Emotion Regulation Through Experiences of Psychic Mediumship:

A Case Study at a Norwegian Hotel

Anne Austad

Associate Professor, PhD

Faculty of Theology, Diaconia and Leadership Studies

VID Specialized University, Norway

anne.austad@vid.no

Hege Kristin Ringnes

Senior Adademic Librarian, PhD

University Library

OsloMet, Norway

hege.k.ringnes@mf.no

Abstract

The aim of this case study was to explore the emotional experiences of individuals taking part in non-congregational psychic mediumistic services in Norway. A thematic analysis of interview materials from nine users of mediumistic practices identified an overall pattern of increased self-reported positive emotions and decreased self-reported negative emotions soon after their consultations with the medium. In a few cases, the participants reported increased negative emotions, which were linked to their inability to trust the medium or her delivery of unpleasant messages from the dead. The emotional goals and emotional change perceived by the participants were related to their relations with the deceased, their personal futures, and their expectations of an afterlife. The results of this study are discussed from the perspective of emotion regulation theory, with a focus on the individual and social aspects of the process of emotional change.

Introduction

Interest in psychic mediumship appear to be significant in Western Europe (Osborne and Bacon 2015). In addition to spiritualist churches[1], the less organized and unregistered practice of mediumship has been subject to a broad and growing attention, as is evident in media and popular culture (Endsjø and Lied 2011; Kalvig 2016; Kraft 2011). For example, surveys in Norway (the context of this study) suggest that half a million people out of a population of five million regularly watch the television program *The Power of the Spirits* (Kraft 2011). Advertisements for clairvoyant mediums flourish via telemarketing, and Norwegian weekly magazines publish extensively about spirits (Romarheim 2014). In a survey about religion (International Social Survey Programme 2018), 17.7 percent of Norwegian respondents answered "yes" to the following question: "Do you believe in the supernatural powers of deceased ancestors?" (Karlsen, Agasøster, and Skjåk 2019). Based on these studies, we can assume that there is interest in and cultural exchange surrounding supernatural topics in the Norwegian context and that a sizable number of Norwegians involve themselves with mediumistic services at different levels of proximity. Such involvement can occur at a distant level through television shows, at a mid-level through demonstrations of mediumship at spiritual evenings, and at a close level through personal face-to-face readings with a psychic medium[2] (Moberg 2015).

Contemporary mediumship is understood to be multidimensional. That is, it can be seen from the perspective of folk religious beliefs in the supernatural, spiritual connection to the transcendent, spiritualist religious practice, secular grief therapy, popular culture entertainment, and more (Kalvig 2016). This complexity means that participants, functioning as "multireligious actors" (Gilhus and Mikaelsson 2000), may approach and appraise mediumistic sessions from different or overlapping perspectives and motivations. As part of the larger holistic spiritual trend in Western society, contemporary mediumistic practices often feature processes of health and healing (Kwilecki 2009), subjectivized authority (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), and the importance of family relations in life and death, all of which have been found to attract women (Sointy and Woodhead 2008; Day 2012).

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[1] We use the terms *spiritualism* when referring to organised religious community, and *mediumship* when referring to the non-congregational contemporary practice of spiritism (Kalvig 2016).

[2] In a *personal reading*, the medium passes messages on to her clients using clairvoyance and perceived contact with the dead. It is commonly said that "all mediums are clairvoyant, but not all clairvoyants are mediums" (Kalvig 2016, 11, our translation). At a *spiritual evening* the medium conveys the same kind of personal messages in an open session at which more people are present. These sessions may also include a general message of philosophy (Kalvig 2016).

There are several historical studies of spiritism describing its prevalence from the eighteenth century onward (e.g. Braude 2001). Despite their ongoing popularity, however, loosely organized, contemporary mediumistic practices have been scarcely researched (Kalvig 2016, 11), and there is a need to explore how individual users experience this multidimensional practice.

The present study intends to engage with user experiences of contemporary mediumship practices. As emotional aspects are central to people's everyday spirituality (Woodhead and Riis 2010; Emmons 2005), we consider emotions to be a pertinent perspective from which to investigate mediumship experiences. Placing this study within the psychology of religion, we aim to explore perceived emotional experiences among users of loosely organized professional psychic medium practices by applying a qualitative methodological approach.

