

Pub Psychic Nights: Spiritual and Social Transformation Beyond Institutional Boundaries

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This article explores pub psychic nights in Britain. The audience of these events are predominantly working-class women who gather in local pubs and social clubs to participate in spirit communication led by a medium and/or psychic. Drawing on qualitative data from 16 interviews and four participant observations we examine the social and spiritual significance of these events for the audience, arguing that they have a profound impact in helping people deal with grief and loss, extending far beyond mere entertainment. We further argue that pub psychic nights create an opportunity to address existential questions and seek comfort outside of traditional religious institutions. We demonstrate how these nights blur the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary and transform historically male-dominated pub spaces into local hubs of female-led spirituality. This research contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary spiritual practices and their significance for marginalized communities.

Introduction

The first Thursday of the month at a social club in Bristol carries an air of quiet expectation. This is no ordinary evening in “the local.” The psychic night draws in about fifty people—mostly women, four men dragged along by their partners, and even a seven-year-old girl glued to a phone. Most of the women are over the age of 60, but a substantial group is comprised of 20 and 30-somethings, all but one white. It is a working-class

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gathering in a working-class corner of Bristol, where lives appear tough, and comfort comes at a price—even if it is just £7.

Before the medium, a woman gives a teenage girl a tarot reading. The woman’s glittering headband contrasts the heavy sadness palpable in the air. Tables of intergenerational women—grandmothers, mothers, daughters, and friends—sip wine and gin, but there is only one chance to get a drink, as there are no breaks. Conversations fade as the medium takes the floor.

She introduces herself as clairsentient and clairaudient, explaining how she reads objects, hears voices, and feels energies. A few newcomers, visibly unsure, ask how it all works. The regulars—about twenty or so—nod knowingly; they will all get their regular reading later. She scans the room with a practiced gaze, greeting people she remembers. She tells the audience to keep an open mind and warns against shaking heads; what does not fit might belong to someone else.

The room is freezing—not because of any spirit presence—but because heating a space this large would be too costly. One by one, the medium delivers messages (but never to the four men): a husband’s long-forgotten nickname, a childhood pet. Then, a message comes for a large table of women. The young teenage girl from earlier raises her hand, her voice trembling as she asks, “Could it be a baby?” She begins to sob, explaining she had a miscarriage. The room breaks. The medium comforts her, gently saying “this is too much, too public,” and promises to speak with her afterward. Strangers cry for her loss, and the psychic presses tissues into her hands.

By the end, tears have dried, replaced by faint smiles and murmurs of “that was lush” – a common Bristolian phrase. For an hour, vulnerability and the need for comfort filled the room. However, the attendees were not just grieving. They were connected—to the medium and to each other, and potentially to something beyond.

In post-COVID Britain, “psychic nights” in local public houses (“pubs”) and social clubs are seemingly surging in popularity. On any given weekday in any one of the over 40,000 pubs in England and Wales, a psychic and/or medium¹ will offer group tarot or angel card

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1. Psychic and medium are often used interchangeably, and a person can claim to be both. For the purpose of our project, we understand a psychic is someone who claims to have extrasensory perception and uses it to gather information about a person, an event, or a situation and may use tools like crystal balls or tarot to provide guidance. However, a medium is someone who claims to be a bridge between the living and the spirit world. They claim to channel messages from deceased loved ones or other entities through clairvoyance (seeing), clairaudience (hearing), or clairsentience (feeling).

readings,² messages from dead friends and relatives ‘in spirit’ and demonstrations of clairvoyance. Whilst exact figures remain elusive, these events are currently in high demand, often selling out in advance, especially amongst women in working-class areas, and there are companies that exist to host psychic nights and match psychics with pubs, for example, *Psychic Nights UK*. Illustrating their growing popularity, there has been a 550% increase in Google searches for “psychic night near me” over the past seven years.³ These events revitalize the modern Spiritualist⁴ tradition of communicating with the dead, particularly popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, but instead of situating seances or mediumship demonstrations in domestic homes, theatres, or the Spiritualist Church (as was typical in the Victorian and post-Victorian periods and up to the Second World War, the so-called “golden age of Spiritualism”), the pub and the working men’s club has now emerged as the latest collective space for contemporary spirit communication in England. However, this phenomenon has received little to no academic attention, from any discipline, and the experiences of the growing number of people now attending these events have been almost entirely overlooked.

