A concise history of scientific approaches to mediumship

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Origins of modern approaches

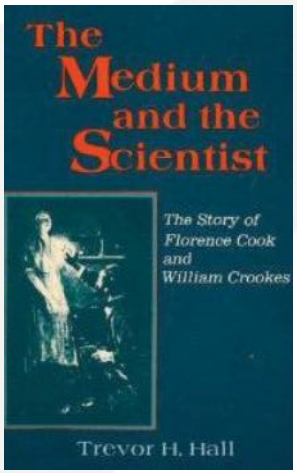
Establishment of the Society for Psychical Research in 1882:

"to examine without prejudice or prepossession and in a scientific spirit those faculties of man, real or supposed, which appear to be inexplicable on any generally recognised hypothesis."

The scientific method

- Responds to real-world issues
- Is founded on true scepticism (not counter-advocacy)
- Speculates on alternative explanations
- Imposes ‘control’ over ‘conditions’ to dismbiguate causes
- Relies on close, detailed and systematic observation

(but not nec. statistics)

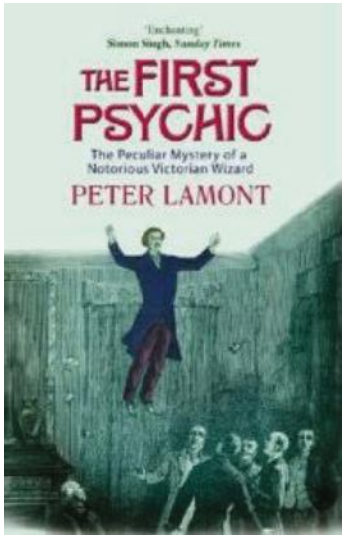


Sittings with eminent mediums

- Promised to provide objective, verifiable evidence of survival
- Seemingly produced repeatable phenomena
- Were amenable to some control and some experimentation

Case studies: Physical mediumship

- Home produced many of the characteristic phenomena such as raps, table levitations, materialisations, direct voice, also self-levitations, and music
- Eusapia Palladino produced similar effects under a variety of conditions but was not averse to cheating…



D.D. Home

Eusapia Palladino

The Scole sittings

- A sitter group in Scole, Norfolk, was investigated by SPR Council members Keen, Ellison, & Fontana (Published as a *Proceedings* in 1999)

- Phenomena included lights, apports, movement of objects, images on film, tape recordings
  - Interpretation limited because of design weaknesses
  - Little experimenter control over conditions or phenomena
  - Almost total darkness & continuous music
  - Sessions stopped when tighter controls requested

The problem of fraud

- It became clear that some demonstrations of physical effects were produced fraudulently
- Drew attention to the unreliability of attention and memory

Case studies: Mental mediumship

Mrs Leonora Piper
(1857-1950)

- Concerns the generation and interpretation of information

- Discovered by William James who drew a contrast with her limited intellect and 'insipid' personality.

- Entered completely into trance during which she was unresposive

- Tested in US and in UK by Richard Hodgson, who hired private detectives. Sitters usually previously unknown to her

- Most well known for her controls (Dr Phinuit, GP) and for cross correspondences

Issue of cold reading

Hyman (1981, 428): *The cold reading employs the dynamics of the dyadic relationship between psychic and client to develop a sketch that is tailored to the client. The reader employs shrewd observation, nonverbal and verbal feedback from the client, and the client's active cooperation to create a description that the client is sure penetrates to the core of his or her psyche*

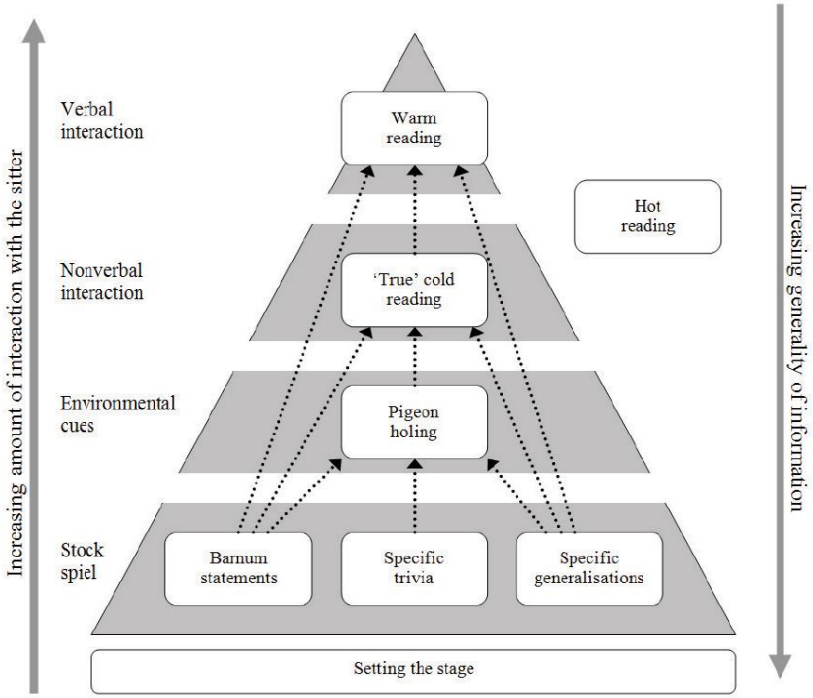


Figure 1. Hierarchy of cold reading methods

Modern controlled tests

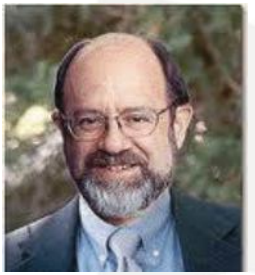
Robertson & Roy protocol

- Form of proxy sitting -- Investigated whether statements made for sitters would be accepted by non-sitters
- Seating arrangement and identity of recipient chosen at random (unknown to sitters)
- 10 mediums, 44 recipients, 407 non-recipients
- Experimenter writes down medium's reading
- Sitters read all statements and tick which apply
- proportion of statements accepted by recipients (0.65) was sig greater than that for non-recipients (0.30) ($p = 5.37 \times 10^{-11}$)
- Very complex weighting of information

