



GERMÁN HERRERA

# TALKING TO THE DEAD:

## Laboratory Investigation of Mediumship

**T**HE SURVIVAL OF CONSCIOUSNESS — that is, the continuation of life after death—is a vital issue to many people. The public’s growing fascination with survival and mediumship is illustrated by recent popular television shows such as *Medium* and *Ghost Whisperer*, movies such as *White Noise* and *The Sixth Sense*, and dozens of books.

Historically, the study of mediumship served as a primary focus for such key players in early parapsychological research as the Society for Psychical Research and J. B. Rhine and his

colleagues at Duke University. However, progress in the quantitative evaluation of the information provided by mediums soon lagged behind innovations in research on telepathy, clairvoyance, and precognition as interest shifted toward those phenomena. In addition, historical mediumship research often lacked the proper protocol design, statistical power, and elimination of potential sources of error for current researchers to value even “positive” studies.

The mediumship studies performed in the past decade do, however, generally confirm and extend the conclusions

**JULIE BEISCHEL**

of earlier studies: Certain mediums can report accurate and specific information about the deceased loved ones (termed “discarnates”) of living people (termed “sitters”) even without any prior knowledge about the sitters or the discarnates and in the absence of any feedback. Moreover, the accuracy of the information cannot be explained as a result of fraud or “cold reading” (a set of techniques used by psychic entertainers in which feedback from the sitter is used to fabricate “accurate” readings).

As with the study of any natural phenomenon, bringing mediumship into the regulated environment of the laboratory allows for the controlled and repeated examination of the mediumship process. Beyond the public’s interest in mediumship, this analysis is important for several reasons:

- *Investigating the phenomenon of mediumship may aid in understanding the mind’s processing of non-local, nonsensory information.*
- *There may be socially useful tasks that mediums can perform (for example, finding missing persons or participating in criminal investigations) that require an extensive understanding of the information they report in order to sensibly utilize it.*
- *Survival and mediumship studies provide unique evidence for an issue central to consciousness science: the relationship between the mind/consciousness and the brain. That is, is consciousness a product of the brain or somehow mediated or transformed by the brain?*

Ideally, laboratory-based mediumship research should include two equally important factors: (1) research methods that maximize the experimental blinding of the medium, the sitter-rater, and the experimenter in order to eliminate all conventional explanations for the information, and (2) a research environment that optimizes the mediumship process for both the medium and the hypothesized discarnate. This maximizes the ability of a phenomenon, if it exists, to be seen in a laboratory setting and limits the explanations for positive results. One cannot study football on a basketball court using baseball players and the rules for hockey.

In order to meet these research goals, the research methods used by the Windbridge Institute for Applied Research in Human Potential include (1) the thorough screening of all research subjects; (2) specific research-reading protocols; (3) the pairing and formatting of research readings; (4)

experimental blinding, including five levels of blinding; and (5) a specific scoring method used by raters that includes both item-by-item and whole-reading scores. Modern mediumship studies can also take advantage of technological advances such as digital recording devices and the Internet, which were not available to historical researchers.

## SUBJECT SCREENING

### Sitter-Raters

Sitter subjects are initially chosen based on their affirmative answers to questions regarding the closeness of their relationship with the discarnates they have lost, their willingness and ability to participate in readings and scoring, and their beliefs about mediumship and survival. Limiting the sitter pool to individuals interested in and open to the possibility of mediumship optimizes sitter-rater motivation and hypothesized discarnate participation. During sitter screening, specific information about one discarnate with whom the sitter was close is also gathered for use in the pairing of readings (*described on the next page*).

### Discarnates

During a mediumship reading, there are three people potentially participating: medium, sitter, and discarnate. Therefore, investigators take into account factors such as motivation, fatigue, and communication abilities when choosing hypothesized discarnate participants and designing research protocols. For example, to honor their participation, we write discarnate-specific instructions for each experiment and include them with those for the mediums and sitters. Final decisions concerning which discarnates are chosen for specific studies are based on the pairing method.

### Mediums

In addition to optimal experimental conditions and well-chosen sitter and purported discarnate participants, the quality of the medium subjects is of paramount importance for a successful mediumship study. Before participating in formal research, each prospective medium is screened over several months using an intensive screening and training procedure. The screening steps include questionnaires and phone interviews regarding the mediums’ histories, training, and experiences of communication with discarnates. The most important screening step involves test readings performed by the medium. Testing mediums’ abilities *before* they

participate in research ensures that they are capable of reporting relatively accurate, consistent, specific, and scorable information under various experimental conditions while following detailed instructions. After successfully completing the test readings, mediums are trained in the basics of mediumship research and the psychological process of grief. The extensive screening of prospective mediums helps ensure a subject population that is reliable, skilled, dedicated, and professional.

## RESEARCH READINGS

Study readings performed by Windbridge most often take place over the phone between the medium and a blinded experimenter who acts as a proxy for the actual sitter, who does not hear or participate in the reading. The medium, the absent sitter, and the proxy sitter are often in different cities, if not states, during the reading. The proxy-sitter paradigm is used to mimic the reading practices with which mediums feel comfortable (that is, with a sitter on the phone and at a time and location of the medium's choosing) while blinding the medium to cues from the absent sitter and the blinded experimenter and blinding the absent sitter to the reading during scoring.