In this paper, we explore this developing grassroots trend, drawing on innovative research from the “Weekday Worldviews: The Patrons, Promise and Payoff of Psychic Nights in England” project, which is the first sociological study of pub psychic nights, funded by the *International Research Network for the Study of Science and Belief in Society*. This was a year-long, mixed methods study, bringing together survey data (n=84), interviews (n=16), and four observations of pub and working men’s club psychic nights in the north and the southwest of England. We advertised for participants on social media (including X, Facebook, Reddit, TikTok and Mumsnet) and found psychic nights to attend near to where we lived (often through social media advertising, or from the pub itself) to ensure

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2. There are multiple different types and styles of cards that are used for divination purposes. Tarot cards, arguably the most well known, feature cards with pictures and names in suits. Angel cards feature illustrations of different guardian angels and provide wisdom and guidance.
 3. Google Trends analyses a sample of Google web searches to determine how many searches were done over a certain period. See [here](#) for the exact search.
 4. Throughout the chapter, Spiritualism, with the initial letter capitalized, shall refer to what some call Modern Spiritualism, the specific religio-spiritual movement typically traced back to the experiences and claims of the Fox sisters in Hydesville, New York in Spring of 1848.

ease of accessibility.⁵ We sought approval from the psychics/mediums and event organisers before attending, and we each participated fully in the events, although only one of us received a personal reading. Through participating as well as interviewing a range of psychic night attendees, we were better able to understand the perspective of patrons of pub psychic events in England and to comprehensively explore the relationship between this contemporary experience of spirit communication and the salience of attendance for individuals. For the purposes of this paper, we will focus on an analysis of the qualitative data gathered during interviews and observations.

At a time when the number of people in England and Wales affiliating with Christianity is at an all-time low,⁶ and distrust more broadly in some religious authorities is growing (Turpin 2019; Brown and Woodhead 2017), we argue that the pub has arisen as a dynamic and innovative spiritual space that effectively challenges established religious hierarchies and norms at the grassroots. In the UK context, the pub has a long social history and a unique communal function. Pubs are typically at the centre of communities and, although under stress in periods of economic downturn, they remain a key part of British culture. Pubs play a particularly strong role in working-class communities. We concur with Thomas Thurnell-Read when he argues that “pubs are sociologically useful ... (as they) represent important and dynamic social spaces” (2023, 423). However, it has been intimated, both in scholarship and by some members of the general public that we engaged with whilst we were advertising for participants, that a psychic night in a pub is solely about entertainment or money-making and has no spiritual or social value beyond this. Our aim in this paper is to challenge these assumptions, arguing that pub psychic nights have more value to participants than has hitherto been ascribed to them, and that they function as spiritually and socially meaningful spaces beyond institutional religious boundaries, particularly in working-class communities that have been marginalized. In doing so, we address the following research question: To what extent does the growth in interest in public psychic events relate to broader socio-cultural factors such as

5. This project received ethical approval from Durham University.

6. For a discussion of statistics in relation to religious affiliation in England and Wales, see: <https://www.brin.ac.uk/christian-decline-how-its-measured-and-what-it-means/>.

the decline in institutional religion in Britain, or COVID-19, and intersecting dynamics of social class, locality, and gender?

We approach this research question through a multidisciplinary theoretical framework to both contextualise and interpret pub psychic nights. Firstly, we draw on the lived religion framework (Ammerman 2021), which emphasizes that spiritual practices occur both within religious spaces, but importantly beyond institutional religious settings, and are embedded in the routines and ordinary spaces of everyday life. Through this perspective, we move away from analysing spirituality and religion solely in terms of established religious institutions and doctrines, but rather as implicit, embodied, and enacted by ordinary individuals in their everyday environments, such as local pubs. Secondly, we engage with secularization theory (Bruce 2010, 2011) and theories of religious change (Davie 2015) and the increased visibility of spirituality (Heelas et al. 2004) to highlight declining institutional affiliation, particularly with Christianity, which is reshaping how spiritual and existential questions are approached in everyday life. Psychic nights offer an under-researched area where the interplay of secularisation and re-sacralization is manifested, highlighting persistent human quests for existential and spiritual meaning, comfort, and connection, even when science explains why one may feel unbalanced in life, particularly after the death of a loved one, but offers no reassurance (Herbert and Bullock 2020). The article begins with a brief scoping of relevant contextualizing literature, specifically in relation to the modern developments of spirit communication and Spiritualism (both within and without institutions). We highlight, in particular, the scholarly preoccupation with Spiritualism as a historic, rather than a contemporary force in British society. We then showcase the original data of our study, exploring our participants' experiences of communicating with the dead in a pub or working men's club space and how, for some, it is playing a vital role in helping with grief. Ultimately, we demonstrate why it is imperative for scholars to reevaluate their assumptions about contemporary spirit communication and its vitality, paying attention to these new venues for spiritual and social transformation.