Research Question

In accordance with the aim of this study, the following research question was addressed: What characterizes the perceived emotional goal, emotional processes, and emotional changes for participants in non-congregational psychic mediumistic practices?

Research Context: Emotions and Experiences of Mediumistic Practice

In an overview of the literature on experiences of perceived contact with the deceased through the help of a medium, Beischel, Mosher, and Boccuzzi (2015) found that some research has indicated that participants feel better after reading sessions with psychic mediums; however, no conclusions could be made due to the scarcity of original studies. In response to this paucity of research, Beischel et al. asked participants (N = 80) to rate their levels of grief before and after mediumship reading sessions and found that the participants self-reported experiencing "noteworthy relief from grief after mediumship readings" (Beischel et al. 2015, 189).

Koss-Chioino (2005) found that medium-assisted contact with the dead at spiritist centers in Puerto Rico helped to upregulate clients' emotions, independent of whether the clients' disorders were understood as obsessions caused by spirits or interpreted within a Western biomedical psychiatric model. Walter (2008) examined how visiting a medium impacted mourners in a British Spiritualist church context and found that the participants primarily experienced positive emotions after participating in readings. Taking the perspective

of the mediums themselves, Wilde et al. (2019) emphasized that mediums viewed themselves as a helping profession bringing comfort to their clients.

In sum, previous empirical research on emotional experiences of contact with the deceased through the help of a medium has focused in different ways on grief and how the emotions of the participants are influenced or changed. As a next step, we find it relevant to introduce the theoretical field of emotion regulation to this research context.

Theoretical Framework

Emotion Regulation

Emotion regulation has been defined as "the processes by which individuals influence *which* emotions they have, *when* they have them, and *how* they experience and express these emotions" (Gross 1998, 275). Emotion regulation can entail decreasing, maintaining, or increasing positive or negative emotions. However, the most common goal of emotion regulation is when a person works toward increasing positive emotions and decreasing negative ones (Gross 2014).

Emotion regulation theory is goal-oriented and holds that individuals influence their own emotions, as well as the emotions of others, through *emotion regulation strategies* (Gross 1998; Koole 2010). The term "strategy" does not necessarily refer to conscious choices, as the name might otherwise imply. Rather, emotion regulation theory proposes that the use of strategies often happens without the user being aware of the attempt to regulate feelings, although more explicit regulation of emotions also happens (Koole 2010). One emotion regulation strategy is *cognitive reappraisal,* which involves altering emotions by changing the way in which one thinks (Vishkin et al. 2016). Another strategy is *social sharing*, which involves openly talking with someone else about the circumstances and emotional reactions related to a particular emotion-eliciting event (Rimé 2010).

Both cognitive and social elements are involved in regulation activities. Emotion regulation through social sharing is directly linked to the cognitive appraisals and reappraisals that happen in the social sharing sequence (Zech and Rimé 2005). In cognitive reappraisal, the social dimension is influential during the reappraisal process through the use of social frameworks for verbalizing emotions (Koole and Veenstra 2015).

The relationship between individual appraisals and their social aspects is particularly visible in the field of religion and emotion. Religious frameworks, such as beliefs and practices, can impact human emotions in diverse ways. In his classic book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Durkheim underscores how religious emotions are not only psychic inner states but also arise in collective ritualized gatherings. Furthermore, religious group settings can offer emotion regulation strategies to individuals affiliated with the group, such as belief-specific cognitive reappraisal and social sharing (e.g., Ringnes et al. 2017). When emotions are activated by religious beliefs and practices, those beliefs and practices may in turn be strengthened if they function emotionally (Boden and Gross 2013). Emotional reactions to religious and spiritual experiences and practices are, however, not predetermined or set. These reactions are also dependent on individuals' (society-influenced) appraisals (Keltner and Lerner 2010).

In the present study, we take a micro-relational approach (Woodhead and Riis 2010, 23) that focuses on the individual's emotion regulation in concrete social spaces, here including friends and family, the deceased, and the medium. We also acknowledge the broader social and cultural frameworks of emotional life, in which, while emotion regulation may conform to the emotional scripts of broader groups within society (Hochschild 1983, ix), the individual also has agency in the regulation of his/her emotions.

