

The Psychology of Channeling

Channeled 'messages' are at a low level of inventiveness. Their style of production and associated claims are classical examples of dissociation.

Graham Reed

TO DATE, the topic of channeling has not attracted much attention among psychologists, and it may well be correct that there exists no particular phenomenon requiring explanation. However, several aspects merit observation from the psychological viewpoint. I will address a central question: What psychological processes underlie the behavior of channelers? The question will be examined from three points of view: (1) cognition, (2) motivation, (3) psychopathology.

The best data available for the study of the intellectual activities of channelers are the spoken messages they produce, as represented by recordings, transcripts, and a profusion of published works. Much has been made of the sagacity and profound insights communicated by such messages. These alleged qualities have been regarded as clear proof of the messages' supernatural origins because, it is argued, the channelers themselves have neither the erudition nor the intellectual power to produce such material without help. But in actual fact, if the messages are examined objectively, ignoring their assumed origins, they prove to be simplistic, repetitive, and extremely vague. They quite lack the clarity, the tightness of argument, and the succinctness of expression that characterize productive thinking. On the contrary, they seem to consist solely of strings of loosely associated gobbets of naive ideas and verbal formulae. They are well within the intellectual capacity of channelers of even moderate education. What they do require is high and facile verbal fluency, together with a loosening of cognitive controls.

Perhaps the most important "law" running through modern psychological theory is the principle of "hierarchical integration." This concept was crucial to Bartlett's theory of memory, to Piaget's theory of cognitive development, and to Erikson's theory of personality. It can also be traced in many other areas of psychology, such as perception, reasoning, motor skills, and social

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organization. In brief, the principle states that informational input is assimilated into one or more mental structures, termed *schemata*. These are active, dynamic organizations, continually changing as they accommodate to new input. They interact with other schemata, producing higher-level syntheses or superordinate schemata. This hierarchical process continues throughout life and accounts for increasing cognitive sophistication, concept development, and emotional adaptation.

Now, obviously, hierarchical integration does not always occur, and mental activities often take place at lower levels, when ideas are simply strung together without vertical development. Much rote and associative learning is of this type, as are cases where clues necessary for the solution of an argument are ignored. Inattention may result in input not being effectively schematized, and so not assimilated in a productive way. What happens, in effect, is that data and ideas are associated in nondynamic chains rather than epigenetic syntheses. I would submit that this simple chaining—of input, precepts, verbal catch-phrases, etc.—is exemplified by the reported products of channeling.

As we are dealing here not with vertical development but with horizontal chaining, it is tempting to refer to the latter as “lateral thinking.” But this term has been preempted by de Bono (1977) in his discussions of creativity. However, de Bono was not debating the dichotomy between syntheses and simple chaining. He was referring to the short-circuiting of conventional thought patterns by the linking of disparate concepts to form a new and unexpected concept. This idea of unexpected, novel syntheses has been at the core of most approaches to creativity. What is proposed here is that there is a spectrum of lateral chaining. At the top end of this spectrum is the production of dynamic and novel creations as described by de Bono. Lower down are a wide range of unusual but exciting ideas. At the very bottom lies “speaking in tongues,” which is the production of streams of speechlike but nonsemantic sounds. This is an interesting phenomenon in

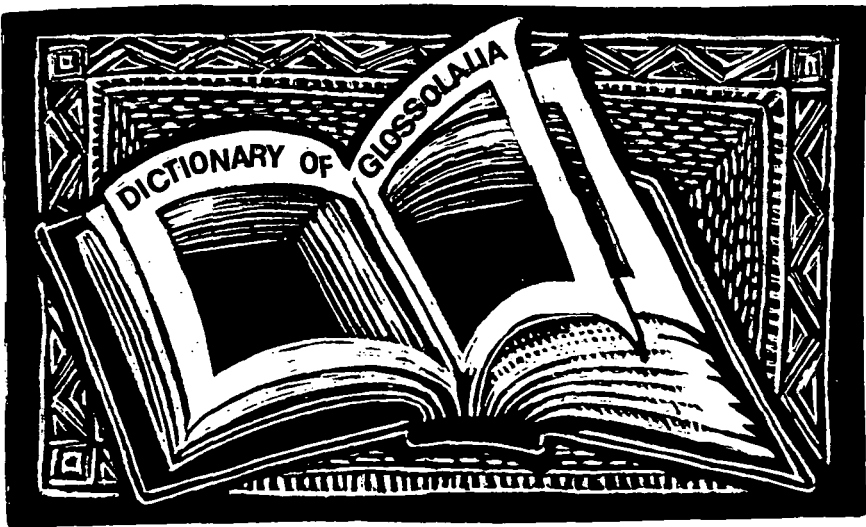


Illustration by Pat Linse.