Pub Psychic Nights: An Underexplored Phenomenon in Spiritualist Context

Although increasingly popular, psychic nights have been occurring in pubs and clubs in Britain for some years. In 2001, John Walliss notes that within pubs, clubs, and other non-Church spaces, psychic and medi-

umship practices have a “value as a form of entertainment, above and beyond any, strictly speaking, religious concerns” although, he notes further research is needed to better evidence this claim (Walliss 2001, 142). Although not specifically mentioning pubs and clubs, Robin Woofitt and Hannah Gilbert (2008) examine mediumship in “secular settings” focusing specifically on hotels in the North of England. They argue these events are “a chance to enjoy a secular version of an article of religious faith” (Woofitt and Gilbert 2008, 223), but the belief patterns and structure of events, as well as demographics of audience members are not discussed in depth. Important for our study, they note that participants at psychic events even in so-called “secular settings” have a “high degree of conviction” in the skills of the medium (Woofitt and Gilbert 2008, 223). In her PhD study, Gilbert (2008) explores mediumship both inside and outside Church settings (including town halls), interviewing mediums and analysing their autobiographies. Whilst her focus is on the experience of being a medium (rather than the experiences of patrons of mediums) she draws attention to the separation of “secular” and “religious” venues for contemporary mediumship. She further highlights that, despite the lack of attention given to it in scholarship, “there is sufficient evidence to suggest that mediumship is a significant feature of Western society: it is sought, consumed, used and debated in a variety of ways” (Gilbert 2008, 34). More recently, the innovative SpELS project (Spiritualism in Everyday Life in Stoke on Trent) aimed to discover what they call the “hidden Spiritualist past of Stoke” and they highlight that alongside Spiritualist churches, the organisation of spirit communication is (and perhaps always has been) “embedded within the every day: amidst shops, town halls, and scout huts and more” (Bartolini et al. 2019, 1123).

As Woofitt and others argue, “there is, undoubtedly, enormous contemporary popular interest in psychic practitioners” (2006, 7) as well as a wide variety of venues where mediumship is demonstrated, both in terms of large settings (in hotels, theatres, and town halls) as well as more intimate venues, such as pubs, clubs, shops, and of course, in television and print media with celebrity psychics (Hill 2010). Furthermore, the continued interest in mediumship and psychic occurrences is evidenced strongly online, where one can have a tarot or angel card reading from any number of mediums and psychics operating on Instagram, Facebook,

7. See SpELS project: <https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FL015447%2F1>.

Reddit, or Tik Tok.⁸ Psychics and mediums have long operated within popular settings, and indeed, public demonstrations of spirit communication are a hallmark of modern Spiritualism. Despite this vitality, whilst there is substantial work on psychic phenomena in psychology (e.g., [Roxburgh and Roe 2014](#); [Moseley et al. 2022](#); [Powell and Moseley 2020](#)) and history (e.g., [Owen 1989](#); [Braude 2001](#); [Oppenheim 1985](#); [Hazelgrove 2000](#)), much scholarship focuses on either the experiences of the medium themselves or on Spiritualism as a historic phenomenon rather than one with much lasting cultural purchase in Britain ([Hazelgrove 2000](#), 13).

Whilst there is a clear gap in scholarly attention to contemporary expressions of mediumship in Britain (one that we aim to contribute to), the historical trajectory of contemporary spirit communication remains important to contextualize these events. Public mediumship rose to popularity in Britain in the Victorian era, referred to as “the golden age of Spiritualism” ([Hill 2010](#), 476). Here, an audience was “crucial” in public displays of connection with the dead, and their belief (and participation) was critical to success ([Hill 2010](#), 476).

Early scholarly work into psychic phenomena (in both public and private settings) was concerned with proving whether communication with the dead was possible, but interest waned in the mid-20th century ([Sera-Shriar 2022](#)). Historical interest in spirit communication from the 1850s to the First World War has dominated the scholarly agenda; however, as Simone Natale highlights, this has often examined the “political and social implications” as opposed to the “visual spectacle” that made demonstrations of spirit presence so popular ([Natale 2011](#), 239). Yet, despite the detailed attention to spirit communication and Spiritualism historically, both have had more muted attention from contemporary sociologists or from religious studies, and Spiritualism in Britain (particularly in the guise of the dimly lit domestic seance) is often assumed to be in decline post-1950s ([Bartolini et al. 2019](#), 1115).