Materials and Methods

Research Design and Context

A qualitative single case study design was employed to explore in depth the experiences and activities related to one psychic medium over a sustained period of time (Stake 2005). The period was a single week when a professional medium, whom we will hereafter refer to as Christina, stayed at a Norwegian hotel to which participants came for consultations (reading sessions)[3].

During this week the medium carried out eight to nine readings per day. Most participants booked their appointments in advance through a booking manager, but a few

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[3] The medium is affiliated with spiritualistic congregations in another country, but most of her practice occurs in non-congregational settings, such as the hotel in which the present fieldwork was carried out.

came to the lobby and asked the manager for available hours in Christina's schedule. The readings took place in Christina's large hotel suite and lasted for one hour, and the price of each reading was 1,000 NOK (approximately 100 euros). In addition to individual readings, the program announced one spiritual evening, one workshop, and offered to "cleanse haunted houses."[4]

Recruitment and Access to the Field

We contacted the participants through a *gate keeper*, who was the booking manager responsible for the practicalities surrounding the arrangement, known personally by one of the researchers. Additionally, we recruited one participant at the hotel after the fieldwork had begun. The sample consisted of the medium plus nine participants: one man and eight women, ranging in age between 21 and 49 years old. This reflects the gender distribution among participants of Christina's services, as we observed it at the hotel lobby and the arranged spiritual evening.

Data Collection

The data collection methods included participatory observation of an open spiritual evening, informal conversations with the medium during meals at the hotel, conversations with the booking manager, and talks with participants who had previously visited the medium but were presently waiting in the lobby for relatives and friends. We further conducted nine semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009) with participants after they had attended personal consultations with the medium and one interview with the medium. In the interviews, we asked the participants about what they had expected to get out of the readings, how they felt before the sessions began, their experiences during the readings, and how they felt afterward. Interview data with the participants served as the primary material, whereas the participant observation and interview with the medium was used to a lesser extent in this article. The observation was, however, important for being accepted as researchers, for the recruitment of informants and becoming usefully acquainted with the practices, language, and interactions, which served as start points in the interviews (Becker and Geer 1967).

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[4] The announced workshop was cancelled due to an insufficient number of participants.

Analysis

The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and the field observation notes were written out as narratives. Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used to identify themes and patterns across cases. We developed a mixed inductive-deductive strategy that was informed by emotion regulation theories (Gross 1998; 2008) but open to other perspectives and unexpected findings. Whereas the first phase of the analysis remained nearer to the inductive end of the inductive-deductive continuum, the second phase was more theoretically informed in that it focused on finding possible interpretive connections to theories of emotion regulation. In order to strengthen the credibility of the project, the two researchers analyzed the material separately before comparing the identified themes.

Ethical Considerations

Before the fieldwork began, we notified the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD; nsd.no) about the study and received permission to carry it out. Prior to our arrival, the medium had accepted our presence at the hotel and the participants had orally consented to the interviews. Written consent was collected immediately before each interview started. We followed instructions from the NSD regarding anonymity and informed consent to participate.

Results

Participants' Experiences of Emotional Change After Reading Consultations

In our data-driven analysis of the participant interviews, we distinguished four relational foci in their narratives: 1) their relations with the medium, 2) their relations with their dead relatives or friends, 3) their relations with other living people, and 4) their relations with their own deaths (see Figure 1). These foci expressed different ways of using the readings and were linked to the participants' emotional goals, perceived emotional processes, and emotional changes. The relational focus that was emphasized the most in the participants' stories differed from person to person.

Relations with the Medium: Trust or Mistrust

All the participants were concerned about the credibility of the medium—that is, whether what she said corresponded with their perceptions of reality. If the participants' experiences

reflected that Christina revealed true details about themselves, their closest family and friends, or the deceased that she could not possibly know of, they became convinced of her extraordinary abilities and therefore trusted her. Seven of the nine participants expressed basic trust in the medium. Some identified a few themes in the reading that did not hit the mark or were too general, but they made allowances for these misses. Two of the nine participants formed the conclusion that the medium could not be trusted. For example, P6 expressed the skepticism as follows:

> **P6:** I've finished the session but am not convinced. I did go in there with a skeptical attitude and came out as not convinced.
>
> **I:** No? Would you tell me about your experiences in there?
>
> **P6:** [Thinking] Yes, okay. I experienced that she [Christina] immediately started to present those whom she saw. First, she talked about my mother's mother as if she was dead, but she wasn't. She isn't. So, I told her that she isn't dead. Then, she said it could be my father's mother instead. And this makes me a little skeptical. I prefer to have it all clear. When I feel it's "fishing," I become skeptical. [Thinking] But then, she also said something that was very accurate… So, when I think it through, it's correct, but it's probably me having skepticism that I won't let go of.

