
WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A MEDIUM? A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH ON THE MEDIUMSHIP EXPERIENCE IN ITALY

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Abstract

Few studies have focused on the point of view of individuals who claim to possess mediumistic abilities. The present study aimed to explore these experiences, including the onset and hypothetical development of such abilities, the modalities in which mediumistic sessions occur, and the ethical value attributed by mediums to their abilities, as well as the relationship they establish with those who are grieving. Data were collected from nine Italian mediums (all female, mean 58; SD = 11). Semi-structured interviews were realised following Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The collected data were processed using Thematic Analysis. Three main thematic areas emerged from the analysis: ‘Onset and development of mediumistic abilities’, ‘Channelling process and modalities’, and ‘Relationship with grievors and ethical dimension’. The results revealed a wide range of experiences related to the onset and development of similar abilities, although the occurrence of losses and grief in childhood and/or adulthood often emerged as a significant motivational factor. Different approaches to conducting mediumistic sessions were also identified. Participants emphasised the high ethical value they ascribed to their abilities as a means of alleviating the suffering of those who are grieving.

Keywords: mediumship, channelling sessions, qualitative research, bereavement

1. Introduction

The term *medium* indicates those who believe to possess the ability to contact and communicate with transcendental dimensions, being ‘channellers’ between two different levels of reality [1]. The communication carried out by mediums can take place with immaterial entities of different types, i.e. angels, guiding spirits, or other intermediary entities and spirits of the deceased [2]. This type of practice is linked to the belief that immaterial entities exist and this belief is inherent to various religions and cultures worldwide. For instance, shamanic traditions, widespread across many continents, are rooted in the belief that all

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elements in the world, including animals, plants and natural phenomena, possess a spiritual essence. Shamans are revered figures within these cultures, as they are believed to have the ability to connect with and influence the spiritual realms. They act as intermediaries between the physical and incorporeal dimensions. Shamanic practitioners are known for their capacity to enter altered states of consciousness through techniques such as drumming, chanting, dancing, or the use of hallucinogenic substances. In these altered states, they embark on otherworldly journeys to communicate with spirits, ancestors, and other entities. These interactions may involve seeking guidance, healing, or performing specific tasks [3].

Shamanic beliefs form a fundamental substratum that has influenced and nurtured popular beliefs, even in regions where traditional canonical religions have historically replaced this kind of faith [4]. Although shamanism and mediumship have distinct cultural and historical contexts, there are overlapping features and similarities that create a continuity in popular culture. These include the shared conviction that it is possible to establish a connection with the spirits of deceased and that certain individuals possess the ability to contact them. Spiritualism, as a Western phenomenon that acknowledges this possibility emerged relatively recently and experienced significant growth in the United States during the first half of the 20th century [5]. In the past century, both shamanism and spiritualism have been revitalized within Western countries through the influence of New Age culture [6].

Italy, being a predominantly Catholic country, has deeply ingrained Catholicism within its social fabric [7]. Although the Catholic Church's doctrine considers mediumship to be a grave sin, in practice, mourners often turn to mediums to establish contact with their departed loved ones. Specifically, Catholic doctrine condemns such practices in Articles 2115 (stating that God can reveal the future to prophets and saints, but curiosity regarding these matters should be avoided) and 2116 (rejecting all forms of divination as they demonstrate a desire to manipulate time and seek advantage from occult forces) [https://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism_it/index_it.htm].

Because of the significant implications of the issue of channelling, studies in the last decades have attempted to explore the phenomenon, both from a qualitative and quantitative point of view. The qualitative studies in this field have focused on gathering the experiences of individuals who claim to possess mediumistic abilities [8]. On the other hand, quantitative studies have aimed to examine the veracity and reliability of such mediumistic faculties. These studies often involve mediums participating in rigorous, double-blind or even triple-blind experimental research designs to minimize the potential for "fraud, cold reading, and similar sensory explanations" [2, p. 178]. The present study aligns with this background and, more specifically, seeks to expand upon the qualitative findings. It aims to further explore the experiences of mediums and delve deeper into the phenomenon by considering the first-hand accounts provided by the mediums themselves, thereby adding additional elements and depth to the study.

2. Literature review

The results obtained from various study protocols over the last decades have been conflicting [9], since sometimes they did not detect adequate demonstrable faculties from the mediums nor the accuracy of the information they provided [10], while in numerous other cases, including recent ones, they actually detected an anomalous reception of information from some mediums [11], which cannot be explained using traditional communication methods [12]. Mediums are frequently sought in particular by grieverers hoping to re-establish a bond with their loved deceased [13]. Despite the difficulty to study this phenomenon, some studies highlighted that, in cases in which the mediumistic sessions were carried out with attentiveness for the grieverers, many positive effects, among which feelings of greater serenity, a better ability to process the loss and rebuild one's life even without the physical presence of the deceased and a decreased fear of facing death [8]. Due to the profound significance that certain individuals, particularly those who are grieving, attribute to mediumistic experiences, some studies have already tried to investigate the personal experiences described directly by mediums themselves, in order to delve even deeper into this phenomenon. These studies have indeed reported some remarkable individual differences between mediums in terms of the personal journey that has led to the recognition of their mediumistic abilities, even if some of them have highlighted how often painful or even traumatic experiences can be present, particularly during the mediums' childhood, including painful losses, which can sometimes provide a further motivational drive to explore the mediumistic field [14].

