Importance of a Psychosocial Approach for a Comprehensive Understanding of Mediumship

Everton Maraldi

Fatima Regina Machado

Laboratory of Research for Social Psychology of Religion

Wellington Zangari

Laboratory of Research for Social Psychology of Religion
w.z@usp.br

All authors: InterPsi—Laboratory for Anomalistic Psychology and Psychosocial Processes,
University of Sao Paulo, Department of Social Psychology,
Av. Prof. Mello Moraes, 1721, Sao Paulo SP 05508-900, Brazil

Abstract—There are several definitions of mediumship. The majority of them are religion-based. In this article, the term *mediumship* is defined as the supposed capacity that certain people—that is mediums—are said to have by which they can mediate communication between spiritual entities or forms and other human beings. Such a definition does not explain the origin of mediumship, but rather highlights its characteristics as they are reported by people who experience the phenomena in different sociocultural contexts. In general, it is said that mediumistic capacity is aroused when the medium is in an altered state of consciousness such as a trance state. However, for Kardecist Spiritists for example, mediumship may also occur in conscious states. Mediumship can be present in practically any human activities, from the elaboration of a scientific or literate text to an artistic production, as well as in such minor experiences as vague physical sensations or even emotional states such as irritability, sadness, sudden joy, obsessive thoughts, moments of inspiration or geniality, and so on. In all these experiences—from the most common to the most exceptional—Kardecist Spiritists admit the possibility of spirit intervention. So, in many cases there is no clear delimitation between what comes from the medium as an individual and what would come from an external source. Although the Kardecist perspective—very widespread in Brazil—is based upon certain religious and philosophic hypotheses that are unacceptable for many scientists and academics, Kardecism has contributed to the development of scientific and psychological conceptions of so-called mediumistic manifestations. Shamdasani (1994:xiv) pointed out that because Kardec believed that mediumship was a fundamental aspect of humanity and must be considered in order to understand the human condition, his Spiritist doctrine

was formed in such a way as to facilitate psychological interpretation of what seemed to be mediumistic phenomena. The main difference between Kardec's theory and a completely psychological study of mediumship is the cause of the phenomena: that is whether the phenomena occurred through the action of spirits or through the action of the medium's subliminal or subconscious imagination. The search for an intrapsychic source for mediumship contributed to the "discovery" of the unconscious mind.

Keywords: mediumship—Spiritism—psychosocial identity

Approaches to the Study of Mediumship, Their Contributions and Consequences

Proper scientific studies of mediumship were first conducted in the period between the late 19th century and the early 20th century, arousing huge public interest, especially in the United States and Europe. However, the interest in the study of mediumship had already appeared in the 18th century when Christian values were profoundly affected by the emergent worldview that was based on industrial and scientific development. These new ideas threatened the ontological status of beliefs in the existence of life after death (Northcote, 2007). Rationalism and the concomitant growth of positivism became popular, imposing a strictly materialistic conception of reality. The new way of looking at the world conflicted with previous religious conceptions, especially those that touched on the origin of human beings and the existence of the soul (Ronan, 2001). Society began to move away from a religious worldview based simply on religious dogmas. To some it seemed necessary to adopt scientific methods in order to scientifically prove the existence of the soul and its immortality (Rogo, 1986). But even if the majority of the scientific and academic community adopted a materialist view of the world and society as a whole questioned the traditional basis of religions, the masses began to look for a worldview that was both religious and, paradoxically, empirical (Northcote, 2007).

Scientific psychology appeared in that context. In the beginning, the discipline was strongly connected to the study of alleged paranormal experiences and especially to the study of mediumistic experiences (Alvarado 2005, Alvarado, Machado, Zingrone, & Zangari, 2007, Ellenberger, 1976). By the end of the 19th century, mediumship was the object of many psychological studies (Shamdasani, 1994). However, the majority of researchers saw mediumistic practices only as the fruit of frauds or as a dangerous threat to the well-being of society. Mediumship was commonly linked to psychopathology in the psychiatric literature of the times (Le Maléfan, 1999). There were physicians who maintained that brain damage and/or other functional disturbances caused spiritualist/Spiritist beliefs and practices or vice versa. Many of those physicians believed that spiritualist beliefs were a principal cause of insanity (Hess, 1991, Shamdasani, 1994, Zingrone, 1994). Consequently, people who

practiced Spiritism or spiritualism or who participated in seances began to be persecuted in Europe and in such countries as the United States and Brazil (Almeida et al., 2005, Giumbeli, 1997, 2003, Machado, 1996, 2005). With the influx of Social Darwinism, the psychiatric community began to use the metaphors of evolution, characterizing mediumistic manifestations along the scale of intellectual and social development.