The two skeptics described contradictory experiences of trust and mistrust. Reportedly, both participants had discussions with themselves about which of these experiences to assign greater weight to and ultimately mistrusted the medium. Their skepticism and mistrust appeared to upregulate negative emotions, such as confusion and insecurity.

However, the most dominant trend in our data was the combination of trust in the medium and increased positive emotions immediately after the reading sessions. P2 trusted Christina because Christina revealed specific private details, which P2 saw as signs of proof. P2 said that "Everything she [Christina] told me was so detailed; she could absolutely not have known about these facts… There's really something going on here!" P4 explained that Christina "really obtained the contact with them [the deceased] I had hoped for," leading to crying, happiness, and trust in the medium.

Most of the participants said they had been recruited to the reading through friends or family members. They were accordingly given a recommendation with a positive evaluation of the encounter with the medium Christina. We also observed friends and family in the lobby discussing with the participants before and after the reading. Thus, the process of trusting the medium seemed to include a wider relational and social frame. The medium herself underscored that she was dependent on a kind of collaboration, stating that a reading would likely be inadequate if the participant had a skeptical or testing attitude towards her.

The participants reported that their relations with the medium were important, and their appraisals of the medium's credibility appeared to influence the emotional outcomes of the readings.

Relations with Dead Relatives or Friends: Exchanging Emotions

Many of the participants expressed that a continued relationship with the dead was their main expectation before seeing the medium. P9 put it clearly by saying that "it [the relationship with the dead] is much more important than what happens in the future."

Some participants reported experiencing increased positive emotions when they received confirmation that their good relations with the dead had continued after death. For instance, they felt glad to be seen by the dead and to receive positive feedback on their achievements in life. P4 recalled that "It was so special when my grandma came forward. She was the first to come; she presumably wanted to be first. And she eventually told how proud she is of me."

Some participants also reported a sense of reduced negative emotions regarding their relations with the dead. For example, feelings of loss were alleviated because the dead were perceived as present through the medium, and feelings of self-blame for not being able to say farewell before death were reduced or eliminated. Further, experiences of reconciliation and settlement after difficult relationships reduced negative emotions when the medium passed on the dead's excuses and pleas for forgiveness:

> **P5:** I've accepted how things are. I no longer need to strive for answers to what and why. It feels so good to be able to, in a way, relax. I did receive the excuse I felt that I needed [from the deceased]. Earlier difficulties are now more okay.

Increased negative emotions and ambivalence were reported by a few participants. For example, P7 displayed increased negative emotions in her tone of voice when she described how the medium conveyed contact with a departed person with whom she did not want to continue a relationship. P7 retold how "Christina obtained contact with [a close person], whom we lost a couple of years ago. That person I had thought that I really would not make contact with. But I knew, of course, that it could happen." Although the participants were told that they could stop the medium if she touched upon relations or themes they did not want to discuss, not all were able to speak out soon enough. In the case of P7, this resulted in unwanted confrontation with a departed relation.

Through the medium, the participants perceived that emotions were being exchanged and shared between the living and the dead. Although there were some negative experiences, positive emotions dominated these encounters. For example, some of the dead were reportedly proud of the bereaved's achievements in life, and the bereaved returned their love. If the deceased had experienced difficulties in their lifetimes, they were perceived to be happy now in the afterlife, sharing their happiness with the living through the medium.

Relations with Other Living People: Boosting and Guiding Future Life

A few of the participants put their relations with the dead in the background and foregrounded their lives among the living as the focus of the consultation. From this perspective, the deceased served as advice-givers for the participants' lives in the here and now and as conduits through which the participants could receive information about the future. One participant (P3) stated that the reason she attended the reading was not that she missed the dead. Rather, she aimed to get answers about the future and assistance in making good life choices: "I wasn't in need of this reading, but then, the excitement attracted me. Now, my judgment is that it's exciting and rewarding to receive answers to unrequited questions" (P3).

