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

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.

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, uncanny¹.

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, Burrows and Wooffitt (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, Burrows & Wooffitt, 2014), and that “nearly half of Americans believe in ghosts” (Bader, Mencken & Baker, 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 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 (Markovsky & 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, Kita & Ruiter, 2007; Hindmarsh et al, 1998; Heath & Hindmarsh, 1999; Heath, Luff & Svensson, 2009; Heath et al, 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 & 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 & 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 creating an imaginary narrated space in which it can take place. As McNeill et al (1993) describe, the process of pointing at nothing (also referred to as 'abstract deixis') during conversation is a fairly common phenomenon and provides a space for abstract ideas to be expressed and formulated. Like other forms of pointing that help to anchor abstract notions in visible space (Cooperrider, 2014), the 'empty spaces' that abstract deixis takes place in are "rich with contextual information which can be used as a resource...[and]...functions to establish co-orientation and shared imagination between participants" (Stukenbrock, 2014:76-77). In addition to narrating abstract ideas, this form of pointing may also help individuals to share and co-construct understanding of non-visible

referents (Bavelas et al, 2011). As such, abstract deixis may be of particular relevance to conversations about paranormal accounts, or indeed ongoing paranormal experiences, which regularly involve referents (i.e. spirits) that are incorporeal in form.

This study examines the collective multimodal practices that inform how empty spaces are noticed and negotiated as a resource for understanding strange events.

In the context of this study, the positioning of an event in empty space carries with it a particular relevance. The group's activities involve them trying to facilitate

paranormal experiences by using various tools and rituals to interact with an unseen entity or spirit. These experiences often manifest themselves as sounds, sights or

feelings, many of which have the potential to have a rational or mundane

explanation. For instance, the group may hear a tapping noise or a voice-like sound in the room. Potentially, if the source of the experience is linked back to a person or

object in the room that could be responsible for the event then it is essentially

meaningless given the purpose of the interaction. However, if the source of the

sound is not evident and located in an 'empty' space away from any rationale cause,

it carries a certain uncanny or strange quality. In doing so, this study examines a

form of pointing at empty space that differs from the previous studies mentioned (Bavelas et al, 2011; Bühler, 1990; Haviland, 2000; McNeill et al, 2003; Stukenbrock, 2014). In this context empty space is not used to narrate or position imaginary referents, but ostensibly prove the existence of a non-visible entity (a spirit) by positioning it in empty space. The proceeding analysis will examine cases where a potentially strange event is noticed in the environment and how by positioning the event in an empty rather than occupied space, it becomes seen and understood as potentially paranormal.

2. Data and Methods

The data used in this study comes from a corpus of video recordings of amateur paranormal investigations. These investigations involve group's visiting reputedly haunted locations and taking part in activities with the intention of having a paranormal experience. As part of the group's investigation they regularly record their activities for the purpose of documenting paranormal experiences and, in some cases, investigating the mundane causes of such events. This has provided the opportunity to obtain rich natural data in a setting where recording of activities is commonplace.

The corpus of video data that this study draws on was captured during my participation in paranormal groups over 4 years in the UK between 2006 and 2010 at a range of locations. Data was collected prior to my knowledge that it would be used for research purposes and during my involvement in paranormal subcultures. As discussed by Eaton (2015), paranormal groups often adopt either spiritual or scientific approach to investigation, the collection of data presented contains footage from both types of approach. The data corpus contains over 100 hours of video footage. To analyse this, ethnographic knowledge of the data was used to select segments which illustrated moments when a paranormal event became part of the group's activities.

