

EPISTEMIC AUTHORITY AND NEUTRALITY IN THE DISCOURSE OF PSYCHIC PRACTITIONERS: TOWARD A NATURALISTIC PARAPSYCHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT: It is argued that although there have been experimental tests of psychic practitioners (mediums, clairvoyants, Tarot readers, and so on), demonstrations of paranormally acquired information in real-life consultations with practitioners have been relatively ignored. Analysis of these routine consultations can provide insight into what are, for members of the public themselves, parapsychological phenomena in their natural settings. It is also argued that contemporary demonstrations of parapsychologically acquired information are mainly linguistically mediated events. Using a qualitative method for the analysis of naturally occurring verbal interaction, this article examines transcripts of recordings of real-life consultations between psychic practitioners and their clients or audience members. The article describes recurrent features of interaction through which the participants address the practitioners' epistemic authority: the source or basis of their ostensible paranormally acquired knowledge. The article concludes by comparing the approach adopted here to explicitly sceptical accounts of psychics' discourse. It is also argued that naturalistic, ecologically valid research of the kind illustrated here complements established experimental traditions in parapsychology.

Contemporary demonstration of mediumship or psychic powers is a mundane, practical, and largely discursive matter.

It is mundane because it is so ubiquitous in contemporary western culture. In the UK, for example, members of the public can consult mediums and other kinds of psychic practitioner in a variety of private and public contexts. Psychic fairs seem to be very popular: These are meetings in specially booked rooms in public houses or hotels lasting a short period of time, such as one evening, at which a small number of psychic practitioners are available for consultation. Private one-to-one sittings can be arranged either in the sitter's home or in the home of the psychic or medium. Psychics advertise their services in national and local newspapers and magazines. Psychics may be consulted over the phone, via the internet, or through mobile phone text messaging services. Mediums demonstrate spirit communication around the country at several hundred Spiritualist church services held weekly. Some psychic practitioners have established successful television careers. Stage demonstrations of mediumship attract large audiences. The British medium Doris Stokes was internationally renowned and able to draw large audiences to her public demonstrations all over the world.

Contemporary stage mediums also enjoy a large public following. A recent observational study of a British stage medium reports that, at a

conservative estimate, he is demonstrating mediumship to at least 50,000 people each year across the UK (with entry prices set, at the time of writing, between £12 and £14 per person). And, as he refuses television work or radio appearances, this popularity is based on “word of mouth” endorsements alone (Wooffitt & Gilbert, in press).

In the UK, then, contemporary consumption of psychic powers and mediumship is relatively straightforward. It is likely that consumption of psychic powers is similarly organized and available in the US and, with cultural variations, in other Western European countries also.

The consumption of psychic powers is a practical matter in that, quite simply, it involves a demonstration of those abilities. This has always been the case. Take, for example, mediumship. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, proof of the medium’s paranormal powers was demonstrated physically: The spirits offered visible, audible, and sometimes tangible evidence of their presence (Irwin, 1999; Nelson, 1969; Oppenheim, 1985). During the latter part of the 20th century, however, demonstrations of physical mediumship declined (but see Keen, Ellison, & Fontana, 1999). A key feature of contemporary mediumship is that demonstrations are primarily discursive events: It is through the words of the medium—in the reports of spirit messages or activities—that the presence of the spirit is established. And it is through the information they are able to provide about their clients or sitters that other psychic practitioners establish the authenticity of their parapsychologically acquired knowledge. Demonstrations of mediumship and psychic abilities are pragmatic and communicative activities.

Parapsychology has largely ignored the practical and discursive features of everyday demonstrations of psychic and mediumship abilities. Parapsychological research has been primarily experimental and designed to test the authenticity of claimed abilities. This is the case whether spectacular psychic gifts are claimed, as in the case of Uri Geller (Targ & Puthoff, 1974), Ted Serios (Eisenbud, 1967, 1977), and Pavel Stepanek (Pratt, 1973), or in cases where lesser known individuals claim more modest psychic abilities (Parra & Argibay, 2007; Roe, 1995; Smith & Wiseman, 1992/1993; Wiseman & Morris, 1994, 1995).

There has, however, been a resurgence of parapsychological writings on mediums. Alvarado’s historical scholarship re-examines the relationship between parapsychology and mediumship (Alvarado 2003, 2004); Braude’s philosophical analysis of the evidence for survival evaluates the mediumship of key figures such as Leonora Piper and Gladys Leonard (Braude, 2003); and there have been reassessments of the evidential value of early mediums (Moreman, 2003; Randall, 2001, 2003) as well as attempts to refine methodologies for the accuracy of mediums’ statements (for example, Roy & Robertson, 2001; Robertson & Roy, 2001, 2004).

Perhaps the most notable methodological developments are the experimental studies of Schwartz and his colleagues. In a series of controlled laboratory experiments, Schwartz has attempted to assess the

accuracy of information provided by well-known mediums. He argues this research offers evidence for post-mortem survival and spirit communication through mediums (Schwartz, 2002; Schwartz & Russek, 2001; Schwartz, Russek, Nelson, & Barentson, 2001; Schwartz, Russek, & Barentson, 2002; Schwartz, Geoffrion, Jain, Lewis, & Russek, 2003). However, it has been argued that his methodology is not sufficiently rigorous to warrant claims of experimental proof of mediumship (Bem, 2005; Hyman, 2003; Wiseman & O'Keeffe, 2001, 2004). However, the focus on experimental studies of the authenticity of psychics' claimed abilities has ensured that there has been little investigation of the contexts in, and characteristics of, their work in real-life settings.

There may be much to be gained from a nonexperimental approach to psychic practitioners. Instead of asking mediums and psychics to perform for professional experimenters in the artificial environment of a laboratory, we can study them working for their clients in what might be termed their "home environments": in face-to-face sittings, or in performance to audiences in stage demonstrations, or in telephone consultations. This allows us to further our understanding of the broader features of the ways in which members of the public actually consult psychic practitioners and consume demonstrations of parapsychological knowledge acquisition in their everyday lives. Thus, we can begin to develop naturalistic and ecologically valid parapsychological perspectives to complement laboratory-based studies. Moreover, we can begin to explore the communicative skills through which psychic practitioners demonstrate their paranormally acquired knowledge and through which, in consultations with sitters or audiences, that information is ratified, negotiated, contested, rejected, and amended. This in turn suggests a novel approach to the question of the authenticity of psychic practitioners' claims.

A concern to establish proof and authenticity is central to the culture of psychic practitioners. For example, mediums will often begin public demonstrations with claims that, tonight, they are going to offer proof of the existence of the afterlife. The genuineness of psychic abilities underlies the content and organization of advertising materials, such as flyers (Wooffitt, 2006) and magazine adverts. Proof of survival and the spirits' abilities to return to provide messages for their living friends and family are also constant themes in mediums' autobiographies and in the *Psychic News*, the weekly UK newspaper for spiritualists and psychics. But instead of exploring the authenticity of psychic practitioners experimentally, in procedures established by professional scientists, we can begin to see how psychics, mediums, and their clients *themselves* address issues of proof and authenticity in their consultations. That is, we can ask: what counts for the participants as a successful demonstration of psychic abilities? How is ostensible parapsychological knowledge introduced into sittings, consultations, and stage demonstrations? And what are the broader communicative competencies that practitioners and their clients draw on?

This article presents some key findings from qualitative analysis of audio recordings and transcriptions of consultations between members of the public and psychic practitioners, such as mediums, clairvoyants, Tarot readers, and so on. It describes the properties of one recurrent pattern in their consultations through which evidential information is offered and accepted as displays of parapsychological cognition. The latter part of the analysis describes specific features of the practitioners' discourse that orient to issues of proof and authenticity.

