

**Virtual Spirituality: The Negotiation and (Re)-Presentation of
Psychic-Spiritual Identity on the Internet**

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**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
September 2012**

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Abstract

This research is an examination of how people engaged in psychic and spiritual interests use the internet to participate as a group through social media. Exploring how individuals take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the internet to pursue their interest in psychic spirituality reveals different ways of participating and interacting online. The ways in which individuals present their psychic-spiritual selves online, how they negotiate their online identities and make sense of their culture, is also examined.

Using an eclectic methodological approach, this research used a combination of ethnographic methods and autoethnography to explore online psychic-spiritual culture. Documentary analysis of website text and images, together with participant observation, both covert and overt, were used to examine websites. Facebook interaction and psychic readings in online discussion board forums based on psychic-spiritual interests were analysed using discourse analysis. Autoethnographic self-reflections were also collected and analysed in order to capture an intrapsychic perspective of psychic reading culture.

It was found that psychic practitioners use their websites to communicate the message that they are credible psychic readers whilst Facebook was found to be a site in which, through a delicate interplay of activity and performance, identity is constructed through interaction between the psychic reader and their Facebook friends. Psychic-spiritual discussion board forums meanwhile are sites of situated learning in which learner psychic readers learn to become appropriate members of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Also, although the sociological analytic mind does not easily accommodate the nature of psychic reading, the study did manage to obtain an intrapsychic perspective on psychic readings. Thus, members of the psychic-spiritual milieu have taken full advantage of the internet to pursue their interest in psychic reading culture.

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Acknowledgements

I would first like to thank my supervisor Professor Robin Wooffitt for his support and guidance throughout the development of my thesis, and for opening my eyes to a different perspective on a world I thought I understood.

I would also like to thank my Sociology PhD colleagues who provided lots of friendship, support and tons of laughter over these last four years. I also include a special thank you to my spiritual teacher and friend Margaret for being an unwavering source of encouragement and support throughout my journey, and to my friend Daniela, who appeared in my life and re-introduced me to Reiki at a time when I needed it most.

Love and a million thank yous go to my family. My mother Lynne and stepfather Steve, my father Geoff and his partner Irene, my brother Justin and his wife Lucy and my three wonderful nieces Lydia, Laurel and Lily. Thank you all for believing in me.

Finally this thesis is dedicated with an abundance of love to my amazing husband Steven and my two beautiful sons Robert and Nicholas. Without their support, love and encouragement, and of course enthusiasm to move to York, the last few years would not have been possible.

Declaration of Originality

In accordance with the University regulations, I hereby declare that:

1. This thesis has been composed solely by myself
2. It is entirely my own work
3. It has not been submitted in part or whole for any other degree or personal qualification

Chapter One

Introduction

Autoethnography is an innovative method that offers the tools and techniques to collect and analyse data whilst taking the researcher's own experiences fully into account (Davies, 1999; Anderson, 2006; Chang, 2008). The following is a brief biographical account that positions the author within the analytic process.

This thesis is an autoethnographic study of how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the internet to pursue their interests in psychic readings. Autoethnography is defined by Chang (2008: 9) as "a research method that utilizes the researcher's autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions"; that is, the subjective experience of the researcher is intrinsic to the research (Davies, 1999). This research is informed by my lifelong interest in psychic and spiritual topics together with my personal involvement with several different virtual communities based psychic-spiritual practices. Consequently, an autoethnographic methodology is the most appropriate approach with which to examine how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the internet for psychic and spiritual practices and to further understand the nature and quality of online psychic readings.

As a research methodology, autoethnography has been used to study a variety of contexts, for example: White-Indian race relations (Foley, 2002); clinical depression (Jago, 2002) and recovery from an Acquired Brain Injury (Smith, 2005). Its main strengths include the way in which it allows the cultural assumptions of the researcher to be brought to the fore and drawn upon to allow a unique understanding of the phenomenon (Chang, 2008). This reveals some key features that are likely to remain hidden within the research if traditional methods are used. In addition, analytic autoethnography acknowledges the objective approach to social science involving systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation (Anderson,

2006; Chang, 2008). This also offers a degree of flexibility in choosing data collection and analytic methods (see Vryan, 2006).

My interest in the psychic and spiritual arose from the many conversations I had with my maternal grandmother as a young child. We would talk for hours about such things as astrology and horoscopes, palmistry, spiritualism and things that went bump in the night. Growing up amongst my peers, I was seen as the unconventional teen dabbling in fortune telling, avidly reading my horoscopes and learning about the influence of the moon and planets on my personality. My appetite for knowledge of the psychic, paranormal and spiritual accelerated considerably when I met my husband in my early twenties. I began collecting and reading books on paganism, witchcraft and herbalism and expanded my knowledge and practice of auras, chakras, Reiki and spiritual healing, crystals and oracle cards.

It was 1999 when my husband and I first logged on to the internet – our first search, ‘psychic readings chat’, took us to psychics.co.uk, which at the time consisted mainly of a synchronous chat room (see below for how this site has evolved over time). We spent many weekend evenings’ online sharing readings and spiritual and psychic experiences with complete strangers who became our spiritual friends. This journey into the psychic community online was to continue for a couple of years until I started studying as an undergraduate in 2003.

In 2000, my husband and I had established our own offline community group, Wirral Psychic Workshop. The group met monthly in a local community hall to discuss a variety of psychic and spiritual topics. Local practitioners in crystal healing, tarot cards, herbalism, angels and Reiki healing, for example, would share their knowledge and generate discussion amongst the audience (averaging around 30 members per month). We invited mediums and clairvoyants to give audience demonstrations and proceeds would go to local charity. The group formed a considerable part of our understanding and learning of the psychic and spiritual for the best

part of the seven years we ran it before relocating to York so I could continue my academic studies. We met many interesting people during those years, some of whom became very good friends.

My friend Margaret had been running a more intimate spiritual development group for many years and one evening in 2002, she invited me along. I became a regular at her group, attending weekly to meditate and share experiences and I learned to read and interpret signs and symbols found in everyday life. This also helped me to interpret the oracle cards and the clairvoyant images I would receive whilst reading for others online in virtual community discussion forums.

Being a member of a broad community of spiritual seekers, offline and online, has led me to this research and has consequently informed a considerable part of my understanding and analysis of what I discovered during it. But it is important for me to set the personal context here: I began this research from the perspective of a believer – not that I believed everything; indeed, I considered myself to be healthily sceptic. However, as I will note at various points throughout the thesis and discuss in the closing chapter, the doctoral journey has challenged many of my previous beliefs in different ways. Nonetheless, in approaching the research with a lifelong interest in psychic spirituality, autoethnography provides the most suitable methodology with which to explore psychic practices on the internet.

This thesis is an exploration of the ways in which people engaged in psychic and spiritual interests and claimed abilities have adapted to the internet and participate as a group through social media. As such, it is an examination of the intersection of new media technology and spiritual practices. Exploring how individuals take advantage of the opportunities afforded by the internet to pursue their interest in psychic spirituality reveals different ways of participating and interacting online. Furthermore, the different ways in which individuals present their psychic-spiritual selves online, how they negotiate their online identities and make sense of their culture, may also be examined. The internet brings the activities of these

individuals into the public eye. Not only is there a growing number of websites offering psychic services such as tarot card readings, clairvoyance and mediumship, there has also been a significant rise in the use of social media relating to New Age spiritual practices such as psychic readings. Established by Craig and Jane Hamilton-Parker in 1996, the oldest psychic online community www.psychics.co.uk has grown rapidly over the years and the website content has evolved extensively. The website has a synchronous (real-time) chat forum with several chat rooms used for different kinds of interaction such as readings, meditations or social chat. It also has an asynchronous (non real-time) discussion board forum that allows members to discuss an array of spiritual and paranormal topics such as ghosts, tarot cards and spiritual experiences. The website includes many articles relating to spiritual and psychic phenomena and media snippets from newspapers and magazines as well as clips from *YouTube* of television programmes Craig and Jane have been involved in and videos of their private readings and public demonstrations. The community side of the website is well organised. There is an obvious hierarchy to membership status with general visitors to the chat room and the online community discussion boards, whilst paying members may access extra features on the site, including psychic development classes. The fee for the mediumship classes is £4 per month (£100 lifetime membership).

One particular service that separates this website, and indeed similar communities, from the more commercial ventures found online is that they offer free readings in their chat rooms. Members who have paid their monthly fee for training practice their readings in the chat rooms, under guidance from more experienced readers. Whilst there are no guarantees of receiving a reading (as per site rules and regulations visitors are not allowed to request a reading), regular chat 'psychic reading sessions' are scheduled where registered members of the site can attend and wait patiently for a reading. Whilst membership to all web communities fluctuate over time, psychics.co.uk still has a large membership base and is highly regarded amongst members of the online psychic community as a

legitimate place in which to learn the skills of mediumship and find others with common interests.

The psychic community also has a large presence on Facebook. As the world's most popular online social networking site, Facebook can be considered a 'microcosm' of the wider web. On the site, there are many groups and communities relating to all manner of interests, including psychic spirituality. Individuals can choose to join Facebook groups in much the same way they can join separate larger communities such as psychics.co.uk on the wider web. Joining Facebook affords individuals the opportunity to find other people who share their interests. People might join a group or 'like' a community page such as Water Lily Temple which discusses a range of spiritual beliefs and practices. They could follow a psychic practitioner such as Soul Art who offers information about obtaining psychic readings or spiritual paintings as well as frequently offering free readings to people who 'like' her page. Indeed, there are many groups and communities relating to a myriad of spiritual interests.

Many spiritual and religious interests have taken advantage of the internet since it became a public medium in 1995. Consequently it has had an important role to play in the changing face of religiosity in Britain. In particular, the internet appears to have been instrumental in facilitating a variety of spiritual beliefs and practices not typically supported by mainstream Western culture (e.g. Berger and Ezzy, 2004; Cowan, 2005). Yet whilst sociologists of religion have recognised the impact internet technologies have had on religion and spirituality in the twenty-first century (see for instance Dawson and Cowan, 2004), activities within the psychic-spiritual milieu have been overlooked. In order to gain a sociological understanding of the ways in which the internet is used for psychic-spiritual practices, this research aims to consider the ways in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the various applications of the internet: websites, Facebook and discussion board forums. How they

negotiate online identity and participate in online social spaces will be a particular focus.

Academic interest in psychic, spiritual and paranormal beliefs and experiences has traditionally been associated with parapsychology or cultural history. Accordingly, there seems to be very little sociological analysis of the nature and experience of psychic services, particularly those available on the web, or indeed the spiritual orientations of these kinds of services. Whilst there does appear to be a developing interdisciplinary interest in the study of parapsychological phenomena (Walker, 1995; Young and Goulet, 1996; Wooffitt and Allistone, 2005; Wiseman and Watt, 2006; Leech, 2009; Wooffitt and Holt, 2011), sociological investigation into paranormal beliefs and occult practices, meanwhile, has been somewhat sporadic (see for instance Nelson, 1975; Jorgenson, 1992; Goode, 2000; Adorno, 2002; Emmons and Emmons, 2003; Wooffitt and Gilbert, 2008; Tart, 2009). Further, research concerning the more spiritual orientations of the paranormal tends to focus more specifically on the nature of religious belief and its relationship with paranormal experience (see Irwin, 1993; 2009; MacDonald, 1995; Orenstein, 2002; Rice, 2003). In particular, research into the relationship between religious belief and the paranormal tends to be associated with psychology (see for example Smith *et al*, 2009; Braswell *et al* 2012). Similarly, studies of spiritual-occultist practices have tended to focus on the current resurgence of Pagan spirituality and the revival of interest in witchcraft (see for instance York, 1995; Greenwood, 2000; Hutton, 2001; Blain, 2002; Pike, 2004; Berger and Ezzy, 2007; Coco, 2011). Indeed, there is a growing academic social scientific interest in the nature of paranormal belief and the practice of psychic phenomena and mediumship. For instance, in *The Language of Mediums and Psychics*, Wooffitt (2006) used conversation analysis (CA) to study the way in which the interaction between psychics and their sitters establishes apparently successful paranormal communication with the deceased. Meanwhile Gilbert (2008) conducted an extensive qualitative study of Spiritualist mediums, whilst Castro (2010), also employed conversation analysis to

assess the subjective accounts of paranormal and transcendental experiences. Contemporary anthropological and sociological work has considered contemporary physical mediumship (Hunter, 2010); UFO religions (Partridge, 2003) and ghost apparitions (Sabol, 2007). As a result, recent research has provided a useful contribution to interdisciplinary study of the paranormal.

The Sociology of Religion and Spirituality

However, the focus of this thesis, the spiritual orientations of psychic readings and how psychic practitioners interact and participate online, can be situated in the broader remit of the sociology of religion. Religiosity in Western society has transformed over the course of the twentieth century and it continues to change through the opening decades of the new millennium, in alignment with rapid socio-cultural change and transformation. The task for sociologists has always been to track such social change, to try to explain its causes and its characteristics, as well as aiming to formulate theories and hypotheses that could predict future outcomes. The apparent changes in the nature and function of religiosity in Western society captured the sociological imagination long ago, and the sub-discipline of the sociology of religion has developed well over the course of the last century. Scholars working within this sub-discipline of the sociology of religion have researched extensively into the changing character of British religiosity. Indeed, the distinct changes in religion have provided the discipline with a 'virtually limitless' field of research (Hunt, 2002). What makes contemporary religiosity so interesting to sociological commentators, argues Hamilton (1995: 1) is the diversity of human belief: "the human capacity for belief is virtually limitless". Further, the peculiarity of some of the new and emerging beliefs have led sociologists to ask why religious belief and practice continue to be so important to culture and society today.

Research since the 1960s has followed the supposed secularisation of British society (Wilson, 1966; Berger, 1967; Chaves, 1994; Davie, 1994; Bruce, 1995). Today, with clear signs that religion has not declined but has merely been transformed (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004), sociological focus has turned towards researching the diversity of beliefs and practices apparent in Britain today (see for instance, Aldridge, 2000; Hunt, 2002, 2003; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004; Partridge, 2004; 2005).¹ The diverse nature of religious belief and practice in contemporary society has led to an increasing acceptance of previously marginalised activities such as Paganism, Witchcraft and New Age interests. This coincides with a renewed interest in the supernatural and paranormal as well as a growing trend towards what has come to be known as 'self-spirituality' – a turn towards a subjective and personal experience of (and interaction with) the sacred (Heelas, 1996; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004). This persistence of the sacred is what has captured the sociological imagination and rejuvenated investigative interest. The move away from collective worship is apparent in the decline in church attendance figures (for instance, Davie, 1994). However, it has been suggested that the 'subjective turn' to individualised spirituality better suits the needs of a post-modern society (Hunt, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004). In other words religion and spirituality, in line with wider culture, have become 'a matter of choice': "In simple terms it would seem to involve choosing from an infinite variety of religions and the freedom to mix 'n' match according to one's spiritual, psychological and social needs" (Hunt, 2002: 210; see also Aupers and Houtman, 2006). Further, it appears that new, more innovative forms of spirituality are emerging as a result of this availability of choice.

Hunt (2002), referring to Fenn (1990), suggests that these new forms of spirituality are predominantly characteristic of New Age and occult forms of religiosity. Further, New Age and occult forms of religiosity are particularly compatible with modern day life in that they afford the

¹ With a particular emphasis on the Islamic faith in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attack.

individual seeker-of-spirituality a chance to ‘indulge in the irrational’ against the backdrop of ‘enforced rationality’ characteristic of structured daily life (Roof, 1993; Bahnisch, 2001; Hunt, 2002; Partridge, 2004; 2005). The increasing availability of these new forms of spirituality, and the new freedom to explore them stems from the wider social and cultural changes of the 1960s. How the events of the 1960s were instrumental in driving through the transformations in British religiosity are explored in detail later. Meanwhile, around that time, sociologists began to take note of the new religious movements and cults that were emerging, seemingly revolutionising British religiosity (Campbell, 2002 [1972]).

The Cultic Milieu

The emergence of new forms of spirituality during the 1960s alerted commentators to the fact that wider social and cultural change afforded by the human rights movement of the 1960s was heralding a new spiritual freedom. Changing attitudes towards traditional institutions such as religion and education, alongside enthusiastic demands for equal rights and new freedoms, led to an atmosphere of distinct cultural and social transformation (see also Pike, 2004). Further, the energy behind this ‘countercultural’ movement links to New Age spiritual beliefs and practices. Campbell (2007) argues that “the connections between the counterculture and the New Age are so close and direct, both in ideas and personnel, that it is not unreasonable to consider the latter as the direct continuation, rather than the mere outgrowth, of the former” (Campbell, 2007: 185).

Around the same time, Campbell (2002 [1972]) observed the way in which the activities, beliefs and practices of the New Age appeared to exist within a collective entity. He termed this the ‘cultic milieu’, defined as:

the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel and constitutes a unity by virtue of a common consciousness of deviant

status, a receptive and synchronistic orientation and an interpenetrative communication structure... united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions (Campbell, 2002 [1972]: 23)

Campbell's notion of a 'cultic milieu' is a useful sociological way to frame the relationships that exist between particular people engaged in what could be termed 'New Age' interests. Such people participate in discreet groups based on a common set of beliefs and practices and now, half a century later, they do this online. Because of its usefulness, Campbell's theory of the cultic milieu will be explored in more depth in the next chapter. Meanwhile this definition, argues Hanegraaff (1996), allows us to ascertain which activities, beliefs and practices may constitute what we have come to know as 'New Age'. Such beliefs include Spiritualism, mysticism and Paganism as well as Buddhism and Hinduism. Likewise, interests within the cultic milieu also include paranormal phenomena such as ghosts and UFOs, as well as psychic practices such as mediumship, clairvoyance, tarot card reading and palmistry (Campbell, 2002 [1972]). There are many varied activities and interests relating to psychic practices yet whilst each activity might overlap, it is important to at the very least briefly outline what these entail. Consequently, the following section introduces some of the more basic tools and techniques of psychic practice.

Psychic Practices

Psychic practitioners claim to be able to perceive the world through a 'sixth sense'. Wooffitt (2006) defines the apparent abilities of psychics (and mediums) as being able to "communicate with the dead...acquire information by psychic powers...gain personal or intimate knowledge of people and events from the arrangement of tarot cards, or the lines in the hand, or simply by holding personal belongings" (Wooffitt, 2006: 1). Accordingly, contemporary psychics 'read' for their clients using different

claimed abilities. The Parapsychological Association (PA) have usefully collated these various techniques under the concept of 'Psi phenomena', a term used to denote activity related to paranormal cognition (e.g. Extra Sensory Perception or ESP) and paranormal action (e.g. psychokinesis). However, whilst the PA's definitions are useful when considering psychic practices from a parapsychological approach, psychic practitioners are more likely to refer to their skills in less formal language. Consequently, it is prudent to consider the following definitions as a loose set of terms used to capture particular practices.

The PA uses the terms *clairvoyance* and *precognition* to denote the generic claimed abilities used during psychic readings. Clairvoyance is defined as the "acquisition of information concerning an object or contemporary physical event...not to be confused with the vulgar interpretation of 'clairvoyance' as meaning 'knowledge of the future' (for which see precognition) (Parapsychological Association: online).² In terms of precognition, the PA defines this as "A form of extrasensory perception in which the target is some future event that cannot be deduced from normally known data in the present" (ibid.). Popular internet psychics Craig and Jane Hamilton-Parker provide a similar definition to the one provided by the PA: "'Clairvoyance' – from the French 'clear seeing' – is indeed the "paranormal ability [to] obtain information about an object or an event without the use of the known senses" (psychics.co.uk). However, they note that clairvoyance is often used to refer to a number of psychic abilities such as mediumship, visions and psychic dreams. More generally, clairvoyance is usually employed in combination with other methods such as tarot, astrological forecasting and other forms of divination.

As noted, psychic practitioners may use a range of methods such as tarot cards, palmistry, psychometry, or a combination of these. Although the exact origins of the tarot remain a mystery, it is thought they were

² However, the 'vulgar interpretation' of the term *clairvoyance* as 'knowledge of the future' is what makes its practice so popular.

originally a 15th century Italian game (Jorgensen, 1992). However, later occult revivals in France and Britain led to them becoming regarded as “the symbolic key to all arcane wisdom” (ibid.: 129). The tarot is highly pictorial (Hunt, 2003). Consisting of seventy-eight cards, the tarot deck is made up of the *Major Arcana* – twenty-two ‘special’ cards depicting symbols such as *The Sun*, *The Moon* and *The High Priestess*. The symbols represented within the cards are interpreted by the reader. The cards of the Major Arcana can be read on their own or in conjunction with the remaining fifty-six cards. These ‘lesser’ cards are known as the *Minor Arcana* and are split, like regular playing cards, into suits, typically known as *Swords*, *Wands*, *Cups* and *Pentacles*.

Tarot cards remain popular today, often being used as entertainment amongst friends or consulted for spiritual guidance. There are many different, illustrative decks of tarot cards, for example the traditional *Rider-Waite* deck. The cards are popular tools for psychic readings as they are viewed as ‘triggers for intuition’ with which one may gain self-understanding (Tognetti *et al* 2003). Typically, the cards are used in readings to offer the recipient guidance to problems. During a tarot reading, the cards are shuffled by the recipient of the reading (sitter/client) in the belief that the reading becomes ‘personalised’: “The tarot cards absorb the thoughts, ideas and curiosity of the person who shuffles the deck...your subconscious wisdom is shuffled into the cards” (ibid.: 7). The cards are then laid out in what can often be a complex ‘spread’ (Hunt, 2003). The position of each card relates to one aspect of the sitter’s life, for instance ‘the recent past’ or ‘the immediate future’.

The images within each card are interpreted in accordance to the psychic’s own understanding of the symbolism of the tarot, and the positioning of the card in relation to the others (Bunning, 1998). The reader may also use clairvoyance to ‘tune-in’ further with the cards or the recipient of the reading. Having conducted an in-depth ethnography of experience as a tarot-card reader, Jorgensen (1992) argues that the detailed

interpretations of the tarot cards are sociologically important. As with any religious symbolism, the tarot provides us with a means to understand our everyday, often mundane, lives: “Like all symbolic schemes, the tarot provides a language through which subjective, personal experience can be represented and expressed intersubjectively, publicly and socially” (Jorgensen, 1992: 130). Thus, the appeal of tarot card readings becomes especially clear.

Another ancient art of fortune telling is palmistry. Dating back thousands of years, palm reading (also known as chiromancy or chiromancy) originates from India and was brought into Europe by gypsies in the 14th century (Gile and Lenard-Cook, 1999) and it remains a popular form of fortune telling or divination today. Interestingly, palmists consider the hand to be ‘a microcosm of the self’ (ibid.). By scrutinising the lines on the palm and examining the size, shape and colour of the fingers and hands, a palmist claims to ascertain the character and tendencies of the person receiving the reading. Regarded as a very technical art, palmistry is said to require a considerable amount of study, and is linked to the complex pseudo-science of astrology (Hunt, 2003). There are a range of practices within astrology. Newspaper and magazine horoscope columns, such as that by Jonathan Cainer in *The Daily Mail*, are a very popular form of esoteric entertainment. However, more sophisticated systems of astrological analysis are also consulted for spiritual guidance (ibid.). These complex interpretations of planetary alignments and their apparent influence on an individual’s life have their roots in ancient history. Indeed, astrology is said to date back to 2750BC Mesopotamia (Snodgrass, 1997). The positions of stars and planets were consulted by many ancient peoples – the Babylonians, Egyptians, Chinese, Hindus, Mayans and the ancient Greeks, integral to their wide and varied beliefs in augury and omens (Jorgensen, 1992). Later, the art of interpreting the effect of planetary alignments on one’s fate was adopted by the Romans and considered in depth by noted mathematicians, philosophers and scientists such as Ptolemy and Pythagoras (Snodgrass, 1997). However, even throughout history, astrology, as with other occultist

practices, has been regularly debunked. Adorno's essay *The Stars Down to Earth* (2002) is a particularly critical text concerning newspaper astrology columns. Despite its marginalised status however, one in every ten-thousand people practices astrology or studies it seriously and it is considered by many to be an 'intuitive art' for spiritual guidance (Dean and Kelly, 2003; Gerwick-Brodeur *et al*, 2007).

Numerology is another ancient form of divinatory practice, dating back around 10,000 years. It is still used as a form of prediction today. Numerology as a spiritual tool considers how numbers can be especially significant when individuals are making life decisions, for instance, when buying a house, marrying a partner, or starting business or employment (Hunt, 2003). Also, other techniques may be employed in psychic readings. For instance, crystal ball gazing (or scrying) using crystal balls, scrying mirrors or bowls of water remains a popular divination activity (Besterman, 1995). Likewise, psychometry is another form of divination. This refers to the ability of a psychic to 'read the energies' of an object and obtain paranormal information. Information about the object and its owner is communicated to the psychic in much the same way other information is received – clairvoyantly, clairaudiently or clairsentiently.

Mediumship and Spiritualism

Defined as "the alleged ability to receive communications from people who have died" (Fontana, 2005: 91), mediumship is considered as being distinct from psychic abilities. Psychics, similar to traditional fortune-tellers, often rely on tools such as tarot cards and crystal balls to give them information. Mediums, however, claim to receive their information from communicating directly to spirits in the spirit world, or via their 'spirit-guide' (*ibid.*). There are two particular ways in which a medium is said to receive information from spirit – *physical* and *mental* mediumship. Physical mediumship is also known as trance, or transfiguration mediumship whereby the medium's body is said to be temporarily inhabited by a spirit to produce psychokinetic effects such as 'raps' (knocking) or manifestations of spirit

(Fontana, 2005; see also psychics.co.uk). Mental mediumship, meanwhile, involves the medium communicating with spirits to pass on messages to the people they are reading for. Messages may be received in different ways: clairvoyance, clairaudience and clairsentience. As already noted, clairvoyance relates to the medium seeing images. Meanwhile, clairaudience relates to messages heard by the medium whilst clairsentience involves the medium having impressions placed on them by spirit, usually in relation to the spirit's characteristics. Mediums will typically experience just one of these skills, although it is not uncommon for them to claim to be able to use a combination of these abilities.

Spiritualism became very popular after events which took place in Hydesville, USA (Hunt, 2003; Fontana, 2005). Kate and Margaret Fox, their older sister Leah, and their parents moved into a house that was apparently haunted. They had been experiencing knocking, or 'raps' in response to their own, which they attributed (through 'communicating' with the spirit through the raps) to the spirit of a man thought to have been murdered in their house. Soon, the girls were demonstrating the phenomena to larger audiences, which encouraged many other people to attempt communication with spirits for themselves (see for instance Fontana, 2005, Weisberg, 2005). According to the Spiritualist's National Union (snu.org.uk), a Mrs Hayden brought the phenomenon to Britain. Shortly after, in 1853, the first Spiritualist Church opened in Keighley, West Yorkshire. Today, there are 350 Spiritualist Churches and centres associated with the SNU, which also provides training for prospective mediums. Yet, not all mediums would have had the opportunity to train or practice with the SNU and nor do they necessarily associate themselves with the Spiritualist religion. Indeed, there are numerous independent psychic and mediumship development circles and groups across the country.

Psychics and Mass Communication

Whether psychics and mediums choose to follow Spiritualism, attend an independent psychic circle, or develop their skills themselves, they are usually interested in a wider range of spiritual topics. Indeed, the different techniques employed in psychic readings, and the corresponding eclecticism of spiritual interests are, as noted by Campbell (2002 [1972]), characteristic of the cultic milieu and strongly associated with the beliefs and practices of the New Age Movement. Such interests are many and varied, incorporating for instance, theosophical teachings such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism or Hinduism. Similarly, spiritual interests may also include a fascination with fairies and angels, American Indian traditions, crystals, auras and divination techniques such as tarot cards and psychometry. Although some mediums and psychics like to distance themselves from the negative stereotypes associated with the New Age Movement, their spiritual interests are an important part of their everyday lives. To them, being able to help other people with their skills is paramount to what they term their 'spiritual work' (Ryan, 2008). Indeed, many mediums and psychics do call their skills a 'gift', and believe their life's purpose is to use that gift to help others.³

Yet, despite a growing interest in psychic and spiritual matters, such beliefs and practices remain marginalised. However, as Campbell (2002 [1972]): 14) notes in regards to the wider cultic milieu, there appears to be a 'common consciousness' and a sense of 'mutual sympathy and support' amongst individuals who follow cultic or New Age interests. As previously noted, central to the cultic milieu is this sense of acceptance and tolerance of one another's beliefs. Indeed, as Campbell suggests, individual members of the milieu are united within some sort of community or 'common ideology of seekership'. This may also apply to what could be regarded as a smaller section of the wider cultic milieu. Indeed, Jorgensen refers to the

³ There are many medium autobiographies that make reference to their apparent abilities as a gift. See for example that by Gordon Smith (2003), Sylvia Browne (2004), Colin Fry (2008), Sally Morgan (2008) and T.J Higgs (2009).

'esoteric milieu', whilst Aupers and Houtman (2006) write about a wider 'spiritual milieu'.

Because the focus in this thesis is on the spiritual orientations of psychic practices, it is perhaps more fitting to suggest that psychic readers and mediums constitute a more specific *psychic-spiritual* milieu, within which there is a common consciousness towards using their psychic gifts to help others. Further, this common consciousness is strengthened and tolerance towards one another's beliefs is seemingly reinforced through the various activities of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Given their broad spiritual interests, activities in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu engage often include other service-orientated activities that fall within the wider interests of the cultic milieu. For example, one psychic advertising herself as a 'Clairvoyant' offering 'Tarot Card Readings' also offers 'Reiki Healing' and 'Aromatherapy'. Meanwhile, some psychics may also offer private hypnotherapy and Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) sessions whilst an holistic practitioner might offer Indian Head Massage and Reiki alongside workshops on Angels or Spirit Guides.

Communication and dissemination of information are important ways in which the cultic milieu or indeed the psychic-spiritual milieu, sustains itself. Campbell (2002 [1972]) notes how the ideas, beliefs and practices within the milieu are wide and varied. Further, individuals are free to 'sample' a wide range of activities and belief systems as the cultic milieu encourages eclecticism, being as it is built around the idea of 'seekership'. Similarly, members of the milieu – psychics, spiritual teachers or holistic practitioners – are able to share their beliefs and experiences with the wider community in a variety of ways. For instance, one way in which the psychic-spiritual, and wider cultic, milieu disseminate information and services is via organised events such as Psychic Fairs and Mind Body Spirit exhibitions. For example, *Mind Body Spirit (Inspirational Events)* has been organising fairs

since 1977 [mindbodyspirit.co.uk]⁴. Drawing together many different practitioners of esoteric, holistic and mystical interests, this particularly large event takes place twice a year in London (May) and Manchester (September). Smaller fairs, such as the *Health and Healing Festivals* also take place three or four times a year at different venues. Events such as the *Mind Body Spirit* and the *Health and Healing Festival* usually consist of a large number of 'exhibitors' (usually over 100) promoting a wide variety of holistic and alternative therapies and products. These range from aromatherapy, Aura-Soma and ayurvedic medicine, through to homeopathy, magnet-therapy and Reiki. Likewise, a number of workshops are likely to be available. For example, at a recent *York Health and Healing Festival*, there were sixteen workshops taking place over a period of two days, offering information on Spirit Guides and Angels and various therapies as well as demonstrations of Yoga and Clairvoyance.

Whilst the SNU have demonstrations of mediumship integral to their church services, secular demonstrations also take place throughout the country in pubs, social clubs and community arts centres. Indeed, as public interest in the paranormal has accelerated, larger theatre tours undertaken by 'celebrity' mediums like Tony Stockwell, Colin Fry and Derek Acorah, have become especially popular. Although Uri Geller and Doris Stokes sparked the early beginnings of the 'celebrity psychic' in the 1980s, the work of contemporary mediums appears today to be more widely accepted. This may in part be attributed to television programmes such as *Most Haunted* (Living TV). More recent programmes such as America's *Ghost Hunters* (Sci Fi Channel) *Haunted Homes* (ITV) and Derek Acorah's *Ghost Towns* (Living TV) have further fuelled natural human curiosity with ghosts and hauntings (see for instance, Sparks and Miller, 2001; Hill, 2011). Likewise, there have been many fictional programmes showcasing the work of mediums and psychics such as *Medium*, *Afterlife* and *Ghost Whisperer*.

⁴ *WitchFest* is also a Mind Body Spirit-type event which is aimed at individuals who are interested in Paganism and Witchcraft [witchfest.net].

Doris Stokes was one of the earliest psychics to appear on television. However, television programmes featuring the work of contemporary mediums such as Colin Fry (*Sixth Sense*, 2002), Sally Morgan (*Star Psychic*, 2007) and John Edwards (*Crossing Over*, 1999) have been popular.⁵ Similarly, audience participatory programmes such as SKY's *Psychic Interactive* have been especially fashionable forms of entertainment. However, psychics and mediums have utilised various technologies to promote their work and deliver their readings. The format of SKY's *Psychic Interactive* is reminiscent of the premium-rate telephone service *Psychic Friends Network*. Established in 1990, the *Psychic Friends Network* became the first telephone psychic service in the USA and quickly became a lucrative business, earning an estimated \$150 million in one year (Barboza, 1995).

Donna Kenworthy (1998) documents her experience of being a telephone psychic in her book *A 1-900 Psychic Speaks*. During the three years employed as a *1-900 Psychic*, Kenworthy spoke to and helped many of her clients. However, although her job meant that she could work from home, she reports how she could not relax when 'signed out' from the telephone service. She describes her ability as an 'empath' and how being tuned in to the emotions of other people took over her daily life: "the more I tune in the more I take on the feelings of the client" (Kenworthy, 1998: 104-5). Eventually she had to leave the telephone lines to find more suitable, regular employment. Frederick Woodruff (1998) also documents his time employed as a telephone psychic, a job he says enabled him to combine his skills as a 'metaphysical counsellor' (he is also an astrologer and tarot card reader) with his 'inveterate love of gossip' (in reference to his fascination with how people talk, interact and gossip with one another).

Like Kenworthy, Woodruff left his employment as a telephone psychic due to the invasion of private space and the need to 'get out and do real work'. Kenworthy and Woodruff's accounts allow an insight into the activities of

⁵ Information from www.imdb.com

employees working for psychic 'hot-lines' in the early 1990s. However, telephone psychic services remain very popular today (Shepherd, 2009). They are widely advertised in newspapers and, in particular, magazines relating to psychic-spiritual topics. For example, a recent issue of *Spirit and Destiny* magazine carried almost eighty adverts relating to psychic readings, mediumship and fortune telling. Similar adverts appear in more mainstream magazines such as *Marie Claire*. The majority of these have a premium rate telephone number which puts potential clients through to a credit-card payment service. There is often a number of adverts advertising a texting service whereby a client uses their mobile phone to text their question to a psychic, usually costing around £1.50 per message.

Internet technology is changing the way people go about their day to day lives (Rheingold, 1993).⁶ Although early writings about the internet may now be considered a little over-optimistic or technologically deterministic, the impact of new internet technologies on all factions of social life cannot be overlooked (Dawson and Cowan, 2004). The internet has wrought new ways of communicating and sharing information as well as proving to become an unprecedented, phenomenal medium of entertainment and commercial enterprises. It has played an important role in transforming the nature of religious and spiritual belief and practice; something which demonstrates the continued importance of religious experience in contemporary society (ibid.). Indeed, it has been said that any "student of religion – or, indeed, of contemporary society – will ignore this new variable at his or her peril" (Barker, 2005 in Hojsgaard and Warburg, 2005: 2). Further, there is now a distinguishable sociology of 'e-', 'cyber-' or 'digital-' religion (see for example, Dawson, 2000; Helland, 2000; Brasher, 2001; Cowan, 2005; Hojsgaard and Warburg, 2005; and more recently Campbell, 2010; Hutchings, 2012). Indeed, it is widely believed that the internet has been instrumental in helping traditional religions sustain

⁶ Rheingold writes in 1993, considerably earlier than the time the internet became a public medium. This is because he was involved in the W.E.L.L (the Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link') an early version of a computer conferencing system. He was inspired to write about what he considered to be a 'virtual community' (see www.rheingold.com).

themselves in contemporary society: “[the internet is]...helping religious groups to do what they have always done better. It is allowing people to reach out to more others, in more ways, to a greater extent than ever before in history” (Dawson and Cowan, 2004: 5). As a result, religion online provides the social researcher with a vast field for exploration.

The Psychic-Spiritual Milieu Online

Just as religion has a significant presence on the internet, so too do the interests, beliefs and practices of the psychic-spiritual milieu. New and alternative forms of religion and spirituality have made use of the internet to provide information and promote their services and practices. Whilst many websites relating to the interests of the psychic-spiritual milieu are largely commercial ventures, there is a wealth of information pertaining to psychic-spiritual interests. Moreover, as an important tool for communication in the twenty-first century, the internet provides opportunities to network and communicate with others who share similar interests. In line with the characteristics of the wider cultic milieu, the internet affords the opportunity for people to become less ignorant about other cultures, religions and practices. As noted by Dawson and Cowan (2004: 5): “The diffusion and clash of religious worldviews has taken a quantum leap forward, but so, it is hoped, has our ability to learn about and from each other and develop ways to live in harmony”.

The character of the World Wide Web allows the practices and beliefs typical of the cultic milieu to be freely expressed. Further, all manner of interests are catered for through the myriad websites relating to cultic milieu topics. A simple web search of a specific topic, for instance, gives at least some indication as to the number of websites containing material concerning the relevant search criteria. Furthermore, there has been significant growth in the number of web links relating to particular search terms. For example, the term ‘Paranormal’ retrieved 21.3m results in May

2009, yet in May 2012 the term retrieved 111m.⁷ Meanwhile, a search for 'UFOs' found 6.04m links in 2009, and 23.9m in 2012. Although a simple Google search is trawling only a fraction of the internet, the differences in numbers are interesting and might be indicative of a general growth in interest in paranormal topics. Indeed, similar searches for spirituality-related topics have also shown increases. For instance, 'Yoga' found 81.3m results in 2009 and 398m in 2012. However, the results retrieved using Google or similar search engines, include a host of different websites relating to websites with varying content. Websites may be based solely on information for instance, or relate specifically to shopping. Likewise, various URLs may link to user-generated content on the web such as YouTube videos or blogs and wikis. Also, many websites focus upon communicating with others who share similar interests. Some of these uses of the internet and their relation to the psychic-spiritual milieu are explored below.

Information exchange is one of the most primary uses of the internet (Donath, 1999). For example, a popular informative website is crystalinks.com, created in 1997. This website is a vast resource of alphabetised information relating to the metaphysical, spiritual and religious. Typical information includes the history and development of topics relating, for example, to healing, astronomy, sacred places and psychic development. Meanwhile, one of the primary activities on the internet is shopping and there is an abundance of websites and commercial ventures selling 'spiritual' items.⁸ Websites such as Holisticshop.co.uk and mindbodyspiritdirect.co.uk sell books, music, clothes, jewellery, tarot and Oracle cards, crystals and Feng Shui items amongst many other spiritual items.

⁷ Several films have been released in this three year period, most notably a film called 'Paranormal Activity' which has had several sequels in a short time, so many of the newer web links might relate to this.

⁸ See Carrette and King (2005); Aupers & Houtman (2006).

Some interests within the cultic milieu may be considered in terms of entertainment.⁹ Again, a simple Google search demonstrates the growth in number of websites related to various interests. For instance, there is an abundance of websites relating to astrology – 37m website ‘hits’ were retrieved in May 2009 but this had almost trebled by May 2012. YouTube, and other websites based on user-generated-content (UGC) are changing the way people experience the web (Cha *et al*, 2007). Individuals and groups within the cultic milieu are able to utilise websites such as YouTube or Google Video to share their experiences and beliefs as well as using them to inform others. Such websites include user-generated video clips created for spiritual enlightenment, featuring inspiring images and uplifting music (often composed by the user posting the video). Video clips of psychic readings and mediumship demonstrations are also available, providing an interesting illustration of psychics and mediums at work.

Psychic Readings Online

Although psychic readings are still advertised in magazines and newspapers, increasingly, psychic practitioners have been able to use the internet to promote and deliver their services. Searching for psychic readings via the internet is simple. Performing a Google search for ‘psychic readings’, for instance, retrieved 2.15m in 2009, and 8.4m in 2012 results. Meanwhile, a search for ‘tarot card readings’ found 789,000 results in 2009 and 3.65m three years later. As websites advertising and delivering psychic readings are many and varied however, deciding on which particular type of service to use becomes difficult. However, websites promoting psychic readings may be roughly sorted into three categories. By no means mutually exclusive, each category does however have specific

⁹ Indeed, the recent *Consumer Protections Act* (2008) enforces all practicing psychics and healers to provide a disclaimer whereby they state clearly that their practices are for entertainment or educational purposes only (Davies, 2008). Millions of websites relating to psychics and psychic readings have to display this disclaimer, although the new regulations have done little to change the abundance of spiritual entertainment on offer.

characteristics and may be defined as: commercial websites which typically advertise premium-rate telephone psychic readings; personal web listings by individual psychic practitioners promoting their services and social media such as virtual community discussion boards and Facebook.

A vast amount of search results for the term 'psychic readings' relates to websites promoting premium-rate psychic telephone lines. Often, such readings are advertised within a larger commercial venture, for example Liveperson.com. Launched in 1995, LivePerson.com promises to put "the world's experts at your fingertips" by providing contact with a knowledgeable person, expert in all manner of everyday topics from balancing the household budget to finding love. In the section on Spirituality and Religion, there are links to experts on spiritual interests such as Astrology, Dream Analysis and Psychic Readings. Meanwhile, elsewhere on the internet, psychicreadings.org.uk advertises psychic readings from professional clairvoyants. Readings are delivered via phone, text or email. Email readings cost £35 (plus VAT). Calls to the live psychic lines cost £1.53 per minute whilst their texting service is £1.50 per message.

In many ways, individual psychic practitioners share similarities with those offering readings via the more commercial websites, particularly in terms of using the web as a promotion tool. Media personalities such as Russell Grant and Jonathan Cainer offer psychic readings via their own commercialised websites, although they are both astrologers. Whilst Russell Grant advertises a team of telephone psychics, Jonathan Cainer promotes tarot card and I-Ching readings via his astrology-based website. Individual practitioners like Jonathan Cainer rely on promoting their services for income, and many are likely to have their own website through which they might sell various services. Individual websites advertising psychic services on the internet can be divided into celebrity psychics, stage mediums and psychic practitioners.

Whilst celebrity' psychics such as Sally Morgan, Colin Fry, Tony Stockwell and Gordon Smith each have their own extensive websites, they are not advertising private sittings, often due to high volume of requests. Merely, these websites are for informational purposes. For instance, Tony Stockwell has an extensive website relating to his tours and merchandise. He also gives details of his residential seminars – courses on which to learn spirit communication and develop psychic awareness; and his Psychic Studio which runs psychic development and mediumship workshops, seminars and demonstrations. Similarly, less well known but still popular, stage psychics and mediums such as Stephen Holbrook (see Wooffitt, 2006), advertise details of tour dates via their websites. Some mediums advertise private sittings or display video footage of their demonstrations.

The top results retrieved for the search criteria 'psychic readings' on Google lead to more commercialised services. Search terms such as 'spiritual consultant' or 'tarot card reader' often prove more useful to find personal psychic services. For example, the term 'spiritual consultant' found just 296,000 results in 2009 and 18m in 2012). One of these is Keith Thompson's website (keiththompson.org). Keith promotes his services as a Psychic Consultant and Spiritual Therapist. As with many psychics, Thompson offers a range of different psychic and healing services either through private appointment or workshops. He offers past-lives and tarot readings alongside mediumship, as well as spiritual or crystal healing. He does not advertise his fees on his website, instead inviting potential sitters to contact him via telephone. Psychic services advertised via the web vary immensely. A Google search for tarot card reader retrieved 241,000 results in 2009 and 2.75m in 2012. The top link reveals a website advertising the services of Annie (tarotcardreader.co.uk) – a psychic clairvoyant and tarot Card Reader. Annie, based in the UK, is available to give readings in person (one-to-one, group, or parties) or via telephone, email or webcam. A one-hour, recorded, face to face reading at Annie's home costs £45. Meanwhile, email readings, featuring a six month forecast, cost £30 whilst

webcam readings cost £40. However, there are other ways in which a psychic practitioner will use the web to promote their readings.

Up until Sept 2012, psychic practitioners also advertised their services via eBay.¹⁰ Psychic readings were a popular listing and were advertised as single readings or as one of a range of services available from the seller. In one search on eBay in May 2009, there were over 600 listings for psychic readings. In 2012, there were 808 in June. Listings advertised individual readings, for instance “Psychic Readings...Only have a few questions? Try This!” and “Amazing In Depth Psychic Tarot Reading Very Accurate”. One such listing, “Messages from your Angels a Psychic Spiritual Reading” was advertised by Victoria, a psychic consultant and astrologer. She advertised her readings by saying that she draws five cards from Diana Cooper’s *Angel Oracle Card* deck to give a reading which, she claimed, would “inspire and bring comfort”. Victoria also sold tarot card readings, astrology and numerology reports and white magic spells via her eBay shop.

Of particular interest however, are those psychic readings which are promoted and delivered via virtual communities and social networking site Facebook. These groups and communities based on psychic interests constitute a significant portion of the online psychic-spiritual milieu. The idea that people come into contact with ‘more others’ (Dawson and Cowan, 2004), demonstrates the integral social function of the internet, as Campbell (2005: xv) states: “...cyberspace and the internet are seen to bring together the real and the virtual in a technological world...people do not simply use technology; they become part of the network”. Further, the distinction between the real and the virtual is no longer clear (Nettleton *et al*, Pleace, Burrows, Muncer and Loader, 2002; Beer, 2008). This can be attributed to the way in which communicating with others via the internet has become an everyday practice; just another way of communicating with friends, family and work colleagues as well as complete strangers.

¹⁰ eBay recently changed its rules relating to consumer law which means that from 11th September 2012, psychic readings and related services such as astrology reports and spells may no longer be advertised on its site (BBC News Online, 2012).

The term 'Virtual Community' emerged during the mid-1990s, as noted by Campbell (2005), and has become a particularly popular subject of research (most notably Rheingold, 1993; however see also Kling, 1996; Baym, 1998; Kollock and Smith, 1999; Gatson and Zweernik, 2004). The popularity of these internet-based communities is that they are enabling many users to locate others who share similar interests or who have had similar experiences. Chat rooms and discussion board forums that make up virtual communities have existed on the World Wide Web since it was introduced into wider society in 1995. Within the psychic-spiritual milieu there are numerous virtual communities that utilise either synchronous or asynchronous means of communicating, although often, both will be available.

Psychic readings and mediumship are freely offered on virtual communities such as inspiredofspirit.com. Established in 2004 inspiredofspirit.com, at the time of commencing this research, was an active message board community, although most of their interaction now takes place on Facebook.¹¹ There was an active chat room within which scheduled development circles and real time psychic and mediumship readings would take place synchronously. Classes in tarot reading and other related psychic-spiritual interests were also conducted via the chat room. Asynchronous readings are still freely offered on the community message boards, and the readings forum is the most popular. There appears to be a hierarchical structure to the provision of readings on the site, similar to that in psychics.co.uk. For instance, *Fledgling Reader* status is given to a community member who has expressed a keen interest in reading for other members. Readings are publicly posted in the relevant forum, and the recipient of the reading is required to provide detailed feedback. After a period of time, Fledglings become *Approved Readers*. Here, readings become more private in the sense that after a sitter has requested a reading their readings are sent via the private messaging system to the

¹¹ The chat room is no longer active and postings to the message board are now sporadic.

recipient's private message inbox. Any feedback the recipient then wishes to give is also sent via the private messaging system.

Another virtual community, spiritualforums.com, is a definitive example of an asynchronous psychic-spiritual community, and it is extremely popular.¹² Founded in 2006 the community has grown rapidly with over 14,000 registered members, roughly 300 of whom visit each day.¹³ The forums on spiritualforums.com cover many topics related to the wider cultic milieu. Discussions boards are arranged in categories relating to Spirituality and Beliefs, Religions and Faiths, Paranormal and Supernatural, Complementary Medicine, Lifestyle and 'Most Anything' (relating to topics such as current events, art, books etc). Finally, there is a 'Members Only' area, which is also where readings are offered and exchanged. This is popular as it allows learner psychic readers the chance to practice their readings in what is considered a 'safe' environment.

Free psychic readings are an important part of the time members spend in these communities. An earlier study included readers from inspiredofspirit.com who recounted their experiences (Ryan, 2008).¹⁴ One reader reported how reading asynchronously via the message board (asynchronously) is often much easier as it gives the recipient time to digest what is being said before giving feedback. Meanwhile, another reader spoke about his experiences of reading in real time synchronous communication via MSN Messenger and within various psychic chat rooms across the internet. He recounted how when he first started to use the internet for psychic readings, he was very uncertain as to how it could work, believing that the recipient would have to be present. However, he soon discovered that the images and messages he received came in just the same way as if conducting the reading in the presence of the sitter.

¹² The site does have a chat room. However, it is not advertised widely, no classes are held there, and there is usually no more than six people chatting at any one time.

¹³ It must be pointed out here that some members may have registered more than once due to changing their username, forgetting their password or being banned from the site and registering as somebody else.

¹⁴ The preliminary study conducted for my MA thesis in 2008.