A conversation analytic approach was assumed to examine the data, with segments being transcribed using an adapted version of the Jefferson system.² The approach of using Conversation Analysis to examine video data was adopted due to its potential to reveal situated multimodal activities (Heath, Hindmarsh & vom Lehn, 2010; Mondada, 2008). Transcripts and video stills are presented throughout the analysis to illustrate multimodal activities. The extracts have been annotated to provide easy reference to relevant features, a description of these is provided in the footnotes.³

3. Discovering Spirits in Empty Spaces

In the analysis that follows data extracts are presented from occasions when an ostensibly paranormal experience is noticed by the group and through a series of interactions made sense of in relation to its positioning in empty, rather than occupied space. The analysis begins by examining how empty spaces are rendered noticeable, then discusses the multimodal practices that inform the positioning and features of the experience within these spaces.

3.1 Rendering Empty Spaces Noticeable

The following extracts illustrate when an empty space is first noticed by the group. In these extracts a noticing is produced towards an empty space just before a *that* reference is produced. As discussed by Hayward, Wooffitt and Wood (2015) 'that' turns are regularly produced when referring to an event that has the potential to engender certain transgressive qualities (i.e. it is unusual/ strange/ uncanny in the current course of interaction).

(2) Grandfather Clock

17 G Are you scared (0.5)[of us?
 18 [(A lifts her gaze off the board and
 19 looks to top left of camera, G follows A's gaze) <--G
 20 (Unknown tap and then quiet "ooooo" (moaning) sound can be
 21 heard. C looks towards the sound. A looks at C)
 22 A [What the fuck is that? <--T
 23 A [(A winces whilst speaking. C and G look at A)

In extract 2, the group are participating in the Ouija Board session. During line 17, A shifts her gaze as G asks if the spirit is scared of the group. Her gaze which has been focused on the business of the Ouija Board moves up and away from this activity and towards an empty space near the camera (19, 20). G and then C also follow A's shift in gaze and look towards the same space (21). This is preceded by a *that* reference (22).

In both cases, a shift away from the activity that the group are involved in – the business at hand – and towards an empty space is followed by a *that* reference. This turn is not always produced by the individual that looked towards an empty space and in some cases is delivered by a participant who notices another's shift in gaze. For example, in extract 1 the reference is made by individuals who do not look towards the empty space, but who 'see' another do so. In those cases where the individual who

looked at the space is the one to make the reference, they seek mutual gaze prior to their reference towards the event. In both of these cases then, the reference occurs after more than one participant becomes involved in the activity of noticing.

As a *that* reference occurs after an initial noticing it seems that the action of looking towards empty space, rather than attending to the business at hand, is relevant to the referral of an uncanny event. Sudden gaze shifts such as these that interrupt the current activity may indicate that something 'new' has been identified in the environment (Kääntä, 2014; Kidwell, 2009). In each of these extracts, the gaze shift is noticed by others who also gaze in the same direction, indicating that an initial noticing is seen by others as potentially meaningful to the interaction (Goodwin, 2000; Kääntä, 2014). Furthermore, the gazing at empty space is in itself meaningful, displaying the discovery of an event in a location where the source of both the noticing itself and the event are undefined. Thus, others are invited to search for the source of the noticing, in a space where the source is not immediately apparent. This is in contrast to Kidwell's (2009) study in which she demonstrates that toddlers will orientate to another's noticing gaze until they find the relevant source after which they continue their activity.

In these instances, however, the source through its ambiguous properties will likely require further action to discover what it is. Therefore, by producing a noticing towards an empty space participants demonstrate that something new has been discovered and that this may be relevant and meaningful to the ongoing activity. Regardless of whether others actually notice the event, seeing a noticing is enough to engender further interaction which, as demonstrated, is initially produced in the form of a verbal *that* reference. Furthermore, beyond encouraging others to participate in noticing, orientation to an empty space invites co-participants to discover and understand an event in relevant ways (Heath, 2000, 2002; Heath et al, 2002b; vom Lehn, 2006a, 2006b). By positioning a noticing in an empty space, it is implied that the event *does not* have a material source, and as such possesses transgressive properties and should be seen and understood as such.