DATA, TRANSCRIPTION, AND METHOD

Data

The data corpus used in this research consists of:

1. Thirty-eight recordings of sessions of psychic practitioners conducting sittings with individual clients. In all cases, the sittings were recorded by the psychics themselves (they provide a tape of the sitting as part of the fee). The sittings were conducted either at psychic fairs or in the psychic's or the sitter's home in various locations in the UK. The sitters were either students who volunteered to go to a psychic and provide me with a copy of the tape or people who have consulted psychics independently of this research and who subsequently provided me with copies of the tape recording of their sitting.

Of the student volunteers, only two knew that the focus of the subsequent research would be the organization of verbal interaction between psychic practitioner and sitter. Some of the student volunteers had readings from more than one psychic, and there were seven psychics from whom more than one reading was obtained.

2. Data from six stage demonstrations. A colleague, Colin Clark, provided transcribed fragments taken from a tape of "edited highlights" of a Doris Stokes performance at the Dominion Theatre in London recorded in the early 1980s. A doctoral student provided me with a CD recording of a performance of stage mediumship recorded in 2004. There are also ethnographic notes of four other stage demonstrations of mediumship in large halls and hotel conference rooms; these were observed by the author between 2003 and 2006 in the north of England.

3. An audio tape of a private sitting conducted in the Northwest of England and a videotaped reading by an American medium, both of which were recorded independently of the research project outlined in this article. (These were provided by the James Randi Educational Foundation.)

4. Fragments transcribed from the video recording of a 1998 terrestrial UK television documentary about mediumship.

In total, the corpus stands at audio recordings of 42 sittings and stage demonstrations, and ethnographic notes from a further four stage

demonstrations that were not recorded. The corpus contains sittings and demonstrations from 28 psychic practitioners. There are 34 sitters in the corpus. This does not include the numerous audience members who identified themselves as recipients of messages from the spirits at the five stage demonstrations in the corpus.

Method and Transcription

The data were analyzed according to conversation analytic conventions. Conversation analysis (hereafter, CA) is a qualitative method for the study of naturally occurring interaction. Despite its title, CA methods are not only applicable to the study of ordinary conversation but provide a rigorous set of analytic procedures for the investigation of all kinds of naturally occurring verbal interaction (see for example Drew & Heritage, 1992). As its application to parapsychology has been outlined in detail elsewhere (Wooffitt, 2003, 2005), a brief summary of the key methodological features is provided.

CA treats talk as social action. It investigates how turns at talk perform discursive actions: greetings, questions, answers, requests, assessments, accusations, agreements, rebuttals, clarifications, and so on. Analysis reveals how participants manage interactional activities through strongly patterned turn-taking sequences. Analysis proceeds on the assumption that the orderliness of talk as social action is not consciously produced but is the outcome of tacit communicative skills that underpin language use. The explication of these tacit communicative skills is a key task of CA research.

In the following empirical sections, analytic claims will be made about the interactional force and consequences of utterance. However, this should not be taken to imply that psychic practitioners and sitters are deliberately using language to achieve these ends. The communicative competencies which they employ, and which are revealed by the design of their utterances, are *tacit* skills. They inhabit the weave of everyday interaction, but they do not yield easily to reflection or introspection, and often resist explicit articulation. They are identified only through the analysis of turn design and the discovery of sequential environments.

Although CA research is qualitative, it is quite different from other qualitative methods, such as those advocated by scholars working in interpretivist, postmodern, or (some) microsociological traditions in that analysis is not driven by the analyst's interpretative skills or analytic agenda. That is, the goal of analysis is not to provide a set of subjective interpretations (or "readings") of data (or "texts") but to describe stable and objective structures in interaction (Schegloff, 1997). As such, in CA research there are formal requirements which govern the production of empirical claims, and which safeguard against unwarranted interpretation. Empirical claims are always grounded in close description of the data. Analysis proceeds

initially from close examination of particular cases. Analytic findings are then developed via inspection of collections of instances of particular verbal practices. In this sense, although not an experimental procedure, conversation analysis has much in common with the procedures in scientific naturalism in which several instances of a type of creature or plant may be examined to identify generic properties of the species. (Introductions to CA research can be found in Heritage, 1984; Heritage & Atkinson, 1984; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998; Psathas, 1995; Sacks 1992; Schegloff, 2007; Ten Have, 1999.)

Finally, it must be stressed that CA is ultimately agnostic about the content of verbal interaction. It is not, then, predisposed to an underlying sceptical appreciation of the ultimate ontological status of psychic practitioners' claimed abilities. So, although, as will become apparent, the results from the application of a CA methodology do lend themselves to a sceptical interpretation of the psychics' powers, it would be an error to assume that the method itself assumes a sceptical position.

The data were transcribed using the conventions of conversation analysis. CA transcriptions try to capture characteristics of verbal interaction omitted from transcripts that merely record the spoken word. This is because research has shown that even speech events that seem trivial can have important consequences for the participants. This means transcriptions capture aspects of utterance delivery as well as what was said. To capture these often overlooked features of verbal interaction, CA employs a transcription system, developed by Gail Jefferson, which uses symbols available on conventional typewriter and computer keyboards, a description of which is provided in the Appendix.

"SUCCESSFUL" DEMONSTRATIONS OF PARAPSYCHOLOGICALLY ACQUIRED COGNITION
IN PSYCHIC PRACTITIONER-SITTER INTERACTION

A routine feature of the discourse of psychic practitioners (a term I shall use generically to refer to mediums, clairvoyants, Tarot readers, and so on) is the use of questions to initiate topics or develop ongoing topics, which then become, even if only momentarily, the focus for both participants. Moreover, these questions embody or "hint at" aspects of the sitters' current circumstances or their future plans, information that should not be available to a stranger such as the psychic. If the sitter finds the psychic's utterance to be accurate or in some way relevant, it is receipted and accepted with a minimal turn, usually a simple "yes" or "yeah." After the sitter's minimal acceptance or confirmation, the psychic practitioner moves swiftly to a turn in which the now-accepted knowledge is attributed to a paranormal source. From the psychics' perspective, these instances may be considered "successes," and they routinely exhibit a three-turn structure. To explicate this structure we will consider the following extract. This comes from the transcript of a sitting between a psychic who uses

Tarot cards and a young woman. During this sitting, the psychic is using the cards to discern aspects of the sitter's present and future life. (In this and subsequent extracts, the psychic practitioner is designated by the letter "P" and the sitter by the letter "S.")

(1) (KOJ:7/F:F) (The code before the slash indicates the recording from which this extract is taken. The code following the slash indicates the gender of the practitioner and the sitter.)

(Discussing S's plans to travel after graduating.)

S: I graduate in June I'm probably going to work until
about february [so: jus' (.) any old j[ob]y'know.

P: [RIght okay [right]

P: and are you going to the states,
(.)

S: yeah.

P: yea:h, c'z e I can see the old ehm:
(.)

S: Hh [huh Hah `h]

P: [statue of] liberty around you,

S: heh heh h[e `hhh

P: [there you are, there's contentment for
the future.

The question "and are you going to the states" may be heard as displaying the psychic's special knowledge that the sitter is indeed planning to visit the US. Once this has been accepted it is retrospectively cast as having been derived from the Tarot cards: the psychic's utterance "c'z e I can see the old ehm: statue of liberty around you," portrays her prior turn as a consequence of her ability to discern from the arrangement of cards a classic iconic representation of the US and interpret its relevance to the sitter. Moreover, the turn is initiated with a derivation of "because," thus explicitly establishing that the topic of her prior utterance was generated from the special powers subsequently claimed in her turn.

This three-turn sequence can be described schematically as:

T1 Psychic: a question embodying a claim about, or knowledge of,
the sitter, his or her circumstances, and so on.

