

Describing the Contents of Consciousness - A study of the Production of Reports of Mental Imagery Using Parapsychological Data

Results:

Objectives: A key objective of this project was to examine how people use communicative resources and linguistic tools to verbalise reflections on their own experience of consciousness. It is anticipated that the results of the project would be of benefit to parapsychologists interested in the ways in which mentations may reveal the working of anomalous communicative processes in ordinary consciousness.

Methods: Data consisted of audio recordings of the mentation stage of ganzfeld ESP experiments conducted at the Koestler Parapsychology Unit at the University of Edinburgh during the 1990s. These recordings were transcribed according to the conventions of conversation analysis.

Data were analysed using conversation analysis. This is a qualitative method for the examination of the structural, interpersonal and normative properties of naturally occurring verbal interaction. It has previously been used in study of experimenter-subject interaction in ganzfeld experiments, in studies of reports of spontaneous psi related experiences, and in studies of the language of psychic practitioners.

Results: The empirical analysis has discovered various communicative practices by which participants in ganzfeld experiment produce mentation reports. Analysis focused on

The institutional character of the discourse of mentation reports

(how descriptions of inner experience are designed to address the institutional, experimental and laboratory context in which the report is produced);

The management of rights and responsibilities

(how subjects display their tacit understanding of the normative obligations and expectations that underpin participation in laboratory procedures);

The playfulness of mentation discourse

(how subjects used poetic discourse in the mentations, and how these poetical features impinged on the content of the report).

Conclusions: In various publications, we have argued that, in the use of introspective data, it may be necessary for parapsychologists and consciousness researchers to try to take account of the social and interpersonal properties of discourse and communication. This is because what is taken to be the *content* of a report may be inextricably tied to the discourse practices through which it is made available to the researcher.

Published work:

Wooffitt, R. and Holt, N. (2011) 'Introspective discourse and the poetics of subjective experience' *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 44(2), 135–156.

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Wooffitt, R., & Holt, N. (2010). Silence and its organisation in the pragmatics of introspection. *Discourse Studies*, 12(3), 379-406. doi: 10.1177/1461445609358520

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Wooffitt, R. and Holt N. (2008) 'Reporting on Consciousness: communication in mentation narratives' *Proceedings of the 51st Annual Convention of the Parapsychological Association* New York: The Parapsychological Association, 288-303.

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