Virtual communities are still used today. However, social networking site Facebook has proved even more popular. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are popular because their basic premise is that users are able to create public or semi-public profiles of themselves enabling them to share as much information about themselves as they wish to (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Connections are made with friends and family, but also with strangers who are added to the users 'Friends' list. Users' social networks are then visible to their 'Friends' and they also have the option of allowing 'Friends of Friends' to see their network so more connections can be made. Connecting to strangers is not always the primary goal of Facebook users as connections are more often than not shared offline in some way (ibid.). 'Friend' links are made by requests sent from one user to another for the latter to either accept or reject. Facebook is a widely popular promotional tool and people can now have a Facebook 'Page' that people can subscribe to. 'Friends' lists have a limit of five thousand, so one of the advantages of having a page is that users can invite those who send them a friend request to 'like their 'Page'. Followers still receive information through their 'News Feed' which forms the first page seen when logging into Facebook. The News Feed informs Facebook users what activities their online Friends have decided to share with their network such as updating their 'Status', to adding new photos or 'liking' a page.

Many different groups of people, with many different interests use Facebook. The psychic-spiritual milieu has been able to exploit Facebook and its functions in various ways. For instance, there are groups relating to psychic readings, some of which are online representations of offline spiritual development groups. There are also pages created and maintained by psychic practitioners to promote their services and also for offering free short readings occasionally. Furthermore, there are individual psychic practitioners who promote their services and talk widely about their psychic-spiritual practices on their own 'Wall', encouraging others to comment and join in a conversation. Occasionally, these readers might offer free readings.

Conclusion

Psychic spirituality has emerged as one particularly good example of how the internet may be used for spiritual purposes. Members of the psychic-spiritual milieu have utilised the various applications of the internet to their advantage. Personal websites, eBay, YouTube and social media tools such as Facebook, virtual community websites and web messenger services are all used to publicise and exchange psychic readings. This has contributed to the increasing acceptance of marginalised beliefs and practices, and spirituality is starting to become recognised as a part of the everyday (MacKian, 2012), in a similar way the internet has become an embedded part of everyday life. However, the everyday situated practice of psychic services online and the spiritual orientation of such beliefs and practices have been overlooked. Consequently, the wide presence of the psychic-spiritual milieu on the internet provides a site rich for sociological analysis.

Many questions may be asked concerning what impact the internet has had on specific spiritual (and religious) activities and how these have been adapted for online social spaces (Dawson and Cowan, 2004). How the internet is used for psychic-spiritual practices may be explored. This will provide an in-depth insight into how individuals who participate in psychic reading culture online make sense of their psychic-spiritual world and their role within it.

This contributes to wider research into the kinds of activities people engage in on the internet and how they use the various technologies available to them online. Likewise, the nature and quality of personal psychic-spiritual experience in cyberspace is sociologically relevant. Accordingly, the present research seeks to investigate the following key areas of research:

- There are many psychic practitioner websites; what can be known about how these are used and how do psychic practitioners present themselves in online personal web space? Also, what can

sociological analysis reveal about the ways in which the wider psychic-spiritual milieu is represented online?

- Further questions may be asked with regards to Facebook. As the most popular social networking site on the internet at present, what can be understood sociologically about how psychic practitioners use it?
- Also, despite Facebook being so popular, virtual communities still exist and thrive online. How do psychic readers use these communities for reading and furthermore, what can be understood by adopting a discursive analytical approach to the analysis of the readings that are conducted in these communities?
- Lastly, what can be understood about the subjective experience of psychic reading online from the intrapsychic perspective of someone who for whom, an occult knowledge of reality is personally meaningful?

This chapter has provided a broad overview of psychic practices on the internet, and has introduced the various ways in which a community of psychic-spiritual seekers participate in online social spaces and use internet technologies to pursue their interest in psychic readings. However, this new area of research may be usefully situated within a framework that helps to capture the group's broad sociological characteristics. For this reason, it is useful to explore literature concerning the emergence and activities of spiritual groups: the sociology of religion. The following chapter considers sociological analysis of the decline of traditional participation in religious belief and practice, the subsequent emergence of new alternative spiritualities and the development of psychic-spiritual interests.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The previous chapter introduced the various ways in which psychic-spiritual seekers use the internet to pursue interest in psychic readings. Psychic-spiritual seekers form a community of people who are using internet applications such as asynchronous discussion board forums, synchronous chat and social networking sites such as Facebook to engage in common practices and shared beliefs. This community of seekers sit within a wider 'cultic milieu' (Campbell, 2002 [1972]), a concept which will be explored in detail later on in this chapter, to constitute what might be known as a 'psychic-spiritual milieu'. In order to understand the emergence of the cultic milieu and the various milieux within it, it is important to consider the literature relating to the decline of traditional participation in religion and the emergence of new age spiritual practices. The literature concerning both areas of interest is vast. Consequently, the following chapter considers literature relating more specifically to the emergence of the wider cultic milieu as defined by Campbell.

Religion in Britain has changed considerably over the course of the 20th century, and sociological analysts have tracked these changes. Whilst opinion differs as to how and why religion has changed, it is undeniable that religion today is very different to how it was a century ago. In particular, the advent of the internet in the closing decade of the 20th century wrought distinct change to how religion is followed. Nonetheless, church attendance figures have declined, and are indicative of an overall decline in interest in more traditional forms of religion. However, it could also be suggested that this has been replaced by an explosion of interest in newer forms of religiosity (see for instance Davie, 1994; Hunt, 2002; Wuthnow, 2003). The nature of these new ways of believing and belonging, and how they came about form the focus for this literature review. This chapter begins with a broad overview of existing literature concerning

what religion is and why it has been of sociological significance. There are many descriptions of the status of religiosity in Britain today, and there are many confusing explanations as to why traditional forms of religion have, as Heelas and Woodhead (2004) suggest, 'given way to spirituality'. However, before looking at the emergence of new spiritualities, it is useful to locate the changing status of religion in various significant points in history (see Campbell, 2007). In particular, the 1960s countercultural movement and the advent of the internet in the mid 1990s have had a significant impact on religiosity today. Both events have been under the sociological spotlight, particularly with regards to sociological understanding of contemporary religiosity. Finally, this chapter will consider the significance of studying 'psychic spirituality'; a different way of believing and belonging that is often overlooked by researchers.

Sociology and Religion

In order to understand the character of contemporary religiosity and the nature of new forms of spiritual belief and practice, it is useful to consider what is meant by 'religion' and why it is of sociological significance. However, the task of defining such a term is difficult given the diverse range of beliefs and religious practices. To facilitate sociological understanding, Hunt (2003) identifies two main theoretical approaches to the study of religion. Firstly, the *substantive* definition of religion considers what religion *is*; that is, "a belief in spiritual beings" (Taylor, 1903 quoted in Hunt, 2003: 2). This includes God, the supernatural and spiritual entities, and is largely related to the monotheistic Christian belief system that is prevalent in the West. Meanwhile, Hunt's *functional* definition of religion considers what religion *does*, what role it plays in society, and ultimately offers some explanation as to why it continues to exist. For example, Durkheim (1982 [1912]: 10) rejected the idea of religion as being simply "a belief in the supernatural" and instead defined religion as being "eminently social". For Durkheim, religion had an essential role to play in the maintenance of social cohesion and the reinforcement of societal

norms and values. Religious worship was considered as an outward, representation of a collective reality, and the rituals performed served to strengthen that group collective.

However, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) draw attention to Durkheim's statement that "religion has given birth to all that is essential in society" (Durkheim, 1915, cited in Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 4), arguing that this idea cannot effectively be applied to today's multicultural society of many differing belief systems. Instead, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) argue that an appropriate definition of religion cannot be too precise nor too broad, and suggest their own definition that seeks to identify the parameters within which religion may be defined: "religions involve some conception of a supernatural being, world, or force, and the notion that the supernatural is active, that events and conditions here on earth are influenced by the supernatural" (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 5). Whilst Stark and Bainbridge avoid definitions of religion which they consider as being too inclusive, encompassing for instance scientific humanism and Marxism, others argue for a more encompassing definition which includes a whole range of non-supernatural beliefs and practices (Partridge, 2005). Hunt (2003) for instance comments that in contemporary society religion can encompass such a wide range of beliefs and practices that it becomes increasingly complicated to pinpoint exactly what may be regarded as religious. Indeed, this idea becomes more significant when considering the extensive growth towards a more individualised, subjectively experienced self-spirituality (Heelas, 1996; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004).

Nonetheless, the fact that religion has persisted over time is sociologically significant. As Hamilton (1995:1) notes "the human capacity for belief is virtually limitless". However, the diversity of beliefs held by humans is what makes religion such an interesting subject for research. Sociological commentators are not only intrigued by the strangeness of some of those beliefs but are also compelled to ask why such beliefs and other religious practices have been and continue to be so important to culture and

society. Thus the changing face of religiosity has provided an endless supply of research material for sociological analysis, despite any difficulties in pinpointing an exact definition of what religion actually is.

A Case for Secularisation?

One significant factor contributing to the difficulties in addressing the central question of 'what is religion?' is the secularisation thesis (Chaves, 1994). Defined by Wilson (1966: xiv) as "the process by which religious thinking, practices and institutions lose social significance", secularisation has been a central debate in the sociology of religion throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. It was widely considered by early theorists such as Marx that religion would eventually die out or, as Comte suggested, be replaced by new thought around scientific rationality (Hamilton, 1995). Partridge (2005) also makes reference to how people are no longer 'thinking in religious mode', blaming the way in which society has become increasingly dominated by scientific rationality.

To explain secularization, Davie (2000) provides a useful analysis of two specific texts that have examined the declining authority of religion: *Religion in Britain Since 1945: Believing Without Belonging* (Davie, 1994) and *Religion in Modern Britain* (Bruce, 1995). Although the books examine the same subject matter, they differ considerably (Davie, 2000). Davie (1994) places belief as the most central factor in the secularization debate. There needs to be an acknowledgement, she argues, that despite the decline in church attendance figures, there is still a 'persistence of the sacred' in modern society that needs sociological examination. This opinion is shared by many commentators. For example, Hammond (1985) criticises the secularisation thesis, declaring it as insufficient for scholarly understanding of why the sacred persists. He outlines how classic notions of secularisation spoke of the "decline of religion, it did not necessarily mean as well the disappearance of the sacred" (Hammond, 1985: 3). Further, the sacred was regarded as separate and distinct. Hammond points to Simmel's writing on 'piety' to mean that encountering the sacred

is not necessarily religion but “religiosity in a quasi-fluid state” (Simmel, 1959 quoted in Hammond, 1985: 3).

The human leaning to the sacred is not innate, but the impulse emerges through a person’s life experience. Religion on the other hand, is a social product. Here, Simmel is similar to Durkheim and, as Hammond points out, there has always been a distinction between the sacred and religion, which is indeed “eminently social” as stated by Durkheim (1982 [1912]: 10) because it demands the collective. Hammond (1985) quotes Durkheim in illustration of this: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things...which unite into one single moral community...all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim, 1912, cited in Hammond, 1985: 4). All these conditions must be met: beliefs and practices that are systemized and which result in unifying people. Thus, the sacred develops through stages to become religion (see Hammond, 1985: 4). Hammond also notes that what does cause puzzlement is that whilst religion is seemingly in decline, the sacred persists.

Meanwhile, Bruce (1995) reflects upon the notion of religious practice and how that has declined over the second half of the 20th century, and develops this further in his later work *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Bruce, 2002). Bruce (1995) offers a sociological definition of secularization:

Secularization is a social condition evident in (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as the state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions; and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind, and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs
(Bruce, 1995: 3)

However, Davie (1994) notes that people may still engage in religious belief and practice, albeit privately. This is also something Dobbelaere (1998)

considers in his writing about the influences of the processes of detraditionalisation (of institutions such as the family and education) and individualization (whereby engagement in religion has become increasingly private). Furthermore, he argues that this makes the study of religious belief and practices remain important; an opinion shared by many scholars such as Bauman (2001, cited in Walsh, 2002: 6) who stresses that the shift from the social self to the individualized individual is “of utmost sociological relevance”. This is explored in more detail later.

Brown (2001) argues against the notion that secularisation, or what he terms, the ‘De-Christianisation of Britain’, has been a long drawn-out process wrought by a process of industrialisation and urbanisation from around 1800. Instead, he suggests that Britain was highly religious during the nineteenth century, and that it was not until the 1960s when Christianity began a rapid downward spiral. Furthermore, in the post-war era from 1945 until the 1960s, it appeared as if British people were enjoying a rejuvenation of the Christian faith and people lived their lives very much in accordance to Christian values and principles (ibid.: 7). However during the 1960s, church attendance statistics dropped dramatically. Brown concludes that rather than social commentators talking about Britain’s main religion as ‘in decline’ at the beginning of the twenty-first century, it is more useful to consider that it had already declined, and did so suddenly, forty years ago. Interestingly Britain, as a multi-cultural society, can no longer use its religious leanings as a means with which to define its character: “What made Britain Christian was the way in which Christianity infused public culture and was adopted by individuals, whether churchgoers or not, in forming their own identities” (Brown, 2001: 8).

According to Brown, from the 1960s, Britain’s moral and cultural fibre changed dramatically. The hold that institutions had on societal values started to crumble, and also, argues Brown, the biggest challenge to Christianity was the second-wave feminism of the decade. The traditional

notion of what it was to be female was very swiftly and dramatically replaced by something very different (ibid.). Essentially, these new ideas about what it meant to be female stood defiantly against the Christian construction of femininity (ibid.: 179). Such new ideas and ways of living emerging through the 1960s and 1970s included the contraceptive pill (1961), changes in abortion law (1967), the decriminalisation of homosexuality (1968) and a general sexual permissiveness; each of which the Church was opposed to.

Campbell (2007: 184) agrees that the 1960s were a critical cultural catalyst for creating the ideal climate for the transformation of religious and spiritual beliefs and practice. As old religious structures were breaking down, others were taking its place. Whilst Christian congregations across Britain tried to mimic youth culture in an attempt to appeal to the younger generation (Brown, 2001), new religious movements were increasingly popular, focussing as they did on religious and spiritual freedom. This popular appeal of new religious movements and the continuation of religious and spiritual beliefs and practices throughout history are explained by Campbell (2007) who draws on the work of Weber concerning theodicy. Theodicies are cultural frames of meaning which are not necessarily religious but which provide people with a frame of reference that is not only emotionally meaningful, but also constitute the values and beliefs used to handle emotions (ibid.). These frames of meaning also provide support for emotional catharsis and help to “translate such negative feelings as fear, anxiety, and despair into the positive ones of calm, confidence, optimism and contentment” (Campbell, 2007: 167). Theodicy also provides a moral framework, which is crucial to explain and give meaning to painful human experiences.

Although traditional religion has been displaced by scientific rationality, science has not, for a significant proportion of the human race at least, satisfied the human need for meaning, leading to what Weber termed ‘disenchantment’ (Weber, 1966 [1920]). As noted by Campbell, no frame of

meaning can satisfy all human need: “There will always...be a gap of some degree between how life and the world are meant to be, according to the theodicy, and how these are actually experienced” (Campbell, 2007: 171). This gap, argues Campbell, is imperative for creating and encouraging further change. Furthermore, it helps to explain why newer forms of religious and spiritual belief and belonging were favoured over traditional forms of religion at that particular time and why they continue today.

The 1960s are also said to be the origins of the ‘New Age’ movement (ibid.). The changing attitudes towards nature and the natural, seen in the rise of vegetarianism, holistic health and animal rights, and what Campbell regards as the ‘counterculture’, were significantly important during this era. Indeed, Campbell suggests that “the connections between the counterculture and the New Age are so close and direct, both in ideas and personnel, that it is not unreasonable to consider the latter as the direct continuation, rather than the mere outgrowth, of the former” (ibid.: 185). Campbell (2007) provides a useful quote from Michael York’s (1995) *The Emerging Network* which is in itself a comprehensive analysis of the New Age movement: “New Age is becoming recognized as a ‘generic term’ for the exploding re-interest in the 1960’s counter-culture concerns of ecology and all things alternative – mystical religion, mind expanding drugs, meditation and healing” (York, 1995: 37-38). Campbell refers here to Melton (1992) and Hanegraaff (1996) as also anchoring the roots of the New Age in the 1960s counterculture, but these are just a few out of many commentators on when the New Age movement emerged. For example Pike (2004) dedicates a chapter in her book concerning *New Age and Neopagan Religions in America* to ‘The 1960s Watershed Years’, in which she also refers to the counterculture and, as does Campbell, the Beat Movement.¹⁵ Pike (2004) and Campbell (2007), anchor many spiritual beliefs and practices of the 1960s, such as channelling and Spiritualism, in

¹⁵ The Beat Movement – used to denote a movement expressing the discontent of the youth of the late 1950s, in rejection of mainstream American societal values, and reminiscent of the Bohemians of the Romantic era.

the 19th century. Similarly, Hunt (2003) also refers to the 1960's countercultural movement. He addresses Campbell's earliest introduction to his work on Easternization (Campbell, 1999) in agreement that the Western popularity of beliefs such as reincarnation and human potential may indeed be rooted in Eastern mysticism.

However, there are other writers who relate the 'New Age' to the late 1930s/early 1940s (Sutcliffe, 2003) or even earlier, in relation to Theosophy (England) and New Thought (America) (see Alexander, 1992: 30).

Meanwhile, Campbell (2007) does acknowledge that the roots for what constitute the New Age, and indeed the thoughts and practices of the East, reach far back in history. However, if the 1960s is considered as a time when considerable social and economic changes happened, it is easy to see how, where from and why the 'New Age' as we know it today emerged.

Campbell (2007: 189) explains the changes in terms of a 'Post-War Crisis of Meaning', which he states, needs to be appreciated in order to fully understand the 'cultural upheaval of the 1960s'. Although the need for change was apparent on the economic and social level, Campbell suggests that there was a general consensus that there was little need for any change on a cultural level. However, he argues that the younger generation were significantly dissatisfied with maintaining the status quo and instead felt the need for change on a radical scale. He refers to two distinct forms of expression of their dissatisfaction: the 'Beat Movement' of the late 1950s and early 1960s and the more political form of the 'Moral Protestors' (although Campbell also refers to other subcultures emerging at this time). Although not explicit in his writings, Campbell is alluding to theodicy here.

The young generation of the 1960s were dissatisfied and seeking other forms of meaning making. The 1960s were conducive to the emergence of new forms of theodicy and ways of believing (Campbell, 2007). During the early 1970s Campbell (2002 [1972]) observed that British sociological attention had been drawn to the noticeable explosion in cult formation. As already noted, the sociology of religion was particularly concerned with the debate over whether Britain was becoming a secular society. However,

there was also growing societal concern over the emergence of cults. The following section considers the notion of 'cult' and the wider 'Cultic Milieu' outlined by Campbell (2002[1972]).

The 'Cultic Milieu'

Hunt (2003) argues that "By way of definition, perhaps no category of religion has created so much confusion as that of the 'cult'" (Hunt, 2003: 17). Similarly, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) also make reference to how sociological analysis on cults is especially 'chaotic'. Hunt (2003) explains how the defining and re-defining of 'cult' by sociology over the years has only contributed to the confusion of what it is meant to mean. As a starting point, he refers to the definition of 'cult' as laid out by the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: "a system of religious worship; homage, to a person or thing". Developing on this, he proposes that: "cults would seem to have a private, eclectic quality; attracting a loose association of members...cults are popular, non-official expressions of religion, which grow up inside or outside established faiths" (Hunt, 2003: 17). Hunt also identifies that traditional notions of 'cult' tend to regard them as arising out of established orthodox religions. He stresses however, that the more contemporary explanations of cult recognise that they encompass ideas and practices that are not religious in the usual sense.

Meanwhile, Bruce (1996) refers to Wallis (1976) in order to define the cult as: "a small, loosely knit group organized around some common themes and interests but lacking a sharply defined and exclusive belief system. Each individual member is the final authority as to what constitutes the truth to salvation" (Bruce, 1996: 82). This relates to Campbell's work on the 'cultic milieu' (2002 [1972]), which he defines as:

the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel and constitutes a unity by virtue of a common consciousness of deviant status, a receptive and synchronistic orientation and an interpenetrative communication structure... united and identified by the existence

of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions
(Campbell, 2002 [1972]: 23)

As noted in the previous chapter, Campbell's work is one of the most frequently cited in publications relating to the emergence and development of 'new' spiritualities and cults. Hanegraaff (1996: 16) argues that this is because it "provides us with a solid foundation for determining what should and should not be regarded as 'New Age' within the wider field of NRMs". He also argues that it is 'of crucial importance' to quote Campbell at length, in order to capture Campbell's notion of the cultic milieu as a cultural passage, as follows:

Given that cultic groups have a tendency to be ephemeral and highly unstable, it is a fact that new ones are being born just as fast as the old ones die. There is a continual process of cult formation and collapse which parallels the high turnover of membership at the individual level. Clearly, therefore, cults must exist within a milieu which, if not conducive to the maintenance of individual cults, is clearly highly conducive to the spawning of cults in general. Such a generally supportive cultic milieu is continually giving birth to new cults, absorbing the debris of the dead ones and creating new generations of cult-prone individuals to maintain the high levels of membership turnover. Thus, whereas cults are by definition a largely transitory phenomenon, the cultic milieu is, by contrast, a constant feature of society. It could therefore prove more viable and illuminating to take the cultic milieu and not the individual cult as the focus of sociological concern (Campbell, 1972, in Hanegraaff, 1996: 15)

Other researchers have drawn on Campbell's theory to inform their work on cults. For example, Kurti (2001) points to how Campbell's work on the cultic milieu was the first to draw attention to the fact that cults exist but

that this only happens in a social context in which they are able to flourish and reproduce.

Much research has been conducted into the formation of cults within the cultic milieu, their methods of recruitment and their characteristics (see for example Barker, 1984, 1989; Bruce, 1996; Dawson, 1998). However, Campbell (1992[1972]) noted how the sociological response to cult formation was somewhat belated. Drawing on their theory of 'religious compensators', Stark and Bainbridge (1985) looked at theories concerning how new religious ideas are invented and how these ideas then become socially accepted by a specific few people. They explain that "cults are social enterprises primarily engaged in the production and exchange of novel or exotic compensators" (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985: 172) arguing that the reason people pursue other forms of religion is because their old religion is no longer adequate. This aligns with earlier discussion by Davie (1994) and Bruce, (1995) concerning how old institutions and religions are breaking down in favour of new ways of thinking, believing and belonging. However, this does not suggest that religion did not have its own compensators.

Stark and Bainbridge (1985) offer three models of cult formation. To summarise, the *psychopathology* model describes how a cult may be created by an individual suffering from mental illness. They might be experiencing a particular crisis in their lives and will begin to believe in a new truth they feel the need to share with others. One of the examples the authors give of such a cult formation is that of the *Oneida Community* created by John Humphrey Noyes. The *entrepreneur* model meanwhile involves the main motivation behind the creation of the cult to be largely monetary gain – the compensators are *sold* to followers. Again Stark and Bainbridge provide some examples of cults that have become very successful business ventures, for instance Scientology. Lastly, the *subculture-evolution* model accentuates group interaction within the cult, which evolves over time by members collectively attempting to gain

particular rewards. When repeated attempts fail, the group then develops its own compensators.

Further, Stark and Bainbridge (1985) suggest that there are three ways in which cults may be organised: the *client* cult – the most organised, whereby the relationships within the cult are similar to that of therapist and client and, often, the ‘client’ will remain active within another religious organization; the *cult movement* – “full-fledged religious organizations that attempt to satisfy all the religious needs of converts” (p. 29), in the hope of causing social change; and lastly the *audience cult*, which is the most loosely organized and the membership mostly exists at a consumer level, for instance a UFO convention.

Stark and Bainbridge state that it is often the case that cults as ‘social enterprises’ will offer their prospective members the promise of rewards for joining them. However, they also argue that most cults fail. For instance cults, or new religious movements, need to grow rapidly in size in order to sustain themselves; the recruits need to be a good mix of socially isolated people and people who, through their social networks, could recruit more members. This relates to Campbell’s observation that cults have a high turnover. They are often transient, lasting only a short time; in short, they are highly unstable: “new ones are being born just as fast as the old ones die” (Campbell, 1992 [1972]: 14). This instability, argues Campbell, means that sociological analysis should focus instead on the cultic milieu rather than the cults themselves.

Similar to Stark and Bainbridge’s (1985) typology of cults, Campbell (2002 [1972]) identifies three types of people within the milieu that act together to maintain it. Whilst there is the *spiritual seeker* who actively supports the milieu by attending lectures and workshops and consuming cultic products (which could relate to Stark and Bainbridge’s ‘Client’ cult), there is also the *passive consumer* of cultic products such as (the more commercialised) magazines and the occasional services of a cultic practitioner (relative to Stark and Bainbridge’s ‘Audience’ cult); and then there is the *loyal member*,

loyal to a particular cult actively helping to get the cult known (and thus relates to Stark and Bainbridge’s ‘cult movement’ type of cult). The following table illustrates the links between the two theories:

		Type of Cult (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985)		
		Client	Movement	Audience
Type of Person (Campbell, 2002 [1972])	Seeker	✓		
	Loyal Member		✓	
	Passive Consumer			✓

Fig. 2.1: Links between Stark and Bainbridge (1985) and Campbell (2002 [1972])

Campbell’s distinction is important to bear in mind for the analyses discussed in later chapters because individuals who constitute the psychic-spiritual milieu differ in their depth of involvement in websites relating to spiritual and psychic matters. Whilst the categories are not exclusive, observation of websites such as spiritualforums.com over time indicated that there were indeed individuals who could fit into the category *loyal member*. These seekers might be moderators on discussion board forums or especially active in discussions; their main purpose being to maintain community dynamics and ensure others follow the forum rules. *Passive consumers* are more likely to be the individuals who visit psychic practitioner websites occasionally, perhaps to seek out their services. These types of individuals might have a passing interest in psychic spirituality or be relatively new to engaging in psychic-spiritual matters online. Meanwhile, *seekers* can be taken to refer to those individuals for whom psychic spirituality is becoming a genuine interest. They will be interested in spiritual development and learning about psychic reading, but are also likely to be interested in other topics such as Reiki, crystal healing or meditation for instance.

Whilst the emergence of cults and NRMs caused alarm through the 1960s and 1970s (and later through the 1980s and 1990s when specific cults made headline news, for example the Waco Siege in 1993 and Heavens Gate in 1997), it can be argued that the religious landscape has been irreversibly changed (Dawson, 1998: 13).¹⁶ In more recent years, new religions and alternative spiritualities have enjoyed a significant revival (although it is debatable whether this has had an active role to play in the decline of traditional ways of believing and belonging). The following section focuses on academic commentary about 'new spiritualities', a term used here to encompass a vast range of beliefs and practices. The term moves away from late 20th century consideration of cults and NRMs to better recognise the individualisation of the sacred, and the turn to the 'subjective self' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004).

A Revival of Spirituality?

The sociology of religion has had a lot to say about the changing nature of religiosity over time. The recent revival in 'old' religion such as Witchcraft and Paganism is no secret (for example York, 1995; Greenwood, 2000; Hutton, 2001; Blain, 2002; Pike, 2004; Berger and Ezzy, 2007; Coco, 2011), and a surge in interest in 'enchanted' spiritual practices such as mediumship, psychic phenomena and spiritual healing provides abundant material for scholarly analysis (for example Partridge, 2003; Wooffitt, 2006; Sabol, 2007; Gilbert, 2008; Hunter, 2010; Castro, 2010). A brief introduction to the literature in this area was given in the previous chapter. The following is a more in-depth focus on the beliefs, interests and activities relating more specifically to the psychic-spiritual milieu.

Partridge (2004) comments at length on the idea of Easternization, and like Hunt (2003) refers to Campbell's earlier work on re-enchantment. He too traces what he terms 'the current re-enchantment' back to Romanticism; mystical religions including the modern revival of nature religions,

¹⁶ Heaven's Gate was one of the earliest cults to use the internet to spread its message (Dawson and Hennebry, 2003; Macwilliams, 2005).

Spiritualism and Western Esotericism, and he cites Harvey Cox's *Turning East* (1977) as an even earlier discussion concerning Easternization. Partridge (2004) highlights how Cox's study of young people and their interest in Eastern traditions found that individuals were searching for a "real personal encounter with God or the Holy, or simply with life, nature and other people" (Cox, 1977 quoted in Partridge, 2004: 87).

Campbell (2007) also refers to Cox in reference to how Eastern traditions have effectively become 'westernised'; that is "not particularly Eastern at all" (Campbell, 2007: 31). Regardless of how Eastern traditions have become westernised, Partridge (2004) highlights how this relates to how collective (external) religion has instead become individual (internal) spirituality: "it is important to understand that central to this *turning East* is the turn towards the experiencing self and away from external authorities" (Partridge, 2004: 88 original emphasis). This echoes Heelas and Woodhead's (2004) *subjectivization* thesis noted earlier.

Heelas and Woodhead put forward their subjectivization thesis, based on Taylor's (1991) observation of 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture', in their text *The Spiritual Revolution* (2004). Their research concerned an extensive case study of Kendal, Cumbria, exploring the extent to which it could be said that Western culture had undergone a 'spiritual revolution' whereby people were rejecting traditional forms of *life-as* collective worship and religious practice in favour of a more *subjective-life* where emphasis is placed on individual, self-spirituality. Indeed, as a result of individualization, religion and spirituality now offer more freedom of choice: "In simple terms it would seem to involve choosing from an infinite variety of religions and the freedom to mix 'n' match according to one's spiritual, psychological and social needs" (Hunt, 2002: 210). Further, it appears that new, more innovative forms of spirituality are emerging as a result of this availability of choice. However, Hunt (2002, referring to Fenn, 1990), suggests that these new forms of spirituality are predominantly characteristic of New Age and occult forms

of religiosity. Further, New Age and occult forms of religiosity are especially compatible with modern day life in that they afford the individual seeker-of-spirituality a chance to 'indulge in the irrational' against the backdrop of 'enforced rationality' characteristic of structured daily life (Roof, 1994; Bahnisch, 2001; Hunt, 2002; Heelas and Woodhead, 2004; Partridge, 2004; 2005).

More recent research by Aupers and Houtman (2006) highlights how new spiritual practices have become incorporated into people's everyday lives (see also MacKian, 2012). They stress that New Age spirituality is no longer about people wanting to express themselves as 'unique individuals' in an attempt to mark themselves out from the crowd; this is the stereotypical view of a 'New Ager'. Instead, individuals are recognising, and preferring, self-spirituality. This is characterised by recognition of 'the self as sacred' juxtaposed against the increasing realisation that social institutions are alienating bureaucracies of the modern age. Aupers and Houtman (2006) found that social institutions – traditional religion, politics for example – were increasingly being seen as subordinating the individual, causing resentment, frustration, disease and mental disorders such as depression. As a result, these institutions were quickly being regarded as no longer having legitimate authority to determine what is 'right' or 'wrong' – the answers to these questions lie with the individual. The 'Spiritual Milieu', they argue, is perfectly legitimate particularly with respect to the beliefs and practices within it which are 'overwhelmingly diverse' (ibid.). Aupers and Houtman's findings echo that of Heelas and Woodhead (2004) and Partridge (2005) and align also with the work of Campbell, (2002 [1972]; 2007) and Jorgensen (1992).

'Self-spirituality', argue Aupers and Houtman (2006), comes as a result of repeated behaviours and practices; the sacred self becomes normalised. Today, whilst many people would not consider themselves to be religious, they might instead consider themselves to be 'spiritual' (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004). Indeed, spirituality appears to have become an

everyday phenomenon (MacKian, 2012). Further to this, various practices that could have been considered as 'New Age' are entering into different spheres of day to day life. For instance, clear links have developed between spirituality and health, and there is a growing literature on this area. One significant example of this is in midwifery. Linhares (2012) researched midwives' experiences with the spiritual during childbirth, and found that midwives in the study regarded spirituality as integral and essential to their experiences of childbirth. Intuition was reported as a key spiritual tool whilst assisting mothers through childbirth and childbirth itself was considered a miraculous event and spiritual experience, not just for the birthing family but for the midwives too (Linhares, 2012). The appeal of spirituality in health related matters is in opposition to the traditional institutionalised and increasingly corporatized world of medicine, consequently re-enchanting the natural - in this case childbirth.

Education and work might also incorporate elements of 'New Age' practice. For example, meditation has been used in primary schools (Groothuis, 1986; Brown, 2007) and workplaces might adopt new ways of ensuring a healthy workforce through offering various therapies such as Shiatsu massage (Back *et al*, 2009). Carrette and King (2005) refer to the work of Nigel Thrift (1997) who identifies how the corporate world is adopting New Age 'spiritual training' in offering their employees 'personal growth experiences' to help them understand themselves better. Indeed, corporations are recognising the need to help their employees adopt a more meaningful existence to satisfy their 'spiritual hunger' (Carrette and King, 2005). This is also bound up in a 'privatisation of religion': "tailoring ...spiritual teachings to the demands of the economy and of individual self-expression to business success" (Carrette and King, 2005: 44).

Nonetheless, whilst 'new spirituality' does indeed generate a large and rapidly growing market, the fact remains that people indulge in these spiritual beliefs and practices on a daily basis. Yet defining just what is meant by spirituality or 'being spiritual' is not easy. Indeed the only

certainty appears to be that it means different things to different people. Spirituality has been defined in different ways. For instance, Tacey (2004: 11) writes how “Spirituality arises from love of and intimacy with the sacred”. Meanwhile, MacKian (2012) identifies how for the last twenty years, a ‘general new age sentiment’ has become more diffused within society as a whole. She also notes that whilst any discussion of spirituality usually includes a reference to the New Age, the participants in her study distanced themselves from traditional notions of what that might constitute. Participants interviewed for the preliminary study for the present research also did not appreciate being labelled ‘New Age’ (Ryan, 2008). When asked what they meant by the idea of ‘being spiritual’ they instead offered the following responses:

Extract R3

To me being spiritual has nothing to do with psychic awareness or the ability to ‘see’ spirit. It’s all about living a life of caring and helping others.....trying to see the good in all and to be forgiving whenever possible.

Extract R8

Being spiritual is a feeling of being connected with everyone and everything and living a life that is as pure as possible in thought, word and deed.

Extract R9

Being spiritual to me means, loving everyone as you would as that they love you....helping people and doing things for them just because you can...smiling even when you feel your on heart is breaking...giving someone your support just because you can...trying to make the world a better place!

MacKian (2012) also comments on the ambiguity of meaning when people say they are ‘spiritual’. However, she adopts an approach that goes beyond

considering spirituality as something individuals *do*. She argues that the spiritual needs to be understood in an everyday context and that “we cannot ignore the *spirit* at the heart of the *spiritual*” (MacKian, 2012: 3-4). She does this effectively in her own study concerning spirit in everyday worlds; the emphasis on spirit ‘shifts the gaze’ away from trying to explain it in relation to what was traditionally religious life. Interestingly, Holmes (2007) points to how spirituality is seen as a mystery. This, he argues, gives us a choice: “we acknowledge that we cannot study it directly because of its intangibility “or “we accept the study of spirituality at a corporeal level, but only through its outcomes and symptoms” (Holmes, 2007: 23). Holmes also notes that definitions of what is ‘spiritual’ have changed over time and that now there is a much broader spectrum of spiritualities; each with different ideas of what is spiritual. He argues whether or not it is necessary to identify one single definition of Spirituality, and whether we actually need one. Holmes puts forward a tentative definition of the term as being “the human search for meaning, particularly relationally, and that for many today this incorporates a supernatural/corporeal dimension that suggests many of us have discovered we are more than our physical biology” (Holmes, 2007: 24-25).

For the purposes of this research, I use the term ‘psychic spirituality’ to refer to the beliefs and practices of psychic readings. Whilst psychic readings – tarot reading, palmistry, mediumship for instance – do fall under the umbrella of the ‘New Age’ or wider ‘cultic-milieu’, it is more appropriate to consider such beliefs and practices in their own right. Similarly, the *spiritual* orientation of interest in psychic readings has been overlooked. It could be argued, as MacKian (2012) does with regards to spirituality, that psychic reading is not just an isolated activity that someone *does*. Indeed, it is very likely that psychic readers are involved in other ‘spiritual’ activities, and consider themselves to be ‘spiritual’, as found in the preliminary study for this thesis (Ryan, 2008). In short, their spirituality constitutes a part of their everyday identity.

Identifying a Psychic-Spiritual Milieu

Aupers and Houtman (2006) identify a 'spiritual milieu' in which the various ideas, beliefs and practices that might be considered 'New Age' might be grouped together. This is more specific than Campbell's (2002[1972]) notion of the cultic milieu which, as noted, was taken to encompass much more in relation to what was happening around the 1960s/1970s at the time he was writing. His work was extended upon by Jorgensen (1992) in the mid-1970s. Jorgensen used participant observation to study the 'esoteric culture' (Tiryakian, 1973; 1974, in Jorgensen, 1992: 3) of a large metropolis known as 'the Valley' in the USA, over a three year period. He wanted to get close to the subject matter – the 'cultic milieu', of people who, in Jorgensen's terms "were making extraordinary claims to knowledge on the basis of unconventional practices" (Jorgensen, 1992: 3) using, for example, such techniques and practices as mediumship, witchcraft, healing, clairvoyance and other divinatory techniques. Jorgensen examined in great detail the way the socio-cultural world of 'the Valley' described their beliefs as, for instance, 'esoteric', 'spiritual' and 'psychic'; or used the words 'pagan', 'new age', 'metaphysical' or 'occult' to describe their practices.

By becoming a participant himself (Jorgensen took the role of tarot-card reader), he was able to gain an in-depth perspective of the 'esoteric scene' of 1970's America. His reasons for doing so included his realisation that the subject matter of this type of cultic milieu was steeped in stereotypical views from outsiders, which distorted the views of those on the inside, following, believing and practicing the unconventional topics they did. Academic attention towards esoteric culture at that time, warranted due to the explosion in public interest and concern over the status of traditional religiosity, began to realise just how popular the subject matter of the cultic milieu actually was. Jorgensen provides some examples of the extent to which the esoteric scene had taken hold in the popular media – for instance, horoscopes were published in nearly 70% of daily newspapers

whilst telephone-based tarot readings were becoming increasingly popular and clairvoyance, palmistry and other related services were well advertised. Similarly, there was an increase in books, magazines, television programmes, courses and workshops relating to such topics as alien visitations, spirit communication, psychic powers, meditation, yoga and other spiritual and occultist practices. Specialist shops and mail order catalogues began to sell a vast range of esoteric-related paraphernalia such as candles, incense, jewellery and tarot cards. Studies into this emerging esoteric culture were also carried out. Jorgensen cites Greeley's (1975) research which discovered between 24 and 59 % of Americans reported to have had 'psychic' experiences such as déjà vu or clairvoyance, and 27% reported having had contact with the deceased.

Jorgensen's (1992) study explores esoteric culture, the cultic milieu and the rising popularity of New Age related subjects. His description and analysis of the cultic milieu found that, in the esoteric community an ethos existed which he notes as being previously identified by Scott (1980), listing a number of basic beliefs that followers held, for example, a connection with the divine, communication with spirits and other invisible forces, and interaction with cosmic realities through rituals and magical practice. Jorgensen describes the esoteric community as:

a very loose connection and network of seekers, clients, practitioners, groups, businesses, confederations of practitioners and groups, and a few central activities, such as psychic fairs, all of which are dispersed geographically throughout 'the Valley'. It exists in the imagination (ideation) of its members, their symbolizations and talk, and their activities. Despite their diversity, it is sustained by their sense of community (mutual belonging), differences with the exoteric world, similar values, ethical and normative principles and worldviews, as well as their collective symbolization, interactions, relationships, and other involvements (Jorgensen, 1992: 61).

Jorgensen's 'esoteric milieu' describes a specific cultic milieu which has more of a focus on psychic reading and the esoteric tarot. For the purposes of this thesis, I refer to the term 'psychic-spiritual milieu' which relates more specifically to psychic reading, essentially 'bracketing off' any other activities that might be associated with the cultic milieu, such as healing. However, the term 'spiritual' is used here to relate to how the practice of psychic reading is situated within a reader's own beliefs and activities which constitute their everyday spiritual world (see MacKian, 2012). Thus, it would be unhelpful to separate the two in this instance. The 'spiritual' also relates to the connection the readers seemingly have with spirit when practicing. Indeed, it is believed that psychic practitioners engage with the spiritual in order to perceive the information from the person they are reading for (Ryan, 2008).

The internet has enabled people interested in religion and spirituality to pursue their interests more easily. Many offline religious practices can be carried out in online spaces. There is a wealth of literature relating to various religions online such as Christianity (Young, 2004; Lovheim and Linderman, 2005), Buddhism (Prebish, 2004; Kim, 2005), Witchcraft (Berger and Ezzy, 2004) and Paganism (Griffin, 2004; Cowan, 2005), amongst others. Psychic-spiritual practices are also carried out online. This includes the more commercialised face of psychic readings as well as the less well-known more *spiritual* aspect of psychic practices which takes place in online social media, both of which are outlined in the previous chapter.

However, whilst there has been considerable research into psychic practices (and scepticism) in general, predominantly from a parapsychological perspective, psychic practices online and their *spiritual* aspect (beyond Spiritualism) have been overlooked. Yet psychic practitioners do what they do offline in online social contexts. Hine (2000) and Kozinets (2010) insist that if social scientists want to understand society they must consider the various ways in which people use social media and other technologically-mediated communication to go about

their daily lives. Writers such as Dawson and Cowan (2004) and Hojsgaard and Warburg (2005) contend that the impact the internet has had on shaping the nature of religious and spiritual belief cannot be ignored. Likewise, the intricacies of the digitalised psychic-spiritual milieu, how it shapes social relations within the milieu and how the online psychic-spiritual milieu has been shaped and used by its members, need to be explored.

Conclusion

In summary, sociology has recognised that religious belief and practice has not declined through a process of secularisation. Rather, collective worship has given way to a more subjective experience of religion and spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead, 2004); an experience that is a part of everyday life (Mackian, 2012). This is why religion and spirituality remain sociologically important today. The internet, in such a short space of time, has been particularly instrumental in the ways in which religiosity has changed and remained important. Psychic spirituality has emerged as one particularly good example of how the internet may be used for spiritual purposes. A range of questions which frame this thesis were introduced at the end of the previous chapter. Briefly, these were:

- What can be known about psychic practitioners and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu through examining their websites?
- How do psychic practitioners use Facebook to manage and negotiate their identity?
- How might we understand the ways in which psychic-spiritual seekers use online discussion board forums for psychic readings?
- What can be understood about the spiritual and subjective experience of psychic reading online from the intrapsychic perspective of someone for whom, an occult knowledge of reality is personally meaningful?

These questions help to consider how psychic reading culture is made sense of in online social spaces. Chapter one introduced the wider research field to be explored in order to address these questions whilst chapter two highlights the gaps present in the existing literature; predominantly, the ways people 'do' participation in the very environment (the internet) in which social scientists are interested in. Exploring discourse on websites, and analysis of interaction and participation in online social spaces will help us to understand sociologically the ways in which psychic-spiritual seekers use the various applications of the internet to pursue their interests. In order to do so, a suitable methodology must be considered. The following chapter explores a range of qualitative methods that may be used to consider the above research questions.

Chapter Three

Methodology

As the previous chapters have discussed, the internet has provided an ideal research field in which sociologists of religion and spirituality (and indeed other disciplines) can explore and discover the ways in which people use the internet to pursue spiritual interests. It has also been noted how psychic-spiritual culture online has been overlooked as a potential field for sociological analysis. This research concerns how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the internet to participate in psychic and spiritual interests, and examines the ways in which psychic-spiritual seekers construct their worlds and make sense of what they are doing whilst online. Although more specific methods discussion is reserved for the chapters to which they are relevant, this chapter considers the broad methodological approach taken for this research. Firstly, it is useful to consider the methodological context in which the research was conducted. This is discussed in the following section. Secondly, a useful way to research an area that has yet to be sociologically understood is by adopting an eclectic ethnographic approach. Why this is and how ethnographic techniques can be usefully applied to the study of online psychic-spiritual practices will be discussed, together with the different methods that were used for data collection and analysis. Finally, research on the internet is fraught with ethical considerations different to that which concern traditional offline methods. This chapter will therefore close with a deliberation on the various ethical issues associated with researching psychic-spiritual culture online.

Methodological Approach

An eclectic qualitative methodological approach was taken in order to study how psychic-spiritual seekers' activities are constructed online as well as how their realities are produced through interaction. These

activities include participation in the online psychic-spiritual world (virtual communities and social networking site Facebook), and the relationship between the offline and online psychic worlds as represented on psychic practitioner web pages. Ethnographic techniques were used to collect data relating to sense-making practices whilst visual and textual data were analyzed from a broadly ethnomethodological perspective. This was useful to find out how sense-making is negotiated and managed in online social spaces.

Qualitative Methodology: the reflexive turn

The nature of the data and the researcher's prior experience as an online reader invites a range of broadly related methodological approaches. These approaches are underpinned by the reflexive turn in sociological analysis. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) chart how qualitative research has evolved over time, moving through seven 'historical moments', and expanding widely to incorporate new foci, new methods and consequently, new fields of research. Qualitative research focused on traditional anthropological methods in the earlier years (1900s to 1940s), followed by interpretive methodology and the emergence of new interpretive perspectives such as feminism, phenomenology, ethnomethodology and critical theory (1940s-1960s). 'Blurred Genres' emerged during the 1970s and early 1980s when the focus turned to cultural representations and their meanings, and what Geertz called "thick descriptions" (see Denzin and Lincoln, 2003: 25). This was followed towards the end of the 1980s by a marked 'reflexive turn' for qualitative research when the researcher's position and potential impact on the research became particularly prominent. Labelled also as 'the crisis of representation' this was a time when it was realised that the old representations of, for example, class, gender, and race, were no longer valid.

The crisis was a catalyst for qualitative researchers to find new ways of writing about and therefore representing the 'Other' (Coffey, 1999). New

forms of ethnographic writing emerged as a possible solution and new ways of composing ethnography were developed including autoethnography and other ways of immersing the researcher in the research (Ellis and Bochner, 2000). The need to represent the 'Other' more accurately continued. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) point to the sixth (post experimental) and seventh (the future) moments as being characterised by new and emergent research methodologies such as fictional ethnography, ethnographic poetry (see for instance Ellis, 2004), and multimedia texts. This is evident in more recent work on visual ethnography (see Prosser, 1998; Pink, 2001; Gauntlett, 2007) and more recently, sensory ethnography (Atkinson et al, 2008; Pink, 2009). Also, because qualitative research is carried out in different disciplines, increasingly, multi-disciplinarity is being encouraged.

However, it may be argued that traditional methods have merely evolved to fit the requirements of research today. Indeed, in defining the state of qualitative research in the twenty-first century, Denzin and Lincoln (2003: 4) posit the seventh moment as "a situated activity that locates the observer in the world... [consisting]...of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world... [turning it]...into a series of representations". These representations come from a multiplicity of traditional data collection tools: observational field notes, interview data, informal conversations and other data such as photographs, recordings, and research journals. Denzin (2004) highlights the importance of internet research. Indeed, he argues it is a crucial component of the seventh moment which he defines as a:

period of ferment and explosion. It is defined by breaks from the past, a focus on previously silenced voices, a turn to performance texts, and a concern with moral discourse, with critical conversations about democracy, race, gender, class, nation, freedom and community (Denzin, 2004: 1).

Denzin states clearly that online critical interpretive qualitative research is essential to our understanding of the world and moving it forward in positive ways. Accordingly, qualitative research today incorporates a vast range of methods enabling the qualitative researcher to take an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the online social world. Ethnographic techniques are useful tools with which to approach the online research field. Ethnography and how it may be adapted for online research is now explored in more detail.

Ethnography

Ethnography is defined by Atkinson and Hammersley (2007: 1) as “an integration of both first-hand empirical investigation and the theoretical and comparative interpretation of social organization and culture”. To study the ‘Other’, the researcher is immersed in a culture for an extended period of time, collecting data using a variety of methods (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1995; Schensul *et al*, 1999; Tedlock, 2000). The approach comes from anthropology and is associated with the work of Malinowski (1922) and Mead (1943) (see Denscombe, 2007). In anthropology, direct experience of social phenomena can elicit knowledge and understanding from the perspective of the participants (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999). To gain this understanding, ethnographic fieldwork triangulates methods such as participant observation (covert and overt), documentary analysis and interviewing. Ethnographers may also choose to incorporate quantitative survey methods (MacDonald, 2001; see also Zhang, 1999; Andrews *et al* 2003).

For Wolcott (1999), Chang (2008) and others (see for instance, Reed-Danahay, 1997; Davies, 1999; Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004; Smith, 2005; Anderson, 2006) the term ethnography refers to both *process* and *product*, although a distinction must be made between the two. Some studies simply borrow ethnographic techniques, adapting traditional ethnographic methods, such as participant observation and interviews, to

collect data (Wolcott, 1999). Often, the phrase 'participant observation' is used instead of ethnography, although essentially ethnography refers to fieldwork that involves the researcher living amongst or engaging fully in the culture in which they are interested in studying. Both participant observation and ethnography employ similar methods: participation and observation, the collection of textual and visual documents as data and interviews.

Nevertheless, the focus of ethnography is on the culture of a group. Participant observation is a key method as it allows researchers the chance to gain, at the very least, a microscopic sense of the different aspects of that group culture. For example, Jorgensen (1992) conducted a participant observational study of the esoteric milieu, observing the types of activities that were practiced in psychic fairs and workshops as well as undertaking the role of professional tarot card reader. He also conducted interviews and collected documents. However, Jorgensen considered his study to be limited in a number of ways because he felt he could not understand the extraordinary view of reality the other participants seemed to have. By immersing oneself more fully in experiencing the phenomena, the researcher expends more emotional energy and involvement, taking on more of an understanding of the phenomena (Gold, 1958). Participating in psychic readings either as the sitter or the reader, as Jorgensen did, allows the researcher to experience the phenomena first hand. Importantly, participant observation is an excellent methodological tool with which to study online culture, as considered in the next section.

