

**ORIGINAL PEER-REVIEWED RESEARCH***Intended Audience: Researchers, Clinicians*

# Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of Mediumistic and Psychic Experiences

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**Abstract.** Mediums are individuals who report experiencing regular communication with the deceased; the phenomenon of mediumship has been reported in cultures all over the world since time immemorial. The current study examined similarities and differences in the reported experiences of secular American mediums (those not associated with any formal religious organization) during mediumship readings involving communication with the deceased and during psychic readings for/about the living. Participant responses to two counter-balanced, open-ended online survey items were quantitatively analyzed using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) text analysis software and qualitatively analyzed using a content analysis methodology. Participants included 113 self-identified mediums and 14 Windbridge Certified Research Mediums; over 90% were white females; their average age was  $54.2 \pm 9.6$  years; 97% reported being able to distinguish between mediumistic and psychic experiences; and 122 provided complete survey responses. Statistically significant differences between descriptions of mediumistic and psychic experiences were seen regarding the proportion of words included in the LIWC categories of: social processes ( $11.76\% \pm 5.8\%$  vs.  $9.93\% \pm 5.64\%$ ,  $p=0.004$ ); perceptual processes ( $6.63\% \pm 4.31\%$  vs.  $4.81\% \pm 3.81\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); ingestion ( $0.23\% \pm 0.57\%$  vs.  $0.05\% \pm 0.20\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); past-focused time orientation ( $3.09\% \pm 3.23\%$  vs.  $2.06\% \pm 3.19\%$ ,  $p=0.001$ ); religion ( $0.90\% \pm 0.11\%$  vs.  $0.34\% \pm 0.09\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ); and insight ( $5.06\% \pm 2.97\%$  vs.  $6.48\% \pm 4.30\%$ ,  $p=0.002$ ). The proportion of words describing positive and negative emotions, present-focused and future-focused time orientation, health, and money were not different. Qualitative content analysis found three overarching, summative themes regarding mediumistic communication: preparation, communication triangulated, and experience of the communication. Four overarching, summative themes emerged from the text regarding psychic readings for the living: establishing the connection, experiencing the connection, content of the reading, and psychic information flowing from various sources. Perhaps most interesting is the finding that experiences of psychic connections during readings for the living included “non-specific discarnates” as a source of information; this strongly calls into question theoretical frameworks that posit separating mediums’ experiences into categories that do and do not involve communication with the deceased as well as the continued use of terminology reflecting such a separation.

**Keywords:** medium, psychic, text analysis software, LIWC, content analysis, pluralism

Psi is an umbrella term describing various anomalous information or energy transfer processes (also termed anomalous cognition and anomalous perturbation, respectively; e.g., Palmer, 2015). Psi involves acquiring information or influencing material systems independent of sensory or other physical means. Experiences such as those involving psi are regularly viewed as bizarre or paranormal in modern times but “have been reported in all civilizations throughout the ages” (Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo-Neto, 2017, p. 283). The study of anomalous experiences such as those that occur during psi phenomena provides “valuable insights into the full range of human experience” and “can expand and enrich our understanding of human nature and potential” (Cardena, Lynn, & Krippner, 2017, p. 4). Indeed, researchers “have been exploring human experiences of psi in an attempt to pull back the curtain and expose the inner workings of individuals, groups, and cultures that have integrated psi into their daily lives” (Kruth, 2015, p. 219). Previous research has demonstrated that common themes among psi-related experiences involve feelings of connection and unity, peak emotions, and “knowing” (Heath, 2005).

The psi-based phenomenon under investigation in this study was mediumship. Here, we are defining mediums as individuals who report experiencing regular communication with the deceased (here, termed discarnates). “Using this definition opens the lived experience of mediums and their clients to multidisciplinary investigation” (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015, p. 302). Mediumship has two identities in the modern world: it has recently gained increased exposure in the popular media but is “generally rejected or marginalized as an intuitive way of knowing” (Emmons, 2000) in Western societies. In a larger, more complete sense, mediumship is “ancient and ubiquitous across cultures” (Hunter & Luke, 2014, p. 9) and “has been reported since antiquity” (Harris & Alvarado, 2013, p. 196).

### **Mediumship Research**

Modern mediumship studies (reviewed in Beischel & Zingrone, 2015) have explored the historical and anthropological roots of mediumship all over the world as well as mediums’ practices, training, use of language, psychology, neurophysiology, societal impact, and phenomenology (i.e., experiences). This research has included both quantitative and qualitative methods, though initial investigations of mediumship were primarily qualitative (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015).

Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative phenomenological research methods provides unique and valuable insights into mediumship. “Mediumship is well suited to investigation using a mixed methods approach in view of the fact that both quantitative and qualitative methods have been instrumental, thus far, in furthering our understanding of mediumship” (Roxburgh & Roe, 2013a, p. 226). “Converging on a phenomenon from a number of related points of view” produces “broader perspectives” (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015, p. 310). In order to acquire an “accurate and comprehensive assessment” of any experience being examined, “it is extremely useful to combine different research strategies, such as quantitative and qualitative methods” (Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo-Neto, 2017, p. 7).

Contemporary mediumship research has also included examinations of the accuracy of mediums’ statements under experimentally controlled conditions. For example, one recent replication study (Beischel, Boccuzzi, Biuso, & Rock, 2015) employed blinding methods that addressed conventional explanations for successful mediumship readings including cold reading, rater bias, experimenter cueing, and fraud. Scoring data was collected for 58 blinded phone readings performed by 20 mediums and statistically significant findings included forced-choice reading selections and higher global scores given to target (vs. decoy) readings. These types of data provide evidence for the phenomenon of anomalous information reception: the reporting of accurate and specific information about the deceased without prior knowledge about the deceased or their associated sitters, in the absence of any sensory feedback, and without using deceptive means. However, accuracy data collected under controlled conditions does not address the source of the mediums’ information. Two hypotheses have been proposed as explanations for the presumably psi-based source of accurate information reported by mediums: the term *survival psi* (Sudduth, 2009) is used to describe the theoretical phenomenon in which mediums communicate telepathically with the deceased and the term *somatic psi* (Beischel & Rock, 2009) is used for the competing theory that mediums use telepathy with the living, clairvoyance (including of a psychic reservoir), and/or precognition but not communication with the deceased to acquire information. Because the types of information theoretically accessible using psi and the times at which they could be accessed are limitless, accuracy data cannot distinguish between these two theories. As a result of this survival psi vs. somatic psi impasse, qualitative phenomenological methodologies have been used to collect data regarding mediums’ experiences and examine

which explanation they better support (Rock, Beischel, & Cott, 2009). This and additional relevant qualitative research is described below.

**Qualitative research.** Qualitative methods in general provide insight into mediumship “by gathering data that are more concerned with experiential accounts than evidence for the existence of post-mortem communication” (Roxburgh & Roe, 2013a, p. 226). This direction involves a “willingness of researchers to suspend theory-laden research questions and dig more deeply into the experience” (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015, p. 309).

In qualitative examinations of experiences like mediumship, research methods most often “entail some form of retrospective reporting” (Pekala & Cardeña, 2000, p. 61). The introspective verbal report “is used in one form or another in virtually all research on consciousness” (Farthing, 1992, p. 45). William James noted, “Introspective Observation is what we have to rely on first and foremost and always” (1890, p. 185, cited in Farthing, 1992, p. 45). Phenomenological methods are used to examine the remembered experiences of individuals in order to specify “the essential characteristics of the phenomena” (Irwin & Watt, 2007, p. 8). Phenomenology “considers every experience to be valid in and of itself” (Heath, 2005, p. 362). An individual’s “conscious experience is an important phenomenon in its own right, and introspective reports are critically important for finding out about people’s conscious experiences” (Farthing, 1992, p. 48).

Previous qualitative phenomenological research examining the experiences of modern mediums and similar practitioners has demonstrated several common themes related to mediumistic experiences as well as comparing them to experiences during psychic readings for the living. Barrett (1996, as cited in Heath, 2005) examined the experiences of nine channelers and found seven common themes. The channelers: (1) experienced communicators as separate but close, (2) felt “in control of the staging the transmission,” (3) received and expressed the information, (4) experienced a cooperative partnership with the communicators, (5) were mentally and emotionally detached from the information, (6) experienced physical sensations, and (7) had positive feelings regarding the experience (Heath, 2005, p. 367).