According to the Office of National Statistics, there were 33,134 people who identified themselves as ‘Spiritualist’ on the 2021 census of England and Wales (“[Office for National Statistics, Religion \(detailed\)](#)” 2022). This is a slight decrease from the 2011 census, where the number was 39,061, but is arguably substantially fewer than during the 1930s where some

8. For more about psychic demonstrations online, see [Tamlyn Ryan \(2012\)](#). Ryan gives greater attention to Facebook, than platforms such as Tik Tok which was not initiated until 2016.

sources report “100,000 home seance circles” (Hazelgrove 2000, 15) and many more people caught up in the wave of interest in spirit communication.⁹ Whilst seeing the numbers of official Spiritualists declining may tell one story, it is important to be mindful that most likely only a few of those who attend pub and club psychic nights would tick ‘Spiritualist’ on the census. From our research, we found that only a small number that we interviewed aligned in any way with institutionalized religion (including Spiritualism).¹⁰ More affiliated with “no religion” or “spiritual but not religious” categories, and (as we will discuss later) some balanced self-described “weak” mainstream religious affiliations (including Catholicism) with alternative spiritual practices. Whilst there are umbrella organisations attempting to bring together Spiritualist churches and centres (for example, the National Spiritualist Union), Nelson (1969) has highlighted that one of the features of Spiritualism in Britain has been its loose connection to institution or organisation, and something that Bertolini et al. noted in the SpELS project was that Spiritualists they spoke to were less attached to physical buildings and institutional spaces than the ability to communicate with the dead everywhere and at any time (Bertolini et al. 2019, 1123) with a cross-over of some mediums who attend/speak at Spiritualist Churches also operating in pubs.¹¹ So, even though officially the numbers of Spiritualists may have declined since the end of the Second World War, the British public maintain a fascination with “anomalous

9. Data from the 2021 census in relation to religion can be found here: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/bulletins/religionenglandandwales/census2021>. A data-led discussion of the 2011 census figures is available here: <https://www.brin.ac.uk/census-2011-any-other-religion/>. It is very difficult to estimate with certainty about the number of Spiritualists operational in earlier periods, and there is some dispute as to the accuracy of figures in circulation (see Nelson 1969 and discussion in Hazelgrove 2000, 15).

10. See Powell and Moseley (2020) for evidence that the majority of practicing mediums in Britain do, in fact, view Spiritualism as a “religion.”

11. It is important to acknowledge that Nelson’s observation has been contested by more recent studies of Spiritualist communities in Britain and the US (Luhmann et al. 2023) which noted the tendency of Spiritualists – particularly in Britain – to be affiliated with religious organisations or formal communities of like-minded adherents. This is perhaps a question of comparison. When compared to a group like Anglicans, British Spiritualists seem quite loosely bound together but in comparison with those who express general interest in the occult or the supernatural, those identifying as “Spiritualists” or “mediums” seem very organized and linked to formal institutions.

experiences,” the supernatural and “paranormal,”¹² but this is more likely to exist outside of official membership of Spiritualist churches (Roxburgh and Roe 2014; Castro et al. 2014) and has likely grown with mainstream podcasts and television shows like Danny Robins “Uncanny” lessening the stigma around paranormal encounters. Furthermore, the number of people believing in the possibility of communication with the dead has increased significantly between the mid-1990s and 2007 in Britain.¹³

Whilst it is not clear why the mid-1990s to 2000s saw such a peak in belief in after-death communication,¹⁴ historians and others have suggested that interest in Spiritualism tends to follow spikes in death rates and collective mourning. Lisa Morton (2020, 210), for example, notes that interest in Spiritualism in the Victorian period began to decline as infant mortality rates declined and rose again when the First World War claimed an unprecedented number of young lives. In line with this rationale, we frequently heard from colleagues and others that, perhaps, the COVID-19 pandemic had had a similar effect – leading our participants to seek answers about death and the afterlife beyond the halls of established religious institutions. While these theories are arguable, it does seem that Spiritualism, from mid-nineteenth-century America to modern Britain, has not only been impacted by global events and its own entanglement with external forces like pop culture and technological innovation but also by a broad curiosity about spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural that has continued unabated despite changes to the role of religion and religious organisations in British public life.