Virtual Ethnography

As a diverse methodology, ethnography can be easily adapted for researching the online social world. This type of ethnography has been termed *virtual ethnography* (Hine, 2000), *webnography* (Puri, 2006), *digital ethnography* (Murthy, 2008) and *netnography* (Kozinets, 1998, 2010; Xun and Reynolds, 2010). Essentially, the subject matter is the same; that is, the

(virtual) ethnographer is immersed in the online culture using a variety of methods in order to understand the culture as much as possible. Indeed, as noted by Jeffrey *et al* (2010: 2): “ethnography, in its broadest terms, and qualitative research are now the preferred forms for research of online social groups”. They also suggest that online ethnographers, rather than doing ‘fieldwork’ are instead doing ‘deskwork’ because their research does not involve travel: “it is an experiential rather than a physical displacement” (Jeffrey *et al* 2010: 2). Consequently, rather than the ethnographer observing people in their natural surroundings, behaviour in online culture is “nothing but text” (Thomsen, 1998: online). As Hine (2000: 50) points out, the role of the ethnographer “is to develop an understanding of the meanings which underlie and are enacted through these textual practices”. Text might be generated as information or as interaction; both synchronously and asynchronously, and all text can be analyzed in order to understand online culture. This research concerns online psychic reading culture which is manifested through textual practice and is readily available for analysis.

As Hine (2000) states, as a cultural artefact, the internet has interpretive flexibility and should not be accepted at face value: “what might seem technical features or inherent characteristics are therefore open to ethnographic investigation” (Hine, 2000: 34). Whilst that statement was written over twelve years ago, it might be argued that since its widespread diffusion through society, the internet has become more complex and diverse over that time. Interpretive flexibility therefore remains particularly important as internet users, and therefore researchers of online culture, perceive the internet differently. Consequently, a multi-method ethnographic approach to the study of online culture is the most appropriate, and flexible, way to research online culture (Wilson, 2006).

There are many examples of virtual ethnographies. Markham (1998) was one of the earliest researchers to adapt ethnographic techniques to study the lived experience of using the internet. She documents this in her book

Life Online: Researching Real Experience in Virtual Space. In the book Markham tells the story of becoming connected to the internet in its early days and talks at length about the experiences she had. In particular she studied online communication and how internet users create the online social world through text. She emphasizes the individual experience of going online, explaining that whilst people communicate with others in this virtual space, the experience is very much an individual one. Further to this, each user has their own reasons for using the internet and their own intentions with regards what they do when online. Markham engaged in synchronous communication at Diversity University, a MOO (MUD Object Oriented) and was struck by how ordinary the communication was even in the early days of public use of the technology.

Baym's study of online community, documented in her book *Tune In, Log On: Soaps, Fandom and Online Community* (2000) is also well known. Contributing to an asynchronous Usenet discussion group rec.arts.tv.soaps (r.a.t.s), Baym observed the communicative practices that took place through text. Her participation in the newsgroup began in 1990, so her study was extremely early in the history of public engagement with the internet. As well as participant observation, she used online survey methods and discourse analysis. Baym found that the topics and purposes behind the group's existence were important, as were the experiences of the participants. Indeed, their individual biographies influenced the way they participated online.

Meanwhile, Hine's *Virtual Ethnography* (2000) is a seminal text consulted for many online ethnographic studies. Hine considers the internet as a field of ethnographic study, exemplifying this with her case study ethnography of internet coverage and virtual discussion of the Louise Woodward case in 1997. The Louise Woodward case was an extremely high profile media event which was televised in both the USA and UK as well as having significant attention worldwide because of the internet. Louise was an 18 year-old British nanny standing trial having been charged with the murder

of an 18 month-old baby boy in her care. She was found guilty by the jury but the judge was asked to reconsider the verdict. He released his verdict on the internet ten days later, overturning the verdict of murder and instead ruling involuntary manslaughter with a sentence of 279 days, the amount of time Woodward had already spent on remand. Consequently, she was free to leave and returned home to England a few months later. At the time, the internet served as a popular space in which to discuss the trial, providing a site rich in information about how the internet was being used and what it had come to mean sociologically. It was unusual because this was the first time the world's media had used the internet on such a large scale to report on one particular case (ibid.).

Hine (2000) studied the media interest, websites and discussions that emerged about the Louise Woodward case. The newsgroups popular at the time were considered by Hine to be collaborative spaces for interaction, whilst websites were seen as sites for social action. Both were created and sustained over time because they were based on a specific topic or cause. In the case of the Louise Woodward trial, newsgroup users understood that within that social space, they were expected to behave in a particular way; that is, to discuss the trial (ibid.). Likewise, websites set up either in support of Louise or otherwise had a specific purpose, understood by the website author in anticipation of a perceived audience.

Hine's ethnography of the internet during the closing years of the 1990s was particularly interesting because it provided an ethnographic overview of how the internet was appropriated by its users, and how they were shaping the technologies for their own use. Other well-known virtual ethnographic studies include that by Miller and Slater (2000) which examined the early adoption of the internet by Trinidadians and a study by Kendall (2002) which examined the ways in which gender was negotiated in online social spaces. These earlier studies provided interesting insights into the appropriation of ethnographic methods to the study of online social spaces. Virtual ethnography has therefore been used effectively in a

variety of online research fields. For example, researchers studying online or distant education and blended learning find ethnography to be a particularly useful approach for examining students' experiences (see for instance Kruger, 2006). Petrakou (2009) explored virtual worlds and their use in education. Similar studies have also been carried out into the area of e-health (for example, Maloney-Krichmar and Preece, 2005; Liang and Scammon, 2011). With regards to the present study, virtual ethnographic research has also been carried out into various religious and spiritual practices online.

Gerth (2009) studied a virtual community of Zoroastrians, by examining their use of websites, email lists, YouTube and Social Networking Sites, finding that their use of the internet facilitated offline group cohesion. Similarly, Howard (2009) researched Christian Fundamentalists and their online lived experience of their faith. He found that new media can be used to supplement offline brick-and-mortar church activity, for believers to share fundamentalist ideology. However, the internet merely carries an expression of this ideology because religion exists in the *lived* experience of individuals. Nonetheless, the internet does free the individual from institutionalised control of their beliefs (Howard, 2009: 241). Scott (2011) also used ethnographic methods to study online religion. He studied Mormons in Second Life, a virtual world popular in the late 2000s. He immersed himself in the virtual world as an 'ethnographer avatar' to analyse how the experience of Mormon culture was constructed in a virtual space. In summary, these studies demonstrate how ethnographic methods can be adapted for use online.

Data Collection Methods

Studying online psychic-spiritual culture from an eclectic methodological perspective allows flexibility, making ethnographic techniques the ideal tools to apply to this particular research. The following section considers the most appropriate ethnographic methods with which to research the

way in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use different applications available via the internet. These were: analysis of websites as media texts and participant observation of Facebook and virtual community discussion board forums. These methods are discussed below followed by an introduction to autoethnography; a method used to examine the subjective experience of using the internet for psychic-spiritual practices.

Websites as Textual and Visual Data

Hine (2000) highlights how texts are cultural products which are rich in information about how authors understand their reality. Whilst websites are media texts which can be interpreted in multiple ways (Wilson, 2006), they offer potential for mass communication and are used to display and promote services or products and offer representations of people and their cultural interests (Chandler, 2009).

In order to examine how psychic practitioners express their identities to potential clients through their websites, an opportunity sample of nine personal websites promoting psychic-reading services was chosen for analysis. These were selected either through psychic practitioner's profiles on Facebook or chosen through using a Google search. Data, in the form of screenshots, was collected using the 'Snipping Tool' application from Windows7 in order to preserve some of the more salient features of the websites.¹⁷ This was important given the transient nature of web documents. Chandler (2009) points out that as a medium of identity maintenance, websites can be continually revised in accordance to the message the author wants to convey. The website images were collected in one month, March 2011, in order to provide a 'snapshot' of a variety of different websites relating to psychic readings.

¹⁷ The 'Snipping' tool in Windows 7 is a quick way to capture a full or partial screenshot image.

Participant Observation

Cultural meanings can also be identified through participant observational methods. In his book entitled *Participant Observation* (1989), Jorgensen writes how the method is used to describe what goes on in a social setting, who or what is involved and when and where things happen. The researcher can witness first-hand how things occur and gain a qualitative insight into why they happen the way they do, from the perspective of the participants. He notes how participant observation is used to study processes, relationships, the organisation of people and events, continuities over time and patterns, and the immediate sociocultural contexts in which human existence unfolds. In this sense, participant observation is especially useful when exploring a less well-known phenomenon, such as online psychic reading culture. Jorgensen (1992) employed the method of participant observation when researching into the esoteric milieu of the 1970s. Eventually taking on the role of practitioner of the occult tarot, he immersed himself as fully as possible in the phenomenon he was studying. This allowed him to come to understand and appreciate more fully what the experience of being a tarot reader was like. Jorgensen's study demonstrates how the extent to which a researcher may gain an in-depth perspective of the phenomena being examined depends on the level of participation of the researcher.

In discussing the different levels of participation in a research study, Gold (1958) outlines Junker's (1952) 'four field observer roles'. The first role of (1) *complete participant* is when the researcher's position is not known to those who are being observed. For example, in his well-known work *Tearoom Trade* (1970) Humphreys took on the role of 'voyeur' in a men's public restroom where men were known to engage in anonymous sexual encounters. Although widely criticised in terms of the ethics of studying this activity covertly, Humphreys had very little choice but to remain anonymous. Another role is that of (2) *participant-as-observer*, typically the primary role undertaken by most ethnographic researchers. The focus here

is more on participating and reflecting than simply observing. This is the role Jorgensen occupied in his study of the esoteric milieu of the 1970s, where he was able to gain an in-depth unique perspective of the lived experience of the esoteric milieu. The third role, (3) *observer as participant*, moves further out of the participatory role. According to Gold (1958), this is the type of role undertaken in one-visit interviews or more formal observations undertaken, for instance, when observing a classroom situation. Lastly, there is the role of (4) *complete observer*. In this case, the research is likely, although not always, to be covert, and will not involve any social interaction. This is a less dominant fieldwork role which enables the researcher to study the social situation without having an impact on it. It is often the role a researcher will take on when carrying out preliminary groundwork (see also DeWalt and DeWalt, 2002). Furthermore, it is not uncommon for the researcher to move between two or more of these roles throughout the fieldwork process.

Each of these roles may be easily adapted for researching online sociality. For instance, a *complete-participant* can participate in an online social activity without revealing their true identity as a researcher. The practice of 'lurking' is used to denote how one can simply observe what is going on in an online social environment: "the person who reads but never posts" (Baym, 2010: 87). Brotsky and Giles (2007) covertly participated in an online community based on eating disorders, looking at the psychological support available in such communities. Alerting participants to the idea that they are being studied is fraught with ethical problems (as discussed later), however Hine (2008) argues that it is important to actively engage with participants. This empowers participants during the research process by giving them ownership over their words and actions (Herring, 1996; Bakardjieva and Feenberg, 2001). In relation to Gold (1958), the researcher here would be taking on the role of *participant as observer*. Meanwhile, the role of *observer as participant*, affords the researcher a more detached relationship from the participant. This is especially useful when collecting interview data. Finally, because the internet is essentially another social

space, all individuals are *complete observers* of activities and situations, and in this instance websites, as they surf the internet. Anybody can enter a chat room, post a message in a discussion board forum, or create a character in a MUD (Multi-User Dungeon, an online role playing game) and not disclose who they are (Turkle, 1994).

Markham's study *Life Online* (1998) can be used as an example of how these roles are played out in an online setting. Markham set out to research what it meant to experience and recreate reality through textual interaction in online social spaces. Initially, she spent time lurking in online social spaces. As she notes: "I had resolved, for the span of this study, to sit comfortably behind a glass screen, acting as an anonymous, distant observer of the 'Other'" (Markham, 1998: 25). However, Markham began to realise that she needed to immerse herself more fully within the online culture in order to understand more about it; she needed the *lived experience* of being online. Whilst lurking in the initial stages of her study, Markham, as *complete participant*, was able to gain an overview of what went on in online social spaces. However later, the lived experience of being present and actively participating and engaging with other participants enriched not only the experience itself but her knowledge and understanding of life online. As Markham notes, the participatory and interactive aspects of observing online phenomena are what constitute the study as ethnography. Indeed, the present study involved varying degrees of participant observation. Each is outlined below with respect to the particular context.

Facebook

Facebook has become a very popular site for social research. For example, Raynes-Goldie (2010) studied Facebook users' understanding and negotiation of privacy concerns whilst using the site. Barash *et al* (2010) studied impression (mis)management and Facebook users' awareness of the impression they make on others through their status message updates.

Meanwhile, Al-Sagaaf (2011) used ethnographic techniques to study the experiences of young Saudi females on Facebook. Again, these studies provide good examples of how social research methods can be usefully adapted for studying social networking sites.

To study the various ways members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use social media the researcher took on the role of *complete participant* (Gold, 1958) to examine their practices on Facebook. The focus was on psychic practitioners who were on her own 'Friends' list. These had been previously identified as interested in or practicing the activities of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Only those with 2000 or more friends were added to a designated 'Psychics' list for research purposes, because it was considered that their high volume of friendship links meant that they wished to be publicly known. Seven psychic practitioners were on this list, which could then be selected to view in order to filter out activity from other Friends.

The data corpus was collected through a random selection of potentially interesting occurrences on the 'Psychics' list NewsFeed when the psychics and mediums spoke about or performed psychic practices (tarot Card reading or mediumship). Data was again extracted using the 'Snipping Tool' available in Windows7, and collated digitally. The psychic practitioners were not aware that their status message updates were being extracted for research purposes because it was considered an intrusion on their everyday activity. The ethics of collecting data without consent from participants is discussed later.

Discussion Board Forums

Virtual community discussion board forums remain a popular site for social interaction around specific interests or activities (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). For example, Wright and Street (2007) deliberated on online discussion board forums as democratic forums. Meanwhile, Marra *et al* (2004) considered the use and significance of discussion board forums in

education and distant learning (see also, for example, Case and Hentges, 2011). In short, virtual community discussion board forums, despite the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook, remain sociologically relevant.

Discussion board forums based on psychic-spiritual interests constitute a significant site for this ethnographic study. The researcher had several years' prior experience of participating in such forums, so for the purpose of this research forums beyond those she was already familiar with were explored. The data collected for the study documented in Chapter Six, therefore, is collected from three psychic-spiritual forums, these were: *spiritualseers.com*; *spiritual-doorway.com*; *psychicseers.com*.¹⁸

In order to study the activities of members of the psychic-spiritual forums the researcher took on the role of 'complete-participant' (Gold, 1958), interacting with other members via the discussion boards and attempting to establish a relationship. The main data corpus for this particular study consisted of twenty readings chosen randomly across the three forums; the main criteria being that they were in two parts consisting of a reading by the psychic reader followed by a response from the recipient. The readings were analyzed using discourse analysis outlined shortly.

Autoethnography

Because I had prior knowledge and experience of participating in psychic-spiritual forums, and experience of offering card-readings for free in these social spaces, autoethnography was considered the most appropriate method with which to study a familiar social phenomena. This approach is used to explore the nature and quality of personal experience of online psychic readings (see Dawson & Cowan, 2004) and examines the different ways in which internet technologies facilitate interest in psychic spirituality. By their nature, psychic readings are highly subjective, both for the reader, and the recipient of the reading. In order to closely examine the more

¹⁸ Pseudonyms

subjective and intrapsychic experience of this phenomenon, researchers would benefit from being immersed in the experience itself (Emmons, 2009). As previously noted, Jorgensen (1992) took on the role of practitioner of the occult tarot for his participant observational study of the 1970s esoteric scene. Whilst this enabled him to gain an in depth perspective of the culture he was immersed in, Jorgensen felt his research was somewhat limited because he was unable to fully assume an extraordinary view of reality: “My inability fully to internalize an occult knowledge of reality as personally meaningful *limited direct access to the subjective significance of the most intimate aspects of occultists’ experiences*” (Jorgensen, 1992: 229 emphasis added).

To address the difficulty experienced by Jorgensen, and to bring his work into the twenty-first century, the present study involves the researcher taking on the role of ‘virtual psychic reader’, offering Oracle card readings via a psychic-spiritual virtual community. A keen personal interest in psychic spirituality and involvement in the psychic-spiritual culture for the last thirteen years affords the researcher a closer association with the personally meaningful ‘occult knowledge of reality’ Jorgensen felt was missing from his own study. To capture the more meaningful experiences of psychic readings in online social spaces, autoethnography appears to be the most suitable approach with which to do this.

The term ‘autoethnography’ has multiple meanings, although the basic principles of the approach remain the same (Reed-Danahay, 1997; Chang, 2008). For example, Davies refers to autoethnographic work as ‘reflexive ethnography’. Ellis and Bochner (cited Chang, 2008: 47) meanwhile, list a wide range of alternative terms for autoethnography. A shortened version of their original list is documented here:

Autobiographical ethnography (see also Reed-Danahay, 1997)

Confessional tales (see also Van Maanen, 1988)

Ethnographic memoir

Evocative narratives

Experiential texts

Interpretive ethnography (see also Denzin, 1997)

Lived experience (see also Collinson, 2006)

Personal ethnography

Reflexive ethnography (see also Davies, 1999)

Self-ethnography

Although there are many alternative labels for autoethnography, Chang (2008: 9) provides a simple, but useful definition of it as “a research method that utilizes the researchers’ autobiographical data to analyze and interpret their cultural assumptions”. Essentially, argues Chang, whilst autoethnography relies on autobiographical writing and self-narratives, the method goes beyond this to incorporate cultural analysis and interpretation.

Anderson (2006) refers to Davies’ (1999: 5) who writes that the goal of what she terms *reflexive ethnography* is to “seek to develop forms of research that fully acknowledge and utilize subjective experience as an intrinsic part of research”. The ultimate challenge with revealing the subjective self in autoethnographic writing then, is to avoid self-absorption. At this stage, one may ask to what extent this thesis avoids the possibility of self-indulgence. Anderson (2006: 385) provides a useful quote by Behar (1994), used here to provide a rationale for using autoethnographic methods for this research: “The exposure of the self who is also the spectator *has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go. It has to be essential to the argument, not a decorative flourish, not exposure for its own sake*” (emphasis added). However, the study of subjective experience of psychic readings on the internet, does indeed ‘*take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go*’. As discussed earlier in reference to Jorgensen (1992), the researcher’s own position within the culture of psychic readings on the internet affords the chance of getting much closer to the subject under investigation. Further, autoethnographic exploration of psychic readings on the internet is essential to achieve direct and intimate access

to intrapsychic experience of psychic readings. This is particularly so in regards to the perspective of the reader, whose subjective experiences (often regarded as irrational or superstitious) tend to be overlooked, particularly in parapsychology. Indeed, Jorgensen (1992) himself noted that this was an area of inquiry worthy of further ethnographic attention.

Given the marginalized ontological status of psychic readings however, it has to be carefully considered what kind of autoethnography is most appropriate to study experiences of them. Anderson (2006) reports that evocative autoethnography and its distinct emphasis on the subjective has been criticised for moving too far away from traditional ethnographic work. Alternatively, Smith's (2005) work reconciles traditional ethnography with autoethnography and demonstrates how autoethnography allows the researcher to analyse and interpret their own experiences in correspondence with other peoples' accounts.¹⁹ Chang (2008) also writes about how adopting Anderson's (2006) approach to autoethnography as an analytic tool goes a considerable way to retain the sociological tradition of objectivity in social research. Consequently, the present study studied psychic readings on the internet using the analytic autoethnographic approach outlined by Anderson (2006). Anderson defines analytic autoethnography (AA) as: "ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting; (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts; and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena" (Anderson, 2006: 375).

The nature of qualitative inquiry has changed substantially over time. New perspectives and methods have emerged that have expanded the social researcher's toolbox significantly. Further, a recognition that research has 'missed out' or 'not regarded as worthy of study' particular aspects of human experience has led to the opening of a whole new area of academic exploration. Autoethnography is just one of a range of new and alternative

¹⁹ For the present study, involvement of other participants was not forthcoming, as discussed in Chapter Eight.

forms of research that have emerged in recent decades. Some research has evolved out of traditional methods. For instance, Pink (2009) outlines an approach known as *sensory ethnography*, a new form of ethnography that seeks to *explicitly* acknowledge and account for sensory experience during ethnographic fieldwork. Pink's work is referenced here as an example of how ethnography has changed to such an extent that "there is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practised" (Pink, 2009: 8). Indeed, new forms of ethnography are not without criticism. For example, Pink cites Atkinson *et al's* (2007) suggestion that what they term, 'postmodern' ethnography has "devalued systematic analysis of action and representations, while privileging rather vague ideas of experience, evocation and personal engagement" (Pink, 2009: 8). However, she argues that recent approaches to ethnography are 'far from vague' because they explicitly seek to address the relevance of experience. Pink suggests that ethnography should be defined with regards to its practice, and she cites O'Reilly (2005) as providing a basic idea of what ethnography *entails* rather than prescribing what an ethnographer *should do*:

Iterative-induction research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agent, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject (O'Reilly, 2005 cited in Pink, 2009: 9).

The direct consequence of defining ethnography in regards to what it entails, is that it allows researchers to explore realms and depths of phenomena that have thus far been overlooked. Autoethnography, whilst an element of which has always been present in social and anthropological research (Anderson, 2006), is becoming an increasingly popular method

with which to research aspects of social and psychological life that have not been explored in such qualitative detail.

Nevertheless, the key feature of autoethnographic research is the positioning of the researcher. Anderson (2006) stresses that effective analytic autoethnography relies on the researcher being a complete member in the social phenomenon under scrutiny. He points to Adler and Adler (1987) who distinguish between two types of what they term 'complete member researchers' (CMRs): *opportunistic* and *convert*. The latter refers to those researchers who *become* complete members during the course of research. The former is the approach taken in this thesis and concerns the researcher being a member of the cultural group, *prior* to deciding to conduct research. Autoethnography allows for a particular level of reflection on the researcher's position. However, this highlights distinct ethical considerations which are discussed in due course.

Readings in Forums

The researcher was able to offer card-readings in one of the forums she had encountered, *spiritualseers.com*. She took on the role of participant-as-observer, dipping in and out of two worlds; participating in discussion elsewhere on the forums (there are over 60 different forums visible to visitors, and an extra 10 appear when members log in, one of which is the 'readings' forum) alongside offering readings. Readings were solicited using the following post:

Hi all

I'd like to offer free Mythic Oracle readings for anyone interested. Because each reading takes about an hour to do (usually I deal 3 cards and use clairvoyance) and then I have to type it up, I will start with 3 people at first, to make sure I have time. If you leave your request on the board below I will pm you your reading as soon as it is done.

First though I just need to tell you that these readings will form part of my research for my PhD thesis. My research examines personal experience of psychic readings over the internet. To get an in-depth perspective and because I have done internet readings before, I am taking the unusual approach to research by offering these readings. The focus in doing this is on the experience – I reflect upon the reading afterwards, the sensations and images I receive etc.

For this reason, anyone who wishes to have a free reading needs to know that parts of the reading may be used in the final write up of the thesis, although I will stress that names are anonymised. Further information is available on request.

A total of 27 readings were carried out in November and December 2009 and in January 2010. Readings were carried out using the Mythic Oracle and involved dealing three cards which were then interpreted according to the symbols depicted on them. Fieldwork notes were written in a research journal throughout the experience and each reading was reflected on afterwards using self-observation techniques (outlined in Chapter Seven).

Summary

In order to study the psychic-spiritual milieu online, different types of data were considered. Firstly, websites were chosen as media texts potentially rich in information concerning how psychic spirituality and the wider milieu is understood and represented through the internet. Secondly, status message updates posted by psychic practitioners who were on the researcher's Friends list were collected in order to examine the ways in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu interact online. Thirdly, readings were extracted from discussion board forums based on psychic-spiritual practice in order to examine how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu participate in psychic reading culture on the internet. In order to gain a more personal perspective of psychic reading culture online, and to emulate Jorgensen's participation in the esoteric milieu as a tarot card

practitioner, the researcher offered card readings on spiritualseers.com. Autoethnographic self-reflective data was collected at the time the readings were offered and carried out.

Analytic Approach

The different types of data collected were analysed in specific ways so the main discussion for each is left for the relevant empirical chapter. However, some generic features are discussed here. Websites, as documents, can be studied using quantitative or qualitative content analysis. For example, Stein (2009) used quantitative content analysis in order to survey how US-based social movement groups used the web. One benefit of applying quantitative methods to website analysis is their usefulness in surveying a large sample; Stein's study surveyed 749 social movement organizations. However, one particular flaw with quantitative content analysis is that it consists of counting words. This tells researchers very little about the context of the data.

For the present study, which sought to consider the ways in which offline psychic practices may be understood and represented online, context was essential. The study also sought to understand how the psychic-spiritual milieu and its members were represented in these online spaces; as Chandler (2009) notes, the personal home page is an important tool in the presentation of the self. Data was analyzed using a basic thematic approach that draws on the work of Altheide's (1996) Ethnographic Content Analysis (ECA) and Braun and Clarke's (2006) basic thematic analysis. The researcher was also able to draw on her own prior knowledge of the shared cultural meanings of the visual symbols that featured on some of the websites.

Autoethnographic data generated through self-observational reflections was also analysed using Altheide's (1996) ECA and Braun and Clarke's (2006) basic thematic analysis. Because online psychic reading culture is an

area of research that has not been studied before, this method of analysis was chosen in order to explore what key issues were captured in the data.

In order to understand how psychic practitioners participated in online social spaces, data in the form of Facebook Status Message Updates and readings extracted from online discussion board forums were analyzed using discourse analysis. This method approaches data from a broadly ethnomethodological perspective concerned with how people construct meaning and understand their mundane reality. Melvin Pollner (1987) considered ethnomethodology to be a valuable approach to the understanding of social life. He was concerned with how people make assumptions about their world in accordance to their ontological positioning to it. In the present study the researcher can sympathise with the ontological position of the participants whilst at the same time being able to maintain a social scientific perspective, broadly considered to be social constructionist. However, the researcher's own perspective is based on wider assumptions she has in relation to her perception of reality; her own assumptions of an 'objective and intersubjectively shared world' (Pollner, 1974). Being a member of this objective and intersubjectively shared world affords the opportunity to draw upon the resources needed from within it (Zimmerman and Pollner, 1971). Indeed, within this social world, individuals work together to negotiate a shared mundane reality (Pollner, 1974) and, using the tools of discourse analysis, it is possible to observe and uncover the processes by which this mundane reality is negotiated in online social interaction.

Because the internet offers a "research setting par excellence" (Jones, 1999, cited in Mann and Stewart, 2000: 85) in that it is abundant in textual interaction and material, it is possible to 'lurk' or observe interaction without intervention (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Analysing online data is different to analysing naturally occurring talk. Indeed, people interact via the internet in socially organized ways just as people talk face-to-face (Yates, 2001). In comparison with offline interaction, online interaction

does have its disadvantages. As outlined by Mann and Stewart (2000) in reference to Paccagnella (1997), online interaction suffers from delays in responses. Time varies depending on whether the conversation is synchronous (real-time), which means responses can be almost instant, or asynchronous, where responses could come days, weeks or even months later. The delay therefore takes away the naturalness of the conversation. As Mann and Stewart (2000: 87) note, delays “can shape the mood of the interaction. This information is often lost in the analysis”, Paccagnella also points out that online interaction is less likely to be understood by someone who has not been directly involved in the conversation; they are likely to miss the meaning of what has occurred (ibid.).

Nonetheless, discourse analysis was considered more useful in the understanding of how psychic readings were socially organized online. For instance, although a very useful method for obtaining a broad appreciation of something that has not been studied before, basic thematic analysis can only give a certain degree of understanding; it does not, however, allow for the intricacies of talk or interaction as discourse analysis does (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

To summarise, data collected from websites and autoethnographic data collected through self-observational reflections was analyzed using a basic thematic approach. Meanwhile, interactions initiated by psychic practitioners on their Facebook Status Message Updates and data collected from discussion board forums that focused on the practice of free psychic readings were analyzed using a broad discourse analytic approach. The broad ethical considerations of data collection will now be considered.

The Ethics of Online Research

In any social research involving other people, researchers must adhere to good standards of ethical practice. In qualitative research in particular, researchers get close to the participant’s lives and in many cases, intimate details of participants lives are sought and reported. Often, vulnerable

groups of people will be studied. As a result, researchers need to be fully aware of the possible implications their intrusion may have on participants' lives; researchers have a responsibility to protect participants (Bulmer, 2001).

The internet has become a very popular field to research as well as a useful research tool. Consequently, this calls for a need to re-evaluate traditional sociological methods and well-worn ethical guidelines in their application to online social settings (see Hine, 2005). Despite efforts by agencies such as the *British Sociological Association* (BSA), the *Economic and Social Research Council* (ESRC) and the *Association of Internet Researchers* (AoIR) to develop a standardised set of ethics, this is further complicated by the continued technological development of social media and the various ways in which they are shaped by users. However, traditional ethical considerations can and still do apply to an online environment. However, the development of ethical guidelines for online research is especially complex, given that the internet is in constant flux and change (Berry, 2004). Researchers must allow for flexibility in the design of online research methods and ethical approaches, particularly as guidelines concerning internet research are still in development. As the BSA notes:

Members should take special care when carrying out research via the internet. Ethical standards for internet research are not well developed as yet. Eliciting informed consent, negotiating access agreements, assessing the boundaries between the public and the private, and ensuring the security of data transmissions are all problematic in internet research. Members who carry out research online should ensure that they are familiar with ongoing debates on the ethics of internet research, and might wish to consider erring on the side of caution in making judgements affecting the well-being of online research participants (BSA, 2002: 41)

At present the AoIR stress that guidelines cannot be considered as step-by-step recipes for sound ethical practice (Ess, 2002). They also emphasise that the diversity of research settings on the internet, and the ethical pluralism wrought by interdisciplinary study of the online world, will mean that internet researchers are not likely to find simple answers to their ethical dilemmas.

The ethical dilemma in the present research surrounds whether or not informed consent must be sought before collecting Facebook Status Message Updates or data available on the discussion board forums. However, the issue of informed consent in online research has caused significant debate. One particular argument in relation to this is whether information online could be considered as in the 'public domain'. The premise is that behaviour in a public space, for instance a public house, can be observed without the need for the researcher to disclose their true identity (see Hilbert, 1980; Homan, 1980 for discussion on this). The more recent guidelines from the ESRC (2010) address this issue:

Information provided in forums or spaces on the Internet and Web that are intentionally public would be valid to consider "in the public domain", but the public nature of any communication or information on the Internet should always be critically examined, and the identity of individuals protected unless it is critical to the research (ESRC, 2010: 1.3.2.5)

Zimmer (2010) also discusses the public nature of social networking sites on his blog, using Twitter as an example. He argues that 'Tweets' are not posted with the automatic consent to having those Tweets captured and archived by researchers. This would also apply to Facebook status messages. However, comments made by others reading Zimmer's blog demonstrate that the research world is very much divided on the issue. Again, the discussion surrounds the notion of whether posts via social media such as Twitter or Facebook can be regarded as public or whether

their authors considered them as private. Those in favour of seeking informed consent argue that as Twitter was a 'micro blogging' site, posts must therefore be treated as information posted on a normal blog; that is, referenced as the work of the original author. However, there are also those suggesting that if people wanted what they said to remain private then they should find other ways of communicating instead of using public social media like Twitter and Facebook. The discussion in response to Zimmer echoes what Eynon *et al* (2008) state is crucial to sound ethical practice in internet research: researchers must be sensitive to the intentions of those who choose to interact in online social settings. Indeed, the internet means many things to many people and people will use it with different intentions (Donath, 2007). However, the British Psychology Society's (BPS) advice for conducting research on the internet further complicates any decision a researcher has to make: "unless consent has been sought, observation of public behaviour needs to take place only where people would 'reasonably expect to be observed by strangers'" (BPS, 2007: 12).²⁰

This statement is considerably vague, so herein lies the dilemma: Facebook has become a part of the everyday for many of its users and, as in any use of social media, is a space in which people behave in both public and private ways (Hudson and Bruckman, 2004; Eynon *et al*, 2008). Some users of Facebook may not give a second thought to who is reading what they post and observing their behaviour, and may have added complete strangers to their Friends list. For others however, status message updates are an excellent way of sharing information with others in a form of self-promotion; in this case, advertisements for workshops or demonstrations of mediumship. At the same time, there are some status messages that can be regarded as quite private, for example, comments on family arguments or illnesses. However, this leads to another issue

²⁰ To ensure researchers are up to date with online research ethics, the ESRC's *Framework for Research Ethics* (2010) recommends consulting the guidelines set out by the *British Psychological Society* (BPS).

in relation to sound ethical practice online: to what extent would seeking informed consent off participants lead to intrusion? The BSA's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2002) acknowledges how, by its very nature, social research does intrude into people's lives. Consequently, wherever necessary, researchers must endeavour to minimise disturbance. Because status messages collected from Facebook will be anonymised, it may be considered less intrusive to covertly collect this data without (a) causing distress to Facebook Friends who may become acutely aware they are being watched and may therefore restrict their behaviours in response – this would ultimately spoil their enjoyment of what has become a very big part of their online (and offline) lives; and (b) intruding on their Friends' time and convenience by having to also seek their informed consent if they had posted a comment in response.²¹

In online social research, there are ways in which one may justify *not* seeking informed consent. As noted, seeking informed consent can alter natural behaviour (Berry, 2004). Further, because of the way Facebook has become so embedded into its users' lives, to seek consent would only intrude on the lives of participants and possibly ruin their enjoyment of using the social network. Ultimately, Facebook is a social utility and although research into its impact is still very new, one can surmise that many use Facebook not just in support of existing friendships but often also as a form of social support. So, to prevent participants coming into unnecessary harm in this way, the decision was made to 'lurk' covertly, observing the interaction happening on Facebook without participating or revealing the researcher's intentions. In a sense, all users 'lurk' on Facebook Newsfeeds – they are a unique way of being a remote

²¹ In the case of some psychic and medium Friends' updates, there could be a significant number of comments in response. For instance, 44 people responded to an update made by well-known medium Gordon Smith.

observer on somebody else's life. These are 'lives on screen' (see Turkle, 1994).

Being an anonymous observer of Facebook interaction and wishing to adhere to ethical protocol, all participants' details were anonymised; this includes names of spirit the mediums might claim to be communicating with. As Herring (1996) argues, any identifying characteristics – name, age, date of message – should be anonymised. However, she also suggests that this extends to the online community situation being studied: "If the use of deception or nonreactive research methodology is justified for the research, then the results must be published in a manner that does not allow the group to be identified" (Herring, 1996: 120). However, this poses a particularly salient problem with the use of Facebook. It is a unique social utility so consequently, there is no way to not identify it in any write-up. Further, potential participants, and the researcher, are not anonymous to each other. Likewise, the perception of privacy held by the potential participants cannot be presumed. Yet the transient nature of Facebook status messages means that the words are not necessarily going to be traceable after they have been posted, because they are not searchable via a search engine. And, as already noted, whilst some information shared by users on Facebook could be considered private, there are some status updates that are used for promoting various services, demonstrations, fairs and workshops.

The same ethical principles would similarly apply to the online discussion board forums. However, the ones used in this research varied in terms of privacy. Two of the forums used did not require a log-in in order to see the readings that had been posted, whilst the third did. This could raise questions as to whether the more private nature of that forum meant that members posting in that particular forum intended for their posts to be private. However, all members already anonymise themselves by choosing

a username that is likely to be very different to their own name. Further to this, all usernames contained in the data corpus were changed for alternatives and synonyms used for the forums' names.

Conclusion

In order to examine how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the internet this research adopted an eclectic methodological approach. Ethnographic techniques of documentary (textual and visual) analysis together with participant observation (covert and overt) were used to examine websites, Facebook and psychic reading culture in online discussion board forums based on psychic-spiritual interests. These have been discussed here, including a brief consideration of autoethnography and how that was used to gain an intrapsychic perspective of psychic reading culture. Data collection methods and choice of analytic approach will be discussed in more detail in the corresponding chapters. Meanwhile, after considering the most appropriate methodological and analytical tools with which to study psychic reading culture online, the chapter then discussed the various ethical considerations raised by using the methods chosen.

How these methods were implemented, and the ensuing results and findings will be discussed in the following chapters. Chapter four documents a study of how self and community is represented through psychic practitioner websites. Chapter five presents an analysis of the negotiation and management of psychic practitioner identity through interaction on Facebook. Chapter six considers participation in free psychic readings which are offered in online discussion board forums. Finally, chapter seven offers an autoethnographic insight into the subjective experience of psychic reading in online social spaces. The findings from all four empirical chapters and their contributions to sociological understanding of psychic reading culture online are then discussed in the concluding chapter to this thesis, chapter eight.

Chapter Four

Web as Window: (Re)Presentation of Self, Work and Community in Psychic Practitioner Websites

Psychic-spiritual seekers have taken full advantage of the internet to promote their services. Many readers have their own website through which they showcase their interests, beliefs and practices, but ultimately, their websites are also spaces in which they can promote and sell their psychic reading services. Because websites afford their authors the space in which to manage their identity and create a particular representation of what it is they want to communicate, this makes websites analytically interesting (see Turkle, 1994). Whilst Facebook encourages users to build personal profiles, personal websites stand alone as single sites of impression management. Website owners present the self they wish to put forward to make a favourable impression on potential clients (Bargh *et al*, 2002; Doring, 2002). As Miller and Arnold (2003: 76) note, web home pages “provide(s) a locus for the electronic self”. However, the *self-as-presented-online* is a transient self; owners of the website can alter the impression they make to the world whenever they wish. Being able to change the impression made, by maintaining an up-to-date calendar of events or adding new testimonials or links to recent television and radio broadcasts helps the owner of the home page promote themselves and their services. In promoting their services, beliefs and lifestyles, psychic practitioner websites become sites in which self, work and community are represented and constructed. How psychics use their websites in these ways is the focus of this chapter.

Managing Initial Impressions

Research has shown that the first impression a website gives off to visitors is crucial as it is understood to influence subsequent experience (Lindegaard *et al*, 2006). For example, studies have suggested that visitors

to website homepages can take as little as fifty milliseconds to make their minds up as to the nature of the person and service being promoted on the website. Visitors look for confirmatory evidence to support what they expect to find (ibid). This is a particularly important factor in market research studies concerning how best to use websites as a promotional tool. Several factors need to be taken into account when designing web pages. First impressions will be negative if visitors to websites note errors in spelling or grammar, or if they are in any way inconvenienced because of slow load time, error messages or general accessibility. Likewise, potential clients or consumers will be deterred if website designers have not taken care with colour scheme, layout or the quality of images and general content.

Vazire and Gosling (2004) comment on how unintentional negative factors on websites have the potential to impair the impression the web author wishes to convey. They distinguish between *identity claims*: “symbolic statements made by individuals about how they would like to be regarded” (Vazire and Gosling, 2004: 124) and *behavioural residue*, which refers to the unintended residue of a persons’ behaviour. This is similar to Goffman (1959), who distinguishes between the *impression given* - messages psychic practitioners *intend* to convey to potential clients via their websites, and the *impression given off* – which might manifest in the unintended errors website designers advise against. Equally, psychic practitioners might unintentionally convey wrong messages about themselves, the services they offer and the wider psychic-spiritual community in general. Overall, they would be looking to market themselves in a favourable way. Fogg *et al* (2001) researched into evidence of credibility on websites, and how web designers can maximise this. They argue that *trustworthiness* and *expertise* are key elements of credible websites and even small faults in web design will impair credibility. Authentication is an issue for psychic practitioners offline, as studies have demonstrated (see Jorgensen, 1992; Wooffitt, 2006), so websites afford the space in which they can communicate a

particular identity that not only represents them as individuals but the wider psychic-spiritual milieu as a whole.

So, how websites behave as visual representations of a particular activity is especially important; websites must *draw the visitor into* the experience it is promoting. Often, the home page will contain limited information so the potential client will have to click further into the site to find the information relating to the readings and details of fees. Hyperlinks on the website will lead to information on the types of readings on offer and how they might be conducted, including asynchronously via email, synchronously using Skype or face to face. Clients may be able to purchase the reading via the site (often using PayPal) or will need to contact the medium to arrange an appointment time.

This demonstrates the advantages of web based promotion. For example, whilst Mind, Body and Spirit fairs are a good way for psychic practitioners to showcase their work and solicit potential clientele, the internet works in much the same way. The added advantage to using the internet, however, is that there is a vast range of media platforms that can be drawn on to enhance the initial experience of the service or product on offer. For example, psychic practitioners may like to add music to their websites whilst videos of demonstrations of mediumship or ghost hunts can be used as illustrative of the activities they engage in. Such methods are not available face to face. As a result, online media provide several points of contact between the website and the visitors, inviting the opportunity for a particular relationship to develop between the psychic practitioner and the potential client (Kumar and Benbasat, 2002). Website designers want visitors to engage in as rich an experience as possible in order to become deeply immersed in the product or service on offer (Lindegaard et al, 2006). Text and images used on websites can be regarded as symbolic of invitations to engage with the spiritual. Thus, websites serve to give the visitor the sensation of stepping through a portal (see Hume, 2007).

In portraying engagement with 'the Spiritual' and implying one has abilities with which to 'read' others or contact dead relatives and friends of potential clients, web authors work to ensure that they convey the right message: that they are genuine psychic readers. Accordingly, once visitors step through the portal, the relationship between the potential client and the psychic changes, becoming more personal (Kumar and Benbasat, 2002). This client/practitioner relationship is key. Ultimately, the relationship between psychic practitioner and client is built around the private, hidden world of the client, which the psychic is able to know about using their psychic abilities. Therefore, trust is paramount in this relationship. Communicating trustworthiness as well as knowledge and expertise is crucial to convey credibility and respectability in order to earn trust (Macdonald, 1989; Fogg *et al*, 2001). Thus, visitors to psychic practitioner websites will be looking for evidence to suggest that they can trust in the person they wish to pay for their services. How knowledge and expertise, trustworthiness and respectability are communicated via psychic practitioner websites is the focus of this chapter.

Qualitative Assessment of Psychic Practitioner Websites

The methodological chapter of this thesis considers basic issues relating to the usefulness of qualitative methods to study psychic practitioners on the internet. This chapter therefore concentrates on further methodological issues related to the specific focus of this chapter: the messages psychic practitioners communicate via their websites in regards to themselves, their services and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. Data consisted of an opportunity sample of nine psychic practitioner websites. These were: garydakin.com; mediumallanjones.com; meryem.com; psychicshelly.com; elizabethrose.com; sallytaylor.biz; davidtaylormedium.co.uk; angeltarotguidance.com; and David Radley's webpage, forum1.aimoo.com/davidradley34. For these where then analysed using a broad thematic analysis based on ethnographic qualitative analysis (ECA). Developed by Altheide (1996) in his critique of quantitative content

analysis, this can be summarised effectively as “the reflexive analysis of documents” (Plummer, 1983, cited in Altheide, 1996: 14). The approach extends on document analysis; a document being “any symbolic representation that can be recorded or retrieved for analysis” (Altheide, 1996: 2), but the researcher is a central component to the analysis. The researcher is thus responsible for interacting recursively and reflexively with the ethnographic materials collected and the subsequent analysis and interpretation. Altheide (1996) asserts that the process should be systematic and analytic whilst remaining fluid and iterative, so that patterns of human action can be uncovered and explored.

Altheide’s ethnographic content analysis (ECA) is useful for analysing websites because it offers a systematic process that ensures reliability and validity. Ethnographic content analysis is appropriate in the analysis of psychic practitioner websites because it allows for a holistic understanding to be gained from an area that has not been examined before. Essentially, the approach develops upon basic thematic analysis which, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2006), is often favoured for its flexibility. Braun and Clarke simplify their basic thematic analysis as a ‘six step recipe’ whereby the first stage involves the researcher familiarising themselves with the data before moving to the second stage of generating initial codes. Next, stages three, four and five involve searching for themes, and reviewing, defining and naming them. Finally, the findings are produced.

The Presentation of Self and Expertise

As noted previously, visitors to psychic practitioner websites will want to know they can trust the person selling them a service; so how do psychic practitioners present themselves in such a way as to demonstrate credibility? Fogg *et al* (2001) identify two crucial components considered by website visitors when assessing the credibility of the service or product on offer: *expertise* and *trustworthiness*. Expertise of the person selling a product or service is communicated by drawing on terms relating to them

being *knowledgeable, experienced* and *competent*, but how might this be accomplished on psychic practitioner's websites? The following analysis looks at how psychic practitioners present their expertise and knowledge of their field.

Psychic Abilities as "Gifts"

A common feature found in the data for this study is the reference to psychic ability as a 'gift'. For example, on his website, Gary Dakin states "my personal gift is one that spans all areas of psychic and mediumistic faculties".²² Offering a brief description that this means he is clairvoyant, clairaudient and clairsentient, he talks about what each of these mean, claiming that having all three gifts enables him "to give clear, distinct and accurate messages from the spirit world and from the psychic vibration". By calling his ability a 'gift', being able to give a description of what each skill entails and how each skill enables him to be accurate, Dakin is demonstrating his extensive knowledge and expertise in psychic reading. This helps visitors to his website make an informed decision about whether or not he is likely to provide a credible service. Furthermore, this highlights an interesting feature in terms of the changing relationship between the website visitor and the psychic practitioner because it is a subtle invitation to engage with the spiritual and enter into a particular relationship with the psychic practitioner.

The nature of this relationship is revealed when we consider how Dakin promotes himself as "One of the UK's Top Stage Psychic Mediums". Closer inspection of his biography and his CV (Dakin is the only psychic practitioner in the sample to include a CV on his website) suggests that he is looking for work that enables him to reach as many people as possible. This shows how he wishes to use his gift by demonstrating the range of his abilities to larger audiences and become a 'professional stage medium'.

²² The analysis is based on the website as it was in 2011, it has since changed.

Meanwhile, Psychic Shelly describes her gifts as clairvoyance, clairsentience, clairaudience, empathy and mediumship and states: “I use all of my gifts to bring clarity and guidance to those that I read for”. Referring to an abundance of gifts, Shelly continues by talking about her involvement in paranormal investigations and her ability in the “removal of spirit from this dimension” and elsewhere on her site she adds to her repertoire of skills by claiming: “I can remote view”. Shelly also lists her services, which include email readings. However Shelly does not claim to do these readings herself: “Email readings will be provided by either Shelly herself or one of her team of trusted and gifted psychics”. Again the issue of being ‘gifted’ arises, but these other psychics are also ‘trusted’ implying that Shelly vets her team of readers herself, to ensure they can do the job effectively. However, there is no description of who these gifted psychics are and the skills they possess.

A slightly different situation occurs on Elizabeth Rose’s website. As noted above, visitors to website homepages take as little as fifty milliseconds to make up their minds about what is being sold (Lindegaard *et al*, 2006). Given that there is an image of Elizabeth Rose predominant on the homepage of her website, and no obvious mention that other psychics give the readings, the first impression obtained from this website is that Elizabeth Rose conducts the readings herself. The only indication of the other readers is from the tab at the top of the page, “Readers”, and the panel underneath Elizabeth Rose’s photograph where it says “Live Reader Status”:

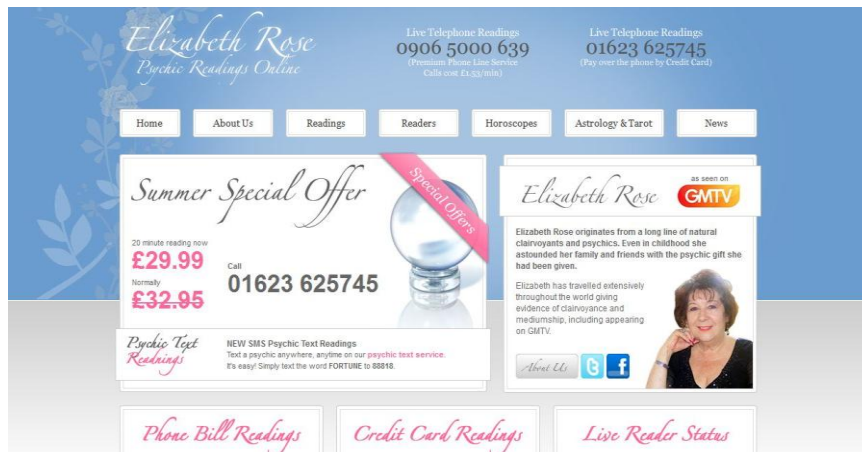


Fig.4.1: Front Page of Elizabeth Rose’s Website

Clicking on the “Readers” tab reveals that there is an extensive team of psychics working for this website. From twenty-six readers, eleven refer to their ability as a gift in some way. For example, Samantha is noted as “naturally gifted”, as are readers Michelle, Amber and Justin. If the word ‘gift’ itself is not used, then reference to the ability being ‘natural’ is often employed, denoting that the psychic was born with this ability, or gift. For instance, the psychic reader at the top of the list is Rose, who is billed as being a “natural clairvoyant medium”. Annie, meanwhile, has been “naturally clairvoyant from childhood”, referring to having been psychic for a long time and encountering the spiritual from a very young age. Likewise, Taniya “is a gifted medium and psychic and can use the tarot. She is a natural clairvoyant and knew from childhood that she had the gift”.

