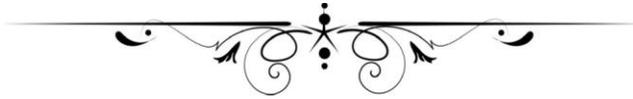


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Exploring the Effects of Mediumship on Hope, Resilience, and Post-Traumatic Growth in the Bereaved

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Abstract

In previous decades there has been a lack of research into what people who sit with mediums gain from this process in terms of psychological benefits. Taking a positive psychology perspective, a qualitative approach was used to explore the effect that mediumship has on the bereaved. Seven participants gave retrospective accounts of a sitting which was felt to be meaningful to them, explaining reasons for this belief. This was explored using a thematic analysis. Findings suggested that mediumship appeared to furnish some resilience. Coping which appears linked to hope, linked to post-traumatic growth and also appears to be enhanced when someone experiencing a sitting with a medium believes they have had confirmation of survival of the deceased. Hope appeared to be increased, and resilience and coping were reported as strengthened after a subjectively meaningful sitting with a medium. The implication therefore is that mediumship appeared to offer positive psychological tools to enable better coping styles post-bereavement. This study has been condensed and updated from the original dissertation research conducted by the lead author (Bains, 2014 [now Cox]) and supervised by Smith.

Keywords: Mediumship, post-traumatic growth, positive psychology, qualitative research, thematic analysis, bereavement

Bereavement is a universal experience that can follow many paths. The five stages outlined as necessary to healthy grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). People often experience these stages in a variety of ways and orders, although rarely all five, nor always in the popularly proposed order (see Kastenbaum, 1989). In some cases this could progress through to what is considered as complicated mourning or grief (Shear, Monk, & Sillowash 2007), and may be prolonged or cause adverse health problems to the bereaved. Bereavement is also considered necessary to adjustment after loss, in order to accept life without the deceased (Schultz, 1978). Rando (1993) suggests that a mourner must acknowledge the reality of a death or they may start to construe the death as a temporary absence and not deal with it and readapt to their life afterwards.

Upon experiencing grief, some people will do nothing, some will see a counsellor, and some might seek spiritual counsel – amongst other things. This counsel can be sought via a religious figure such as a priest or vicar when grieving (Burke & Neimeyer, 2014). Sigmund (2002) would argue that pastoral counselling offered by religious figures, and certified pastoral counsellors is seen as helpful. Conversely, there is also the claim that spiritual or pastoral counselling will not benefit people who have no interest in, or are against any religion or spirituality (Sigmund, 2002). Yet some people irrespective of religious beliefs may seek to communicate with the person whom they have lost through a medium in a one-to-one setting, or via a platform demonstration in a spiritualist church (e.g. Beischel, 2014, Roe, 1998; Rock, 2014; Wright, 1920). In this con-

text, mediums are defined as “individuals who are used as an agency to receive communication from deceased human beings or other supposed disembodied entities” (Gauld, 2005, pp 215-223).

Recent research on mediumship has tended to be either “proof-focused” aimed at exploring whether mediumship is actually providing afterlife communication (e.g., Braude, 2003; Fontana, 2005; Robertson & Roy, 2001), or “process-focused,” which may focus more on the medium’s experience (e.g. Roe, 1995; Roxburgh, 2008). There have been fewer studies that have focused on whether mediumship can provide positive health benefits to the bereaved, as might be found in counselling. However, two existing studies of this nature, which yielded positive results, are Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) and, Beischel, Mosher and Boccuzzi (2015). Both studies explored the therapeutic capacity of mediumship with comparable findings. Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) looked at mediumship as a form of counselling from a counselling perspective, while also using a strong positive psychological perspective to explore the adaptive outcomes following an adverse event, specifically bereavement. It was found that in those who sought ‘mediumistic counselling’ following a bereavement, there was a higher sense of agency resulting in adaptive coping. This sense of agency expanded into a belief that life would get better, which could be considered to be post-traumatic growth (PTG). However, no measure such as the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2006) – proposing only two items, one focusing on religiosity and spiritual understanding – was used in this study as it was anecdotal reporting, yet, it would offer potential for a more longitudinal study.

PTG can be defined as positive personal changes that result from the survivor's struggle to deal with trauma and its psychological consequences (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). “Spiritual Change” is one of the five domains of PTG which is now being proposed, which fits well in relation to this study due to the nature of reported changes in beliefs and the experience of mediumship (Tedeschi et al, 2017). Similar finding were uncovered by Beischel, Mosher and Boccuzzi (2015), where the impact on grief for those who had a sitting with a medium was explored through survey feedback. It was found that in turning to mediumship as an alternative to other therapies for coping with loss, the bereaved reported positive outcomes such as relief from the grief they suffered and a sense of a continued bond.