According to Zingrone (1994), behind the intrigues involving mediums and scientists, there were racial, gender, and social status conflicts, as well as conflicts stemming from political and religious interests. Mediumistic phenomena were associated with such marginal social groups as women, individuals of African descent, and the poor, reproducing and amplifying existing prejudices. Some criticisms aimed at Spiritists/spiritualists had an evident party–political content. They alluded in a pejorative way to the connection of mediumship to suffragism and other social movements. Critics also were against beliefs incompatible with Roman Catholic dogma—which was considered a model of religious institutional beliefs, especially in the West—and against several forms of alternate therapies not approved by the medical establishment. Efforts to stop spiritualists and Spiritists could take a judicial form. As Zingrone says:

> For the anti-Spiritualists, this characterization of Spiritualism and mediumship as categories of mental illness was deadly serious and could be used to strip "the patient" of legal rights and social privileges. Owen (1990) uncovered an abundance of legal records of "lunacy" cases tried in England. A number of similar cases were litigated in the United States as well [Haber, 1986]. The evidence in some of these cases rested solely on defendants' interest in, practice of, or belief in Spiritualistic phenomena. Purely on this basis, many persons, mostly women, were involuntarily committed to asylums. Only a handful of these inmates were able to obtain their release, and then only after enlisting the legal and financial aid of other more socially powerful Spiritualists (Owen, 1990:160–167, 168–201). Many others—again, mostly women—lost legal control of their monetary resources to members of their immediate families—usually men—on the grounds that commitment to Spiritualism was symptomatic of a severe chronic mental incapacity (Owen, 1990:160–167). (Zingrone, 1994:102–103)

In spite of the persecutions, however, a segment of the scientific community considered mediumship from another point of view. In 1882, a group of intellectuals from different areas decided to join forces to found *The Society for Psychical Research* (SPR), the purpose of which was to investigate so-called mediumistic and paranormal events using the scientific method.[2] Investigation on mediumship done by the SPR resulted in pioneering studies on dissociation and altered states of consciousness (Alvarado, 2002).

The first studies of mediumship were strongly influenced by their historical time. People then were still deeply involved in their traditional religious beliefs, so much so that many scientists still believed in life after death, and felt it was possible to study the topic from a scientific point of view. Similarly, such scientists were also interested in studying mediums. Frederic Myers, for instance, was both favorable to the Spiritist survival hypothesis and explored evidence

related to it in his work (Myers, 1903/2001:31). Theodore Flournoy, who was skeptical of the possibility of communication with the dead, declared that, even though he felt that way, he still considered himself a Spiritualist and therefore believed in the existence of a transcendent dimension in the human being. As Flournoy said:

> Let me insist here that we must not confound *Spiritism*, which is a pretended scientific explanation of certain *facts* by the intervention of spirits of the dead, with *Spiritualism,* which is a religio–philosophical belief, opposed to materialism and based on the principle of value and the reality of individual consciousness, and which I conceive to be a necessary postulate for a wholesome conception of the moral life. […] One may be a Spiritist without being a Spiritualist, and *vice versa.* So far as I myself am concerned I am a convinced Spiritualist. (Flournoy, 1911/2007:142)

Although pioneers of scientific studies on mediumship had different opinions and beliefs on the subject, all of them privileged the scientific posture in their studies and shared some ideas: (a) they believed in the importance of the psychological study of mediumship for its potential to add to our understanding of the human mind; (b) they understood that mediumship is a complex phenomenon but despite that fact it was possible to formulate certain testable hypotheses for mediumistic phenomena that were not sufficiently well-understood; (c) they believed that even though mediumship could sometimes be associated with psychopathology, they felt that such an explanation could not be applied in general because it did not explain all the available evidence; and (d) while the majority of them were in doubt about the paranormal nature of some of the phenomena described in the mediumistic context, in other cases available evidence confirmed the legitimacy of the paranormal hypothesis.

The majority of the early investigations conducted by SPR members were focused primarily on verifying that the content of supposed mediumistic communications had, in fact, originated with the deceased. Although many hypotheses proposed by these researchers contained psychological concepts, their main purpose was to investigate the notion of survival (Zangari, 2003). One evident problem in these early investigations was the emphasis on individual aspects of mediumship, that is on the study of intrapsychic and unconscious processes in mediums. This approach neglected the power of culture and society in modeling beliefs and experiences associated with mediumistic phenomena (Maraldi, 2008).

In the first two decades of the 20th century, the interest in mediumship diminished considerably. The ascension of psychoanalysis has been said to have been greatly responsible for the decline. Unlike psychical research—an empirical discipline—psychoanalysis established therapeutic methods that became popular and, to some extent, obscured the investigation of mediumistic phenomena and other forms of paranormal experiences as verifiable occurrences. Psychoanalytic techniques made possible a more controlled and

rational relationship with the unconscious, less intense and passionate than those observed in mediumistic seances (Alvarado, 2002, Shamdasani, 1994).

Due to the association of mediumship with Spiritism/Spiritualism and Occultism, mediumistic phenomena began to be considered threatening to psychology because their studies were seen as metaphysical speculations. Psychology gradually abandoned its interest in mediumship, concentrating instead mainly on psychopathology, learning, child development, and comparative psychology, and other areas of modern psychology. Theories began to focus on referential models designed to increase comprehension of the psyche. Mediumship was set aside and only recently has become the object of intensive investigations on a par with those conducted previously (Almeida & Lotufo Neto, 2004:137).

The renewed academic interest in mediumship is relatively recent. It has been occurring because of the growing enthusiasm about the study of paranormal beliefs and/or experiences in general. Mediumship studies have made little progress over the intervening decades, and researchers continue to face practically the same problems faced by the pioneers of mediumship research.