Emmons and Emmons (2003) performed 40 in-depth interviews with mediums, reviewed library materials on 80 additional mediums, and observed participants in Spiritualist services including the Lily Dale community in New York. One element they examined was the “kinds of input” a medium experiences “in the process of ‘getting the message’ that they bring forth” (p. 242). They noted that mediums’ experiences were

primarily visual and auditory but could also include other modes of sensory experience. Similar to the “knowing” theme involved in other psi experiences (Heath, 2005), Emmons and Emmons (2003) noted that sometimes mediums “just ‘g-know’ (pronounced ‘guh-know’) things intuitively,” a term “based on the word ‘gnostic’” (p. 243).

Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009) used a qualitative thematic analysis methodology to analyze descriptions provided by six Windbridge Certified Research Mediums [i.e., mediums who were previously screened and certified using published criteria (Beischel, 2007) and whose abilities had been previously demonstrated under controlled laboratory conditions]. The mediums described their experiences while performing mediumship readings for the deceased and providing psychic readings about/for living clients. The analysis demonstrated nine comprehensive constituent themes of the mediumship experience: (1) “signs” confirming the presence of the discarnate; (2) “merging” with the discarnate by adopting the emotions or personality traits of the discarnate; (3) experiencing the discarnate as an autonomous entity; (4) a multi-modal sensory experience; the inclusion of pertinent (5) visual, (6) auditory, (7) tactile, and (8) olfactory imagery; and (9) “just knowing” information related to the discarnate. The descriptions of experiences during psychic readings for the living collected during the Rock, Beischel, and Cott study (2009) involved seven constituent themes, the first six of which (1-6) were similar to the mediumship themes: (1) multiple sensory modalities, pertinent (2) visual, (3) auditory, and (4) tactile information, (5) empathy (similar to the discarnate “merging”), (6) “just knowing” information about the target, and (7) apparent precognition.

Roxburgh and Roe (2013b) used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze responses from 10 Spiritualist mediums gathered during semi-structured interviews. The medium participants reported seeing, hearing, and sensing discarnates (‘spirits’); experiencing symbols or familiar associations; “how their sense of identity is transformed;” and “how they can feel changes taking place within their personality and their body” (p. 33). One participant “used the metaphor of energy to make the distinction between a psychic link that is ‘static’ and ‘dense,’ and spirit communication that is ‘vibrant’ and ‘lighter’” (p. 33).

**Quantitative research.** Previous quantitative phenomenological research with contemporary mediums has demonstrated that the experience of communication with the deceased may be quantitatively different than experimental control conditions but may be relatively similar to experiences of obtaining psychic information from or about living targets.

Rock and Beischel (2008) examined the experiences of seven Windbridge Certified Research Mediums (described above) during mediumship readings for the deceased and a control condition in which no communication occurred. They utilized the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (PCI; Pekala, 1991), a 53-item questionnaire used to quantify 26 phenomenological elements. The reading condition was found to be associated with significantly higher scores for negative affect, altered body image, altered time sense, and altered state of awareness. Conversely, the reading condition received significantly lower scores than the control condition for self-awareness, volitional control, and memory. These results suggest the presence of an altered state of consciousness during the mediumship reading condition as compared to the experimental control condition.

A second quantitative study (Rock, Beischel, Boccuzzi, & Biuso, 2014) also employed the PCI and compared the phenomenology of 19 claimant (vs. certified) mediums during mediumship readings and a control condition. The results suggested that the mediumship reading condition in this study did not induce an altered state of consciousness. The findings from this larger sample of claimant mediums did not replicate the previous findings (Rock & Beischel, 2008) with the sample of Windbridge Certified Research Mediums in which a difference between conditions was found.

Beischel, Rock, and Boccuzzi (2013) quantitatively compared 10 Windbridge Certified Research Mediums' phenomenological processes during mediumship readings for the deceased and during psychic readings for the living, both under blinded and randomized conditions. The participants completed the PCI regarding their experiences during the blinded mediumship and psychic readings as well as during baseline and control conditions. When the intensity scores of the 26 PCI dimensions were compared for all four conditions, no quantitative differences were seen between the mediumship and psychic readings.

**Mediumistic and Psychic Experiences.** The Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009), Roxburgh and Roe (2013b), and Beischel, Rock, and Boccuzzi (2013) studies described above included the finding that medium participants report an ability to differentiate between experiences of discarnate communication and psychic readings for living targets.

After the Beischel, Rock, and Boccuzzi (2013) study, the 10 Windbridge Certified Research Medium participants were informally interviewed about their general experiences during mediumship and psychic readings. Representative collected comments included:

*In a mediumship reading, it feels like someone is talking to me. With psychic readings, it's information about someone.*

*The physical feeling I get is a tingling or a pressure in my head when the medium stuff starts to happen or when they're entering the room. I don't get that at all during a psychic reading.*

*There's a heaviness around the sensation of living people; like air compared to helium. The auditory aspect is much sharper when I'm perceiving someone who is deceased. Their energy is more like helium.*

The population of interest for the current study was secular American mediums, a population of mediums not yet effectively described in the literature. As stated above, Emmons (e.g., 2000) has primarily examined mediums from Spiritualist communities. In addition, although Reinsel (2003) surveyed 18 American mediums using standard questionnaires as part of a pilot study, she specifically examined symptoms of dissociation, depersonalization, absorption, and temporal lobe dysfunction. Kelly and Arcangel (2011) examined the accuracy of 15 mediums and did not collect phenomenological data. Beyond the phenomenological research and accuracy testing described above, our own research with the 20 US-based Windbridge Certified Research Mediums has also included an examination of mediums' electrocortical activity (Delorme, Beischel, Michel, Boccuzzi, Radin, & Mills, 2013).

The subset of American mediums not associated with any formal organization and who hold no organized belief system may serve as the majority of mediums in the US, but the experiences of these mediums require further examination. The current study aimed to examine the similarities and differences of self-reported secular American mediums' retrospectively reported experiences during mediumship readings involving communication with the deceased and experiences during psychic readings for and/or about the living. It used the quantitative method of computerized text analysis and the qualitative method of content analysis to analyze 122 mediums' open-ended survey responses describing the two types of experiences. This is, to the best of our knowledge, the largest phenomenological study to ever systematically examine the experiences of secular American mediums.

## Method

### Participants

**Human research participant protections.** The methods used during this study were approved by the Windbridge Institutional Review Board (WIRB, #2014-BF-723). Adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in the study were provided.

**Participant recruitment.** Recruitment for the current study began during a previous study called the Online Census of Traits and Observations (OCTO) Study. OCTO Study recruitment used email, social media, and word-of-mouth methods and through calls for participation shared by other US-based organizations with similar missions including Forever Family Foundation and Rhine Research Center. The results of the OCTO Study will be reported elsewhere. After completion of the OCTO Study survey, participants could provide their contact information if they were interested in completing additional online surveys. The survey responses analyzed for the current study were collected as part of a larger, multi-part study which was called the Secular American Mediums Survey (SAMS) Study during recruitment. Other SAMS Study results will also be reported elsewhere. Self-identified medium participants were recruited by email from the contact list collected at the end of the OCTO Study. A full consenting process was performed with each SAMS Study participant. All participants reported being 18 or more years old, citizens or permanent residents of the United States, and able to read and write English easily. Experimenters did not interact in-person or over the phone with any participants; the consenting process and all data collection took place online. Participant questions were answered by experimenters by email.

As the world becomes more and more digital, the large majority of people in the US now use online services for nearly all business, social, and retail interactions often through mobile devices. “The fact that people have become more accustomed to completing various daily activities online” may make them “more receptive to completing surveys online” (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014, p. 301-302). For each survey in the SAMS Study, participants were notified if that day’s survey would include only multiple-choice items and be easily completed on a mobile device or if it would require longer, open-ended responses in which “a keyboard might be useful in answering them.” SAMS Study participants completed online survey items every other day for nine days. The two sets of responses analyzed and reported here were collected on Day 3.



**Participant selection.** Based on survey responses during the OCTO Study, participants were categorized as mediums and non-mediums. When mediums' contact information was collected at the end of the OCTO Study, they were asked to confirm that they identified as mediums and asked if they practiced mediumship or spirit communication as part of an organized religion. Only participants who identified as mediums and reported a secular practice (not as part of an organized religion) were invited to participate in the SAMS Study. During recruitment, participant requirements were again listed as including (1) self-identifying as a medium (i.e., "For the purposes of this study, you are a medium if you regularly experience communication from the deceased and report the information you receive to the living.") and (2) not practicing mediumship or spirit communication during the services of an organized religion. Only participants who reported self-identifying as mediums who did not practice mediumship as part of organized religions were consented and participated in the SAMS Study and the data collection described here.

