

## INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP DIALECTICS IN THE STUDY OF MEDIUMSHIP: A PSYCHOSOCIAL PERSPECTIVE

EVERTON DE OLIVEIRA MARALDI & WELLINGTON ZANGARI

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PSYCHICAL RESEARCH and Parapsychology have always been devoted to the study of supposedly unusual and sometimes amazing human capacities. Since the works of Myers (1843-1901), James (1842-1910), Richet (1850-1935) and many others, until the most recent advances in the experimental research of psi, we investigate controversial experiences that could apparently reveal a yet obscure facet of reality and human potential. Despite the resistance and doubt that our field has been obliged to challenge, since its very foundation, we have moved on and have learned how to improve our methods and how to obtain partial scientific and academic approval. Nevertheless, a more critical evaluation of our history also indicates important contradictions to be acknowledged. We cannot deny that our main object of investigation is the human being. The experiences that we study and that are so essential for us and for all that are interested in the advancement of our field would not have any value, or even would not exist, without those who reported and experienced them. However, throughout history we have sometimes behaved as if those people were not as relevant as their own capacities or the alleged phenomena that they report. In fact, we have acted as if it would be possible to separate an experience from its complex individual and social context. This attitude has been proved to be a very limited perspective by developments in psychology and social sciences since the last century.

Mediumship may be the best example to illustrate this problem, for a variety of historical reasons. The psychiatric movement at the beginning of twentieth century considered mediums to be very similar, in principle, to hysterics and other mental patients (Le Maléfan, 1999). Skeptics have long associated mediumship with charlatanism, trickery and psychological disturbances, frequently excluding other possibilities. The first psychical researchers were undoubtedly much more occupied with the mental and physical phenomenology of mediumship than with mediums' life history or psychological and

social profile (Cole, 2001; Maraldi, Machado & Zangari, 2010). Thus their complexity as human beings and social actors was often disregarded. Even if it is true that some of the great mediums of our field were involved in fraudulent phenomena, or showed pathological behaviour, this is certainly not the whole story. The famous Eusapia Palladino (1854-1918) used to employ tricks during séances, whenever possible, to simulate paranormal agency. Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) also found in her some of the classical symptoms of hysteria (Lombroso, 1910). But, before receiving international recognition as a medium, Eusapia was a person like many others: a poor woman, fascinated with the glory of her days of mediumship, and marked since childhood by a series of traumas.

Many were the researchers who failed to recognize and investigate more seriously this human aspect behind the physical phenomena of mediumship. For some, the medium is not much more than a mere producer of phenomena, and his or her principal function is to offer the presumed evidence of life after death or other extraordinary capacities, losing importance as soon as his or her powers fade. It is known that practically no information about Leonora Piper's personal life was registered by the founders of the Society for Psychical Research. The official reports did not mention either her date of birth or the date of her death (Cole, 2001). Her social circumstances, religious beliefs, personality, economical condition, childhood, familiar and conjugal life were only superficially considered in psychological terms. Some would argue that this was due to the still incipient and pioneering condition of the psychology available at that time, as well as to certain characteristics of the social context, greatly influenced by Victorian morality and discretion. However, in contradiction to these hypotheses, the unilateral tendency to disregard the human facet of mediums has not been fully eliminated today. Despite interest in the correlations between psi performance and personality variables, the intimate life of mediums and other participants in parapsychological studies remains virtually

ignored. It is not necessary to say that this is something that we cannot evaluate solely using questionnaires and scales; it is a knowledge that requires careful observation and deep consideration of the life of a person. When we ignore the emotional, sexual and social life of mediums, focusing only on the phenomena that they convey, we tend to reduce these individuals to mere 'vehicles', running the risk of an excessive idealization or, conversely, of a destructive devaluation. Besides, we lose the opportunity to understand better how their behaviour and their subjective experiences can influence, or even determine, their mediumistic manifestations.

