

Discovering strange events in empty spaces: The role of multimodal practice and the interpretation of paranormal events



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Received 9 February 2017; received in revised form 9 September 2017; accepted 11 September 2017

Available online 28 September 2017

Abstract

This article examines how empty space may be used as an interactional resource to see, understand and categorise events as potentially paranormal. By drawing upon video data of groups noticing and negotiating their experiences of a strange event, this study examines the verbal and multimodal practices used to negotiate the status of these events (as either paranormal or normal). It is argued that through interactional practices individuals render certain events in the local milieu noticeable, and through negotiation of the features and location of an event in empty space, imply transgressive qualities towards them.

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Keywords: Multimodal; Interaction; Gesture; Pointing; Paranormal; Empty space

1. Introduction

This paper explores how people make sense of experiences that, through a variety of interactional resources, are understood as *paranormal* in nature. Paranormal experiences can be understood as “those instances in which persons perceive phenomena that appear to defy scientific explanation” (MacDonald, 1994:35). These experiences have been labelled in various ways including supernatural, ghostly or spiritual experiences. However, the fundamental feature of such events is that they involve an experience that is deemed in some way, uncanny.¹

Whilst the variety of paranormal experiences claimed by individuals are unusual including encounters with the dead, UFO's, out of body experiences and psychic phenomenon, as Greeley (1975) and Castro et al. (2014) argue, reports of paranormal experiences are common. Indeed, studies have suggested that over two fifths of the population in Britain have reported an experience (Castro et al., 2014), and that “nearly half of Americans believe in ghosts” (Bader et al., 2010:44), with nearly one-quarter reporting to have felt or sensed a presence (Alfano, 2009). These findings suggest that the paranormal is still a prevalent feature in our everyday lives. These experiences are, however, somewhat contradictory to a society that has seen a decline in organised religious affiliation (Saad, 2012) and a predominance of rational and scientific thinking. As such, it is important to consider how individuals make sense of their paranormal encounters. In a recent study by Waskul and Waskul (2016) this question is addressed through their investigation of accounts of paranormal experiences. In their findings, they suggest that individuals draw upon various sense-making practices to understand their

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¹ I use uncanny here in reference to the term ‘unheimlich’ (translated in conventional English to *uncanny*) relied on by Freud in his analysis of the psychodynamic conditions that underpin unusual or disturbing experiences (Freud, 1958 [1919]). ‘Unheimlich’ is the antonym of ‘heimlich’ which broadly means home or of a place, and as such ‘unheimlich’ refers to those things that are not of home, or are out of place be that physically, ontologically or epistemically.

experiences, often invoking individualised and contextual narratives to explain their encounters. As Waskul and Waskul found, there is rarely an immediate categorisation of the experience as ghostly, “instead, strange happenings become ghostly encounters most often in a patterned process by which people contend with three successive layers of doubt: self-doubt, a doubting of what is real, and finally, a doubting of what is true.” (2016:41). The process of making sense of these experiences is then, a complicated one. Individuals do not immediately ‘jump’ to the conclusion that they have experienced something uncanny but, as Waskul and Waskul state, that conclusion “emerge[s] from the minded ways that people act towards things and the consequence thereof” (2016:52).

This paper seeks to compliment and expand upon this research by examining the ways that people come to understand their experiences as being paranormal, or unusual in some way. In contrast to [Waskul and Waskul's study \(2016\)](#), however, I seek to understand sense-making practices through the study of micro-level interactions as ostensibly paranormal events occur. In addition, the focus of this study is on the collective experiences of groups seeking paranormal events, an approach that responds to a call for the study of paranormal experiences at an interpersonal and small group interactional level ([Markovskye and Thye, 2001](#); [Wooffitt, 1991, 1992](#)). The study of group interaction as an experience takes place is of particular interest because the predominant feature of many of these experiences is that they are often ‘unseen’ or ‘invisible.’ As supported by the accounts that [Waskul and Waskul \(2016\)](#) present it is rare for individuals to encounter a visible ghost, much rarer for this to occur in a collective manner. Contrary to the expectation of ‘seeing a ghost’ often perpetuated by popular culture, ghostly experiences are often fairly subtle in the way that they occur manifesting as sounds, embodied senses or feelings. However, the potential to collectively experience a paranormal event carries with it the validation that is often sought. As such, this poses an interactional challenge to paranormal groups who seek to share and understand these events, that often have no visible source, collectively.