T2 Sitter: minimal confirmation/acceptance

T3 Psychic: attribution of now accepted information to paranormal
source.

(From Wooffitt, 2006)

This is a routine organization of ostensibly successful claims about the sitter. The following two extracts come from sittings with mediums. Extract 2 is taken from a sitting with a medium in the US and comes from an early part of the sitting; Extract 3 comes from a sitting in the UK.

(2) (JREF:2/M:F (US)) (In this and other extracts, conventional speech marks are used to indicate direct reported speech.)

- P: So spirit wants me to do a scan on your bo:dy, talk about your health, so I'm going to do that okay? I'm going to do this for your health (0.8) Let's see what's going on with you. 'hh number one thing is your >mother in spirit please?< T1
(0.2)
- S: Yes T2
- P: >'cause I have (n-m) y'r mother standing right over T3
here, 'hh and she said "I WANna TALK to HER and I want to speak to her" because hh your mother has very lou:d when she comes through. h she speaks with a in a very lou:d way a very uhm (.) y'understand very [she has to be
S: [ye:s.
- P: heard, h and like this would not happen today without her coming through for you. D'y' [un'erstand?
S: ['kay
S: Ye:s.

Extract 2 begins with a section from the psychic practitioner's description of how the sitting will proceed. After this initial preamble, he produces a question about the sitter's mother. This could be heard as a genuine question about the sitter's mother—that is, it may be equivalent to "has your mother passed on or is she still living?"—or it could be heard as a question which seeks confirmation of information already known to the medium. The sitter's minimal response does not disambiguate the prior turn in that a simple "yes" could be an answer or a confirmation. The medium's next turn, however, reveals that he is in contact with the spirit of the sitter's mother. Moreover, the medium prefaces this turn with "'cause"; this establishes that his prior turn was a consequence of, or an upshot of, information or events he is about to disclose in his current turn. This retrospectively characterizes his first turn as a question seeking confirmation of information already at hand. Also, it can now be inferred that the knowledge that the sitter's mother has died came from a paranormal source: the spirit of the mother herself.

Extract 3 provides three further examples of the sequential unit outlined above.

(3) (TV:1/M:F/F) (In this extract there are two sitters, a mother and her daughter (“S1” and “S2”). At this point in the sitting the medium claims to be in contact with the spirit of their husband/father.)

- | | | |
|-----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| P: | >’ave you ‘ad< (.) bit >(o’)< trouble with
your back as <u>w</u> ell. | T1 |
| | (0.2) | |
| S1: | yes a little bi[t | T2 |
| P: | [he says ah’d best send her a bit of
sympathy down so you understand it,
’hh [h | T3 |
| S1: | [ye [s | |
| P: | [coz y’know h y’try to <u>b</u> ottle things
up and you don’t always let people
get <u>c</u> lose to you in that sense do you | T1 |
| S1: | <u>n</u> o. | T2 |
| P: | he says she can be quite stubborn at times y’know
(.) | T3 |
| P: | is that true | |
| S1: | yes: | |
| P: | an’ he knows czh you are <u>f</u> ussy about the bungalow
aren’t you [girl | T1 |
| S1: | [yes I am | T2 |
| P: | bless her he says | T3 |

There are three questions, each of which can be heard as proposing that the psychic has access to intimate knowledge about the sitter: that she has back trouble, that she can be withdrawn, and that she is houseproud (“fussy about the bungalow”). To each of these questions the sitter provides minimal confirmative responses. And on each occasion the psychic then goes on to report what the spirit of the sitter’s husband has said to him, thereby making it inferable that it was the spirit who provided the information about the sitter.

The display of paranormal cognition, then, is sequentially ordered: it is in the third turn of the sequence where now-accepted claims about the sitter are attributed to a paranormal source, and thus constitute evidence of paranormal cognitive abilities. Space restrictions prevent further demonstration of this sequence by examination of other cases. This three-turn sequence however, has been found in one-to-one consultations, in stage demonstrations, and in telephone interaction on a television programme between a medium and viewers; it occurs in consultations at psychic fairs,

and in the sitter's home; it informs the discourse of mediums, clairvoyants, Tarot readers, and other kinds of psychic practitioners; it can be observed in recordings of world famous mediums as well as lesser known local psychics, and in recordings from the US and the UK; it occurs in sittings consisting of male practitioners and female sitters, and in sittings of female practitioners and male sitters; it even informs written recollections of notable successes in mediums' autobiographies (Wooffitt, 2006). This is not the only way in which psychic practitioners can demonstrate paranormally acquired knowledge, but it is a recurrent and generic feature of psychics' discourse.

Deviant Case Analysis: Projected and Completed Extensions of Second Turns

The analysis so far suggests that the third turn in the sequence is significant because it is here that paranormally acquired cognition is retrospectively claimed and thereby demonstrated. Evidence of the practitioner's tacit understanding of the epistemic significance of the third turn may be found in cases in which participants deviate from the established pattern of this sequence. We will consider two cases in which sitters do not provide minimal acceptances/confirmations.

In the following extract the psychic's question implies knowledge of the sitter's ill health.

(4) (UniS:5/F:F)

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| P: | are you fi:nding that >y'got to have< check
ups and it's getting you down
(1.8) | T1 |
| S: | yea:h ah've got my[()] | T2 |
| P: | [yeah] yeah >we(II) ah know<
'cos I've got the medical: (0.2) feel arou:nd
you `hhh erhm: | T3 |

There are three features of the sitter's turn which mark its difference from routine acceptance/confirmations: first, it is delayed; second, the turn initial item is a slightly extended "yeah," which could be hearable as expressing hesitation or unwillingness to produce an unequivocal endorsement; and finally, "ah've got my" projects a forthcoming report or telling.

The psychic begins to talk in overlap with the sitter. Indeed, her utterance cuts across the sitter's on-going turn, which is then abandoned before reaching any recognizable completion. Moreover, it can be inferred from "ah've got my" that the sitter is working up to a disclosure or announcement of some kind, the site of which is projected after the production of "my." Thus the psychic's first "yeah" is timed to collide with precisely that part of the sitter's utterance in which it is likely that the sitter

will produce a word or phrase which reveals what the topic of her turn will be (for example, “operation,” “appointment,” and so on). The psychic’s turn is initially composed of “yeah” repeated, and only when she is clear of co-occurring talk from the sitter does she, first, explicitly claim to know already about the sitter’s problems, “we(II) ah know,” and, second, attribute that knowledge to a paranormal source: “‘cos I’ve got the medical: (0.2) feel around you.”

Similar concerns inform the following extract. Here, the psychic proposes that earlier in her life the sitter may have considered a career in what is characterized broadly as a caring profession. The sitter treats this as correct, but instead of a minimal acceptance, she states specifically which kind of caring profession she had intended to enter.

(5) (UniS:10/M:F)

- P: ‘h ↑y’ever though(t) o(f) ‘h did you want to go
into a caring pro↓fession early on, when
>y’w’s uh(t)< y’know when you were
choosing which way you were gonna go. T1
(.)
- S: yeah I wanted to: go into T2
child care actual[ly when I]
- P: [MMmm:::]:::=
- S: =when I let school
- P: that’s right yeah >well< ‘h (.) ‘m being shown T3
that>but (t)< ‘h it’s (0.2) it’s not your
way ye(t) actually but i(t) y’y may be caring for
(t)-ch- children or whatever later on okay?