Both studies produced themes identified in bereaved individuals following interaction with mediums, which include: continued bonds with the deceased, relief, hope, spiritual healing, resilience and PTG. This present study aims to extend and build on the work of such research, to further explore theories of positive psychology, which is the science of what makes life worth living (Peterson, 2008). It can also be seen as founded on the belief that people want to lead meaningful and fulfilling lives, to cultivate what is best within themselves, and to enhance their experiences of love, work, and play, according to Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2014). Many people consult mediums and appear to display positive gains, even when spiritualism is outside of a person’s usual beliefs or faith system, sometimes after unexpected contact from the deceased (e.g., Guggenheim & Guggenheim, 1996).

Seeking mediumship and “evidence of an afterlife” is not deemed to be a painful experience to those seeking a sitting, but rather is intended as a means to find peace and come to terms with the loss of a person who has died (see Beischel, 2014; Krippner, 2006). Thus, the exceptional experience of mediumship essentially provides an alternative to bereavement counselling, but with a spiritual approach. Certainly when we look at anomalous experiences during bereavement as a whole, the impact has predominantly been described as therapeutic and positive (see Beischel, 2014; Cooper, 2016, 2017; Cooper, Roe, Mitchell, 2015; Krippner, 2006).

The research by Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) argued that where counselling is seen to take the form of mediumship, it produces a sense of agency where the bereaved feel they have established a continued bond with the deceased, the result of which was adaptive coping. The recommendation was that areas such as counselling, clinical studies, positive psychology, and parapsychology, would benefit from collaboration and showing awareness for such processes and outcomes (also see Cooper, 2016, 2017). Therefore, in taking the next step, this present study will explore themes of hope, resilience, and PTG further (all of which

were identified within the previous studies mentioned), to understand how a sitting with a medium is seen to promote these character traits or emotions from the “sitter’s” (the bereaved) phenomenological perspective.

To give a brief explanation of the theories explored within the context of this study, Masten, et al. (2009) suggested that resilience can be defined in relation to positive adaptations, and this is especially so when seen in the context of significant adversity. In this case bereavement is considered to be the significant adversity for survivors to manage, and previous research has suggested resilience to be buffered when survival of death is suggested by a mediumistic reading (or spontaneous experiences) and perceived as such by the bereaved.

Hope can also be seen within this context, where suggestions of an afterlife presents an ultimate form of goal attainment (Cooper, 2017), with the experience of mediumship presenting the experiential evidence for the experient that there will be more to life beyond death. In the context of Snyder’s (1994) hope theory, a per-*ceptient* is given the suggestion of life beyond death (*cognitive agency* – in this case a “will” to believe in survival), has experiences suggesting this which may either be spontaneous or sought, such as mediumship in the latter case (*thought pathway* – in this case the “way” in which this survival belief is supported), and achieves a continued bond with the deceased and a transformation of views on life and death (*goal attainment* – positive psychological support through the established perception/assurance that life continues beyond death ([also see Steffen, Wilde & Cooper, 2017])).

Clear comparisons can also be made with Snyder’s (1996) views on bereavement, in that we need some form of hopeful stimulus to facilitate the gap of loss, and exceptional experiences suggesting a continuation of life rather than a finality act as such (see Cooper, 2017). In turn, this appears to assist PTG and coping styles where mediumship is concerned, as an alternative to bereavement counselling (Beischel, Mosher & Boccuzzi, 2015; Beischel, 2014; Evenden, Cooper, & Mitchell, 2013). Extraversion, openness to experience, positive affect, and optimism, have all been established as positively associating with PTG (Joseph & Linley, 2008), these traits are often significantly impaired through bereavement. However, research has also produced data suggesting a transpersonal shift and personal attainment of a positive philosophy on life with enhanced appreciation for one’s own existence emerging after trauma such as bereavement (e.g. Lawrence, 2014; Malinak, Hoyt & Patterson, 1979).

Research Aim

Themes of hope, resilience, and PTG, are to be explored within the process of visiting a medium following bereavement, thus, further exploring and expanding on the generated themes of previous studies (Beischel, Mosher & Boccuzzi, 2015; Evenden, Cooper, & Mitchell, 2013), and an issue which has received little research attention.

Method

Interviewees

The study by Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) contained a small sample of only three participants. In the present study and partial replication, a larger sample was considered to yield more meaningful interpretation overall of what is happening to the bereaved experientially within sittings with mediums. It could also explain more thoroughly why this is such a sought experience in some people as a means of managing bereavement.