Talking to the Dead in a Pub

Our interviews and observations all took place between September 2023 and June 2024. We observed three pub and working men’s psychic nights,

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12. This is common in other contexts like the US where 67% of Americans believe they have had a paranormal experience (YouGov 2022)
 13. See British Religion in Numbers <https://www.brin.ac.uk/figures/belief-in-britain-1939-2009/alternative-religious-belief/belief-in-ghosts-and-communication-with-the-dead/>.
 14. For a popular discussion of this, see the Time article by Tabitha Stanmore <https://time.com/6980787/mysticism-history-difficult-times-essay/>. Although we only have anecdotal evidence for this, the reason for the increase may relate to the rise in television programmes in the 2000s that explored ghosts, mediumship, and spirits, such as *Ghostwhisperer*, *Most Haunted*, and *Charmed*. Whether the media was capturing the popular zeitgeist or was shaping it (or both) remains to be investigated.

three in the north of England and one in the Southwest, although one of the researchers had also been to more than ten pub psychic nights since 2022. We interviewed 16 people across several regions in England, all of whom had been to at least one event in the last 18 months. Interview participants were from across England, and there were 13 women and three men. All were over 18. Six participants had attended a psychic night once, while the remaining 11 had attended multiple times, with some as many as 25. The age range of participants was between 35 and 67. The majority (10) of our participants self-identified as working class with the remaining (6) as middle class. 12 of the participants were white British, with the remaining participants' ethnicity listed as mixed and Asian. Three participants held post-graduate qualifications, 10 held a university degree and the remaining three participants had a mixture of high-school and college level qualifications. In fact, pub psychic events tend to be a working class, predominantly female-orientated intergenerational space, with mothers, daughters, aunties, and close friends in attendance. Whilst there are both male mediums (some of which are high-profile celebrity mediums) and male attendees (often there, it seemed, with female partners), these evenings were by and large almost entirely dominated by women. This is perhaps not a surprise, given the often socially subversive roles for women in Spiritualism, spiritual healing and the occult (see, for example, Owen 1989; Braude 2001; Kontou 2011). The pub, however, has historically been a typically male space. There have been plenty of formal and informal surveys in Britain suggesting women feel less safe than men in a pub environment, particularly in relation to harassment and drink spiking.¹⁵ However, at psychic nights, these established power dynamics are typically subverted within a space that has been, historically, a male preserve, and this (at least for a limited time) has the potential to alter women's relationships with the pub.

In terms of recruitment, participants could not identify as practicing mediums/psychics or as members of the Spiritualists' National Union who have not been to psychic pub nights as we did not want a sample composed of highly convinced Spiritualists. The questions we asked interviewees focused on their experiences at pub psychic nights, why they attended, and how they initially became aware of events. In a semi-structured conversational-style interview, we explored their views on

15. See, for example, <https://www.ifsecglobal.com/uk/more-than-80-of-women-want-safer-pubs-bars-and-restaurants-says-yougov-survey/>.

the pub/club setting and how it felt as well as questions about the role of religion in their lives, views on the relationship between religion and science, and whether attending pub psychic nights had any influence on wellbeing. All interviews were conducted via Zoom and the transcripts were analysed using narrative analysis.

When a psychic or medium runs an event in a pub or club, the space is often set up in a specific way, and the programme for the evening is markedly similar each time. The events are ticketed, and often sell out in advance, at prices that range from under £7 to over £20. Participants either sit around small pub tables, or in theatre style, with the medium at the front, sometimes on a raised platform so that all attention is focused on them. Although there is some variation, the typical psychic night uses a separate function room in the pub or a cordoned off area that is open to the main bar (sometimes with noise transfer across areas). Most people will be drinking alcohol, but drinks are purchased before the start of the event, and participants are usually encouraged not to get up, or chat, during the readings but are encouraged to “give the medium their voice” in saying “yes or no” when detail of a communication is delivered. Even for those who do not receive a message, the experience is deeply communal. As one participant stated “the whole room just felt connected, even though I didn’t get a message, I felt like I was part of something” emphasizing the collective experience and a shared emotional space. The request not to chat is rarely entirely adhered to, although most do offer careful focus to the psychic, especially at the start of the evening. Most psychics initially outline to the audience how they work – either selecting individuals for spirit messages or putting evidence of afterlife communication for people to claim. For example—I’ve got someone here called Robert—does anyone know a Robert who passed to spirit with a chest condition? Or – you, in the pink top, I have an older lady here who has come through for you, a mother figure, do you recognize a mother in spirit? She wants you to know that she has been with you at home, have you been looking at photographs recently, she knows you have, please talk to her, she wants to help you through this difficult patch you are going through (see [Wooffitt 2006](#) who gives a detailed outline of psychic/audience communication patterns). [Wallis \(2001, 134\)](#) highlights that psychic and mediumistic messages (whether in public or private, in Spiritualist Church or outside) include similar elements of advice, support, and, to a lesser extent, prophesy. Where there are strict guidelines for mediums working at Spiritualist National Union churches prohibiting prophecy,