Regarding the process of communicating with the deceased, various modalities have emerged. These include both trance-like states and more alert conditions. Mediums can convey messages from the afterlife through direct dialogue with grieverers or through other means such as automatic writing, where writing flows without the medium's conscious control [2, 15]. Literature includes testimonies indicating that mediumistic faculties often involve multiple senses, particularly sight (clairvoyance), hearing (clairaudience), and sensory perceptions [16]. Lastly, the ethical dimension that underlies the mediums' relationship with those who have experienced the loss of a loved one is of great importance. Studies have shown that mediums generally attribute significant ethical value to their abilities. They are aware of the intense fragility of grieverers and view their abilities as a means to provide relief from the profound suffering they are going through. Therefore, mediums recognize the importance of conducting themselves in an honest and respectful manner [14, 17].

However, it is undoubtedly necessary to realise more studies "using randomization schemes, control groups, a standard grief instrument, and appropriate statistical tests to analyse the therapeutic effects of a personal mediumship reading" [2, p. 184], and despite the growing attention given to the phenomenon, there remains a scarcity of studies conducted in this field, particularly qualitative research that explores the perspectives of individuals who

identify themselves as mediums. Then, the present research has therefore been elaborated with the aim to explore the direct experiences of people who consider themselves mediums, in order to better understand how these abilities were discovered and developed, how a typical mediumistic sitting takes place and what it involves, and the meaning these people give to their faculties and to the relationship they build with bereaved people who ask for a consultation and related ethical aspects.

3. The study

3.1. Participants

Nine female participants, ranging in age from 44 to 72 years old (mean age: 58; SD: 11), residing in the northern region of Italy, and claiming to possess mediumistic abilities, participated in this study. The initial mediums were approached during a conference focused on the topic of mediumship that took place in Italy a few months prior. The researchers presented the study project to these mediums and inquired about their interest in learning more about it and participating. Subsequently, a snowball sampling approach was employed. The initial participants were asked to identify other mediums who might be interested in participating in the study and provide them with the researchers' contact information for a more detailed description of the research. As mentioned earlier, all participants were provided with a comprehensive explanation of the research objectives, methodology, data storage and protection procedures. They were assured of maximum privacy and anonymity, and any questions they had were thoroughly addressed. Furthermore, prior to participating in the research procedures, all participants received a written informed consent form via email. They were requested to carefully read, sign, and return the consent form to the researchers, officially confirming their willingness to take part in the study.

The study followed the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and the Code of Conduct and the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki, it also received research ethics approval from the Health Sciences and Science Research Ethics Committee of the University of Padova (reference no. 5315BAD04884B50A1C86FB139403C2B5).

3.2. Data collection

The research employed a qualitative methodology, specifically following the principles of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) [18]. This approach was chosen as it allows for an in-depth exploration of new and scarcely investigated phenomena by delving into the direct perspectives of the individuals involved, without imposing preconceived notions from the researchers. A semi-structured interviews were conducted to investigate various aspects. These included how the participants' journey into mediumship began, the initial emergence of their faculties, and the typical process of a mediumistic session.

Additionally, questions were asked about the perceived value of their abilities and the relationships they established with those who sought their help, particularly grievors seeking to reconnect with a deceased loved one. Ethical implications were given special attention. Data were collected via internet using online meeting platforms such as Skype or Zoom, as well as through phone calls, to prioritize the health and safety of both the participants and the researchers. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes.

With explicit consent from each participant, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim into separate text files, with one file for each interview.

3.3. Data analysis

The obtained written texts were subsequently analysed following the principals of Thematic Analysis [19], which consists of six main phases: engaging in preparatory organization, reading the texts carefully, coding data, interpreting themes, searching for alternative explanations, and producing the final report [20].

The researchers, more specifically, proceeded by highlighting some particularly meaningful concepts in each text, creating adequate labels (codes) to describe their meaning, and subsequently comparing these elements with those found in the other participants' narrations. Lastly, broader, common themes to all the texts were identified and proper thematic categories to describe them were created. Therefore, the process adopted was a bottom-up one, since all the obtained categories emerged directly from the texts without pre-defined ones available at the beginning of it. The process was conducted by two researchers with a precise experience in qualitative analysis, who proceeded in parallel and subsequently compared the obtained thematic categories, to ensure an objective interpretation of the data. Their work was supported by the software for qualitative textual analysis *Atlas.ti* [21].

4. Results

From the analysed data three fundamental thematic categories have emerged: 'Onset and development of mediumistic abilities', 'Channelling process and modalities' and 'Relationship with grievors and ethical dimension'.

4.1. First thematic category - Onset and development of mediumistic abilities

As regards the development process of their mediumistic abilities, each participant presented the peculiarities of this path.

For some mediums, mediumistic faculties have always been part of their life, and have therefore often been experienced as something natural since childhood, since the participants realised only later in life that these were not experiences common to everyone. This has been reported for example by Anna,

a 72-year-old woman: “I’ve always been like this, I never noticed it, I thought it was a normal thing that everyone had. [...] then one day a friend comes to me and tells me that her aunt had died and I say: ‘But, is she a person not very tall, tall like this, with a bob haircut, with a beige-brown skirt, and with two little legs like this?’ and she said yes!”