Our mediumship research program focuses on secular participants for two reasons: (1) The beliefs, experiences, and practices of secular American mediums may be different from mediums who practice mediumship as part of the services of an organized religion such as Spiritualism or Spiritism and/or be different from other culturally- or geographically-based forms of mediumship. Regarding phenomenological research specifically, it is difficult to remove or account for the impact that organized doctrines and/or practices may have on the perceptions and experiences of participants during phenomenological research. (2) The majority of mediums practicing in the US seem to be secular. For example, of the medium participants who provided their contact information at the end of the OCTO Study, only 5% reported being a participating member in an organized religion that includes mediumship or spirit communication as part of its services. The other US-based organizations who shared our call for participants are also secular organizations with no religious affiliations.

**Participant characteristics.** A total of 127 participants provided responses to the SAMS Study items described here. "By using multiple participants, [interviews] can ascertain how generalizable a particular experience is" (Pekala & Cardeña, 2000, p. 60). The participant total for this study includes 14 Windbridge Certified Research Mediums who were, as stated above, previously screened and certified using published criteria (Beischel, 2007); they are secular mediums. The remaining 113 participants self-identified as secular mediums as described above.

**Age.** The mean age of the 127 participants was  $54.2 \pm 9.6$  years.

**Gender.** Participants were asked, “With what gender do you currently identify yourself?” and could choose female, male, intersex, transgender, and “Do not identify as female, male, intersex, or transgender” as well as “Prefer not to answer.” Participants reported being 90.6% female ( $n=115$ ) and 8.7% male ( $n=11$ ) and one participant (0.8%) reported not identifying with a listed gender (total  $n=127$ ).

**Race.** Participants were also asked, “Which category best describes you?” Three participants preferred not to answer this item. Of the remaining 124 participants, 121 reported identifying with only one racial category: 92.7% identified as White ( $n=115$ ) and 2.4% identified as Hispanic ( $n=3$ ). Each of the following three options was chosen by one participant (0.8%) each: American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and “Another race, ethnicity, or origin.” Three participants (2.4%) identified with more than one racial category: two reported identifying as Hispanic and White and one reported identifying as American Indian/Alaska Native, Black/African American, and White.

## Data Collection

**Survey Instrument.** The online questionnaire hosting and development service FormSite (<https://fs7.formsite.com/>) was used to create and host the consenting materials and survey items and to capture participant responses.

**Phenomenological Items.** During one survey in the five-part SAMS Study, participants were asked, “Can you tell the difference between communication from the deceased and psychic information about the living?” and could choose ‘Yes,’ ‘No,’ or ‘I don’t know.’ Participants who chose ‘Yes’ were then asked (on another screen) for open-ended responses to both of the following: “In your own words, describe your experiences when receiving communication from the deceased” and “In your own words, describe your experiences when getting psychic information about the living.” These items were counter-balanced; that is, half of the participants were shown the communication item first and half were shown the psychic item first.

## Analyses

Participant responses to the two open-ended items regarding their mediumistic and psychic experiences were quantitatively analyzed using

text analysis software and qualitatively analyzed using a content analysis methodology.

**Text analysis software.** The collected text was quantitatively analyzed using Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC, <http://liwc.wpengine.com/>) software. LIWC (pronounced 'Luke') is a validated text analysis software program that calculates the degree to which different psychologically meaningful categories of words are used in a given text. LIWC is used to examine text for the degree to which 80 different language categories including positive/negative emotions, self-references, causal words, attentional focus, emotionality, social relationships, and thinking styles are represented. The psychometrics of words assessed by LIWC are based on a random collection of over 2,500 blogs, experimental essays, poetry, books, science articles, and natural speech transcripts (Tausczik & Pennebaker, 2010). LIWC has been used to “classify texts along psychological dimensions and to predict behavioral outcomes, making it a text analysis tool widely used in the social sciences” (Chung & Pennebaker, 2012, p. 206).

From the 80 different language categories provided by LIWC, we made the *a priori* choice to examine 12 characteristics: positive emotions; negative emotions; social processes; insight; perceptual processes; ingestion; health; past-focused time orientation; present-focused time orientation; future-focused time orientation; money; and religion. LIWC provides a percentage of each participant's text that fell into each category. For this study, these percentages in the 12 categories were compared for each condition (communication with the deceased vs. psychic information about the living) using two-tailed Wilcoxon signed-rank tests for paired non-parametric data; the Bonferroni-corrected  $\alpha$  was set to 0.0042.

We chose to examine *positive* and *negative affect* because previous research has not achieved consensus on the topic of affect during mediumship experiences. One quantitative study (Rock & Beischel, 2008) found that a discarnate reading condition received significantly higher scores than the control condition for negative affect. However, during the control condition, the participants were asked to describe a living person s/he (i.e., the medium) knew personally. The participants most often chose members of their families with whom they had positive relationships so it is understandable that negative affect would not be a component of those “control” experiences. In subsequent studies (Beischel, Rock, & Boccuzzi, 2013; Rock, Beischel, Boccuzzi, & Biuso, 2014), the control condition involved participants describing people with whom they did not have relationships.

Those studies did not find differences in negative affect between reading and control conditions.

The category of *social processes*, which includes words describing relationships, was chosen in order to assess if the differences in the purposes of the two types of readings would be reflected in the descriptions of the experiences. The purpose of mediumship readings is to share messages from discarnates with living sitters wanting to hear from them. Conversely, the purpose of psychic readings is primarily to share information about the living reading recipient about their own life.

The LIWC category of *insight* contains words such as ‘think,’ ‘consider,’ and ‘reason’ that refer to cognitive processes. It was included in the analysis to examine if descriptions of the two types of readings differed in their inclusion of analytical vs. intuitive (metaphorically, ‘left-brain’ vs. ‘right-brain’) language.

The category of *perceptual processes* was included because numerous previous studies (e.g., Emmons & Emmons, 2003; Rock, Beischel, & Cott, 2009; Roxburgh & Roe, 2013b) have found descriptions of multiple senses at work during mediumship readings.

The category of *health*, which includes words describing illness and treatment, was included to assess if mediums’ descriptions of feeling discarnates’ causes of death would be reflected.

The categories of *past-, present-, and future-focused time orientation* were included because it was expected that descriptions of mediumship readings focused on individuals who had died would be more past-focused whereas psychic readings for the currently living might be more present-and/or future-focused.

It seemed appropriate to include the category of *money* as an example of a concern the living have which might be addressed during psychic readings; however, references in mediumship readings to inheritances or other financial issues would also be possible.

The LIWC category of *religion* includes words relating to spiritual matters including soul, angel, and afterlife. It was theorized that these words would be more prevalent in descriptions of mediumship readings than in descriptions of psychic readings.

**Content analysis.** Qualitative content analysis was performed on participant descriptions of their experiences by a researcher blinded to the LIWC quantitative analysis results. Qualitative content analysis has been defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding

and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1278). This occurs through “data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (Patton, 2002, p. 453). Content analysis was chosen and performed here because of its ability to analyze large data sets with flexibility, its ability to accommodate unstructured text data, and its unobtrusive method of analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). In addition, examining retrospective reports “does not interfere with ongoing thought processes during” the task (Farthing, 1992, p. 55).

The stages of data analysis were conducted in accordance with Heath (2005) using an inductive approach whereby “evidence-based inferences” rather than preconceived categories guided the coding process (e.g., Finegold-Connett, 2013). First, a researcher with experience with qualitative methodologies (CM) analyzed the queries by initially reading over the data set in its entirety several times to get an idea of the data as a whole: content, context, flow, and potential unit of analysis. Next, each text was read separately to hone in on meaningful units for analysis and to ascertain general categories, themes, and patterns. Second, each text was read more deliberately and carefully in detail for initial categorization. Sub-categories (e.g., seeing video-like images) emerged throughout analysis. Each meaning unit that represented a sub-category was coded accordingly. Through a process of constant comparison, text data were analyzed until all meaningful phrases were categorized, and no new sub-categories emerged. Sub-categories were then compared to create categories, and, in turn, to create summative themes. An inductive method of analysis allowed for flexible, descriptive, and detailed results beyond a mere count of the words and was inclusive of latent context and meaning (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

### **Philosophy**

The experimenters’ overall attitude during the current study and throughout our mediumship research in general is in line with the methodological guidelines recently specified by Moreira-Almeida and Lotufo-Neto (2017) for the rigorous study of anomalous experiences. They suggest avoiding dogmatic prejudice and pathologizing the anomalous, evaluating the phenomenon under the conditions it is normally utilized, including non-clinical populations in order to make inferences to the general population, carefully choosing terminology, distinguishing the experience from interpretations, having a neutral but empathetic attitude, and using diverse research methods.