On the limited number of websites examined in this study, it appears important that psychic practitioners refer to their ability as a ‘gift’ or as a ‘natural ability’ rather than something they have learned to do. Ultimately, the psychic reader is wishing to present a specific image of themselves in order to promote their readings and draw in potential clientele. The notion of being ‘gifted’ relates to having an inherent (natural) talent bestowed only on a chosen few and suggests a special status; one of authenticity and competency (see Adorno, 2002). Furthermore, reference to such has a clear rhetorical function in pointing to heritage and legacy (see Wooffitt, 2006). Indeed, if a psychic practitioner is to convince

potential clients that they have knowledge and expertise in what they do, words such as these can be very persuasive, but there are other strategies they can use to persuade potential clients. These are explored below.

Early Spiritual Encounters and Trauma

Linked to the commonly held belief that psychic ability is a natural gift someone is born with, another common feature found in psychic practitioner biographies appears to be that they have experienced spiritual encounters from a very young age (see Wooffitt, 2006; Gilbert, 2009). Often, such experiences will be reported as having been unwanted and spontaneous and usually, the psychic will relate how they did not choose to develop as a medium or psychic until later in life. Also, it may be that a significant life event awoken a latent spiritual ability. For example, Laurel is a member of the team of psychics who work for Elizabeth Rose's telephone psychic reading service. Her short biography, listed on the website, says:

[WEB.3c]

Laurel first noticed her psychic ability 22 years ago when going through some trauma in her life. She started to receive premonitions through the day and dreams at night. She began with the tarot and found she had a natural talent with predictions. Her speciality is relationships although can pick up on significant events that are happening.

Similar biographical information is also related via psychic practitioner websites; often on home pages or in an 'About Me' section. Gary Dakin provides a lengthy biography on his website. He talks about his childhood and his abusive father, and how his mother moved house frequently. Dakin also mentions that his mother discovered she was psychic at the age of forty and that each of her five sons had psychic abilities (see next section for analysis on heritage). Dakin is the youngest, but claims to be the most gifted son having had psychic and spiritual experiences as a youngster:

People often ask me when it was that I had my first psychic experience but I find this very difficult to define as I can actually recount seeing and hearing people who had passed over for as far back as I can remember.

When Dakin turned thirty, his mother and eldest brother passed away. He marks this as the time when his “psychic gift really became apparent”. Interestingly, he makes reference to how trauma can awaken psychic abilities and offers an explanation as to why:

I have since observed that mediums seem to have to go through a time of trauma just prior to their true awakening. This was certainly true in my case, it is almost as if we have to endure suffering in order to gain experience of pain with the result that we can hopefully empathise with people in distress.

Dakin’s explanation for experiencing personal trauma in order to empathise with people in distress is a commonly held belief amongst the psychic-spiritual community. Another example is Meryem, a psychic medium who was brought up in war-torn Cyprus. She offers her account of her traumatic experiences and spiritual encounters and talks about the grief and suffering she witnessed as a child, and how this impacted on her later life and decision to become a psychic medium:

Meryem quickly learned two very valuable lessons that are still with her today – that everyone should make the most of their life whilst they are alive and, that people should always endeavour to help out others who were less fortunate than themselves... Through the gift that she had been given, and the traumatic experiences she had suffered from, Meryem realised that she was one of those people who had ‘been given’ the power to help others improve their lives and this was the path that she would follow.

Again, there is a reference to a ‘gift’ that had ‘been given’ to her in order to help others. Meryem’s lessons are narrated here to present her as a caring

and understanding person who can empathise with others, sharing in their distress because she has experienced it for herself. She also mentions her childhood encounters with spirit. From the age of five she would communicate with a boy no-one else could see:

Meryem herself recalls talking to a little boy, dressed in an army uniform, who had died in the war – someone no one else ever saw. And she says this little boy would come to her anytime she was feeling upset, lonely or in need of help.

It is interesting to note that when she was young, the boy would join Meryem whenever she felt lonely or upset and how spirit are portrayed as lending comfort in times of need. However, her website tells visitors that she would spend a lot of time with the boy as she grew up and it was later in her life, during her teens, when she realised that what the spirit boy was telling her were messages from the spirit world.

For Meryem, it seems that her early encounters with spirit naturally led her to become a medium. It also appears to make her different to anyone else. A similar story can be found on Allan Jones's website where he makes reference to his early spiritual encounters in the opening sentence of his homepage:

My earliest recollection of experiencing the paranormal world happened to me when I was about 8 years old, lying in bed seeing my father who had died before my 1st birthday standing at the bottom of my bed. At this point I knew I was different, very much a loner in life and often feeling a sense of isolation with no reasons as to why.

Accounts of spontaneous early encounters with the spiritual typically relate to deceased grandparents or parents sitting or standing at the bottom of the bed, and usually the child would be under the age of ten. Such accounts add to the sense that being a medium or psychic is somehow different and unique to other people's own experiences. In relating his

experience of his father standing at the foot of his bed, Jones continues the narrative by stating: “at this point I knew I was different, very much a loner in life and often feeling a sense of isolation with no reasons as to why”.

Whilst Jones is not recalling any specific childhood trauma such as what Dakin experienced, he refers to the emotional trauma he experienced as “a loner in life and feeling a sense of isolation” and relating it to his encounters with the spiritual.

He gives another brief account of how his early spiritual encounter led to another visit when he was in his early teens and his deceased father appeared to him whilst out shopping. It appears as though this encounter served to awaken his psychic skills:

Sensing and seeing the occasional questionable spirit,
developing to the point where I began hearing voices on a
regular basis by the time I had reached my early twenties.

It is interesting to note here that although Allan Jones seems to relate his psychic skills to an emotional childhood and one or two encounters with his deceased father, he does not refer to his ability as a ‘gift’. Meanwhile, another medium in the study, Anne Marie Kell, refers to her abilities as ‘Psychic and Clairvoyant skills’ rather than a ‘gift’ and on the “About Me” section of her website relates back to her childhood experiences to explain why she has these skills. Her earliest encounter was with a young spirit boy who visited her every night. She relates how her grandmother knew this and offered an explanation:

I spent some time in Peterborough YMCA as a young girl due to family problems and this is where my first spirit visitation took place, a boy came into my room every night and I didn’t feel any fear I knew the spirit was a kind soul. When I next visited my grandmother I was very surprised when she said “you have had a visitor every night and he is your uncle who passed at an early age”. I asked why he had come into my life and I was told he was there to watch over me and next time I saw him to wave

and say hello. I did as she instructed and the spirit boy waved back to me. This was the first of many visitations.

Whilst this narrative details her earliest spiritual encounter, Kell also makes reference to problems during her childhood, although there is no clear indication of what these were. However interestingly, she does make reference to further upset in her life that appears to have led to her becoming a professional psychic reader. She makes reference to her marriage breaking up and meeting her fiancé who, she says, helped her to feel more confident in her abilities.

However, although Kell attributes this revival of her psychic abilities to meeting her fiancé, she does make reference to how her grandmother was instrumental in her young spiritual awakening. This is also a common feature in psychic and medium autobiographical accounts. But why might this be? The following section considers Kell's experience further together with some examples.

Legacy

Anne Marie Kell attributes much of her spiritual development to spending a lot of time with her grandmother, who was a "Clairvoyant/medium/healer and Tarot Reader", whilst growing up:

During this time my eyes were opened to the world of spirit and my Grandmother's ability. I experienced spirit contact from an early age I was amazed at my grandmother's sense of knowing the future and the number of people who travelled from far and wide to consult with her.

Here, Kell draws on her grandmother's success as a psychic practitioner to explain her own abilities relating to tarot, clairvoyance and mediumship. By explaining her own spiritual abilities within the context of her relationship with her grandmother from an early age, Kell is providing a foundation on which her own spiritual development was built. Whilst not directly

referring to her skills as a 'gift', what she says does imply that her psychic skills were *natural* to her, somehow passed on through her family from her grandmother. She adds evidence in support of this, that she was indeed meant to inherit her grandmother's skills, and for a purpose:

My grandmother always told me that I would do her work, and eventually would replace her when her time came to pass, she told me that I would meet many people on my path that would help me, and this has definitely been the case... My grandmother has passed to spirit now, and I know what I have to do, and that is to carry on with her work, and in my life time touch as many peoples hearts and lives as she did.

Drawing on family legacy is a useful way for psychic practitioners to endorse what they do, and these stories can be used as persuasive tactics to draw in potential clientele. Kell mentions that her grandmother "always told me that I would do her work, and eventually would replace her when her time came to pass". This statement presents her grandmother as a respected and talented medium, who needs replacing and the only person worthy of stepping into her role is her granddaughter.

The role the family plays in a psychic practitioner's interest in psychic practices and spirituality is also seen in other examples. As previously mentioned, Dakin relates how his mother realised she had psychic abilities at the age of forty and that subsequently she was a very active member of her local Spiritualist church. He also makes reference to his four brothers, each with some degree of psychic ability, although he claims to be the most 'gifted'. To explain his family's abilities, he refers to other members of his family from earlier generations:

I can trace the gift of prophecy in our family back a couple of generations, firstly to my mother and her sister Brenda and also back to a sister of my grandfather's on my mother's side called Agnes.

Claims that psychic abilities are inherited are also presented on Elizabeth Rose's website, by herself and members of her team of psychic readers. Rose claims that she:

...originates from a long line of natural clairvoyants and psychics. Even in childhood she astounded her family and friends with the psychic gift she had been given.

Again, this claim draws on the notion that the medium is 'gifted'. Furthermore, she has been psychic from childhood because clairvoyance and psychic ability is inherited through a long family history of natural psychics.

Two females from Rose's team of psychic readers also claim psychic lineage. Jayne claims to "come from a long line of hereditary psychics" and has been psychic all her life. Meanwhile, Samantha "comes from a family of mediums and tarot readers and inherited the gift". However, Samantha's narrative continues by claiming "She is half gypsy bloodline". References to such traditions are quite popular. In his analysis of psychic practitioner advertisement flyers, Wooffitt (2006) found many references to heritage connections such as Romany Gypsies or Native American ancestry. Such claims, he argues, draw considerably on stereotypical ideas about spiritual or ethnic groups. Further to this, it can also be argued that these spiritual or ethnic groups are more often associated with fortune telling and mysticism. This lends support for claims to authenticity; if a psychic reader claims to have mystical heritage, it helps to present a more favourable image.

Summary

For this autoethnographic informed analysis, I was able to draw on the shared meanings of the speech community – the wider psychic-spiritual milieu of which I am a member (Philipsen, 1992). Having developed an understanding of psychic-spiritual culture over time, this helped me to interpret the text, symbols and images used by psychic practitioners on

their personal websites. As a result, analysis of psychic practitioner websites revealed the strategies they use to persuade potential clients of their credibility. For instance, one such strategy is the claim that psychic abilities are a 'gift'. The connotation of this is that the gift is only bestowed on a chosen few, and that it is something to be shared with others. Psychic practitioners use this to present their expertise and denote trustworthiness. As well as psychic abilities being regarded as a 'gift', it is not uncommon for psychic practitioner biographical accounts to refer to early spiritual encounters or traumatic experiences that awakened their spirituality or made them special in some way.²³ Reporting early experiences and explaining gifts in these ways serve predominantly as performative devices in that they convey the message that the psychic practitioner is authentic. Further support for authenticity may also be offered when the psychic practitioner refers to some form of natural lineage or legacy, such as Anne Marie Kell who informs her website visitors that she has taken over from her psychic grandmother.

These performative devices are similar to that studied by Billig (1987) who explored social psychological approaches to persuasion. He points to two, seemingly opposing, views on how individuals might be persuaded by rhetoric. One posits the individual as a 'response machine', apparently passively consuming (and therefore being persuaded by) what they are being told: "if the sender only gets the arrangement correct, then audiences will succumb to the charms of the communication" (Billig, 1987: 108). Applied to how people consume websites, this implies that website visitors are passive consumers gullible to rhetoric. The other view however, from cognitive social psychological approaches, states that the brain needs to process the messages and individuals differ in terms of how they interpret information. Contemporary approaches however see both sides as valid (Billig, 1987). Billig points to the work of Petty and Cacioppo (1984) who suggest that people might be persuaded by two means: the central

²³ Participants for the pilot study of this thesis also referred to their psychic abilities as a gift to be shared with others (Ryan, 2008).

and the peripheral. Billig (1987: 108) states: “When people are interested in the issue at hand, then they are likely to pay attention to content. If the peripheral route is taken, then an attractively packaged, but intrinsically worse, argument might succeed over an unadorned, but better, argument”. What this suggests with reference to website content is that centrally, people assess, process and consider the visual material available on a website by actively engaging with it in order to find specific things that will persuade them of the site’s credibility. This is especially important if the website is selling a product or service. However, if people are not paying full attention, perhaps idly browsing websites and not really engaging with the information available (by clicking on hyperlinks and media for instance) they might only perceive a message peripherally. If we recall, initial impressions do count, as noted by Vazire and Gosling (2004) and Lindegaard *et al* (2006). Therefore, there may be a special offer or flashing image that causes visitors to a particular website to become persuaded by its message and want to explore further. In the case of psychic practitioner websites, an attractively-advertised psychic reading service might rhetorically portray authenticity more readily (and visually) than a more meaningful autobiographical account that might carry a more persuasive message. How an individual consumes the website, passively or actively, determines which message they choose. However, a website author might use rhetoric to persuade potential clients of authenticity in different ways, as will now be examined.

The Presentation of Psychic Practices as Work

The psychic practitioners in this study use their websites to present themselves as knowledgeable experts. However, they also need to demonstrate that they are trustworthy. Using their websites, psychic practitioners attempt to demonstrate this by portraying themselves as respectable people who are experts in what they do and that they are credible, competent and expert. The following section considers how psychic practitioners might do this by presenting what they do as ‘work’ or

as a professional practice. How psychic practitioners may consider themselves as having 'celebrity' status will also be examined.

Psychic Practices as 'Work'

Many psychic practitioners, particularly mediums, refer to what they do as 'working for spirit'; that is, they regard their spiritual 'work' to be in service to a higher spiritual realm. This has also been observed in Facebook status messages such as:

[FB.3]

Its always so so lovely to have your clients phone and tell you that after their reading there lives have changed for the better, and things look more positive..i so love my job and working with spirit..they are awesome..:) xxxxxx [PsychicJim]

[FB.7]

Totally amazing night at circle tonight... boy I didn't know I could do that! I do love working with spirit
[ClairvoyantSuzanna]

Similar examples are found on psychic practitioner websites. For example, psychic medium Sally-Ann Taylor states on her website: "I really love my *work* as a spiritual psychic clairvoyant medium... I am really lucky to have a *job* which brings me great pleasure". Similarly, David Taylor relates how his activity as a medium provides opportunity to travel: "My *work* takes me all over the North West". Additionally, when narrating how he became involved in psychic mediumship, Allan Jones informs visitors to his website that his involvement with a paranormal investigation team resulted in him "*working* in the capacity of mediumship" and that he found "the verification of my *work*" rewarding, particularly since "my *work* takes me further a field" to do audience nights. Further reference to work is made by Jones when he refers to how "people [are] claiming lasting emotional benefit from my *work*".

Jones's reference to mediumship as 'work' could be considered as a way to demonstrate that he takes what he does seriously; indeed he does, thus using this to persuade any visitors to his website that he is a trustworthy medium. However, Jones sees what he does as work because it gives him a sense of having a 'greater purpose' in life. Given that he felt isolated as a child, and somewhat 'a loner', it seems appropriate that this story fits together – Jones was a loner as a child but that was because he was to serve Spirit as a medium later in life. The idea that being able to communicate with spirit and pass messages on from the spirit world is in service to 'Spirit' is not uncommon amongst mediums and psychics. Indeed, evidence for this was found on other practitioners' websites. David Radley states: "My *job* is to prove life continues long after we cross over to the other side", and on her website, Anne Marie Kell tells her visitors: "you ask the questions, it is my *job* to find the answers for you".

Although referring to their readings as work or a job denotes a practice worthy of financial reward, the term 'professional' might also be used. When searching the internet for psychic reading websites, as well as finding links to 'Gifted Psychic Medium' it is common to find websites advertising the services of a 'Professional Psychic Medium' or 'Professional Clairvoyant'. But what is meant here by the term 'professional' and how can it relate to a seemingly questionable activity? Formal dictionary definitions of a 'profession' acknowledge that a detailed and expert knowledge is required of the subject or field one practices in and that the professional holds credentials, often in the form of prolonged training and formal qualifications (Malin, 2000). The following section considers the meaning of 'professional' when used on psychic practitioner websites.

'Professional' Psychic Services

The psychic practitioners in the sample varied in terms of whether or not they included the term 'professional' when referring to their status as a medium or psychic reader. For example, on his website Gary Dakin claims

to have been a 'Professional Medium' since 1995, whilst Susan Angel from Angel Tarot Guidance tells visitors to her website "I am a professional Psychic, Spiritual Healer and Hypnotherapist, with over 17 years experience". Meanwhile, Psychic Shelly also refers to herself as a "professional medium".

However, closer analysis reveals the latent meanings of the word 'professional' in each of these websites. It is clear from Dakin's website that he refers to what he does to be a profession in the sense of it being an activity in which he engages to gain income. On his front page, his biography and his online CV Dakin claims to be a "Professional Psychic Medium". In his biography, Dakin reveals more detail about how he considers what he does to be a profession. For him, becoming a professional medium was a *process*. Furthermore, he was helped on this journey into professional mediumship by a well known medium:

Turning professional was for me an obvious step and I hit the professional stage with my own one man show at Burnley Mechanics Theatre/Hall and worked on radio for the first time to promote the night.

I was perhaps fortunate in the fact that prior to turning professional, I had been able to visit theatres and halls with the medium James Byrne. He had allowed me to introduce him on several occasions and I think this helped to build up my confidence when it was time for me to stand up in front of large gatherings of people.

Dakin does not reveal precisely what he means by "turning professional" but when he talks about "the professional stage" it does appear that to him, becoming a professional medium was to become a *stage medium* – his home page refers to Gary Dakin as "One of the UK's Top *Stage* Psychic Mediums" rather than 'One of the UK's Top *Professional* Psychic Mediums'. It is clearly important to Dakin that becoming professional meant to be on

stage, but also to be on stage alone; many mediums start out their mediumship demonstrations co-working with other, more established, mediums. For Dakin, he had been able to visit theatres and halls with James Byrne, a well known stage medium from the 1970s, allowing him to build confidence talking to large audiences. Whilst Dakin was the only psychic practitioner in the sample to mention working with well known older practitioners, it is often the case in Spiritualist churches that developing mediums will 'shadow' or accompany more established mediums whilst they demonstrate platform mediumship. Making reference to this as Dakin does however, is another way of establishing expertise and prestige; working with a well-known respectable medium communicates the message that Dakin is also a respectable medium. Further evidence for how Dakin regards what he does to be professional is provided in his statement that he *specialises* in 'large scale audience based demonstrations of clairvoyance'. Having a specialism denotes a particular expertise in a given field.

References to specialisation and professional status were also found in other websites in the sample. On her website *Angel Tarot Guidance*, Susan Angel also states that she specialises in a particular activity connected to her work. Here, Angel specialises in Corporate Events, which include workshops and staff training days. Although she does offer 'Intuitive Professional Readings' via her website, alongside Reiki Healing and Hypnotherapy, her corporate involvement appears to stem from her own style of life coaching (or 'Empowerment Sessions'), which she promotes on her website. She informs corporate visitors that psychic readings make great ice breakers for workshops and training days whereas hypnotherapy and past life regression sessions provide relaxation and useful self-empowering visualisation techniques. To lend endorsement to her corporate involvement (to be taken more seriously), Angel also lists some of the companies she has worked with, including Manchester City Football Club.

Similar to Dakin and Angel, engagement in corporate events appears to be important to Psychic Shelly, who states: “I have also by invitation hosted corporate events in London”. Interestingly, Psychic Shelly also refers to herself as a professional medium in her home page blurb:

Although I am a professional medium I do have readings myself and have found that it can sometimes be difficult to find a genuine reader. Make your own minds up about me as a reader, and to help you do this, please read the testimonial pages on this site. In 2009 it became law that each testimonial has to be genuine and provable. This is to avoid fake testimonials placed onto sites and is in my opinion an excellent law.

With this statement, Psychic Shelly is doing several things. Firstly, her statement that she is a professional medium could be interpreted the same way as Dakin or Angel’s site. Secondly however, she makes reference to how difficult it can be to find a genuine reader and invites visitors to read her testimonials to make their own minds up about her as a reader.

Here, Shelly is communicating the message that she is the medium that can be trusted; not only is she warning her potential clients to be wary of other practitioners, but she is implying that she can be trusted because she has genuine testimonials to prove that she is respectable. Anne Marie Kell uses a similar strategy on her website home page. She tells her visitors: “If you are sitting here looking at my website then you have been drawn here for a reason”. This extends on the invitation to engage with the spiritual, implying that the “reason” the visitor has come to her website has some spiritual context. Further to this, Kell places responsibility for choosing a reading in the hands of her potential clients, again by situating the choice in a spiritual context:

Before choosing to have a reading with any psychic, make sure you have a good look at the website, and go with your gut instincts, if you get a good feeling about the psychic in question and are drawn to them then this is when you should look at

having a reading with that person. If however this is something you can't put your finger on, then steer clear, as it may well be spirits way of saying that Psychic is not the right one to read for you.

By giving her potential clients ownership of their choice to have a reading with her, Kell is already starting to empower them. The way she connects their choice to the spiritual differs to Shelly's strategy above where she draws on previous client's testimonials to support what she does.

Celebrity Status

However, closer inspection reveals that beyond wishing to communicate the message that they are professional psychic mediums, it appears *becoming known* for what they do is also an important theme communicated via psychic practitioner websites. In the statement: "I have also by invitation hosted corporate events in London", Psychic Shelly gives the impression that she is well known for what she does; she has been personally invited to host events (including charity events) because of her credibility and status as a known professional psychic medium. Being asked to host events implies an element of celebrity status; in recent years there has been a rise in number of 'celebrity psychics', so it would not be uncommon to find less noted psychic practitioners aligning themselves to such a status. Indeed at the very beginning of her narrative Shelly refers to her involvement with an international psychic television channel and connection to other psychic practitioners:

For those that don't know me, I am Shelly, a psychic clairvoyant medium, for those that do know me you will have seen me on an international psychic channel, and know that I am involved with some of the most well known, respected psychics, mediums and astrologers.

Whilst Shelly does not mention in this statement any particular psychic by name, this apparent relationship with other well known, respected

(professional) practitioners is similar to Dakin’s relationship to well known (early celebrity) medium James Byrne. Thus, popularity and credibility appear to rely on *association with* other popular and respectable psychic practitioners by way of endorsement.

Another way in which Psychic Shelly aligns herself to professional status as a psychic medium is in her reference to working for the international psychic television channel, *Psychic TV* (established in 2004): “for those that do know me you will have seen me on an international psychic channel”. However, this is the only mention of Psychic Shelly’s involvement with television and she instead appears to place more emphasis on her skills, her website and the testimonials. Yet for Gary Dakin, it seems that television appearances are important.

In his CV, Dakin talks about his involvement with television, broadcasting on Granada Breeze and Sky TV’s *Psychic Livetime* and concludes with the statement “For Gary Dakin the future will certainly include many more television appearances”. The confidence in this statement seems to be an attempt to justify the lack of television appearances thus far, given that Gary has been a medium for twenty years. But what makes a television appearance so important? Elizabeth Rose is also showcased on her home page as having been “seen on GMTV”:



Fig.4.2: Elizabeth Rose Media Engagement Advertisement

GMTV was a popular ITV breakfast show between 1993 and 2010, and has featured several well known psychic practitioners including astrologer Russell Grant who was “resident astrologer” on breakfast television since joining the earlier version of GMTV, TV-AM in 1986. He has also featured very regularly on ITV’s *This Morning* daytime programme. Thus

appearances on television, and involvement with other well known psychics, mediums and astrologers appears to be a key factor that psychic practitioners draw on to present themselves in a particular way. Being well known and *connected* to other well known practitioners thus appears to align with the notion of being professional, of being a credible psychic practitioner.

Indeed, media involvement appears to be a key activity that enables psychic practitioners to demonstrate to their potential clients that they are active and that they are credible enough to be involved this way. Another way the psychic practitioners in this study are involved with the media is with radio appearances; Gary Dakin himself listing several stations he has broadcast on, including BBC Radio stations in Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Merseyside, as well as stations such as National Talk Radio and Chorley FM. Featuring on the radio is very popular, and well-known mediums have featured on the radio, such as Derek Acorah who had a regular slot on Radio Merseyside in the 1990s. Radio appearances are also mentioned on other psychic practitioner websites in the sample. For example, David Taylor Spiritualist Medium expresses that he appears regularly on *Bolton FM* radio whilst Anne Marie Kell appears weekly on internet-based *Blog Talk* radio show giving free tarot readings. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Rose's website also mentions her radio appearances:

Elizabeth Rose has also appeared on many radio stations where she has conducted live psychic predictions on air and jammed all the lines with her popularity. Every time she makes an appearance she becomes more in demand as her reputation spreads.

In the above extract, Rose is portrayed as an extremely popular medium, but key to this statement is how each appearance makes her more popular as her reputation grows. The defining feature here is that increasing popularity equals growth in demand leading to enhanced reputation. Rose and the other psychic practitioners are appealing to their radio and

television appearances as persuasive devices to showcase their popularity and enhance their reputation. Furthermore, having a good reputation encourages clients to trust the credibility and experience of the psychic practitioners and the services they have to offer.

Summary

The autoethnographic informed analysis drew on my own understanding of how psychic practitioners frame what they do as 'work'. Having sat in the audience of many psychic demonstrations over the years, I am familiar with the general idea, particularly amongst spiritualists, that mediumship is classed as 'working for spirit' and many see this as a professional practice. However, whilst situating psychic practice as 'professional' can simply be regarded as a strategy to make money from psychic readings, closer analysis of what is portrayed on psychic practitioner websites reveals something much broader. Firstly, particular identities are being performed. Butler (1988) has written extensively about the ways in which gender is performed. She argues that gender, as an identity, is not stable. Rather, it is performed or "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1988: 519). Gender, of course, is just one way of performing a particular identity (or what one believes to constitute that identity). In the present study, psychic-spiritual seekers are drawing on culturally held notions of what it means to be a professional psychic reader in order to perform that specific identity through content on their websites. We return to this later in the chapter. Meanwhile, Larson (1977, in Macdonald, 1989) suggests that professionalism is an attempt to transform knowledge and skills into social and economic rewards. Thus, in promoting a *professional* service, or selling psychic readings by a *professional* medium, website authors are communicating the message that such services and the people who are offering them are respectable. This aligns with the notion of credibility, which website visitors seek evidence for. Indeed, displaying such characteristics, for instance through referring to a repertoire of skills, directing potential clients to a testimonial page or showcasing media

involvement, demonstrates success, which in turn shows they can be trusted and are therefore worthy of social (status) or economic reward (Macdonald, 1989).

The Representation of the Psychic Spiritual Community

Societal norms perceive psychic readers as fraudulent or as charlatans. However, many psychic practitioners and mediums believe it is their soul's purpose to share their gift to help others. In the wider psychic-spiritual milieu, this idea is respected and supported by others who may not necessarily share similar skills. However importantly, psychic practitioners constitute a large number of members from the psychic-spiritual milieu who promote themselves via the internet. As well as presenting themselves in a favourable light, inadvertently they will also be representing the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. In so doing, they are representing the 'common consciousness' and 'ideology of seekership' outlined by Campbell (2002[1972]) in his definition of the cultic milieu.

The following section considers the ways in which aspects of 'the spiritual' are employed to enhance website visitors' engagement with the side of psychic reading that orients to a spiritual experience.

Representing Spirit

The spiritual aspect of psychic practice considers that psychic ability comes with particular roles and responsibilities. For example, both Gary Dakin and David Taylor inform their website visitors what they consider their role to be:

Dakin: My aim is to relay messages from spirit world accurately and with sensitivity in order to prove to people that there is life after death.

Taylor: My aim is to give the best possible evidence that when the physical body dies the spirit lives on.

This reference to the role of a medium to be a messenger between two worlds is a common theme running through other websites in the sample, as demonstrated below:

Radley: My job is to prove life continues long after we cross over to the other side.

Jones: Using my ability to help people joining the two worlds together.

Here, the psychic practitioners are informing potential clients about what they see as the purpose behind their abilities. Ultimately, the purpose behind mediumship is purportedly to provide a channel of communication between those living and their deceased friends and family. Speaking metaphorically about their role as messenger communicating between 'two worlds', helps to instil a sense of confidence in the potential client that the psychic practitioner is knowledgeable about what they do. Furthermore, it presents a particular picture of what the spiritual is about; that the spirit world exists and that it is possible for some people to communicate with souls who have passed into that spiritual world. In demonstrating their knowledge and belief in this other world, psychic practitioners are underpinning their claim that their ability is a 'gift' that only a chosen few possess, alluding to a community of gifted individuals. Furthermore, this gift is to be used for 'the greater good' (Ryan, 2008); to be able to 'bridge two worlds together' means to share this with others who do not have exclusive access and offer proof that life exists after death. Presenting the psychic-spiritual self in this way helps to persuade potential clients visiting such websites that they are being offered an authentic spiritual experience.

Besides using their websites to talk about psychic abilities, website authors draw on visual symbolism representing the link between two worlds. Photographic images of the sky, clouds, sunlight and the moon are among some of the symbols found on the websites in this study. As previously

discussed, websites act as portals inviting visitors to engage in a spiritual experience and images act to enhance this experience, drawing visitors in to engage further with what is on offer. Images relating to psychic readings are also used; crystal balls and tarot cards are particularly favoured as they represent tools that might be used in readings, for example:

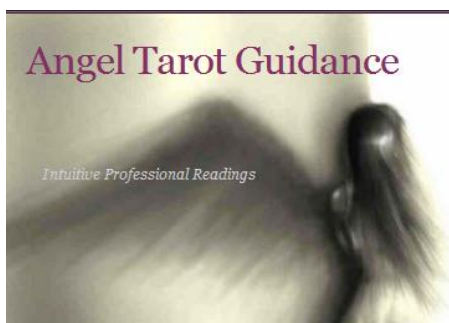


Fig.4.3: Angel Tarot Guidance Intuitive Professional Readings

However, whilst this may appear to be typical imagery found on psychic practitioner websites, there are marked differences in the websites in this study, relating to the kind of identity or style of psychic practice each practitioner wished to represent. For example, on her Angel Tarot Guidance website, Susan Angel uses an image of an angel to represent her services (see Fig.4.3 above). On the 'Readings' page of her website, several different images are used to represent the style of each of those she has on offer; for example:

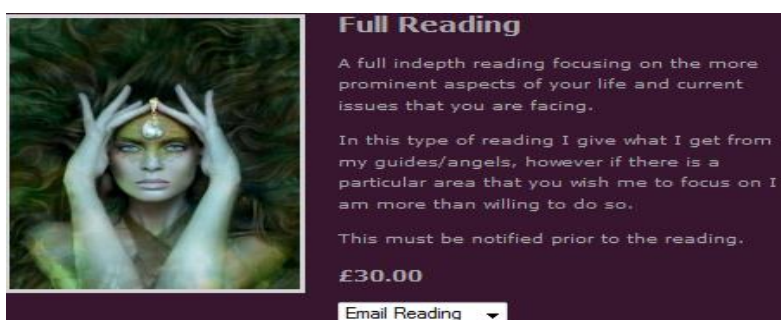


Fig. 4.4: Angel Tarot Guidance: Full Reading

A 'Full Reading' (Fig. 4.4, above) is represented by an image of a female holding a clear jewel to her forehead. Here, the website author has drawn on broader psychic-spiritual rhetoric to present a particular interpretation, although this is not necessarily obvious to the lay website visitor. In the

above image, the forehead is believed to be where the ‘third eye’ is situated (the third eye being related to psychic seeing). This also relates to the sixth chakra in the yogic system and also relates to the pineal gland in the brain. The clear crystal jewel is representative of crystal quartz, a stone typically associated with clarity, focus and clear seeing (clairvoyance). In using this image, Angel is representing the clarity of the full reading she has to offer, which she describes as:

A full indepth reading focusing on the more prominent aspects of your life and current issues that you are facing. In this type of reading I give what I get from my guides/angels, however if there is a particular area that you wish me to focus on I am more than willing to do so.

The blurb for the reading relates to the issue of *focus* – this, together with the image, denotes the reading as providing a particular kind of service – one of clearly seeing the client’s issues and focussing on possible solutions.

Angel’s “Mixed Reading Package” includes a full reading, angelic guidance, Soul Card insight and the opportunity to focus on three main questions. Again, psychic-spiritual symbolism is drawn on to communicate a specific message. Angel uses what members of the psychic-spiritual milieu would consider to be powerful imagery to illustrate this (Fig. 4.5):



Fig.4.5: Angel Tarot Guidance: Mixed Reading Package

The image shows a naked female form, free from the clothes (confines) that restrict; this represents freedom gained from finding guidance to overcome the issues that compel somebody to have a reading. The female's hair is purple, wispy and free-flowing in the wind. The colour purple and the wind (representative of the air element) are conventionally taken to be symbols of spiritual guidance and again, freedom due to having the knowledge to move on from life's problems. The backdrop is predominantly a swirl of yellow, representative of higher spiritual wisdom and guidance, and of healing from worrying and anxiety. It is also symbolic of the sun, warmth and upliftment. The butterfly is particularly symbolic, and many are used here to accentuate how this reading would lead to transformation and transition from one situation to another in which the person feels freer and more able to cope with life. The rainbow of colours in this image is highly significant in the psychic-spiritual community. Whilst each colour has its own meaning (usually personal), all colours together, en masse, signify unity. Furthermore, all colours together are white light, and white light is also taken to represent Spirit.

Angel's website appears to be the only one in the sample studied to use different images depending on which readings were on offer. The images are powerful, and will convey the message that she is a reliable reader. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Rose's website carries just two images; a crystal ball and an image of Rose herself (discussion about photographic images of the psychic practitioners follows below). As can be seen in the illustration (Fig. 4.6, below) the crystal ball is placed in the box advertising "Summer Special Offer":



Fig.4.6: Elizabeth Rose: Summer Special Offer

The crystal ball, an iconic symbol of fortune telling and seeing the future, is a typical symbol that is used to denote clear seeing (clairvoyance). Here, the spiritual symbolism of the crystal ball is lost as the focus becomes the discounted price for a twenty minute reading. The phone number is emphasised and the “special offer” banner crosses the crystal ball. Indeed, further evidence that this website is oriented to money-making lies at the foot of the page where the only other images on the page relate to payment methods.

The crystal ball image is also used by Psychic Shelly. However, this is very different:



Fig. 4.7: Psychic Shelly Clairvoyant Medium

Inside the crystal ball is a smaller version of the main image of Shelly featured on her web page (Fig. 4.7 above). However, the image is somewhat distorted due to the sheen of the glass globe. This gives the impression of the moon; another very powerful symbol. The moon is again representative of psychic ability, as it denotes a feminine, intuitive nature.

Clairvoyant (psychic-spiritual) interpretation of this symbol denotes the moon as a light that illuminates a pathway, a way out of a situation holding the person back. Shelly's image within the moon illustrates to her visitor, whether they are aware of this or not, that she is the path illuminator, the person able to show someone the way out of the situation they seek help with.

The website authors may not necessarily have been aware of the shared meanings behind the images they used. However, these are powerful symbolisms of psychic-spiritual culture; images that members of the psychic-spiritual milieu will be conscious of, but that are also normal everyday cultural symbols to them. They would use the symbols as representative of their beliefs and practices without necessarily being fully conscious of their wider cultural meaning. Equally, visitors to websites will not necessarily know of the cultural meanings of the symbols they see, and that they are symbolic doorways to a spiritual experience (Hume, 2007; see also Karaflogka, 2002).

Visual Representation of the Psychic Practitioner Self

In contrast, the absence of metaphysical symbolism does not necessarily lessen the meaning or the effect the website has in terms of inviting visitors to engage with the spiritual. The photographic images of self the psychic practitioner displays on their website are equally as powerful. They serve to establish a sense of personal connection between the visitor and the psychic, a sense of parasocial presence (see Kumar and Benbasat, 2002). In doing this, these images are also symbolic of the portal, the doorway across a threshold into the spiritual experience. In this study, all but one of the psychic practitioners are featured on the home page of their website.

As can be seen in the image below (Fig. 4.8), Anne Marie Kell sits in front of what appears to be a pine panelled wall. On the wall behind her is a framed image of a painting of a man's face. He wears white and has white hair and

a white beard. Kell sits at a small square table which has a purple cloth on it that has a Celtic Trinity knot symbol in the centre. This symbol has lots of different meanings, but can be taken to mean the link between the past, present and future, or the link between mind, body and spirit. Meanwhile, the purple colour is a popular choice for tarot reading, as purple is often considered to be a highly spiritual colour, representing divinity and connection to spirit. Kell is also wearing what appears to be purple velvet. She wears her hair loose and is smiling, looking directly at the photographer with her head tilted slightly to one side. According to Goffman (1976) head canting (tilting) can be interpreted as “an acceptance of subordination, an expression of ingratiation, submissiveness, and appeasement” (Goffman, 1976: 46). Also, because tilting ones head to the side exposes the ear, it indicates someone who is willing to listen. In presenting herself as likeable, calm and caring, Kell is illustrating that she has the qualities one would expect in a spiritual counsellor. Similarly, her smile denotes a person who is friendly and happy to help. Indeed, out of the sample of websites used in this study, the female psychic practitioners were more likely to be smiling; an observation also made by Henley (1977 in Ragan, 1982).



Fig. 4.8: Anne Marie Kell: Tarot Reading

In this image, Kell is presenting a particular image of her identity as a psychic practitioner and uses various cultural props to enhance the image. On the table in front of her and to her right, there is a large white lit candle

within an ornate lantern. Next to this is a smaller candle, also lit, on a disc shaped holder. To Kell's left is a large crystal ball in an ornate holder. On the table in front of her are some tarot cards set out in the traditional 'Celtic Cross' spread, and her hand rests on one of the tarot cards as if to indicate that she is reading them. Goffman (1976) also writes about hands in photographic images. He refers to 'the feminine touch' and how women are pictured barely touching an object as if to trace its outline or caress its surface. He distinguishes a female touch from that of a man's, who is more likely to be shown grasping or holding something.

Indeed, in two of the photographs on his website, Psychic Medium Allan Jones is holding a microphone, appearing to be giving a demonstration of mediumship. In another photograph he is seen holding something whilst sitting at his computer and in the fourth photograph his hand is placed flat, palm downwards on a photograph of what appears to be a large building. Holding something is akin to taking control of it, a particularly masculine trait that is often portrayed in photographs (Goffman, 1976):



Fig. 4.9: Psychic Medium Allan Jones at Work

Whilst the differences between Kell and Jones appear subtle, the two websites share a distinct commonality that is also found on Psychic Shelly's website: each practitioner is shown carrying out their individual psychic practices.

Kell is sat at her table, touching (reading) the tarot cards, which are laid out in a formal tarot spread. Meanwhile, Shelly is stood with her eyes closed holding her left hand up as if to be listening to her spiritual communicator

(see Fig. 4.1.1 below) and Jones is shown speaking into a microphone, as if to be giving a public demonstration of mediumship. In two other photographs he is shown performing psychometry; his palm face down on the photograph of a building in one image whilst in the other he is shown as 'reading the vibrations' off an object.



Fig. 4.1.1: Psychic Shelly at Work

Summary

An autoethnographic informed analysis provides a unique insight into the spiritual orientation of psychic practices by drawing on my prior knowledge and understanding of the shared meanings and interpretations of the psychic-spiritual milieu. However, the interpretation of these symbols from a solely sociological imagination would not have provided the rich insight my insider-knowledge has lent to this particular analysis. It was discovered that by displaying a particular identity, psychic practitioners bring about a sense of personal connection with potential clients drawing them in to engage in a spiritual experience (Kumar and Benbasat, 2002). They do this by drawing on the shared meanings of their 'speech community' (Philipsen, 1992), or what Hall (1997) terms 'frameworks of interpretation'. These meanings include text and images that constitute symbolic statements of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu; symbolism that psychic practitioners might use on their websites, including angels, crystals and tarot cards or photographic images of clouds and sky to represent a 'heaven' or 'afterlife', in order to perform identity.

Further to this, because the symbols are representative of the shared meanings of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu, they are likely to be found elsewhere on the psychic-spiritual web such as Facebook group profile pictures and websites of other psychic-spiritual practitioners such as astrologers. Psychic practitioner websites also carry images of them acting out the activity they wish to promote – photographs depict them as performing the identity of professional psychic practitioner (see Butler, 1988). This helps to foster a particular image of the psychic as dedicated to and experienced in what they do. Thus, the psychic-spiritual community is represented through language and images by and of its members, just as any other religious or spiritual community or, indeed, any other cultural interest or activity would be.

Conclusion

Psychic practitioners use their websites to promote their psychic reading services. As such, websites are designed to reach a specific audience; that is, visitors who are likely to consume the service or product on offer. When psychic practitioners refer to their practice as a 'gift', draw on early experience of spiritual encounters or the notion that they inherited their abilities, they attempt to communicate a specific message: that they are authentic psychic readers. Another way in which psychic practitioners attempt to convey the message of authenticity and credibility is by 'doing professional psychic reading' by portraying what they do as a professional practice. Such references to working with spirit may be considered persuasive rhetoric or credibility strategies in much the same way as using language to refer to psychic practices as professional or 'gifts', or explaining them by reference to early spiritual encounters. However, to further 'do professional psychic reading' and endorse their psychic practices as credible, psychic practitioners might talk about their involvement with other psychic practitioners, or place emphasis on their media involvement. Such activities convey the message that the psychic

practitioner is actively involved in the wider psychic-spiritual community, that they are respectable and have a popular reputation.

However, as well as making textual references to the psychic-spiritual self, or psychic practices as work, psychic practitioners draw considerably on visual representations of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. Here, they communicate a message that they are members of an exclusive cultural group; one has to have a specific ability in order to be a part of it. Being able to draw on symbolic imagery of the psychic-spiritual milieu conveys shared knowledge of this community, further enhancing their credibility and authenticity. Furthermore, using photographic images of themselves in action, performing psychic readings, supports this. Nonetheless, in conclusion, psychic practitioners use their websites to promote themselves and their services. They do this by presenting the self, their practices and their membership of a wider psychic-spiritual community. Drawing on the shared language of the psychic-spiritual milieu, psychic practitioners present a particular kind of identity that is oriented towards respectability, authenticity and trust. This helps them to establish a particular relationship with potential clients; one of trust and credibility, in order to receive social or economic reward.

So far I have considered websites as windows for mainly passive consumption by audiences. However, a predominant activity of the psychic-spiritual milieu online is participation in social media platforms and so it is necessary to explore online interactions. In the following chapter, I consider how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu participate on social networking site Facebook.

Chapter Five

Psychics on Facebook: The Practical Management of Psychic-Spiritual Identity in Computer-Mediated Interaction

Psychics and mediums also take full advantage of social media applications available on the internet. Computer-mediated interaction takes place via social media platforms such as chat rooms, asynchronous message boards and social networking sites such as Facebook. Social Networking Sites (SNSs) are especially popular as they have numerous facilities. For instance, users may create public or semi-public profiles of themselves, which they can then share with others (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Furthermore with over 500 million users Facebook, as essentially a social utility, affords users the opportunity to connect with friends and family. It also allows people to expand their social networks beyond those they know in real life. Users may connect with people they once knew at school for instance. However, Facebook also gives users the chance to connect with others of like-minds who they may not have the opportunity to meet offline. This is particularly important when considering seekers of psychic spirituality. In connecting people worldwide, Facebook has the capacity to facilitate the growth and maintenance of offline communities. Colin Campbell's (2002 [1972]) notion of the cultic milieu includes the personnel, the people who constitute the 'common consciousness' (community) and are thereby "united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions" (Campbell, 2002 [1972]: 23). Heidi Campbell (2005) has written extensively on religious communities and how they utilise social media. She defines community as a 'relational network' (p. 188). Relating to others across the world via a giant network of computers is increasingly important to religious communities (see Berger and Ezzy, 2004; Campbell, 2005). Furthermore, the psychic-spiritual milieu recognises how the internet has enabled increasing amounts of like-minds to connect with one another.

This chapter considers how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu participate on social networking site Facebook. Communicating with others on Facebook and via other social media is commonplace now internet technologies are a part of everyday life for many (Markham, 1998). Moreover, Facebook provides the ideal space in which a psychic practitioner (or psychic spiritual seeker) may present their psychic-spiritual self. Whether they choose to use Facebook to communicate with others, publicise their work or offer free impromptu readings as demonstrated in the data in this chapter, psychic-spiritual seekers are spending time making full use of what this social media platform has to offer.

One of the main applications of Facebook is that users are able to build their social networks. A user may add another as a 'Friend' by sending them a 'Friend Request'. Thus, connections are not only made with friends and family, but also with complete strangers. Users' social networks are then visible to their Friends who then have the option of allowing 'Friends of Friends' to see their network so even more connections can be made. Connecting to strangers is not always the goal of Facebook users as connections are more often than not shared offline in some way (boyd and Ellison, 2007). Shared interest in the goals and practices of the psychic-spiritual milieu afford seekers the confidence in being able to connect with complete strangers. This also facilitates self-promotion.

Once connected, a user receives a continuously updated 'News Feed' of what their Friends have been doing on Facebook. From updating their profile with new photographs or playing one of Facebook's popular games, each Friend's Facebook activity is fed through to each person in their online social network. One extremely popular way in which Facebook is used in this way is the Status Message Update (SMU), a space in which users share their thoughts and opinions with those who are in their network:



Fig. 5.1: Facebook Status Message: Update Status Function

Thoughts and opinions can be on a variety of topics, but this function is one of the particularly salient features of Facebook because it allows people to ‘comment’ on what their Friend has said. This provides opportunity for conversation between all those who respond.

In the present study, the researcher’s own News Feed was used to follow and capture the everyday discourse shared by psychics and mediums on her ‘Friends List’. The particular research question providing the focus for this study was: *How do members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use social networking sites to negotiate and maintain their spiritual identity?* In order to address this research question, a broadly discursive approach was adopted to analyse Status Message Updates (SMUs) recorded on the researcher’s Facebook News Feed.

This chapter addresses how psychic-spiritual identity is negotiated and managed in online interaction. The chapter begins by introducing the work of Goffman (1959). Goffman’s work referred to verbal and non-verbal ways of achieving and sustaining one’s identity within interaction. However the present research concerns interaction which takes place in an online social environment. Relying solely on textual communication, online interaction lacks particular nuances of face-to-face interaction (see for instance Walther, 2007). Yet what remains are the discursive practices that orient toward specific actions participants are trying to achieve. Hence, the chapter continues by considering how a form of discourse analysis (DA) may be applied to the data gathered for this study in order to uncover the subtle ways in which identity is managed through interaction taking place via SMUs. Following on from this, an extract of data taken from an SMU will be used as a single-case analysis to demonstrate the ways in which the originator of the SMU, Medium JB works to align her identity with the

wider psychic-spiritual milieu and how other participants help maintain and reinforce that identity. The analysis will also show how features specific to online interaction allow participants to manage interpersonal tensions arising from challenges to authority and expertise.

Analysing Psychic Discourse Online

In order to understand the ways in which identity is achieved and maintained in online social spaces, we can draw upon the work of Goffman. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), Goffman considers how reality is negotiated between people through the acting out of roles. In explaining this process, Goffman states that people naturally seek to find out more about another person they wish to interact with. In doing so, this helps to frame the interaction. People find out about others through various means. Appearances and behaviour allow each person to build up an impression of the other by drawing upon past experience and stereotypes. In online interaction, individuals are given the opportunity to present themselves through what they type. Computer-mediated interaction such as that which takes place via virtual communities or virtual gaming worlds allows individuals the space to play with their identities and present themselves in whichever way they wish to (Turkle, 1994).

However, on social networking platforms such as Facebook, the opportunity to play with multiple identities is diminished because each user has their own personal profile.²⁴ The profile facility, however, allows users to present themselves visually and textually to friends and family (and if they have not set specific privacy settings, complete strangers).

Several studies have been carried out that consider impression management through the presentation of self on Facebook via profile pictures and textual information (see for instance Strano, 2008; Barash et al, 2010). However, the present study considers how psychic-spiritual identity can be negotiated and maintained through interaction that takes

²⁴ Some users might have more than one profile; for instance a personal profile and a professional profile.

place via an SMU. SMUs allow typed conversation to take place whereby the original poster of the message uses language to present a particular identity, whilst drawing their Facebook Friends into the interaction. In doing this, their Friends become tools in the construction and reinforcement of the identity they are attempting to express. The tools of discourse analysis help to reveal how this is done.

As a site of social interaction, as well as a place to present one's own identity, Facebook provides rich data from which one may extrapolate examples of how psychic-spiritual identity is achieved and managed in online interaction. Discourse analytic tools may be employed to attend to how this occurs. Wittgenstein argued that language is used to achieve certain actions (Wooffitt, 2001a). What language use is hoping to achieve may be ascertained and analysed by focusing on the pattern of interaction, its function and its consequence (Potter and Wetherell, 1987). Gilbert and Mulkey's *Opening Pandora's Box* (1984) demonstrates the use of discourse analysis in the sociological study of scientific knowledge and how it may reveal the tacit orientations reflected in the data. However, discourse analysis is today associated predominantly with the cultural approach to social psychology, in which it has been developed by, amongst others, Potter and Wetherell (1987). As posited by Wooffitt (2001a), the aim of discourse analysis is to unpick how different forms of verbal and textual materials are put together. Furthermore, analysts are concerned with the performative function of the text: what is the communicator trying to do through interaction?

