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Forgive Them; For They Know Not What They Do?

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The notion that cold reading is something that can be executed unconsciously seems to be almost as popular among skeptics as it is among the advocates of psychics and soothsayers. The general idea is that the psychic is so convinced of his or her authenticity that s/he is unaware of the fact that s/he is using a technique of psychological trickery to accomplish a so called "reading". Thus, it may very well be that psychics are using trickery, but they cannot be blamed for doing so, since the fraud is committed unconsciously. Believers of spirit communication use this line of thinking to excuse every debunked or busted psychic – often in combination with the old "using-deception-to-compensate-for-bad-days" argument. Skeptics use it as an excuse for treating psychics with respect and taking their claims seriously – a deceiver unaware of using deception cannot be blamed for deceit. This respectful approach seems more in line with the concept of a "curious" or "investigating" mind – it gives the skeptic an air of benevolence, which is more likeable than simply dismissing psychic readings as fraud.

One often cited example of this alleged unconsciousness is Ray Hyman's account in his classic *The Zetetic* article on cold reading from 1977:

"One danger of playing the role of reader is that you will persuade yourself that you really are divining true character. This happened to me. I started reading palms when I was in my teens as a way to supplement my income from doing magic and mental shows. When I started I did not believe in palmistry. But I knew that to 'sell' it I had to act as if I did. After a few years I became a firm believer in palmistry." (Hyman, 1996)

A more recent example is the "coming-out" of former New Ager Karla McLaren:

"I never knew what cold reading was, and until I saw professional magician and debunker Mark Edward use cold reading on an ABC News special last year, I didn't understand that I had long used a form of cold reading in my own work! I was never taught cold reading and I never intended to defraud any-

one - I simply picked up the technique through cultural osmosis." (McLaren, 2004)

Now, Hyman's contribution to the skeptic movement is, without a doubt, monumental. Nevertheless, I suggest that there are fundamental differences between the fortune-telling of the 1940's and the psychic séances and private sittings of today. And although I have the greatest sympathy for McLaren's attempt to make two opposing sides reach out and touch, I think it is of some importance to note that even if McLaren did not identify what she was doing as 'cold reading', she was apparently aware that she was employing a technique. In addition, the lack of intention to defraud is a somewhat slippery argument; the ethical status of an act may very well be assessed according to its effect on the object – it cannot be fraud without an abused victim. Since the technique used by McLaren did not cause apparent damage to anyone, her unintention to deceive is irrelevant.

Whether a psychic knows that s/he is using something called 'cold reading' or not is of course of no importance. What is essential is if the psychic knows that s/he is doing something else than receiving messages from the dead or from some other supernatural source. The deception is not the use of 'cold reading', but the use of anything but supernatural means. Following hunches, intuition, guessing, or any means other than supernatural, is deception if you claim it is divination or talking to the departed.

There is no doubt that a fantasy-prone person may seriously believe that his or her intuition is in fact the voice of a spirit. But mistaking whatever pops into your head for divination is far from what today's psychics are doing. Let's first consider what 'cold reading' is, before deciding if it can be employed unconsciously.

The common definition of 'cold reading' is something in line with "a procedure by which a 'reader' is able to persuade a client whom he has never before met that he knows all about the client's personality and problems" (Hyman, 1996). Wikipedia suggests "a technique used to convince another

person that the reader knows much more about the subject than they actually do" (Wikipedia). Both of these variations are misleading in that they suggest that 'cold reading' is a subject-object relation, when it in fact is a subject-subject interaction. Defining 'cold reading' as something an active agent (the psychic) delivers to a passive receiver (the "sitter") is simply not accurate. Instead, it must be defined as a joint effort by at least two persons to confirm one's belief in the other's supernatural knowledge or ability. For 'cold reading' to work, the client's desire for it to work and active participation in the process are absolutely necessary. Consider how a believer readily identifies stock spiel or some other cold reading tool when performed or exemplified by a skeptic. But when a psychic uses the exact same wording, the believer denies that it is cold reading. Thus, the client must have faith in the performer's authenticity for it to work. Skeptic demonstrations of cold reading are subsequently pointless; they will not work when used to refute beliefs, only to confirm them.

