phenomena in some than in others, according to different developmental and situational variables.

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PHYSICAL MEDIUMSHIP, MACRO-PK AND THE AUTONOMIC NERVOUS SYSTEM

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The accounts of séances held with several physical mediums of the 19th and early 20th century provide tantalizing clues to extreme bodily states during the production of PK effects. Observations of mediums such as Eusapia Palladino, Franek Kluski, and Rudi Schneider give evidence that macro-PK phenomena were produced at a substantial physical cost to the medium.

Symptoms that were commonly observed during macro-PK included pallor, increased heart rate (tachycardia), hyperventilation or irregular breathing (dyspnea), hoarseness of voice, and increased perspiration. After séances where macro-PK phenomena were apparently produced without fraud, many physical mediums experienced severe physical and mental sequelae, including in some cases, exhaustion, headache, extreme muscle weakness, vomiting, and long-lasting disturbances of digestive function and sleep.

These symptoms from the séance room share a common basis in that they are produced by competing branches of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) which exert opposing effects on bodily organs. The sympathetic branch has a stimulatory effect and produces arousal, while the parasympathetic branch produces relaxation. Normally both branches are active at the same time, to keep the body in an optimum state of functioning.

Braud (1981, 1985) reviewed the evidence that the autonomic nervous system may modulate psi performance. He concluded that GESP is generally facilitated by calm, quiet states, and PK may be facilitated by states of arousal. Roll and Persinger's (1998) observations with poltergeist agents support the role of arousal in macro-PK. The symptoms listed above during production of macro-PK are symptoms of activation of the sympathetic branch of the ANS. The post-séance sequelae are typical of activation of the parasympathetic branch of the ANS (Robertson, Low & Polinsky, 1996).

Most of the cardiovascular and respiratory effects and alterations in level of arousal seen during physical mediumship are under the control of the vagus nerve (cranial nerve X) and the insular cortex. The insular cortex (insula) lies directly under the temporal lobe. It controls the regulation of bodily functions by the ANS. Sympathetic activation of the insula results in increased heart rate and blood pressure, respiration, salivation, and dilation of the pupil, as well as gastrointestinal activity (Robertson, Low & Polinsky, 1996).