Here again, the sitter does not provide a one-word acceptance/confirmation, but in T2 embarks on an extended turn in which she discloses factual information. The psychic’s subsequent turn begins with a loud and extended agreement marker. While this is positioned at a possible turn transfer location (the end of “actually”) it is continued in overlap with the sitter’s continuation. The psychic’s agreement marker has an exaggerated and extended character and seems to be designed to close down the sitter’s on-going turn. Indeed, the sitter does abandon this turn, albeit temporarily, and the end of the psychic’s overlapping agreement marker occurs in the clear. However, the sitter recommences her turn exactly at the point where psychic’s “mmm” finishes, and completes it. And, as in the previous extract, when the psychic eventually gets the chance to produce the third turn in this sequence, the demonstration of knowledge obtained from a paranormal source is delayed, this time, by the inclusion of “that’s right yeah,” an item which is responsive to the sitter’s informing.

In Extracts 4 and 5 the sitters treat the psychic's prior utterance as warranting or inviting disclosure of fairly specific information, and in both cases the sitters' departure from the established pattern of second turns is followed by the psychics' departure from the established pattern of third turns. In Extract 4 the psychic initiates an overlapping turn, thereby demonstrating an orientation to the possible loss of relevancy of the third turn. And in Extract 5, although the psychic's agreement marker is placed in the vicinity of a location where turn transfer may be initiated, its exaggerated and extended production seems—conspicuously—to cut across a factual report from the sitter and ends when it appears that the sitter has terminated her turn. Moreover, before the psychics move to an attribution they produce components that are responsive to the “informings” being produced. However, they do not mark the informing as “new,” as this would constitute a clear breach of the lay understanding that psychics are meant to tell the sitter things, not the other way around. Instead, they produce agreements: “yeah” and an exaggerated “mm,” thereby exhibiting that they are confirming news, not receiving it. And in both cases, the psychics then establish that they already knew what the sitter has just revealed. This is explicitly addressed in Extract 4 when the psychic says “>we(II) ah know<.” In Extract 5 it is realized by “that's right yeah,” an unmarked acknowledgment which specifically proposes that the speaker is already aware of—and therefore in no need of—the information being presented to them (Heritage & Sefi, 1992: 395–398).

These turns, then, display the psychics' understanding of the interactionally problematic nature of extended second turns. This is because they threaten the practitioners' epistemic authority.

Consider Extract 5: once the sitter has revealed that she had wanted to work in child care, the psychic is placed in the position of having to claim in his next turn that information which has just been disclosed by the sitter just so happens to have been revealed to him through a paranormal source. This invites a sceptical query about the authenticity of the psychic: if he already knew this, why didn't he mention it before the sitter? Furthermore, insofar as the sitter has elaborated upon the kinds of work adumbrated by “caring professions,” it is now apparent that the paranormal source has provided less specific information than a human one. This raises another basis for doubt about the credibility of the psychic, for even if it is accepted that the psychic is indeed using paranormal powers to glean information, what value are his reports if they are less perceptive or insightful than those provided by the sitter? Finally, his subsequent prediction about the sitter's future involvement with child care—“it's not your way ye(t) actually but i(t) y'y may be caring for (t-) ch- children or whatever later on”—seems transparently to originate not so much from a paranormal source but from her disclosure that she had *wanted* to work in this area, a formulation from which it can be inferred that she had not yet done so.

Extended utterances, then, threaten the effectiveness of the third turn as the site in which attribution can be accomplished. The design of third position turns in Extracts 4 and 5 addresses this: claiming that something was known already provides for the possibility of a subsequent attribution; treating the sitter's disclosure as "news" does not. In this, the oriented-to properties of the sequence provide the grounds for the psychic's attempts to close down or forestall utterances designed to provide factual information. Furthermore, it demonstrates the psychics' understanding that the third turn in this sequence is the site in which their epistemic authority—the grounds for the claims to have access to parapsychologically derived knowledge—may be demonstrated.

The attributive sequence, then, is a vehicle for the negotiation of implicit epistemic claims that bear directly on attributions of authenticity. In the following sections we explore this feature of the sequence in more detail and focus in particular on various ways in which psychics can establish epistemic neutrality in first position, topic-initiating questions.

EPISTEMIC MANAGEMENT AND NEUTRALITY

Analysis of the way that authority is invoked, warranted, and negotiated in interaction has been a longstanding focus of conversation analytic research (for example, Clift, 2006; Heritage & Raymond, 2005; Pomerantz, 1980, 1984, 1986; Raymond, 2000; Raymond & Heritage, 2006; Sacks, 1979, 1984, 1992; Stivers, 2005), and has been the focus of research in cognate disciplines such as discourse analysis and discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; 2005; Potter, 1996; Potter & Hepburn, 2003; Stokoe & Hepburn, 2005; Wiggins & Potter, 2003). A key finding of these studies is that epistemic authority is not a given in social interaction, an invariant feature that simply reflects the participants' roles, relative status, or identities. These studies show how epistemic authority is the outcome of discursive activities embedded in routine communicative procedures, such as turn-taking and turn design, and an attribution that may be challenged, negotiated, and warranted in various ways.

But it is not only epistemic *authority* that has to be accomplished interactionally: so do interpersonal stances that exhibit the speaker's neutrality towards a topic, issue, or state of affairs. This is particularly clear in institutional contexts in which there is an expectation that one or more parties should be seen to be impartial, such as courtroom activities (Atkinson, 1992), television news interviews (Claymen, 1988, 1992, 2002; Heritage & Greatbatch, 1991), and family mediation (Greatbatch & Dingwall, 1999).

Examination of the attributive sequence suggests that the accomplishment of neutrality is also relevant to psychic practitioners. The third turn of the sequence is primarily concerned with demonstrating that now-confirmed knowledge was available to the practitioner because of some form of parapsychologically derived cognition. It is a clear and

explicit display of epistemic authority. In the first turn, however, there is, routinely, no attribution to any kind of source for the hinted-at knowledge claim, paranormal or otherwise.

This section presents a closer analysis of some recurrent properties of design and delivery of topic-initiating first turns. Data are presented which strongly suggest that practitioners display a tacit understanding that first-position turns should not explicitly state or implicitly hint at an attributable source for the suggested knowledge claim. We then examine properties of questions by which practitioners establish a neutral stance toward the knowledge claims they are providing, and thereby manage the epistemic basis of their authority and authenticity as psychic practitioners.

“Conspicuous” Nonattribution

A recurrent phenomenon in the corpus is that practitioners do not identify a source for implied knowledge claims prior to their confirmation. The absence of attribution can become noticeable and conspicuous when viewed in the context of on-going talk. This is most clearly evident in consultations with mediums. It is routine to find that even when there is an explicit claim of concurrent spirit communication there is no implication that the spirit might be the source of the information hinted at in any subsequent topic-initiating question. In the consultation from which the next extract is taken, the medium has established communication with the sitter’s deceased husband. The medium is reporting that the husband liked to give gifts of jewelry to his wife; other remarks about the husband follow.

(6) (JREF:2/M:F (US))

P: and uhm it was very special (.) for him to give
you some jewellery. hh and he reserved that for
special times, >s’wa’< s[pecial- occas[ions:] when

S: [mm hm.- [Yes:.]
he did this with you. ARhm: hhh °got you°
(1.3)

P: he is a tough man to figure out,
(0.2)

P: he’s a a tough guy to figure out h he has
his own agenda.
(0.2)

S: that (.) could be true.

P: mm hm because um, he’s also a person (.) it’s
very hard to get to know him.(.) h he has
very t- tough skins. he’s very tough-skinned. h
and it feels like (.) he doesn’t let many
people through, (0.2) but he let you through,

- S: mm hm
 P: you understand?
 S: yes.
 P: and this is what he is talking about.
 S: [ˈkay=
 P: he said he let liz through. h
 >did he ever call you< Lizzie? T1
 (0.4)
 S: Ye:s,
 (0.4)
 P: because he says “I let lizzie through”.

A topic-initiating question (identified by “T1” in the transcript) implies that the practitioner knows that the sitter’s husband used this name for his wife when he was alive. Once the implied knowledge claim is confirmed, it is attributed explicitly to the spirit of the sitter’s husband. But in the first turn, there is no attribution.