Perhaps the most important contribution of recent work is the establishment of mediumship as a psychosocial phenomenon, which, in a certain way, disconnects it from exclusively intrapsychic and psychopathological interpretations. Regarding the psychosocial aspect, modern researchers have understood that perceiving mediumship as a dissociative phenomenon constrained by the historical and social context was something that most of the pioneer researchers missed because of their focus on individual aspects of the mediums themselves. As Zangari has said:

> [...] in spite of the fact that mediumship "uses" a medium's dissociative capacities, it seems to be a dissociation disciplined by the medium´s social group. [...] Socio-cultural elements that outline the "intruder" personality are present in the medium's social group and, therefore, in the medium's mind [. . .] the difference between pathological disso-ciation and non-pathological dissociation lies in the consideration of context, of culture. (Zangari, 2003:54–55).

Unilateral analyses of mediumship tend to partial—and therefore incomplete—interpretations. Monique Augras (1983:77) has criticized those who have tried to understand mediumship using an approach that excludes the cultural elements involved in the phenomenon.

There are clinical studies that have considered mediumship from psychosocial perspectives that seem to corroborate the importance of mediumship as a social construction as opposed to seeing the phenomena from a merely pathological or intrapsychic point of view. Several authors have provided evidence for the notion that mediumship is not necessarily associated with psychopathologies (Almeida, 2004, Almeida, Lotufo Neto, &

Greyson, 2007, Negro, 1999, Reinsel, 2003). Grosso (1997) defends the notion that mediumship, artistic inspiration, and surrealism are forms of "creative dissociation". According to Grosso (1997) and Zangari (2003), what seem to be fragmentations and disintegration in a specific culture may be the prelude to a major psychological integration in another culture.

Discussing the correlation between mediumship and dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder), Braude (1988) has suggested that while the creation of multiple personality usually begins as a reaction to unbearable traumatic events, mediumship tends to develop in a more healthy way—although the author considered the possible link between certain mediumistic phenomena and psychopathology. A similar opinion was adopted by Richeport (1992).

After interviewing and administering dissociation scales to individuals diagnosed as suffering from multiple personality disorder, Hughes (1992:191) has concluded that mediums do not present a high level of psychopathology or dissociative experiences. Mediums differ from those who have multiple personality disorder in terms of mental processes (etiology, function, control, and psychopathology). For those who have multiple personality disorder, dissociation is compulsive; for mediums, it is disciplined and culturally contextualized.

Similarly, recent research results have not confirmed that mediumship is invariably a defense mechanism against psychological suffering or social exclusion (Negro, 1999). Almeida (2004), for instance, has demonstrated that the socio–demographic profile of Spiritists in Brazil is quite different from what is expected.

The Flourishing of a Psychosocial Perspective of Mediumship in Brazil

It is said that Brazil—often characterized as the largest Spiritist country in the world—is a *warehouse* of paranormal experiences, especially Spiritist-like ones. And Brazil is also well-known for its mixture of cultures and its tolerance of different religious beliefs. But it was not always like that. Spiritist practices were illegal at one point in the history of the country—especially in the first part of the 20th century—and during that time a number of interpretations of mediumship related to dissociation were proposed. But the cultural context of experiences was usually neglected. Mediumship was also almost invariably described as a symptom of psychopathology. Raimundo Nina Rodrigues (1862–1906), an eminent Brazilian physician and anthropologist, interpreted possession as "a provoked sleepwalking-like state with fragmentation and substitution of personality" (Nina Rodrigues, 1900:81). Manoel Querino (1851–1923), a Brazilian intellectual and anthropologist who was a pioneer historian of African culture in Bahia, Brazil, described mediumship as an impressive

hysterical phenomenon peculiar to women (Querino, 1955:73).

Monique Augras (1983) points out that such important researchers and academics as Artur Ramos (1903–1949), a Brazilian physician, anthropologist, and folklorist, believed "that trance does not reveal any characteristic beyond what is already established by Psychiatry as mass hysteria" (p. 36). Brazilian researchers were influenced by 19th century European psychiatric ideas, especially those in France, such as Le Bon's concept of "mass hysteria" and Charcot's ideas on hysterical dissociation as a neurological degeneration of women (Ellenberger, 1976).

The opinion of the Brazilian medical community on *Spiritism*—a term that was commonly used to refer to Kardecist Spiritism as well as mediumistic African or Afro–Brazilian practices—was linked to the Brazilian historical context. Spiritists in general were persecuted for political and religious views when Getúlio Vargas was the President of Brazil (1930–1945 and 1951–1954). A large number of Spiritist centers were closed during those years (Hess, 1991). The campaign against Spiritism helped to legitimize the position of physicians who were against Spiritist beliefs and practices. For example, in the 1920s and 1930s, the *Liga de Higiene Mental* (League for Mental Hygiene) considered Kardecist Spiritism and other mediumistic religions to be both a mental health problem and a social problem (Costa, 1976, Oliveira, 1931, Ribeiro & Campos, 1931). Their views were consonant with the opinion of such early Brazilian psychoanalysts as Artur Ramos.

Social dimensions of mediumship started to be considered formally in Brazil with the work of Melville J. Herskovits (1967) who did not see mediumship only from a psychopathological point of view. According to Augras, Herskovits "states that ritual trance, while institutional, is an abnormal phenomenon. It is an organized cult, not an individual pathology" (Augras, 1983:47). Herskovits' perspective was assumed later by such Brazilian researchers as Octavio da Costa Eduardo and René Ribeiro (1978). However, it was the French sociologist Roger Bastide (1898–1974) and the French photographer and ethnologist Pierre Verger (1902–1996) who first proposed a properly sociological and historical perspective for the analysis of mediumistic religions in Brazil in the mid-1950s (Bastide, 1989, Verger, 2002).