Channeling is rewarded by social recognition and esteem . . . [Also] the speaker's views are attributed to somebody else. This alibi gives subjective security, which engenders confidence and fluency and improves the performance.

its own right, with decided similarities to channeled messages. The speaker in tongues is usually excited in the context of a religious gathering. The audience attributes the speaker's gibberish to the Holy Ghost or some other prestigious source. The speaker's blathering carries no semantic import, but the hearers assume that it must have some meaning—obscure but vested with divine profundity. Channeled products are not, of course, gibberish. But the “messages,” as I noted, are intellectually on a low level, being trite, naive, and clichéd.

What makes channelers do it? Clearly, the activity answers a variety of needs, three of which may be indicated here.

1. *Ego-enhancement.* Like several other forms of verbal activity, channeling is rewarded by social recognition and esteem. It produces, at least among believers, attention, respect, gratitude, and even affection. As may be attested by teachers, politicians, judges, and ministers, having other people listen to one's voice is in itself highly gratifying. Particularly is this so when the performance makes few demands upon the speaker in terms of preparation, presentation, or pedagogy.

In channeling, there is an additional advantage. The speaker's views and judgments are attributed to somebody else, so that the speaker himself is alibied. As with academic lecturing, citing an authority leaves the teacher less vulnerable to negative criticism or attack. A positive feedback circle occurs here, too; the alibi gives subjective security, which engenders confidence and fluency. These improve the performance, which in turn increases audience appeal and reduces even further the possibility of negative or critical response.

2. *Compensation.* Engagement in channeling provides a counterweight against the perceived drabness and lack of excitement of the individual's everyday life. The individual is elevated to the position of seer, oracle, and spiritual adviser. From an engagement in prosaic and little-appreciated routines, she or he is suddenly credited with occult or divine talents.

It should be recognized that this compensatory activity is not unlike artistic expression, but it involves creative achievement at only a very low level.

3. *Material rewards.* There is no need to emphasize this factor here. Suffice it to say that the successful channeler can gain high monetary return for minimal training and capital investment. The entrepreneur who introduces channeling franchises will undoubtedly make a fortune.

It has sometimes been asserted that channelers are mentally ill people. This is surely a suggestion that invites consideration, though it must be pointed out that simply to attach a diagnostic label to somebody achieves little in

itself, at least from the theoretical standpoint. To be of help beyond the purely categorical level, such a label must offer some enlightenment in terms of etiology or wider implications. Before proceeding, it must be pointed out that psychopathology relies crucially upon the study of *form* rather than *content* (discussed in Reed, 1988). Our comments regarding cognitive aspects of channeling were derived from considerations of the contents of channelers' messages. To assess the possibility of psychopathology, we must focus upon the form of channelers' experience. Fortunately, abundant reports of this are contained in the channelers' accounts, being implicit in what they report as constituting channeling itself.

Let us start by considering the possibility of psychotic disorders, these being most commonly suggested by the "mental illness" school of critics. It is true that the behaviors manifested by channelers during their seances bear uncanny resemblances to certain psychotic symptomatology.

1. From the clinical point of view, channelers' reports are by definition classifiable as systematized delusions. The very fact that the channeler asserts that she or he is occupied by somebody else would in other circumstances be sufficient to justify the diagnosis of a psychosis.

2. Similarly, channelers consistently report experiences that are technically auditory and often tactile hallucinations. Such reports, if made by psychiatric patients, would certainly cause great concern to clinicians.

3. Channelers manifest dramatically what are termed the "formal thought disorders" characteristic of schizophrenia. They report, as normal components of their channeling experience: (a) "thought insertion," where thoughts from external sources intersperse the individual's own thinking, (b) "broadcasting of thoughts," where one's thoughts are believed to be publicly available, (c) "thought withdrawals," where naturally occurring thoughts are believed to be removed, (d) "thought-blocking," where the stream of thought is interrupted.