Modern controlled tests

Schwartz protocol

- Pre-evaluated mediums (having "integrative research medium" status)
- Programme of research with loose controls at first but refined and tightened over time
- Sitters screened from medium but with differing levels of feedback
- Developed a 'triple blind' method
- Methods still criticised, especially by Hyman and Wiseman & O'Keeffe
- Mediums "produce inventories of facts many of them correct for the sitter, but negligible evidence for an animating personality endeavoring to communicate" (Stevenson, 2004)



Gary Schwartz
University of Arizona

Julie Beischel
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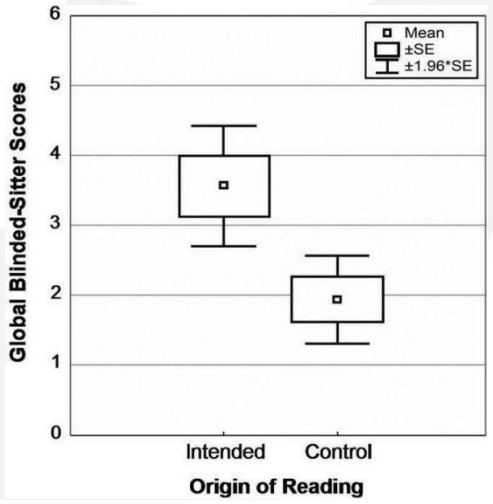


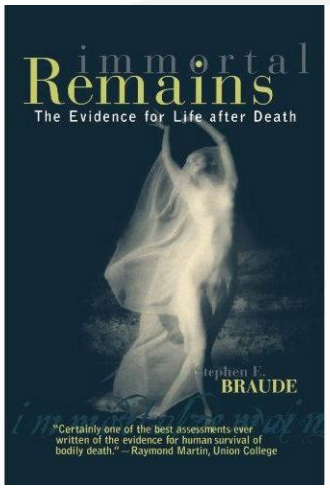
Super-Psi (Steve Braude)

- 'Normal' processes such as fraud, misreporting, malobservation, cryptomnesia ('The Usual Suspects'); "survivalists have shown clearly that these alternatives can't accommodate the strongest cases" (p. 91)

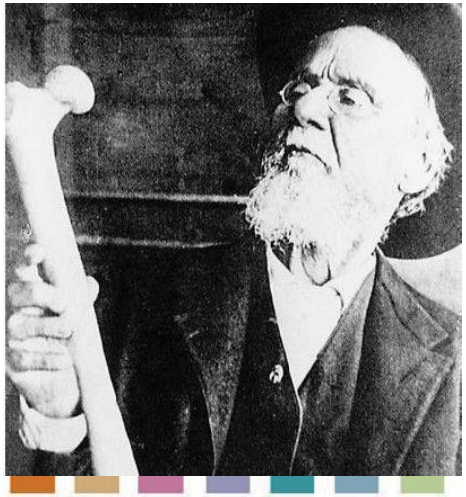
- Dissociative pathologies, rare mnemonic gifts, extreme or rare savantism or creative abilities (the 'Unusual Suspects')

- Psychic functioning among the living (superpsi),

"We would need evidence of intelligence, of personality characteristics, purposes and affections, and of a stream of memory, that are largely or recognizably continuous with those once possessed by a certain formerly incarnate human being" (Gauld, 1982, p. 8).



Motivated communications: Runki's Leg



- Icelandic medium Hafsteinn Björnsson
- Received a drop-in communicator who gave his name as 'Jon Jonsson', and demanded the return of his leg
- Wasn't forthcoming until 18 months later a new sitter attended who was from Sandgerdi, 38 miles away
- Gave his name as Runolfur Runolfsson and described his demise
- Details were confirmed in Church and official records
- A femur was found at the new sitter's Sandgerdi home and ceremonially buried

Exceptional skills: Chess grandmaster

- Eisenbeiss & Hassler (2006) report on an attempt through a medium, Robert Rollans, to contact a deceased Grand Master to play a match against Viktor Korchnoi

Géza Maróczy (1870-1951)

Viktor Korchnoi (1931-)

- The game played out over 7 years 8 months, ending when Maroczy resigned at move 48

- Korchnoi commented:

During the opening phase Maróczy showed weaknesses. His play is old-fashioned. But I must confess that my last moves have not been too convincing I am not sure I will win. He has compensated the faults of the opening by a strong end-game. In the end-game the ability of a player shows up and my opponent plays very well.

- Neppe (2007) concluded:

"Maroczy" played at Master or very disputably low rusty grandmaster level, and this was possibly equivalent to his standard of play while alive; the winner, Korchnoi played at the level of an accomplished grandmaster. Because of major stylistic differences, [a chess] computer could not have simulated the game, nor could many living chess players play at this high a level.

The future?

- Parapsychologists remain interested in the issue of survival
- Claimants have had some success under controlled conditions
- Ruling out all forms of cold reading is complex
- The usual focus on unlikeliness of accurate information tends to emphasise the trivial (e.g. Robertson & Roy)
- A more holistic approach that considers personal meaning would be preferable and particularly suggests intentions on the part of the communicator
- Surprisingly little attention paid to the needs, expectations and responses of clients

Thank you for your attention

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