Sociologists and anthropologists, more than members of any other discipline, have offered psychological or social interpretations for mediumistic phenomena. However, the sociological perspective is a generalist one and does not always adequately consider the individual and group dimensions in their interaction with broader social and institutional processes. Social psychology, on the other hand, takes on as its task the investigation of particularities and mechanisms involved in the dialectic between group and individual. From a social psychological perspective, then, mediumship can be seen as a psychosocial construction, that is as a phenomena that is simultaneously

individual and collective. Recently, this perspective has been flourishing in Brazil and seems to us to be a fruitful approach to the study of mediumship.

An Exploratory Psychosocial Study of Mediumship in Brazil

An exploratory study conducted by the Brazilian psychologist Everton de Oliveira Maraldi (2008) is offered here as the first step in a larger research project focused on psychosocial aspects of mediumship in Brazil. His study aimed to understand the use and meaning of mediumship and the paranormal beliefs connected to it in the formation of the psychosocial identity of Kardecist Spiritists. The research program draws on the theory of identity proposed by Ciampa (1987, 1994), a well-known social psychologist in Brazil. Ciampa's work can be defined as a tentative recasting of identity theory that is anchored especially in Habermas's (1990) philosophy.

According to Ciampa, identity is in a constant state of transformation and metamorphosis, passing through different moral or cognitive stages of development. He also recognizes identity as a predominantly social phenomenon, that is all individuals contribute to the actualization of a group's identity even if it is only in a potential way. Individual particularities reproduce universal particularities. Thus, group identity and individual identity are not disconnected. They form together in a shared context. Identity can be understood as two different aspects in a dialectical relation: the representational aspect (categorization) and the dynamic aspect (metamorphosis), both seen as process. Identity results primarily from the process of metamorphosis itself, and its construction occurs across the lifespan. The construction of a "good" identity project is a process that can be favorably influenced (or not) by social conditions or by adaptive crises faced by the individual in his or her daily life.

Using Ciampa's approach to discuss the construction of Kardecist Spiritist mediums, Maraldi's exploratory research was composed of two "life history" case studies with two female mediums from the *Centro Espírita Ismael* (http://www.ceismael.com.br) in the city of São Paulo in Brazil. In addition to doing deep interviews with the mediums, Maraldi visited the Spiritist center several times and observed mediums in action. He has also considered other complementary materials for his analysis, such as psychographic messages and a mediumistic drawing. Maraldi has selected two mediums who seemed to have effectively established a significant personal and group connection to mediumistic beliefs and practices. The main objective of the exploratory study was to evaluate the potential influence of indoctrination and group context on the maintenance of beliefs and on the construction of mediumship as an identity, as well as to raise hypotheses for future investigations.

From the analysis of interviews—as well as consideration of the complementary material—using Ciampa´s ideas as reference, Maraldi verified

that the uses and meanings of mediumship in the construction of the investigated mediums' identities varied not only in terms of psychodynamic functions but also in psychosocial meanings. These can be reduced to the following three basic categories:

(a) ***Mediumship as a life project.*** This is a category that includes the *re-signification* of mediumistic and Spiritist identity in the interviewed mediums' life histories as the search for emotional and spiritual meaning. In this category, Maraldi explored how daily situations and physical and emotional experiences are interpreted by each of interviewees (E.D.E. and I.N.) to conform to their evolving mediumistic identities. That is, how the interviewees learned to give a spiritual meaning to their personal problems, difficulties, or even successes. Maraldi also investigated the interviewees' interpretations of their mediumistic abilities and their efforts to bring their experiences into conformance with Kardecian Spiritist doctrine as their mediumistic identity developed and matured, and as they came to see their mediumship, as they told Maraldi, as predestined and predetermined even from before their reincarnation into their present lives.

(b) ***Mediumship as a way to veil or unveil identity.*** This is the category in which Maraldi examined the psychodynamic means by which the interviewees masked or disclosed their mediumistic identity in the context of the Spiritist center including those moments when their activities occurred within unconscious mediumistic states, or through what seemed to be paranormal phenomena.

(c) ***Mediumship as ideology.*** In this category, Maraldi's investigation revolved around the notion that mediumship can be seen as an ideological posture that is a kind of materialization of Spiritist doctrine. He focused his analysis on the way in which the interviewees commonly incorporated scientific and religious tropes in support of Spiritism in their speech. In this category, Maraldi noted that the discourse in which the interviewees engaged repeatedly centered on the debates between materialist science and Spiritism, medicine and Spiritism, and Catholicism and Spiritism.