Wooffitt (2001a; 2001b; 2006) applied the tools of conversation analysis to the study of psychic-sitter interaction to see how psychic readings were performed through language. Data comprised of taped psychic readings whilst the focus of analysis was placed on *the way talk was produced* rather than on *what was being said* in the conversation (Wooffitt, 2001b). Similar analysis has been applied to telephone conversations (see for instance Schegloff, 1968 cited in ten Have, 1999). However, Hutchby (2001)

discusses how interaction which takes place through Internet Relay Chat (IRC) is similar to that which takes place on a telephone; although IRC differs in that the conversation is typed online. These modes of communication differ in other ways. For example, participants within the conversation are not co-present, but are still able to converse simultaneously. IRC however, typically involves many people talking in the same room, similar to a gathering of co-present people. Whilst IRC interaction is widely considered to be synchronous, in that it takes place in real time, Hutchby draws on work by Garcia and Jacobs (1999) who argue that it may be more accurately described as quasi-synchronous. This also applies to interaction taking place on Facebook. Interaction via Facebook status message updates *can* take place almost like synchronous conversation (indeed, there is also the capacity for turns to overlap). However, comments can continue to be made hours or even days later, demonstrating the otherwise asynchronous nature of this kind of communication. Nonetheless, data is readily transcribed as it exists as a textual document immediately after production.

Discourse analysis and conversation analysis are data driven. That is, to apply an existing analytic framework to data would be going against principles of ethnomethodological investigation, which seeks to understand and explain sense making practices. Instead, discourse analysis “focuses attention on the constructive and functional dimensions of discourse, coupled with the reader’s skill in identifying patterns of consistency and variation” (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 169). Taking the data as the starting point, patterns are identified and discussed alongside variations and anomalies which occur within the data. All discourse is taken to be rhetorically focused in that it addresses an explicit or implicit challenge. The identification of variations and anomalies help to highlight these challenges. In the present study, anomalies that occur highlight particular instances of interest that could shed light on the nuances of identity construction and maintenance via Facebook SMUs. There are always other viewpoints, other ways in which individuals make sense of

their world. Discourse analysis helps reveal the subtle ways in which these manifest in interaction. Whilst Hutchby (2001) argues that CA may be applied to computer-mediated interaction (CA concentrates on sequences of interaction, see Wooffitt, 2001b), it is considered here that a broadly discursive approach will help to explicate the latent functions of language through interaction taking place via Facebook SMUs.

What follows is a single case analysis, used here as an example of how this sort of data might be dealt with. It is a useful analytical strategy in DA and CA studies because it is an exercise in teasing one thing apart to see how it is put together, to see what the interaction does and how it works, in order to generate research issues (see Schegloff, 1987). Consequently, the use of a single case analysis here demonstrates how the tools of discourse analysis can be used to reveal how psychic-spiritual identity is negotiated and maintained through interaction via Facebook status message updates.

The Negotiation and Maintenance of Psychic-Spiritual Identity Online

The following section, illustrated with a data extract taken from the researcher's Facebook News Feed, seeks to examine how language is used to do particular things. At first glance the extract looks as if the initial poster of the SMU, Medium JB, is attempting to initiate a demonstration of her skills as a psychic medium. Medium JB is a prolific SMU poster. Aged in her mid forties, she is married with children and lives in the Midlands. She notes on her Facebook Profile page that she is a Spiritualist, and she often posts her activities in relation to Spiritualism via SMUs. From her SMUs, we know that Medium JB often holds offline workshops and demonstrations of mediumship, and that she has several private reading appointments per week. We also know that these readings take place both face-to-face and via email. By regularly communicating such activities via her SMUs, she has established her reputation as a credible medium via her online social network and knowledge sharing contribution. When Medium JB posts via her SMU, it is usual for her to receive several comments in response.

Typically, those who respond to what Medium JB shares via her SMU (whether mundane or spiritually oriented), do so quite swiftly and with positive regard for what she has to say. Often, a conversational dialogue will ensue between Medium JB and those in her social network who have rights to post comments on what she says. The following data extract (captured spring 2010) illustrates these features. It is an analytically interesting SMU because of what it is intended to be – a demonstration of Medium JB’s skills as a credible medium. This is not typical of her SMUs, which are, as already noted, usually concerning her offline spiritual activities. Furthermore, Medium JB is not the only psychic practitioner on Facebook to use the SMU facility in this way. Other data extracts are presented in a later section. In the meantime, the data is presented below in its entirety.²⁵ Analysis of one extract allows identification of several interesting phenomena (Schegloff, 1987), as will be discussed shortly.

Fig. 5.2: Medium JB Facebook Reading May 2010

- 1 **Medium JB:** mmmm i keep getting the impression im supposed to
- 2 do a reading for sum1 tonite but im not sure who yet.....
- 3 **FS:** Me?
- 4 **Medium KKM:** Me? Lol xx
- 5 **Medium P:** usually when that happens its a sign that u need to
- 6 meditate and connect to your inner self? at least in my case anyway
- 7 x
- 8 **PD:** me please
- 9 **Medium JB:** lol poss me included...i agree p but at the moment i
- 10 feel the need for a dad to come through to someone and ive not
- 11 booked a reading with any1 xxx
- 12 **CJ:** lol j..thats going to be an hard one to place..my dad is in spirit
- 13 too lol XX
- 14 **Medium JB:** lol ive been put off by kids at mo and am waiting for
- 15 spirit to decide what im supposed to do xxx
- 16 **Medium JB:** ‘Starsky and hutch’ the programme and also ‘chips’

²⁵ Although please note that there are one or two necessary exclusions for ethical reasons.

17 mmmmm lol xxx
18 **CJ:** mmm that sounds so close to home lol...starsky and hutch used
19 to be my no1 show and we used to watch chips on a Sat after dad
20 came home from the pub lol XX could be anyones dad hun of a
21 certain age lol XX
22 **Medium JB:** lol tell me about it but i know he has a fasionation with
23 bikes esp the big American one in chips as there is a photo with him
24 sitting astride a motorbike sum1 has....michael is also important
25 xxx
26 **CJ:** ahh that is me out then lol..good luck with finding the right one
27 hun XX
28 **Medium JB:** Lol ok c thanku xxxx
29 **SI:** I have a picture of my dad on a motorbike :) he was obsessed
30 with them :) And one of his best mate's is called Michael x
31 **Medium JB:** That sounds so right S xxxx
32 **Medium JB:** Im gonna in box u xxx
33 **SI:** Ok thank you

As can be seen at the start of the interaction, using her Facebook SMU, Medium JB gives off the impression that she intends to demonstrate her skills as a medium. Indeed, in lines 1 and 2, she makes a claim to recipiency of Spirit communication; by stating “mmmm i keep getting the impression im supposed to do a reading for sum1 tonite but im not sure who yet.....”, she is reporting how, as a medium, Spirit are prompting her to receive and pass on messages to a sitter – the identity of whom she has yet to determine. Potential recipients of this reading exist within the five thousand friendship connections Medium JB has on Facebook. However, whilst a psychic reading seemingly occurs within the interaction, discourse analysis helps to unveil the subtleties of how language is used to invite the potential recipient to engage with the spiritual.

Medium JB prefaces her turn with “mmmm” demonstrating her stance towards what is coming. This display of epistemic uncertainty can be considered anticipatory, as an interpersonal strategy should no-one step

forward as a possible recipient. If nobody accepts the information, Medium JB's authority and therefore her identity as a credible medium appear unstable. Thus, the "mmm" acts to imply a certain amount of agency on the Spirit world. As a medium, Medium JB's role is to be the recipient of spiritual messages and then to pass them on to other people. The uncertainty of the message she is intending to pass on is attributed to Spirit, and the difficult work involved in communicating with them. This is confirmed further in what she says next: "i keep getting the impression" implies that Spirit are particularly keen to use her as a medium to communicate the information. This gives Medium JB the chance to play out her role as medium and establishes her authority as recipient of paranormal cognition. Who the information needs to be communicated to remains undisclosed in this first turn. However, what she says next acts to invite potential recipients of the communication: "a reading for sum1 tonite but im not sure who yet.....". The ambiguity within this particular statement also alludes to the epistemic uncertainty of the "mmm" at the beginning of the post. However, this statement ends with an ellipsis: "....." that acts to openly invite Medium JB's Facebook Friends to respond in specific ways that will enable her to demonstrate her supposed skills as a medium.

The responses appear quickly, the first of which comes in line 3 when FS comments "Me?". This response is elicited from the design of Medium JB's prior comment. Yet whilst this posits FS as a potential recipient of the proposed psychic reading, other responses quickly ensue, further shaping the outcome of the interaction. Indeed, in line 4, Medium KKM also says "Me?", but follows this with a "Lol xx".²⁶ The statement: "Me? Lol xx" could be interpreted in a number of ways. For instance, it could simply be an anticipated response by another potential sitter as in line 3. Medium JB's post is designed to encourage more than one person to join in with the interaction; in stating "but im not sure who yet", she is acknowledging a large potential pool of recipients. However, the response in line 4 comes

²⁶ 'LOL' is an abbreviation for 'Laugh out Loud'

from another person identifying themselves as a medium through their username. The response, including the apparently friendly “Lol xx” could be interpreted as a challenge to Medium JB’s attempt to play out her identity as medium in this semi-public space. Indeed, Medium JB’s response in line 9, “lol poss me included...” appears to address only that comment made by Medium KKM in line 4. In effect, this ignores the other potential recipients who responded in lines 3 and 8. Medium JB’s turn also acts in subtle defence of the ambiguity of her initial post. The idea that she too could be the recipient of the messages from Spirit relates to her initial strategy designed to deal with no recipients of the information she is apparently communicating from spirit. If the ensuing interaction is not successful and she is not able to fruitfully demonstrate her skills as a medium, Medium JB could then imply that she is indeed the recipient of the message, and she would therefore be able to minimise inferential threats to her authenticity.

Interestingly, Medium KKM’s response may be compared with that which may be received in a face-to-face demonstration of mediumship. In the comment in line 4, the ‘Lol’ acts to denote laughter (laugh out loud) and as such, is considered an emotional acronym (Marriccia et al, 2008). Yet this is not an exact substitution of laughter; instead, text is used here to convey a particular type of response that could only be seen in computer-mediated interaction. The proposed demonstration of Medium JB’s skills as a medium thus differs in comparison to, for instance, a Spiritualist Church demonstration of mediumship, which benefits from visual non-verbal communication. A typical audience member of a public, face-to-face, mediumship demonstration is unlikely to respond by calling out “Me?” and laughing. Furthermore, the audience member is unlikely to demonstrate affinity to the medium by kissing the medium. Face to face, affinity would be done differently, through smiling for example, to indicate friendliness (Kraut and Johnston, 1979). Thus, such interactive features are unique to textual interaction and are, as a result, very common in online social

interaction. Kisses in online interaction therefore are used light-heartedly to perform friendliness.

The friendly tone to Medium KKM's contribution to the interaction also acts to present the psychic-spiritual milieu online. By responding the way she does, Medium KKM is offering support for Medium JB and for mediumship in general. In effect, this displays visually the common seekership consciousness of mutual support and syncretisation (Campbell, 2002 [1972]). Importantly however, this would generally only be understood by those who shared and understood the language and discourse of mediumship and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. Here, the tools of discourse analysis help to reveal these latent actions within the interaction.

The following response by Medium P (lines 5-7) further demonstrates the unconscious sharing of seekership ideology amongst members of the psychic-spiritual milieu: "usually when that happens its a sign that u need to meditate and connect with your inner self? at least in my case anyway x". Here, Medium P is making his own identity as a medium relevant by offering support to Medium JB. He does this by drawing on the shared discourse of the community to explain how he would interpret the spiritual experience if he was the one to be experiencing it. The notion of connecting to an 'inner-self' is a shared belief that an individual can communicate with their subconscious mind to reflect upon their life and experience (Ryan, 2008). Suggesting the need to meditate is a typical piece of advice that would be shared within the psychic-spiritual milieu.

Medium JB responds to Medium P's advice in her next turn, although she addresses the two prior responses first (line 9): "lol poss me included". Continuing on from this (lines 9-11) Medium JB directs the rest of her response to Medium P: "i agree p but at the moment i feel the need for a dad to come through to someone and ive not booked a reading with any1 xxx". Medium JB's direct response to Medium P here suggests that she detects a challenge to her expertise and identity as a medium. Medium P's

comment is thus perceived as an unanticipated response. To handle this challenge, Medium JB offers new information: “i feel the need for a dad to come through to someone” acts to secure her position in authority; she is a medium in receipt of spiritual communication. As a result, she is not in need to connect with her ‘inner-self’ as suggested by Medium P. Neutralizing the perceived challenge allows Medium JB to re-establish her authoritative status within the interaction and Medium P withdraws from the interaction.

Immediately after her response to Medium P, in lines 12-13, Medium JB faces another challenge; this time, a comment made by CJ: “lol j..thats going to be an hard one to place..my dad is in spirit too lol XX”. This points to the ambiguous nature of the information Medium JB is sharing. The statement itself, and the inclusion of laughter, would not be uttered in a public demonstration of mediumship. However, it could also (and is more likely to) be seen as sympathetic to the broader practices and conventions of mediumship. Nonetheless here, and in the continued statement “my dad is in spirit too lol XX”, CJ explicitly acknowledges how there are lots of people who have deceased fathers, which means Medium JB faces a distinct challenge in ascertaining who the spirit messages could be for.

Meanwhile, Medium JB offers an explanation for the apparent weak connection with her Spirit communicator: “lol ive been put off by kids at mo and am waiting for spirit to decide what im supposed to do xxx”. This turn does two interesting things. Firstly, the account offers an explanation as to the ambiguous nature of the supposed spirit message: her children are a distraction. Secondly, this statement acts to re-establish spiritual agency by highlighting her relative lack of agency in waiting for direction and guidance from them. This affords Medium JB the chance to reaffirm her role as a medium. By alluding to a separate, spiritual agency, she is able to demonstrate how mediumship relies upon Spirit making contact with the medium and sustaining it over enough time as to relay any message of

importance. This also allows Medium JB to position herself as being in a privileged role.

In situating the problems she is having establishing clarity, Medium JB is able to normalise her mediumship as part of her everyday reality. Here, she alludes to the fact that even though she is a medium, she is also a mother. Furthermore, her children act as a distraction despite Spirit continuing to give her the impression that she is to pass on a message. Medium JB also attributes the confusion she is experiencing to the supposed Spirit contact: “and am waiting for spirit to decide what im supposed to do”. Here, she draws on specialised vocabulary and discourse specific to the belief of mediums and psychics that their spiritual work is determined by Spirit. That is, she appeals to the broader rhetoric of mediumship that she ‘is in service to Spirit’ and therefore waits on their direction as to how the reading will continue.

Medium JB uses the immediate next turn (lines 16-17) as another chance to introduce new information: “‘Starsky and Hutch’ the programme and also ‘chips’ mmmmm lol xxx”. This is typical in mediumship interaction when the medium has grounds to suppose that the desired outcome of the reading will not be achieved (see Wooffitt, 2006). In offering more information, Medium JB is hoping to draw in other potential recipients of the proposed message. However, CJ is the first to comment on the new information (lines 18-21), and close examination of her response reveals a particular instance of confusion. Whereas the “mmmmm” at the end of line 17 could have been taken to relate to the *food* chips (in part because it was not capitalised as the title of a programme), CJ interprets “chips” as another television programme of the same era as Starsky and Hutch. Indeed, CJ informs Medium JB that *Starsky and Hutch* used to be her favourite television programme and that she and her father used to watch *Chips* when he came home from the pub. Although CJ has offered confirmation that she can relate to this information, the “mmmmm” at the end of line 17 could be compared with the one in line 1. It may be

suggested that the “mmmmm” in line 17 was intended to be ambiguous so “chips” can be taken either way, thus opening up opportunities for the information to be correct. If the information is received as correct by potential recipients, this enables Medium JB to play out her identity as a successful medium. Here, Medium JB’s turns are designed to sustain her identity throughout any likely challenge.

However, what happens next reveals the possibility of another challenge from CJ. The statement in lines 20-21: “XX could be anyones dad hun of a certain age lol XX” suggests that rather than being sympathetic to the intricacies of mediumship, CJ re-ignites the vagueness issue, revealing a more sceptical position concerning whether or not Medium JB is indeed communicating with her deceased father. The statement is perceived by Medium JB as a challenge to her credibility as a medium, as can be seen by her interpretation in her next turn (lines 22-25): “lol tell me about it but i know he has a fasionation with bikes esp the big American one in chips as there is a photo with him sitting astride a motorbike that sum 1 has....michael is also important xxx”. This statement provides evidence for her supposition of a challenge, and it does several things. Firstly, in line 22, Medium JB’s statement “lol tell me about it” is a way of re-establishing her authority as the medium receiving information from Spirit. Furthermore, to challenge CJ’s perceived attempt to challenge her authority as knowledgeable and experienced medium she again offers more information, purportedly from Spirit: “but I but i know he has a fasionation with bikes esp the big American one in chips as there is a photo with him sitting astride a motorbike that sum 1 has....michael is also important xxx”. This turn is especially significant as it demonstrates how Medium JB re-establishes her authoritative position within the interaction, as a medium trying to pass on messages communicated from Spirit. However, CJ relinquishes any possible claim of relating to this information by bowing out of the interaction: “ahh that is me out then lol..”. This explicitly rejects the new information Medium JB has offered. She then offers Medium JB support in finding the correct recipient of the message: “good luck with

finding the right one hun XX". This brings CJ's involvement in the conversation to an end whilst Medium JB's response: "Lol ok c thanku" serves to acknowledge this. However, it might be suggested that the ensuing four kisses: "xxxx" acts to either open the conversation back up to further potential recipients or, if there are no further takers of the information, Medium JB has effectively closed the conversation, having already put in place the mechanism by which the information could relate to her as well as the explanations as to why she did not find the right recipient of the reading.

However, immediately after this exchange with CJ, in lines 29-30, SI informs Medium JB that *she* can relate to the information (line 29): "I have a picture of my dad on a motorbike :) he was obsessed with them :)". She follows this up in line 30 with "And one of his best mate's is called Michael x". In receiving confirmation for the information she has related from Spirit, and therefore receiving the response she was anticipating from her first turn, Medium JB answers to confirm that she has been correct in the information she was required to pass on from Spirit: "That sounds so right S xxxx". However, her next action changes the direction of the conversation. She tells SI "Im gonna in box u xxx" effectively taking the supposed reading out of public view and into their private message inboxes. By doing so, Medium JB brings an end to the public display of her mediumship skills which have, up until now, faced considerable challenge. However, in choosing to abort her endeavour to demonstrate her skills publicly, Medium JB manages to maintain her credibility as an expert medium.

Summary

As a regular user of Facebook, and therefore an observer of psychic practitioner activity on my News Feed, an autoethnographic methodology enabled me to gain, and subsequently report, a particularly in-depth perspective of what was occurring. My prior understanding of psychic

practitioner discourse and the context of online psychic practices allowed me to unpick the meanings behind what was being said; something that would not necessarily be noticed had I not had that insider knowledge. As a result, the analysis revealed two key findings: identity is managed on a turn by turn basis, and interaction is a delicate interplay of rights, expectations, activities and performance. Medium JB's identity emerges out of her interaction with prospective recipients of her intended reading and whilst other participants may help to construct Medium JB's identity as credible medium, their contributions to the discussion may also pose as a challenge to this.

Indeed, Medium JB may effectively perform her role as credible medium, and others may help to construct this identity. However, there are other responses which Medium JB would not have anticipated when she posted her original SMU. The response by CJ is perceived by Medium JB as a direct challenge to her epistemic authority. Such a challenge requires careful handling by Medium JB. Indeed, the effective management of any perceived challenge is crucial to sustain her identity as credible medium. Consequently, turns are designed to ward off any challenge to her authoritative status within the interaction, allowing her to retain epistemic prowess through the interaction. Further examples of perceived challenges and epistemic tussle are detailed in the following analysis.

Maintaining Epistemic Prowess

What follows is a collection of different examples whereby one particular psychic practitioner uses her SMU to deliver a daily one card tarot reading. The practitioner is a woman in her forties from North Wales who regularly demonstrates her clairvoyance at regional public demonstrations and house parties as well as offering face-to-face readings. Her identity as a psychic practitioner is already known by her Facebook Friends, and she has 'Clairvoyant' in her username. At the time the data was gathered, she was a very regular poster on Facebook, often updating her status between ten

and twenty times a day. GHClairvoyant posts a daily tarot Card of the Day on her Status Message Update. This typically involves her drawing one card and posting her interpretation of it in her opening post. She does this every day and usually receives between ten and twenty-five responses from her Facebook friends (like Medium JB, she also has around 5000 Facebook contacts in her network). The following analysis takes a broadly discursive approach to examine the way language is used by GHClairvoyant to demonstrate epistemic prowess. Also examined is the way in which the ensuing comments might serve to reinforce or challenge this. GHClairvoyant begins her daily tarot Card of the Day with a greeting, before introducing the card and its interpretation:

Fig.5.3: GHClairvoyant: High Priestess and the Moon (Sept. 2010)

1 **GHClairvoyant:** Sorry the card for the day is late today as couldn't
2 get onto facebook earlier – anyway its the High Priestess and the
3 Moon also fell out of the deck. Bit of a mysterious energy about
4 today – like we're waiting for something to happen that's actually
5 going on behind the scenes only we can't see it yet you may also
6 find your psychic abilities heightened today – the veil grows thinner
7 :) hmm
8 **RJ:** It's only a matter of time :-)
9 **VKPsychic-Medium:** with my hermit, its a day of the unconscious
10 thoughts, paying attention to your inner feelings, could even be big
11 changes to how we think xxx
12 **CST:** Feel like I've been waiting for something to happen for
13 months!
14 **GHClairvoyant:** me too
15 **FM:** Yes, nail on the head there! When that something happens I
16 think this one is a bit bigger than we expect
17 **TC:** oh most definitely lol as always all will be revealed x
18 **GHClairvoyant:** sick of blooming waiting TC – we've had this
19 conversation many times haven't we LOL x

Drawing a card of the day is common practice amongst tarot card readers; daily tarot cards are used to give an indication of the energies of the day. In posting her own card of the day in her SMU, GHClairvoyant affirms her identity as a practitioner of the tarot cards. She does this by aligning her identity with the beliefs and practices of a wider psychic-spiritual milieu, and anticipates others responding in order to positively reinforce her identity. In her SMU post she provides an elaborate interpretation of the card she has drawn, and draws on the common rhetoric of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu to further compliment her identity as psychic practitioner. For instance, the phrase “its the High Priestess and the Moon also fell out of the deck” (lines 2-3) relates to a traditional tarot reader belief that any ‘jumpers’ (cards that fall from the deck whilst shuffling or dealing the cards) need to be read alongside the cards that are dealt. They act to supplement the reading in the belief that they offer further insight into the interpretation of the cards.

By making reference to the extra card, GHClairvoyant is demonstrating that she is fully aware of psychic-spiritual milieu understanding that these cards are also significant and need to be taken into account in the interpretation of the first card. Further to this, the phrase “Bit of a mysterious energy about today” in lines 3-4 is a result of her interpretation of the appearance of the Moon card alongside the High Priestess (Mendoza and Bourne, 2000). The Moon represents things that are hidden, yet to be revealed; that something is not as it seems. Meanwhile, the High Priestess card depicts a woman sitting between two pillars representing dark and light, whilst a veil hangs between them (ibid.). Demonstrating her knowledge of the tarot and drawing on the shared language helps to align her identity with the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. GHClairvoyant is saying that she can feel a mysterious energy – implying that she is sensitive and psychic enough to feel it whilst at the same time positioning herself as *different* to those who read her daily interpretations, in a display of epistemic authority.

Making further reference to the beliefs of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu, GHClairvoyant again works to reinforce her identity: “the veil grows thinner :) hmm” (lines 6-7). First of all this is a direct reference to the imagery in the High Priestess card. GHClairvoyant is referring to the commonly-held belief that the Spirit world exists in the same space as the physical world, and sometimes the ‘energy’ is right to allow more of a chance of spirit communication even with those who are not psychic practitioners. However, being able to share this information, albeit implicitly by reference to the notion of the veil, GHClairvoyant further aligns her identity to the wider psychic-spiritual milieu because she is able to draw on the commonly held rhetoric of that social group. In so doing, she displays once again epistemic authority, confirming her position as an expert in tarot reading.

Yet whilst GHClairvoyant’s SMU acts to place her in an authoritative position within the interaction, she effectively reaches out to her audience by personalising the card(s) she has drawn. “Our” implies that the interpretation of the card will have some meaning to all who choose to read her SMU. This not only encompasses others who have knowledge of the tarot, but it is written for a lay audience. However, as well as non-readers of the tarot, other psychic practitioners and tarot card interpreters contribute to the ensuing discussion of the cards. Lay audience and fellow tarot card readers alike also contribute to the alignment and affirmation of GHClairvoyant’s identity as credible psychic practitioner.

For example, VKPsychic Medium is also a tarot Card reader. Her contribution to the discussion in lines 9-11 can be interpreted in two ways. At first glance, it looks as though she is offering information to supplement GHClairvoyant’s original interpretation, further reinforcing her identity within the wider psychic-spiritual milieu: “with my hermit, its a day of unconscious thoughts, paying attention to your inner feelings, could even be big changes to how we think xxx”. Here, VKPsychic Medium says “with my hermit”, demonstrating her own knowledge of the tarot cards and

aligning her own identity as a tarot card practitioner alongside GHClairvoyant and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu.

However, VKPsychic Medium's contribution could also be considered a challenge to GHClairvoyant's interpretation and guidance for the day. Interestingly, GHClairvoyant chooses to overlook VKPsychic Medium's contribution, suggesting that she senses a challenge to her original interpretation. This epistemic tussle is played out in silence however; GHClairvoyant does not respond to VKPsychic Medium's contribution but continues to interact with others who appear to be lay audience members. For example, in lines 12-13, CST responds to GHClairvoyant's interpretation of the card where she makes reference to waiting for something to happen. CST says: "Feel like I've been waiting for something to happen for months!", to which GHClairvoyant replies in line 14 "me too".

GHClairvoyant elaborates more on this when she responds to TC who says: "oh most definitely lol as always all will be revealed x" (line 17). This gives GHClairvoyant the opportunity to respond once more, but what she says is particularly interesting: "sick of blooming waiting TC – *we've had this conversation many times haven't we* LOL x" (emphasis added). Here, "*we've had this conversation many times haven't we*" reveals GHClairvoyant's sense of epistemic authority. Her use of 'we' serves to highlight a particular relationship between herself and TC, suggesting that TC is within a closer circle of friends than an anonymous follower out of the 5000 contacts GHClairvoyant has. It suggests that they have spoken about something prior to this interaction that is pertinent to GHClairvoyant's interpretation of her daily tarot card reading. In displaying this prior relationship by reference to a time passed, GHClairvoyant is drawing on an ally to demonstrate that her identity as a credible tarot card practitioner is something that has been established and sustained over some time. This serves to neutralize any perceived challenge to GHClairvoyant's authority and expertise.

VKPsychic Medium often contributes to GHClairvoyant's tarot card of the day. In the following data extract, again it could be suggested that GHClairvoyant perceives a challenge by VKPsychic Medium, although this time she responds:

Fig.5.4: GHClairvoyant: Ace of Wands (Sept. 2010)

1 **GHClairvoyant:** Morning All :) Our card for today is the Ace of
2 Wands – new opportunities arising, particularly in the work area. It's
3 like spring time – new shoots should be appearing in your life but
4 remember these shoots have to be nurtured in order to grow so make
5 sure you take advantage of these new opportunities. This is also a
6 card of conception – whether its a new baby, a new job or a new
7 business idea – v nice energy around this ace x
8 **VKPsychic Medium:** and i got the four of wands, so looks like it is
9 going to be a successful day today, lots of positive things me thinks,
10 hope your ok hunny xx
11 **FP:** hope this means im gonna find a new job soon after being
12 sacked unfairly on Saturday
13 **GHClairvoyant:** fingers crosses F xx – ooh yeah nice one
14 VKPsychic Medium – one of my favourites that four x
15 **FP:** i hope so....
16 **GHClairvoyant:** with the suite of wands F the energy for this is
17 there – but you have to go out and grab it with both hands; it won't
18 just come to you so if you look you will find so to speak
19 **DO:** Yay! I'm loving all this positivity! ;o) xx
20 **FP:** Cool
21 **RTarotmanL:** good cards all round GH xx
22 **TW:** Posative day ahead then hopefully my daughter will have her
23 accomadation sorted by later afternoon x
24 **GHClairvoyant:** VKPsychic Medium's four is often seen as a house
25 move card in a positive way TW so looks like it :) x

GHClairvoyant opens her SMU by addressing her audience: "Morning All :)". The card of the day is the Ace of Wands which she attributes to new

opportunities. Immediately following her interpretation, VKPsychic Medium offers her contribution (lines 8-9): “and i got the four of wands, so looks like it is going to be a successful day today, lots of positive things me thinks”. However, before GHClairvoyant has chance to respond to this, a lay audience member, FP, takes a turn: “hope this means im gonna find a new job soon after being unfairly sacked on Saturday”.

Whilst GHClairvoyant could perceive VKPsychic Medium’s turn to be a challenge, here she gets a chance to answer FP. Although VKPsychic medium spoke first, GHClairvoyant’s first response is to the lay audience member FP (line 13): “fingers crossed F xx”. This places the lay audience in position of priority over and above any other psychic or tarot practitioner who wishes to contribute. Only after she has addressed the lay audience member (who is also a potential client), GHClairvoyant turns her attention to VKPsychic Medium’s contribution. Following on from her response to FP, GHClairvoyant addresses VKPsychic Medium by saying: “ooh yeah nice one VKPsychic Medium – one of my favourites that four x”. GHClairvoyant does not return VKPsychic Medium’s friendly “hope your ok hunny” (line 10); instead, her contribution alludes to her own expert knowledge of the tarot whilst at the same time neutralizing any perceived attempt to challenge that. Here, she is able to demonstrate her own understanding of the significance of this card and how it supplements her own. By displaying a common identification with VKPsychic Medium, GHClairvoyant also positions herself once again within the wider psychic-spiritual milieu.

Another tarot reader, RTarotmanL comments: “good cards all round GH xx” (line 21), effectively aligning his own identity with the wider psychic-spiritual milieu, or at the very least the tarot reading community. However, GHClairvoyant fails to confirm this for him. RTarotmanL’s ‘good cards all round’ is indicative of support for both her and VKPsychic Medium’s identity as tarot practitioners. However, whilst this also creates a sense of commonality between the three of them, it also acts to enhance the challenge to GHClairvoyant’s epistemic prowess that she perceives as

coming from VKPsychic Medium. GHClairvoyant's silence in response thus serves to maintain the status quo she has already achieved when she neutralised the perceived challenge initially.

She continues to manage the perceived threat from VKPsychic Medium by referring to her card again later in lines 24-25 in her response to TW's mention of her daughter's wait for university accommodation: "VKPsychic Medium's four is often seen as a house move card in a positive way TW so looks like it :) x". Interestingly, what this does is change the ownership of the original interpretation of the Four of Wands card that VKPsychic Medium initially drew so that the interpretation of the card becomes shared. However, further to this, this statement has a pedagogical quality to it, instructing VKPsychic Medium of an alternative meaning to the card. This effectively positions VKPsychic Medium in the role of 'learner' reader in comparison with GHClairvoyant's more credible 'instructor' role. Thus what is observed once again is the effective handling of another epistemic tussle.

GHClairvoyant's status as an instructor demonstrates her expertise and epistemic prowess in reading the tarot. The following extract is an extra card reading GHClairvoyant decides to share with her Facebook Friends, having already posted the card of the day earlier. She again positions herself as instructor, despite her open appeal to other tarot card readers to contribute their own thoughts:

Fig.5.5: GHClairvoyant: 9 of Chalices and the Moon (August 2010)

- 1 **GHClairvoyant:** Every time have turned a few cards over today
- 2 have been coming up with the 9 of chalices and the Moon – the
- 3 moon is mystery and unconscious forces as well as mediumistic
- 4 ability – 9 of chalices is the 'wish card'. I'd say this was what you
- 5 wish for you can have but you just can't see it yet - any ideas fellow
- 6 tarot people? I was getting that 9 all day yesterday as well
- 7 **RT:** could do with a wish right now
- 8 **IK:** Well I hope what I've been wishing for is coming true.....things

9 are looking promising.
10 **WS:** I had the “wish card” in a reading recently, when can we see it
11 then G? could it be September being the 9th month please?
12 **FG:** That is true G love . Things stay hidden incase we change the
13 path we are on . And 9 is completion of a cycle before the start of a
14 new one . X x
15 **GHClairvoyant:** I was getting the Sept connection too yes W and
16 that sounds about right F wish I cld see it tho still lol

GHClairvoyant opens her SMU with reference to her offline activity: “Every time have turned a few cards over today...”. The statement implies that she uses the cards on a very regular basis, which could be as often as several times in one day (this is also seen in line 6 where she states “I was getting that 9 all day yesterday as well”). The implicit meaning in this statement is that GHClairvoyant reads the tarot as a practitioner, providing readings for other people. Those that are Friends with GHClairvoyant will know this, indeed many of her SMU’s relate to her offline reading activity, and so her statement serves to affirm her identity as a tarot practitioner. It also serves to convey this message to any new Facebook contacts reading her SMU. This demonstrates her credibility as an active, busy, psychic practitioner.

Similarly, GHClairvoyant’s knowledge about the cards demonstrates her expertise in the tarot. She gives a succinct interpretation of the cards that she says keep appearing throughout the day. Interestingly, she openly invites other tarot readers to comment on the cards’ significance given their repeated appearance. This also positions herself as a ‘tarot reader amongst like-minded others’ and asking fellow tarot card readers for their opinion supports the wider psychic-spiritual (cultic) milieu consciousness of mutual support and syncretisation (Campbell, 2002). This again helps to align her identity with that of others who share in the beliefs of the psychic-spiritual milieu and practices of other tarot card readers.

However, by explicitly inviting other people to comment on her own interpretation of the tarot, this opens opportunity for her to supplement their ensuing comments. For instance, in the data extract, GHClairvoyant does not respond until FG has taken her turn in lines 12-14. Although FG does not explicitly disclose herself as a tarot practitioner in her username, she clearly has knowledge of the cards and how they might be interpreted. She at first addresses GHClairvoyant's SMU and invite to other tarot reader's with: "That is true G love ". At first this appears as if she is responding in the way that GHClairvoyant was anticipating. However, the statement has an instructive quality; FG is telling GHClairvoyant that she has interpreted the cards accurately. GHClairvoyant's response to this comes at the end of the exchange in line 16 "that sounds about right F wish I cld see it tho still lol". Here, the "that sounds about right F" is used to redress the balance in the relationship between the two card readers. Effectively, GHClairvoyant is returning the instruction, and positioning herself as equal to FG as a fellow tarot reader.

The delicate interaction discussed above has an instructional quality. GHClairvoyant openly invited other tarot readers to contribute to discussion of a particular tarot card, effectively displaying her affiliation to a wider tarot-reading community. However, the following extract displays very different interaction. GHClairvoyant addresses her Facebook audience as usual and posts her tarot card of the day, the 3 of Wands. But, the ensuing responses do not necessarily relate to her interpretation. Instead, one of her Facebook Friends asks for some input concerning a spirit that is apparently making his presence known in her home:

Fig.5.6: GHClairvoyant: 3 of Wands (August 2010)

1 **GHClairvoyant:** Morning all – still coughing and sniffing here but
2 today's card is the 3 of Wands which is a card of good news on the
3 way. So today expect some positive news about where you're going
4 next in life – house,job,holiday – you name it. You just have to take
5 notice of this energy and act upon it.

6 Also can indicate that someone at a distance has you on their mind
7 (this can be on either side of life) so watch out for msgs or signs xx
8 **TF:** hi G I have a old man here in a tracksuit any clues if ya dont
9 mind me asking xx
10 **GHClairvoyant:** not really – try asking him who he is and what he
11 wants T x
12 **TF:** my daughter keeps askin but the guy wont answer i have had a
13 few spirits here for the last few days xx
14 **PK:** Hope so have had nothing but bad luck and news lately x
15 **GHClairvoyant:** perhaps he just wants to stay anonymous – always
16 say to ppl they’ll communicate if and when they want to – just like
17 us :)
18 **RCG:** Hoping the job comes up for me!
19 **KJ:** TF I’ve just been given the name Jim for you hun and he had
20 something the matter with his fingers or hand if you dont mind me
21 saying :) xxx
22 **TF:** well maybe its just me couse i don’t communicate with them but
23 thankyou :) x
24 **TF:** aw thankyou KJ i will keep that in mind xx
25 **MC:** this is so right for me made the decision to go from council to
26 private renting to get to where we want to be and also was contacted
27 last night from someone wanting to use my items in photo shoots.
28 **GHClairvoyant:** I’ve a Jim in spirit too KJ :)
29 **KJ:** Morning G, lovely positive card again thank you, hope your
30 coughs n snivells go away today and that you don’t get the snow yet,
31 my sons up Conway, are you anywhere near there. Have a great day
32 anyway :) xxx
33 **GHClairvoyant:** yes live just round the corner from there :)
34 **KJ:** oh right maybe yours then bab, just came so strong when I saw
35 TF’s comment lol :) xxx
36 **GHClairvoyant:** lol it can get confusing when they come through
37 on f/b

The first response to the card of the day comes from TF in lines 8-9: “hi G I have a old man here in a tracksuit any clues if ya dont mind me asking xx”.

Because TF's comment does not directly relate to GHClairvoyant's card reading, this is not a response that GHClairvoyant was anticipating. This is demonstrated in her apparent lack of interest in trying to help TF establish the identity of the man in the tracksuit, suggesting she asks him who he is: "*not really* – try asking him who he is and what he wants T x" (emphasis added). The 'not really' does suggest that there is a possibility GHClairvoyant could come back with an answer. TF persists by telling GHClairvoyant that her daughter had asked the spirit repeatedly but he was refusing to answer. In lines 15-17, overlooking a response to the card of the day by PK in line 14, GHClairvoyant suggests: "perhaps he just wants to stay anonymous". She continues by saying "always say to ppl they'll communicate if and when they want to – just like us". This statement has an instructive quality which is publicly viewable. Thus, GHClairvoyant's expertise as not only a tarot reading clairvoyant, but a psychic medium, is presented.

What ensues changes the dynamic of the conversation considerably. Although in lines 18 and 25-28, there are further replies to the card of the day, the focus is on the epistemic tussle that ensues following KJ's interruption in lines 19-21. Although GHClairvoyant has not engaged in a psychic mediumship reading for TF, KJ, a different medium, offers some information: "TF I've just been given the name Jim for you hun and he had something the matter with his fingers or hand if you dont mind me saying :) xxx". TF responds twice, firstly in reply to GHClairvoyant's statement in lines 15-17 and then immediately after KJ's statement with "aw thankyou KJ i will keep that in mind xx". Yet despite KJ's clear offer of information about TF's spirit, TF does not show any certainty. The possible explanation for this is that she is very much familiar with the work of GHClairvoyant and wanted her advice specifically.

Interestingly, GHClairvoyant responds to KJ's information: "I've a Jim in spirit too JH :)". Now KJ has offered a possible identity for TF's spirit, even though TF had not necessarily given a positive response, it is too late for

GHClairvoyant to offer any information that might link to the spirit. Instead, GHClairvoyant also becomes a possible recipient. Thus, it could be suggested that any further attempt by KJ to identify the spirit, and the possibility that she might present an apparent successful attempt at mediumship on GHClairvoyant's SMU, is thwarted. It is a successful diversion as KJ replies with positive regard for the card of the day: "Morning G, lovely positive card again thank you, hope your coughs and snivels go away today and that you don't get the snow yet". There is no clear challenge to GHClairvoyant's authority, and KJ continues: "my sons up Conway, are you anywhere near there. Have a great day anyway :) xxx". GHClairvoyant responds to this information by confirming that she lives not far from there. Although it is not clear in what KJ says that this information was in relation to the spirit, her ensuing statement (line 35-36) suggests it was: "ok right maybe yours then bab, *just came so strong* when I saw TF's comment lol :) xxx" (emphasis added).

Indeed, here it appears as though KJ has perceived a challenge from GHClairvoyant's interruption of her attempt to read for TF and so she retreats immediately. Meanwhile, GHClairvoyant brings the dialogue to a close with a clear attempt to regain epistemic prowess: "lol it can get confusing when they come through on f/b" (lines 37-38). Furthermore, GHClairvoyant presents herself as having experience of spirit 'coming through' on Facebook and although she offers a reason as to why KJ's attempt to read failed, it becomes clear that she has effectively managed and maintained her own identity as credible tarot card reader and clairvoyant.

Summary

As a regular observer of Facebook interaction and a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu, an autoethnographic approach to analysis allowed me to understand the subtle nuances within what was being said. As a reader myself, I could identify how the psychic practitioner was using

specific linguistic strategies to bring about particular actions. GHClairvoyant uses her status message updates in a similar way to Medium JB although she posts daily one-card tarot readings. This is an explicit invitation to prospective recipients to contribute to the construction of GHClairvoyant's identity as knowledgeable tarot practitioner. Recipients include lay audience members as well as fellow tarot card readers and other psychic practitioners. The challenges GHClairvoyant perceived from tarot card readers helped her to position herself in an instructive role to deal with epistemic tussles. Also, other tarot card readers attempted to align their identity with hers, although she never confirms this for them, therefore maintaining epistemic prowess. Consequently, GHClairvoyant is presented as an expert and knowledgeable tarot card practitioner.

Conclusion

Although Facebook is a site of communication, this chapter has discussed how the interaction that takes place amongst members of the psychic-spiritual seeker community online is revealed to be a delicate interplay of activity and performance. Analysis has revealed such interaction as a place of tussle and epistemic management but has also considered how facework and friendliness is done through textual alternatives such as emoticons or emotional acronyms such as LOL. These constitute a set of resources that are used for managing interpersonal tussle. Facebook provides the ideal everyday space in which identity may be constructed. As discussed above, the discourse analysis reveals the latent functions of the textual interaction that takes place there. As a result, a different understanding is gained: what at first appeared to be a medium performing her role by offering to demonstrate her skills in spiritual communication is instead revealed as a site of identity alignment and management of epistemic authority. This contributes a sociological understanding of how psychic-spiritual identity is performed through interaction that takes place on online social networking sites such as Facebook.

Furthermore, seemingly mundane identity-related practice (channelling the spirits in an online reading to a community of recipients) is revealed as a site of interpersonal struggle with respect to epistemic authority and expertise. In particular, two important aspects may be highlighted: the way in which the psychic practitioner aligns themselves to a particular identity by initiating interaction and, how other participants contribute to this. Consequently, whilst other participants' contributions may serve to reinforce the identity of the medium, there are also times when the medium needs to manage perceived challenges to their purported epistemic authority.

Up to this point I have examined the ways in which psychic practitioners represent themselves and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu on their websites and have explored how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu engage in the practical management of psychic-spiritual identity through computer-mediated interaction. In the following chapter, I turn my attention to virtual community discussion board forums to examine the ways in which interaction in these social spaces provide an environment for situated learning.

Chapter Six

Virtual Psychic Forums: Pedagogic Practice and the Negotiation of Psychic Practitioner Identity in Asynchronous Psychic Readings

The previous chapter considered how analysis of social interactional processes on Facebook reveals the tacit negotiation of psychic practitioner identity. Discourse analysis may also be carried out into psychic readings that take place on discussion board forums. Text generated through interaction can be analysed to examine actions done through turns. How these turns are designed to represent social reality may also be examined. Discussion board forums have been a very popular way of communicating to others with similar interests since the internet was created (see for example Rheingold, 1993; Wellman and Gulia, 1999). They provide a space in which a sense of community and belonging might be fostered, and where problems are shared and advice is given on a diverse range of subjects without the need for disclosing one's identity (Rheingold, 1993; Turkle, 1994; Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

There are many discussion board forums based on the concerns and interests of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Mediumship and psychic readings are practiced in these social spaces just as they are offline. What differs is that the readings are offered freely; the only exchange is the feedback the recipient gives on the developing psychic reader's performance. The feedback is an essential component of freely offered psychic readings in specialised online forums (see Wellman and Gulia, 1999). Recipients of readings are most likely to be spiritual seekers themselves, and so those looking for a reading will typically be interested in, and sensitive to, wider spiritual concerns. They will know that the reader is offering readings to practice their skills in psychic development and will understand that the reader is seeking feedback on their performance. Such feedback differs to that given in face-to-face or telephone readings because the relationship

between the psychic and sitter offline is not the same as that between the psychic and the recipient of the reading in online forums. Offline, the psychic and sitter enter into a relationship based on the exchange of money for a service, so the relationship is one of service-provider and client. In online development forums, the relationship differs considerably. Readers and recipients of the readings have to play out particular roles in order to conform to the norms of interacting in online communities (see Porter, 2004). The nature of those roles and how these are played out through social interaction form the focus of this chapter.

Psychic Readings as Social Interactions

Previous research has only considered the linguistic features of *offline* psychic practices. Aphek and Tobin (1990), Jorgensen (1992) and Wooffitt (2006) studied face-to-face readings. Aphek and Tobin (1990) conducted a semiotic analysis of fortune telling, contrasting the linguistic and extralinguistic features of readings with astrological forecasts. Jorgensen (1992) considered the social organisation of readings conducted with the occult tarot by becoming a tarot-card reader himself. He asserts that participating as a tarot-card reader was essential in order for him to learn about the phenomenon from the standpoint of membership roles. Meanwhile, using conversation analysis, Wooffitt (2006) identified how sequences of interaction during psychic readings aid both parties to construct the reading collaboratively. For example, 'three-turn attributive sequences' appear to be a central organizing principle of psychic readings (Wooffitt, 2006: 77). Here, the psychic implies knowledge about the sitter, the recipient provides minimal positive responses, typically one word, and the psychic confirms the knowledge claim, attributing it to a paranormal source: a spirit communicator or spirit guide, tarot cards or clairvoyance. Thus, face-to-face or telephone psychic readings can be considered as conversations involving multiple turn-taking.

Turn-taking in asynchronous psychic readings differs considerably in that the dialogue is usually restricted to just two turns – a reading and a response. By their very nature, asynchronous readings are narratives rather than sequences of interaction because the responses given are likely to be much broader than typical face-to-face readings that rely on conversation. Nonetheless, like readings that take place offline, meaning-making is negotiated by two parties; the reading and the ensuing response work together as one unit. Whether a reading is made up of attributive sequences or a series of statements, both the reading and response are woven together to construct a reading. Thus, psychic readings are collaboratively produced in online social spaces through social interaction (see Wooffitt, 2006).

In studying tarot card readings, Jorgensen (1992) identified that there were five basic types of utterance. *Statements of possible fact* provide information to and/or request information from the recipient. These include questions that seek to find out information about the sitter and declarations which seek to elicit a response; for example, predictions. Meanwhile, *interpretive statements* provide the meanings for statements of possible fact, presenting the significance or purpose of a situation or encounter. Although taking place in non-real time, online readings also feature statements of possible fact and interpretive statements. However, Jorgensen also identified *instructive statements*. These would not be found in online readings for practical reasons as they take the form of direct embodied instructions, for instance “please shuffle the cards”. Additionally, Jorgensen also notes how during face-to-face readings, the reader gives *responsive statements* such as “yes”, “O.K” or “yeh” in response to questions made by the recipient of the reading. These are usually transformed by the reader into interpretive comments to clarify what is being said. Additionally, in face-to-face readings, information given by the psychic reader might be rejected by the sitter. Here, *qualifying statements* are used by readers to adjust previous comments and interpretations in light of what response the recipient gives. Statements might include, for

example: “It’s hard to gauge extremes with cards” (Jorgensen, 1992: 221). Such statements are rarer in online readings due to the asynchronous nature of the communications.

Jorgensen also observed the comments made by sitters, identifying at least three types of utterances. First, recipients might *confirm* or *reject* (deny) statements of possible fact or they might request more specific information. Second, *translations* made by the sitter rephrase or clarify what the reader is saying. This is meaning-making in action. For example, a recipient of a reading might say “yeh, you must be thinking of my brother, he has red hair” (Jorgensen, 1992: 221). Finally, further meaning-making is done through *revelations* whereby sitters provide the sense and meaning to what is being said in response. For example “I’m dieting” or “I have problems with my teeth” (ibid.). Translations and revelations are particularly important in online asynchronous readings and constitute a sizeable portion of the recipient’s feedback. Confirmations, rejections and requests for clarification are useful prompts in a face-to-face reading, and as linguistic features, they help to persuade both parties that the reading is successful. This chapter considers how these linguistic features work in asynchronous psychic readings.

Psychic Readings in Asynchronous Discussion Board Forums

In online discussion board forums, readings are offered by learner psychics as well as by those who have more experience, typically to engage in spiritual and psychic development. Some experienced readers may wish to offer free readings to others purely out of enjoyment and because they believe their skills are to be used in that way (Ryan, 2008). In psychic reading forums, readings are both sought and offered. Some members will be seeking a reading, and will post something similar to the following.

Fig.6.1: Post taken from spiritalseers.com: Request for reading

I would like to request a reading...

Yeah, it's been quite bland in that area lately. I would like to know if there's anything I can do to make something happen, or just make it a bit more interesting, especially because there's someone I like and have a lot in common with at the moment.

