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Thematic Analysis of Mediums' Experiences

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Criticism 1: Validity of Findings

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

validity¹ of their findings. Ultimately, whether the comprehensive constituent themes Rock et al. identified are valid can only be determined by the Integrative Research Mediums (IRMs) who provided the data that were thematically analyzed during the study. In this context, it is noteworthy that in Step 6 of Rock et al.'s thematic analysis, "Each of the participants [i.e., mediums] were contacted via email and invited to provide feedback and verification with regards to the comprehensive constituent themes" (p. 185). In the "Results and Discussion" section of the original peer-reviewed paper, Rock et al. reported that,

All IRMs stated that the comprehensive constituent themes captured the essential aspects of communication with a discarnate. For example, one IRM remarked: "Perfect! This is how I feel about your Comprehensive Constituent Themes. I like how you listed each and then described what you meant. Great job!" Similarly, another IRM stated, "I verify the seven comprehensive themes that you have listed. I believe you have covered the most common ways a medium experiences communication with a discarnate. (p. 188)

Indeed, it is noteworthy that Roxburgh and Roe concede that, "Rock et al. should be praised for . . . conducting checks of the credibility of their themes with participants."

It is, of course, arguable that the IRMs simply verified the themes that Rock et al. identified because, as Roxburgh and Roe suggest:

. . . there is every possibility that participants in the Rock et al. study might have felt encouraged to give "appropriate" responses given the heavy emphasis on "qualifying" as an "integrative research medium" by virtue of achieving certain targets, including giving two email and two phone readings and in particular requiring participants to have read Schwartz's own book on mediumship, *The Afterlife Experiments*.

However, it is noteworthy that while Step 1 of the screening procedure used by Rock et al. invites the claimant mediums to provide information regarding their phenomenology concerning ostensible communication with discarnates, no aspect of the screening procedure imposes phenomenological criteria that a claimant medium must satisfy to qualify as an IRM. That is to say, there are no "appropriate" phenomenological responses that the individual may provide during the screening process.

It might be noted here that Roxburgh's own research (2007, 2008) involves medium participants who are members of the Spiritualists' National Union (SNU) and, thus, are ostensibly very likely to frame their experiences of mediumship in any phenomenological investigations within the context of the education, training, and religious belief system prevalent within the SNU culture. It is also possible that participants in Roxburgh's research would feel "encouraged to give 'appropriate' responses given the heavy emphasis" on training and qualifying as an accredited SNU medium.

Additionally, the participants in the Rock et al. study had rather obviously completed the Step 1 questionnaire prior to embarking on any of the other screening steps: the Step 5 test readings and the Step 6 reading of *The Afterlife Experiments*² mentioned by Roxburgh and Roe, or the Step 3 and Step 4 interviews in

which the claimant mediums are asked about some very specific aspects of their experiences (e.g., Can you tell when communicators switch?). Thus, the participants provided the phenomenological data prior to any of the latter steps that could have “primed” them regarding “appropriate” experiences.

Regardless, Step 5, which included the two blinded email and phone readings, was solely concerned with the veridicality of the claimant mediums’ statements as judged by the absent sitter; it did not address the claimant medium’s experiences during the readings. Furthermore, Schwartz’s (2002) *The Afterlife Experiments* text does not consider the phenomenology of mediumship; it also was primarily concerned with the veridicality of mediums’ information. Thus, it seems reasonable to assert that the content of this text did not function as a demand characteristic that “shaped” claimant mediums’ phenomenological responses in the Rock et al. study if, in fact, a claimant medium had read the book prior to beginning screening.

Roxburgh and Roe also state:

an important step in qualitative data collection is to ensure that participants feel empowered to give a full and candid account of their experience safe in the knowledge that theirs is a privileged perspective relative to the researcher’s and that their personal impressions rather than some abstract “right” or “wrong” answers are of most interest.