## Results

In response to the SAMS survey item, “Can you tell the difference between communication from the deceased and psychic information about the living?” 96.9% of participants ( $n=123$ ) chose ‘Yes,’ 2.4% ( $n=3$ ) chose ‘I don’t know,’ and 0.8% ( $n=1$ ) chose ‘No.’

For the counter-balanced items “In your own words, describe your experiences when receiving communication from the deceased” and “In your own words, describe your experiences when getting psychic information about the living,” complete responses were provided by 122 of the 123 participants who answered ‘Yes’ to the previous item. These 244 retrospective narratives (122 for each type of experience) were quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

### Quantitative Text Analysis

The means, standard deviations, significance values, and effect sizes as well as example words from participants’ texts for the 12 LIWC categories analyzed are contained in Table 1. The output of the LIWC text analysis software is the percentage of a participant’s text that falls into each category. For this study, the participants’ data were then averaged during analysis. For example, on average,  $11.76\% \pm 5.8\%$  of participants’ descriptions of mediumistic experiences were words that were categorized as relating to social processes (e.g., family, friends) whereas  $9.93\% \pm 5.64\%$  of participants’ descriptions of psychic readings were words related to social processes. That difference was statistically significant ( $p=0.004$ ).

In addition to the *social processes* finding, the participants’ descriptions of their experiences when communicating with the deceased contained statistically significantly higher percentages—compared to their descriptions of getting psychic information from the living—of words describing: *perceptual processes* (e.g., sight, sound, touch;  $6.63\% \pm 4.31\%$  vs.  $4.81\% \pm 3.81\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), *ingestion* (e.g., cooking, food;  $0.23\% \pm 0.57\%$  vs.  $0.05\% \pm 0.20\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), *past-focused time orientation* (e.g., former, previously;  $3.09\% \pm 3.23\%$  vs.  $2.06\% \pm 3.19\%$ ,  $p=0.001$ ), and *religion* (e.g., spirit, god;  $0.90\% \pm 0.11\%$  vs.  $0.34\% \pm 0.09\%$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Conversely, compared to descriptions of psychic readings, participants’ descriptions of mediumistic communication contained a statistically significantly lower percentage of words describing the cognitive process *insight* (e.g., discern, categorize;  $5.06\% \pm 2.97\%$  vs.  $6.48\% \pm 4.30\%$ ,  $p=0.002$ ). Percentages of words describing *positive* and *negative emotions*, *present-focused* and *future-focused time*

*orientation, health, and money* were not different for the two conditions. Descriptions of psychic experiences contained a higher percentage of words from the category *health* (e.g., doctor, illness, disease) but the difference did not reach significance after Bonferroni correction.

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

**Mediumistic communication.** Three overarching, summative themes emerged from the content analysis of the text provided by participants regarding mediumistic communication (Table 2). These three themes represent nine categories and eighteen subcategories and were: (A) preparing for mediumistic communication, (B) communication triangulated, and (C) experience of the communication.

The participants described preparations for mediumistic communication. The intentional process of shifting their mental state included the use of meditation and prayer, shifting focus to open channels, calling on their guides, the use of objects such as a pendulum, and a focus on the discarnate to intentionally shift their mental state. One participant stated,

*When I am ready to communicate, I center, breathe, and focus my energy above me and out to the back and sides. This is only one method. I find that my frequency must be high in order to hold the link.*

A focus on the space within which communication occurs also helped to enhance the communication. One participant specifically described the way in which they prepared the physical surroundings: “I start off by spraying with a sage aromatherapy spray I make to clear the energy within and without.” Whether the participants “shifted” or “centered” awareness, “deepened” consciousness, or “place[d] my attention” in an intentional way, communication with the deceased necessitated internal and external preparations.

The communication itself was described as triangulated, whereby information from the deceased or from guides is received by the medium and communicated to the sitter.

*When I am working with the dead, sometimes I triangulate through my guide and sometimes I listen directly to the deceased. If I can access the deceased directly, I pose the questions asked and listen to or see the answers or messages.*

**Table 1.** Comparison of the percentages of language categories represented in descriptions of mediumistic experiences (communication with the deceased) and experiences of acquiring psychic information about the living provided by 122 mediums (14 laboratory-tested, 108 self-identified). Includes means, standard deviations (s.d.), *p* values, and Pearson's effect size *r*. The Bonferroni-corrected  $\alpha$  for these 12 analyses is 0.0042. Significant findings are listed in bold.

Category	Example Words	Communication with the Deceased		Psychic Readings for the Living		<i>p</i>	<i>r</i>
		mean	<i>s.d.</i>	mean	<i>s.d.</i>		
Positive Emotions	kind, safe, grateful, happy, rewarding	2.27	2.04	2.22	2.31	.56	
Negative Emotions	afraid, alone, confused, unpleasant, difficult	0.72	0.84	0.75	1.16	.73	
<b>Social Processes</b>	communicate, marriage, family, parents, friends	11.76	5.80	9.93	5.64	<b>.004</b>	<b>.2</b>
<b>Insight</b>	discern, presume, reason, categorize, evidence	5.06	2.97	6.48	4.30	<b>.002</b>	<b>-.2</b>
<b>Perceptual Processes</b>	sight, sound, smell, touch, taste	6.63	4.31	4.81	3.81	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.2</b>
<b>Ingestion</b>	coffee, cooking, dish, food, kitchen	0.23	0.57	0.05	0.20	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.2</b>
Health	disease, doctor, headache, illness, symptom	1.03	1.28	1.59	1.90	.013	
<b>Past Focus</b>	ago, earlier, former, happened, previously	3.09	3.23	2.06	3.19	<b>.001</b>	<b>.2</b>
Present Focus	current, happen, is, now, today, begin	12.89	5.89	13.03	4.93	.23	
Future Focus	upcoming, predictions, ahead, plan, potential	1.50	1.43	1.81	2.12	.36	
Money	bills, finances, income, wealth, business	0.08	0.25	0.12	0.38	.38	
<b>Religion</b>	angel, god, soul, spirit, spiritual, afterlife	0.90	0.11	0.34	0.09	<b>&lt;.001</b>	<b>.3</b>



**Table 2.** Mediumistic Communication: Categories (A, B, C) and subcategories that emerged from the content analysis of text provided by 122 mediums (14 laboratory-tested, 108 self-identified) describing mediumistic communication.

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### Mediumistic Communication with the Deceased

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#### **A. Preparing for Mediumistic Communication**

- A.1. Intentional shift in mental state for the purpose of mediumship
  - A.1.a. Meditate/pray
  - A.1.b. Open channel
  - A.1.c. Use of objects
  - A.1.d. Shift awareness/focus on discarnate
- A.2. Enhancing the space in which communication occurs

#### **B. Communication Triangulated**

- B.1. "I'm not in control of the communication with the deceased"
  - B.1.a. Spirit/deceased in control of what information I receive
  - B.1.b. Spirit/deceased in control of when information is sent to me
- B.2. Way of communicating that is meaningful to the sitter
- B.3. Medium acts as a translator for the sitter

#### **C. Experience of the Communication**

- C.1. Sensory Experience
  - C.1.a. See
  - C.1.b. Hear
  - C.1.c. Feel
  - C.1.d. Smell
  - C.1.e. Taste
- C.2. Cognitive Experience
  - C.2.a. Merging with the deceased
  - C.2.b. "Just knowing"
- C.3. Emotions
  - C.3.a. Empathy with deceased
  - C.3.b. Strong emotional reactions during communication
- C.4. Bodily Sensations
  - C.5.a. Within the medium
  - C.5.b. Outside the medium
  - C.5.c. Direction-specific sensations

The discarnate was described as controlling when the information is provided and what is contained within the communication. Participants described the spirit or discarnate as being “in control.” For example,

*The only thing is where I place my awareness. I shift my awareness to the Spirit World and when a spirit blends with me, I sense them coming into my essence from behind on my right. The Spirit is in control of the information given to me. I don't seek it out.*

Other participants discussed the discarnate as guiding the communication and the information provided.