This is conspicuous given that in the immediately prior talk, it is clear that the practitioner is reporting concurrent and on-going communication with the spirit. So, earlier in the sequence, after discussing the deceased husband’s fondness for giving his wife jewelry, the medium produces a *sotto voce* “got you,” thereby acknowledging on-going communication from the spirit. Furthermore, the practitioner establishes that he is reporting the spirit’s words, “and this is what he is talking about.” The present tense of “talking” implies concurrent communication from the spirit. The spirit’s words are also paraphrased in indirect reported speech: “said he let liz through,” which further attests to on-going contact with the spirit. There is evidence, then, that the practitioner is receiving a continuous, on-going stream of information from the spirit. Yet the topic-initiating question and its implied knowledge claim—which is subsequently attributed to the same spirit—does not index a paranormal source.

Extracts 7 and 8 provide further instances of a nonattributive question being produced immediately after a stretch of talk in which the spirits’ presence, participation, or words have been reported. In Extract 7 the practitioner, a medium, is in contact with a spirit (referred to here as “she”) who is a deceased relative of the sitter. The medium reports: the spirit’s pleasure at some event, some communication from the spirit which was problematic, the spirit’s happiness, images of flowers presented by the spirit, the spirit’s words of advice for her living relative (in direct reported speech), the spirit’s gestures towards the sitter, the spirit’s concern for the sitter, and, in indirect reported speech, the spirit’s greetings to the sitter’s (non present) wife. It is clear that the medium seems to be reporting on a stream of information from and activity by the spirit.

(7) (JREF:1/F:M)

P: oh she's so pleased. (0.3) she's so pleased she's
really (.) (ptchuh) h ahm: (.) (ah reck'n) (tchuh)
(0.8) 'h and I suppose if I go back to the: (.) ellen
(0.2) and then say (.) alice bennett (0.4) because I said
where's the enn then (0.2) ah said is it lesley ann=do
you remember,

S: mm hm
(0.2)

P: hhh but now I understand what she was trying
to give me (.) >and it was all getting jumbled up,<
(3.5)

P: she's so: happy,
(0.7)

S: good.

P: and so happy to see: (.) everybody, and she brings
me the beau:tiful colour of violets, (0.2) that lovely
soft colour of violets, (0.5) which is lovely (.) and
it's
beautifully peaceful (0.3) and uh
(1.2)

P: and then (.) she just said "don't ↑ever be afraid:
(0.4) don't
↑ever be afraid: (0.2) there's nothing to be afraid of."
(0.7)

P: an(g)uh:,
(3.3)

P: (ptch) oh it's lo:vely,(0.2) she just leaned forward
and put a scarf round your neck and turned your collar
up huh huH HUH HAH HAH HAH(n) nn HHH which is a a(hh)y
o(h)f sa(hu)ying, 'hh (.)h "I look after
you?"(ch)huh) (ch)huh huh=
=Yeah.

S: 'h (ch)Hhu(n) sure she would've always been
co[ncerned ↑are you warm enough, (w'y-)hh hu(n)

S: [yeah

P: hu(n) hu(n) hhh a:nduh: (0.2) and (.) her ↑love to
lesley
because 'h she's a nice girl she said (0.4) a:nd um:
(10)

P: swimming. (2.5) who's been swimming,

T1

When the medium introduces the topic of swimming, there is no suggestion that the spirit, whose presence has been firmly established in

the preceding talk, is the source of this implied knowledge claim. Moreover there is no indication that communication with that spirit has now ended. Indeed, the turn “her ↑love to lesley because `h she's a nice girl she said (0.4) a:nd um:” suggests report of further communication from the spirit is forthcoming.

Extract 8 details the stretch of talk prior to the three consecutive attributive sequences in Extract 3.

(8) (TV:1/M:F/F) (This extract is taken from a video recording, hence the descriptions of the sitter's visible reactions.)

- P: cos I know it's been very difficult for you at
the moment [bless you
- S1: [yes
- P: and you know it's so hard to get yourself motivated
isn't it
- S1: °yes°
- P: you haven't been feeling well neither bless you
have you
- S1: no ((S1 getting watery eyed))
- P: w'l he says “just tell her ah'm been tuning into her so
much” (0.6) you don't sleep and (what you're told do you)
((S1 very tearful))
- P: s'alright tissues are down if you want them
they're down here girl
- ? ()
- P: alright so (0.8) but as he says he just wants to let
you know he's here he's not missing out on anything
(0.8) alright (0.5) now (.) he says “tell her to stop
worrying” because y- he says to it's not worth it now
what you've got to remember is (0.6) you're important to
him now can you understand it (0.6) your life's important
to him as well
>'ave you 'ad< (.) bit >(o')< trouble
with your back as well. T1

Again, after a relatively lengthy account of the spirit's positive regard and concern for the sitter, in which the co-presence of the spirit is suggested by direct reported speech of his utterances, a subsequent topic-initiation question does not index that spirit as the source of the medium's implied knowledge of the sitter's back trouble. It subsequently transpires, though, that the spirit was indeed the source of that information.

Topic-initiating utterances are designed so that there is no inferable source for the implied knowledge claim, even when the logic of the sitting, and the content of the practitioners' prior and on-going talk,

strongly suggests that they have current “live” access to paranormal sources of information. This suggests that practitioners orient to a procedural requirement to produce unattributed and epistemically neutral first position turns. In the following sections we examine three discursive practices through which epistemic neutrality can be further established.

“Relevance Implicative” Properties of Topic-Initiating Questions

First position turns have a propositional quality, in that they implicitly propose that the information around which the question is built is relevant to the sitter. Extracts 9–16 provide further examples.

(9) (Misc:11/F:F)

P: yer must be looking to travel at the [↑]moment are ya?

(10) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: and who’s got debts,

(11) (Misc:5/F:F)

P: do you ever find under the(t) rib aches a bit as well.

(12) UniS:10/M:F

P: (okay) hh [↑]are you suffering a bit of bad period _↓problems just recently,

(13) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: and who’s pregnant around you.

(14) (JREF:1/F:M)

P: and steve who’s steve.

(15) JREF:1/F:M

P: who’s david.

(16) (Misc:8/F:F)

P: and who’s bi:ll,

The questions may be said to be relevance implicative, as they are designed to propose that the sitter *should* be able to recognize the relevance of the referent(s) of the question: that the sitter is likely to suffer from rib pain, or does indeed suffer from menstrual problems, or is going traveling; or that someone known to the sitter has got debts, or is pregnant, or is called Steve, David, or Bill.

The relevance implicativeness of these questions emerges from various design features. First, each utterance is concerned with only one issue, statement, or implied knowledge claim. As the sole focus of the turn, that issue or claim is highlighted, and its potential significance to the sitter is implicitly underlined. Second, topic-initiating questions can be almost declarative in that they display an unequivocal confidence that that sitter will recognize, for example, a name, or a person identified by a particular characteristic. For example, “and who’s got debts,” and “who’s david.” are not mitigated by turn components that imply any degree of uncertainty as to the answer of the question (such as “is there,” “have you,” and so on). Third, topic-initiating questions can be prefaced by “and.” The use of “and” to preface turns is a feature of utterance design in a range of institutional or work related contexts and implies that the speaker is working through a set of predetermined issues or topics (Sorjonen & Heritage, 1991). In this context, and-prefacing works to suggest that what follows is merely one in a series of pre-established issues relevant to the sitter.

Confidence in the relevance of the topic-initiating question can also be underlined by the use of “so.” For example:

(17) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: so who’s going to Greece?