When dealing with "mediumship as a life project", Maraldi's results supported the notion that the formation of a mediumistic identity organized the mediums' emotional experiences so as to sustain a life project that was previously nonexistent or inconceivable. This is the re-signification function of mediumship: a search for meaning to face, explain, or justify difficulties or successes. Not only are certain psychodynamic functions serviced—such as diminishing anguish and anxiety from the exposure to conflictful and traumatic situations—but also future personal psychological needs are prepared for. From the analyses of the mediums' discourse, it becomes apparent that prior to their conversion to Spiritism and their training as mediums, the interviewees' lives had no defined direction, as they were unsure as to what role they might

play in the world. The interviewees tended to see their pre-mediumship past as marked by problems that could only be solved after their predestined dedication to Spiritism. The way in which the mediums described their lives before mediumship centered on a painful life full of disease and disturbance. Both mediums had endured difficult childhoods. E.D.E. was ill frequently and hospitalized repeatedly without her doctors being able to render a diagnosis. I.N. had psychological and family problems. Her childhood was complicated by continually arguing parents to the extent that her siblings seemed to have played a more significant role in her upbringing than her parents did. Both E.D.E. and I.N. also suffered from relatives who considered them to be mentally disordered. On the other hand, the "discovery" of their mediumship re-signified their experiences, giving them a paranormal meaning. For E.D.E., what she thought were hallucinations became the perception of spirits. I.N.'s mood swings and other emotional difficulties were not only the result of family conflicts, but also flowed from her as-yet-untrained ability to "capture energies" from discarnate spirits or living people, something mediumship training helped her to balance. Seemingly inexplicable relationships and occurrences in both mediums' family lives were now understood as consequences of past lives. For instance, E.D.E. explained her difficult relationships with her parents and her good relationships with her grandparents as a result of her parents having been her aunt and uncle in a previous life while her grandparents had been her parents. An emotional dependency on her displayed by her brother was also explained in terms of past life events. In effect, E.D.E.'s attributions of past life causes to current life events or relationships allowed her to delineate a mythical origin to those elements—including social roles—of her current life that she considers *emotionally* unacceptable or incomprehensible.

Not only do mediumship practices help E.D.E. and I.N. to deal with their experiences, but social perceptions both made by and of the interviewees have also changed. As mediums, both E.D.E. and I.N. find themselves embedded in a context in which who they are and what they do are culturally valued. For I.N., for example, the "discovery" of her mediumship has been a transformative experience that has changed her from a shy and unstable person to someone who has occupied a more adaptive and fulfilling social role in life.

The second analytical stance Maraldi took with his interviewees was to follow Ciampa's (1987) notion that identity is alternatively veiled and unveiled. That is, an individual's multiple social roles are revealed or hidden at different moments, each role being only a partial representation of the whole individual. These transitions may be conscious or unconscious and it is the unconscious roles that may become strange to the waking self, dissociated because they cannot be openly assumed. A tension is created, however, in that what is masked and unconscious must seek to be disclosed, expressed in some way. In this sense, the context of *Centro Espírita Ismael* provides E.D.E. and I.N. with the opportunity to unveil an otherwise veiled aspect of their selves through

exercising their mediumistic identity. The Spiritist center becomes a safe, controlled environment in which those aspects of the mediums' psychology that are repressed or undeveloped may be expressed (and we are not talking only about mediumistic ability surfacing: Maraldi also observed such creative processes as painting and writing being expressed in the context of the *Centro*). Diffuse emotions may also be expressed, and by doing so the mediums are able to deal with their subjective world without assuming total responsibility for what emerges in mediumistic sessions.

Mediums report they are susceptible to feelings that damage family and social life. To maintain an emotional balance she believes is necessary for her mediumship, I.N., for example, says she avoids feeling anger or hostility toward her husband. Allowing her emotional balance to be upset I.N. fears makes her vulnerable to invasion by something strange and compulsive that could harm her, her family, and her mediumship. She is also afraid of losing effective contact with the world, of dissociating from herself. I.N. fears possession as a sign of obsession, an uncontrollable negative influence by spirits. From a psychodynamic point of view, however, that which I.N. sees as an abrupt intrusion of the spirit world may be, in fact, an unconscious activity, what Jung (1920/2004) defined as "ideo-affective complexes". As Jung has said, complexes tend to become true secondary personalities, or, in other words, *unconscious roles*, such as the roles that mediums can freely experience in the Spiritist center, but for which they do not assume complete authorship.

In their own way, activities at the Spiritist center can be integrative and therapeutic, facilitating safe contact with the unconscious and promoting the adaptive development of individual identity through a form of emotional control instilled through doctrinal compliance. The Spiritist center provides meaning through both a symbolic system and practical training that allows the medium to interpret and control otherwise disturbing experiences without fear. The power of Spiritist doctrine to shape the medium's emotional control can be seen as a progressive capacity that increases in efficacy as the mediums develop. Zangari (2003) has called this process "the training of altered states of consciousness in a ritual context". Negro (1999), on the other hand, characterizes this process as the "modeling of social behavior" or the assimilation of experiences in a "social matrix".

Techniques employed at the *Centro Espírita Ismael* to train or induce mediumship are derivations of hypnosis that clearly evoke altered states of consciousness in which it is suggested that the emotions should be worked on through practices that comply with Spiritist doctrine. The capacity of mediums to *surrender* to the spirits—as proposed by Zangari (2003)—is a passive surrender to (potential) unconscious elements. The Spiritist center both welcomes and allows latent content within a socially accepted ritual that, at the same time, helps mediums preserve the stability and integrity of their personal identity.