In addition, mediumistic communication was described as spontaneous or abrupt occurrences whereby the medium was not in control of when the information was received. For instance, “I just sit and wait and if spirit would like to come through, then I provide the beautiful space of openness.” Another participant stated, “They present exactly as how they wish to present and give the information they wish to convey. And then we go wherever spirit wants to go.”

Participants described the content of the communication with the deceased as having specific and unique meaning to the sitter, sometimes in ways that were meaningful only to the sitter and other times it was necessary for the medium to translate the meaning for the sitter. For example,

*The information contains things that are in a way that relates information that is personal to the person receiving the information. Names of people, streets, personal experiences. Once I said the word pearls relating to a male and pearl beads were strung into a garland and placed over the gravestone.*

Sometimes the information is specific to the sitter, such that only the sitter may understand. One participant stated, “Sometimes I get humorous messages that only my client understands.” For one participant, communication is provided as is, not interpreted. “It is important to give the information without interpreting as you don't know their life story or how it might apply.” In contrast, information was sometimes described as needing to be translated for its “subconscious” or “symbolic” meaning. For example: “I translate feelings from the subconscious into words, symbols, images, messages.”

Participants described the communication itself as including sensory, cognitive, emotional and physical experiences. Each of the five sensory modalities was identified across the analysis. Usually, references were made

to at least three senses, but a smaller portion of participants referenced two senses. Most sensory experiences described by the participants referenced seeing, hearing, and feeling.

Participants sometimes explained communication using single sensory descriptors, such as:

*Communication from the deceased comes to me as thoughts in my mind. When really concentrating I almost “hear” words, sentences, laughter, etc. I tell people it’s much like what it “sounds like” when you have a song in your head you have trouble dismissing. There have only been a handful of times I have actually heard audible noise.*

Similarly, participants may “see scenes of accidents, or I see clairvoyantly pictures of them and they show me health conditions or the situation of their deaths.” Physical sensations, such as touch, were described. For example, one participant feels energy

*tingling around me, like a nervous energy, especially when it’s an important message to give. Many times, it is a burst of energy that comes [through] and as the message begins I feel like I almost go into a trance to get it out quickly and then almost a gasp of air once they back their energy off..*

A small minority of participants described taste or smell. “I smell a fragrance or worse, like cigarette smoke. Sometimes I am made aware of their favorite taste/food.”

In other cases, simultaneous multisensory experiences were described as with this participant:

*I know I am receiving communication from the deceased when it feels like a memory but I know it is not my memory. I know it is information about or from the deceased when I hear a phrase or words in my head, or see an image, or smell something, or feel a physical sensation or emotion while talking with someone about their loved one.*

Another participant stated,

*I will see photos, videos of the deceased or what they want me to know, I will also “hear” words, sentences, phrases, songs or lyrics of what they want me to know. But always comes in with a lot of energy rush from the left side of my body.*

In addition to the five sensory experiences, participants described two distinct cognitive processes during mediumistic communication. One was

the concept of merging with the discarnate. The experience of merging, or blending as this participant stated, was described as:

*I'm blending with the essence of a soul who is in the Spirit World and not living on Earth. ... Some spirits are better with their emotions some are better with visuals. I have to surrender to the spirit and how they want to blend with me.*

Another cognitive process reported by the participants was “just knowing” information. One participant described the experience as:

*I generally pick up communication from spirits as a ‘knowing’ that comes from behind my head and slightly to the left, and although the information comes all at once I have to translate it into words to make sense of it.*

Another participant described, “Usually I can hear, see, know and feel spirit around me.” Merging with the discarnate functioned to experience the discarnate’s energy to both confirm the connection with the medium and affirm information with the sitter. “Knowing” also served to confirm the connection and affirm information.

Participants described emotional responses to the communication with the deceased. One medium stated,

*I'm an emotional intuitive—I almost always have access to feelings from the deceased—it might be regret, joy, a sense of humor, compassion, overwhelming love, respect—I am continually amazed by ways in which Spirit will impress feelings upon me.*

Another participant referenced the consequences of blending with the deceased:

*If I blend too deeply, the emotions and/or pain that they are trying to convey, can overwhelm me and I become too emotional (crying, etc.). As I blend with spirit, I pull them close in order to read them and push them back if I feel that I'm getting too emotional.*

Such strong emotional responses and reactions during the communication were described in positive terms, such as: “The peace and healing that comes with communication from the deceased brings me joy. It feels bigger than me. It feels full of life.” For other mediums, the strong emotions can be negative, particularly if the communication includes information about the death of the discarnate: “I feel creeped out, when it (messages about their death) happens. Most often taken by surprise.” Emotional connections in the

form of empathy served as information vital to the medium and the sitter, often eliciting strong emotional responses within the medium.

Participant descriptions of bodily sensations during communication with the deceased were categorized as internal and external feelings, and as direction-specific sensations. One participant described internal experiences, stating, "I feel my body change to sense and feel the limitations the deceased experienced." Another participant stated, "I feel someone in the room. When I open to connect with them, they will often appear." Participants described external sensations such as tapping, pressure on the skin, or changes in temperature. "I tend to get a lot of body feelings such as what happened to bring about their passing. I may feel choking or get pain in the middle of my chest, for example." Similarly, another participant stated, "I am aware of a presence(s), that is, I feel a body sensation usually. Top of my head tingles, I feel very hot/cold..." The sensations served to confirm a connection with the deceased as well as providing information specific to the discarnate related to the purpose of the reading for the sitter.

Direction-specific communication such as "an incredibly strong, high-pitched sound, usually in my left ear" or a "pull on my right or left side" were identified by participants. Directional sensations may be internal such as the example used above: "and when a spirit blends with me, I sense them coming into my essence from behind on my right." Directional sensations may also be external, such as feeling "some light pressure from the top right side of my head or from the back of my head." Participants identified sensations coming from their right and left, and behind and above; no participant identified sensations coming from in front of them. As with the other forms of sensory experiences, direction-specific sensations functioned to both confirm connection with the deceased and provide information to the medium about the discarnate that was meaningful for the sitter.

**Psychic Connection.** Four overarching, summative themes emerged from the content analysis of the text provided by participants regarding psychic readings for the living (Table 3). These four themes represent seventeen categories and twelve subcategories and were: (A) establishing the connection, (B) experiencing the connection, (C) content of the reading, and (D) psychic information flows from various sources.

Participants described the process of establishing a connection with the psychic reading recipient, such as setting intentions, attuning to the recipient, and tapping into their own intuition. One participant stated,

*When I do readings, I set up very stringent energetic requirements that I receive only what is of my client's best interest in their healing journey. I set my intention of being an open conduit, clear of any aspect of self that would interfere with this process, and I connect with the client's higher self to get permission to do the reading.*

Another participant described:

*I project my consciousness into the aura of the person and tap into my intuitive centers regarding issues that come up for me or I send my consciousness into their life if they want to know about certain areas of their life.*

Participants also described the intentional attunement as “‘infused’ with that person’s energy, issues, thoughts, feelings, food preferences, health/body issues...” The connection with the reading recipient, rather than a discarnate, necessitated intentional attunement and awareness of energy specific to the recipient.

As with mediumistic communication, participants described sensory experiences during psychic readings for the living. However, only four senses were identified across the data describing psychic experiences: seeing; hearing; feeling; and smelling. Taste, which was present in descriptions of mediumistic experiences, was omitted. For example,

*I will hear information. Sometimes it will come through very quickly and I will just follow the words. Very often I will also receive the feeling of the entire concept, as well, and use that to further explain things to the client. I also will feel energy rushing through me when something is particularly important.*

The sensory experiences were not described with as much depth as for mediumistic communication and did not contain as much emphasis on multiple sensory modalities occurring simultaneously. For example, “I see these inside, it is not a hallucination, but more a conceptual visualization. It is that kind of knowing an image without having to draw it or even visualize it.”

Cognitive experiences were also described. Information felt “downloaded” and as transferred to the medium as new knowledge. One participant stated, “I get more information ‘downloaded,’ I just know things, when dealing with the living. It is much like the mediumship readings but I ask questions and get answers and guidance if needed.”

**Table 3.** Psychic Connection: Categories (A, B, C, D) and subcategories that emerged from the content analysis of text provided by 122 mediums (14 laboratory-tested, 108 self-identified) describing psychic readings for the living.