The initial noticing of the event in empty space remains a significant point of reference for the continued interaction of the group. As we will explore next, the progression of the conversation from what the event was/ is, to where it occurred is important to negotiating its transgressive properties, and thus paranormal status. The first empty

space noticed acts as a 'marker' to initiate, negotiate and establish the status of the event.

3.2 Becoming uncanny: From 'That' to 'There'

As discussed, a gaze shift and subsequent *that* turn highlight to the group that something unusual or uncanny has been noticed and as such should be attended to.

Through an initial gaze shift towards empty space the potential source of the event is implied. However, as we will see in the subsequent analysis, what occurs after this is a series of collaborative multimodal actions to establish the exact locality of the event in the immediate environment.

In extract 3 below, the group are participating in a séance session. After establishing that an event has been shared by at least two of the group members (I and A) they both produce a turn that locates the event in a particular area. This is the same area that A looks up and towards (21) before the *that* reference. Their turn "over there" (28) and "down there" (29) is accompanied by a head point by both A (30) and I (32) towards this space. D also turns around to look towards the empty space.

(3) Dungeons Moan

21 *(A looks up straight over F's shoulder, toward*
 22 *the camera, then towards F. Rest of group look at I)*
 23 I did you not hear that <--T
 24 F [no
 25 G [hmm noo
 26 A [I did
 27 *[(A looks towards I)*
 28 I (unknown)[coming from[over there
 29 A [mmm [down there
 30 *[(A points with head towards* <--P
 31 *camera. D turns to look towards camera.)*
 32 *[(I points with head towards* <--P
 33 *camera)*
 34 I [that was it copying you
 35 A [something just went mmmmmmmmm
 36 *[(G looks towards I. G, F and E look towards camera)*
 37 G well hopefully we'll catch it on [camera
 38 F [its co::ld-
 39 F [down there
 40 *[(G looks back down towards the centre of the circle)*
 41 G [okay cool umm:: hh let's do it again can you copy me-
 42 *[(All of the group except F look towards the centre of*
 43 *the circle)*

Following on from this I describes the sound as copying G's earlier request for the spirit to mimic her voice (34), A also supports this in line 35. G, F and E then all look towards the empty space, which becomes a resource for the group to spatially orientate and discuss the paranormal potential of the event (i.e. if indeed it did occur in this empty space, where there is no natural explanation for the sound heard by A and I, then this could suggest a paranormal origin). Whilst a potential paranormal explanation for the event in this case is not openly acknowledged there is no resistance from the group towards I and A's claims. Indeed F's expression of "it's cold down there" (38) indicates an acknowledgment of the space referred to and immersion in the event.

Likewise, G's turn in line 41, appears to accept the event and use this to further the activity of the group – as they attempt to repeat it.

This case, like extract 4 and 5 below, demonstrate those occasions where the locality of the event is determined and agreed upon swiftly and without resistance by the group.

In these cases the location of the event is established through verbal and visual references towards the empty space.

(4) Popping Sound

39 A [I'm feeling really dizzy like you did
 40 [(A looks at C. B looks around towards A)
 41 A we got that before didn't we
 42 (**B looks back towards board**)
 43 C °what's that° <--T
 44 A what
 45 C like popping so[und
 46 E [(unknown) behind you
 47 [(**B looks towards C. E looks at C**)
 48 A ye[h
 49 C [yeh
 50 D [yeh
 51 E (unknown)
 52 A [I thought there's someone stood there .hhh
 53 [(**B looks to his left where the noise is** <--G
 54 **thought to be coming from, and then back around to C)**

In this sequence, the group are participating in a Ouija Board session and have been attempting to get the spirit to move the planchette in a circular motion. During a period of 27 seconds of silence C and E produce several glances towards A. A then offers an account of feeling cold (39), after which C produces a *that* reference (43). Following

A: where did that come from?