Similarly Teresa, a 47-year-old woman, indicated that for her as well the approach to mediumship represented something natural, since it had always been part of her family history, especially on the maternal side and in female relatives, and therefore a theme already known and studied in her family, which helped her understand and accept her faculties: “I was very lucky, because in my family all the women of the maternal branch have always been curious about this discipline. [...] all the terms related to esotericism, to sensitivity, were always well-liked. My dad resisted these themes a little but the women spoke very freely, and for this I say that I was lucky since I was not afraid of these things, because we spoke in a completely natural way about it. But as a child I didn’t see, I didn’t hear anything, [...], but my mum told me: ‘Look, one day it will come to you because it’s in your blood!’ and then in the end it happened.”

Laura, a 54-year-old woman, on the other hand, introduced an aspect of considerable importance in this regard, which is found in the narrations of most of the participants, namely that of grief as an event related in some way to the discovery of one’s mediumistic faculties, or in any case as a further and powerful source of motivation to approach the world of mediumship: “A week after my father’s funeral [...] I couldn’t sleep [...] I turn on the light [...] I’m there looking around and I see my father walk through the door [...] he looked beautiful, I remembered him very emaciated, unfortunately we all witnessed his death, I remembered him very sick... poor thing. I see him enter my room very handsome, very bright but with earthly clothes. He spoke but I could not hear him, I could not understand what he was saying, but he approached me smiling, he sat down next to me [...] He invited me to lie down, I lied down and he tucked me in, and he kept talking. [...]. I saw my father then I began the clairaudience, to listen, I decided not to be afraid of all this but to try to understand.”

Furthermore, apart from losing loved ones during childhood, many other participants suffered losses later in their life, during adulthood, such as Giovanna, a 71-year-old woman, who reported that she began to approach the world of mediumship in particular after the early loss of her brother, who died of cancer, although she had a previous interest in the theme as well: “So there has always been an interest, then when my brother fell ill, who then died at the age of fifty, with a brain cancer, the worst of all, from there I started taking courses.”

Similarly, Valeria, a 55-year-old woman, narrated a peculiar experience that for her marked the beginning of an in-depth study of the world of mediumship and her faculties, which took place at a time when she was about to lose a loved one as well due to a serious illness: “In February 2019, [...] on that occasion there was a very dear friend of mine hospitalised. [...] Unfortunately he was seriously ill and he called me precisely to say goodbye, but his greeting was

an almost definitive greeting. [...] I was very sad [...] I was basically like a caged lion [...] I made a prayer. I asked the Universe to support him in his path, whatever path he had to take. And that's when I heard a voice inside my head. The voice said to me: 'Don't worry about him, we'll take care of him. However, from now on, you have to commit yourself to attending...' how can I explain? I was thinking of attending a course for mediumistic abilities, also because I had already matured this desire of mine for communication with the beyond for some time at that point."

Lastly, for some of the participants, the minority, the approach to mediumship instead happened more by chance, like some sort of game, and subsequently evolved into something more and more significant, as reported for example by Erica, a 65-year-old woman: "I didn't get the first signs of mediumistic abilities when I was little, as often happens to people who have these particular faculties, but I realised that there was something special about me when, at the end of the '70s, together with some friends, we played the 'game of the glass'. It is said that this 'game' is a way to get in touch with the afterlife. A board is built with the letters of the alphabet, the participants all put a finger on a glass at the same time and it begins to move on the letters of the board, thus forming sentences. After some experiences of this kind, which were done purely for fun and curiosity, I tried to do the same thing using a pen and I noticed that the pen moved on the paper without me commanding it: it was a strange sensation, difficult to describe".

However, even in these cases in which the mediumistic faculties were discovered more by chance, it was often later, as for many other participants, an experience of grieving that gave subsequent motivational drive to listening and refining these faculties. Erica herself, for example, underlined this aspect in her interview: "At that time I had heard of automatic writing and since I was attracted to this thing I began to experiment with the use of the pen. [...] At that time, however, I had no knowledge about it and no possibility of consulting anyone. My writing attempts lasted for 10 years, but the results were practically nothing. [...] I wrote the first meaningful sentence after my father's sudden death [...]. On that occasion, I took the pen and asked my father what had happened. The answer was: 'At first I was scared, then it was like falling asleep'. His death was the beginning of a great change for me."

The losses and grief experienced during their life, both in childhood and later, have sometimes also contributed to shape the type of contacts with the deceased that some participants reported having preferentially. Teresa, for example, who indicated that she had lost her father and had suffered a lot because of it, reported how in the present she felt much more inclined to channel deceased men who were also fathers, precisely because of her peculiar sensibility to this type of relationship: "I experienced my father's death in a bad way, it really touched me deeply, he was a point of reference for me, and now many deceased fathers come to me because I can understand much more what it means to lose a father".