### Psychic Readings for the Living

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#### **A. Establishing the Connection**

- A.1. Setting intentions before the reading for protection
- A.2. Attunement to the recipient
- A.3. Use of objects
- A.4. Tap into my intuition

#### **B. Experiencing the Connection**

- B.1. Sensory Experience
  - B.1.a. See
  - B.1.b. Hear
  - B.1.c. Feel
  - B.1.d. Smell
- B.2. Cognitive Experience
  - B.2.a. Information download
  - B.2.b. "Getting ego out of the way"
  - B.2.c. Acquisition and transference of expertise
- B.3. Emotions
- B.4. Qualities
  - B.4.a. Bursts and flashes of information
  - B.4.b. Lifeless, dense energy

#### **C. Content of the Reading**

- C.1. Different than Mediumistic Communication
  - C.1.a. Easy to understand
  - C.1.b. Clear information
  - C.1.c. Direct format
- C.2. Specifies time
- C.3. Confirmatory check with the recipient

#### **D. Psychic Information Flows from Various Sources**

- D.1. From recipient's energy
- D.2. From guides/angels
- D.3. From non-specific discarnate(s)
- D.4. From Source/universe
- D.5. From within me
- D.6. From within dreams

Participants identified emotions as an integral part of psychic experiences. “Some of the kinds of psychic information I receive is about their wishes, their dreams, the days they had, criminal activity, they hate their boss, they have a lover, ethics, sincerity, what is in their hearts...” Another participant stated,

*I feel psychic information from the living. It doesn't come to me in words or pictures, but ...in feelings. Sometimes it comes to me in the form of what I call energy. It is difficult to explain because it's not really definable. I can tell how they are feeling, if they are comfortable or uncomfortable, sometimes I can feel their thoughts and know what they might be thinking about in regard to the particular situation. Often what I feel leads me to say just the right thing or ask just the right question.*

Empathic connections to the living were important components and experienced in conjunction with the four senses.

Participants described specific and clear differences between the quality of information experienced during mediumistic and psychic readings. Descriptions of psychic information from a living reading recipient referenced the weight, density, or thickness of the energy and the speed at which it was experienced. The quality of information experienced during psychic connections was described as quick flashes of information. For example: “When receiving information about the living, the information generally comes to me in either quick bursts of visual and/or verbal communication.” Participants also described the communication as dense and/or lifeless. For example, one participant noted,

*Getting psychic information is more like picking pieces of information off a person. If we all walked around wearing [sticky notes] that described us—tall, smart, funny, mother, teacher, drive blue car, etc.—then doing a psychic reading is like picking the [sticky notes] off one by one and reading them.*

Another participant described the difference in the quality of the experiences as:

*To me, psychic information has a heavier, denser quality than mediumistic information, which would make sense since it is dealing with the physical container—the body. In viewing energy, I can tell if a person is reading psychically or mediumistically because in a psychic reading, the energy is flowing horizontally between the [recipient] and*



*the [reader]. In a mediumistic reading, the energy flows mostly vertically from the crown chakra.*

One participant contrasted the experiences as: “psychic information is under my control. I set the pace and flow as well as control the information based on what I ask and want to receive.”

The content of the information experienced during psychic readings was “different than mediumship” and described as clearer and easier to understand. “It is very light and factual. Some emotions and energy come with it but rarely any that is difficult to clear away right after the reading.” Another participant noted: “What is very clear is hearing my client’s thoughts, both what they really want and what they think they should want. I also have constant physical sensations going on that give me clues about the living.”

Participants also described psychic readings as containing time-orientation (e.g., past, present, future). For example,

*While receiving information from a living person, I see very clearly all things pertaining to their life. I am shown a very slow, old, black and white movie. As I am reviewing the movie, my senses are heightened and it’s during this process that I am seeing with my non-physical eyes very quickly past, present, and future events the sitter has gone through, or is going through, or will be going through. It’s much different than connecting to spirit and doing a mediumship reading.*

Participants attributed the reason for the differences in the quality of these experiences to the source of the information. Whereas the source of information during mediumship readings was described as communication with discarnates connected to the sitters, psychic information was described as coming from multiple sources, such as guides, the psychic reading recipient and their guides, and Source. For instance, one participant described psychic experiences as such: “I am not distinguishing who I am getting info from, I just get it. It’s a lot faster and is just as accurate as mediumship can be. I have very strong guidance, so I can just let it rip.” Participants identified guides as both facilitators and sources of information about the reading recipient. For example,

*When I receive information from the living’s higher self, guides, angels, it seems to come in through the upper back of my head and radiate frontwards with a higher vibration. This information holds a deeper kinesthetic reaction and requires me to “know” what the appropriate way to communicate it to my client is.*

Source, or universal life energy, was also identified as a source of information about the living:

*The masters and teachers, or the universe, then shows me where they need to be healed or their blocks for living the best life they can. What is holding them back; is it about their relative? The universe will show me what they look like so I can describe them.*

Of particular note is that some information reported during psychic readings for living recipients was described by the participants as coming from unidentified discarnates unrelated to the recipient. For instance, one participant articulated, "I will begin, then my energy moves and a deceased individual may come through unexpectedly." Another participant cited guides as the source of information: "Information about the living generally comes to me from guides who are dead." Participants distinguished the discarnates related to the sitter that communicate during mediumship readings and discarnates unrelated to the reading recipient as a source of information during psychic readings.

Participants provided descriptive comparisons between communicating with the deceased and psychic readings for the living which were not included within the categorization of data; however, they are noteworthy and included here. One participant described a similarity in the way mediumistic and psychic readings are experienced, stating: "For both [types of experiences], sometimes I'm interpreting the information incorrectly or seeing/sensing/hearing something wrong.... If I get a 'no' for both, I can go back and FEEL where I may have gone wrong." Another participant contrasted the experiences as such: "Psychic information comes from some place different than the energy of the dead. It is all around us, less focused, less of a high vibration than the dead. It is not a specific energy. It is a potential energy." One participant attributed the difference in experiences as being a function of

*this dimension. I think that may be because the information is needed for the person's life that is in front of me, right now, this moment and in this dimension. Generally, psychic information benefits the person and the life they are living, or trying to move towards in their life.*

Thus, mediumistic and psychic experiences are qualitatively different and serve different purposes.

## Comparative Descriptions of Mediumistic and Psychic Experiences

Taking into account the independent quantitative and qualitative analyses, several similarities and differences can be seen when descriptions of mediumistic and psychic experiences are compared. Both types of experiences seem to involve similar emotional and sensory aspects. However, differences were seen related to social processes, the specific sensory modality of taste, time-orientation, and cognitive processes.

**Similarities.** Both experiences seem to have important emotional components. Qualitative analysis demonstrated themes relating to emotions for psychic connections (Table 3, B.3) and “strong emotional reactions” for mediumistic experiences (Table 2, C.3.b). Quantitative LIWC analysis implies these emotions are positive across experiences. Though no differences were seen between-experiences when mediumistic and psychic conditions were quantitatively compared for either positive or negative emotions, *post hoc* within-experiences comparisons of positive vs. negative emotions demonstrated that both types of experiences contained significantly ( $p < 0.001$ ) more (roughly three times as many) words describing positive emotions than words describing negative emotions.

Both mediumistic and psychic experiences also seem to involve multiple sensory modalities, often functioning concurrently. Content analysis found that multiple modes of sensory experience were described for both types of readings (Sensory experience categories C.1. in Table 2 and B.1. in Table 3) and a relatively high content of sensory (perceptual processes) words was found in descriptions of mediumistic and psychic experiences ( $6.63\% \pm 4.31\%$  and  $4.81\% \pm 3.81\%$ , respectively; Table 1). That is, both mediumistic and psychic phenomena may involve mental sensory experiences of seeing, hearing, and feeling.

**Differences.** Notable differences were seen between mediumistic and psychic experiences in addition to the differences in purpose described above. Descriptions of mediumistic experiences contained more references to other people as is reflected by the LIWC category of social processes (Table 1) and the major theme of triangulated communication between the sitter, the medium, and the deceased discovered during content analysis (Table 2, B).

In addition, concepts related to food or taste were only present in descriptions of mediumistic experiences. Qualitatively, five sensory experiences were identified during mediumistic communication, whereas only four were identified during psychic experiences; taste was not present in the latter. Similarly, the LIWC category of perceptual processes which includes all five senses was statistically significantly more prevalent in

mediumship descriptions than for descriptions of psychic experiences. This difference can also be seen in the LIWC category of ingestion (e.g., cooking, food) which was more prevalent in descriptions of mediumistic experiences.