Experimental reading protocols include both Discarnate-Directed and Questions sections. During Discarnate-Directed sections, the medium is provided with the first name of the discarnate and asked to report any information they receive about or from the discarnate. This mimics what is often the format of a real-world reading between a client and a medium, serves to focus the medium, and allows for the production of similar one-discarnate readings across a study.

During Questions sections of a reading, the medium is asked specific Life Questions about a discarnate's physical life (for example, physical and personality descriptions and cause of death) and for any message(s) the discarnate may have for the absent sitter (Reverse Question). The Reverse Question (which asks, "Does the discarnate have any questions, comments, or requests for the sitter?") is included in all question-based protocols to ensure discarnate and sitter motivation and to show respect and compassion for the discarnate and the sitter.

The use of questions during a reading increases the probability of obtaining information related to the identification of the discarnate, further focuses the medium, and emulates normal human communication.

## PAIRING AND FORMATTING OF RESEARCH READINGS

### Pairing

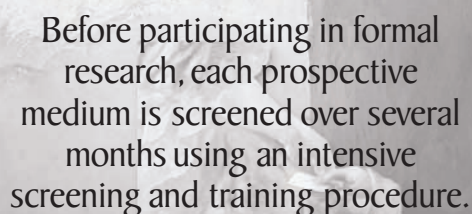
In order to maximize sitter-rater blinding, research readings are paired, and each paired rater scores two readings—one that was intended for that rater and one that was intended for the other rater in the pair—without knowing which is which. This is possible because the sitters are not present during the readings. Raters have a tendency to score a reading as either more or less accurate than it is in reality if they know the reading was intended for them. Rater bias is limited by having raters score their own reading as well as a control reading intended for someone else. Having raters score readings intended for someone else is also a useful test of the

generality or specificity of the medium's statements and has been used throughout the history of mediumship research.

After item-by-item and whole-reading scoring (*described later*), raters are asked to choose which reading they believe was intended for them and which for the other rater's discarnate. This forced-

choice method is a common endpoint in mediumship studies as well as other parapsychological tests. However, to maximize each rater's ability to discriminate between the two readings, the discarnates in our studies are paired before the readings to optimize their recognizable differences while still maintaining rater blinding. This is in stark contrast to historical mediumship studies, in which discarnates that were similar (for example, in age and cause of death) were paired or in which discarnates were randomly grouped or paired.

To prevent any obvious gender-based clues, paired readings in our research are for discarnates of the same gender, but the discarnates are paired to be as different as possible in age at passing, physical appearance, personality, cause of death, and favorite hobbies or activities. Both discarnates in a pair are read by the same medium to ensure that the two readings contain similar wording and types of information.



Before participating in formal research, each prospective medium is screened over several months using an intensive screening and training procedure.



## Formatting

Formatting mediumship readings optimizes both the clarity of the items and the rater's capacity to score them objectively, ensures rater blinding, and unifies the quality of the information across readings and mediums. During formatting, a blinded experimenter removes all references to the discarnate's name and assigns a number to each reading. The experimenter then organizes the items into single, direct statements and replaces any weak or uncertain associations with clear statements. For example, the medium's statements, "I think Judy might have had a scar on her face . . . I feel like it was on the left side," would be provided to the rater as the formatted items: "(1) She had a scar; (2) It was on her face; (3) It was on the left side." This optimizes the rater's ability to objectively score each individual piece of information that the medium provides while still maintaining rater blinding.

It is important to note that the items are not randomized during formatting. The interdependence of scorable items has been commonly and historically viewed as a limitation of the scoring of mediums' readings; thus, they were often randomized prior to scoring. However, the context of items in a reading contains information potentially relevant to the rater that would be lost if the items were randomized. Their interdependence is a necessary component of the processing of information that occurs during normal human communication.

## BLINDING

Numerous nonparanormal psychological processes are at work during a sitter's unregulated interaction with a medium, and these processes can be solely responsible for a "successful" reading. Therefore, blinding the medium to feedback from the sitter is essential for eliminating such factors as fraud, cold-reading, and unintentional cueing as explanations for the accuracy of the information a medium provides. Additionally, blinding the rater to the origin of the readings (that is, "mine" or "not mine") is important in preventing bias on the part of the rater during scoring.

In quintuple-blind protocols, (1) the medium is blinded to information about the sitter and the discarnate (other than their first names) before and during the reading; (2) the raters are blinded to the origin of the readings during scoring; (3) the experimenter who screens, pairs, and trains the sitter-raters (Experimenter 1) is blinded to which mediums read

## Instrumental Transcommunication (ITC)

Instrumental Transcommunication (ITC) is a broadly defined, new field of inquiry into the phenomenon of technical devices such as computers, radios, telephones, televisions, and digital cameras "capturing" voices, images, and text from what many would call the spirit world. The term ITC was first coined in the late 1980s by now-retired physicist Ernst Senkowski of the University of Mainz in Germany. Occurrences of these communications, however, have been documented since at least 1901, when U.S. ethnologist Waldemar Bogoras traveled to Siberia to visit a shaman of the Tchouktchi tribe and made the first known recording of an allegedly discarnate spirit. Experiments in EVP (electronic voice phenomena) became popular in Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and in 1982 the American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena (AA-EVP) was formed ([www.aaevp.com](http://www.aaevp.com)).