In general, the future prospects reportedly relayed by the dead pointed to events to come, such as having a child, moving to a new house, or getting a particular job. The participants said that these messages increased their positive emotions or, in cases where a negative situation was predicted to gradually become better, reduced their negative emotions. However, challenging personal messages were reported as well, with the consequence of increasing negative emotions and ambivalence. For example, P8 was told by the medium that she would not be able to return to work as she wanted and would instead remain on disability benefits. In addition, P1 was informed that she would break up with her partner, with whom she was in a difficult relationship that she hoped would improve. In the latter case, the message was simultaneously perceived as difficult to bear and as a relief.

Overall, one factor that reportedly influenced each participant's emotional state after their reading was the quality of messages received about his or her life situation, whether these messages were optimistic or confronted the participant with difficulties.

Relations with Personal Death: Fear and Questions of the Afterlife

Two of the participants (P6 and P7) were particularly concerned about what would happen after death. Part of their motivation for going to see the medium was their desire to find proof of an afterlife. If the medium seemed credible and the details she revealed fell in line with their own images of the dead and life experiences, they would find the message to be true and, consequently, it would strengthen their belief in an afterlife:

> **P6:** This [going to a medium] was important, as I have questions regarding whether there is more after death. Is there more or only what we can observe? Is the rest just fantasy? When we believe, is that only a hallucination? I have questions about such things, and it's one reason for coming here. The goal was to be more convinced of an afterlife, for if there's nothing, it's quite scary! The feeling of just fading away and then nothing more!

P6 talked about her relations with her own death in emotional terms. Specifically, she stated that death would be frightening if there were no afterlife. The goal of reducing anxiety about death by visiting the medium was not a major theme in the remaining interviews. However, for several the aforementioned concern about the credibility of the medium was a matter of finding out what happens after death.

The participants' emotional changes and relational foci are summed up in Table 1.

[Table 1 here]

Discussion

Emotion Regulation – Individual and Social Aspects

In this study significant *emotion regulation goals and changes* were found to be connected to a web of different relations, including relations with the dead, relations with living friends and family, and relations with death itself (Table 1). In the *process of emotion regulation*, participants' relationship with the medium played an important role. The perceived credibility of the medium appeared to influence emotion regulation, creating space for (or hindering) positive regulation. Accordingly, the quality of participants' emotion regulation was not only dependent on the degree of optimism in the medium's messages, but was also influenced by participants' perceived trust in the medium and how the participants interpreted and gave meaning to the medium's messages (See Figure 1, page x). The participants appeared to use *cognitive reappraisal* as an emotion regulation strategy (Vishkin et al. 2016). The reappraisal of general descriptions to make them more personally relevant allowed participants to draw out the positive emotional potential in the medium's messages. Some participants chose to reinterpret or give very little weight to passages in which the medium was too general or even

wrong about certain facts, whereas others let the inaccurate messages override reception of the accurate ones, which in turn hindered positive emotions and produced negative ones. The process of cognitive reappraisal shows how reason and emotion are interwoven (Woodhead and Riis 2010) and how empirical and tacit judgments (in this case, of the credibility of the medium's messages) produce beliefs and affectual truths. As Boden and Gross (2013, 595) argue, people hold particular beliefs because they successfully regulate emotions in valued directions, and, in doing so, their beliefs come to be held with greater conviction.

The strategy of social sharing (Rimé 2010) also appeared to be used: it took place between the medium and the participant, between the living and the dead, and within the social network of the living. Although the studied mediumship practice was loosely organized, we identified a fellowship orientation in which social sharing appeared to take place in the hotel lobby, as well as at home after the reading. Friends and family members, among them some men, were distantly waiting for news from the women who had taken on the spiritual responsibility of emotional change. As Day (2012, 178) explains, family relations in life and death are primarily managed by women, a matter that partly explains women's overrepresentation in spiritistic practices (Kalvig 2016). This overrepresentation of women was also the case in our study, although men were not necessarily entirely absent but were present on the fringe.