B: °over°



11: B holds hands up



13: B points out of doorway

In each of these cases we see the initial *that* reference progress into a physical location “*there*” - in each instance an unoccupied or empty space. The noises heard by the group in these cases all have the potential to have an ordinary or natural explanation (i.e. the “mmm” noise in extract 3 has the potential to be one of the group), however, by locating them within a space that is free from this 'normal' explanation and in an empty space, the transgressive qualities of the event are established. However, the group do not always establish the source of an event as quickly as the above cases and in some instances “*there*” is established through a period of negotiation and discovery of the event. As we will observe in the following extract this can take on the form of initially locating the experience in a potentially 'normal' space. This is often directed towards one of the group members.

To examine this we return to the first extract. In the section below, following the group hearing a noise and E describing the sound as a dog scratching, B produces a turn towards D and points at her. This turn (72) aimed at D, asks if the sound came from her. D replies with a “no” (74).

(6) Dog Scratching

61 F what was that
 62 B did you hear tha[t <--T
 63 G [which is unusual because there's thi[s
 64 U [m
 65 G [theory-[about [universal language
 66 B [like
 67 E [I heard that then[the dog [scratching
 68 U [mm
 69 U [mmmmmmmm
 70 [(E and B look at each other, B
 71 *scratches table and points)* <--P
 72 B yeh was tha- that was[n't you[like
 73 C [just wa[sn't you
 74 D [no
 75 [(B points at D) <--P
 76 [(B makes
 77 *scratching gesture)*

Following a brief exchange between F and E where they once again discuss the noise in relation to a dog, G joins the discussion with the suggestion that the sound could be coming from the Ouija Board. This is quickly dismissed by B who redirects the potential location of the event back towards D. On this occasion she suggests that the sound was “like” (85) D and points towards the right of her and into the empty space that was initially orientated towards prior to the “that” reference (61).

(7) Dog Scratching

84 G is it the board again?
 85 B no: it was like-[it was like you hh hhh[h
 86 E [hh
 87 D [hh
 88 [(B points towards the area around D) <--P
 89 (B points to space at right of D) <--P

In the conversation that follows the group continue to question D over the event until they finally ask her to scratch the material that she has on as a way of proving that she is not the source of the sound. After D scratches her clothes both B and E agree that the sound did not come from her (110 and 111 below).

(8) Dog Scratching

110 B n[o it wasn't that it was like a dog
 111 E [no it wasn't that it was a [high pitched
 112 [(E makes scratching gesture
 113 **in the air and B produces point)**
 114 B [you right your right
 115 E [chu chu chu chu

The conclusion regarding the location of the event in this case is determined by establishing where the event *did not* occur, rather than where it did. This process of discovery is instigated by a series of verbal summons directed towards a member of the group and also regarding a particular object in the environment (the Ouija Board).

Similarly, in extract 9 and 10 below, which follow the group referencing a ticking noise

that they describe as similar to a grandfather clock the group proceed to investigate a 'normal' clock in the room.

(9) Grandfather Clock

82 F Are you sure it's not that [clock
 83 C [Dah- I've just been over to-
 84 C that clock it makes a sss a really qui[et tick (.) it's-
 85 D [you sure 'cause
 86 C not that one
 87 [(C shakes her head and looks
 88 towards OB. G stands up)

By investigating the sound made by the normal clock they come to the conclusion that it is not the clock which is located to the right of the group and is located "there"(112)

– the space originally orientated towards before and during the "that" reference.