In relation to their first peculiar experiences of contact with a further dimension, an interesting aspect is that most of the mediums reported that they had never felt fear towards such events, despite them being rather unusual, as Giovanna, for example, indicated: “No, no, fortunately I’ve never been afraid, I’ve never experienced things that frightened me”.

Some of them, on the other hand, reported more fear and concerns not generally linked to, however, the experience itself but rather to the difficulty of accepting their faculties, as described for example by Pia, a 44-year-old woman who, coming from a Catholic family, feared that her ability could be in sharp contrast to religious precepts: “Let’s say that I grew up in a Catholic family, among other things, so I also had a hard time accepting what I felt was a gift, so I often went to the priest, I went to confession, to tell him what I was experiencing”.

Angela, a 66-year-old woman, reported how she has experienced as well some fear, however, more for the possibility of not being accepted by others, rather than for the experience itself: “I can’t even tell you all the fears I had in doing this, because I was terrified of being judged, of being taken for a lousy, fake psychic, for a fortune teller. [...] I was terrified, so much that I didn’t exist [from the point of view of advertising] anywhere.”

The mediums have also described the way in which, following the discovery of their faculties, they worked on them and therefore how they managed to develop and refine their abilities. Most of them reported in particular how they had to face a complex path in order to be able to refine their sensitivity, dedicating a lot of passion and commitment to it, and often also following more formal courses organised by other expert mediums, most of which in England, as Teresa reported: “And then a challenge with myself on a rational level began [...]. So I said okay, I’ll try it on my own, if you see my house, it’s full of books, so I started on my own but no one in the books explained how to do it, no one explained the secret to you and so of course I had to do everything by myself. [...] I met a person who brought me to know the spiritualism school in England, I went there but I cried all the time because I couldn’t contact anyone, being self-taught they gave very strict rules [...]. However, after some time, little by little, defeating all my mental limits, I succeeded.”

However, for others there were no formal courses, but a constant personal commitment to improve and understand their faculties, as Laura, for example, described: “A lot by myself, I learned, I experimented by myself [...] I was fourteen or fifteen years old, I went on just for personal research. I remember inventing communication possibilities, so for example one thing I did was take a large billboard, I wrote many letters [...], then I cut them out and made small squares and said ‘If the spirits work with energy they will be able to do this, if they move objects, they will also be able to do this. So I would put all these letters scattered on the table and say: ‘I’d like to receive a message, use them and write me something’. I think I spent a month every night like this but one morning I found written: ‘Hello Laura’. Then you experience, if you love it, and

if you want to understand, you want to know, there's this hunger inside that leads you to search [...] you feel it inside how to be able to work with the world of the spirit."

Lastly, for some participants (the minority), on the other hand, mediumistic abilities seem to have always been part of their daily reality, without the need to study or undertake particular paths to refine and develop them, as for example Pia reported, who even underlined that she sometimes felt criticised by other mediums as well precisely for the fact that she has never followed formal paths of learning and refinement of her faculties: "I really grew up with the use of the spirit. I have never studied mediumship, astrology, or cartomancy, because mine is a gift. [...] And I am proud of it, look, I am proud of it also because in the world of mediums I have always been very snubbed even by my colleagues, because they all go to England, they all go to study here and there."

4.2. Second thematic area - Channelling modalities

Concerning moreover the theme relating to how the participants' faculties concretely manifest themselves in the present and how a typical channelling session takes place, each of them described different methods and procedures. Some have described how the main means by which they manage to receive messages from the deceased person is through sudden images, an ability commonly defined as clairvoyance, as Anna reported for example: "The other day a girl whose dear friend had died came to me, I had a visualization, and I said: 'I see a guy with dark hair, 5'7"' tall, in a mustard-coloured shirt'. Of course, I don't see the precise features, but I visualize that I can describe it."

Something similar was also described by Giovanna: "If I put myself in a condition of listening near a person, this film begins to unfold, I begin to see a sort of film, I describe the person, I perceive how they are, their character, sometimes they give a name, sometimes dates, the stranger things come to you because they let themselves be recognised by the strangest things".

Other mediums, on the other hand, have indicated that for them the contact occurs mainly at the level of sounds and voices, as reported for example by Teresa, who reported that she is not able to follow the path of clairvoyance, but that she has developed what she defines as 'clear knowledge', that is an inner sensation of knowledge of the person, even though they do not manifest visually: "For example, I don't see, many teachings are based on clairvoyance, but I don't see, and so I had to find my way. [...]. In my case it works that I have perceptions and clear knowledge. For example, when a deceased person arrives, I don't see him, I can't give you a physical description."

Other participants, such as Pia, indicated that they were able to use both clairvoyance and clairaudience (the ability to hear the voice of deceased people): "I am both clairvoyant and clairaudient [...], it means that just on an auditory level, I hear whispering, they speak to me or if they do not speak to me telepathically most of the thoughts and information arrive in my mind. [...]"

Obviously other times I really see them but I see them not in my mind but I see them outside, that is, as I see a living person.”