However, mediumship practices also involve risks. An extreme adherence

to Spiritist doctrine can provoke, to some extent, a resistance to change, to identity metamorphosis, resulting in the mere re-positioning of social roles and the exercise of repressive "control" of aspects deemed undesirable by, or incompatible with, Spiritist doctrine. During his visits to the Spiritist center, Maraldi noticed that it was not uncommon for participants to repress contrary phenomena not in keeping with Spiritist ideas. Attitudes expressed by mediums or even by the supposed deceased communicators that contradicted Spiritist doctrine were received with anxiety. Mediums tended to avoid doctrinal conflicts, attempting to maintain harmony and balance with both Spiritist and Christian values. This goal was not always accomplished owing to the difficulty of controlling the upswell from the unconscious that occurred during mediumistic trance. In such moments, while the medium's role was preserved, the spiritual harmony of the *Centro* was not. At those moments, the Spiritist center's concern with the maintenance of its Spiritist ideology overrode the development of the medium as an individual. Yet, even at moments when ideology was the main goal, the imposing of doctrine could lead to therapeutic and integrative outcomes. As Ciampa (1987) has argued, institutions must also undergo transformation and metamorphosis of their collective identity so as to adjust to the needs of their members and to the requirements of the social environment as a whole.

Maraldi also noted that the interviewees reported both some paranormal-like personal experiences that were better explained psychologically as the result of interpretation and cognitive process biases, group suggestion, or *criptomnésia*, and a mediumistic drawing that seemed to have resulted from a paranormal retrieval of information.[3]

From the perspective of mediumship as ideology, Maraldi had postulated that the medium's individual history seems to reproduce in several aspects the history of Spiritism in Brazil. For example, there is the fusion of a personal search with the still-unsolved collective search. Mediums' discourse—when it centered on debating scientific materialism and discussions about the supremacy of conventional Medicine and Catholic dogma, for instance—seem to reproduce (even indirectly) the early history of Brazilian Spiritism when suffering persecution by medical and religious institutions.[4] It seems that initial conflicts and continuing rivalries are alive in the mediums' imagination, keeping mediums on the defensive where their Spiritist beliefs are concerned. And this defensiveness, in fact, can be seen as an act of preservation of their own mediumistic identities.

Finally, Maraldi's study provides an important reflection based on I.N.'s life history which reveals a very significant development of psychologically adaptive identity that contradicts the idea that Spiritist beliefs and paranormal experiences indicate regression in the psychological sense as Ciampa and Habermas believe.

For Habermas (1990), paranormal beliefs are a regressive cultural form that represents a step backward in the process of identity development. Ciampa (1987) also believes that paranormal beliefs may be an obstacle to the achievement of Habermas's (1990) *post-conventional identity* as proposed, that is a relatively autonomous identity that moves beyond group and institution beliefs. Maraldi has noticed, however, that I.N. seems to be taking her first steps toward a *post-conventional* worldview, albeit without abandoning her paranormal beliefs. The formation of an adaptive identity has not cancelled her beliefs nor her commitment to her mediumship.

Developing a mediumistic worldview must be recognized as a valid way in which individuals may search for emotional and spiritual meaning in their lives, even if the outside observer doubts the reality of alleged Spiritist phenomena. A perspective that is both historical and psychological can help. Maraldi has proposed that the ideas presented by Foucault (1968) in *Mental Disease and Psychology* provide insight here. To Foucault, the regressive character of pathological behaviors in neurosis or in certain cultural phenomena—such as mystical and religious experiences—do not constitute an inherent expression of such phenomena, but rather reflect a culture that allocates to the past those elements that are offensive to the dominant worldview. The repression of such cultural phenomena would cause them to re-emerge as a kind of marginalized discourse. Linking the phenomena to pathology then can be seen as a cultural and historical construction, and not as an inherent property of the phenomena themselves. The pathologizing of mediumistic practices and Spiritist beliefs becomes, in a sense, more properly an effect rather than a cause.

So we would not agree that the majority of those who hold paranormal beliefs are members of socially marginalized groups such as women, the elderly, individuals of African descent, or homosexuals (Emmons & Sobal, 1981). Even if certain paranormal beliefs may be a psychological resource for dealing with the frustrations of social exclusion, such a generalization does not explain the enormous interest that members of socially privileged (dominant) groups have in the paranormal (Irwin, 2003). Perhaps such paranormal experiences as mediums claim and seek to develop can be seen as marginal not only because they are restricted to a specific segment of society or because they can serve as both a compensation and a justification for social and economic alienation in specific groups, but because they can be characterized as fundamentally resistant to the secularization of culture in its legitimate expression of a persistent spiritual aspect of the human condition.

Conclusion

In order to arrive at a more comprehensive understanding of mediumship, it is necessary to pay attention not only to its psycho–physiological aspects—as

has been done in the past—but also to consider its psychosocial and cultural aspects. An exclusively psychopathological or intrapsychic interpretive axis has recently begun to transform into a psychosocial one, but it seems that the relationship of these perspectives to each other has not been successfully outlined as yet. It is not enough to point out both these perspectives as relevant. Rather it is necessary to determine *how* psychosocial aspects influence mediumistic experiences. This approach has inspired a number of recent studies (Machado, 2009, Maraldi, 2008, Negro, 1999, Stoll, 2004, Zangari, 2003), but more research is needed, especially that which can integrate the psychosocial with other aspects of mediumship.

We believe that the psychosocial perspective can promote a more effective scientific understanding of mediumship from that already provided by the theoretical heritage that reduces the social to the biological. It is necessary that different analytical perspectives—psychosocial and biological—be seen as complementary so that the complexity of mediums and mediumship may be better understood.