A relevant contribution to the subject of mediumship is what we call "the psychosocial perspective" (Maraldi, Machado & Zangari, 2010). From this point of view, mediumship, as other forms of dissociation, is embedded in a particular socio-historical context and depends on a dialectical relationship between individual and group. This does not necessarily mean that mediumistic experiences are not paranormal in any way, since this option is not entirely ruled out for some cases. It simply means that mediumship cannot be properly understood without a serious look at the cultural context of mediums. One could argue that such a perspective already exists and has been used by anthropologists and sociologists with shamans and other groups. However, the sociological perspective does not always consider the individual dimension in its own terms, and usually projects society onto the individual. The social psychologist is more able to think in a dialectical manner, because his primary object of study remains the individual, although the individual is now considered within a broader context of analysis. For the social psychologist, the knowledge that we have about society enriches the understanding of the individual. It is very important to note that we are not just talking about a more respectful manner of treating participants, although such an ethical position is implied in our discourse. In fact, we are talking about considering mediums as they appear in their daily life, that is, as people with mundane preoccupations and activities. We need to look at mediumship as only one of a variety of roles played by the individual.

At this point, some of you may ask "what is the practical and theoretical importance of such a perspective for the specific problems we have encountered in the study of mediumship?" In

the first place, we think that the emphasis on the paranormal claims of mediums can be more disruptive than beneficial. We have an appropriate example in the disputes between survival and super-psi hypotheses. When we presume 'psi' to be motivated by the psychodynamic processes of the medium, we are soon faced with the conclusion that little can be done without a good understanding of his or her affective and unconscious life. Janet (1859-1947), Flournoy (1854-1920), Jung (1875-1961) and many others defended the position that our minds have an almost natural tendency to experience certain psychological material as being 'personified', 'alive' or autonomous, just as in dreams and other products of imagination. A similar argument has been used to account for the psychogenesis of spirit manifestation: anomalous information is somehow received and then personified as the apparent communication of a deceased person. The mechanism seems to be very simple and could explain much of the data available. However, there is virtually nothing we can do to resolve more complex cases when the social and emotional life of the medium was poorly investigated, because we do not have a precise idea of the psychological aetiology of the phenomena. In these situations it is too easy to ignore a psi explanation and favour the survival hypotheses, even in the face of scarce information. Moreover, independently of the paranormal origin of the manifestation, we lose the opportunity to understand the human side of the experience and how the psychological and social aspects determine it.

The case of a spiritualist woman studied by one of us will serve as example (Maraldi, 2011). The woman in question had a dream in her youth in which she was enjoying pleasurable moments in a restaurant with a man that she had never actually seen previously in her waking state. In the dream she had travelled to the United States to find this man, with whom she was in love, and who had taken her to a special lunch. The dream ended with the man saying goodbye and leaving the restaurant, while the dreamer tried desperately to bring him back. This lady was very young when she had the dream and was about to marry another man, but she was unhappy with her marriage and had accepted her situation only to satisfy her mother, with whom she had strong emotional bonds. Under the suggestion of a medium whom she visited at this time, she forgot about the dream

for many years and accepted her marriage. However, one day, she was at home and was surprised by a vision of her mother. After this she was informed that her mother had died at the same moment that she had the vision. While she was at the funeral, she suddenly remembered her old dream, and all of its details. It seems quite clear to us that this dream was a symbolic representation of her libertarian and romantic wishes of adolescence, once repressed by her marriage and her close relationship with the mother. Thus, we see how an apparent paranormal experience is entangled with a series of mental associations and acquires meaning only within this broader context of affective bonds. Whether or not it was her own mother responsible for eliciting the vision (according to the survivalist interpretation), this experience makes much more sense and is more fully explained when we consider the psychodynamics of this woman and her special bond with the mother-figure.