There are also considerable differences concerning the specific procedures and the amount of concentration necessary for the medium to be able to channel. Among the participants, the majority of them reported they do not need to reach a particular cognitive state in order to be able to contact the spirits of the deceased, but that in fact the contact can often happen rather spontaneously. This has been described for example by Pia, who even reported to be able to perceive the presence of the deceased even without actively searching for them, and she therefore has also specified she cannot visit certain places where many spirits could easily be found, as for example cemeteries, precisely because she would be overwhelmed by their presence: “No, I don't even decide, I do not say: ‘Now I'll do mediumship’, I don't decide anything at all. I'm just like that. I don't need to, of course if I am worried for something, I'm nervous, I try to calm down for a moment, of course [...] I'm neither in a trance or anything, I'm conscious, it's more similar to the sensation one has when is meditating [...] there are places I can't enter. Like if I had to enter a cemetery it would be the end for me, I can't enter there because I hear them, that is, I hear their voices, they talk to me, I see them, there are so many. [...] Even in hospitals it has happened to me, sometimes I went there just to pay a visit to a relative [...] and I saw a lady waiting there and her deceased husband stood in front of me and said: ‘Please, can you tell her that I'm here?’.”

Anna has also reported similar experiences, in which the contact with the deceased did not require any preparation but simply happened, once even in a rather tragic situation, in which a woman had passed away in the streets and Anna felt the need to comfort her spirit: “Once it happened to me, when I was at the station [...] I saw someone lying on the ground with two paramedics nearby, I went to listen to the wind and understood she was dead, and I immediately felt she was full of fear, so I contacted her, I was there I had to do something, and then I started to tell her: ‘Don't be afraid, now you're done, what was before is over, you are now free, you don't have to be afraid anymore because it blocks your path, now let yourself be carried, of course you will follow your body and go to the place where they place it, but you are now in another dimension, and you don't have to be afraid, that's enough, that's enough fear, think about love’.”

Only one medium, Giovanna, described entering a trance-like state, albeit a less intense one, a condition that could be considered halfway between a proper trance and complete lucidity: “Trance is a big word, I think there are few people in the world who can do physical trance, [...] ours are altered states of consciousness. Many times I don't remember what has precisely happened, but I'm always mentally present in the moment.”

Other mediums instead reported relying on other methods as well, such as Valeria, for example, who said she usually relies on the so-called opening of the Akashic registers, a concept that takes its origins from Hinduism, and on automatic writing: “I proceed with the opening of the registers, of the Akashic registers [...]. The person comes to me with a question. And of course I prepare

myself, I prepare myself with prayers and small invocations. [...] And with the opening of the registers and the reading of the question, then the answer comes to me. [...] More than a few times it can happen that there is always this voice that makes me write because with the opening of the Akashic registers there are more possibilities. [...] And dictation is basically... It's this internal voice, inside my head. It is peculiar because at the beginning it is a bit confusing [...] there is a fairly fast dictation and the end is as fast as the beginning. [...] When what needs to be said to me is finished, there are no more words. The mind is empty, everything stops."

Some mediums have also indicated the way they approach the requests of grievers who come to them asking for a consultation to communicate with their deceased loved one. A particularly interesting point in this regard, for example, emerged from Laura's narration, who underlined how it is extremely important that no previous information concerning the deceased is given to the medium, this because many mediums have the ability of 'psychometrics', that is, the ability to receive information about a person from just a photograph of him/her, an aspect which however does not mean that the medium is actually communicating with the deceased himself/herself: "As a medium you shouldn't ask for the photograph of the person who is no longer there, because we have the ability of psychometry, that is, to be able to read a photograph, you bring me a photo, you bring me an object, you bring me anything of the person who is no longer in this dimension, I look at it if it's a photo, I touch it if it's an object and I can tell you anything you want about the person. [...] So the person who goes to ask for a contact must sit down and say nothing, because if the medium is a medium, it is he/she who must tell you whose spirit is nearby, it is not you who must tell the medium who you are looking for."

Moreover, the experience of channelling the deceased represents for many mediums an event that in any case requires considerable energy and leaves the person rather tired, as described for example by Teresa: "If I do more than three mediumship sessions a day I can no longer do anything, I can no longer think properly".

Pia explained as well how making contact deeply involves her physicality, indeed agreeing with Teresa about the consequent loss of energy: "So when I make contact with the spirit intended as deceased [...] I feel tired because the spirits to be able to manifest themselves take their energies either from the environment or from the medium, that's why you feel cold during a mediumistic session, because energy equals heat."

Pia also recounted how sometimes, especially if a person's death occurs violently, she is able to perceive the same sensations experienced by the deceased before dying, in a way that is naturally extremely engaging and painful for her: "[...] I don't know how to explain because when I see these things I experience them first-hand and then I feel terrible. [...] She died of cold, literally. And she made me feel, see that she was walking. I was her at that moment, she died of cold because she didn't have the courage to get up, because she was afraid he was still there. She died not because of her wounds, she died like this.

When these things happen to me, I feel terrible, because I feel the fear they have... during channelling sessions I feel how they died, how they lived, the emotions they had... indeed, many times when I make contacts, I get emotional too, I cry because I feel their suffering.”

Pia also indicated that it is particularly painful for her to channel deceased children, due to the fact that they do not realize they are dead: “I really suffer a lot when children arrive. Because they don’t even realize they’re dead. I remember an evening during a public mediumship session at a conference. I was channelling with a lady and I was in front of her. [...] And just as I was talking to this lady, at a certain point this child arrives [...] with a bicycle, from the world of the Spirit, and he says to me: ‘I want my mum’. So I said to the boy: ‘What are you doing here? You must go with the angels!’. But the baby didn’t want to leave, and I started to cry.”