There was a good demographic balance of gender and age. In total seven interviewees were recruited (Male, $n = 3$; Female, $n = 4$), with ages ranging from 23 to 65 ($M = 39.7$). Cultural balance in terms of ethnicity was noted as not being diverse enough, which may have been due to recruitment methods, where a call for

participants was put onto a social media group for people with an interest in the paranormal and a community group for local people. Backgrounds were mixed in terms of existing belief systems about life after death; some had an existing belief, whilst others had beliefs which evolved from having the experience of a sitting with a medium. Three participants claimed to have had beliefs of a spiritual nature for some time, with family members who shared those beliefs, one claimed to previously be quite sceptical, and two felt that their experience with a medium shaped those beliefs. Beyond the usual trauma expected following a death, three of the sample had experienced ongoing trauma about the manner in which someone had died. Two of the sitters had experienced the death of a significant relative by suicide.

Interview Procedure

Ethical issues were noted due to the sensitive nature of bereavement. Therefore, the BPS code of ethics (BPS, 2009) was fully adhered to throughout this study, especially when engaging with and interviewing the participants involved. However, much like previous research (Cooper, 2017; Krippner, 2006), it was noted that adverse effects were unlikely to occur given the therapeutic benefits of talking about such experiences. Even so, awareness for potential negative reactions during interviews was maintained by the researcher at all times. All interviewees were given an information sheet and then post-interview a debrief sheet, which also contained Cruse Bereavement Care helpline number and email address. In order to generate inductive data looking at the exploratory research question, semi-structured interview questions were used (see Bains (2014) for the original interview schedule). All interviews were pre-arranged and conducted at the interviewee’s home, except one who preferred the location of a coffee shop. Most interviews were conducted at a kitchen table with a computer tablet on the table between interviewer and interviewee to record the interview which was later transcribed. Interviews were typically twenty-five minutes to an hour in duration. All personal information was changed for pseudonyms.

Findings and Discussion

The chosen method of analysis for this study was thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006), which is not defined as a specific method, but rather a tool to be used across different methods of analysis in qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998). The versatility of thematic analysis made this an appropriate method to use for this research.

Themes Generated

A total of five superordinate themes emerged from the data set, with these being: “growth after trauma,” “belief systems,” “meaning and authenticity,” “hope and resilience,” and “protective barriers.” There were a further 19 sub-themes identified, all of which are discussed in full in the original report (Bains, 2014).

Theme 1: Post-Traumatic Growth

| | | |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| Self-Mastery | Answers Surrounding Death | Sadness Reframed |
|--------------|---------------------------|------------------|

Figure 1: Post-traumatic growth sub-themes

This theme emerged in relation to PTG and how interviewees had reported that having an experience of a sitting had allowed for them to feel they were able to experience growth and positive emotions again – despite in two cases having experienced significant trauma,. Interviewees felt that they had grown after facing

their loss, gaining the strength to move forward after catastrophic loss – such as in two examples the suicide of a close relative.

Interviewee 2 said in relation to having perceived contact from her mother whom she had a difficult relationship in life “mostly all the contact I’ve had from her has been some sort of confirmation that she is sorry for the way she was with me and that she did love me.”

Theme 2: Belief Systems

| | | |
|------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Someone Watching | There is Something Else | Good Evidence in Names and Descriptions |
|------------------|-------------------------|---|

Figure 2: Belief systems sub-themes

“Belief systems” also formed a theme after being mentioned several times, yet not necessarily being needed before a client had seen a medium. What also emerged was that belief in the medium stemmed from sitters’ perceptions of evidential feedback rather than a preconceived belief. Existential feelings of a continued bond, a sense of a having a protector, and life after death also emerged. When asked about afterlife beliefs, interviewee 4 reported having had no beliefs prior to visiting one particular medium: “My brother passed away last year and I went to see a medium in a church, and she couldn’t pick anybody out. Then the second lady I saw hit the nail on the head and she was telling me stuff that was just like him and so then I believed it a bit more.”

Theme 3: Meaning and Authenticity

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|-----------|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|
| Curiosity | Binary Responses | The Medium Couldn’t Have Known | Sense of Presence | A Vague Medium is Not Good |
|-----------|------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|

Figure 3: Meaning and authenticity sub-themes

A sense of curiosity as to content given to the sitter was mentioned several times with themes emerging as to how the medium could have known salient things personal to the deceased if they weren’t communicating with them. From this, the theme of ‘meaning and authenticity’ emerged from the data. Answering minimally with yes or no were also reported several times as a means of controlling both belief in authenticity and feeling like nothing was being given away which could feed the medium with information.