this does not always reflect what happens in a pub setting, where more specific future predictions (and sometimes warnings) are, in our experience, occasionally given.¹⁶ Indeed, this does provoke condemnation from some affiliated with Spiritualist Churches towards those mediums who work the pub circuit, particularly concerning the potential impact and support for people who are vulnerable as [Hammer \(2010, 305\)](#) highlights, people in uncertain life situations or crisis are often drawn to clairvoyance, raising concerns about the ethical implications and support available for those in vulnerable states. Although some mediums try to offer a reading to everyone present, this is not always possible depending on the number of people in the pub (or indeed, the contact made with spirit, as mediums cannot predetermine which spirits come through to them), but typically a medium will move around the room talking to different participants, although all readings will be heard by the entire audience. Usually there is a short break about halfway through the evening, where the audience are encouraged to get another drink, before the second half resumes. Most pub mediums use mental mediumship (clairaudience or clairvoyance), some use props such as tarot or angel cards, or psychometry with objects or photographs. One of the researchers has seen an example of physical mediumship in a pub setting (moving tables and glasses) although this is comparatively rare. At the end, either the medium or the landlord/lady will call time on the event, and often some members of the audience gather to talk to the medium with more privacy. Sometimes, the medium will advertise their one-to-one readings that they might offer in future or other events that they are speaking at.

Immediately then, this marks the pub psychic night as different to the ordinary pub evening – you are in a familiar social environment but are not encouraged to chat or move around the room. While the events are often full, you do not always know everyone there, yet you are getting and giving out personal details of dead family members, and their relationship to you. Sometimes this can be very uncomfortable and certainly disquieting at points, and participants do not always know whether to laugh or cry, or how to respond. There can be tears, and the element

16. For example, the SNU states: “The main purpose of mediumship is to provide evidence that can be proof of survival to the recipient, not to predict the future, not to give advice and not to counsel.” It is also important to note that prophecy and fortune telling were prohibited by the 1824 Vagrancy Act, which was not repealed until 1951. <https://www.snu.org.uk/mediumship>.

of shock is sometimes palpable. For example, one of our interviewees recounts the following:

One of the first times I went that got me hooked, it was in a pub ... and my sister-in-law has lost two brothers to suicide, and she didn't want to go, wasn't into it, and just came along with us, and she was sort of hid in the corner, and this psychic picked her out, even though she was hidden, and said, "I've got a gentleman here with a rope around his neck." And my sister-in-law was crying, she had to leave, she didn't want to hear it, but obviously the roomful of people heard it, saw her reaction as well.

Readings like this—which happen more often than not—are confronting and discomfoting. One site visit revealed a case of a psychic who intentionally attempted to unsettle attendees – often asking leading questions about stress levels or the everyday challenges of life before indicating that a deceased loved one was present with a message about that (di) stress. Yet the tone of pub psychic events often moves quickly between dark and light and back again, balancing sadness with jokes and laughter. A pub psychic night therefore balances the familiar with the unfamiliar and blurs the boundaries between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the social and the solitary, despair and delight, bringing the dead into a social space for the living that is not always easy to manage or negotiate.

Transformative Potential: Comfort, Closure and Hope

In undertaking this project, we were faced with strong assumptions about the role of pub psychic nights in participants' lives. We were told in online forums where we were advertising for participants (but also from academic colleagues) that the pub psychic night was simply entertainment, mediums are charlatans, and it had no social or spiritual value beyond this. On the one hand, pub psychic nights are assumed to be just a bit of fun, but on the other, concerns about mediums preying on vulnerable people were also raised. Whilst there are elements of entertainment (like any good religious service), the above demonstrates that these events can be more meaningful in people's lives than might be initially assumed. They can be highly emotive, with tears and laughter, even if you are not getting a direct message yourself. Far from being perceived solely as a source of entertainment, many participants we interviewed said they benefited psychologically from a sense of closure, hope, and comfort in the face of grief, and we quickly became aware that a pub psychic night was seen by participants as a space that had transformative

potential (either for themselves or others). For example, one participant whose father had died suddenly told us why she went to psychic nights:

I think it was a number of things, it was...giving me definitely that support so I knew (my dad) was ok, and him letting me know that he was ok...there were a few questions and things that I still wanted to know from my dad, and I managed to ask those questions and I got those answers.