Apart from some particularly upsetting and painful episodes, the majority of mediums in any case reported that they usually experience channelling sessions with a positive emotional intensity, in particular as a moment of meaningful sharing with grievors who seek mediumistic contact. For example, Laura described the intense value of some moments in which, through channelling, she manages to provide effective evidence of the fact that she is indeed communicating with their deceased loved ones, giving people a sense of wonder and intense emotion: “There is so much emotion and people don’t even remember everything, they are excited, they are confused, because we bombard them, if you are really a medium you bombard the person in front of you with information, and the information is the famous evidence, that is, all those things that a spiritual entity tells you and tells you about their life, because whoever you have in front of you must be certain that you are talking to that specific loved one. They tell you things that are incredible, with a surgical precision, painstaking, absolutely fantastic. [...] And whoever is in front of me I know how they feel and they say: ‘But who is this person? How does she know all these things?’, there they realize that something really big is happening, that it’s not a story, that it’s not an invention, that it’s not a suggestion, because a stranger can’t tell you certain things if there is not someone who is informing him/her.”

Pia has expressed as well very positive emotions related to some of her channelling experiences, in particular, similarly to Laura, in relation to the surprise she feels when some deceased report extremely specific details, which the medium could have never known and which become certain proof of the truthfulness of the experience for the person requesting a contact: “The surprising thing, the surprising thing is that many times I have made beautiful contacts because then the spirits really give you certain details that even I, who have been communicating with the world of the Spirit for 31 years, still today find shocking, I swear. They are things that you really can’t imagine, even if you want to imagine them. Honestly, the most beautiful thing is when the sceptics arrive, look, I really enjoy it, it’s beautiful because then they cry the most [...] no, it’s fantastic and the beautiful thing is that many times the spirits tell me things that not even the person there knows and they have to go home to ask

their mother, sister and then they write to me the next day telling me that I was right, that they didn't know but it's true, and so there you say: 'Wow, this is really proof'."

4.3. Third thematic area - Relationship with grievors and ethical dimension

The mediums also reflected on the meaning and value they give to their own faculties. In this regard, all the participants described their faculties as a gift or a service to be offered to others who may benefit from it, as explained for example by Luisa, a 47-year-old woman: "As I told you, it is putting yourself at service. [...] I simply consider it similar to the greengrocer who gives you the fruits of the earth, as the teacher who teaches you, you put a gift to good use and make it available to others. If one gives from the heart and gives all one has, for me it is almost a liberation, well, it is a bit like saying finally in some field I can finally be who I am and I simply express it and share it. I give my contribution on this earth."

Similarly, Giovanna highlighted the importance of putting oneself at the service of others who are facing a moment of suffering, in order to be able to alleviate their pain: "To lend a hand, to try and understand existence, what happens. Sometimes I have so many doubts but when the people in front of you come with a sad face and bitterness in their eyes and go away having maybe untied a knot in their chest and cry and open up, perhaps the result is already that."

Valeria also confirmed the same point of view: "The aim of bringing a little more serenity, a little more harmony into the situation in which the person lives. Just this. Making sure that in a moment perhaps of great discomfort, it can be helpful. Making sure that in a moment in which they miss a deceased loved one [...] you can bring a little help and ensure that the hard and perhaps sad and painful period can flow away more easily, you can give a little support."

Angela, in line with the thoughts of the other mediums, reported that from her point of view it is of fundamental importance to carefully take into consideration the pain and vulnerability of those who request a consultation, to be aware of the fact that it takes very little to worsen the suffering of those who are already very fragile, and therefore she underlined the mediums' need to constantly work on themselves in order to better refine their faculties, as well as to welcome even those who cannot offer a payment: "There are those who come out of curiosity, or because they are desperate, and in this case, when I see desperate people, among other things, the ethics I try to use, I really do this thing... I really pray every day, right? But I realised how much I could influence people [...] and that is, you can ruin the person even with just a look, even if a person is worried and you show yourself a little worried as well, so you put them in total panic because I feel their panic and then this is really... this pushed me even more and more to continue working on myself, to do meditation [...] Ethics are very, very important. Even if I try to be as humble as possible and to put myself at the service of people, when there is someone who has no money, who

has nothing, I don't charge them. [...] My real intention is to put truth, love and service into it, here service is perhaps the right word."

As regards indeed the possibility of asking for payment for the consulting services they offer, some mediums have indicated that they ask for payment only from those who can actually provide it, however also offering their free support to those who do not have the possibility to pay, as Pia, for example, pointed out: "I had to make a choice, it was also a matter of time I could dedicate to this, and therefore I chose to request a payment and it has been six years since I registered for a VAT, because I am in compliance with the law, and it has also become my daily life. Obviously, for those who can't pay [...] I obviously do it for free, God forbid, of course. But yes, it has also become my job."