During the participant consenting process and prior to beginning the screening steps, the mediums in Rock et al.’s study read a document describing “the opportunities, responsibilities, and requirements for 1) the mediums and 2) the researchers involved in integrative mediumship research.” That document stated:

The focus of the Laboratory is on *integrative* research designed to be *scientifically comprehensive* while *honoring spiritual integrity*. Being scientifically comprehensive refers to examining various philosophies and approaches to mediumship; that is, comparing the similarities and differences of different mediums’ explanations, opinions, and techniques in a scientific manner. Honoring spiritual integrity involves doing so in a fair, ethical, honest, responsible, and compassionate manner.

Thus, the participants had been specifically notified that their unique perspectives were valued; this created an environment in which they were ostensibly “empowered to give a full and candid account of their experience” throughout the screening process. Additionally, we contend that the “anonymous” situation of participants responding by themselves to a questionnaire item might, in fact, elicit a more “full and candid account of their experience” than face-to-face interviews with an investigator who might appear to the participants to embody the role of an imposing and critical scientist.

Roxburgh and Roe list one advantage of face-to-face data collection as allowing

the researcher to tailor the interview to reflect the participants’ values and emphases. . . . This was not possible with Rock et al.’s favoured method of data collection, which severely constrains the range of topics that the participant could consider to be legitimate in that context.

This suggested steering of the interview by the researcher is arguably no more or less advantageous than Rock et al.'s use of a standard set of questions. The use of the consistent question set across participants controls for response variance and encourages greater consensus among the data. Variability between responses makes analysis difficult as it only highlights differences in experiences. In that respect, "constrain[ing] the range of topics" discussed by the participants may be viewed as an advantage. This may, of course, be regarded as anathema by qualitative researchers who subscribe to a "purist" position. However, researchers who acknowledge that the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy is spurious (e.g., Crawford et al., 2002; Foss & Ellefsen, 2002; Risjord et al., 2002) also understand that, as Allen-Meares and Lane (1990) argue, "one must view data collection techniques and methods as not irrevocably linked to one paradigm or the other" (p. 16). In addition, the aim of the study was to elucidate the mediums' specific *sensory* experiences versus their entire lived experiences, and so a limited question set was necessary.

Roxburgh and Roe also state that

Although Rock et al. include original quotations from participants, the majority are merely "sound-bites" of one sentence or less, which do not provide any context for the mediums' experiences or allow the reader to conceptualize their own interpretations.

The listed quotations from the IRMs were extracted significant statements from the IRMs' original protocols which, in turn, were used by Rock et al. to formulate comprehensive constituent themes. The nature of the IRMs' responses was generally such that a succinct statement more appropriately captured the fundamental essence of the theme than would more lengthy quotations from the original protocols. Furthermore, it would be redundant—and indeed misleading—to include quotations that consisted of material other than extracted significant statements to illustrate comprehensive constituent themes. Moreover, it is our view that Rock et al.'s commentaries serve the function of creating the context for each extracted significant statement in terms of the comprehensive constituent themes.

Criticism 2: Fully Embracing a Qualitative Approach

Roxburgh and Roe assert that Rock et al. "have yet to fully embrace a qualitative approach." The tacit assumption underpinning this remark is arguably a purist position whereby a qualitative-quantitative dichotomy is supported. However, the qualitative-quantitative debate is currently characterized by the position that this dichotomy is spurious, and that the two approaches can be reconciled (e.g., Abussabha & Woelfel, 2003; Baum, 1995; Bolden & Moscarola, 2000; Burke-Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Calderon et al., 2000; Caracelli & Greene, 1993; Coyle & Williams, 2000; Howe, 1992; Malterud, 2001). If qualitative and quantitative approaches are reconcilable—and thus not mutually exclusive—then it seems reasonable to suggest that the approaches may inform one another. In this case, it may be edifying to invoke one approach to elucidate the limitations

of another approach as Rock et al. have done when considering possible methodological shortcomings of their study.