4. By definition, the channeler is demonstrating a "blurring of ego boundaries," where there is confusion about the limits of individuality and a disturbance in the sense of self. Some authorities argue that this experience not only is symptomatic of schizophrenia but actually constitutes the disease.

In short, not only are some channeling experiences ones normally taken to be symptomatic of affective psychosis, they include all the hallmarks of schizophrenia.

However, debate about whether some or all channelers are psychotic is misplaced. In view of the symptoms outlined above, how can the matter be in question? Simply because channelers are able to turn the "symptoms" on or off at will. True psychotic symptoms are not under conscious control. If they are deliberately manifested, this would be taken, in the psychiatric clinic, to constitute malingering.

If channeling experiences are not attributable to psychosis, can they be termed neurotic or due to personality disorder? In fact, they do include certain components regarded clinically as attributable to one or the other of these.

1. "Depersonalization," where the individual feels in some way different,

changed, or unreal in relation to the environment, and “derealization,” where the individual feels as usual, but senses that the environment has changed. These experiences are usually transitory, although they may occur frequently. They are commonly associated with anxiety states; patients with fragile ego controls who are suffering from insecurity and tension are particularly susceptible. The symptom may be chronic, in which case the sufferer is categorized as suffering from a “depersonalization syndrome.”

2. “Ego-splitting,” where the subject feels as though he is detached and actually outside of himself. This is a not unusual reaction to stress in normal people, being precipitated by fear-invoking situations. It is commonly reported among neurotic patients, whose thresholds of fear and anxiety are presumed to be lower than those of their more robust counterparts.

3. “Hysterical amnesia,” where the subject seems to suffer from a loss of identity, being unable to remember any details of his or her life to date, while retaining language, formal knowledge, social skills, and so on. This is often associated with the so-called dual personality, or multiple personality, that has so excited public interest in recent years. Here the subject vacillates between two or more identities, manifesting quite different traits and characteristics, including speech habits and styles of expression. Some such individuals are aware of the existence of their “other self” and can discuss themselves in a detached way. Others manifest hysterical amnesia for the “other” personality. Multiple personality was a topic of scientific interest in the final decades of the last century. Investigations declined when it was realized that hysterical patients tended to produce symptoms that they knew to be of interest to their doctors. Of relevance to our present concern is the fact that at the time many of the patients, as described in detail especially by French and German psychiatrists, not only manifested dual personalities but were clairvoyant, telepathic, or mediumistic. Their idiosyncracies came, as it were, in one package, which does not seem to have been regarded as unusual by their investigators.

4. “Trances” and “trancelike states,” where a condition similar to sleep is induced by suggestion or the ingestion of drugs.

All the anomalies I have mentioned are classical examples of *dissociation*. That is to say, they involve temporary alteration in the normally integrated functions of consciousness or identity. Traditionally, dissociative states have been associated with hysteria or the hysterical personality (character). The great French authority Janet (1920) concludes that the hysterical personality reflected instability of psychological integration, which resulted in dissociative experiences. Abse (1974) presents an authoritative review and discussion. The current edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM 111) collates the symptoms listed above under their own heading of “Dissociative Disorders.” Other characteristics of the hysterical personality type are a need for attention (love, appreciation, etc.), posturing, shallowness of affect, lying, plausibility, and likability.

Kraepelin, a father of European psychiatry cited by Schneider (1925), described the hysterical personality as displaying emotional responses, a delight

in novelty, vivid imagination, striving to be in the limelight, and a tendency to cheat. Schneider himself referred to such individuals as "attention-seeking psychopaths": "The most striking way of dealing with this passion for attention is pathological lying. For this the individual needs to be endowed with certain powers of fantasy and invention. . . ."

In summary, channelers may reasonably be regarded as persons of hysterical personality, displaying classical dissociative features. Their motives are characteristic of their personality type, including ego-enhancement and a need for attention. Channelers' statements (guidance, advice, etc.) evince simple inventiveness at a nondynamic level. The reiterativeness, diffuse structure, and trite content of these statements place them well within the intellectual capacity of any fluent but uninhibited individual, without any assistance from occult or other sources.

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