This participant used the psychic night, as well as one-to-one readings, in order to connect with her father and ask him practical things that she needed to know (which related to his will) as well as for reassurance that he was fine after a difficult illness that ended his life. Although [Walliss \(2001, 142\)](#) highlights that only a small percentage of Spiritualists are motivated into the church due to grief and loss, we found that with our sample of pub psychic attendees there was a much greater sense that grief propelled them towards events. So, whilst one participant stated they had always had an interest in psychic communication:

I do know I haven't sought out... readings until we lost our friend (and) until our friends lost their son. I know that's been a big catalyst for me.

Sometimes attendees, even though they had experienced losses in the past, were not aware until attending the event that they needed greater comfort and reassurance around dealing with death. One told us:

The reading gave me a sense of closure I didn't realise I needed. Whether it's real or not, it helped me deal with my grief in a way that nothing else has.

Therefore, it seems that whether participants believe that the medium is really communicating with a dead relative or not is not what is important, it is that the time spent with a medium, even in public, assisted in dealing with feelings of loss that had lain dormant. The idea that psychics and mediums can assist people in managing grief and bereavement is certainly clear from the literature cross-culturally. For example, [Pierini \(2018\)](#) has shown that mediumship practices in Brazil have recognized therapeutic benefits, [Powell and Moseley \(2020\)](#) note that British mediums consistently restrict themselves only to conveying messages they believe will be of comfort, and a study of bereavement more generally ([Beischel et al. 2014](#)) argues there are psychological benefits in psychic readings for those experiencing acute grief.

Whilst at a pub event, the medium does not spend more than five minutes, typically, on any participant, and the kinds of support and advice they provide is experienced by participants as soothing. In our experience, attendees were told a range of things, including that they needed to prioritize themselves more, take time out and not always be all things to all people, as well as that relatives were proud of them, they loved them, and that they were looking over them supporting them from beyond. These messages are also socially and psychologically supportive in intent, encouraging participants who may feel powerless in particular social situations to take control and make changes (including changing jobs, challenging male partners who might not be pulling their weight in the relationship or with their children, and avoiding those who might be seeking to manipulate or deceive). This makes the pub an unexpected space for reflection, but also, potentially, of social change, where audience members (who are, in the whole, working-class women) are encouraged to develop a stronger sense of control over social life and relationships and receive the support of the medium as well as the audience to do this. When advice such as “you need to take care of yourself more” is offered, we sometimes saw other audience members agreeing with the medium, including those who knew the reading recipient, reinforcing the transformative potential of the message. This kind of homely support was perceived as not being readily available in other settings in the community, especially with the reduction in public services in Britain. According to one participant, the pub psychic night (operating in a working-class and under-resourced area):

...gave these people something that you can't get anywhere else. I personally believe you can get medication and that dulls whatever you're feeling, you can have a therapist which helps you cope and unravel, but this psychic gave them comfort that I don't think you can get, I might be wrong, from anywhere else, apart from the person that you love... that's what they were looking for, they were looking for hope, comfort, something that they could take away what I don't think they could find anywhere else in the community.

Questions and Answers Beyond the Boundaries of Religious Institution

Whilst a number of participants were propelled towards attending pub psychic events following a bereavement, others were on a more curiosity-

fuelled quest for answers that related to a more general sense of wanting to find out more about the unknown. Questions such as ‘what happens when you die? What happens to my loved one who has passed away? Is it possible to communicate with the dead? Is there an after-life? Can a person predict the future? In this difficult situation that I am in, what should I do? These were not “emotionally impaired” people, as [Castro et al. \(2014\)](#) also highlight, but individuals that were using psychic nights and interactions with mediums to think through important questions and gain greater clarity, particularly both about the afterlife, but also about dealing with difficulties in life in the here and now. For example, one interviewee told us:

When I’m stressed about anything, I just go, and it’s like the hope that everything will be clearer. But they also tell you things like, oh I can see that your head’s going a million miles an hour, you need to not work as much, and all the things that I already know, they’re reinforcing to me, but because they’re telling me and it’s not me, it does calm me down and I think, right, they’ve reinforced what I already know, so I need to look after myself a bit more.