However, most of the participants do not receive payment at all for their consultations, as Giovanna, for example, reported: "I don't get paid, because I've always had my job, I can't do it, I understand it's wrong, we've talked about it many times with other mediums too, there are those who get paid and it's OK if they do but I cannot. There have also been financial investments for all the courses done, but it's my thing, I don't know, for now I can't, especially if I have a mother, or a person who is grieving."

Erica, similarly, does not ask for money as well, as she has learned to do this since she started channelling with a dear friend of hers, now deceased. Erica also underlined another topic of great importance, namely the need to be careful not to believe that, thanks to one's own faculties, the mediums could replace other healthcare professionals, such as psychotherapists, for example, and therefore to always maintain a clear boundary between the type of support they can offer and the one other professional categories provide: "We made ourselves available to those in need, always free of charge, because we were continually told by the world of the Spirit that 'what is given to you for free must be returned to others free of charge as well'. All this took place with the utmost respect for people and their privacy, aware that often those who came to meet us opened up to us, told us about their sufferings and their secrets. We have never replaced the work of a psychotherapist, we have never judged who was in front of us. We have always considered ourselves good friends who brought a word of comfort or offered a lesson we received from a reality parallel to ours."

Furthermore, within the context of their personal ethics with which they approach grieving people who ask for their support, the mediums also reflected on the theme of honesty with which they deal with what happens during mediumistic session, in particular with regard to the possibility of omitting some parts of the messages they receive during channellings. All the participants reported that they absolutely feel the need, also from an ethical point of view, to fully communicate the messages that came to them from the deceased. Some of them choose the language they consider most suitable for the listener's possibilities, but the message is not changed nor any part is omitted, as Teresa, for example, made explicit: "I trust the spiritual world a lot, and if a certain piece of information arrives from there and perhaps even said in a certain way, I try not to change my word or tone of voice because I have noticed that if I change

my message, it doesn't arrive properly to people, it doesn't psychologically activate them because they must understand it exactly with that specific word, with that tone, otherwise the miracle of transformation doesn't happen, nothing happens, and maybe they get angry because they can't understand".

Laura confirmed as well that she does not change the message given nor she omits any part of it. However, she indicated how, contrary to Teresa, she believes sometimes some words can and should be changed in order to be better understood and accepted by the person: "Change the word yes. Because we have this great responsibility, which is precisely the word. With a word we can kill a person, or we can give them life. [...] Depending on the person I find myself in front of [...] I would never allow myself to change the meaning of what is being said, but perhaps I find a synonym. Because perhaps that person is already in great pain [...] But one must never, in the most absolute way, change the meaning of what is being said."

Lastly, some mediums have also reflected on a topic of great importance to them on an ethical level, namely the fact that, since channelling is not an immediate and simple process, there is the possibility that sometimes the medium will not find it possible to channel the deceased that the griever is trying to contact. This represents another aspect that the participants identified as a point of fundamental ethical integrity, with some of them also reporting how sometimes in a mediumistic environment some people can be able to capture information about a deceased even through simple photographs or other means that, however, do not represent the result of a true contact with the deceased.

Teresa, for example, in this regard, underlined how it is of great importance for her not to lie and to clearly communicate it whenever the deceased is not present during a channelling: "And I tell the person exactly how things are, it's not that I go into psychic contact, which is much simpler. If you ask me for a mediumistic contact and I cannot do it, I can't cheat, I can't take one thing for another, because one can understand something about the departed also through sensitivity, telepathy. I can enter the energy field of the living person, and see all the dead loved ones the person has lost, but this is not mediumship, I can tell how your loved ones were, how they dressed, what they liked, but this is the person's memory, this it is not a mediumistic contact."

Laura, similarly, strongly emphasised the importance of being honest about these occurrences, out of respect for the griever: "In the meantime, if you are a serious person you will not necessary have always a mediumistic contact, it's not as if the spiritual being says: 'Oh look, my mum gets there at nine, so I'll go there at nine as well', you know? We need to be clear concerning these things. [...] We are dealing with people's pain, and we cannot deceive the person, especially the sensitivity, the vulnerability of a person who is in pain, you cannot do this, it is a matter of personal conscience. So usually if I don't hear, I don't perceive, I don't see, I say: 'I have no contact', do you know how many times they can say I'm a charlatan? But that's okay, I'd rather be perceived like this than deceive people."

5. Discussion

The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of individuals who claim to possess mediumistic abilities. We wanted to investigate how these faculties initially emerged, how they were developed and refined, the typical process of a mediumistic session, and the emotional impact that these experiences have on the mediums themselves. Additionally, the study sought to understand the meaning and value attributed by the mediums to their abilities, as well as the nature of their relationship with grievors who seek consultations, and the ethical principles that guide this relationship.

From the obtained results, and more specifically the first thematic area that has been identified (*Onset and development of mediumistic abilities*) it emerged how, first of all, for some participants mediumistic faculties appeared during childhood, as was reported for example by Anna, Teresa and Laura, while others developed an interest in mediumship during adulthood, as reported for example by Giovanna, Valeria and Erica. This appears to be generally in line with studies in the field, which have reported how usually mediumistic faculties tend to emerge during childhood, however, some people might experience them later in life [16].