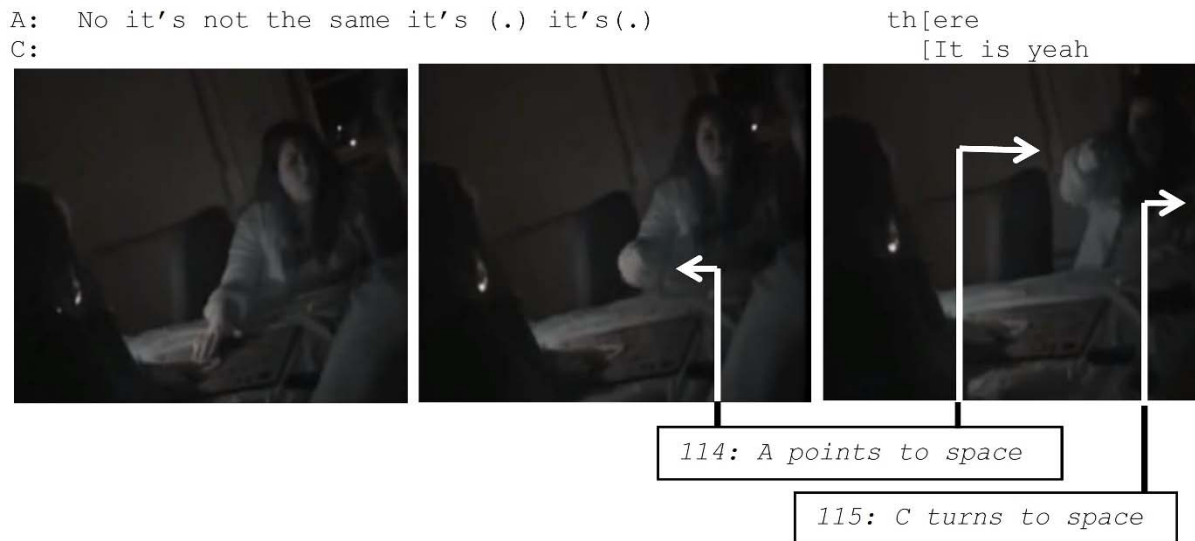
(10) Grandfather Clock

108 C [Ca[use that's different before it was making a tick
 109 B [Lets put it out [(?)
 110 G [I do ()
 111 A [No it's not the same it's (.) it's(.)
 112 A th[ere
 113 C [It is yeah
 114 [(C shakes her head and A points to the right of camera.
 115 C turns to look at where A is pointing)
 116 A It's like a proper old bo[om boom boom
 117 C [boom boom
 118 A [It's like a[heart beat
 119 G [Can I lift it down, [can I lift it down
 120 F [Yeah(0.5)[take it by all means
 121 E [yeah
 122 A [(A gestures to her heart)

A points towards this space as she states "it's there" (114). This is illustrated in

Figure 2 below.

Figure 2

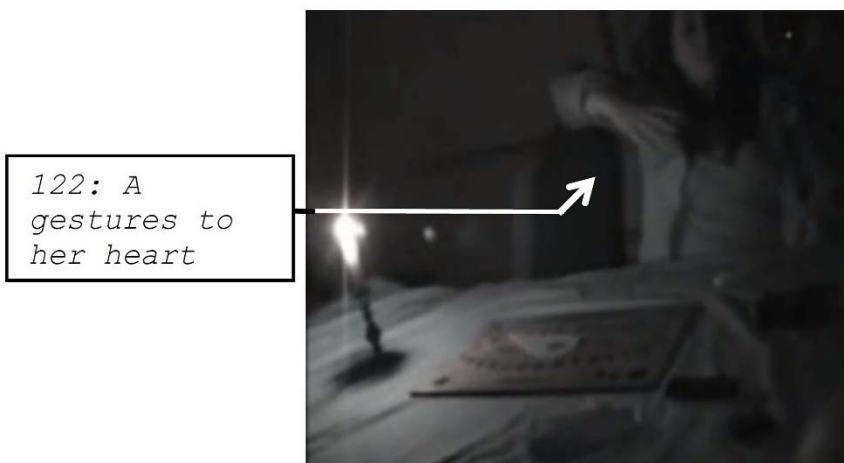


There are several interactional features of interest during these negotiations regarding the location and source of an event. Firstly, in both of these cases whilst the group appear to be investigating the possible normality of the event, in each case they offer a description of the event that does not fit with a 'normal' explanation. This is offered before the investigation into 'normality' takes place. For example, in extract 6 the noise is described as a dog scratching (not someone scratching their clothes) and prior to extract 9 the group have already discussed the noise as sounding like a grandfather clock (not the electric clock that they investigate). Therefore, in each case whilst the group produce a sequence of actions to investigate the claim in what would appear to be a sceptical manner, the potentially transgressive properties of an event are