Differences in time-orientation were also noted. Participants' descriptions of their experiences when communicating with the deceased contained statistically significantly higher past-focused time orientation (e.g., former, previously) content than did their descriptions of psychic experiences. In addition, the psychic experiences were reported as containing time orientation (e.g., past, present, future) which was qualitatively "different than mediumship."

Descriptions of cognitive processes were also different between experiences. Psychic experiences were described as involving a download of new information, whereas mediums "just know" the information during mediumistic communication. Quantitative analysis demonstrated a lower percentage of words related to the cognitive process of insight (e.g., discern, categorize, evidence) in mediumistic experiences when compared to psychic experiences.

## Discussion

These findings from 122 secular American mediums' descriptions of mediumistic and psychic experiences provide insight into both types of experiences in that population.

### Confirmatory Findings

Several findings echoed those observed during previous research with similar and other populations of mediums. The major components of altered states, bodily sensations, 'just knowing,' time orientation, emotions, interpersonal aspects, sensory perceptions, and cognitive processes are discussed below.

**Altered states.** Qualitatively, mediumistic experiences analyzed in this study included both intentional and unintentional shifts in awareness. This finding is similar to Rock and Beischel's (2008) finding that the mediumistic experience involves an altered state of consciousness relative to an ordinary waking state including altered self-awareness; the finding of Delorme, Beischel, Michel, Boccuzzi, Radin, and Mills (2013) that communicating with the deceased is a mental state different than remembering or imagining; and Emmons and Emmons' (2003), for example, descriptions of mediumistic trance states. This shift in awareness is also

similar to the findings of Roxburgh and Roe (2013b) that mediumship experiences include changes in sense of identity and personality.

The finding here of mediums reporting “not being in control” of communication with discarnates (Table 2, B.1.) is similar to Rock and Beischel’s (2008) finding that a mediumship reading condition received lower scores for volitional control than did a control condition.

**Bodily sensations.** The present qualitative finding of changes in bodily sensations (Table 2, C.4) is similar to Barrett’s (1996) finding of channelers’ experiences of physical sensations; Roxburgh and Roe’s (2013b) finding of mediums feeling changes take place within their bodies; and the participant’s description above (Beischel, Rock, & Boccuzzi, 2013) stating that physical sensations (“a tingling or a pressure in my head”) occur during mediumistic but not psychic experiences. Emmons and Emmons’ (2003) also observed mediums’ experiences of confirmatory “goosepimples” and “tinglies” (p. 246) and Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009) observed the theme of “verificatory signs of contact with a discarnate” that included “vibratory phenomena coupled with elevations in temperature” (p. 81).

**“Just knowing.”** This theme refers to the phenomenon of knowing specific information without the conscious experience of obtaining it. The qualitative theme of the participants in this study “just knowing” information about the deceased (Table 2, C.2.b.) is resonant with Rock, Beischel, and Cott’s (2009) constituent themes of mediumship and psychic experiences including “just knowing” information related to the discarnate or the living target, respectively. It is also comparable with Spiritualist mediums just “g-knowing” things (Emmons & Emmons, 2003) and the “knowing” theme common to general psi experiences (Heath, 2005).

**Time orientation.** As stated above, it was expected that descriptions of mediumship readings centered on individuals who had died would be more past-focused than descriptions of readings for the living. Indeed, participants’ descriptions of their communication experiences contained statistically significantly higher past-focused time orientation (e.g., former, previously) content than did their descriptions of psychic experiences. In addition, the psychic experiences were reported as containing time orientation which was qualitatively “different than mediumship.” Similarly, one participant in the Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009) study noted that “a psychic reading is like reading a book... that contains past, present, and future information” (p. 85).

However, no quantitative differences were seen in the proportion of words categorized as present- or future-focused time-orientation when the

two conditions were compared. Similar present-focused content may have been seen simply because the participants were describing experiences that occur in their lives regularly not due to difference in the source or content of the information. In addition, the lack of future-focused content differences may be because neither type of experience contains considerable predictive content.

**Emotions.** The presence of important emotional components in both experiences suggests that the finding by Rock and Beischel (2008) that a discarnate reading condition involved greater negative affect than a control condition was most likely due to the positive nature of the control condition during that study and not the presence of negative emotions during the mediumistic experiences. The emotional aspect of similar experiences was also found by Barrett (1996, as cited in Heath, 2005) as reflected in the theme of positive feelings regarding the experience.

**Interpersonal aspects.** Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009) noted that descriptions of psychic readings “tended to pertain primarily to the individual client, whereas mediumship reading themes pertained to the discarnate, the sitter, and other friends and relatives of the discarnate” (p. 86). One participant in that study stated: “In a psychic reading, the information that comes through usually has to do with life issues and often does not continually make references back to family members” (p. 86). This finding was confirmed by the social processes (Table 1) finding here. It is important to note, however, that this may be a social definitional factor related to the needs and requests of the clients rather than a mental experiential factor related to the mediums’ phenomenology.

The communication triangulation (Table 2, B) theme of mediumistic experiences involving mediums experiencing information from discarnates and then conveying that information to sitters is similar to Barrett’s (1996, as cited in Heath, 2005) theme of a cooperative partnership between channelers and communicators and Emmons and Emmons’ (2003) description of the relationship between medium, discarnate, and sitter as a “relay system” (p. 225).

**Sensory perceptions.** The finding of multi-modal sensory components in each type of experience is in line with previous studies examining the experiences of mediums (e.g., Emmons & Emmons, 2003; Rock, Beischel, & Cott, 2009; Roxburgh & Roe, 2013b). In an informal collection detailing how mediums experience communication in their own words (Beischel, 2014), one Windbridge Certified Research Medium stated:

*I get a sense in my body of how they passed... I will hear names and dates, see numbers... letters... memories... [and] objects... I get a sense of smells or odors, or am able to “taste” foods with special connections with the discarnate. (chapter 2)*

It is also important to note here that just as it is difficult to categorize any individual modern medium as a “trance medium” because the states of consciousness that occur during mediumistic experiences may be “arrayed along a continuum from waking states to trance states... of varying depth and levels of dissociation” (Beischel & Zingrone, 2015, p. 302), it may be difficult to categorize any mediumistic or psychic reading experience or experiencer as clairvoyant (‘clear seeing’), clairaudient (‘clear hearing’), or clairsentient (‘clear feeling’) as all three of these perceptions may be involved for any individual or event/reading and/or for any individual reader.

**Cognitive processes.** Compared to descriptions of psychic readings, the descriptions of mediumistic communication collected for this study contained a lower content of words describing the cognitive process insight (e.g., discern, categorize). This suggests that mediumship may be a process that is more intuitive than analytical. Similarly, Heath (2005) noted that the nine channelers in Barrett’s study (1996) “saw paranormal communication as a form of right-brain activity” (Heath, 2005, p. 367).

## Novel Findings

In addition to these confirmations of previous findings from different populations, the analyses detailed here also provide unique insight into the mediumistic and psychic experiences of secular American mediums. These relate to money, religion, health, taste/food, and the source of the content experienced.

**Money, religion, and health.** As expected, descriptions of mediumistic communication with the deceased contained a statistically significantly higher content of words in the category religion (e.g., spirit, god, soul, afterlife) than did descriptions of psychic connections with the living. The quantity of words contained in the LIWC categories of money (e.g., finances, income, wealth) and health (e.g., disease, doctor, illness), however, were not different for descriptions of communication with the deceased and psychic experiences with the living.

**Taste and food.** References to the sense of taste and/or concepts related to food were present in the descriptions of mediumistic but not psychic experiences collected for this study. The LIWC text analysis software

includes the parent category of perceptual processes which includes all five senses but breaks that down only into 'see,' 'hear,' and 'feel' subcategories; thus, in order to capture olfactory and gustatory imagery, only the more inclusive parent category was included in the current analysis.

Rock, Beischel, and Cott (2009) previously found that olfactory imagery was present in six mediums' descriptions of mediumship readings but not psychic readings. The current study observed descriptions of olfactory imagery in the participants' descriptions of both mediumistic and psychic experiences in this larger population of mediums.