However, in any case, for most of the participants it was the experience of grief due to the loss of a loved one, either during their childhood or in adulthood or both, which provided an important motivational incentive to approach the field of mediumship, as specifically narrated for example by Laura, Giovanna, Valeria and Erica.

These elements appear to be in line with recent literature on the subject, which has reported how frequently an experience of great negative impact, as for example the loss of a loved one, can indeed represent a turning point for many people who later report having developed mediumistic faculties [14].

Moreover, it has emerged how, in the majority of cases, the participants' faculties have been recognised without any particular difficulty or fear, which is partly in contrast with what has been reported by other studies [14] which have indicated how the development of these faculties has often been lived as "traumatic, and participants had often felt confused, isolated and afraid of what was happening to them" [14, p. 272-273], with a consequent experience of isolation and alienation.

Regarding the modalities of conducting a channelling session, which is the second thematic category explored in the research results (Channelling modalities), significant individual differences have emerged. For instance, some mediums reported entering a trance-like state, i.e. Giovanna. On the other hand, Pia and Anna mentioned being able to make contact spontaneously while remaining fully lucid. Another approach mentioned by Valeria involves using procedures such as automatic writing and accessing the Akashic records. Additionally, some participants claimed to possess clairvoyance, clairaudience, or both, including Anna, Giovanna, Pia, and Teresa.

This appears in line with the literature available as well [2, 15, 16, 22], with some studies reporting a remarkable variety of methods through which mediums are able to get in touch with the deceased or other spiritual entities [23].

Mediums have also further explored the meaning and value they give to their faculties, which, in the present research represents the third thematic area in the results (*Relationship with grievors and ethical dimension*). All of them strongly underlined the fact that they consider these faculties a sort of gift, which they wish to make available to other people who could benefit from it. From this has also emerged the fundamental need to respect the pain of those who seek the help of a medium, in particular if consequent to the loss of a loved one, and to understand the fragility of the person, ensuring compliance with solid ethical principles (these aspects have been particularly underlined by Luisa, Giovanna, Valeria and Angela). This confirms what has been highlighted by other studies, that is, the parallel that some mediums perceive between their own activity and the work of a counsellor, as well as their recognition of the need to be sensitive and responsible towards the clients' vulnerability, and careful to monitor their reactions, responding to them appropriately [14, 16, 17].

Most of the participants do not actually receive compensation for their activity (such as Giovanna and Erica), while even those among the participants who request payment for a consultation are willing to provide their support for free if those who want their help cannot pay, as reported in particular by Angela and Pia.

Furthermore, another significant theme related to the ethical aspect emerged, which is the honesty with which mediums interact with individuals grieving the loss of a loved one. This aspect encompasses two important points. Firstly, it involves acknowledging when the medium is unable to establish communication with the deceased and refraining from exploiting the person's pain by falsely claiming contact (as passionately emphasized by Laura and Teresa). Secondly, it entails the belief that it is necessary to faithfully transmit the messages from the spirit world without altering them (as reported by Teresa and Laura).

However, it is important to consider how this last point presents critical issues, already highlighted in other studies [9, 14], implying the moral dilemma relating to revealing the entirety of the message or hiding those parts that could disturb the customer.

The ethical aspect therefore represents a theme of particular significance for the participants, also considering the peculiarity of mediumistic experiences themselves, which, according to some recent studies possess a component of authenticity that is still rather difficult or even impossible to explain [11, 12] but which in fact, because of the complexity of its implications, is still often regarded with high scepticism [17].

The extreme attention of the participants for the ethical aspect of their work with grievors has also been underlined by other researches in literature, which have indeed indicated how the ethical matter is considered essential by people who put their mediumistic faculties at the service of others [12, 17].

6. Conclusions

Mediumship remains an area of considerable complexity and interest, particularly for individuals who have experienced the loss of a loved one. The present research investigated the direct perspectives of individuals who claim to possess mediumistic abilities, highlighting the diverse range of experiences that underlie the onset and development of similar abilities. It was observed that the occurrence of losses and grief, both in childhood and adulthood, often serves as an additional motivational factor towards pursuing mediumship. Furthermore, the study identified various approaches to channelling among the participants. Nevertheless, a common element among them is the profound ethical value attributed to these faculties, particularly as a means of providing support to individuals who are suffering from bereavement.

Given the good faith and strong motivation of these people to do good to those who ask them for help, our research highlights that perhaps it would be worthwhile to open a dialogue to understand whether there is indeed a malevolent will in them. Future research could also explore more deeply the relationship between this type of experience and Catholic doctrine, in order to recognise possible forms of clarification and reconciliation between these practices and canonical religion.

The present study has some limitations, in particular (which is also an intrinsic limit to qualitative research) the low number of participants, an aspect that does not allow to reach a generalization of the results. In this regard, it would be useful to conduct further research involving a higher number of mediums.

Moreover, another limitation of the research is the fact that only Italian mediums were involved. In the near future, it would therefore be interesting to involve mediums from other different international contexts, in order to detect eventual socio-cultural differences.

Lastly, it could also be interesting to explore further aspects relating to the field of mediumship, in particular with regard to the impact such faculties have on the lives of mediums, as well as the description of the afterlife provided by the deceased channelled by mediums and the possible impact this may have on the mediums' own perception of death and spirituality.

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