established early on in the interaction. This not only occurs through an initial reference towards an empty space, but also in the description offered after the *that* reference. Indeed, the description of the event has a significant role in establishing its transgressive properties. Through their investigation of the event the group establish that the features of it do not correspond with the 'normal' explanation they have been investigating, but the 'abnormal' explanation provided at the start. For instance in extracts 9 and 10, the electric clock that is investigated as the potential 'normal' explanation for the sound is described as being too quiet and not the “proper old boom boom boom” (116) that the group experienced. This is illustrated through a verbal mimic of the sound and a visible iconic gesture by A towards her heart as she describes it as “like a heartbeat” (118) (Figure 3).

Figure 3

A: it's like a heartbeat



Likewise, in extract 8, after D scratches her clothes B and E both conclude that it was not the 'normal' sound of the clothes being scratched but was “high pitched”(111) and “like a dog”(110). As they discuss this E produces a mimic of the sound (115) and makes a scratching gesture in the air (112) (Figure 4).

Figure 4

B: n[o it wasn't that it was like a dog you right your right
 E: [no it wasn't that it was a [high pitched chu chu chu chu



These findings bear similarities to Woods and Wooffitt's (2014) study into the tellings produced during UFO encounters. Through their analysis they suggest that additional features of a phenomenon (in this case the sighting of something unusual in the sky) are identified during a telling to mitigate against a potential normal explanation. For instance suggesting that a certain movement produced by lights in the sky is not typical

of an aeroplane. As such, unusual and transgressive qualities are implied. In the two extracts examined, whilst a normal explanation is offered and even investigated, the transgressive status of the event unfolds as the features of the event are identified and confirmed by the group. Additionally, iconic gestures produced by the group appear to act as symbolic representations of these features (Lebaron & Streeck, 2000). Whilst providing a visual representation, they also present a known gesture (a recognisable scratching gesture) to aid the understanding of an 'unknown' event. In doing so, features of the event can be seen and understood in particular ways – as transgressive – through a socially shared understanding of the gesture, and the meaning this constitutes for the event. In figure 4, the description of the sound accompanied by a scratching gesture in the air (rather than on her clothes), suggests a different type of sound than that produced by D.

In these cases the paranormal potential of the event is then established not only by a shift from noticing “that” to positioning the source of an event “there”. It also occurs through a sequence of actions that discover the features of the event as unexplainable and out with the norm for that particular space. In the extracts examined these spaces

are made visible and become part of the collaborative activity of the group through deictic gestures, most notably hand and head points. Enfield, Kita and Ruiter (2007) suggest that pointing gestures, in particular 'B-type' gestures (extended points with the hand and arm) often accompany a description of 'where' a reference is. These gestures are generally produced alongside a verbal "there" or "here", and when identifying a location will also display a shift in gaze and a head turn towards the relevant space. It is worth noting at this point that empty spaces by their very status of being empty present a particular difficulty in seeing the source of the event. They lack specificity and unlike physical referents cannot necessarily be seen as inhabiting a particular position in the space. Therefore, whilst the specific source cannot necessarily be identified, deictic gestures alongside gaze shifts, may provide an interactional resource to highlight a domain of scrutiny (Goodwin, 2003). The point occurs within a larger framework of orientation by the pointer and co-participants in which an event has been noticed (gaze shifts), referenced (*that* reference), co-participation has been established, and then pointed at. The point does not occur during or immediately after the first noticing and occurs after a participation framework has been established (Goodwin, 2003). Therefore, deictic gestures in these cases are

not necessarily intended to reference the exact position of an event, but highlight a domain of scrutiny in which co-participants can derive further meaning and intelligibility from it. Therefore, similar to studies by vom Lehn (2006a, 2006b), Goodwin (1994) and Heath et al (2002b) the identification of relevant features of the environment, in this case an empty space, enables the group to share a way of seeing and thus understanding the event through collaborative activity.