Faith is a primer even stronger than rational assessment. On two occasions, I have presented transcripts of actual séances to believers, without disclosing the name of the psychics at hand. On both occasions, believers easily identified the multitude of cold reading elements in the transcripts and dismissed the psychics as obvious frauds. However, when I told them the names of the psychics (both renowned TV-psychics), the believers immediately recanted. What they moments before considered to be cold reading was suddenly profound mediumship. So cold reading is not depending on how it is performed, but by whom.

Establishing cold reading as a subject-subject interaction, a joint social process towards a mutual goal, does not belittle the tools of the trade. If the context is a situation where a client has faith in a psychic, stock spiel and other techniques are very powerful. But can they be executed unconsciously? No, they cannot. Although the psychic session is a joint effort, the psychic and the client face different tasks – the medium that of suggestion, the client that of confirmation. Although the client tends to lend personal significance to very general suggestions, the medium still has the task of navigating through the client's responses and this navigation is an intellectual effort that demands conscious action and choice. It can not be done without knowing what you are doing, regardless of whether you call what you are doing cold reading or not.

Skilled pianists are able to play complicated pieces and participate in conversations at the same time. The conversations require their conscious awareness, the musical pieces does not. Is playing a piece on an instrument equal to executing cold reading? No, it is not, because playing complicated pieces on a piano does not offer an intellectual challenge for a skilled piano player in the way a psychic session does to a psychic, regardless of skill. There are no sudden interruptions when playing a piece of music you've played ten or hundreds of times before, demanding you to chose between one, two or more optional routes to continue. The psychic session is nothing but optional routes, nothing but adaptation to the client's responses. The psychic session is thus comparable to the pianist's conscious conversation rather than his unconscious playing.

Walking is done more or less unconsciously. You don't think of the steps you take and that works fine, until your path offers an obstacle, let's say a curb. If you are not conscious of the curb and adjust your steps to it, you will stumble on it. Your walking is unconscious but your adjustment to obstacles is not. If you don't become aware of the obstacle, your unconscious walking will be interrupted.

Unconscious actions are essential to us humans. We would not be able to cope with everyday life if everything

we did demanded our conscious awareness. In fact, a great portion of our lives consists of performing unconscious acts. But convincing people that we are in contact with their departed loved ones is not one of those acts.

On February 26 and 27, 2005, I and a friend of mine recorded two séances held by self-proclaimed psychic Pehr Trollsveden. He is a peddler in superstition who, apart from doing psychic séances, operates a psychic hotline phone service and provides online shopping, should you be interested in buying crystals or other "spiritual" gadgets. I don't think he is held in high regard even in the psychic community, but he has a very interesting technique. He simply walks around among the sitters of the séance, stops behind a person, lays his hands on the client's shoulders and rattles off for three to five minutes about older women cleaning kitchen floors and ancient viking spirit guides. He has a flow of words comparable to that of John Edward, but unlike him, Trollsveden makes no room for client feedback. So when he is done with one person, he doesn't wait for confirmation or comments, he just goes on to the next client. In an hour, he works through an impressing amount of clients, finishes off making alleged contact with some dead pets, and that's it. The money, 100 Swedish Kronor (approx. \$12) a head, is stuck right down his pocket.

This technique is a variation of what I call shotgun. You produce so many details and statements at a fast rate that the client will be hit by some detail or details that he or she is able to render personal significance and forget all the rest that have no significance at all. John Edward and many others use the same technique, I'm pretty sure that you're familiar with it. It enables the psychic to be more detailed than when using stock spiel, which is a set of general statements that fits most people. And when two such details out of 20 stick and the rest is forgotten, the client is convinced; if two features of a passed away grandmother fit and the rest is forgotten, the client is satisfied.

Trollsveden offers no opportunity for feedback; there is no interaction whatsoever in his sessions. Thus, it could be accomplished unconsciously (not that I think he doesn't know exactly what he is doing). Comparing the first day's session with that of the second day, it is also apparent that Trollsveden recycles the same statements over and over again. So it could in theory mean that he is unaware of what he is saying and just repeats often used phrases unconsciously.