For this type of analysis to be complete, it is important to know what led a person to mediumship, that is, the conscious and unconscious motives. It is also important to know how he or she developed mediumship and what the relationship of this development is with the life choices of the individual. For example, what is the religious or scientific group to which the medium belongs? What are the techniques employed by a group to develop mediumship? What are the biographical and psychosocial aspects related to his or her mediumship? In this respect, it is important to evaluate the influence of childhood experiences and certain cognitive and emotional processes that could have elicited mediumistic experiences or favoured paranormal beliefs (see, for example, Maraldi, 2013). Finally, we must consider the cultural and socio-historical aspect behind the phenomena, so as to recognize how it determines, in each particular context, the practice of a medium and his or her group. Without this cultural sensitivity, we would not be able to understand, for example, the reason for the joy of a young Brazilian woman, like the lady we mentioned above, in travelling to the United States during her dreams.

The history of mediumship has often been marked by discrimination and persecution of mediums. This was particularly true in Brazil during the first decades of the 20th century, when many were arrested on the charge of charlatanism, and spiritualist centres were

closed (Maraldi, Machado & Zangari, 2010). This reality has changed, and today in our country we have a larger social acceptance of such practices. Nevertheless, the relationship between mediumship and mental illness remains alive in popular discourse, reinforcing religious rivalries. Contrary to what occurs in the United States or in different European countries, mediumship in Brazil is not an activity largely detached from religious affiliations. While many Brazilians believe in life after death or reincarnation, those who are dedicated to mediumship are usually linked to a Spiritist, Umbanda or Candomblé centre, because these religions welcome the possibility of paranormal experiences in their own systems of doctrine or ritual. Thus, we may have more awareness than our colleagues in other countries of the group and social factors that underlie the practice of mediumship, especially given the way in which this phenomenon appears in our context. We do not think, however, that the social and cultural importance of mediumship is unique to Brazil, but only that this dimension tends to reveal itself more clearly to us. We are familiar with Brazilian spiritist literature and the manifestations that occur in centres, and we know how much of the alleged paranormal experiences can be determined by prior beliefs and expectations that are culturally available. We have observed in studies that we have conducted that although many mediums have healthy living conditions, others have suffered since childhood from the psychosocial impact of certain anomalous experiences that they have found difficult to control and understand. Some have been discriminated against by family members, whilst others have had their experiences interpreted as mediumistic by their own family (Maraldi, 2011; Maraldi & Zangari, 2012; Zangari, 2003). Nevertheless, regardless of how the phenomena presents itself in each case, most of these claims could be explained as the result of psychological and social processes that are already studied by psychologists. As we have observed, it is very common for a medium to interpret symptoms of physical or psychological disorder, or even unusual perceptual processes, even if they are not necessarily anomalous, as being evidence of spiritual and paranormal phenomena. Further, this interpretation is reinforced by their reference groups. Knowing the religion or worldview that a medium holds is an essential prerogative of our model of analysis, in order to

interpret his or her experiences. We must always remember, despite the apparent obviousness of this argument for some, that although mediumship is not necessarily associated with psychopathology, this does not mean that these experiences cannot be explained in psychological or social terms.

On the other hand, to consider mediumship and other experiences from a psychosocial perspective does not deny, absolutely, a metaphysical or parapsychological explanation for some cases. If mediumship has effectively an anomalous origin, whatever it is, this aspect of the phenomena will manifest itself in spite of the culture. The consideration of culture here does not have the function of replacing other possible explanations, but to fill a gap without which our understanding of the phenomenon would become weak. We are all more or less accustomed to raising sophisticated physical, biological and evolutionary explanations for mediumship and psi, without realizing that the daily preoccupations that are imposed on mediums and other collaborators in these studies are often of a social and cultural character. Even if we understand culture as an acquisition made possible by biological evolution, this acquisition should also be considered on its own terms, and this is a work for social psychology, anthropology and sociology. We are in favour of bringing the medium, as a person, to the centre of discussions, more than ever, without disregarding the religious centre to which he or she belongs.

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Everton Maraldi can be contacted at  
evertonom@usp.br

Wellington Zangari can be contacted at  
w.z@usp.br

Both are based at the Inter Psi – Laboratory of  
Anomalistic Psychology and Psychosocial Processes,  
University of Sao Paulo (Brazil)

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