Participant 4 had no afterlife beliefs prior to visiting a medium and spoke of a powerful sitting where he received what he felt was information that he could only have got from his deceased brother. He stated,

I hadn’t spoken to anyone about it, I was with a friend when we went to go and get his van from his house and I didn’t even mention to my mum or family about it. It was a white van, which the lady (medium) also knew, and there was this very loud music playing. The only way to describe it was like angel music, but very, very hard like drum and bass but with a classical almost influence to it, which made me automatically think that he was thinking about what he was going to do whilst he was sat in the car. But she said he wasn’t thinking about it then... there was no way the lady could have known that.

Theme 4: Hope and Resilience

| | | | | | |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------------|
| Coming to Terms | Buffering | Caught in a Moment | Trauma Reduction | Finding Peace | Let's Resolve our Issues |
|-----------------|-----------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|--------------------------|

Figure 4: Hope and resilience sub-themes

Of all the emerging themes, “hope and resilience” featured significantly in recounting meaningful experiences within a sitting. Several interviewees described how the sitting and perceived contact allowed for a sense of completion where previously they had struggled with features of grief, particularly around acceptance of death circumstances. This was described as offering coping strategies. Interviewee 2 gained a belief in life after death that had not been there previously. Interviewee 4 spoke about coping with bereavement after seeing a medium and said “It makes it easier, it makes you feel better to talk to someone that knows things it’s not possible to know. You don’t feel so deflated, it gives you enthusiasm that you can actually get on with your life and it doesn’t just stand still.”

Theme 5: Protective Barriers

| | |
|-----------------------|--|
| Don't Feed the Medium | I Am Not My Death Experience, I Am My Life Experiences |
|-----------------------|--|

Figure 5: Protective barriers sub-themes

Feeling a sense of control by not giving away any information was separated out from sticking to yes or no responses and added something to this theme due to appearing to offer a sitter a feeling of protection from possible deception. Three interviewees described a perceived contact suggesting that they needed to move away from dwelling on the circumstances of the deaths, which had traumatic impact. This naturally fit within this theme as it seemed that the perceived advice offered a boundary against dwelling on the painful events surrounding death. Participant 5 who is sceptical spoke of a powerful experience in a spiritualist church which he felt gave irrefutable evidence and said, “I mean that (evidence) was absolutely gob smacking and everyone in the room clapped and I was absolutely... I wasn’t surprised but I was absolutely pleased to get the information.”

One of the key themes explored within this study was PTG and whilst the entire sample had not experienced a loss of someone where the actual death could be described as traumatic, it is still a significant feature. Participants reported an increase in coping ability day-to-day after the mediumship with a definite decrease in trauma associated with the death. This was reported most when the information brought about by the medium was felt to directly affect and reduce the trauma level. This was when the perceived contact gave evidential features about their death and words of comfort to reassure that nothing could have been done differently. This in turn reduced feelings of guilt which were reported as feelings of trauma or responsibility about the death particularly in the case of suicides.

Several participants spoke of the deceased providing information about their own death, which seemed to reduce trauma associated with the death for the bereaved. Interviewee 3 talked about how her deceased son gave her advice in order to reframe the sadness she felt after his suicide and gained comfort knowing he didn’t suffer. She explained that she had often found herself thinking over circumstances of his death before her sitting with the medium. Here mediumship could be seen as a protective factor against avoidance outcomes such as ruminating, where mediumship allows the bereft to face to issues in a different light than avoid them altogether.

Existing beliefs appeared to be strengthened, while lack of belief became a much more robust feeling that there was an afterlife, which again pointed to prior belief not being necessary in order to gain benefit from

having a sitting with a medium, thus supporting the findings of Cooper (2017) with regards to any kind of post-death phenomena the bereavement may encounter.

Issues surrounding “meaning” and “blame” were noted within the data, in cases where there had been difficult death circumstances. The belief that spirit contacts will provide some form of protection to loved ones from the afterlife was demonstrated in several of the responses. The data also show that the more interviewees felt that substantive evidence had been given, the more meaning they appeared to place on their own lives moving forward. Existential well-being, that is, well-being associated with feeling at peace with thoughts on life and death and feeling satisfied with life (Smith, Range & Ulmer, 1992) could also be said to be impacted on by the experience of having a meaningful sitting with a medium due to the reported increase in well-being feelings after perceived contact. Interviewee 4 described his experience with a medium as making him feel better, and not so deflated, he visited a medium after the suicide of his brother. Resilience was reported as increased after perceived contact had been given by a medium, and interviewee 4 described his coping levels as better than before, although this “comes in waves.”