However, gustatory imagery ("Taste," Table 2, C.1.e.) was found in descriptions of mediumistic but not psychic experiences. Similarly, a statistically significantly higher proportion of words in the LIWC category of ingestion (e.g., cooking, dish, kitchen) appeared in descriptions of mediumship experiences when compared to descriptions of psychic experiences. This category was included in the analyses in order to reflect references to discarnates' favorite foods that appear in anecdotal descriptions of mediumship reading experiences. In the representative example of description included above (Beischel, 2014), the medium noted an ability to "'taste' foods with special connections with the discarnate" (chapter 2). It is unclear if the inclusion of foods in mediumship readings reflects that the discarnates actually miss physically enjoying those foods or if they are just trying to convey how much they liked those items in order to identify themselves.

**Source of information.** The mediumistic experiences analyzed in this study included shifts in awareness with a focus on the discarnate as the source of information. The psychic experiences of the self-identified mediums in this study were described as flowing from multiple sources (Table 3, D) including from guides/angels, non-specific discarnates, Source/universe, self, and dreams in addition to the living reading recipient. This finding draws into question unsupported claims that mediums are using psi with the living to obtain information about the deceased when this current finding implies that they are, at least partially, communicating with the deceased in order to acquire information about the living (discussed more below).

### **Advantages of Pluralistic Research Methods**

Pluralism refers to the mixing of quantitative and qualitative research methods (e.g., Barker & Pistrang, 2005) which can expand what is known about a given phenomenon. Using more than one method to analyze a single data set may both enforce findings and provide additional conclusions.



In this study, the findings of related to emotions, social processes, cognitive processes, and the multi-modal nature of sensory perceptions were reinforced due to their presence using both analysis methods. In addition, it would not have been possible to quantify altered states of consciousness using LIWC text analysis software as was previously possible using the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory (e.g., Rock & Beischel, 2008) because that falls outside the scope of LIWC. However, by also including the qualitative content analysis component, altered states of awareness were observed in the descriptions. Similarly, although LIWC could find differences in the content of sensory perception words between the two types of experiences, only with content analysis could which specific sense was different be determined.

### **Limitations of this Study**

Farthing (1992) stated “introspection has some severe limitations... but it is still the best method we have” (p. 46). He also noted that “the topic of conscious experience is too interesting and important for it to be ignored merely because of difficulties in studying it” (p. 54).

The use of everyday language to describe anomalous experiences can be difficult (e.g., Hufford, 1992; Moreira-Almeida & Lotufo-Neto, 2017). These experiences are categorized as anomalous because they cannot be easily explained using traditional scientific and social paradigms. In addition, they often include phenomena that are described as ineffable. Asking someone to describe an experience that is, by definition, indescribable and drawing conclusions from those descriptions can be problematic.

In addition to verbal description difficulties, the data collected and conclusions drawn during this study are subject to the same limitations as introspective verbal reports about any experience. These limitations include: forgetting, reconstruction errors, confabulation, distortion through observation, substitution of inferences for observation, censorship, demand characteristics, social desirability, and lack of independent verification (e.g., Farthing, 1992). However, some of these limitations are mitigated in the current study because the participants described phenomena that they experience regularly rather than just once.

Furthermore, introspective verbal reports can be limited due to state-specific memories. Transpersonal psychologist Charles Tart (1985) has noted,

I think one of the tragedies of our times is that we have forgotten about the state-specificity of knowledge in regard to many vital spiritual questions. Thus, we approach them only from an ordinary states perspective, and get answers that are distorted and pale reflections of reality. (p. 3)

Consequently, the experiences examined here may, in reality, be described differently if the experiencers and/or the investigators (and, in turn, the readers of this article) completed their respective tasks in relevant altered states of consciousness. Tart (1972) has proposed that ‘state-specific sciences’ be used to study the altered states of consciousness that occur during anomalous experiences in order to prevent scientists from “concentrating on the irrelevant” and viewing experiencers as “confused or mentally ill” (p. 1204).

Another limitation of this study is that the participants whose experience descriptions were analyzed all identified as mediums. It may be possible that aspects of psychic connection experiences described here, such as non-specific discarnates as a source of information, may not be present in the experiences of psychics who do not identify as mediums. A common understanding is that all mediums are psychic but not all psychics are mediums. It may be that the experiences of non-medium psychics are different than the psychic experiences detailed here.

Finally, it is unclear if the current sample is representative of the larger population of secular American mediums in age, race, and gender. Regardless, studying a sample more varied in these attributes may provide different results if descriptions of their experiences were analyzed.

Future studies may wish to explore the experiences of psychics who do not identify as mediums and/or participant groups with more varied demographic traits.

### **Limitations of Theoretical Explanations for Mediumship**

Positing theoretical explanations for how mediumship works or the source of the information mediums report (once normal, local, sensory explanations have been addressed) is a task full of pitfalls, primarily those involving language and terminology.

Related to the linguistic limitations discussed above, Moreira-Almeida and Lotufo-Neto (2017) have noted that the “words and the structure of our language are very inappropriate tools” to describe the “nature and dimensions” of anomalous experiences (p. 287). One prime example of

problematic language used during discussions of mediumship is the continued use of the term “living-agent psi” (e.g., Kean, 2017) to describe the unsubstantiated theory that mediums are acquiring the information they report about the deceased (at least in part and perhaps subconsciously) through telepathy with living reading recipients (‘sitters’). This term is imprecise and cryptic because both the medium and the sitter are, in fact, living. As stated above, it has previously been proposed that the term survival psi (Sudduth, 2009) be used to describe the type of psi a medium would be using in order to telepathically communicate with the dead and the term somatic psi (Beischel & Rock, 2009) be used to describe the type of psi a medium would be using if she was solely using psi with the living and not communicating with the deceased to obtain information.

However, the use of terms implying an understanding of various phenomena has long been a problem in research into anomalous experiences. Early on in the life of parapsychology as a discipline, arguments about terminology occurred. For example, in a critique of J.B. Rhine’s paper “Telepathy and clairvoyance reconsidered” (1945), Carrington (1946) noted, “Telepathy and clairvoyance are not two rival hypotheses, but closely related modes of the same phenomena” (cited by Rao, 2017, p. 48).

Similarly, survival psi and somatic psi may be terms referring, in actuality, to the same phenomenon. Based on the conclusions drawn here from descriptions provided by 122 mediums which include communication with the deceased as part of psychic readings for the living, it seems appropriate to rethink the terminology used to describe mediumistic phenomena. Perhaps somatic psi actually does include survival psi and they cannot be separated. In fact, if the common wisdom that ‘all mediums are psychic but not all psychics are mediums’ holds, then none of these terms are accurately descriptive.

In addition, survival psi, somatic psi, and even the oft-mentioned “super-psi” are theoretical constructs; just names for ideas that are not backed by any empirical evidence. Thus, using them as explanations for the source of mediums’ reported information about the deceased would fall under Whitehead’s “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (1929), the error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete (also called *reification*). Because we can neither disprove that mediums are communicating with the deceased nor disprove that communication with the deceased is part of every type of psi experience (i.e., telepathy, clairvoyance/remote viewing, precognition, and psychokinesis), it would be irresponsible to posit a general “super-

survival” theory for all psi phenomena or to continue to use super-psi-like explanations for mediumistic experiences.

In addition, based on Tart’s call for state-specific sciences and the language issues described above, it may not be appropriate to conjecture about mediumistic phenomena unless one is currently or at least has previously been experiencing a mediumistic state. Moreover, the full quote from Moreira-Almeida and Lotufo-Neto (2017) above was that the “words and the structure of our language are very inappropriate tools” to describe the “nature and dimensions” of anomalous experiences “especially to those who have not experienced them” (p. 287, emphasis added). Thus, it may be required that both the conveyer and the receiver of information about mediumistic experiences be in altered states similar to a mediumistic one in order to truly understand the phenomenon.

### **Conclusions**

This study quantitatively and qualitatively examined the experiences of 122 secular American mediums as described in their retrospective reports of communication with the deceased and psychic connection with the living collected with open-ended, counter-balanced items during an online survey. Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software was used to quantitatively analyze the participants’ text responses which were also independently qualitatively analyzed using content analysis. Both types of experiences seem to involve similar emotional and sensory aspects but differences were seen related to social processes, the specific sensory modality of taste, time-orientation, and cognitive processes, mediumship seeming to be a less analytical process than psychic reading. Perhaps most interesting is the finding that experiences of psychic connections during readings for the living included “non-specific discarnates” as a source of information; this strongly calls into question theoretical frameworks that posit separating mediums’ experiences into categories that do and do not involve communication with the deceased as well as the continued use of terminology reflecting such a separation.

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