But when John Edward is using the shotgun technique, he is doing it in interaction with the clients. He is constantly faced with feedback from the client that requires him to make choices, to adapt to what the client is saying. That is an intellectual task that demands conscious awareness, i.e. Edward must know what he is doing in order to accomplish anything (although we know much is accomplished during editing of his shows).

There is more to be said on this subject, but for now, I propose that the notion that psychics are unaware of what they are doing is an understandable fallacy among followers of psychics but an ignorant misconception among skeptics. The psychic session offers intellectual tasks that cannot be accomplished unconsciously. The notion persists among skeptics because they tend to read Hyman or McLaren instead of visiting a séance and see what is actually taking place during a psychic session.

I also propose that the definition of cold reading as a technique is at fault and does not sufficiently describe what a psychic session is about. It is better defined as a joint effort by at least two persons in social interaction to confirm one's belief in the other's supernatural knowledge or ability, employing one or more psychological methods of illusion or suggestion.

I see no reason to forgive psychics; for they know that they do not speak to the departed.

(Thanks to Mr. Jespert Jerkert for language corrections.)

References

- Hyman, R. (1996). 'Cold Reading': How to Convince Strangers That You Know All About Them. In J. Nickell, B. Karr, & T. Genoni (Eds.), *The Outer Edge. Classic Investigations of the Paranormal* (pp. 71-84). New York: Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, Inc.
- McLaren, K. (2004). Bridging the Chasm between Two Cultures. *Skeptical Inquirer*, 28, (3).
- Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cold_reading

Comments

Carl said...

Greatly written. Indeed
- Respect from a fellow skeptic.
February 2, 2007 12:59 PM

Maakuz said...

This site is just great – rarely have I seen such well-written arguments aimed against paranormal claims.

Got this site bookmarked, keep up the good job!
February 2, 2007 5:30 PM

St. Jimmy said...

Interesting, I had never thought that anyone really believed Edward & co. weren't doing it on purpose.

Enlightening, thank you very much.
February 2, 2007 8:09 PM

Slither said...

Cold Reading is fascinating and has endless real-world applications in social settings, not to trick people, but just in understanding dynamics and recognizing the first clues that somebody real friendly is actually intending to sell you something.

In my opinion, the best written and most comprehensive book on the subject, with excellent examples and deconstructed reading sessions is Ian Rowland's *Full Facts Book of Cold Reading*.
<http://ianrowland.com/ItemsToBuy/ColdReading/Cold-ReadingMain1.html>

You'll occasionally find it on ebay by people claiming it's out of print. It's expensive but worth it. I'm not the author and have no affiliation with him. Just an appreciative Skep-chick.

Jan

February 4, 2007 7:33 PM

Sean Keboe said...

A very well written article.

Personally, the reason why I give psychics the benefit of the doubt regarding cold-reading is to make it more difficult to be sued.

I'd say it's safer to say "John Edwards is not using psychic powers" than it would be to say "John Edwards is a fraud".

February 5, 2007 3:14 PM

luke said...

I am of the opinion that there are two types of psychics. Those who know they are frauds, and those who are deluded in believing they are truly psychic.

I agree that most mediums are of the first type. Certainly those who do physical manifestations are. You can't make a trumpet float using trickery and not know you are using trickery unless you are quite insane.

However, M. Lavar Keene discusses in the beginning of his terrific book, *The Psychic Mafia*, that when two mediums first meet, they probe each other carefully to see if the other is an "open" or "closed" medium. And he is speaking as a former "open" medium himself. An open medium is one who has self-knowledge of being a fraud. A closed medium is one who is deluded in the belief of being actually psychic.

So in the face of someone who was in the business like Keene, I think Garvin may be off the mark when he flatly asserts it is not possible for a medium to be unconsciously performing a cold reading.

However, I am of the opinion that the vast majority of mediums are of the open variety.

Your run of the mill psychic, however, can easily be "closed." By run of the mill, I mean those who make predictions of the future and do not sit with clients and who do not claim to be in contact with any entities.

I think determining whether a psychic of this type is open or closed is much more difficult, and so as skeptics, we must give them the benefit of the doubt before leaping to a charge of fraud.

My two cents.

February 9, 2007 1:16 AM