In conversational interaction “so” projects that what is to follow is in some sense a gist, upshot, or consequence of prior talk, that is, it is in some sense relevant to and grounded in prior action (Raymond, 2004). Here, the “so” projects that “who’s going to Greece” is in some way the upshot or consequence of—that is grounded in—some (unstated but implied to be paranormal) means of knowledge acquisition.

Relevance implicativeness can also be emphasized by the use of “yknow” as a preface to a topic-initiating question, which proposes common knowledge, and phrases which are linguistically predisposed to elicit agreement, such as tag questions like “do you,” “don’t you,” and “aren’t you.” Examples of both these devices are illustrated in a topic-initiating question from the series in Extract 3.

(From Extract 3)

P: coz y’know h y’try to bottle things up and you don’t
always let people get close to you in that sense do you

Topical Disjunctiveness

A feature of topic-initiating questions that works to propose their relevance to the sitter is that they are routinely disjunctive to the on-going topic of the immediately prior exchanges. In Extract 18 both participants are discussing the sitter's plans to travel.

(18) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: an' and travel?-

S: what I'm I'm go(n)- (.) (plan these)
travel[s with- f' when've (.)]

P: [okay well that will be:] eh[:m:

S: [finished

P: that will be that then. [travel? 'h ahr: because

S: [yeah

P: feel that this country you've had enough
of it fo[r a while [and the] studying and

S: [(k)hh hu ye(hh)ah [()]

P: learning is saying that you haven't got the knowledge at
the moment, but you're go(n) - you're doing it.

S: y[e:ah]

P: ['h w]ho works at computers ↓sally.

(1)

S: Ehrm::

(0.6)

S: I can't think of anybody actually

Over a series of turns the psychic establishes that the sitter intends to travel, then formulates motives for these travel plans: the sitter has "had enough" of this country. The psychic then refers to the sitter's current progress in her university studies "you haven't got the knowledge at the moment but you're go(n)- you're doing it." After the sitter's confirmation of this general and vaguely optimistic prognosis, and in overlap with that confirmation, the psychic introduces an entirely new topic, unconnected to any feature of the prior talk in this extract, or indeed, to any topic introduced in the entire sitting prior to the section transcribed here: "who works at computers ↓sally."

This topical disjunctiveness is a robust feature of topic-initiating questions. Extracts 19–22 provide further examples (indicated by arrows). (See also Extract 6.)

(19) (Misc:8/F:F)

P: hh who has links with austria

S: oh I have a sister in austria
 P: thank you very much (.) erm: (0.6) now I don't know
 what (.) gladys - how gladys comes into this 'hh er but
 she certainly knows about the austrian (.) er (.) part
 of the family y'know hh so: (.) she may have been a
friend of that part of the family 'hh ah get a lovely
 little old lady 'ere who just pops in and says "she
 doesn't know me mandy 'hh but I know the ones in austria"
 she's saying (.) 'hhh
 → and who's into nursing luvvie

(20) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: =y- I feel th't you go for eyes, you >know what I
 mean, <=you like people [with nice eyes as well. 'h and
 S: [↑yea:h,
 P: there's also travel, for you,
 (.)
 S: m[m hm]
 P: ['h] and there's also ↑money for you as wg:ll? 'h
 → an' are y' changing a ca:r,

(21) (6) (Misc:11/F:F)

P: as you mature an' as y' get older I think you'll see more
 of 'im 'h an' I think it'll take you around about five or
 six years before you seem a little bit more closer
 (0.4)
 S: r[ight
 P: [for some reason 'hhh
 → you don't want to live in the area d'ya?

(22) (KOJ:7/F:F)

P: and are you going to the states,
 (.)
 S: yeah.
 P: yeah, c'z e I can see the old ehm:
 statue of liberty around you,
 S: heh heh h[e 'hhh
 P: [there you are, there's contentment for
 the future.
 S: oh go[od
 P: → [who's pregnant around you?

In these cases, the on-going topics are, respectively: a spirit who knows members of the sitter's family living abroad, a series of statements about the sitter's romantic preferences and her forthcoming travels and financial developments, the sitter's relationship with her father, and the sitter's plans to travel. The psychic then produces questions that set new topics: someone known to the sitter with interest in nursing, plans to change a car, the sitter's dislike of the area in which she lives, and someone known to the sitter who is pregnant.

Abrupt topical jumps such as these are inferentially effective ways of suggesting relevance to the sitter. This is because lexical components and figures of speech that mark topic changes in routine interaction (for example, Button & Casey, 1984; Drew & Holt, 1998; Jefferson, 1984) are absent. This implies the psychics' concurrent access to a paranormal source of information—be it the spirit world or their parapsychological abilities—is yielding information of such a pressing and vital kind that routine conversational procedures for topic change can be abandoned and the utterance delivered disjunctively to the focus of immediately prior talk.

Self Repair/Termination of On-Going Turn and Projected Turns

The “pressing relevance” of paranormally acquired information can also be established via the termination in mid-production of on-going turns.

(23) (JREF:1/F:M)

- P: and she's pleased about that and she's (.) says
sh(e) - ↑who's ↓derek.
(0.5)
- P: who's derek.=
- S: =derek is a nephew

Prior to the exchange in Extract 23 the practitioner, a medium, has been reporting the positive stance of a spirit toward aspects of the sitter's life. This continues with “and she's pleased about that,” “she” here being the spirit with whom the medium is in contact. The utterance “and she's (.) says sh(e)” suggests that the medium is about to embark on further report of the spirit's communication. However, the final component of the word “she” is curtailed and the practitioner immediately asks “↑who's ↓derek.” The practitioner thus shifts her focus: a direct question to the sitter which initiates a new topic has “cut across” her on-going report of the spirit's discourse about a prior matter. The abrupt termination of the projected, on-going turn exhibits an understanding that the new turn takes priority—that this is now more important to the sitter, or that this is what the spirits

have just impressed upon the medium (for the attention of the sitter). This is the basis upon which it can be heard as exhibiting “special relevance” for the sitter.

The practitioner’s self-repair (Schegloff, Jefferson & Sacks, 1977) on an on-going turn to produce a topic-initiating question is not unusual. For example, in the following case, the psychic is clearly embarked on a report concerning the sitter’s brother.

(24) (UniS:13/F:F)

PP: yes your brother will ahm- (.) is your brother quite sensitive?

The projected report is terminated in mid-production (following a minor hesitation) and the psychic then asks a question about the brother’s personality. Insofar as both the abandoned and new turn are concerned with the sitter’s brother, there is a degree of topical continuity. The focus on the brother’s personality, however, is disjunctive to the projected report of something he will do or experience.

Extract 24 is interesting in that it illustrates that psychics do not only terminate on-going turns which deal with substantively different matters to those they are about to embark on: they also curtail turns which project actions such as informings, reportings, and advice-giving. Again, this is a recurrent phenomenon. In Extract 25, the psychic begins a turn with what looks like a report of her opinion on some matter (“I also think that you should do X”) or a prediction (“I also think that X will happen”).

(25) (UniS:3/F:F)

P: er:m: (0.2) I also think that uhm:
(.)

P: `h are there three of you th’t’re very close,
(0.3)

S: there is in our house yeah yeah I share a house

This projected report/prediction is abandoned and replaced with a question that topicalizes the sitter’s friendship or kinship network.

Extract 5, discussed earlier, also provides an instance.

(5) (UniS:10/M:F)

P: `h ↑y’ever though(t) o(f) `h did you want to go
into a caring pro↓fession early on, when >y’w’s uh(t)<
y’know when you were choosing which way you were
gonna go.

Here, the psychic's utterance “↑y'ever though(t) o(f)” is the first component of a projected turn. Used as initial components in a turn, the words “y'ever thought of” suggest that the speaker is about to offer a suggestion or advice. This projected turn is terminated mid-production, and the practitioner then issues a question, beginning with “did you.”