Notes

[1] Allan Kardec was the name adopted by the French mathematician and educator Hyppolite Leon Denizard Rivail (1804–1869), who was the codifier of Spiritism. In the second part of 19th century, he was invited to analyze and organize several reports received by mediums working in different Spiritist groups—especially those linked to the historical tradition of belief in survival and to the principle that the deceased can interact in our world (Kardec, 1861/2001). In Brazil, Kardec's Spiritist perspective—Kardecism—is the most influential of the Spiritist traditions and has more followers than other similar religions.

[2] Other societies or institutes with similar objectives were later founded, such as the *American Society for Psychical Research* (1885) in the USA and the *Institut Métapsychique International* (1919) in Paris, for example.

[3] This is discussed in more detail in Maraldi's (2008) exploratory study. However, it was not possible to get a broad comprehension of the nature of the "secondary personalities" manifested by the interviewed mediums.

[4] Nowadays people in Brazil are free to adhere to any religion and to express their faith. The country is said to be the biggest Spiritist country in the world. There are Kardecist Spiritist centers as well as other mediumistic religious temples such as Umbanda and Candomblé all over the country. At the same time, Brazil is one of the biggest Catholic countries in the world. In fact, it is common to find Brazilians who are adept at more than one religion, especially Catholicism and Kardecist Spiritism (Machado, 2009).

Acknowledgements

References

Almeida, A. M. (2004). *Fenomenologia das experiências mediúnicas: Perfil e psicopatologia de médiuns espíritas*. [Ph.D. Dissertation]. Faculdade de Medicina. São Paulo: Universidade de São Paulo.

Almeida, A. M., Almeida, A. A. S., & Lotufo Neto, F. (2005). History of "Spiritist madness" in Brazil. *History of Psychiatry*, *16*(1), 5–25.

Almeida, A. M., Lotufo Neto, F. (2004). A mediunidade vista por alguns pioneiros da área mental. *Revista de Psiquiatria Clínica, 31*(3), 132–141.

Almeida, A. M., Lotufo Neto, F., & Greyson, B. (2007). Dissociative and psychotic experiences in Brazilian Spiritist mediums. *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics, 76,* 57–58.

Alvarado, C. S. (2002). Dissociation in Britain during the late nineteenth century: The Society for Psychical Research, 1882–1900. *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation, 3*(2), 9–33.

Alvarado, C. S. (2005). Historical notes on the role of mediumship in Spiritualism, Psychical Research and Psychology. *The Parapsychology Foundation Conference: The study of Mediumship: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Charlottesville: Virginia. (Abstract available at http://www.pflyceum.org/264.html Accessed 14 October 2009)

Alvarado, C. S., Machado, F. R., Zingrone, N., & Zangari, W. (2007). Perspectivas históricas da influência da mediunidade na construção de idéias psicológicas e psiquiátricas. *Revista de Psiquiatria Clínica, 34*(1)*,* 42–53.

Augras, M. (1983). *O Duplo e a Metamorfose*. Petrópolis: Vozes.

Bastide, R. (1989). *As Religiões Africanas no Brasil: Contribuição a uma Sociologia das Interpenetrações de civilizações*. São Paulo: Pioneira. (Original work published in 1960)

Braude, S. E. (1988). Mediumship and multiple personality. *The Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research, 55*(813), 177–195.

Ciampa, A. C. (1987). *A estória do Severino e a história da Severina: Um ensaio de Psicologia Social*. São Paulo: Brasiliense.

Ciampa, A. C. (1994). Identidade. In: Lane, S. T. M., & Codo, W. (Eds.), *Psicologia social: O homem em movimento.* São Paulo: Brasiliense.

Costa, Jurandir Freire (1976). *História da Psiquiatria no Brasil.* Rio de Janeiro: Documentário Cruz Monclova Lidio.

Ellenberger, H. F. (1976). *El Descobrimento del Inconsciente*. Madrid: Gredos.

Emmons, C. F, & Sobal, J. (1981). Paranormal beliefs: Testing the marginality hypothesis. *Sociological Focus, 14,* 49–56.

Flournoy, T. (2007). *Spiritism and Psychology*. New York: Cosimo Classics. (Original work published in 1911)

Foucault, M. (1968). *Doença mental e Psicologia* (L. R. Shalders, trans.). Rio de Janeiro: Tempo Brasileiro (Biblioteca Tempo Universitário, Volume 2).

Giumbeli, E. (1997). Heresia, doença, crime ou religião: O Espiritismo no discurso de médicos e cientistas sociais. *Revista de Antropologia, 40*(2), 31–82.

Giumbeli, E. (2003). O "Baixo Espiritismo" e a História dos Cultos Mediúnicos. *Horizontes Antropológicos, 9*(19), 247–281.

Grosso, M. (1997). Inspiration, Mediumship, Surrealism: The Concept of Creative Dissociation. In: Krippner, S., & Powers, S. M. (Eds.), *Broken Images, Broken Selves: Dissociative Narratives in Clinical Practice.* Washington, D. C.: Brunner/Mazel.

Habermas, J. (1990). *Para a Reconstrução do Materialismo Histórico* (C. N. Coutinho, trans.). São Paulo: Brasiliense.