It appeared easier for participants to come to terms with what had happened to the loved one when specific information was given and this was the most profound finding from the research. Interviewee 3 had lost her son to suicide and described feeling ‘lighter’ after her experience of seeing a medium, as well as it bringing her comfort. Interviewee 4 described how the medium gave him clarity after accurately describing how his brother who had committed suicide had left really loud music on in his car, causing him to feel that his brother had been driving around thinking of taking his life. He explained that the medium was able to reassure him that this was not the case through accurately describing this without prompting, which gave him feelings of hope in moving forward.

Existential isolation was a topic which also emerged, with the feeling that mediumship offered some form of buffering against this feeling by allowing for a sitter to experience healthy enduring bonds with someone who had died. Whether there was a prior belief system or not did not seem to alter the perception that the mediumship and positive effects experienced were genuine. The findings began to explain why mediumship is so actively sought after bereavement, even when outside of an individual’s faith system of beliefs.

Findings suggest that when mediumship was experienced by the participants who had undergone bereavement it appeared to aid resilience and adaptive coping. For this to happen the sitter has to have a belief that afterlife communication is being given, or the experience loses significant value. Interviewees also spoke of “real mediums” versus fake ones, suggesting the capacity to differentiate despite grieving. It is also important to recognise that not all experiences with a medium would offer the benefits described by the interviewees of this study and mediums are not trained in dealing with grief.

Reduction in rumination was noted as salient, which appeared to lead to better coping strategies. It also became clear that ‘evidence’ is as important to someone having a sitting as it is to the parapsychological community – though such standards obviously differ greatly between the two. Both reassurance and a sense of comfort were reported by interviewees. Distinguishing characteristics such as names and ages were useful evidence, as were health conditions the perceived contact had. Cause of death was also described as meaningful. There appeared to be several instances where sitters needed to hear that a death had not been traumatic, for peace of mind. It is this validating evidence which enables the receiver to gain reassurance which leads to a reported sense of comfort. Sense of presence also featured quite strongly as a means of comfort as well as personal evidence, leading to better coping with symptoms of loss.

When looking at the impact of mediumship on hope, resilience and post-traumatic growth in the bereaved, this study has addressed some of the phenomenology around why mediumship may be providing something in the way of cognitive nutrients to the bereaved. Whether there was a prior belief system did not seem to alter the experience negatively. Resilience and adaptive coping appear increased after a meaningful sitting. Mediumship also appears to facilitate hope, which in turn seems to enable people to cope better.

The results appear to concur with the studies of Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013), Beischel, Mosher and Boccuzzi (2015), and related research by Cooper (2017), in that mediumship is able to provide as much comfort as counselling might – if not more so. When exploring the effect that mediumship has on sitters, it is important to note that some people will have endured extreme trauma before they see the medium. It appears that there is enormous potential to help recipients come to terms with their grief and reframe their experience within bereavement by seeking spiritual counsel. This is a relatively unique area in an otherwise extensive proof and process orientated field of research, therefore it adds something to the area of mediumship research and builds on the Evenden, Cooper and Mitchell (2013) and, Beischel, Mosher and Boccuzzi (2015) studies.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From these findings we can conclude that there is a comprehensible explanation for why there are so many people who seek the services of a medium during bereavement or attend a spiritualist church despite holding different religious beliefs. The interviews carried out within this study further support the notion that mediumship is able to positively impact on resilience, hope and PTG. It could also be suggested that mediumship may help individuals experiencing grief to move through the stages of grief (Kastenbaum, 1989; Kübler-Ross, 1969) quicker than those devoid of such experiences, and transition through the stage of acceptance with greater ease, particularly where an individual is held in trauma or contemplating the death. Mediumship appears to provide robust positive psychological coping mechanisms to people who have been bereaved via attributes of hope, resilience, and PTG.

Revisiting the research question of whether there is some positive mental and existential effect caused by visiting a medium has further demonstrated the therapeutic gains the bereaved may obtain from the process. A larger scale study of a similar nature is required if we are to understand a broad range of these experiences and alternative outcomes. For example, what are the consequences of any negative experiences with mediums? Though rare, they still happen and have not been explored in any depth or single study. The question of ethics should also be considered, as whilst this study addressed positive therapeutic benefits, mediums with no training in thanatology have potential to cause harm, and this may point towards the industry of mediumship becoming better regulated. In summary, it is clear from the present analysis that mediumship appears to act in much the same way as counselling, though offers an alternative perspective where continued bonds with the deceased are promoted.

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Biography

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