It seems, then, that projected turn formats that are subsequently abandoned have been designed to display some degree of epistemic commitment to the topic of the utterance. So, a turn which begins with “I think” implies that the speaker believes that what follows is true (or reasonable, rational, appropriate, and so on). Similarly, an utterance that advises a course of action may be deemed to reflect or express the speaker's endorsement of that advice. A question format, however, does not convey that level of epistemic commitment, in that it allows the psychic to suggest knowledge of the sitter but does not imply an endorsement of or commitment to the substance of that claim.

In the light of these observations, consider the next two extracts. In both cases, there is an instance of the three-turn attributive sequence identified earlier. But prior to this sequence, the practitioners explicitly or implicitly announce that they are going to “give news.”

(26) SD:4/M:Aud (Ethnographic notes) “R” is audience respondent.

P:	I'm just going to tell you something <i>(long pause approx 3 seconds)</i>	
P:	did you overfill a kettle recently?	T1
R:	yes	T2
P:	He heard what you said	T3
	Aud: <i>laughter</i>	

(27) (JREF:2/M:F (US))

P:	So spirit wants me to do a scan on your bo:dy, talk about your health, so I'm going to do that okay? I'm going to do this for your health (0.8) Let's see what's going on with you. `hh number one thing is your >mother in spirit please?< (0.2)	T1
S:	Yes	T2
P:	>'cause I have (n-m) y'r mother standing right over here,	T3

In Extract 26, which comes from a stage demonstration of mediumship, the practitioner is addressing an audience member and claims to be in contact with the spirit of her dead husband. He then announces that he is going to make a report, which, in context, is hearable as a report

of something the spirit has communicated. However, instead of a report, his next turn is the topic-initiating question. And in Extract 27, from a one-to-one sitting with a medium, the practitioner reports that the spirits want him to focus on the sitter's health. He states, "so I'm going to do that okay? I'm going to do this for your health," which establishes his commitment to the health scan, and then "Let's see what's going on with you," which suggests an assessment is about to begin. Both the stated commitment to a scan and the suggestion of its onset imply a subsequent report of the results of that assessment to the sitter (that is, it would be perverse for spirits to initiate a check on the health of a sitter that was not intended to be disclosed to the sitter, and for their benefit only). However, instead of a report on the sitter's health, the practitioner asks a question about the sitter's mother that, when confirmed, is retrospectively recast as an implied knowledge claim via its attribution to a paranormal source. (The practitioner does not offer or refer to the assessment of the sitter's health in the rest of the sitting.)

SUMMARY

The analysis has identified and described some properties of a core sequential organization that informs demonstrations of various kinds of claimed parapsychological cognition in a range of interactional and discursive contexts. In particular, I have focused on features of the psychic practitioners' turns in which they attend to epistemic matters: the basis of and warrant for implied claims to have genuine parapsychological abilities. This has revealed that epistemic authority is not a uniform and constant feature of consultations but is handled variably in relation to the activities utterances perform. In first-position topic-initiating turns, practitioners display epistemic neutrality with respect to the knowledge claims their turns implicitly make. Moreover, there are various communicative resources through which this neutrality can be established. In third-position turns, however, there is explicit attribution to paranormal sources.

A concern with proof and authenticity, then, is not the preserve of the professional parapsychologist and to be explored through experimental procedure: it is inextricably implicated in the detailed design and sequential organization of practitioners' utterances, and handled in the moment-by-moment trajectory of the encounter. It is as much a concern for participants as it is for professional parapsychologists.

DISCUSSION

The methodological approach advocated in this paper allows us to supplement experimental, laboratory-based tests of the authenticity of psychic practitioners by examining naturalistic data: recordings and detailed transcriptions of real-life encounters between members of the public and psychic practitioners working in private homes, public houses, clubs, halls,

hotel conference rooms, and theatres. By analyzing the communicative competencies and sequential features of psychic-sitter interaction we have been able to develop robust empirical claims about generic properties of the ways in which mediums, clairvoyants and many other kinds of psychic practitioners actually work with their clients.

CA research is agnostic as to the truth or falsity of claims that are advanced in interaction. It focuses instead on the mechanisms by which such claims are advanced and the organized ways in which co-participants treat them. It might seem that the results of these impartial analyses lend themselves to recruitment to a sceptical position. The finding that practitioners work to establish their epistemic neutrality prior to confirmation from the sitter; and that attribution to a paranormal source is sequentially located after confirmation, can be recruited as support for the argument that no genuine parapsychological abilities are being demonstrated.

However, description of the communicative practices through which knowledge claims are made, attributed, accepted, rejected, or revised is not the same as an exposé of linguistic tricks by which a false claim is made persuasive, or through which one person can deliberately mislead another. Studies of authoritative or factual language have shown that even reports of uncontentious states of affairs may be formulated in such a way as to address anticipated sceptical responses or hostile responses (Billig, 1997; Billig et al., 1988; Edwards, 1995; Pomerantz, 1986; Potter, 1996). The issue is this: a psychic practitioner's knowledge claim still has to be established as authoritative and warranted in the course of the exchange with the sitter, whether it comes from extrasensory cognition, spirit communication, or by conscious inspection of the sitter's demeanor. Whether psychic practitioners possess genuine parapsychological forms of cognition or not, naturally occurring demonstrations of paranormally acquired knowledge in the consultation are irreducibly socially organized phenomena.

It may be assumed that the analysis presented here is aligned to cold-reading accounts of psychic demonstrations (for example Hyman, 1981). However, there are clear differences. CA is agnostic about the content of talk, whereas cold reading assumes that the psychics' claimed abilities are false. CA takes no position on the participants' morality or intellect, whereas cold-reading accounts presume, at best, some degree of gullibility and self-deception, or worse, outright fraud and lamentable credulity. Finally, cold-reading explanations provide only the most cursory inspection of broad features of psychic sitter interaction; CA's attention to detail of turn design and delivery, unencumbered by assumptions of fraud or deception, allows for a deeper and richer appreciation of the actual details of participants' conduct (Wooffitt, 2006). Cold-reading accounts can also invite misinterpretation of the significance of specific discursive activities.

A common theme in cold-reading literature is that psychics will ask questions to obtain information which can then be recycled, in some

suitably amended form, as evidence of spirit contact or parapsychological powers. In Hyman's classic (1981) account, he discusses "fishing," which is:

... a device for getting the subject to tell you about himself. Then you rephrase what he has told you into a coherent sketch and feed it back to him. *One version of fishing is to phrase each statement in the form of a question* (Hyman, p. 87; italics added)

According to this perspective, then, psychics use questions to elicit information. Intuitively, that seems a reasonable claim, but our intuitions are a poor guide to the way in which we actually use language. When we study the sequential and interactional use of questions, a different answer emerges. A conversation analytic perspective has revealed a sequence that is invariably initiated by a question; these questions, however, do not seem to be used to expose information about the sitter but are designed to initiate a short sequence of utterances that return the floor to the psychic with minimal sitter participation. Empirical evidence for this account can be derived from close inspection of the participants' own conduct: If sitters provide more than a minimal acceptance, psychics begin to talk in overlap with them, eventually curtailing that turn. We can understand this because of the significance of the third turn *in this interactional sequence*. It is in this sequential location that the psychics can attribute the now-accepted information as coming from a paranormal source.

Psychic practitioners do ask questions, lots of them, and it is not the argument of this paper that psychic practitioners do not glean information via them which may be used later in the sitting falsely to give the impression of paranormal cognition. The analysis has demonstrated, however, that whatever else practitioners may be doing, their use and design of questions display a clear orientation to sequential organisation of the interaction in which and for which the questions are produced. It is incorrect to assume that these questions are primarily explicitly strategic devices.