Roxburgh and Roe also expressed disappointment regarding Rock et al.'s suggestion that future research might adopt a quantitative approach (i.e., the Phenomenology of Consciousness Inventory or PCI). Interestingly, researchers who argue that the qualitative-quantitative dichotomy is false advocate the notion of choosing research methodology on a case-by-case or research project-by-research project basis (Baum, 1995; Coll & Chapman, 2000). Consequently, if one conducts a qualitative study, then one is not necessarily precluded from suggesting a quantitative avenue for future research. Indeed, it is arguable that future research methodologies should be determined by the research questions or hypotheses that one wishes to address, not an ideological or fundamentalist commitment to either qualitative or quantitative research as Roxburgh and Roe have demonstrated in this instance. Pekala and Cardeña (2000) state "a full understanding of a phenomenon will require different perspectives and methodologies" (p. 72). We, in fact, further addressed studying mediums' experiences using both quantitative (Rock & Beischel, 2008) and qualitative (Rock et al., in press) methods in our subsequent studies "where the focus [was] on the phenomenology of their experiences." For example, in the quantitative study (Rock & Beischel, 2008), we used the PCI as we had suggested in Rock et al. (2008). The PCI has been demonstrated to be a valid and reliable measure of phenomenology (Pekala, 1991; Pekala et al., 1986).

Roxburgh and Roe complete their comments by stating that "the study is disappointing in its ability to resonate with the reader and does little to clarify or expand our understanding of mediumship." One might, of course, wonder on what grounds Roxburgh and Roe feel qualified to determine what does, or does not, resonate with all readers. In any event, the focus of the Rock et al. (2008) paper and our other published scientific research manuscripts involves providing a discussion of the data collected; our intent is not to "resonate with the reader" but to accurately portray our methods, data, and conclusions. In addition, it seems improbable that any systematic peer-reviewed analysis of mediums' descriptions of their experiences would contribute little to the field's understanding of mediumship. This is especially the case for Rock et al.'s study as it included an elite population of mediums unique in their abilities to report accurate information about the deceased. That is, Rock and colleagues were not concerned with the experiences of claimant mediums, but rather were specifically investigating the experiences of mediums whose abilities have been repeatedly demonstrated under controlled conditions in a laboratory. In contrast, it is noteworthy that Roxburgh's (2007, 2008) own research is concerned with "self-classified spiritualist mediums"³ whose purported mediumistic abilities have not been verified scientifically. Rock et al.'s study, therefore, clearly "clarifies and expands our understanding" of the experiences of scientifically verified mediums. To suggest otherwise is frankly insulting to the authors as well as this *Journal's* editors and reviewers and offers no criticism of merit for informing future studies or manuscripts.

Concluding Remarks

There is a paucity of information within the literature regarding scientifically verified mediums and their experiences. The comprehensive constituent themes identified by Rock et al. (2008) were independently verified by the very individuals who wrote the original protocols that were thematically analyzed. Clearly, the authors of the original protocols are in the best position to comment on the validity of Rock et al.'s findings. Furthermore, the chronology of the screening steps as well as the investigators' philosophy regarding the importance of each medium's experiences eliminated "priming" issues and removed any pressure on the participants to provide "appropriate" responses. Finally, it is our view that Roxburgh and Roe have adopted a purist position and, thus, failed to acknowledge that, as Pekala and Cardeña (2000) assert, phenomenological inquiry may be undertaken in different ways and no "laws" exist regarding which methods should qualify.

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Notes

- ¹ "Validity" is a term often used to describe the results of *quantitative* methodologies. The term "credibility," conversely, is normally used to describe the extent to which the results of *qualitative* research resonate with the participants' lived experiences (Patton, 2002). For the purpose of this response, the term "validity" is used to maintain congruency with Roxburgh and Roe.
- ² It is important to note that this popular text is no longer used in the similar screening of prospective research mediums that now takes place at the Windbridge Institute because it was written a number of years prior to the development of the mediumship research methods currently used. Instead, a lay-friendly description of the research methods now used (Beischel, 2007/2008) is employed during Step 6 of the screening procedure.
- ³ It should be noted that Roxburgh's participants "have won awards for mediumship demonstration from the Spiritualist [*sic*] National Union (SNU)" (Roxburgh, 2007), a non-scientific organization. The SNU Training and Awards or "T&A committee organizes quality training and assessment for SNU members and issues awards to successful candidates" (Spiritualists' National Union, 2009). No specific description of the training or assessment procedure is given.

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