So if anyone is up for it, feel free to give a reading, any type I don't mind. I'll leave some constructive feedback :D

Readers wishing to practice their psychic skills may also post a message in the forum announcing that they are offering readings:

Fig.6.2 Post taken from spiritalseers.com: Offer of aura readings

Free Aura Readings

Hello, I would like to offer aura readings to anyone interested. I can do a general reading for whatever comes up or you can ask me some questions, but please no more than 3 questions. I can't always be sure how many readings a week I can do as my schedule varies, but I can usually do about 2-5 readings a week. So if I get a lot of requests, be patient please. Thanks.

Members wishing to take advantage of the offer will then answer with their response and/or questions and the readings are then posted by the reader to individual sitters. Often, readings will be posted publicly on the forums (indeed, some forums stipulate this in their rules). However, some readings may be sent via private message to the recipient and will therefore not be visible to anyone else. Regardless of how they received the reading, it is expected that recipients will provide feedback to the reader on their performance.

To ensure that members benefit from the interaction on the discussion board forums, forums usually have a clear set of articulated guidelines or a code of conduct that it is assumed members will adhere to. The following shows an example of rules for readers wishing to practice readings on the forums:

Fig.6.3.Post taken from psychicseers.com: Forum rules for readers

Please add this line to all of your readings For Entertainment Purposes Only

Please try to ascertain as far as you can whether or not a member is 18+, readings for under 18's are not permitted.

Please don't give predictions of death, or serious illness/injury to any member no matter how certain you are of it's accuracy.

Please report to staff any member who harasses you for a reading or abuses you in any way following a reading.

The following shows another example from the same forum. These are rules that might be directed at those seeking a reading, such as "ALL reading requests and readings are to be posted on the forum and not sent via private messenger. Please report any pm's that break this rule" and "Please be kind and give feedback to our readers":

Fig.6.4.Post taken from psychicseers.com: Forum rules for reading requests

- 1) Readings about unsuitable subjects such as health, baby gender, or pregnancy are not allowed, neither are third party readings (a third party reading is a reading for someone else) instead of asking for a reading for another please ask that person to join and then they can request their own reading.
- 2) Any photo must only show the member seeking the reading and no-one else.
- 3) ALL reading requests and readings are to be posted on the forum and not sent via private messenger. Please report any pm's that break this rule.
- 4) We ask that only one reading be requested in this Reading Room forum in a month. Members seeking multiple readings in a short period of time may have their requests removed. This is because multiple readings can give conflicting advice and confuse the reader leading them to become dependent on readings. Asking

for multiple readings from different readers does not respect or honour the reader and the time and energy that they give freely when reading. Therefore only one reading per request should be given and all other readings will be removed.

Please be kind and leave feedback to our readers.

Such rules (usually constituting only a subsection of general rules for these forums) serve as forum norms and regulations. New members are expected to read through the general rules before interacting through the discussion forums, and in particular are expected to read and follow the rules when seeking a reading. Rules are in place to ensure that the common goals of the site are met, regardless of the subject matter, and most, if not all, forums have something similar (see for instance Reid, 1999).

Psychic-reading Forums as ‘Communities of Practice’

It is useful to consider psychic reading forums as ‘communities of practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a). Indeed, as a site for situated learning, the wider psychic-spiritual milieu can be considered a community of practice. Communities of practice are defined along three lines:

What it is about	- Its <i>joint enterprise</i> (working towards common goals) as understood and continually renegotiated by its members.
How it functions	- <i>Mutual engagement</i> that binds members together into a social entity
What capability it has produced	- The <i>shared repertoire</i> of communal resources that members have developed over time (e.g. shared meanings, see Philipsen, 1992)

Fig.6.5: Communities of Practices (adapted from Wenger, 1998b: 2)

As noted by Wenger (1998b: 2) “communities of practice are everywhere” and “we all belong to a number of them”, even if we are not consciously aware of being so. He also writes: “Across a worldwide web of computers,

people congregate in virtual spaces and develop shared ways of pursuing their common interests” (Wenger, 1998a: 6-7). Thus, virtual spaces such as online communities or social networking sites can also serve as communities of practice; spaces in which people participate in a *joint enterprise* based on *mutual engagement* towards common goals and where they have developed a *shared repertoire* of resources (for instance, shared vocabulary, norms and values, interpretations) (Wenger, 1998b). In psychic reading forums, people participate, or engage with each other to practice psychic readings. Readings can be performed alone; in asynchronous readings the reader performs the reading ‘offline’ and posts the written reading onto the forums once complete or at a time that is convenient to do so. However, although the reading can be practiced, nothing can be *learned*, until the recipient of the reading responds with feedback. Thus, psychic reading forums are individual sites for situated learning in which at least some of the participants are learning through co-participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Overall, in looking at readings/feedback exchange, what can be known about the nature of psychic-spiritual seekership that takes place in these forums? This chapter considers how people negotiate their identity by playing out ‘being appropriate members’ of the online psychic-spiritual community. It considers how the goals of learning might be achieved through co-participation in readings and feedback and seeks to explore the nature of this co-participation. Key to this is exploring the feedback responses given and a consideration of the extent to which these contribute to learning.

The following analysis is based on an opportunistic sample comprising twenty asynchronous readings collected from three different discussion board forums: *spiritualseers.com*; *spiritual-doorway.com*; *psychicseers.com*. Each forum is based on spiritual and psychic development and all have a separate discussion board allocated specifically to psychic readings. The sample includes a range of different readings

ranging from clairvoyant readings or photograph readings to tarot card readings unique to the style of the reader. Some readings also include apparent spirit communication often considered to be mediumship.

Who's Reading Whom? How Roles and Relationships are Established in Online Psychic Readings

The first extract was taken from *psychicseers.com*. It is a tarot card reading, but it is significantly short in comparison to similar readings. The reader, MelodySprite, posted a message in the forums asking for volunteers to help her practice her tarot card reading skills. As is customary in such discussion forums, several responses were posted within the ensuing 24 hours and the reader began posting readings when they were completed. One such reading is shown here in its entirety (Fig.6.6) and the response to the reading follows in italics:

Fig.6.6: Psychicseers.com: MelodySprite reading for Topaz

- 1 I'm not sure if I've given you a card reading before. basically i draw
- 2 six cards and they have meanings on them, i get the nudge from my
- 3 guide as to when to pull the cards and so they know what i'm giving
- 4 to you. i don't generally add to it as i feel it's fine as it is.
- 5 First card, and feel free to look these up to get a deeper meaning on
- 6 them if you wish to.

- 7 **The Chariot** Are you in the middle of moving house or thinking
- 8 about doing so? Or is there a journey up ahead? It states a victory
- 9 over a situation.
- 10 **The hanged man** Getting stronger in oneself after a lot of
- 11 deliberating and delaying in your life.
- 12 **The World** Love this card, It represents the world in the palm of
- 13 your hands, new opportunities await you. It also defines things like
- 14 an overseas trip, money and luck.
- 15 **Queen of pentacles** Woman over 25yrs, dark eyes and dark hair.
- 16 Professional, buisness, domineering. Could this be mum?
- 17 **The Fool** This shows good friends, happiness and fun times.

18 It also mentions needing to take a giant leap forward
19 **Ace of swords** It came up reversed but i don't feel it to be reversed
20 but I could wrong of course.
21 Frustrations, Double edged sword, hollow victory.
22 So there you have it, just a simple read. i do hope you were able to
23 connect to it.

24 *thanks heaps :) well im hoping for victories lol, i have a few things*
25 *coming up i m hoping to triumph!!!! i have changes in all sections*
26 *of my life work, family, love etc.....we are hoping to move house but*
27 *not right this minute, we have started up a plan, kind of like a time*
28 *line in which we would like things to happen , just a rough one,*
29 *nothing precise lol, i know things are always changing.....*

30 *for the hanged man, i would say for me its confidence, i now have a*
31 *direction professionally, im thinking of going back and learning a*
32 *new trade.....lol....im interested in nursing and a few people i know*
33 *in the profession recommend it for me, say its suits my personality*
34 *and i do have a bit of a passion for all things to do with helping*
35 *others and knowing more about the physical body and not just the*
36 *spiritual*

37 *i sort of feel relieved to see you pulled the world :) almost like*
38 *assurance that everything will run smooth as like i said i have*
39 *soooo many changes and im a person who likes permanence*
40 *lol....so ill be more comfortable when my situation settles again :)*
41 *and being the world is a positive card i feel all the outcomes and*
42 *changes themselves will be positive ones also :)*

43 *queen of pentacles, there was only one person in my life who*
44 *popped into my head when i read the description....she is a mentor*
45 *to me and she proclaims to be my addoptive mother haha she has*
46 *the utt most love for me and only has my best intentions at heart, se*
47 *is trying to help me find direction career wise and she has opened*

48 *my eyes to everything im capable of...*

49 *as for the fool.....i do have a great support system, im surrounded*
50 *by love :) and by people who care about me.....but the other*
51 *meaning is correct too....lol....i do need to leap onwards haha its*
52 *the whole not knowing that puts me off walking into the*
53 *unknown.....im a person who likes everything down on paper EG,*
54 *this is what i need to do and this is how im going to do it....*

55 *finally the ace of swords.....this would describe my current state,*
56 *frustrated!!!*

57 *im a loyal person privately and professionally but my current job is*
58 *killing me inside, im a person who likes to achieve everything i can,*
59 *i want to move up and know i really earned it.....unfortunately i*
60 *dont work for a company that likes to build their employees....my*
61 *boss is threatened by anyone who can do better then her, so she*
62 *keeps everyone small. its soul crushing at times. hence the change*
63 *of careers :)*

64 *i feel the same at home too....we currently live with my fiances*
65 *mother, and i dont think that needs a description lol*

66 *thanks for the quick read :) i could relate to everything :) great job,*
67 *i feel better for having read it, gives me satisfaction to know i am*
68 *doing the right things :)*

In Fig.6.6 above, the reader does not provide a detailed and personalised interpretation for each card. Instead, the reader has provided the meanings that the author of the cards has assigned to them (line 2). In justification for this, the reader states that she chooses the cards with help from her spirit guides. This attributes the responsibility of the choice of cards, the method of reading and ensuing interpretation to a spiritual source. However, in line 4 she adds “i don’t generally add to it as i feel it’s fine as it is”. Psychic readings take on many forms but will usually entail more than simply sharing the stated tarot card meaning with the recipient.

What is interesting about this extract is the response from the recipient of the reading because it demonstrates clearly that the interpretive work (meaning-making) is done by the recipient and not the reader.

Tarot readings will usually involve some form of intuitive interpretation of the cards with regards to the reader's prior knowledge and often in relation to the other cards that are dealt. MelodySprite reports that she *feels* that this is how she is to read, implying that she does this intuitively. However, in the ensuing response from recipient Topaz, it becomes clear that it is not the reader that does the work in interpreting the cards. PS1.MS.a below is the opening to the reply by Topaz in response to the given interpretation of the first card, *The Chariot* (lines 7-9; see Fig.6.6).

7 **The Chariot** Are you in the middle of moving house or thinking
8 about doing so? Or is there a journey up ahead? It states a victory
9 over a situation.

24 *thanks heaps :) well im hoping for victories lol, i have a few things*
25 *coming up i m hoping to triumph!!!! i have changes in all sections*
26 *of my life work, family, love etc.....we are hoping to move house but*
27 *not right this minute, we have started up a plan, kind of like a time*
28 *line in which we would like things to happen , just a rough one,*
29 *nothing precise lol, i know things are always changing.....*

Here, Topaz confirms that she is indeed hoping to be victorious over a few things and then states that she is going through some changes and that this might include moving house sometime in the future (lines 24-27). Here, she provides personal relevance for the card, stating why the information given to her by the reader is relevant. It is interesting to note that Topaz gives a somewhat detailed response to the card, given that the reader only gives a very short translation. Instead Topaz, who possibly has some existing knowledge of the tarot cards, draws on a broad range of possible explanations related to her own life in order to give her own interpretation.

However, although the confirmation of the information provides feedback to MelodySprite that she was accurate, it is actually the recipient, Topaz, who has provided the interpretation. Text-based online readings such as these offer a unique insight into the otherwise non-vocalised meanings and interpretations attributed by the recipient of a reading. Regardless of the method of reading, meanings will be interpreted within the context of the recipient's own life circumstances. As reported by Aphek and Tobin (1990), tarot cards have a series of:

...meanings that are open to various interpretations in different cultures and societies, or within different social groups or classes, or even the same social group or class within the same society, or even the same individual at different times within the same or different contexts (Aphek and Tobin, 1990: 138-9)

With this in mind, the very brief interpretations offered by MelodySprite in the present example could also be interpreted by another recipient, in accordance to their own situation.²⁷

However, it is interesting to note the different pedagogical functions being performed by the responses given to the reading in Fig.6.6. In lines 24-27, Topaz confirms that *The Chariot* does indeed relate to her specific situation. This confirmation *instructs* MelodySprite that her intuitive drawing of this card was correct. Next, in lines 27-29, Topaz elaborates on why this card is significant. This is similar to Jorgensen's notion of *revelations* that provide further meaning-making. Explaining *why* the card is relevant is important. It provides instructive support for the reader's choice of card, and it equips the reader with further meaning to the card should she choose to do a full reading at some point in the future.

²⁷ The short ambiguous *t*Farot card interpretations are not dissimilar to those found in automated *t*Farot readings found elsewhere on the internet. For example, Lotus Tarot (free-tarot-reading.net) is a website that offers such a service: visitors to the website can have a free reading which entails six *t*Farot cards being drawn at random. The same meanings are given for the cards each time they appear, inviting the recipient of the 'reading' to apply it to their own circumstances.

MelodySprite continues her reading for Topaz by introducing another card, *The Hanged Man*, for which she offers the short interpretation as: “Getting stronger in oneself after a lot of deliberating and delaying in your life” (lines 10-11). The ensuing response by Topaz follows in lines 30-36 (see Fig.6.6):

30 *for the hanged man, i would say for me its confidence, i now have a*
31 *direction professionally, im thinking of going back and learning a*
32 *new trade.....lol....im interested in nursing and a few people i know*
33 *in the profession recommend it for me, say its suits my personality*
34 *and i do have a bit of a passion for all things to do with helping*
35 *others and knowing more about the physical body and not just the*
36 *spiritual*

According to Mendoza and Bourne (2002) *The Hanged Man* is one of seven cards in the Major Arcana that focus more specifically on “the realm of the intuitive mind”.²⁸ The Hanged Man card shows a young man hanging upside down from a tree by his left leg. His arms are folded behind his back but the look on his face is quite peaceful. The meaning of the card suggests that this is a period when life is at a standstill and that the recipient of the reading should exercise patience in waiting for the right time to move on.

Once again, Topaz provides her own interpretation of the card: “for the hanged man, i would say for me its confidence” (line 30). This *translates* the meaning of the card, instructing the reader of an alternative interpretation, but from the recipient’s point of view: “...*for me* its confidence” (emphasis added). Further translation ensues: “i now have a direction professionally, im thinking of going back and learning a new trade”. According to Topaz’s translation, the *Hanged Man* can also mean finding direction, a period of reviewing a situation and also learning something new. She clarifies this by applying her interpretation to an interest she has in pursuing a nursing career. The response is quite detailed

²⁸ Tarot card meanings, whilst having a central and specific focus, will vary according to different interpretations and traditions. For the purposes of this analysis, and to avoid confusion, only one interpretation is used.

as she refers to her passion for helping others. If a similar response had been given in a face-to-face tarot card reading, this would have allowed the reader to tailor the remaining reading to the sitter's circumstances. In other words, the reading for Topaz would have focussed on the central theme – her changing career goals – and it would appear as though the reader knew this information through paranormal cognition. However in the present example, this is not possible due to the asynchronous nature of the exchange. Instead, the recipient is the one doing the interpretive work, but in turn, this instructs the reader how to play out the role of accomplished psychic reader appropriately.

Topaz's response to the next card provides further instruction. She shares her own interpretation of *The World* card with MelodySprite (see Fig.6.6):

12 **The World** Love this card, It represents the world in the palm of
13 your hands, new opportunities await you. It also defines things like
14 an overseas trip, money and luck.

37 *i sort of feel relieved to see you pulled the world :) almost like*
38 *assurance that everything will run smooth as like i said i have soooo*
39 *many changes and im a person who likes permanence lol....so ill be*
40 *more comfortable when my situation settles again :) and being the*
41 *world is a positive card i feel all the outcomes and changes*
42 *themselves will be positive ones also :)*

Within the psychic-spiritual milieu it is common knowledge that *The World* card has an overtly positive meaning; much in the same way *The Tower* and *Death* cards from the Major Arcana are regarded as particularly significant cards representative of transformation. The interpretation given by reader MelodySprite notes its positivity: "Love this card, It represents the world in the palm of your hands, new opportunities await you" (lines 12-13).

However, the opening statement in Topaz's response to this card (line 37) is a reserved endorsement: "*i sort of feel relieved to see you pulled the world*" (emphasis added) indicates that she only partly agrees with

MelodySprite's interpretation. What she says next translates the reading, offering an alternative meaning: "almost like assurance that everything will run smooth". To clarify this alternative instruction, Topaz applies the card to her own situation: "as like i said i have soooo many changes and im a person who likes permanence lol....so ill be more comfortable when my situation settles again".

The application of the card's meaning to her own situation also demonstrates the therapeutic function of a card reading, as summarised by Semetsky (2005):

A reading, very much like a traditional therapy session, is a dynamic process towards awakening one's conscious awareness. The interpretation per se is of secondary importance, the primary factor is what this interpretation triggers in a subject's mind and how she is going to respond to it (Semetsky, 2005: 85)

The therapeutic function of the card is clarified in Topaz's response in lines 41-42, which is designed to be uplifting and positive: "and being the world is a positive card i feel all the outcomes and changes themselves will be positive ones also". This last statement is again instructive, highlighting the positive meaning of *The World*, particularly as Topaz's translation of the card is supported by broader understanding of its meaning.

This mutual engagement in negotiating the meaning of the cards extends beyond simply instructing the reader in how to read them appropriately. By drawing on the shared meanings of the wider community of practice, Topaz is also instructing MelodySprite in psychic-spiritual seekership in general. To understand this further, it is useful to consider Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory of learning and their concept of *legitimate peripheral participation*. This goes beyond considering learning as simply being situated in practice in that it relates to. The participant has a sense of belonging (legitimacy) within the community they are learning in. They also know that whilst they are located in the specific community they participate in a variety of ways within it, not just in psychic readings (their

involvement is peripheral as opposed to completely central). Lastly, in relation to the varying forms of community involvement, they are working towards full participation within that community. Thus, a learner reader such as MelodySprite is participating (practicing and learning as well as participating in other ways) within these psychic reading discussion forums, with the view to *becoming* a fully participating reader within the wider psychic-spiritual milieu.

Further instruction follows with the exchange that comes with the next card: the *Queen of Pentacles*. Queens in the Minor Arcana represent women and feminine qualities (which may also be exhibited by a male) such as that relating to the home, relationships and emotions. Meanwhile, the suit of Pentacles relates to issues of security, finances, career, home and family (Mendoza and Bourne, 2002). MelodySprite exhibits knowledge of the general meaning of this card (lines 15-16), presenting its brief meaning as: “Woman over 25yrs, dark eyes and dark hair. Professional, buisness, domineering” and asks: “Could this be mum?”. Whilst interpretations of this card may differ considerably, the recipient relates her own interpretation of the description given by the reader (see Fig.6.6):

43 *queen of pentacles, there was only one person in my life who popped*
44 *into my head when i read the description.....she is a mentor to me and*
45 *she proclaims to be my addoptive mother haha she has the utt most*
46 *love for me and only has my best intentions at heart, se is trying to*
47 *help me find direction career wise and she has opened my eyes to*
48 *everything im capable of...*

For this card, the reader attempts to position the woman represented in the card as the recipient’s mother. As noted in common interpretations of this card, such as that by Mendoza and Bourne (2002), the female (Queen) and the suit (Pentacles) represent the home. Thus, the question “Could this be mum?” is borne out of this meaning. Once again, the recipient provides her own interpretation of the card, and relates it to the decisions she is making concerning her career. Here Topaz, as instructor, is providing

clarification as to how the card applies to her situation, providing an example of a more elaborate meaning of the card. To her, the card demonstrates that the woman helping her with her career will help her reach her goals. Indeed there appears to be a shared joke between them that she acts as an adoptive mother to Topaz. It was this mother-figure who was instrumental in helping Topaz develop the confidence in herself that she refers to in her interpretation of card one, *The Chariot*.

For the remainder of the present reading/feedback exchange, Topaz's personal situation concerning her career continues to be the central theme, indicating that she knows what it is that she wants to get from having this reading. For the penultimate card, *The Fool*, the recipient responds directly to the reader's brief interpretation: (see Fig.6.6)

17 **The Fool** This shows good friends, happiness and fun times.

18 It also mentions needing to take a giant leap forward

49 *as for the fool.....i do have a great support system, im surrounded by*
50 *love :) and by people who care about me.....but the other meaning is*
51 *correct too....lol....i do need to leap onwards haha its the whole not*
52 *knowing that puts me off walking into the unknown.....im a person*
53 *who likes everything down on paper EG, this is what i need to do*
54 *and this is how im going to do it....*

The Fool is a card that stands alone in the Major Arcana which has three sections of seven cards: The Realm of the Material World; The Realm of the Intuitive Mind and the Realm of Changing issues. The Fool is represented by a young androgynous figure that is often depicted as a court jester. The card denotes change and adventure, fresh new beginnings and spontaneity and relates to risk taking without really knowing the full outcome (Mendoza and Bourne, 2002).

Reader MelodySprite presents two meanings to the card: one centring on good friends and the other on moving forwards. However, whilst her interpretation of the card is very brief, Topaz is able to gain considerable

information from this and responds in detail, again drawing on broader understanding of the tarot and relating the cards to her own situation.

Topaz's response instructs MelodySprite by confirming that she does indeed have a "great support system" (line 49) and that she is surrounded by people who care for her. She also states that "the other meaning is correct too...lol...i do need to leap onwards" (lines 50-51). However, she elaborates on this, providing further explanation of the card's meaning in relation to her own situation; particularly as it is the "not knowing that puts me off walking into the unknown". This statement provides further instruction by way of an alternative meaning; this is how the card should have been interpreted by the reader. To clarify this, the meaning of the card is applied to Topaz's own life in lines 53-54: "im a person who likes everything down on paper EG, this is what i need to do and this is how im going to do it....".

The last card, the *Ace of Swords* is reversed (see Fig.6.6):

19 **Ace of swords** It came up reversed but i don't feel it to be reversed
20 but I could wrong of course.
21 Frustrations, Double edged sword, hollow victory.

55 *finally the ace of swords.....this would describe my current state,*
56 *frustrated!!!*
57 *im a loyal person privately and professionally but my current job is*
58 *killing me inside, im a person who likes to achieve everything i can, i*
59 *want to move up and know i really earned it.....unfortunately i dont*
60 *work for a company that likes to build their employees....my boss is*
61 *threatened by anyone who can do better then her, so she keeps*
62 *everyone small. its soul crushing at times. hence the change*
63 *of careers :)*
64 *i feel the same at home too....we currently live with my fiances*
65 *mother, and i dont think that needs a description lol*

In the tarot reading community, a reversed card (upside down) changes the meaning of the card by giving it a less positive meaning, and MelodySprite presents the short interpretation of the card accordingly. Given the overall positive message set out by the previous five cards, the sudden appearance of a less-than positive card leads MelodySprite to openly question her competency in reading. She states that the card “came up reversed but i don't feel it to be reversed but I could [be] wrong of course”. This is unusual; psychic readers would not usually admit a mistake so openly in a reading.²⁹ Instead, this statement is anticipatory. The reading is taking place in a psychic development message board forum. The reader, MelodySprite, remains modest about her competence, or perceived lack of, and apologises for possibly giving the wrong information in anticipation that this would be the case.

This statement validates each person’s role in the exchange. In this final card, Topaz again exhibits her prior knowledge of the tarot cards. In lines 55-56, the statement “finally the ace of swords...this would describe my current state, frustrated!!!” confirms MelodySprite’s own interpretation. Topaz continues by explaining why the Ace of Swords (reversed) is appropriate to her situation. This application to a real life context is important because it allows the reader to understand why the card and its meaning are correct, and how it might be interpreted in a future reading.

The reading draws to a close in the final few lines (lines 22-23; see Fig.6.6):

22 So there you have it, just a simple read. i do hope you were able to
23 connect to it.

66 *thanks for the quick read :) i could relate to everything :) great job, i*
67 *feel better for having read it, gives me satisfaction to know i am*
68 *doing the right things :)*

²⁹ Wooffitt (2006: 133) considers trouble management and how mediums and psychics draw on a number of “interactional and rhetorical devices through which participants in consultations identify and address troubles”.

“Just a simple read” exhibits the reader’s learner status as she demonstrates a lack of confidence in her ability to give a reading. This is a strategy used again in anticipation of getting the information wrong. This is particularly interesting given the tone of the interpretation of the final card as it becomes clear that the reader perceives a distinct challenge to the otherwise positive nature of the reading.

However, the recipient of the reading provides reassuring feedback. Although she has done most of the work explaining why and how the cards are applicable to her, or translating the cards to offer alternative meanings, Topaz says: “thanks for the quick read :) i could relate to everything :) great job”. The positive tone of this final piece of feedback rewards the reader for her efforts. To bring her feedback to a positive close, Topaz again applies the reading to her own experience: “i feel better for having read it, gives me satisfaction to know i am doing the right things :)”. This last statement is the final instructive element to the feedback. It tells MelodySprite that the reading provided mostly the correct information, and confirms that Topaz could relate it to her own life. By this stage, their roles and relationship are firmly, yet subtly established: Topaz has been a willing volunteer instructing MelodySprite on her performance as a learner, providing training on how to become an accomplished psychic reader.

Summary

As a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu and having experienced psychic readings in online discussion board forums, an autoethnographic methodology allowed me to draw on the shared meanings of the speech community to unpick what was occurring. The insider insight I have helped to reveal some key findings in the above single case analysis: the recipient draws on their own prior knowledge of the tarot to offer her personal interpretation of the cards. She then applies this to her own situation which demonstrates to the reader how the cards might have been interpreted. Secondly, explaining why a particular card is relevant is important because it provides instructive support for the reader’s choice of

card. The reader can then develop on their existing knowledge of the card to use in later readings. Also, if the recipient does not agree with the reader's interpretation, an alternative meaning is given, building the reader's range of interpretations for each specific card. Finally, the therapeutic function of readings such as this becomes apparent. The rationale behind modern day tarot card readings (and indeed other types of reading) is not for fortune telling but to empower the recipient to improve their own lives and find their own solutions to their issues (Semetsky, 2005).

Consequently, there is a distinct pedagogic function to online readings in virtual communities. Knowledge is gained through engaged practice (Avis and Fisher, 2006), as also stated by Wenger (1998b). Wenger writes about mutual engagement and collaboratively produced discourse and learning. In psychic-spiritual discussion board forums based on psychic readings, learning is a joint enterprise (ibid.) It is understood by its members who may draw on shared meanings and a repertoire of communal resources to facilitate that learning. This is what can be seen in the extract above. Topaz draws on her own prior knowledge of tarot reading and implicit understanding of the way the community operates to instruct MelodySprite in becoming an experienced psychic reader. As a learner, MelodySprite (and other readers on forums like this) learns how to become an appropriate psychic reader as a result of the exchange that takes place. Consequently, psychic reading forums are sites for situated learning and within this context identities change: the learner or novice (Avis and Fisher, 2006) becomes a knowledgeable practitioner over time and through mutual engagement in psychic reading practice.

Presentations of learner reader identity are found frequently in psychic-spiritual practice reading forums. These will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

Exhibiting Learner Status

Forums are specifically designed around providing a 'safe' learning environment in which individuals can practice their psychic reading skills. Their very nature already establishes that the readers offering readings are not likely to be accomplished or experienced psychic readers. This can be juxtaposed with the Facebook status message updates in the previous chapter. The mediums considered in that chapter were seen to *perform* the identity of 'competent psychic reader'. In online psychic development forums however, the identity being performed by the psychic reader is different, because they are positioned as 'learner psychic readers'.

The following extract is from a reading offered by Fated on psychic development forum spiritual-doorway.com. Fated reads people's photographs. This is done by the reader meditating on the photograph to 'tune-in' to the person's perceived energies in much the same way a psychic reader would in a face-to-face reading.

Fig.6.7: Spiritualdoorway.com: Fated reading 1

1 Please keep in mind, I am just now getting back into this, so if I get
2 some things wrong I apologize.
3 The first thing that came to mind-
4 You are a very emotional and sensitive person.
5 I feel that sometimes when something bad happens to you or in your
6 life, you take on the burden by blaming yourself or putting yourself
7 at fault in some way. This is because somewhere deep down inside
8 you, you feel that you don't deserve more than that. You put others
9 before yourself. There is a part deep inside of you that knows what
10 you deserve- and sometimes it shines out. But then a situation
11 comes where you are cornered, and you sink back into your
12 'shadow', this is partly why I feel you are very reserved- you do not
13 like to 'disturb' anyone.

In the very first sentence to this reading (lines 1-2) Fated openly acknowledges her learner status: “Please keep in mind, I am just now getting back into this, so if I get some things wrong I apologize”. Here, Fated is referring to how she has not practiced psychic reading for a while and is offering readings on the forums because she wishes to return to developing her skills. This is a particularly important feature of such forums as it allows spiritually-minded individuals the space in which to ‘dip in and out’ of their interests in psychic reading when they choose. Meanwhile, the phrase “If I get some things wrong I apologize” does two specific things. Firstly it exhibits clearly the lack of confidence Fated has in her ability as a psychic reader. Secondly, in stating this, she is already accounting for any inaccuracies or errors in her performance.

Statements such as this are not unusual in online psychic development forums. The following short extracts (again taken from the opening lines of readings by Fated from the forum spiritual-doorway.com) also show epistemic caution. In doing so, they demonstrate how the relationship between the learner/reader and the instructor/recipient is established, and also how instruction is solicited from the outset of the exchange.

Fig.6.8: Spiritualdoorway.com: Fated reading 2

1 your reading i hope its ok, i'm doing it in parts. feedback always
2 appreciated good or bad xx

This particular extract shows Fated’s learner status in two ways. Firstly she states: “i hope its ok” in reference to the reading she is about to post.³⁰ Here, she is asking the recipient (instructor) to reassure her that she performs well in the reading. She then follows this with a request: “feedback always appreciated good or bad”. The reader openly accepts that feedback will contain both positive and negative statements; it is inherent in the nature of learning. Further to this, this firmly establishes

³⁰ The “i’m doing it in parts” refers to how rather than post the reading in one post, she is reading in real time, posting each separate piece of information into a new post. It would be anticipated that the recipient will wait until the reading had drawn to a close before providing a response.

the recipient in the role of instructor, politely requesting that feedback is given on the reading in order to help her learn.

In the following extract, Fated openly admits to her status as learner reader by asking the recipient to remember that they are only a beginner:

Fig.6.9: Spiritualdoorway.com: Fated reading 3

- 1 gonna try and do your reading now, please remember i'm a beginner,
- 2 take what you can and leave the rest hope its ok for you.

Again, the instructor-learner relationship is established early on in the reading. The statement “take what you can and leave the rest” draws on psychic-spiritual rhetoric that not all components of a reading will be immediately relevant (if at all). A common statement made during an offline psychic mediumship demonstration is, for example: “take that with you and ask around as this information might be for someone else you know”. Such statements do two things: firstly, they are strategic ways of dealing with any information that cannot be confirmed or translated by the recipient of the reading. Secondly, they remove responsibility for interpreting the information from the learner reader onto the recipient of the reading who, it is intended, will respond to confirm or deny the information that ensues or will provide their own translation. Thus, these statements may be regarded as strategies used by readers to justify any particular errors on their behalf. Stating “please remember i’m a beginner” further justifies any inaccuracy that follows in the reading, but this statement also establishes her identity in-relation-to the ‘other’: the recipient of the reading who will provide feedback and instruction on how to become an accomplished psychic reader.

As well as exhibiting their status of ‘learner reader’ at the beginning of a reading, readers sometimes use other strategies that serve to anticipate any potential inaccuracies, and invite instruction as to how to be more accurate. The following section considers how these strategies are employed in online asynchronous psychic readings.

Strategies for Soliciting Feedback

The following extract is taken from the middle of another reading by Fated 2 from *spiritual-doorway.com*. The extract contains a series of questions relating to a celebratory event in the recipient's life:

Fig.6.1.1: Spiritualsoorway.com: Fated reading 4

- 1 Maybe not with you, but someone close to you or related? Possibly
- 2 an engagement or news of a baby? It seems like something
- 3 congratulated over.

In face-to-face readings such questions serve as statements of possible fact which might be used to find out information about the recipient of the reading (Jorgensen, 1992). However, in non real-time asynchronous psychic readings, the answers to such questions are not available until (or indeed if) the recipient provides feedback. In this particular extract the obvious uncertainty lends a distinct ambiguity to the reading. "It seems like something congratulated over" concludes that whether the good news relates to an engagement or new baby, or indeed something else entirely, there are good times ahead. This generalisation again demonstrates the reader's epistemic uncertainty concerning the interpretation of the information. This invites the recipient of the reading to either confirm that there is cause for celebration concerning an engagement or a baby, or to offer an alternative translation of the statement. This is also seen in the following extract which is a reading by TulipRose on *spiritualseers.com*:

Fig.6.1.2: Spiritualseers.com: TulipRose reading 1

- 1 I'm hearing joleen the song?? don't know why

The double question mark here is interesting. In conversation, this emphasis on the question would be a marked rise in pitch. However, it could be suggested that in text-based conversation such as that which takes place in online social spaces, the double question mark adds emphasis to the statement. The reader is seeking a definite answer from

the recipient of the reading because they are unable to state why this song has particular significance. The ensuing statement: “don’t know why” serves as an invitation to the recipient to find the significance of the song for themselves, but in doing so solicits instruction on how this should be interpreted. This is epistemic management. “Don’t know why” exhibits neutrality on behalf of the reader placing agency with the spiritual world.

This is also seen in the following extract from a reading collected from psychicseers.com. The reader is Lisa78 who is performing a photograph reading for Heidi. The reading was a typical two-part reading comprising the reading followed by the feedback; however, two specific parts of the reading are shown together with the response that accompanied them. The response from Heidi is in italics:

Fig.6.1.3: Psychicseers.com: Lisa78 reading for Heidi 1

- 1 I also see children around you – yours or may be nieces and nephews?
- 2 Lots of them because you love children (correct?).

- 3 *Again spot on, I have two of my own and lots of nieces and nephews*
- 4 *and some of them have own children, just become great aunty for 10th*
- 5 *time.I love children as they are the most honest and loving being*
- 6 *around. They make me happy.*

This extract asks for feedback twice: “yours or may be nieces and nephews?” and “(correct?)”. The response ensues, providing detailed feedback. Firstly Heidi confirms that Lisa78 is indeed correct, thus responding to her last question. Heidi then gives an explanation as to why, clarifying the reading in relation to her own situation: she has two children, but has many nieces and nephews who also have lots of children. Lastly, she confirms that Lisa78 is accurate in her statement that she loves children, explaining that they make her happy. Even though it appears that Heidi is merely confirming what Lisa78 says, it is clear to see how her feedback instructs Lisa78. The confirmation that Lisa78 was correct instructs her to be more confident in her abilities as a reader; indeed to

trust in what she wishes to communicate as a reader to the person she is reading for. *Trusting* the information one perceives about another is accepted amongst the psychic reading community as a crucial part of psychic development.

Later in the same reading, Lisa78 offers the following insight. This time, the statement is confident (again the response from Heidi follows in italics):

Fig.6.1.4: Psychicseers.com: Lisa78 reading for Heidi 2

- 1 Also see you leading people. Are you a manager or a teacher or a
- 2 trainer? I see you directing people, both adults and children.

- 3 *I used to own my own business and had to lead a couple of people,*
- 4 *but my true teaching lies in teaching spiritually. I run a spirituell*
- 5 *development group, again you are righth*

The question “Are you a manager or a teacher or a trainer?” seeks a simple answer to confirm whether Lisa78 is correct in the information she is sharing. The first statement “Also see you leading people” is reformulated after the question, but reworded: “I see you directing people, both adults and children”. As expected, Heidi provides her response to the question, confirming that Lisa78 is indeed correct. Beyond giving a simple yes for an answer however, she then explains why she is correct, that she used to run her own business and did manage people. She provides further explanation by stating: “but my true teaching lies in teaching spiritually. I run a spirituell development group, again you are righth”. Interestingly, Heidi reveals that she runs her own spiritual development group, indicating that she has experience of guiding others in learning to do psychic readings. Clarifying that Lisa78 has given accurate information, Heidi states “again you are righth”. The instructive nature of these exchanges can be seen even in very short extracts.

Summary

My prior experience as a reader allowed me to understand, from an autoethnographic perspective, the rationale for novice readers requesting feedback. Having read for others in similar forums, I was able to pick out specific linguistic strategies that were used to solicit feedback from the recipients of the readings. Although free psychic readings are offered on the implicit understanding that recipients will provide feedback, learner readers are required to solicit that feedback by offering readings. They do so by posting a request for others to engage in psychic reading and feedback exchange. We have considered how Fated does this in the extracts in this section. She begins by openly establishing herself as a learner reader using phrases such as “please keep in mind, I am just now getting back into this” and “please remember i’m a beginner”. This establishes the relationship of learner and instructor before the exchange can take place. However, these statements are also strategies to deal with epistemic uncertainty, removing responsibility for interpretation from the learner to the recipient, which in turn becomes the instruction. It was also found that feedback is solicited in other ways through ambiguity for example. This invites the recipient to confirm or reject information whilst phrases such as “don’t know why” invite the recipient to provide the meaning. Confirmation and meaning is provided in the form of feedback which in turn instructs the learner reader in how to ‘do’ psychic reading appropriately.

Instruction is invited in different ways. The following section considers a reading offered by SilverStar from forum SpiritualSeers.com. The extract differs in the way it is structured. Instead of the exchange consisting of two parts, a reading followed by a response, the exchange is a dialogue, most of which is included in the extract. However, the reading provides an interesting insight into an alternative way in which instruction may be solicited in the online psychic reading practice forums.

Soliciting Alternative Instruction

The following extract differs somewhat from the previous extracts in that instead of an open invitation for volunteers to help the learner practice psychic reading, the initial post is the start of the reading. The title of the post was “Mediumship Reading Offer... FOR ONE...?”. Consequently, it serves as a subtle invitation for a willing recipient to co-participate in the reading by taking on the role of instructor. It is particularly interesting in that it provides the opportunity for the recipient of the reading to ask questions, which is not typical of asynchronous psychic readings, so the exchange is not just in two parts. The following extract shows both participants taking two turns each:

Fig.6.1.5: Spiritualseers.com Silverstar reading for Emerald

1 I get the feeling someone on SS is in need of contact from a loved
2 one, I feel that this person is female, and it is a Husband or Father
3 that is trying to reach them...?
4 This is just a feeling I am picking up, I have not been on SS for a
5 few weeks and this is the first time I have been on, having just
6 updated my profile page I keep getting this nagging feeling from
7 spirit...
8 If you feel you have connected to this offer please by all means leave
9 a message on the thread or PM me *hug*
10 Thanks for your indulgence
11 xxx

12 P.S
13 I have a Man with me in spirit as I type this, he has very white hair,
14 short stocky build, and he is showing a gold cygnet ring...? Can
15 anyone recognise this man, very tanned , and you can not help but
16 like this male spirit, has a lovely smile :)

17 *It's Ted my Grand father :) Is he wearing a string vest? The gold*
18 *cygnet ring is my mothers x*

19 *Although I could be wrong . x*

20 The ring was very prominent, it was a shield shape, and had detail on
21 the inside of the shape, he pushed it forwards to me, to make sure I
22 put it in the description... He is wearing a white top...and brown
23 shorts/trousers... a truly lovely man, his energy is infectious, dose
24 this make sense...? :)

25 *Yes it does xx I am going to give the ring to my nephew x*

26 I am glad the message found you :D The lovely man is putting his
27 thumbs up in acknowledgement to you giving the ring away to your
28 nephew.

In the first line SilverStar writes “I get the feeling someone on SS is in need of contact from a loved one”. This is similar to what was examined in the previous chapter. MediumJB announced on her Facebook status: “I keep getting the impression im supposed to do a reading for sum1 tonite”. It was concluded that MediumJB, as an experienced medium, was using her status message updates as a way in which to express and affirm her identity as a medium. The extract above however, differs in context.

The asynchronous mode of communication on forums such as these means that more detail needs to be included in the first post in order for potential recipients to decide whether or not the message is for them. Shorter posts and responses add unnecessary time as it is not clear when each poster is able to provide that response.³¹ Consequently, if the information is given in as much detail as possible, the conclusion to the reading can be achieved more swiftly.

To begin the reading, in lines 4-7 SilverStar writes: “This is just a feeling I am picking up, I have not been on SS for a few weeks and this is the first time I have been on, having just updated my profile page I keep getting this

³¹ It is possible that communication will be taking place globally so there is also a time difference.

nagging feeling from spirit...”. It is here that SilverStar exhibits her learner reader status by presenting justification as to why the information she is posting may not be accepted by a possible recipient. Furthermore, this also acts as prior warning that the information she gives in the rest of the reading might not be correct.

Justifying why she is posting the invitation to read for someone, SilverStar announces “I keep getting this nagging feeling from spirit...” (lines 6-7). As discussed in the previous chapter, Medium JB posted a similar statement when she announced: “mmmm i keep getting the impression im supposed to do a reading for sum1 tonite but im not sure who yet.....”. This is strategic, implying a special relationship with spirit whereby if spirit is urging a reader to read, they should not ignore this. This positions the reader, whether learner or experienced, as somehow privileged to be working for spirit. However, coming as it does as part of an open offer of a reading, SilverStar’s statement extends upon the invitation in line 1. The ellipses “...” in line 7 indicate a further extension of this offer, and were used in a similar way by MediumJB on Facebook, to draw attention to the statement and in anticipation of a response.

A more explicit invitation ensues (lines 8-9) when SilverStar writes: “If you feel you have connected to this offer please by all means leave a message on the thread or PM me *hug*”. This invitation also confirms SilverStar’s status as the learner reader, particularly when she follows this up in line 10 with “Thank you for your indulgence”. This thank you is a direct statement about the nature of the interaction that will take place: she is a learner reader who would appreciate feedback on her performance; and, as already noted, feedback is an interactional practice that provides instruction on how the reading should have been done. Consequently, the learner reader is not requesting feedback, but is instead requesting instruction on how to become a better reader.

Emerald responds with a statement (lines 17-19; see Fig.6.1.5) confirming the identity of the spirit communicator:

- 17 It's Ted my Grand father :) Is he wearing a string vest ? The gold
18 cygnet ring is my mothers x
19 Although I could be wrong . x

After identifying that the information shared by SilverStar relates to her grandfather, Emerald then asks a question "Is he wearing a string vest?". There is a distinct pedagogical function within this question: SilverStar's statement about Emerald's grandfather Ted is almost right, but here she is prompting the reader to find out more information so that the information can be accepted as more accurate.

Interestingly, following the question and her statement informing SilverStar that the ring belonged to her mother, Emerald expresses uncertainty about the information she has given, stating that she "could be wrong". This short statement does two things. Firstly, it suggests that the information could actually be for someone else. This would mean Emerald stepping aside as instructor and passing that role to someone else. However secondly, it serves to add weight to the prompt for further information, in order to confirm that the spirit is indeed Emerald's grandfather, so that the exchange may continue.

In response to Emerald's question, SilverStar responds as follows (see also Fig.6.1.5):

- 20 The ring was very prominent, it was a shield shape, and had detail on
21 the inside of the shape, he pushed it forwards to me, to make sure I
22 put it in the description... He is wearing a white top...and brown
23 shorts/trousers... a truly lovely man, his energy is infectious, dose
24 this make sense...? :)

SilverStar seeks verification that she is doing the reading correctly by asking Emerald directly "dose this make sense...? :)" (lines 23-24). Confirmation that the information does indeed make sense comes in Emerald's response in line 25: "Yes it does xx I am going to give the ring to my nephew x". This response is also instructional because it provides positive confirmation that

the information SilverStar has given can be considered accurate. SilverStar is then able to bring the reading to a close, attributing the accuracy of the message to Emerald's grandfather, who is portrayed as being pleased that the ring is being passed to her nephew (lines 26-28).

Emerald's statement about the ring collaboratively provides a motive for the appearance of the spirit, who appears interested in seeing the ring given to Emerald's nephew. This is also strategic in that it is a way of concluding the interaction with the spirit – that is, now Emerald's grandfather knows the ring is in good hands, he can go back to being dead. This helps draw the reading to a close, with the grandfather's 'thumbs up' as a parting gesture showing approval for her plans to give the ring away.

SilverStar's reading offers an example of how co-participation in a learning experience may be solicited through an initial post that constitutes the start of a reading. The post itself was a tentative effort to seek participant engagement in a practice reading using mediumship. The following extract is from a reading performed by the same reader. However, rather than the first post constituting the start of the reading, this time, the forum thread was opened with the more usual request for volunteer recipients. Once people posted their request to take part in the practice readings, SilverStar would post the readings on the forum. Ariadne84 is the recipient of this particular reading; her response is in italics:

Fig.6.1.6: Spiritualseers.com: Silverstar reading for Ariadne84

1 I have an older male and female with me, I feel there grandparents...
2 in spirit... the older female is holding your face, your a lot younger,
3 and she is squeezing your face saying pretty girl... she loves you a
4 lot, I feel many tears around this lady and yourself, they may not be
5 connected, but they have come through together... I am also being
6 given a light flowery sent...?
7 I feel this is also from this older lady xxx

8 *Oh wow, spot on :)*

9 *The older male and female are my grandparents. My mum's mum*
10 *and my dad's dad. My mum and I have been told many times that*
11 *those two seem to hangout together and come around to visit us*
12 *together. They didn't know each other in life but there is something*
13 *comforting about them visiting us together :). Sometimes I can sense*
14 *her around and its so overwhelming I do get a bit teary, not in a bad*
15 *way, but just too full and I have to let it out a bit haha. She lets her*
16 *presence known to my mum with a very flowery perfume scent. I*
17 *don't smell it often but to my mum and a few other intuitives that*
18 *have been around when this has happened they say it smells like*
19 *someones spilt a whole bottle of perfume haha.*
20 *Thank you so much for your lovely reading, I really appreciate it.*

At the beginning of this excerpt, in line 1, SilverStar introduces the two spirits she is communicating with: “I have an older male and female with me, I feel there grandparents... in spirit...”. No further identifying information is offered until the tentative mention of a “light flowery sent” (line 6). In her response, Ariadne84 confirms who she believes the spirit communicators to be: “The older male and female are my grandparents” and clarifies this by explaining who they are: “My mum’s mum and my dad’s dad” (lines 9-10).

Although this confirmation would not be available until the recipient provides the feedback (which would otherwise have been immediate in a face-to-face reading), SilverStar continues with further information (lines 4-5): “they may not be connected, but they come through together”. This additional information then allows Ariadne84 to provide further clarification as to why it is more accurate to state that the older male and female are her grandparents (consequently demonstrating how meaning making is collaborative). She then explains why and why they come together despite not knowing each other when they were alive: “My mum and I have been told many times that those two seem to hangout together and come around to visit us together. They didn't know each other in life but there is something comforting about them visiting us together :)”.

Here, Ariadne84 applies the reading to her own personal circumstances, instructing learner reader SilverStar how she should have interpreted the information. Nonetheless, the comfort Ariadne84 says she obtained from the two spirit communicators visiting together is what mediums and their clients often hope to gain from a reading (Ryan, 2008). The mediums' apparent role is to provide evidence of life continuing after death in order to bring comfort to those who are grieving (see chapter four). Accordingly, SilverStar has fulfilled this part of her role as medium, and Ariadne84 is confirming this.

Next, SilverStar reveals a more personal connection between the recipient and the female spirit communicator, explaining that there are "many tears around this lady and yourself". Drawing on her previous experience of receiving readings and also her own psychic-spiritual knowledge to talk about how she experiences spirit communication herself, Ariadne84 confirms that the message about many tears appears to be true:

"Sometimes I can sense her around and its so overwhelming I do get a bit teary". Revealing that she feels the female spirit around her sometimes, Ariadne84 is elaborating on why there are tears. However, what she explains next suggests that she is interpreting SilverStar's statement to mean that the tears relate to sad times or a bad feeling between herself and the female spirit communicator. This offers further opportunity to instruct the reader in how the information should have been interpreted, so Ariadne84 clarifies that to the contrary, the teariness is "not in a bad way, but just too full and I have to let it out a bit haha".

Towards the end of the reading (lines 5-6), SilverStar asks a question that seeks confirmation from the recipient of the reading: "...I am also being given a light flowery sent...? I feel this is also from the older lady xxx". The question mark and ellipses directly invite a response from the recipient. Ariadne84 confirms that her grandmother does indeed make her presence felt with a flowery perfume (lines 16-17): "She lets her presence known to my mum with a very flowery perfume scent". Once again, Ariadne84

provides instruction on what should have been the correct information; the perfume is usually very strong. What is particularly interesting here however is what she says next (lines 17-19) "...to my mum and a few other intuitives that have been around when this has happened they say it smells like someones spilt a whole bottle of perfume". The phrase "and a few other intuitives" suggests that other psychic readers have been more accurate because the scent was much stronger (smelling like someone had spilt a bottle of perfume) than SilverStar says. Despite this small inaccuracy however, like other recipients providing feedback, Ariadne84 closes her response with acknowledgement and thanks for SilverStar's efforts.