There is a broader point: People consult psychic practitioners, in significant numbers and in a variety of contexts, regardless of the experimental efforts of professional researchers, whatever the outcome, or the arguments of sceptics. And this in turn suggests that more effort should be devoted to analysis of the ways that ordinary people actually consult psychic practitioners. To understand the consumption of what is offered as parapsychologically acquired knowledge in everyday life, it is necessary to try to capture the lived experience of psychic demonstrations as they occur, in the ways in which they occur.

It is this to which conversation analysis can make a significant contribution. It allows the analyst to identify the structural, communicative procedures through which the sitting or demonstration is conducted, and which define it as a distinct form of social interaction. It permits us to describe

the tacit reasoning processes that can be seen to inform the participants' contributions to the turn-by-turn unfolding of the encounter. Furthermore, it exposes assumptions and expectations that shape participants' inferences about and evaluations of each other's conduct. The acceptance or rejection of parapsychological cognition is a discursive activity. Whatever the lived experience of a sitting or demonstration is for the participants, it is manifest in the communicative orders explicitly investigated in conversation analytic research.

This analytic approach is not based on post hoc reflections about peoples' experiences of their consultations nor on retrospective accounts from practitioners about their activities, but it is derived from direct examination of actual recordings of parapsychological abilities being offered, demonstrated, accepted, challenged and so on. We have, then, an emic, organically grounded analysis of the interactional discourse practices of psychics and mediums through which matters such as proof and authenticity (and inauthenticity) are addressed in the routine progression of the consultation or stage demonstration. In this sense, we are examining what are, *for the participants themselves*, parapsychological phenomena, mediated through interaction and discourse, in their natural settings.

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ABSTRACTS IN OTHER LANGUAGES

Spanish

RESUMEN: Se expone que aunque han habido estudios experimentales de psíquicos practicantes (médiums, clarividentes, los que usan el Tarot, etc.), las demostraciones de información paranormal en consultas en situaciones fuera del laboratorio han sido relativamente ignoradas. Análisis de estas consultas de rutina pueden proveer un entendimiento sobre lo que los fenómenos parapsicológicos son en ámbitos naturales para las personas del público. También se discute que las demostraciones contemporáneas de información adquirida paranormalmente son principalmente eventos mediados por medios lingüísticos. Utilizando un método cualitativo para el análisis de interacciones verbales de ocurrencia natural

este artículo examina transcripciones de grabaciones de consultas entre psíquicos, clientes, o miembros de una audiencia. El artículo describe características recurrentes de interacción a través de las cuales los participantes se refieren a la autoridad epistémica de los psíquicos: el origen o base de su supuesto conocimiento paranormal. Se concluye comparando el enfoque presentado aquí a discusiones escépticas del discurso de los psíquicos. También se defiende que investigaciones de validez ecológica como las discutidas aquí complementan las tradiciones experimentales establecidas en la parapsicología.

German

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG: Es wird die Meinung vertreten, dass – ungeachtet der Tatsache, dass parapsychisch Praktizierende wie Hellsehmedien, Tarotkartenleger u. dgl. experimentellen Überprüfungen unterworfen worden sind –, Demonstrationen von paranormal erworbenem Wissen in alltäglichen Beratungssituationen mit Praktizierenden bisher weitgehend unberücksichtigt geblieben sind. Eine Analyse des Ablaufs von Routineberatungen kann Einsichten darüber vermitteln, welche Bedeutung parapsychologische Phänomene in ihren natürlichen Kontexten für die Allgemeinheit gewinnen kann. Es wird auch davon ausgegangen, dass gegenwärtige Demonstrationen von parapsychologisch erworbenem Wissen in erster Linie aus linguistisch vermittelten Vorgängen besteht. Unter Verwendung einer qualitativen Methode für die Analyse von natürlich vorkommender verbaler Interaktion, untersucht der Artikel transkribierte Aufzeichnungen von alltäglichen Beratungsgesprächen zwischen parapsychisch Praktizierenden und ihren Ratsuchenden oder Teilnehmern ihrer Vorträge. Der Artikel beschreibt wiederkehrende Merkmale der Interaktion, mit deren Hilfe die Teilnehmer die epistemische Autorität der Praktizierenden in Anspruch nehmen, nämlich als die Quelle oder Basis ihres offensichtlich paranormal erworbenen Wissens. Den Abschluss bildet ein Vergleich zwischen dem hier zugrunde gelegten Zugang und bewusst skeptischen Erklärungsversuchen eines Diskurses über Medien. Es wird die Meinung vertreten, dass ein naturalistischer, ökologisch valider Forschungszugang, wie er hier vorgestellt wird, die herkömmlichen experimentellen Traditionen innerhalb der Parapsychologie ergänzt.

French

RESUME: Nous avançons que, bien qu'il y ait eu des tests expérimentaux menés sur des praticiens psychiques (médiums, clairvoyants, cartomanciens, etc), la mise en évidence de l'information acquise de manière paranormale dans les consultations quotidiennes de praticiens a été relativement ignorée. L'analyse de ces consultations routinières peut fournir un aperçu de ce que sont, pour le grand public, les phénomènes parapsychologiques dans leur milieu naturel. Nous avançons également que les mises en évidence contemporaines de l'information acquise de manière parapsychologique correspondent principalement à des événements médiatisés par le langage. En utilisant une méthode qualitative

pour analyser l'interaction verbale qui a lieu naturellement, cet article examine les retranscriptions des enregistrements de consultations entre des praticiens psychiques et leurs clients. Cet article décrit les caractéristiques récurrentes de l'interaction à travers laquelle les participants s'adressent à l'autorité épistémique du praticien: la source ou la base de leur prétendu savoir acquis de manière paranormale. Cet article se conclut par la comparaison entre l'approche adoptée ici et les comptes rendus sceptiques du discours des voyants. Nous avançons également qu'une recherche naturaliste et écologiquement valable, telle que celle illustrée ici, constitue un complément aux traditions expérimentales établies en parapsychologie.

APPENDIX

TRANSCRIPTION

The transcription symbols used here are common to conversation analytic research, and were developed by Gail Jefferson. The following symbols are used in the data.

- (.5) The number in brackets indicates a time gap in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot enclosed in a bracket indicates pause in the talk less than two tenths of a second.
- ˙hh A dot before an “h” indicates speaker in-breath. The more h’s, the longer the inbreath.
- hh An “h” indicates an out-breath. The more “h’s” the longer the breath.
- (()) A description enclosed in a double bracket indicates a non-verbal activity. For example ((banging sound))
- A dash indicates the sharp cut-off of the prior word or sound.
- :
- : Colons indicate that the speaker has stretched the preceding sound or letter. The more colons the greater the extent of the stretching.
- () Empty parentheses indicate the presence of an unclear fragment on the tape.
- (guess) The words within a single bracket indicate the transcriber’s best guess at an unclear fragment.
- .
- , A comma indicates a continuing intonation.
- ? A question mark indicates a rising inflection. It does not necessarily indicate a question.
- Under Underlined fragments indicate speaker emphasis.
- ↑ ↓ Pointed arrows indicate a marked falling or rising intonational shift. They are placed immediately before the onset of the shift.
- CAPITALS With the exception of proper nouns, capital letters indicate a section of speech noticeably louder than that surrounding it.
- ° ° Degree signs are used to indicate that the talk they encompass is spoken noticeably quieter than the surrounding talk.
- Thaght A “gh” indicates that word in which it is placed had a guttural pronunciation.
- > < “More than” and “less than” signs indicate that the talk they encompass was produced noticeably quicker than the surrounding talk.
- = The “equals” sign indicates contiguous utterances.
- [] Square brackets between adjacent lines of concurrent
- [] speech indicate the onset and end of a spate of overlapping talk.

A more detailed description of these transcription symbols can be found in Atkinson and Heritage (1984: ix–xvi).