By examining how groups collectively make sense of strange events in their environment, this paper also seeks to contribute to the growing body of work that has examined the multimodal practises that inform how individuals notice, share and come to collectively understand features in the local milieu. Predominantly, this research has largely focused on workplace studies, highlighting how visual actions such as pointing, gesturing, head tilts and body shifts, provide a way for individuals to highlight something in the environment to others and invite further collaborative action ([Enfield et al., 2007](#); [Hindmarsh et al., 1998](#); [Heath and Hindmarsh, 1999](#); [Heath et al., 2009, 2002a, 2002b](#)). As examined in [Goodwin's \(1994\)](#) study of an architectural school and [Hindmarsh's \(2010\)](#) research in dental practices visual actions, such as pointing, can also invite others to look and see features in certain ways. In doing so they develop a professional vision of their practice by demonstrating an understanding of what these referents mean in the context of their professional activity. Likewise, [vom Lehn's \(2006a, 2006b\)](#) study in museums and galleries discusses how visitors share their ‘way of seeing’ exhibits (such as finding something funny or interesting) with others through referential action. Thus, through the organisation of visual and verbal actions individuals are then able to invite others to discover, understand and react to certain features of the local milieu in relevant ways ([Heath and Hindmarsh, 1999](#)).

In these studies, participants are dealing with objects and features that are visible and tangible. They are, therefore, accessible for individuals to orientate towards and interact with. There are, however, instances where the focus of attention is not on an object but an event that occurs in, essentially, empty space. This study examines such occasions where empty space is regularly orientated towards during the course of interaction, and through these actions imply that the event is strange or paranormal in nature. In the context of this research the characterisation of an empty space is defined by *its lack of any physical object or normal influence that could, conceivably, be responsible for the event that occurred*. During these interactions, individuals invite others to look towards and notice particular events in the environment, they engender a certain ‘feel’ about these events (mainly that they are unusual/strange), and encourage others to collaborate in further actions that establish the transgressive and potentially paranormal properties of the event. Through these collaborative activities the group not only render a space noticeable, they configure an identity for it as one that is potentially inhabited by a strange event or presence, in the context of this study a ‘Spirit’. Whilst the work of [Wooffitt \(1991, 1992, 1994, 2006\)](#) has provided some valuable insight into the verbal practices that inform how individuals account for and manage ostensibly paranormal experiences, and other researchers have examined these claims from a broader sociological perspective ([Goode, 2000](#); [Hill, 2010](#); [Hufford, 2005](#); [Rice, 2003](#); [Waskul and Waskul, 2016](#)). Studies of multimodal practises have yet to examine ostensibly paranormal events. The use of empty space as a resource during interaction has, however, received some attention. In particular, the practice of *Deixis am Phantasma* identified first by [Bühler \(1965\)](#) is described as “the imagined objects, on and to which ‘pointing’ takes place within imagination” ([Bühler, 1990:150](#)). As discussed by Bühler, this practice often involves individuals creating a shared understanding of a ‘non-present’ entity in visible space. [Stukenbrock \(2014\)](#) expands on Bühler's early work, examining how non-visible phenomena are constructed and interacted with through verbal deictics and visible bodily acts. In doing so she further distinguishes two different forms of *Deixis am Phantasma*, the first in which imagined phenomena are brought into real space (such as pointing to people that were but are no longer present), and the second in which the space itself is constructed in the imagination (such as re-enacting a story and referring to objects within this imaginary context). Indeed, as examined by [Haviland \(2000\)](#) pointing to empty space is often used by speakers to tell a story and provide a means of

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