Herskovits, M. J. (1967). *Les bases de l'anthropologie culturelle*. Paris: Payot.

Hess, D. (1991). *Spiritists and Scientists. Ideology, Spiritism, and Brazilian Culture*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Hughes, D. J. (1992). Differences between trance channeling and multiple personality disorder on structured interview. *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology, 2,* 181–192.

Irwin, H. J. (2003). *An Introduction to Parapsychology, Fourth Edition*. Jefferson: McFarland.

Jung, C. G. (1920/2004). *O Eu e o Inconsciente* (Dora F. da Silva, trans.). Petrópolis: Vozes, 2004.

(*Obras Completas de Carl Gustav Jung*, volume 7)

Kardec, A. (2001). *O Livro dos Médiuns: Guia dos Médiuns e dos Doutrinadores* (J. Herculano Pires, trans.). São Paulo: Lake. (Original work published in 1861)

Le Maléfan, P. (1999). *Folie et Spiritisme: Histoire du Discourse Psychopathologique sur la Pratique du Spiritisme, ses Abords et ses Avatars (1850–1950)*. Paris: L'Hartmattan.

Machado, F. R. (1996). *A Causa dos Espíritos: Estudo sobre a Utilização da Parapsicologia para a Defesa da Fé Católica e Espírita no Brasil*. [Master's thesis]. Ciências da Religião. Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo.

Machado, F. R. (2005). Parapsicologia no Brasil: Entre a Cruz e a Mesa Branca. *Boletim Virtual de Pesquisa Psi, 2.* http://www.pesquisapsi.com.br

Machado, F. R. (2009). *Experiências Anômalas na Vida Cotidiana: Experiências Extra-Sensório-Motoras e sua Associação com Crenças, Atitudes e Bem-Estar Subjetivo.* [Tese (Doutorado)]. [Doctoral thesis]. Instituto de Psicologia: Universidade de São Paulo.

Maraldi, E. O. (2008). *Um Estudo Exploratório Sobre os Usos e Sentidos das Crenças e Experiências Paranormais na Construção da Identidade de Médiuns Espíritas*. [Monograph]. São Paulo: Curso de Psicologia, Universidade Guarulhos.

Myers, F. W. H. (2001). *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death.* Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing Company Inc. (Original work published in 1903)

Negro, P. J. (1999). *A Natureza da Dissociação: Um Estudo sobre Experiências Dissociativas Associadas a Práticas Religiosas*. Tese (Doutorado) [Doctoral thesis]. São Paulo: Faculdade de Medicina, Universidade São Paulo.

Nina Rodrigues, R. (1900). *L'Animisme Fétichiste des Nègres de Bahia*. Salvador: Reis.

Northcote, J. (2007). *The Paranormal and the Politics of Truth: A Sociological Account*. Exeter, UK: Imprint-Academic.

Oliveira, A. X. de (1931). *Espiritismo e Loucura.* Rio de Janeiro: A. Coelho Branco.

Owen, A. (1990). *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England.* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Querino, M. (1955). *A Raça Africana*. Salvador: Livraria Progresso.

Reinsel, R. (2003). Dissociation and Mental Health in Mediums and Sensitives: A Pilot Survey. *Proceedings of Presented Papers* (pp. 200–221). (The Parapsychological Association 46th Annual Convention; Vancouver BC; August 2–4, 2003)

Ribeiro, R. (1978). *Cultos Afro–Brasileiros do Recife*. Recife: I.J.N.P.S.

Ribeiro, L., & Campos, M. (1931). *O Espiritismo no Brasil. Contribuição ao Seu Estudo Clínico e Médico–Legal.* São Paulo: Editora Nacional.

Richeport, M. M. (1992). The interface between multiple personality, spirit mediumship and hypnosis. *American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis, 34*(3), 168–177.

Rogo, D. S. (1986). *Life after Death: The Case for Survival of Bodily Death*. London: Guild.

Ronan, C. A. (2001). *História Ilustrada da Ciência da Universidade de Cambridge: Da Renascença à Revolução Científica* Volume 3 (J. E. Fortes, trans.). Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar.

Shamdasani, S. (1994). Encountering Hélène: Théodore Flournoy and the Genesis of Subliminal Psychology. In: Flournoy, T. (1900), *From India to the Planet Mars: A Case of Multiple Personality with Imaginary Languages,* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, pp. xi–xii.

Stoll, S. J. (2004). Narrativas Biográficas: A Construção da Identidade Espírita no Brasil e sua Fragmentação. *Estudos Avançados, 18*(52), 181–199.

Verger, P. (2002). *Saída de IAO—Cinco Ensaios sobre a Religião dos Orixás*. São Paulo: Axis Mundi.

Zangari, W. (2003). *Incorporando Papéis: Uma Leitura Psicossocial do Fenômeno da Mediunidade de Incorporação em Médiuns de Umbanda*. Tese (Doutorado) [Doctoral thesis]. São Paulo: Instituto de Psicologia, Universidade de São Paulo.

Zingrone, N. L. (1994). Images of Woman as Medium: Power, Pathology and Passivity in the Writings of Frederic Marvin and Cesare Lombroso. In: Coly, L., White, R. A. (Eds.), *Women and Parapsychology: Proceedings of an International Conference* (pp. 90–123). New York: Parapsychology Foundation,