The idea of repeatedly seeking clarity about the complexities of life was very strong in our data – people we interviewed had questions, and they went to psychic nights because they thought they might be answered. For some interviewees, one reading or event would be enough to satisfy them. They felt it gave them the proof they needed that life exists after death, but for others it was part of a much longer quest that also included feelings of disappointment when they did not get messages, or the messages that they got seemed unbelievable, or other people’s messages seemed too general, and they were not sure if they trusted that specific medium. In response to this, some participants did not go to see a psychic again, but some kept going to see different people, in order to try to get the answers they wanted. One of our participants described this as feeling “hooked” and a bit like a drug dependency. This is where concerns about vulnerability emerge, and indeed, this participant was trying to wean herself off going to psychics and instead trying to answer the questions she had on her own:

If you go to see a psychic in a pub, you’re sat there thinking, I’ve paid for this, are they going to pick me? Pick me, pick me. It’s like a child in a school. And if they don’t pick you – it’s like a drug.

Whilst addressing pressing questions about the nature of life was a motivating factor in adulthood, few put either their interest or the wider popular interest in psychics down to any traumatic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. We expected the pandemic to have propelled people towards psychics and yet none of our interview participants agreed. There was a stronger sense, from nearly all of our interviewees, that their interest in attending pub psychic nights and mediums in general had long roots in childhood. Parents or grandparents had told them ghostly stories, and they had often had that childhood interest piqued later by popular culture. Several mentioned Derek Acorah (the infamous celebrity medium) as well as the more recent BBC podcast and TV series, *Uncanny*, hosted by Danny Robins. The wider availability of advertising pub events, particularly through Facebook, was seen to be a catalyst for attendance for many, when previously you might only have heard about events through word-of-mouth, seeing a pub-sign advertising a psychic night, or if you were a pub regular. Several interviewees thought that the COVID-19 lockdowns “might” have made people more reflective, but that their own interest was far more long-standing, with some discussing psychic events on Zoom which they did not like, preferring face-to-face readings.

Yet none of our interview participants turned to institutional religion (either their natal religion, or another) to answer any of the questions that they might have. One participant told us she thought religion was “boring and dated” but other participants, when asked about religion, struggled to answer, almost as if it was the first time, they had thought about how it related to their quest for answers to big questions. Rather than seeking guidance from traditional religious institutions, one participant likened using psychics to spiritual counselors, stating, “I see it in the same way as someone that is spiritual will ask the universe, or people would ask the angels for an answer, or ask tarot for an answer.” There were a few participants who expressed an interest in attending a Spiritualist church, following their pub psychic event, but there was some concern that it would feel ‘too religious’ and that they would be uncomfortable there. Almost all of our participants wanted to search for the answers they needed outside of the boundaries of institutional religion, whether mainstream or alternative, either through online research, books, podcasts, or going to see a psychic in a pub or club where they could engage without any firm commitment or behaviour change.

Conclusion

Pub psychic nights represent a significant yet previously unexplored grassroots phenomenon. While often dismissed as mere entertainment and the legitimacy of the psychic/medium brought under question, these perspectives overlook the experiences and meaning participants place on these events and spirit communication. These nights can be transformative, where participants, particularly working-class women, seek comfort, closure, and guidance outside of organized institutional religion in familiar community settings. We have highlighted how pub psychic nights create an unusual space that blends the ordinary profane, everyday environments of the pub with the extraordinary experiences of spirit communication and meaningful encounters with the unseen that can elicit transformative emotional responses. For an hour or two on any given weeknight, pubs become extraordinary spaces, temporarily suspended between the mundane and the sacred. This juxtaposition allows participants to navigate and address deep emotional and existential needs in familiar spaces, particularly around grief, helping people to navigate death and loss in ways that institutional religion might have once fulfilled. Our findings contribute to the sociological and religious studies literature on Spiritualism by drawing attention to its ongoing vitality outside institutional and historically recognised contexts. While much of the academic work on Spiritualism focuses on the “golden age” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Hill 2010, 476), or on Church-based practice, our study expands the empirical lens to include grassroots, often female-led practices, with predominantly female audiences, occurring in secular, everyday venues. We demonstrate that spirit communication persists and even flourishes in commercialised, informal secular pub settings, which challenge assumptions that Spiritualism has lost relevance in contemporary British society. We also document that the core functions of Spiritualism, namely, communication with the dead, meaning making, and the process of healing and emotional closure, are being sought out and enacted by people who would not typically identify as (or understand the term) “Spiritualist” in census or institutional terms, or who would consider attending a Spiritualist church. This demonstrates a reconfiguration of Spiritualism being lived through popular, accessible, and non-institutional channels, which offers a new vantage point to understand both the diversification and persistence of spirit communication practices in modern Britain.

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