A comprehensive summary of ITC/EVP history, research techniques, results, and analysis is the focus of the book *There Is No Death and There Are No Dead* by Tom and Lisa Butler, codirectors of AA-EVP. Other recent books on the topic include *Spirit Faces: Truth about the Afterlife* by Mark Macy, which explores ITC largely through Polaroid photography; *The Orb Project* by Klaus Heinemann and Míceál Ledwith, which looks at the recent phenomenon of lightbulb-like orbs showing up in digital photographs; Victor Zammit's *A Lawyer Presents the Case for the Afterlife: Irrefutable Objective Evidence*, available at [www.victorzammit.com](http://www.victorzammit.com); and Senkowski's seminal 1989 work, *Instrumental Transcommunication*, now available in English at [www.worlditc.org/c\\_07\\_senki\\_00\\_content.htm](http://www.worlditc.org/c_07_senki_00_content.htm).

A good example of the current science on the ITC phenomenon is Daniele Gullà's work at the Interdisciplinary Laboratory for Biopsychocybernetics Research in Bologna, Italy ([www.laboratorio.too.it](http://www.laboratorio.too.it)), involving acoustic analysis of anomalous voices supposedly from the dead. The study is trying to determine if these sounds differ significantly from the human voice and whether they could be produced by the human larynx (see "Computer-Based Analysis of Supposed Paranormal Voices" in *ITC Journal* 17 [2004]; [www.itcjournal.org](http://www.itcjournal.org)).

—MG

which sitter pairs and which blinded readings are intended for which discarnates; (4) the experimenter who interacts with the mediums and formats the readings into item lists (Experimenter 2) is blinded to any information about the sitters and the discarnates (beyond the discarnates' first names); and (5) the experimenter who interacts with the raters during scoring (Experimenter 3) is blinded to all information about the discarnates, which medium performed which readings, and which readings were intended for which discarnates and sitters.

This entire scenario eliminates fraud, cold-reading, rater bias, experimenter cueing, and perhaps even telepathy between the blinded experimenter and the mediums as plausible explanations for the accuracy and specificity of the information the mediums provide during the readings.

## SCORING

Although the scoring of the mediumship readings is the last event to take place during a study, it is obviously the most important step from a data-collection standpoint. During scoring, one blinded rater in the pair is given their reading first and one is given the control reading first in order to balance order-based biases. They both score each item in the two gender-matched and blinded readings by contemplating the question "How well does the piece of information fit?" and then choosing one of the following five options:

- 4:** Obvious fit
- 3:** Fit requiring interpretation
- 2:** Other fit (used if the item does not fit the named discarnate or the rater, but it does fit someone else who the rater is or was close to and who is likely to be the subject of the statement)
- 1:** No fit
- 0:** Don't know (used if the rater does not understand the item or does not have enough information to judge its accuracy)

After all the items in both of the paired readings are scored, the raters give each full list of items a global numerical score from 0 (essentially no correct information) to 4 (essentially no incorrect information) and are asked to "pick the reading that seems to be more applicable to you." This complete scoring system brings clarity, reliability, and validity to the scoring of mediumship readings.


## WHAT NEXT?

The use of the specific subject-screening techniques and the reading protocol, pairing, formatting, blinding, and scoring practices employed by the Windbridge Institute during its investigation of mediumship reflect methodological and conceptual innovations beyond both historical research and modern studies.

A recent peer-reviewed phone study illustrates how these methods can come together during mediumship research and provides positive and significant data (*Explore: The Journal of Science and Healing* 3, no. 1 [2007]: 23–27). Specifically, the findings in that study included statistically significantly higher whole-reading scores for readings intended for the sitter versus readings intended for the paired control rater, as well as significant forced-choice results when the raters were asked to choose which readings were intended for them.

The survival question—Is there life after death?—and methods to address it were challenges in earlier mediumship research and remain difficult in modern studies. The goals of future research at Windbridge will continue to address the survival question and other important issues by asking the following:

- Do mediums get their information telepathically, or are they communicating with the deceased?
- Do measurable changes occur in the environment when a discarnate is present?
- Is a medium's neurophysiology different from a nonmedium's?
- Does participating in a mediumship reading help in the grief recovery process?
- Can mediumship be learned?
- What is the afterlife like?

These and similar questions can be answered only with further investigation. For more information, please go to [www.windbridge.org](http://www.windbridge.org). 

**JULIE BEISCHEL, PhD**, is a cofounder and the director of research of the Windbridge Institute for Applied Research in Human Potential. She received her doctorate in Pharmacology and Toxicology from the University of Arizona and was the first recipient of the William James Postdoctoral Fellowship in Mediumship and Survival Research.