Summary

An autoethnographic informed analysis allowed me to understand the relationship that becomes established between the novice reader and the recipient of the reading. Furthermore, through my experience as a reader I was in the position to understand the underlying context in which this relationship becomes established through the reading process. As communities of practice, psychic development message board forums provide places for their members to find support when practicing psychic readings. As demonstrated in the above extracts, in these forums different kinds of readings are offered free of charge in exchange for feedback. Within this exchange, a particular relationship is negotiated between the psychic reader and recipient of the reading. In requesting feedback in exchange for a reading, the reader establishes themselves in the role of 'learner psychic'; the recipient, in giving feedback, becomes the instructor. These roles are inherent within members' participation in psychic reading forums.

Discourse analysis helps to reveal how this role is established. For example, in Fig.6.6 reader MelodySprite provides a very short reading based on six cards. The recipient of this reading, Topaz, gives feedback. Analysis reveals how within this feedback, the role of instructor is played out. The feedback – or rather, instruction – has distinct features that were also apparent in

the other extracts. Typically, the recipient of the reading would structure the feedback in the same order in which the reading was structured, each new part of the reading being addressed separately.

It is interesting here to contrast the online readings with what would typically happen in face-to-face readings. In the latter, readings take place in a two-way conversation, where participants take multiple turns. This provides ample opportunity for the psychic to ask questions and receive responses immediately. Online however, the asynchronous nature of the readings means that readings are typically in two parts – a reading, followed by the feedback (except in Fig.6.1.5 where the initial post is the beginning of the reading, openly inviting a participant). There is little use in the reader asking a question that would require an immediate answer. Conversely, there is no real use in the recipient *rejecting* incorrect information given by the psychic. Instead, the information is either ignored or *translated*. In translating the information, an alternative meaning is offered back to the reader, for them to maybe use in a later reading. Similar translation of meaning will be offered if information is almost correct, such as in Fig.6.6 when Topaz offers a slightly altered meaning to *The World* card.

In the case of correct or near-correct information, the recipient will confirm this. Many examples were found in the data, such as in Fig.6.1.6 when Ariadne84 confirms the two spirits communicating with SilverStar are her grandparents. The recipient will then explain why they confirm this information as correct, or perhaps elaborate by providing extra information as to why the information is nearly correct. Whether the information is correct and explained, or incorrect and translated into an alternative meaning, it is finally clarified when the recipient applies it to their own situation, providing the feedback to the reader, as shown in Fig.6.1.7. below:

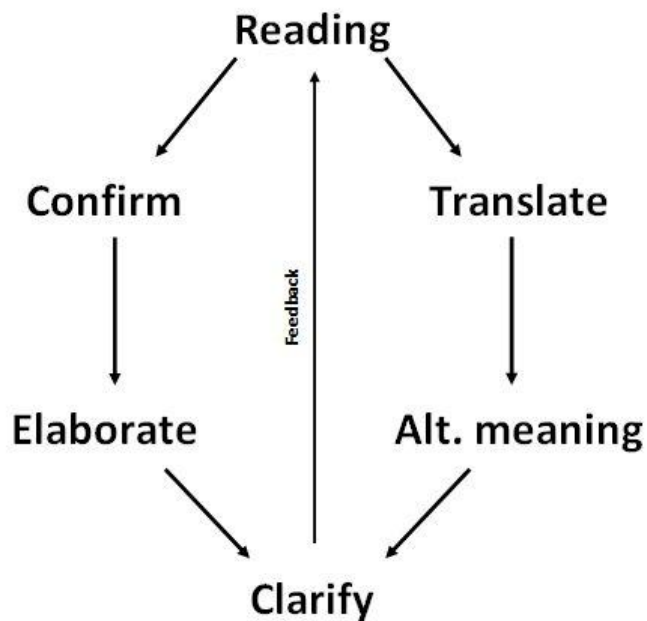


Fig.6.1.7: Process of reading confirmation or translation to clarify meaning

Conclusion

Reading and feedback exchange helps the learner psychic learn how to become an accomplished psychic reader. Mutual engagement produces collaborative learning as a joint enterprise between members of the psychic-spiritual milieu who can draw on a repertoire of shared meanings to facilitate learning (Wenger, 1998b). Engaging in practice in these sites of situated learning enables the learner to gain knowledge (Avis and Fisher, 2006). Consequently, it may be suggested that members who are practicing their psychic reading skills are participating in some form of pseudo-apprenticeship (see Lave and Wenger, 1991). Learner readers effectively surrender authority and expertise to the person receiving the reading, even if the recipient does not themselves possess any psychic skill, in order to receive instruction, without being consciously aware of this. They participate in the community (of practice) – the psychic-spiritual forums, learning a particular skill. However, they also participate in other ways: interacting with other seekers and discussing spiritual topics. In this respect, practicing psychic readings in online discussion board forums are just one way in which learner psychics learn to be psychic readers.

In the last three chapters I have considered how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the various applications of the internet: websites, social networking sites and virtual community discussion board forums, to engage in psychic reading culture online. In chapter four, I considered the passive presentation of the psychic-spiritual self as well as the representation of the wider psychic-spiritual milieu. In chapter five I examined interaction that took place through Facebook status message updates and the management of psychic practitioner identity. Finally, in this chapter, I investigated how interaction in online discussion board forums based on psychic readings can be a site for situated learning practices. This leads me to the next chapter, which changes track considerably to those which precede it in that it addresses my personal experience of psychic reading culture online, lending a more intrapsychic understanding from the perspective of an online psychic reader.

Chapter Seven

Becoming the Virtual Psychic: the subjective experience of psychic reading online

In the 1970s, Jorgensen (1992) conducted a participant observational study of the esoteric milieu in the USA, observing behaviour and activities at psychic fairs and undertaking the role of professional tarot card reader. However, although he gained a good understanding of the social organization of esoteric culture (what I have subsequently termed the 'psychic-spiritual milieu'), he claimed that what was missing from his study was an 'occult knowledge of reality': "My inability to fully internalize an occult knowledge of reality as personally meaningful limited direct access to the subjective significance of the most intimate aspects of occultists' experiences" (Jorgensen, 1992: 229). The aim of this chapter is to give a more in-depth intrapsychic account of that experience, using the researcher as the sole participant offering psychic readings in online discussion board forums. Online psychic reading involves a different set of practices. Expectations from both reader and recipient of the reading need to be managed in particular ways. For example, the previous chapter outlined how the relationship between the two parties in online psychic reading forums was one of learner and instructor. Furthermore, this relationship was implicit in the dynamics of the psychic reading practice discussion board. Also, readings have to be adapted. In synchronous settings such as chat rooms, readings take place in real time, but lack the face-to-face presence of offline readings. Asynchronous readings meanwhile, take place in non-real time at the reader's convenience, and are then posted in the forums when completed. Responses are also posted in the recipient's own time, if at all.

This chapter begins by looking at what autoethnography is: a personal form of participation which involves reflecting on experiences using self-observation techniques. It considers various forms of autoethnography as

well as the importance of the researcher's position. It also examines the key advantages of using this approach for the study of psychic readings online, and how autoethnography, placing the researcher as central to the investigation, is a very useful tool for capturing the intrapsychic experiences Jorgensen felt was missing from his own study. The chapter then discusses autoethnographic methods, mentioned briefly in chapter three; how data is collected and subsequently analysed. Analysis draws on Altheide's (1996) ethnographic content analysis and Braun and Clarke's (2006) basic thematic analysis (both of which are outlined in chapter three and four), identifying the particularly significant themes that emerged out of the data analysis.

What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography situates the researcher central in the qualitative inquiry. This affords the researcher a closer view of the phenomena whilst also enabling a more reflexive approach to data collection and analysis: "Issues of reflexivity are particularly salient for ethnographic research in which the involvement of the researcher in the society and the culture of those being studied is particularly close" (Davies, 1999: 4).

Drawing on the work of Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), who call for a more reflexive approach to sociological research, Anderson (2006) highlights how autoethnography moves beyond simple reflexivity: "it is not enough for the researcher to engage in reflexive social analysis and self-analysis. Autoethnography requires the researcher to be visible, active, and reflexively engaged in the text" (Anderson, 2006: 383). In short, autoethnography involves an explicit, written recognition of the impact the researcher's biographical and personal history might have on the research. This is demonstrated in Smith's (2005) study of recovering from an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI). Smith was acutely aware of how her own experiences were likely to impact on her research and how this required a certain degree of reflexivity:

I was afraid that my experiences would colour and influence my interpretations of the participants' experiences. Although I was very aware of the possibility this might happen, I felt that just recognising the danger of this occurring would not be enough. I had to take action and adopt a position that would not only legitimize my voice but also allow me to express my thoughts without marginalising the voices of the participants (Smith, 2005: 70).

In recognition of the impact of the researcher on the research, autoethnography is becoming a very popular tool for studying phenomena in which the researcher has some prior involvement or has immersed themselves fully in the field by becoming a member. However, more than this, autoethnography acutely recognises the impact the researcher's own experiences as participant and places them as central to the analysis.

The depth to which autoethnographic work integrates cultural analysis and interpretation depends upon the subject matter and the genre in which that work is situated. Autoethnography itself is situated within a much wider range of writings collectively known as 'self-narratives'. Self-narrative work involves delving into personal memory, self-reflection on personal experiences and self-revelation through narration of one's own stories (Chang, 2008). The main focus in these writings is on the self, although these will be different depending on genre, author, thematic focus and style of writing. Moreover, the purpose behind self-narrative writing is to reveal the self in order to describe, analyse and/or interpret it, and there are different ways in which this can be done - different types of autoethnography. 'Life-histories' situate the informant's life (or quite often the life of a member of their family) as the central focus of the study. Meanwhile, 'native-ethnographies' are carried out by ethnographers with the focus on their own people (ibid.: 44). Additionally, there are more personalised styles of writing which detail the ethnographic process and the researcher's own experiences and feelings from the research field. Chang (2008) highlights some examples of personalised writing styles such

as 'reflexive ethnographies' (Tedlock, 2000), 'confessional tales' (Van Maanen, 1988) and 'ethnographic memoirs' (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

The self is accentuated in autoethnography and this raises the issue of how research concerning the self can be labelled an ethnography, considering the origins of ethnography is in its focus on studying 'others' (Wolcott, 1999). To answer this, Chang (2008: 29) accentuates the role of culture in autoethnographic work: "self is consistently connected to others in the realm of culture". Consequently, the reconciliation between culture and the self is what makes autoethnography ethnographic. Foley (2002) agrees that autoethnography encompasses a wide variety of reflexive ethnographic work that focuses on self-narrative. He notes that although autoethnographic work is 'openly subjective', there appears to be a spectrum on which autoethnographic writings might be placed. Placing his 'broad and less intimate' study of White-Indian race relations in his hometown at one end of this spectrum, Foley (2002) situates what has come to be known as 'evocative autoethnography' at the other (see for instance Ellis, 2004; Mykhalovskiy, 1996). 'Evocative ethnography' invokes "an epistemology of emotion, moving the reader to the feelings of the other" (Denzin, 1997 in Anderson, 2006: 377). For example, Jago (2002) provides an autoethnographic account of her battle with clinical depression after a relationship breakdown and how she had to overcome challenges to return to work. As an academic, Jago felt she was in the right situation in which to write about her own experience. However, as a consequence, she was putting her painful experiences with depression 'out there' on display for all of her friends, family and colleagues to see. Accordingly, the nature of autoethnography, particularly evocative autoethnography, requires the researcher to be willing to experience a certain degree of vulnerability (Forster *et al*, 2006: 49).

Anderson (2006) draws attention to how evocative autoethnography has somewhat dominated discussion surrounding autoethnography. In particular, he is critical of evocative autoethnography for losing sight of the

goals of *analytic* autoethnographic work. This has led to a particular critique of autoethnographic work as being overly self-indulgent and narcissistic (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 2002). Anderson's (2006) notion of analytic autoethnography however seeks to move autoethnography away from self-absorption towards a style that is more in line with symbolic interactionist traditions and goals. As noted in chapter three, Anderson outlines 'analytic autoethnography' (AA) as:

ethnographic work in which the researcher is (1) a full member in the research group or setting; (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts; and (3) committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006: 375).

Chang (2008) adopts Anderson's notion of analytic autoethnography because it acknowledges the objective approach to social science involving systematic data collection, analysis and interpretation. Meanwhile, evocative ethnography sits in complete contrast with this being as it is concerned with emotional engagement and subjectivity (ibid.).

In defence of evocative ethnography however, Ellis and Bochner (2002 cited in Chang, 2008: 51) promote the therapeutic effects of such personal ethnographic accounts; not just for the authors themselves, but also for those readers who have had similar experiences. Jago (2002) comments on the therapeutic effects of autoethnographic writing: "I write my story not only to make sense of what happened to me...but also to enhance others' understanding, to provide a window into the illusive world of depression" (Jago, 2002: 738). Ellis (2004) also writes about the therapeutic effects of autoethnography. She stresses that writing about emotional topics and profound experiences means it is impossible to separate research from therapy. She notes how the author, the reader and other participants in the research field can benefit from the therapeutic effects of autoethnography. Vryan (2006) is also critical of what he considers to be an

over-emphasis on objectivity in Anderson's notion of analytic autoethnography. Placing AA in contrast with evocative forms of autoethnographic writing is counter-productive. Vryan agrees with the core goals of AA to be to "conduct traditional ethnography with significantly enhanced researcher visibility and reflexivity and a strong member role" (Vryan, 2006: 405). However, he is particularly critical of Anderson's (2006) argument that autoethnography necessarily requires the researcher to collect and analyse data from other people. Instead, Vryan (2006) maintains that the extent to which data from others is required is dependent upon the project goals of the researcher(s). Furthermore, self-produced data (data concerning just one person – the researcher) can still be rigorously and effectively analysed, so long as the research does not seek to provide a generalisation of a particular population. Vryan notes however that this is a predicament that all ethnographers encounter. He suggests therefore that there is great potential for Anderson's AA to be more flexible to include the many different ways in which analysis via self-study may be carried out.

As an active participant in the online psychic-spiritual culture in the years leading up to conducting this research, it was important to acknowledge my own background and long-standing interest in psychic spirituality and the impact this would have on the research process. Autoethnographic self-study was considered to be an appropriate methodology with which to explore the more meaningful experiences of psychic readings in online social spaces. The following section examines some of the tools and techniques of autoethnography.

Writing the Self: Tools and Techniques of Autoethnography

The nature of qualitative inquiry has changed substantially over time. New perspectives and methods have emerged that have expanded the social researcher's toolbox significantly. Further, a recognition that research has 'missed out' or 'not regarded as worthy of study' particular aspects of

human experience has led to the opening of a whole new area of academic exploration. Autoethnography is just one of a range of new and alternative forms of research that have emerged in recent decades.

Some research has evolved out of traditional methods. For instance, Sarah Pink (2009) outlines an approach known as *sensory ethnography*, a new form of ethnography that seeks to *explicitly* acknowledge and account for sensory experience during ethnographic fieldwork. Pink's work is referenced here as an example of how ethnography has changed to such an extent that "there is now no standard way of doing ethnography that is universally practised" (Pink, 2009: 8). Indeed, new forms of ethnography are not without criticism. For example, Pink cites Atkinson, Delamot and Housley's (2007) suggestion that what they term, 'postmodern' ethnography has "devalued systematic analysis of action and representations, while privileging rather vague ideas of experience, evocation and personal engagement" (Pink, 2009: 8). However, Pink argues that recent approaches to ethnography are 'far from vague' because they explicitly seek to address the relevance of experience. Pink also suggests that ethnography should be defined with regards to its practice, and she cites O'Reilly (2005) as providing a basic idea of what ethnography *entails* rather than prescribing what an ethnographer *should do*:

Iterative-inductive research (that evolves in design through the study), drawing on a family of methods, involving direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures), watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions, and producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience, that acknowledges the role of theory as well as the researcher's own role and that views humans as part object/part subject (O'Reilly, 2005 cited in Pink, 2009: 9).

The direct consequence of defining ethnography in regards to what it entails is that it allows researchers to explore realms and depths of

phenomena that have thus far been overlooked. Whilst an element of autoethnography has always been present in social and anthropological research (Anderson, 2006), it is becoming an increasingly popular method with which to research aspects of social and psychological life that have not been explored in such qualitative detail.

As discussed, the key feature of autoethnographic research is the positioning of the researcher. Anderson (2006) stresses that effective analytic autoethnography relies on the researcher being a complete member in the social phenomenon under scrutiny. He points to Adler and Adler (1987) who distinguish between two types of what they term 'complete member researchers' (CMRs): *opportunistic* and *convert*. The latter refers to those researchers who *become* complete members during the course of research. The former which is the approach taken in this thesis concerns the researcher being a member of the cultural group prior to deciding to conduct research. Meanwhile, Chang (2008) notes three possible ways in which one may be positioned in autoethnographic research in relation to others and the inquiry itself: (1) the 'self as primary focus of inquiry', (e.g. Lazarre, 1996). (2) Others who share your experiences are included but the focus of the research is "still anchored in your personal experience" (p. 65) (e.g. Smith, 2005) and (3) The researcher's self allows access to the field but then the spotlight of the investigation is on the participants as the main characters. Ultimately where one is positioned in relation to others will impact upon the chosen research design. For the present study, it was originally intended to approach the research from option (2) in that the researcher's personal experiences of psychic readings on the internet would inform the collection of data from other people and subsequent analysis. However, as will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter of this thesis, I had to approach the study from option 1, using myself as 'primary focus of inquiry'. This was deemed more appropriate, particularly as the aim of the autoethnographic study was to give an insight into the intrapsychic

experience of psychic reading online and in no way does it claim to generalise to others.

Using the Self as Resource

Autoethnographic methods concern collecting data from the self – using the self-as-resource. Chang (2008) outlines several autoethnographic techniques, one of which is the collection of data concerning the researcher's past, 'personal memory data': "Personal memory is a building block of autoethnography because the past gives context to the present self and memory opens the door to the richness of the past" (Chang 2008: 71). Reflecting on one's own past in order to come to an understanding of the present self is a technique used in the feminist social constructionist method of memory-work. The principle notion behind memory-work is that past memories impact on self and identity because "past experience may offer some insight into the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing relations" (Haug et al, 1987, quoted in Onyx and Small, 2001: 774). Memory-work in its traditional form, that is, when used in feminist social constructionist research, occurs in three stages: individual reflection; collective examination of memories within a group where self is socially constructed through reflection and a recursive stage three involving analysis and further reflection (Onyx and Small, 2001). In autoethnographic and autobiographical work the researcher engages in stage one of 'individual reflection' on, and personal interpretation of, past experiences (Chang, 2008). Onyx and Small (2001) refer to Haug et al (1987) and their outline of the basic rules involved in stage one memory-work research:

- (1) Write one to two pages about the event or action (known as a *trigger* or *cue*) because writing the memory helps one to recall it.
- (2) Write in the third person under a pseudonym. This helps to avoid justification of the experience.

(3) Write in as much detail as possible, even the seemingly inconsequential. This is to help avoid an evaluation of what is or is not important. Chang (2008) notes however that tapping into memory as a resource can be problematic because memory is “sometimes unreliable and unpredictable... [it]...selects, shapes, limits, and distorts the past” (2008: 72).

(4) Just describe the experience; do not try to interpret or explain. ‘Rough edges’ and ‘absences and inconsistencies’ are crucial to the analysis. (Onyx and Small, 2001). The technique of ‘free-writing’ whereby the writer just allows words to ‘flow’ is useful here (see Goldberg, 2005).

Delving into memory for autoethnographic purposes works as a catalyst for further writing, helping the individual to remember things that have happened in the past (Chang, 2008). Memories are ‘personal creations’ and are often used in narrative research (see Lieblich *et al*, 1998). However, Thomson and Holland (2005) highlight how the texts generated through memory work differ from narrative accounts in that they “describe what was subjectively significant in this memory produced through engagement with the past” (Thomson and Holland, 2005: 203).

Chang (2008) outlines various other ways to collect personal memory data, particularly as delving into a vast memory bank can seem like a considerably daunting task. One way to start collecting memory data is to ‘chronicle the past’ by creating an ‘autobiographical timeline’. This involves placing significant events relating to the research questions – in this case, it would be the researcher’s experience of psychic-spirituality over the course of the last ten years – in chronological order (*ibid.*). To start to bring together bits of data collected through chronicling the past, Chang recommends several exercises aimed at creating an ‘inventory of the self’. This involves organising personal ‘memory bits’ into thematic categories by evaluating and organizing them. Further categories are added if necessary, although they will be aimed at representing the “cognitive, affective, social

and material aspects of the culture” under investigation (Chang, 2008: 76). Phifer (2002, noted in Chang, 2008) suggests that one makes lists of people, places, things and experiences that have been important through one’s life. Once a list is created, each item on that list is then written in more detail.

Personal data can also be generated from documenting present experiences (Chang, 2008). ‘Self-observational work’ may be used to help in the collection of behaviours, thoughts, emotions and interactions *as they occur*. This technique requires the researcher to become the observed and observer at the same time, recording selected features of their own everyday experience. Taking care to keep everyday behaviour as natural as possible, informants (in the present study, the researcher) write a field report as soon as possible (preferably immediately) after the event to describe actions, words, background information, thoughts, emotions and relationships (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002). Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) outline systematic self-observation as a technique influenced by the theoretical work of Goffman, as well as symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology and semiotics, although it can be used for a wide range of projects.

Researching into ordinary everyday life often misses ‘small events’ that, as noted earlier with reference to Anderson (1998a), add up to much more than what can be observed. Utilising Goffman’s (1959) notions of ‘backstage’ and ‘camouflaged’ behaviours, Rodriguez and Ryave (2002) demonstrate how systematic self-observation can reveal previously hidden, and thereby overlooked, psychological and social phenomena. Further, when using traditional research methods such as participant observation, the researcher can “miss, block out, or contaminate the meanings that participants give to their own activities and experiences” (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002: 4). Thus, systematic self-observation is a very useful transpersonal tool with which to reveal hidden aspects of human experience. White (1998) introduces her idea of an ‘Exceptional Human

Experience' (EHE) autobiography which records the "highlights of your subjective life – of your exceptional experiences: of places, people, events, visions, dreams and encounters that profoundly affected you" (White, 1998: 136). As an individual recalls past EHEs and records present experiences, they reflect upon those experiences and how they have impacted on their life.

Journals such as that suggested by White are crucial in autoethnography because they record thoughts, feelings and sensations that are likely to impact on data analysis. Phifer's (2002) 'spiritual memoir' is also aimed at the recording of the private thoughts and feelings of the researcher about their identity, values and relationships with others. Meanwhile, Anderson (2006) refers to 'insider meanings' which, he maintains, must be collected alongside the thoughts, attitudes and feelings of other insiders. Being an insider says Anderson allows the researcher a specific vantage point to collect certain kinds of data that would not ordinarily be captured in non-autoethnographic studies. Anderson gives an example of his own autoethnographic study of skydiving. In his journal, Anderson noted his dreams, daydreams and musings, which he says: "I would have been unlikely to see had it not been for my personal obsession" (Anderson, 2006: 390). He refers to C. Wright Mills's notion of 'the sociological imagination' and how although many sociologists are aware of the connections that exist between their intellectual interests and everyday lives, few spend time exploring these connections. Autoethnography, he argues, allows one to explore these connections in a much richer way. This leads to a

kind of self-understanding...[that]...lies at the intersection of biography and society: self-knowledge that comes from understanding our personal lives, identities, and feelings as deeply connected to and in large part constituted by – and in turn helping to constitute – the sociocultural contexts in which we live (ibid.).

Whilst keeping a self-reflective journal is integral to autoethnographic research, Chang (2008) recommends that self-reflections be kept in a separate journal away from self-observational data. This is to avoid self-absorption. It is difficult to keep private thoughts separate to field notes. Nevertheless, a process of journaling will, argues Chang (2008: 96): “provide purposeful and healthy interruptions during fieldwork to help you move into and out of the self-reflective state” (see also Powdermaker, 1966, in Davies, 1999).

However, in the present study, it was not easy to separate self-reflections and self-observational data and it was felt that Onyx and Small’s (2001) approach to writing in as much detail as possible was the most suitable option. Self-reflective data was collected after each reading, consisting of typed documents kept electronically for printing later for analysis.

Twenty-seven readings were carried out in November 2009 and December 2009 and in January 2010, solicited on *spiritualseers.com*. Readings were carried out using the Mythic Oracle; cards based on the Greek myths:

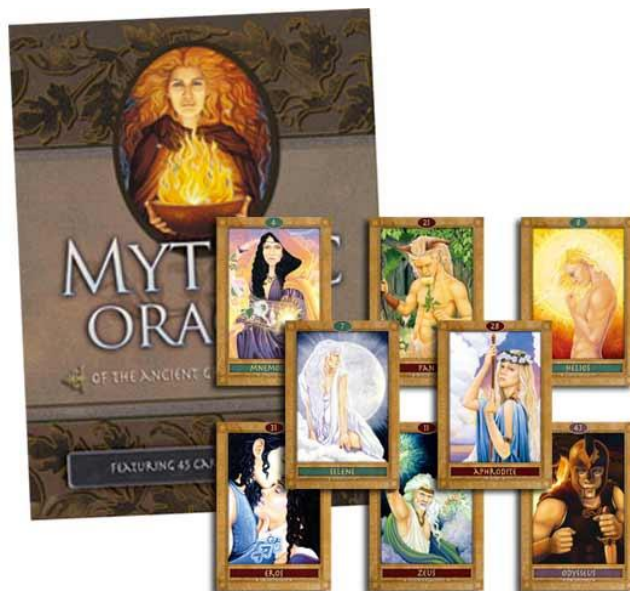


Fig. 7.1: The Mythic Oracle of the Ancient Greek Pantheon³²

³² *The Mythic Oracle of the Ancient Greek Pantheon* by Carisa Mellado and Michele-lee Phelan (Blue Angel Publishing: blueangelonline.com).

Each reading typically involved dealing three cards which were then interpreted according to the symbols depicted on them, by drawing on my own prior knowledge of symbolism, rather than the given translations in the accompanying book. Fieldwork notes were written in a research journal throughout the experience and each reading was reflected on afterwards using self-observation techniques.

Revealing the Psychic-Spiritual Self

Several themes emerged out of the data; the two most interesting themes will now be explored. These are:

- (1) *The Subjective Experience of Psychic Reading Online*: these findings directly address that which Jorgensen said was missing from his own research, the “direct access to the subjective significance of the most intimate aspects of occultists’ experiences” (Jorgensen, 1992: 229).
- (2) *Reconciling the psychic-spiritual and sociological self*: these address the problem of balancing the sociological and spiritual mind. Despite the significant intrapsychic experiences outlined in (1), the sociological analytical mind is also heavily present in the data.

The Subjective Experience of Psychic Reading Online

One particularly significant theme emerging out of analysis concerns the ritual of beginning a reading. Reflections often made reference to my surroundings and the physical process I have come to associate with ‘settling down’ to do a reading and achieving a particular state of mind conducive to being able to ‘tune-in’ to start a reading. This is similar to beginning a healing session. The following is an excerpt taken from a manual written by Taggart King (2009) for the Reiki II (Okuden) course. He talks about the state of mind he feels is conducive to beginning Reiki healing:

I like to clear a space on my desk, light a candle and maybe some incense and just sit quietly for a while watching the candle flame and the plume of smoke from the incense stick. It helps me to relax and quieten my mind. It sets the scene for the ritual to follow (King, 2009: 37).

This first extract relates to achieving that state of mind at the start of a reading:

Fig.7.2: Self Reflection: 03.Nov.09.

I sit looking at the box of cards sat on my living room coffee table, I hear the whirr of the washing machine in the kitchen and I have a scented candle lit on the mantelpiece. I open the box and start to give the cards a shuffle.

I think it is just this act of sitting, relaxing, releasing the thoughts in my mind and calming my mind and then picking up the cards and shuffling, helps me to kind of get into an altered state. I don't recall any physical sensations other than just the feeling of relaxing and calming my mind. The cards appear to help me focus my energies on the reading.

The cards are the focus of my readings and shuffling them has been part of my ritual of starting a reading since I first began to use them. It is a mundane task but one which does help to quieten the mind as it is meditative; I know when I shuffle the cards that I am entering into a state in which I can begin the reading.

Gordon George (1956) wrote about ritual as a form of communication that can be collective or individual but it very specifically "involves a pattern of defined behaviour, externalizing in a sensible form some religious emotion or idea" (Gordon George, 1956: 118). Whilst rituals are important in collective worship, as outwards symbols of community, privately they may be considered as a "dyadic interaction between the human actor and the sacred" (Turner, 1971: 190). Accordingly, shuffling the cards puts me, as

the human actor, in touch with the spiritual (in this case, what I perceive to be the psychic energies around card reading).

However some reflections note certain characteristics in the form of embodied sensations that I have come to associate with being 'in tune' with the energies conducive to reading. For example:

Fig.7.3: Self Reflection: 05.Jan.10.(a).

The energies around me seemed to settle quite nicely and I felt my mind, consciousness or whatever it is, become still and relaxed. I can feel a gentle pressure all around my head and a slight muffling around my ears. At first there was a pulling sensation on both my ears. I would say this is strange, but it is not new to me. I sit almost rooted to the spot and I barely move whilst I read. I feel as if my eyes and my breathing have relaxed.

What I describe here is a typical sensation that I feel whenever I meditate or read. It is different to when I perform Reiki on myself, which feels deeper yet lighter at the same time, and often very warm. It is also very different to when I have read in an offline development group situation. Meintel (2007) participated in spiritualism and also experienced embodied sensations: "It was through bodily sensations that I first came to sense a different level of perception than usual...feeling heat on one side of the body and not the other, for example, or feeling sudden congestion in the throat" (Meintel, 2007: 148). Meintel explains how the spiritual development group creates the conditions in which participants can observe physical sensations and learn to orient clairvoyant perception: "The body becomes a point of departure for understandings that are not literal readings of corporeal happenings but rather leaps of clairvoyant insight for which the body serves as a springboard." (ibid.: 148-149). What she describes here encapsulates how I would describe what happens for me whilst reading. The following extract describes the beginning of a reading and how I start to receive symbols:

Fig.7.4: Self Reflection: 04.Nov.09.

I light a tea light and sit at the dining table. Within a few moments, without picking up the cards, I feel as if I am relaxing and calm and tuning in. Images start to come to mind, like they do ordinarily, but I find I am much more relaxed this time. I note the candle light reflecting off the glossy surface of the cards. The light outside is quite dull with the dark miserable weather. I start the reading, choosing the cards differently to how I usually do, by splitting into 3, choosing a pile and spreading the cards in that pile across the table in front of me. I hold my left hand above the cards and move my hand over them slowly to see if I get any sensations that indicate to me to choose that particular card. I feel a pressing sensation on the back of my middle finger when I get above each of the three cards that I end up using for the reading. Dealing the cards I perceive a feminine energy draw in close to my left side. To try to explain this I have to reflect back on years ago when this first started. I suppose the energy can be described as warmth, like walking past a radiator. I can feel a slight pressure on my cheek and usually this can be accompanied by a sensation where my ears feel muffled and the room appears to disappear. This was quite a subtle sensation but being in the altered state allowed me to pick up on this. I see in my mind a shade of pink and I associate this with femininity and love.

The sensations and intuitive knowing are regarded as 'clairsentience'. I also receive clairvoyant images – images in my 'minds-eye' that I then relate to the recipient of the reading. In this reading I sense a female energy – I know without knowing how I know, and I 'see' pink in association to this. Whilst the colour pink could be taken to relate to a number of things, such as love, mother/grandmother, compassion, it could also be interpreted simply as relating to a female or feminine energy. Other symbols may be perceived which then orient the reader to a more specific interpretation.

The following is an extract demonstrating how this was related to the recipient of the reading:

Fig.7.5: Reading for Participant 4

Before I even start shuffling the cards I feel I just want to sit and quieten my mind. I am holding the cards, feeling the energy off them as my mind lets go. I am sensing a feminine energy over on my left although I am unsure if that is connected with me or you.

I'm seeing a Christmas card. One in particular has an illustration of a snowman. I have a warm feeling in my solar plexus. I'm not sure if this is because you look forward to Christmas in general or you are warmed by the words someone has written in a card. I feel this could link with an older lady, grandmother or aunty.

The reference to a 'warm feeling in my solar plexus' relates to the chakra system. Amongst the cultic-milieu, chakras are considered to be energy centres within the body. The word 'chakra' means wheel in Sanskrit (Arewa, 2001) and it is thought that the body contains many of these of varying sizes. The major chakras are the most well-known and are considered to be important in healing and spiritual work or practices such as yoga. These major chakras are positioned as such: *root* (Muladhara) at the base of the spine; the *sacrum* (Swadhistana) in the lower abdomen; the solar plexus (Manipura) beneath the ribcage; the heart (Anahata); the throat (Vishudda); the brow, or third eye (Anja) and the crown (Sahasrara) (ibid.). The following illustration is a typical image of where the chakras are placed in the body:

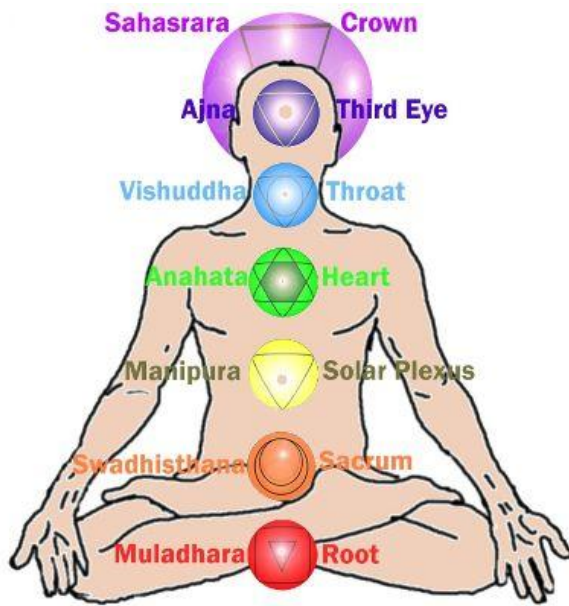


Fig.7.6: The Yoga Chakra System (healingfromtheheart.co.uk)

In the above reading I refer to a warm sensation felt in my solar plexus, which I relate to loving warmth and a feeling of connection to something enjoyed or someone loved. The sensation appears along with images such as the Christmas card and the two are taken together with the feminine energy to be interpreted as a Christmas card from a well-loved female family member.

This next extract below comes from another reflection on a reading. How I related this to the recipient is shown in the excerpt of the reading immediately following, again demonstrating how the information is interpreted and presented to the recipient:

Fig. 7.7: Self Reflection: 06.Jan.10.(a).

As soon as I started to shuffle the cards, I began to receive images. I saw a tiger, sitting serenely under a tree – the message being that she is a calm peaceful person, not a day dreamer as such. Also, this sitter brings sunshine to others simply by being there and being compassionate.

Fig.7.8: Reading for Participant 25

As I start to shuffle your cards, I am immediately seeing a beautiful tiger, sitting serenely watching the world go by. I'm going to take this image as representing you, quietly, yet wisely, watching the world go by, taking everything in. But also, whilst taking everything in, you wait patiently to pounce on something that captures your interest. I'm getting a Pisces link here too, but perhaps not the actual sun sign, just similar characteristics. Pisces tend to be quite fantastical, with their head in the clouds, I don't get this with you, you seem to know what it is you want and are active in making positive changes to your life, without daydreaming like a pisces might do. The Piscean traits i see with you are the calmness you bring to situations around you as you quietly step back and observe a situation before jumping in when the time is right. On another note, tigers are very protective, and I see this as you too, ready to defend any of your loved ones should the need arise. If needs be, you will make as much noise as you possibly can to show others that you do not take any messing off them!

It was through my years of experience of sitting in development groups and practicing in online social spaces that I learned to understand how to perceive and interpret clairvoyant symbols that are seen during readings. Images just appear, and the symbols interpreted according to the situation. For example, in the above extract I see a tiger sitting under a tree. To me, that represented tranquillity because the tiger was sitting quietly, as if resting in the sun. I also relate this to the astrology sign Pisces who, through my studies of astrology, I have come to associate particular personality traits such as being calm and having their heads in the clouds (dreamlike). Conversely, if the tiger had been standing up, prowling or growling, I would have interpreted the symbolism considerably differently; perhaps suggesting that the recipient of the reading was feeling angry about something. There can be no generalised explanation for these interpretations.

Some of the reflections spoke about the issues I had with tuning-in and achieving the relaxed state conducive to an altered state of mind. In particular, where I was sitting appeared to have an impact on the 'flow' of the reading:

Fig.7.9: Self Reflection: 15.Nov.09.(a).

Each reading takes up around an hour of my time. I was initially writing them up and then typing them up later. This was good because I could reflect on the reading as I typed it up and make sure it said what I wanted it to say. However, this was taking away the natural flow. Also, with time constraints and becoming busier reading-wise, I decided to start typing them up directly. So far I have done this on the home pc which has meant that I've had to move my readings from the dining room table to the pc desk. This has not been ideal; I much preferred sitting at the dining table with a candle lit on the table in front of me. However, there doesn't seem to be much of a difference reading-wise and I think once I get used to it, the readings will be fine.

A couple of weeks later, after Christmas, I comment again on where I am sitting and the impact it seems to have on my readings. Using props such as candles or incense add to the 'sacred space' that accompanies ritual. The space in which readings are carried out will also require this:

Fig.7.1.1: Self Reflection: 06.Jan.10.(b).

Again, I wonder if it is where I am sitting that is not conducive to my reading. I feel a little agitated, bored, fed up and wishing to get to a warmer month and feel vibrant instead of hiding in the house trying to keep warm. I feel this is reflected in my readings and I don't want that to be the case. Still, I did the reading although I was aware of two things. Firstly, like in the first reading today, it was as if the words just couldn't come out. I tried to articulate myself but it was as if the finished sentence was a pile of gibberish. Secondly, the images didn't seem to

come through as quickly and richly as in other readings. This could just be my mood. There were no real physical sensations to report. I wasn't even feeling relaxed. Hunched over the small computer desk it doesn't seem as if this is the right place to be.

This negative reflection highlights the problems a reader might have when performing a reading. The conditions, the situation and the surroundings have to be right. Readings could be compared with prayer – prayer is another way in which a social actor connects to the sacred – yet prayer, like psychic readings, can take place in many different contexts. However, there are times – states of mind or surroundings, when praying might not be appropriate. The same applies to healing. As a Reiki healer, I can send distant healing at any time I choose, similar to prayer, but there are more appropriate times for me to engage in hands-on healing. The reader's own energy and well-being must be conducive to healing, and the same applies to psychic readings:

Fig.7.1.2: Self Reflection: 22.Feb.10.

I must admit doing readings does make you tired – it is taxing but in what kind of way? I was wide awake this morning after a good nights sleep. I'm not tired as such now and it is only 10am. I think it is mentally exhausting in some way. It can be quite exciting to sit down and read for someone but after about 10 minutes or so you can become a bit fidgety and want to hurry it up. Readings cannot be hurried though – the information comes at you thick and fast and you are kept on your toes and you interpret it.

Similarly a reading the following day:

Fig.7.1.3: Self Reflection: 07.Jan.10.

Change of position today as I am back in front of the home pc with the kids now back in school. I'm aware that perhaps yesterday I felt a bit more comfortable at the dining table, and had more space. The relaxed feeling and the other sensations

that come with the reading are more readily felt when sitting in the dining room. My lap top takes far too long to boot up though, and it's so much warmer in here!

The reading began quickly again. I wasn't sure if I was in the right frame of mind or position to begin the reading but as soon as I started to shuffle the cards, I perceived images.

Fig.7.1.4. Self Reflection: 12.Feb.10.

This was a difficult reading. Although I was certain I was getting information I could not word it the way I felt was needed. There was a language barrier or something.

That is the readings done for this morning as I am worn out!!

The difficulties expressed in these reflections demonstrate that beyond physical surroundings a reader is more comfortable reading if feeling mentally prepared to read or connect to spirit (a healer would not give another healing if feeling under the weather, for example). Yet this suggests something more. A 'sacred space' therefore is not just an outwardly physical surrounding. 'Sacred space' must also be found within the individual who wishes to connect to the spiritual, and this is where ritual, prayer or meditation might be used. However, it is important to realise that for spiritual seekers, spirit is always there. As MacKian states: "Sacred' spaces may for some be omnipresent in their world, even if we cannot see them manifest in physical form or in the acceptable sociocultural spaces and places we are familiar with" (MacKian, 2012: 89). To illustrate this, she introduces one of her research participants, Richard, for whom spirit is "like the sun, it's always there and everywhere".

Richard's words echo my own sentiments. Spirit, whatever that might actually be, is everywhere. It is there to 'tap into' whenever we feel the need to. Indeed for some people (myself included), we are always connected to spirit; it is an everyday thing, as MacKian (2012) acknowledges in her work.

Summary

To summarise, in capturing the subjective experience of psychic reading online, I identified that each reading tends to begin with a ritual that acts as a focus. It is akin to a meditative state or sacred space, which relaxes the mind and brings about an altered state of consciousness that enables me to start connecting to the recipient and the cards. During the readings I experience embodied sensations that are conducive to the conditions of reading, and I also report perceiving symbols in my mind. I was then able to draw on my ten years of spiritual development in order to interpret the symbols for the recipient of the reading. Whilst this captures the intrapsychic experience of psychic reading, the following section considers a different outcome captured in the self-reflective data.

Reconciling the Psychic and Sociological self

This section examines how my sociological self affected my performance as a psychic reader in comparison with Jorgensen's own experience as a tarot card reader. It had not been my intention to analyse the readings and consider the origins of the information I perceived; it was fully intended to 'bracket off' assumptions about where my knowledge was coming from. However something occurred several weeks prior to beginning the readings which had a considerable effect on my readings and consequently my autoethnography. I had had a conversation about my autoethnography with an academic (a parapsychologist) whilst at a conference. He demonstrated interest in my idea about doing readings online and we spoke about how I intended to do this for my research. A few days later, he emailed me a book chapter that he had co-authored, saying that it might be of interest. The chapter is an overview of the strategies used in cold reading. Cold reading is when the reader draws on visual clues such as client's age, dress, gender and props such as wedding rings to demonstrate insight into the client's life. Cold reading also uses Barnum-type statements which are specific generalizations (Couttie, 1988 cited in Roe and

Roxburgh, forthcoming). These are statements that are likely to be relevant to most people and will take advantage of how people believe they are unique rather than similar to other people in lots of ways, therefore believing in the abilities of the medium. Roe and Roxburgh highlight some of these generalizations as relating to the length of a woman's hair, a divorce in the family or aches and pains that might be relative to a person's age.

Although I remain open-minded to several interesting theories concerning what actually occurs during the process of a reading, this paper was to have quite an impact on the readings I did at the beginning of the data collection stage. The first data extract documents this:

Fig.7.1.5. Self Reflection: 19.Nov.09.(a)

The reading I did yesterday is the first one since reading through Chris's paper. I must admit it did cloud my readings slightly. I did try to push it out of my mind, but sometimes those sceptical (wise?) words came creeping back in.

Roe and Roxburgh's (forthcoming) paper had influenced what I was doing to the point where I wondered if what I was doing was indeed nonsense and what they had written actually made more sense. I recall feeling quite frustrated by this paper at the time. I was an inexperienced researcher and felt as if this was an attack on the psychic-spiritual community, with me as their representative in an academic field. I had heard of cold-reading before, and I could understand the rational thinking around such a contentious topic as psychic reading. Also, I fully understood that clients of psychic readers make the information fit their circumstances (see Aphek and Tobin, 1990), but I never had any concerns about this. Indeed, clients or patients would do the same with personal advice from a counsellor or

doctor. The only difference being that there is no standardised training or tangible source of knowledge for psychic reading.³³

Roe and Roxburgh refer to Hyman's (1981) definition of cold reading and how he distinguishes between two types of reading – static and dynamic. The former relies on commonalities, a stockpile of generalisations that are likely to apply to the recipients in some form or another. This then relies on the recipient making the information meaningful – the so-called 'Barnum Effect'. 'Dynamic' readings rely on the reader being able to make inferences about the recipient by drawing on social cues and the clues they give during the interaction.

Jorgensen (1992) experienced 'cold reading' during his own study as a tarot card practitioner. Recognising that readings were constructed through interaction with the 'querent' (recipient of the reading), if interaction was not forthcoming, it was easy to 'read' the recipient using social cues:

If an account based on the cards was not forthcoming or if the querent did not recognise and participate in the construction of meaning, there was a temptation to read the querent; that is, employ even the slightest verbal and especially nonverbal signs and cues to render meanings. Every reader is conscious that such information is available, and that it may be useful in the event that one is unable to 'get anything' from the cards (Jorgensen, 1992: 121).

Jorgensen noted that it was important to deliver a successful performance of a reading, particularly at the psychic fairs where practitioners were being paid for their services; consequently, it was tempting to resort to cold reading a client in order to achieve this: "Once a dialogue is established it then becomes possible to return to the cards and develop on this theme: health, sex, marriage, money, career, and so on, based on an attribution of the cards" (Jorgensen, 1992: 121). Like Jorgensen, I was

³³ However, the Spiritual Workers Association (www.theswa.org.uk) established in response to the Consumer Protection Act (2008), is now offering a BTEC Advanced Award for Business Management of Spiritualistic Services.

aware of this in my own readings and in some of my reflections I talk at length about the readings I performed and whether what I was doing could be construed as cold reading, even though it was through the internet and visual cues were absent:

Fig.7.1.6. Self Reflection: 07.Dec.09.(a).

Cyberspace offers that space where you are anonymous to the other but I did know if my sitters were male or female, and I could suppose from subtle clues in their communication—their usernames and avatar pictures can tell you so much

Walther (1992) was one of the earlier commentators on how it is possible to develop impressions of anonymous others through computer-mediated communication. He quotes an even earlier recognition of this from a study conducted in 1975 concerning a FORUM established through ARPANET:³⁴

I sit down at the terminal and all of these people talk to me in little [sic] letters that run across the face of the CRT faster than I can read them! I can easily distinguish personalities and moods, although my view of the people behind them may be a little [sic] warped (A FORUM user; Vallee et al, 1975, quoted in Walther, 1992: 52)

Walther (1992) writes that whilst CMC removes nonverbal cues, affecting people's perception of the 'other', it is still possible to make inferences about the other based on the information that remains – text and images.

My reflections also refer to this:

Fig.7.1.7: Self Reflection: 24.Nov.09.

Cold reading – I can't see any clues about the other person before I read. I can choose to click on their profile and find out minimal indicators such as their age, sex, location, but I choose not to. I suppose their username and avatar picture can 'give the

³⁴ ARPANET was the first international computer-mediated communication system developed for the Advanced Research Projects Agency of the US Department of Defense. See Hauben (nd.) <http://www.dei.isep.ipp.pt/~acc/docs/arpa.html>

game away' to an extent, e.g. a picture of a pink angel is more likely to be a woman, whilst a picture of a cowboy or an alien is more than likely to be a male.

Whilst the intention of this research was not to assess the nature of psychic reading, it became difficult to switch off the analytical questioning mind when reflecting on the readings. Consequently, this had an impact on my ability to achieve the state of mind I felt was conducive to reading. I was experiencing difficulties in performing the reading and I believed at the time that what I had read in Roe and Roxburgh's paper had influenced my thinking. Later on in the reflection I try to convince myself that what I was doing remained a good idea:

Fig.7.1.8: Self Reflection: 19.Nov.09.(b).

Again ignoring and pushing away the gnawing scepticism, I can go back to what I know – connect with guides/higher source/inner self and really go into the readings.

Here, I write about a 'gnawing scepticism' and my resolution to overcome this challenge and to reconnect to the spiritual. This is what was missing from Jorgensen's (1992) study; despite the gnawing scepticism, I could draw on prior experience of the rituals and tools available to me to help me 'reconnect' to my reading practice and turn my mind off the cold reading paper. Accordingly, my 'occult knowledge of reality' afforded the chance to overcome any possible scepticism and doubts in my reading practice.

Indeed, my prior experience enabled me to justify to myself why readings were significant to those who requested them, despite the scepticism of some commentators:

Fig.7.1.9: Self Reflection: 19.Nov.09. (c).

Readings can be quite generic – sitter comes for advice, reader gives information that could relate to anyone, particularly in relation to their life situation/age etc... The reading appears personalised to both the reader and the sitter but the ultimate goal is to help that sitter come to their own conclusions and

clarifications about what is bothering them at the moment, and then advice is centred around that sitter being active in finding their own solutions and working themselves towards those solutions.

Semetsky's (2005) conclusion is very similar. She used tarot card readings in counselling and psychotherapy sessions and argues that the aim of a reading is to help clarify a situation for a client and give them insight into psychological processes that can be modified in an attempt to overcome the issues in their life. Indeed, clients will already have an idea of the kind of outcome they want from a reading (or counselling session), and so the emphasis here is to help the client to come to their own conclusions and solutions to their problems. I mention this in another reflection:

Fig.7.2.1: Self Reflection: 15.Nov.09.(b).

In a reading, the reader has a distinct responsibility to the sitter in acting as a facilitator to their own problem-solving, helping them to see things clearer and highlighting the several options they may have available to them... Semetsky states quite clearly – it is not the 'psychic reading' that is key, it is what the sitter/client interprets and takes away from the reading that is important. If they can come away from a reading or counselling session feeling as if they now have viable solutions to their problems, does it really matter about the source of that information.

Here, I am trying to justify and defend my decision to practice readings, alluding to my own perception that whatever the source of information, it should not really matter as long as the recipient of the reading is somehow helped through their problems. Mediums hold similar beliefs; they regard their apparent ability to communicate with the deceased as a way to bring comfort to loved ones (Walter, 2008). The ethical dimensions of such readings however, are dependent on the price prospective clients are expected to pay. However, this is not of concern here.