Through social sharing sequences, appraisals and reappraisals of the experience were verbalized, underscoring the close interrelatedness between the individual and social aspects of emotion regulation.

[Figure 1 here]

Variation in Emotional Goals

In the study of Beischel et al. (2015) concerning assisted contact with the dead, a majority of participants experienced noteworthy relief from *grief* after their mediumistic consultations. In the present study, we found that participants were not using medium-assisted contact with the dead exclusively to downregulate negative emotions related to grief, such as sadness and guilt. Furthermore, not all participants were preoccupied with the continuation of bonds with dead relatives or friends. Rather, our analysis showed that the upregulation of feelings of *excitement* about the near future and *wellbeing* in relation to other living people, as well as the downregulation of *death anxiety*, were the emotional goals of some of the participants. Because the present study was neither conducted in grief therapy groups nor particularly

focused on grief, the broad focus allowed us to identify a variety of emotional implications, including but not restricted to the downregulation of grief. This variety of emotional implications resonates with the multidimensionality of contemporary spiritism (Kalvig 2016).

Variations in Perceived Emotional Change

We identified three perceived *emotional changes*: increased positive emotions, reduced negative emotions, and increased negative emotions. Increased positive emotions was the most reported emotional change among the participants. Supplementary to the focus on the downregulation of negative grief-related emotions in the research of Beischel et al. (2015), the emphasis on an upregulation of emotions by Koss-Chioino's (2005), and Walter's (2008) findings that participants primarily experience positive emotions in spiritualistic congregations, our findings featured a more complex matrix of emotional changes than is present in this previous research.

Increased negative emotions resulting from mediumship practices may be more visible in a loosely organized mediumistic practice that recruits and attracts participants from outside fellowships, compared to the practice of a spiritualist church or congregation, such as that used in Walter's study. Loosely organized practices seldom adhere to stringent shared meaning systems, such as belief in life after death and the possibility of after-death communication. Looser organization may also result in weaker social identity, implying a weaker presence of group-specific appraisals (Kuppens et al. 2013) and, consequently, more variety in cognitive appraisals and reappraisals. Most of the participants in the present study shared nonspecific appraisals of the dead as somewhat approachable or the nonspecific expectation that the medium could provide good news. A few of the participants were both skeptical *and* hopeful about the possibility of contacting the dead. This ambivalence may be traced back to Norwegian discourse surrounding the phenomenon of mediumship. Although the popularity of mediumistic practices appears to be significant in Norway, there is also an existing skepticism in the Norwegian context about contacting the deceased (Døving and Kraft 2013). This skepticism is related to psychological discourse on the presumed negative implications of such practices for mental health, as well as rationalistic discourse that claims the dead cannot continue to exist (Austad 2015).

Thus, our findings resonate with the double status of contemporary mediumship: on the one hand, contemporary mediumship fits well within a broader spiritual holistic trend in Western society, with its focus on healing and wellbeing (Kwilecki 2009); on the other, to a

larger extent than traditional religions, mediumship is subject to truth and effect requirements (Kalvig 2016). From an emotion regulation perspective, this double status of mediumship may imply conflicting social emotional scripts in the appraisal process and may also explain the ambivalence that was observed among some of the participants.

Conclusions

Due to our methodology and the context of our study, we were able to find various perceived emotional goals as well as emotional changes among users of mediumship. For one thing, we identified an extension of emotional goals beyond the regulation of grief, which was the main theme of earlier psychological research on post-death contact. Another finding was that although positive emotion regulation was dominant, participation in the mediumistic practice could also result in unwanted emotions. Important to note is that positive regulation appeared to require cooperation based on trust between the medium and the participant to filter the medium's messages. Social relations emerged as a central theme in our results, both in the process of cognitive appraisal and the social sharing of the experience, and in the goals of emotion regulation, which were deeply connected to continuing or changing relations across the spheres of life and death.

This study is based on limited material; consequently, the results cannot be generalized. Furthermore, because the interview data were collected immediately after the reading sessions, we do not know what happened after the participants left the hotel. Future studies should investigate long-term implications of negative or positive emotional changes for users of loosely organized mediumistic practices, considering the complex appraisals that might occur due to ambivalent social beliefs about this practice in a Norwegian context.

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