Another extract, taken from a reflection written a week later, demonstrates again how my sociological self could not be separated from the spiritual reflection on the readings, and how Roe and Roxburgh's paper was still affecting me. This was a reflection on information that might be available about the recipient of the reading, via the forum, to give clues for cold reading. For instance, members of forums choose personalised usernames and often display an 'Avatar' (an image they think best represents them). I had been wondering about the avatar images and whether it would be easy to ascertain male and female users behind the avatars.³⁵

Fig.7.2.2: Self Reflection: 24.Nov.09.

How do we know that the person we are talking to is who they say they are? What implications does this have for psychic readings – if a reader was to 'read' for someone they perceived to be female in a reading, but who turned out to be male – (a) how would that impact on the supposed credibility of that reader and (b) what are the ethical implications for this from both sides of the story – a reader has carried out a reading on good faith that the person is who they say they are.

Reading online, for the anonymous 'faceless other' (see Nadler and Shestowsky, 2006) may raise questions about reliability – there is no way of knowing for certain who the recipient of the reading is. Some might suggest that 'correct' readings prove there is truth in psychic phenomena, but there can be no certainty that the recipient of the reading is telling the truth – that the reading is correct – or they might be 'making it fit' (thereby returning to Roe and Roxburgh's reference to the Barnum Effect).

Roe and Roxburgh's paper continued to have an impact on my readings. However, whilst the following extract demonstrates this, it also gives an insight into what was happening from my own 'psychic reader' self:

³⁵ See Donath (1999) for discussion on gender identity in online social spaces.

Fig.7.2.3: Self Reflection: 01.Dec.09.

The Roe and Roxburgh paper has knocked me but today, I felt much different about it. I feel determined. They have it wrong. It is easy to make suppositions about a particular practice when you are the outsider. Here, I am the insider, I know how it feels – I experience the emotions, the sensations and I see the colours, the shapes and relate them to the sitter who, for some inexplicable reason, I feel connected to whilst doing their reading. It is not about cold reading, or ... making it up, it is about being present in that particular moment and feeling everything that is happening. I don't think parapsychologists are aware of how that connectedness feels – they are detached, scientific, standing in stark contrast to those who feel every sensation. For me, and countless others, it feels and means so much more than what they think it does.

Here I am relating my own perspective on what I believe about the nature of psychic reading. I believe myself to be healthily sceptical but I will defend against comments and suppositions of others who presume that their perspective is the 'right' one. What I argue here is that without personally experiencing what occurs during the process of apparent psychic cognition, it is impossible to make suppositions about what is actually happening. As I state in the above account: "For me, and countless others (other members of the psychic-spiritual milieu) it feels and means so much more than what they think it does". MacKian (2012) argues that for people experiencing spirituality, their experiences are very real. Furthermore, academics should suspend their disbeliefs and consider people's experiences as they are. She quotes Knibbe and Versteeg (2008) who state: "experiences do not have to be 'explained', but simply 'understood' as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider" (cited in MacKian, 2012: 190). MacKian engaged in both covert and overt participant observation of spiritual events such as mediumship workshops in order to experience for

herself what she notes as being “some of the intangibility which lay at the core of what participants frequently experienced” (MackKian, 2012: 192).

Despite my discussion concerning the nature of psychic reading and whether what I was doing was really how parapsychologists supposed it to be, I had enough personal evidence to suppose that there was something to psychic reading, even if there was no scientific proof. There are a growing number of anthropologists and sociologists who are participating in occult, paranormal and psychic phenomena and exploring extraordinary experiences at face value. For example, Charles Emmons conducted phenomenological research into spirit mediumship, arguing “what better way to do a phenomenological study than to leap whole hog into the phenomenon itself?” (TheSSEChannel, 2009: online). Emmons has spent over fifteen years studying spirit mediumship, and has observed mediums’ own scepticism for himself. However, and in particular reference to his spirit medium wife Penelope, he adamantly argues that he has experienced enough to know that “there is something going on here” (TheSSEChannel, 2009; see also Emmons and Emmons, 2003). Deirdre Meintel (2007) conducted a participant observational study of Spiritualism. During her research, she focussed on finding out about “what it was like to see clairvoyantly, to give healing, and to know how everything fits in with the daily lives of the participants” (Meintel, 2007: 133).

However despite experiencing first hand for a number of years my own ‘occult knowledge of reality’ this particular context, placing my researcher self as central to an exploration into psychic phenomena, generated other concerns. There was considerable anxiety surrounding how my choice of methods would impact on my career in academia, and in particular how my readings might have ethical implications, despite me taking steps to ensure that readings were advertised as ‘entertainment only’. I reflect on this in the following extract:

Fig.7.2.4: Self Reflection: 16.Dec.09.(a).

I feel I am in a strange place with regards my readings. I think this comes with the scepticism from academia – how psychic phenomena are regarded by science, and how really what I am doing is going to impact on any future career I may have in academia. This is having a knock-on effect on the way I do my readings – I don't feel like I can give it what it requires.

At the end of this extract I write "I don't feel like I can give it what it requires" in reference to feeling unable to inject time and energy into my readings like I used to. For me this was an important realisation; a threshold or juxtaposition. Here, I was acutely aware of two seemingly incommensurate selves: my spiritual self and my apparent insight into the lives of others, and my objective sociological self and the chance of a meaningful career ahead of me. This relates to how I wanted to be seen by others in academia (I reflect on this more in chapter eight) and how the way I saw the world was not necessarily acceptable to others. The same could be said for others who have engaged in autoethnography. As noted earlier, Jago (2002) felt that her experiences with clinical depression were exposed for others in academia to judge her. MacKian (2012), who does not profess to believe or otherwise, also points to the response she received when speaking with a colleague about her research into everyday spirituality:

Sara: I'm interviewing people about their experiences with angel healing.

Colleague: Angel healing? What's *that*?

Sara: It's where the healer channels energy from angels.

Colleague: But angels don't exist do they, so how can they heal? That's just ridiculous! [Followed by laughter].

(MacKian, 2012: 188)

Spirituality and belief in psychic phenomena in particular are subject to ridicule in everyday situations and scientific and social scientific circles. I also reflect on how my awareness of being situated in academia impacts on my participation in forum discussion as the following extract demonstrates:

Fig.7.2.5: Self Reflection: 16.Dec.09.(b).

Some of the posts people put up, the ones I feel I can contribute to and the ones that I wish I could but no words seem to come. I suppose this also relates to my status as a researcher – if I was to counsel someone on something, openly on the forums, especially if it is something highly sensitive, then I basically contribute to that person making particular decisions and acting in certain ways. This has massive implications in terms of ethical issues

The reflections above demonstrate how difficult it was to ‘switch off’ my analytical mind whilst reflecting on my readings, but I was also aware – and further reflection on the reflections confirms this – of my own motives for choosing to offer readings. Fully aware that my unconventional approach to studying psychic readings on the internet was likely to meet with opposition or scorn, I wanted to highlight the benefits of readings – their therapeutic function. Further to this, I wanted to show that there are readers who offer their services gratis out of a genuine need to help others. Yet reflecting on my reflections written at the time I was offering readings I can clearly identify my motives to present psychic practitioners in a good light, particularly with regards to presenting them as ethically responsible.

As Stoeltje *et al* (1999: 160) state: “Reflecting one’s own identity and the relation of the self to the other heightens the awareness of the ethnographer and helps to bring into focus the relationship between the researcher and the researched”. Yet this in itself is problematic. I did have a heightened awareness of who I was as a researcher and how this impacted

upon the 'other' and on the research itself. But this was not necessarily a good thing. There were a few times when it was evident that 'ignorance is bliss' and I became even more aware of myself and the 'cultural baggage' I was bringing to the situation (Caplan, 1994 cited by Stoeltje, 1999: 159). Because of my prior experience as a psychic reader, I held opinions and assumptions of what it was I was going to find and observe, despite my intention of entering the field as a researcher with an open mind. Very quickly, it became apparent that I had this wrong. Further to this, my 'researcher self' also came to the field with particular views, perspectives and assumptions about what it was I *was expecting* to see from a sociological perspective. Consequently, the relationship between myself and the 'other' was also in the spotlight, with the added problem that there were few 'others' willing to participate in my research.³⁶

My own ideas about what a reading *should not be* were also apparent, when I reflected on the notion that psychic practitioners tell the future. However, as this next extract demonstrates, my mind was preoccupied with analysing how readers and their clients 'do' readings:

Fig.7.2.6: Self Reflection: 16.Dec.09.(c).

I'm really not convinced someone can predict a persons' future. I certainly do not see myself even pretending to be able to do this. In some sense I suppose my readings can give a sense of options available, or ways of thinking that the sitter may not have thought out properly. This is where I can see the benefit in doing readings in real time (and possibly more so face to face), in that the sitter and the reader co-construct the possibilities the sitter has in front of them. The psychic thus has not given them the answer – has not told them what to do, but the options have been constructed in a conversation.

Again, my sociological knowledge impinges on my reflections. I make reference to how online readings would compare with face-to-face

³⁶ See chapter eight for discussion concerning the problems with recruiting participants.

readings, but here I am drawing on prior reading of Jorgensen (1992) and Wooffitt (2006) and the social construction of psychic readings.

My assumptions about the members of the forums, potential sitters for my readings, are also apparent, and very significant:

Fig.7.2.7: Self Reflection: 16.Dec.09.(d).

what I believe to be the case is that the majority of those on the forums are looking for spirituality-related readings or if they want a reading about something else, there will be a spiritual underpinning – the idea of expansion and growth... I know I am working on a spiritual stereotype – it is hard not to

An acute awareness of my own stereotypical view of the other members of the forum is apparent here, but it was clearly clouding my judgement and impacting on my research field and participants. I was also aware that this would impact ethically: I was still reading for others whilst also being aware of how my own view was changing. In short, it would not usually be the case that a reader would read for their sitter, and then write a lengthy reflection dissecting the experience and the reading process.

It is clear that switching off my sociological world was impossible. Consequently, despite being able to draw on the ‘occult knowledge of reality’ that Jorgensen said was missing from his own work, the sociological ‘voice of reason’ was always at my shoulder trying to convince me I was wrong. I was also aware that my ‘ulterior motive’ for doing the readings on the forums was taking away the *naturalness* of the readings – I was thinking too much. Indeed it could be suggested that I was creating my own demand characteristics. This contributed to my struggle to be convinced that what I was doing was authentic.

Feedback and Motivations

Despite the gnawing scepticism about the nature of psychic reading and the risks I was potentially taking to my PhD research and future career, there were times during those months of reading when I was given

evidence that I was on the right track. It had slowly become apparent that I needed to 'bracket off' any scepticism and my conscience that what I was doing was not as authentic as I wanted it to be (very difficult to do). Later reflections during the data collection period do not fully reflect this, but there is evidence throughout the period that alluded to the spiritual. Further to this, I was also talking about feedback.

Feedback is an essential element of free readings on psychic-spiritual discussion board forums, as discussed in chapter six. My reflections talk at length about feedback; in particular, my uncertainty over whether or not the information I was giving was going to be accepted. It must be noted that I was not looking for evidence of psychic phenomena. As I have outlined earlier, I am open to different theories that give suggestions as to what is really occurring. However, feedback remains an important feature.

The following extract demonstrates my uncertainty, particularly when I say "I hate making assumptions about people, and so in readings like these I tend to give multiple possible meanings of the cards I get". This alludes to my uncertainty but this comes also from my own belief that the person receiving the reading should be the one to interpret the cards. Further to this however, my consistent musings about the nature of psychic readings since Roe and Roxburgh's paper had fuelled a distinct sense of uncertainty, as the following extract shows:

Fig.7.2.8: Self Reflection: 05.Jan.10.(b).

I hate making assumptions about people, and so in readings like these I tend to give multiple possible meanings of the cards and symbols I get...I got the idea that this woman was seeking comfort because of words that had been said that had affected her in a profoundly emotional way. I tried to convey the message that she could heal situations with the right words, and now I can only wait and see if she replies to me to give some feedback. If I get feedback to say I am totally off the mark, then so be it and I take that on the chin (or at least I say now that I

will, but I know it will affect me). On the other hand, if she says that I was totally right, I will be quite pleased, but obviously sympathetic.

I was anticipating feedback because that was the nature of the interaction on the forums: as a reader, I would provide the reading, and the recipient would provide the feedback. The reflection demonstrates a little anxiety as to the nature of the feedback, but in different ways. I was apprehensive about whether or not I was right; I wanted to be right, to show that what I was doing was something worthwhile and not complete nonsense. However, being right meant that the other person was experiencing emotional difficulties that made me uncomfortable for her. This raised particular ethical issues: if I was right, as a complete stranger I was able to 'know' intimate details about another without them telling me or without really knowing how I know.

Mishlove (1997) refers to such experiences as intuition, a term which he defines as "direct perception of truth, fact, etc., independent of any reasoning process" of "knowing without knowing how you know" (p.129). Mishlove argues that whilst psi research has focussed upon verification of anomalous cognition, there exists a large class of extrasensory perceptions that are not, in principle, verifiable. This could be because the extrasensory perception is "directed toward realities that are not presently testable through empirical methods" (for example, the 'otherworld' in Greenwood's study, Greenwood, 2000), or "inextricably intertwined with normal sensory perception" (Mishlove, 1997: 129). Mishlove's definition of intuition can be used to describe what is occurring during the readings conducted during this study. As in Jorgensen's experience with the tarot, Oracle cards are highly illustrated. However, although there is a guidebook to accompany the cards I used for this part of the research, I rarely consulted the meanings written in it. Rather, the symbolism within the cards are read *intuitively*, drawing upon years of experience interpreting objects, colours

and sensations seen in the cards or perceived intuitively as images in the mind or as physical sensations during the reading.

Fig.7.2.9: Self Reflection: 07.Dec.09.(b).

I have completed all the readings i set out to do. A few issues have come – I haven't received feedback off all my sitters. It can be annoying – it makes you think – what was wrong with the reading? Was I completely off the mark? I have had a couple of acknowledgements from some who said thanks, I will think and get back to you – but nothing. It does also give you a sense of 'why bother'. Readings take time and energy and they are offered on the assumption that you will receive feedback – feedback is more than praise – you want to hear the bad stuff too – like 'I couldn't figure out where that fit in, sorry'. I would imagine for some it is about accuracy, but I'm not sure what it is I am after – partly accuracy, but mainly to know that what I have said has helped the other person in some way. You can get feedback where the other person just doesn't appear to have taken on board what it is you have said to them. You wonder if what you have said, the way you have said it is difficult to understand but often you can feel that they just don't want to hear that advice – they want to hear what they want to hear and that is that. I know people in real life who are just the same – but it is not up to me to change them. I will offer advice kindly, but I find it frustrating when the person who has asked you for it doesn't appear to want to hear what you have to say.

But, saying that, when you do get positive feedback, it feels really encouraging, especially when you hit on something that you couldn't possibly know.

The above reflection considers the uncertainty and apprehension that accompanies readings, similar to that in 05.Jan.10. However, it is more than simply waiting for feedback; there is etiquette in the forums, that feedback on readings is expected. An acknowledgement, saying thank you, can suffice although, as noted in the reflection above: "readings take time

and energy and they are offered on the assumption that you will receive feedback”. As noted previously and discussed at length in chapter six, the feedback is a form of instruction, instructing the novice reader on how to ‘do psychic reading’. The meaning-making is done in the feedback so it is important to get the recipients’ perspective: “feedback is more than praise – you want to hear the bad stuff too”.

Summary

To summarise, analysis of self-reflective data highlighted specific issues I had with reconciling my psychic-spiritual and sociological self. Firstly, reading Roe and Roxburgh’s forthcoming chapter on cold reading influenced my ability to read and interpret the cards for the recipients. It was difficult to switch off my analytical mind and it appeared that despite my experience in reading, I questioned what I was doing. The tension between the two perspectives was apparent in my reflections. Further to this, I was anxious that what I had chosen to do – an autoethnographic study of psychic oracle card reading – was not an academically appropriate activity. I was very much aware that my anxiety was also influencing my self-reflections and that the data was going to reflect this rather than provide the information I had hoped.

Conclusion

Online forums offer a different way in which readings might be offered by psychic-spiritual seekers. Whilst readings might be offered in exchange for payment (chapter four) and Facebook might be used as a tool for self-promotion (chapter five), readings in online discussion board forums are offered in exchange for feedback on readers’ performance (chapter six). In an attempt to capture an insight into the intrapsychic perspective of psychic reading culture in online discussion board forums, this chapter has considered a more personal account of reading online: my own. Two key themes emerged out of the analysis: (1) the subjective experience of psychic readings online and (2) reconciling the psychic and sociological self.

What can be known about the former is that psychic readings are often accompanied by some form of ritual to put the social actor in touch with the 'sacred'. This signifies the beginning of the reading and allows a particular state of mind to be achieved by connecting to the sacred through an altered state of consciousness initiated through meditation.

Furthermore, this state of mind is facilitated by a sacred space in which readings take place. Whilst reading I experienced embodied sensations and saw images that I interpreted for the individuals I read for. However my sociological mind, also influenced from reading Roe and Roxburgh's forthcoming book chapter on cold reading, was hard to 'switch off' and it becomes clear in my reflections that I felt this had considerable impact on what I was trying to achieve. Consequently, whilst the study did manage to obtain an intrapsychic perspective on psychic readings that Jorgensen felt was missing from his study, inadvertently it also captured an insight into how the sociological imagination does not easily accommodate this.

The last four chapters have considered online psychic reading culture, examining the ways in which psychic practitioners use websites to communicate a particular image of an authentic, credible psychic reader and how Facebook status message updates serve as platforms on which psychic practitioners can negotiate and manage their identity through interaction with others. This research has also studied psychic reading culture in online discussion board forums, establishing that free readings which are offered in exchange for feedback are instead ways of inviting instruction from the recipients of the readings who then instruct the learner readers, through the feedback they give, how to do psychic reading. Lastly, I also offered free readings in an online discussion board forum in order to obtain an insight into the experience from the perspective of an experienced oracle card reader.

The following, final, chapter to this thesis discusses the key findings outlined in the last four chapters in relation to the main research questions, and examines a particularly important question that positions

the psychic-spiritual milieu as a community of practice. A methodological discussion will then addresses the key strengths and limitations of the autoethnographic approach to this research, leading into the final conclusions of this thesis.

Conclusion

This research took an autoethnographic approach to the sociological study of how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use the internet to pursue their interests in, and practice of, psychic readings. Having had a keen interest in the practices and beliefs of this community for most of my life and having been a member of several online communities relating to psychic spirituality, studying the psychic-spiritual milieu from the perspective of an insider was a fascinating yet challenging project. Given my prior involvement, a non-traditional approach using autoethnographic techniques was considered to be the most appropriate with which to study this field. This provided the opportunity for a more intimate focus on phenomena that would otherwise be overlooked using traditional methods. Discussion in the opening chapters to this thesis highlighted academic research into alternative spiritualities and the impact of the internet on religion. However, it was also stated that there had been little sociological analysis of the nature and experience of online psychic services, or indeed the spiritual orientations of these kinds of practices. In order to address this gap, the focus of the present research was on the following key questions:

- What can be known about the ways in which psychic practitioners use their websites to present themselves in favourable ways? What can sociological analysis reveal about how the wider psychic-spiritual milieu is represented online?
- Facebook is the most popular social networking site on the internet, what can be understood sociologically about how psychic practitioners use it?
- How do psychic readers use virtual community discussion board forums for reading? Furthermore, what can be understood by adopting a discursive analytical approach to the analysis of the readings that are conducted in these communities?

- Lastly, what can be understood about the subjective experience of psychic reading online from the intrapsychic perspective of someone who for whom, an occult knowledge of reality is personally meaningful?

This final chapter will begin by summarising the main findings in relation to these questions and then, more specifically, will discuss a particularly important question emerging from the findings that posits the psychic-spiritual milieu as a community of practice. This is followed by a methodological discussion addressing the strengths and limitations of using autoethnography as a methodology with which to study the psychic-spiritual milieu. Whilst autoethnography offers a distinctly innovative and appropriate approach to the study of a field familiar to the researcher, this familiarity is subject to particular assumptions and criticisms which will also be explored.

In chapter four, an autoethnographic informed analysis was used to examine nine psychic practitioner websites to consider how individuals engaged in psychic reading practices present themselves and the wider psychic-spiritual milieu online. It was found that psychic practitioners use text and images strategically to persuade website visitors of their authenticity and credibility. The autoethnographic methodology also provided the opportunity to gain an in-depth perspective of psychic practitioner discourse on Facebook, as discussed in chapter five. It was found that psychic practitioner identity is established and maintained through the interaction on psychic practitioner status message updates and the ensuing comments from their Facebook friends.

My prior experience and knowledge of the shared meanings of the psychic-spiritual milieu also meant that an autoethnographic approach was the most appropriate way for me to examine psychic readings on virtual community discussion board forums for the study documented in chapter six. Analysis demonstrated how psychic readings are collaboratively produced, with authority and expertise handed to the recipient of the

reading, the instructor, to give feedback to the reader, the learner. Finally, chapter seven was an autoethnographic study of online psychic readings from my perspective as member of the psychic-spiritual milieu and social researcher. The study aimed to obtain an intrapsychic perspective of the occult knowledge of reality that Jorgensen (1992) identified as missing from his study of the 1970s esoteric milieu. My experience and knowledge of the psychic-spiritual milieu were drawn on to analyse the data, which consisted of personal reflections written after performing readings for others on a psychic-spiritual discussion board forum. The study reported some of the more subjective experiences of psychic reading: that a meditative ritual connected the actor with the 'sacred' and that a sacred space facilitates achieving a particular state of mind conducive to psychic reading. However it also revealed some distinct challenges experienced in reconciling the psychic-spiritual self and the sociological self.

Each of these studies demonstrates how an autoethnographic approach can be used to obtain an in-depth understanding of how psychic practitioners draw on the shared meanings of the psychic-spiritual milieu to create their reality. Furthermore, the autoethnographic approach offers a more intimate exploration of a culture that traditional research methods are likely to overlook. This exploration also raises questions about the psychic-spiritual milieu as a whole, and about how the individual member of the milieu is situated within, and outside, it. Such questions also highlight significant complexity in the relationship between individual members and the milieux to which they belong. The following section explores this further.

The Psychic-Spiritual Milieu as a Community of Practice

Campbell (2002 [1972]) defined the cultic milieu as:

the sum of unorthodox and deviant belief systems together with their practices, institutions and personnel and constitutes a unity by virtue of a common consciousness of deviant status, a

receptive and synchronistic orientation and an interpenetrative communication structure... united and identified by the existence of an ideology of seekership and by seekership institutions (Campbell, 2002 [1972]: 23)

This definition highlights a 'common consciousness' and an 'ideology of seekership' that Campbell saw as existing amongst members of the milieu; a sense of unity towards a common goal. Campbell's theory of a cultic milieu provides an ideal framework within which the study of psychic spirituality online might be situated. Indeed, Jorgensen's study of the esoteric milieu in the 1970s focussed on spiritual seekers and the rising popularity of New Age related interests during that era (Jorgensen, 1992). He defined the esoteric milieu as:

A very loose connection and network of seekers, clients, practitioners, groups, businesses, confederations of practitioners and groups, and a few central activities, such as psychic fairs, all of which are dispersed geographically throughout 'the Valley'. It exists in the imagination (ideation) of its members, their symbolizations and talk, and their activities. Despite their diversity, it is sustained by their sense of community (mutual belonging), differences with the exoteric world, similar values, ethical and normative principles and worldviews, as well as their collective symbolization, interactions, relationships, and other involvements (Jorgensen, 1992: 61).

Like Campbell (2002 [1972]), Jorgensen identifies that despite the diverse range of beliefs and practices within the milieu, there exists a sense of mutual belonging and shared ideology. Jorgensen (1992) considers the esoteric milieu which can be said to sit within the wider cultic milieu that is characterised by an even wider variety of New Age interests. In taking this example, for the purpose of this thesis, the term 'psychic-spiritual milieu' was used to relate more specifically to the spiritual orientation of psychic reading practices.

The psychic-spiritual milieu may also be considered to be a 'community' in the same way as Jorgensen's esoteric milieu and Campbell's cultic milieu. Members of a community share a 'common consciousness', as outlined by Campbell (2002 [1972]), and within that community, members engage in particular interests and practices. Consequently, it could be argued that the milieu (psychic-spiritual, esoteric, cultic or otherwise) is indeed a *community of practice* (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998a). Communities of practice are defined by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 4) as "groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis". This also applies to online interaction (Wenger, 1998a), and people are increasingly using the internet, including online community discussion board forums and social networking sites, to pursue their interests and meet others of like mind. These online spaces become places in which people participate in a joint enterprise based on mutual engagement towards common goals, by drawing on a shared repertoire of resources (Wenger, 1998b; see also Wellman and Gulia, 1999).

As this thesis has highlighted, members of the psychic-spiritual milieu engage in a variety of practices online. Such practices include promoting the psychic-spiritual self via websites, social networking on sites such as Facebook, and reading in virtual community discussion board forums. How each of these activities constitutes or contributes to the psychic-spiritual milieu as a community of practice may now be discussed.

Websites and Communities of Practice

As an activity members of the psychic-spiritual milieu engage in, websites can be examined as potential communities of practice. As noted in the introductory chapter to this thesis, a Google search for

'psychic readings' can yield around 8.4 million results. The majority of these will relate to premium-rate psychic telephone lines, whilst some will link to websites promoting well-known psychic practitioners such as Sally Morgan or Colin Fry. However, my prior knowledge of psychic-spiritual culture informed the decision to use more specific search terms such as 'spiritual consultant' or 'tarot card reader' which found the personal websites used as data for the study in chapter four. These are websites presenting the interests and practices of individual psychic practitioners who use their websites to promote their practices.

Websites need to communicate specific messages that present them as credible (Fogg *et al*, 2001; Vazire and Gosling, 2004). Visitors to the websites need to know they can trust what is on offer for the price they will be asked to pay. Consequently, they also need to know they will be able to engage in an authentic spiritual experience. The website author invites visitors to do this by drawing on the shared understandings of the wider community of practice – the psychic-spiritual milieu – to convey their authenticity. They identify with culturally held notions (or a shared repertoire, see Wenger, 1998b) about what it means to be psychic or a professional psychic practitioner by, for example, referring to their skills as a 'gift' bestowed on them by the spirit world. They may also claim psychic lineage such as a gypsy bloodline or claim that they have inherited the gift from a long line of psychic relatives. Thus, members present what they know about being an appropriate member of the psychic-spiritual community of practice by presenting their skills and how they acquired them in order to demonstrate authenticity.

As a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu I share an in-depth understanding of the cultural notions and shared repertoire of resources (language and images) that psychic practitioners may draw on to present a specific identity. Consequently, a more traditional

methodology, such as that used by Jorgensen (1992), is likely to have overlooked some of the more significant aspects found under the surface of what was visually available. Yet, the extent to which websites can be considered a community of practice can be questioned. It is perhaps more appropriate to position websites as *an activity of self-promotion* engaged in by members of a community of practice *should they choose to do so*. Indeed, it could be argued that websites stand alone as representations of an electronic self (Miller and Arnold, 2003): each has wider meaning, situated as one of potentially millions of similar websites within the wider psychic-spiritual, and indeed the cultic, milieu. It is not a requirement of the psychic-spiritual community of practice that psychic practitioners have a personal website. However, it might be suggested that those who wish to pursue a career as a professional psychic practitioner, tarot card reader or clairvoyant, ought to make the most of such an opportunity for self-promotion. Hence, a personal website that engages visitors, and therefore potential clientele, in an authentic and credible spiritual experience appears to be a useful way to do this.

Summary

Although websites are not essential to the psychic practitioner experience, studying them is important for sociological understanding of what psychic practitioners do online. However, each represents an individual psychic practitioner promoting their psychic services and spiritual beliefs and interests. It is through examining these visual representations, particularly through an autoethnographic lens, that we can understand sociologically how psychic practitioners *see themselves* as appropriate members of the community of practice – the psychic-spiritual milieu. Furthermore, this reveals how the online might constitute a visual representation of the persistence of the sacred, a contentious topic of interest for

sociologists examining the secularisation thesis (see for instance Hammond, 1985; Bruce, 1995; Davie, 1994; 2000; Partridge, 2005).

Facebook and Communities of Practice

Chapter five considered how psychic practitioners use social networking site Facebook. In this section I consider to what extent Facebook may be considered a community of practice in its own right or, similar to websites, whether or not it constitutes just another activity in which members of the psychic-spiritual community of practice might choose to engage in. Essentially a social space, Facebook has gained worldwide popularity since its inception in 2007 and, for many users, it has become a part of the everyday. For many members of the psychic-spiritual milieu, the psychic and spiritual is also part of their everyday reality (see MacKian, 2012). Facebook therefore offers an opportunity for this everyday reality to be presented, providing opportunity for this social phenomena to be recorded and researched.

The two psychic practitioners I observed on Facebook took the opportunity to use their status message updates to share readings with their Facebook friends (a potential clientele). Both were experienced psychic practitioners who use their status message updates very regularly to also talk about what they do on a daily basis. Similar to how they use websites, by presenting the activities they are engaged in, psychic practitioners are using Facebook to present what they believe to be appropriate activities engaged in by members of the psychic-spiritual milieu. In short, they are behaving in what they consider to be the most appropriate way to behave as a member of this community of practice.

As a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu and a regular user of Facebook, it was appropriate to approach this study from an autoethnographic perspective in order to gain an in-depth

understanding. My Newsfeed contained status message updates and other posts from friends and family members as well as those by the psychic practitioners I had on my friends list. My membership of the psychic-spiritual milieu allowed me to be more acutely aware of the more prominent, recordable, aspects of psychic practitioner activity on Facebook which are more likely to be overlooked using traditional methodology.

Similar to websites, Facebook is also a key promotional tool. Users (individuals or companies) can present a particular identity that encourages potential clients to use their services or buy goods. Yet, also similar to websites, it is not a requirement to present the psychic-spiritual self on Facebook in order to be considered an appropriate member of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Furthermore, Facebook is more complex than simply a choice between choosing to present the psychic-spiritual self or not. The social networking site offers users the choice to create multiple profiles, groups or pages, so they can present a different identity according to what feature or profile they are using.

Although Facebook is a popular tool for self promotion, to use it in this way is a matter of choice. Essentially, similar to authoring a website, having a Facebook profile is an activity *within* the community of practice that members may *choose* to engage in. The study of how members of the psychic-spiritual milieu use Facebook reveals how, like websites, social networking can be used to present the self whilst also representing the wider milieu.

Meanwhile, analysis of the interaction taking place in response to the psychic practitioners initiating readings on their status message updates revealed how language was used to achieve specific actions; that is, to demonstrate being appropriate members of the psychic-spiritual community. For example, Medium JB presented her apparently privileged position as recipient of paranormal cognition.

Reponses were offered from lay audience members as well as fellow mediums and psychics. Turns were designed to ward off any challenge to Medium JB's authoritative status within the interaction allowing her to retain epistemic prowess. Similar occurred in response to GHClairvoyant's posts.

The interaction on Medium JB's and GHClairvoyant's status message updates became a delicate interplay of perceived rights, expectations and performance. Both practitioners negotiated and maintained epistemic prowess throughout the interactions on their posts, managing their identities in the face of perceived challenges. However, this raises a question about the notion of a friendly and supportive milieu. Consequently, Campbell's theory that members of the milieu are united by "a common consciousness...a receptive and synchronistic orientation" (Campbell, 2002 [1972]: 23) does not appear to fully apply here. Yet, this is complex; for instance, Medium P responds to Medium JB's post in Fig.5.2 but rather than accept this response as supportive, Medium JB perceives it as a challenge to her epistemic authority. Similarly, GHClairvoyant either ignores the extra cards VKPsychic-Medium offers (Fig.5.3) or manages the perceived threat by providing extra information about the cards VKPsychic-Medium offers and thereby maintaining epistemic prowess (Fig.5.4). Consequently, the analysis reveals an underlying tension that is contrary to the idea that the psychic-spiritual and wider cultic milieu is supportive.

Summary

Nonetheless, whilst the idea of the psychic-spiritual milieu as a supportive and synchronistic community is challenged, again it can be concluded that Facebook is not a community of practice in its own right. Instead, Facebook is an activity in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu engage in should they choose to do so. Therefore, it is not a requirement to use Facebook to promote

oneself as an appropriate member of the psychic-spiritual community of practice.

Virtual Communities and Communities of Practice

As a social networking site, Facebook is a space in which users can pursue a variety of different interests, each of which constitutes an activity in which members of a particular community of practice might engage in. A more narrowly-focussed space is that of a virtual community discussion board forum (Wellman and Gulia, 1999). As discussed in chapter six, virtual community discussion board forums based on psychic-spiritual interests may be considered as sites of situated learning. Consequently, they may also be considered as communities of practice in which members behave in ways they consider as being appropriate psychic-spiritual seekers.

As a member (and active reader) of several online communities relating to psychic-spiritual and wider cultic milieu interests over a period of thirteen years, I have a distinct advantage in understanding how psychic readings are organised in these online social spaces. Autoethnography therefore provides the most appropriate methodology with which to examine this social phenomenon. Consequently, traditional methods would not have revealed the same level of understanding about virtual community discussion board forums based on psychic readings.

As previously discussed, Wenger *et al* (2002: 4) define communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis”. As examined in chapter four, members of online discussion board communities do share concerns, problems and passions about psychic and spiritual topics. They do indeed deepen their knowledge and expertise by engaging with others on an ongoing basis in these

online communities (see Wellman and Gulia, 1999). However, the extent to which such communities may, more broadly, be considered as communities of practice or indeed, as supportive and synchronistic communities as argued by Campbell (2002 [1972]), may be considered further.

As noted previously, websites and online social networking are activities psychic-spiritual seekers and psychic practitioners might engage in as appropriate members of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Similarly, they might *choose* to engage in spiritual discussion on virtual community discussion board forums. The two psychic practitioners observed on Facebook did not reveal any involvement in online forums, although this is not to conclude they do not. Indeed, as noted in the introductory chapter to this thesis, discussion board forums were used more regularly before social networking sites became popular (see for instance boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Summary

Discussion board forums remain a popular way in which members of the psychic-spiritual milieu may practice psychic readings. Consequently, as sites for situated learning (see Lave and Wenger, 1991) each forum might be considered a community of practice in its own right. Each forum has a set of guidelines but there is also an underlying understanding amongst members that they are expected to act in particular ways (a shared concern or joint enterprise; see Wenger, 1998b; Wenger *et al*, 2002). For example, as discussed in chapter six, those who receive a reading are expected to give feedback so that the psychic reader is able to learn. However, this is not always the case. In chapter seven I write about receiving feedback from only some of those I had read for and how frustrating it can be not to receive feedback. This was not a unique experience – many posts in response to queries on all manner of discussion board forums go unanswered – for example, answers to questions about

health or solutions to problems with computers. Readings in psychic-spiritual forums are very similar. Indeed, the recipient has ultimately received what they were seeking, yet the novice psychic has not. This presents a distinct challenge to the notion that such forums are supportive. It also challenges the notion that all members share a concern towards a common goal (ibid.).

This section has gone some way to explore how the different activities members engage in online might constitute them behaving as appropriate members of the psychic-spiritual community of practice. It has also considered how the psychic-spiritual community could be considered a supportive and synchronistic milieu. The following section discusses how the psychic-spiritual milieu, as a whole, could be considered as a community of practice.

Is The Psychic-Spiritual Milieu a Community of Practice?

Whilst websites, social networking and discussion board forums can be said to differ with regards the extent to which they might individually be considered a community of practice, it is more appropriate to conclude they constitute activities *within* a community of practice. This particular community of practice, as has been the focus of this thesis, is centred on the beliefs, practices and members of the psychic-spiritual milieu. How psychic practitioners become, or learn to become, appropriate members of the milieu through carrying out these activities has been discussed. However, it is useful to consider the psychic-spiritual community as a whole together with individual seeker's complex membership of it.

From my vantage point as a member of the online psychic-spiritual milieu for the last thirteen years, I can recognise the complexity of the idea of a milieu as a community of practice. The cultic milieu could be considered a community of practice given the common consciousness and ideology of seekership denoting that members

share a repertoire of resources and are mutually engaged in a joint enterprise (Campbell, 2002 [1972]; Wenger, 1998b). However, the cultic milieu has within it a vast range of different interests and activities that are not shared by all. For the purpose of this thesis, it therefore appears more appropriate to consider the smaller milieux within it. For example, within Jorgensen's (1992) esoteric milieu, members were learning how to become appropriate tarot card readers. Within the psychic-spiritual milieu, members learn how to become appropriate psychic practitioners. Yet the two are not mutually exclusive. The complexity of this will now be explored.

Taking myself as an example, I am a member of the wider cultic milieu because of my broad interests. I have an interest in the activities, beliefs and practices of a wide range of New Age topics and consider myself to be a spiritual seeker. However, my interests change over time and I might be a member of different groups and milieux depending on what my current interests are. As a result, my membership of the various milieux is complex. I have had an interest in psychic and spiritual topics since I was young, and through my teens I dabbled in tarot and oracle card reading, palmistry and astrology. When I met my husband, for a very short while I had an interest in paranormal investigations, alongside an interest in paganism and witchcraft. However, my interest in holistic therapies and alternative spiritual practices grew throughout my involvement with our group Wirral Psychic Workshop. I was attuned to Reiki and learned what I could about different holistic therapies. I also attended my friend's spiritual development classes. Today, I no longer read online but I am practicing Reiki and learning yoga and will soon be starting an astrology course. Thus, whilst I might be a member of the wider cultic-milieu more generally, I have been a member of several smaller milieux within it at different times of my life and for different lengths of time. I might also choose to dip in and out of these when I choose.

Although complex, this multi-membership of different milieux may be illustrated more simply using an example of a psychic medium. A medium may consider herself to be Spiritualist, which would mean they were also a member of the Spiritualist milieu. A medium may also be interested in paranormal investigations, and therefore be a member of a paranormal investigations milieu. However, not all members of the paranormal investigations milieu would be mediums; some might read the tarot or consider themselves to be New Age seekers, or simply be interested in parapsychology . The combinations of membership of milieux becomes increasingly complex when the individual member is considered in isolation. The following diagram illustrates this complexity and the overlap between interests:



Fig.8.1: A Medium's Membership of Interrelated Milieux

The complexity of these interests is that they do not necessarily fit in to one specific milieu, and they overlap into others. Furthermore, an individual may consider herself to be a member of only one of these, and may or may not have interest in other cultic milieu activities. For example, my yoga class includes individuals who would not

necessarily consider themselves to be spiritual, and certainly not psychic practitioners. Indeed, they might only be attending classes for health reasons.

Whilst an individual member's relationship to the milieu or various milieux is complex, the question remains as to what extent the psychic-spiritual milieu might be considered a community of practice. Consequently, it is more sensible to conclude that there are many different layers to the wider cultic milieu, and many overlaps between a myriad of interests, beliefs and activities. Therefore unpicking these leads to ever-complex conclusions. The idea of milieux or communities of practice applies to all aspects of social life, including their online equivalent. The online world is an extension to offline life and, as offline, people move in and out of different online communities, interests and activities when they choose to do so. People may also be a member of multiple (online and offline) communities at any one time.

Summary

To summarise, there is a complex relationship between individuals and the cultic milieu. The psychic-spiritual milieu could be considered a community of practice within which individuals engage in a combination of different interests and activities that they consider to be appropriate ways of being a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu. For many members, this constitutes becoming a psychic practitioner, yet being a psychic practitioner does not require using the internet, adding further complexity to this discussion.

Nonetheless, whether individuals choose to practice psychic readings offline or online, the internet makes this visible and researchable. For the present research, my membership of the psychic-spiritual milieu informed the decision to take an autoethnographic approach. The strengths and limitations of this research methodology are considered in the following section.

Autoethnography as Research Methodology

Given my lifelong interest in the psychic and spiritual, autoethnography was considered to be the most appropriate methodology with which to study how psychic-spiritual seekers use the internet. Autoethnography is an innovative method that offers the tools and techniques to collect and analyse data whilst taking the researcher's own experiences fully into account (see for example Anderson, 2006; Vryan, 2006; Chang, 2008). This allows for an in-depth examination that is more likely to reveal aspects of the phenomenon that would otherwise remain hidden using traditional methodologies. This is a considerable strength of the methodology as it allows for a particularly unique perspective of a phenomenon to be sociologically understood. Indeed, when Jorgensen (1992) studied the esoteric milieu during the 1970s he argued that his "inability fully to internalize an occult knowledge of reality as personally meaningful limited direct access to the subjective experience of the most intimate aspects of occultists' experiences" (Jorgensen, 1992: 229). My own interest in the psychic-spiritual and experience in oracle card reading meant that I already shared an alternative view of reality with other members of the psychic-spiritual milieu. Consequently, there would have been considerable challenges approaching this research using traditional methods. However, autoethnography is not completely immune to challenges of its own. This section considers some of the relative strengths and limitations of using an autoethnographic approach to study the psychic-spiritual milieu online.

Strengths

Autoethnography provides the researchers with an ideal methodology with which to study a field they are already familiar with. Anderson (2006) highlights 'insider meanings' and how they afford the researcher a specific vantage point to collect certain kinds

of data that are not likely to be captured in non-autoethnographic studies (see also Davies, 1999). Having been a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu for many years, my occult knowledge of reality (Jorgensen, 1992) became very useful to bring an in-depth understanding to the sociological investigation of psychic practitioners online.

My prior involvement and experience with the psychic-spiritual milieu gave me the knowledge and understanding of the 'insider meanings' of text and images used by psychic practitioners online. Similarly, self-observation in the form of self-reflections also revealed the 'camouflaged' and 'backstage' behaviours of myself as member of the milieu as well as that of others (Rodriguez and Ryave, 2002). In discussing the merits of self observation when examining a familiar culture, Anderson (2006) also noted how the self-observational technique can lead to a self-understanding. Some of this is documented in chapter seven, particularly in relation to being aware that my sociological mind was intruding on my reflections on my psychic-spiritual experience. This is a particular strength of the method because it allows the researcher to be acutely aware of how they might impact on the study. Given my knowledge and experience of the milieu this afforded me the chance to take a step back from the phenomena I was very familiar with. Furthermore, autoethnography places the experience of the researcher as central to the investigation. This is essential to researching such a familiar area, but it is not without its challenges, as will now be discussed.

Challenges

Although there are considerable strengths and advantages to choosing an autoethnographic approach for studying online psychics, it is also important to consider the challenges encountered. Given my prior participation as an insider in this research field, there were two overlapping challenges. Firstly, my position as fellow psychic-spiritual

seeker led me to assume that it would be easy to find willing participants to take part in my research. Secondly, whilst the study significantly benefited from my knowledge of insider meanings, there was a risk of over-familiarity and self-absorption. These two challenges are now explored.

Recruiting participants online is fraught with difficulties in general (Mann and Stewart, 2000). Whilst the internet provides an excellent space in which to post recruitment adverts for participants, the anonymous nature of the internet affords users of virtual communities and similar websites the options to ignore such requests. In the present study, response rates for possible interviewees were extremely low whilst a request for participants in one forum was removed, together with a warning from forum administrators that any further attempt to recruit for the study would result in an immediate ban.

Researcher inexperience also impacts on the successful recruitment of participants (*ibid.*). Because I had prior experience of recruiting and successfully interviewing online, assumptions were made that participants would be willing to help with my research. The lack of response was coupled with my reluctance to pursue this further because I recognised that this particular community of individuals were not welcoming of outside intrusion. Indeed, in one case, forum administrators were openly hostile to my request. I wanted to remain sympathetic to this reluctance, which in turn led to the decision of covert observation as the best method with which to gather data.

However, the unfriendly welcome to the request for research participants contributes to the discussion on whether or not the psychic-spiritual milieu is indeed a supportive and synchronistic community. As participant in, and researcher of, the online psychic-spiritual milieu, I was open and honest about my intentions for the research (see Forster et al, 2006). I introduced myself as a fellow

spiritual seeker, offered information about my background and gave what I considered to be a clear rationale for my decision to research this field. My assumption was that I would be welcome to talk to willing participants in the various forums in which I posted but willing participants were not to be found.

As stated earlier, my prior involvement with the psychic-spiritual milieu allowed me access to the insider meanings which are shared by its members. However, this leads to another distinct challenge of using autoethnography as a methodology. Given the problems encountered with recruiting participants and the focus therefore on my experience and knowledge of the field, the autoethnographic approach could be criticised for being overly self-indulgent and narcissistic (Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Sparkes, 2002). However, Anderson (2006) argues that *analytic* autoethnography avoids this because:

the researcher is (1) a full member of the research group or setting; (2) visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts; and (3) committed to an analytical research agenda focussed on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006: 375).

In response to Anderson (2006), as a full member of the research setting, my insider perspective allowed me to identify particular aspects of the online psychic-spiritual milieu that would otherwise have been overlooked by a researcher who was not familiar with the field. Likewise, I am explicit in my positioning as member of the psychic-spiritual milieu and how this impacts on my research. Furthermore, my commitment to an analytical research agenda informed the decision to use a broadly discursive analysis of the data collected for chapters four, five and six. A social constructionist analysis afforded the research a rigorous analysis which was informed by my knowledge of insider meanings. This resulted an in-

depth understanding of psychic-spiritual culture and how psychic practitioners use the internet.

Anderson also refers to Behar (1994) who argued: “The exposure of the self who is also the spectator has to take us somewhere we couldn’t otherwise go. It has to be essential to the argument” (Anderson, 2006: 385). Indeed, my insider knowledge of the research field, together with the self-reflection data, were essential to sociological understanding of the research phenomenon. However, insider knowledge might be criticised as self-absorption (see Sparkes, 2002), which suggests the findings of autoethnographic informed analysis cannot be generalised. However, Vryan (2006) argues that self-produced data can still be rigorously and effectively analysed, so long as the research does not seek to provide a generalisation of a particular population. Indeed, the aim of this research was to *explore* a previously overlooked social phenomenon – psychic readers on the internet – so it was never the intention to claim generalisability. What this research does instead is provide an in-depth, under-the-surface *snapshot* of a culture which, until now, had been overlooked in favour of more mainstream beliefs and practices.

Conclusion

This thesis has been an autoethnographic approach to the study of psychic practitioners on the internet. As a member of the psychic-spiritual milieu for many years, autoethnography was the most appropriate methodology with which to approach a familiar research field. As has been discussed, this innovative approach afforded a particularly in-depth insight into the nuances of psychic reading culture online from the perspective of an insider. In particular, it contributed the occult-knowledge of reality Jorgensen (1992) argued was absent from his study of tarot card practitioners and the 1970s esoteric milieu. What this results in is a markedly unique contribution to contemporary research of alternative spiritualities. As a result of this distinctly unique insight into the psychic-

spiritual online social world, it was discovered that members of the psychic-spiritual milieu have taken full advantage of the internet to pursue their interests.

On their websites, psychic practitioners use persuasive text and imagery to communicate the message that they are credible and trustworthy psychic readers. Also, that they are members of an exclusive cultural group, one in which members have to have a particular ability in order to participate. On Facebook, psychic practitioners' seemingly mundane interaction is instead revealed as a site in which identity is negotiated through the management of epistemic authority and expertise. Meanwhile, discourse analysis of readings that take place on discussion board forums based around psychic-spiritual interests revealed that reading and feedback exchange has a pedagogic function. Roles are established early on in the exchange: the learner psychic invites potential recipients to engage in a free psychic reading, placing the recipient in the role of instructor and the reader in the role of learner psychic. As a result, the site in which this takes place, the psychic-spiritual discussion board forum, becomes a community of practice; a site of situated learning in which the learner psychic learns to become an appropriate member of the psychic-spiritual milieu.

As a reader on a psychic-spiritual discussion board forum, I discovered that the subjective experience of psychic reading involved a meditative ritual to connect to the 'sacred', in order to achieve a particular state of mind conducive to psychic reading. Furthermore, this state of mind is facilitated by a sacred space in which readings take place. However, although the study succeeded in the aim to obtain an intrapsychic perspective on psychic readings, inadvertently it also captured an insight into how the sociological imagination does not easily accommodate this.

The idea of psychic-spiritual forums as communities of practice was extended to the psychic-spiritual milieu as a whole. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the activities in which psychic practitioners engage in on the internet are activities which they might choose to engage in as part of

being, or becoming, appropriate members of the psychic-spiritual community of practice. The complex nature of this engagement was also considered, noting that individuals might be members of several milieux at any one time. Indeed, membership is likely to change over time. Furthermore, membership of the psychic-spiritual milieu does not necessarily warrant engagement on the internet.

Researching the psychic-spiritual milieu on the internet has been an interesting journey. The research process has been fraught with many questions, much side-stepping and accommodating for unanticipated issues and problems encountered along the way. However, what has been achieved by this thesis is an insight into a culture that has previously been considered by mainstream society as consisting of unbelievable beliefs, questionable practices and disillusioned individuals. The internet has brought their practices into the public eye, and therefore made them an available and fascinating research field.

In taking an autoethnographic approach to this research, I have been able to highlight the spiritually-oriented nature of psychic practices as well as the complex nature of membership and participation in the psychic-spiritual, and wider cultic, milieux. As a result, this thesis offers a unique insight into how psychic practitioners use the various applications of the internet. Whether or not psychic ability exists, groups of individuals believing themselves to have these abilities use the internet in a variety of ways to make sense of their psychic-spiritual world, through the performance and negotiation of their psychic seeker selves in online social spaces.

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