4. Discussion

This study has explored how empty spaces become relevant to the ongoing interaction of a group and their categorisation of an event as potentially paranormal. By noticing these spaces participants are able to demonstrate to others that they have noticed something 'strange', by shifting their attention from the business at hand to an empty space. Similar to previous (although contextually quite different) studies into workplace settings and museums, the process of noticing someone noticing something else through their verbal and visual actions renders certain objects or exhibits visible (Sacks, 1992; Haviland, 1993; Heath & Hindmarsh, 1999; Heath et al, 2002b; vom Lehn, Heath & Hindmarsh, 2001). In a paranormal group setting, this sequence of

noticing renders an empty space, and invisible event within it, relevant, and leads to a series of actions that establish the paranormal potentiality of it. These subsequent verbal and visual actions work together to develop the event from its initial ambiguous referential state of “that” to one that has its own visible space “there” and recognised features. This space is rendered visible and relevant to the group through talk and deictic gestures which highlight this particular space as a point of reference for the event. In addition, further iconic gestures (Kendon, 1997) performed by the group alongside verbal descriptions of the event develop a 'way of seeing' the event based on its relevant features. In the context of paranormal events, the practice of pointing at an invisible rather than visible referent, invites further discovery of its paranormal potential.

Previous research into 'space' as an interactional feature is limited. Studies that have looked into this area tend to focus on the creation of interactional space between two persons, such as Kendon's (1990) discussion of the 'F-Formation' and Mondada's (2009) study of stopping individuals in the street. These 'interactional spaces' emerge and are constantly shaped through the participant's bodies, gaze and gesture during

interaction. Additionally, as discussed some studies have looked at how gestures can be produced in space, particularly during storytelling activities, to provide visual representations of things that cannot be observed, and to illustrate abstract ideas (Bavelas & Gerwing, 2011; Kendon, 1997; McNeill et al, 1993; Stukenbrock, 2014).

However, this study demonstrates that these interactional spaces can not only be produced between co-participants, but can be positioned elsewhere in the local milieu.

These spaces are made relevant through verbal references, and a sequence of bodily, gaze and gestural actions during interaction. As such, even though the event being referred to is essentially invisible, the group are able to produce a common referent, which can be discovered and understood in relation to its paranormal status. The findings of the research, therefore, contribute more broadly to our understanding of how individuals use empty space and their environment to develop a socially shared understanding of events. Previous studies on abstract deixis have highlighted its use as a form of narrating previous events and telling stories (Kendon, 1997; McNeill et al, 1993; Stukenbrock, 2014). This study illustrates a further use of this practice as a means of developing a shared understanding and meaning of a current event.

Furthermore, the findings support Cooperrider's (2014) suggestion that pointing

gestures are not as straightforward and literal as they may first appear. Indeed, as discussed they exist in a broader framework of participation in which talk and iconic gestures are used to make sense of the referent and occur not only as 'B'-points but may involve head points and shifts in body direction. As such, this research contributes to a growing body of research that acknowledges the complexity of referential action and its role in developing a collective understanding of objects and events in the local milieu (Cooperrider, 2014; vom Lehn, Heath & Hindmarsh, 2001; vom Lehn, 2001a; vom Lehn, 2001b).

In addition to these contributions some interesting analytical observations have been made that are beyond the scope of this study, and would benefit from further investigation. In particular, this study has examined the role of empty space in the collective interpretation of paranormal events. However, in examining this it was evident that during the course of interaction individuals produce turns that imply a paranormal potential (such as F's expression of "it's cold down there" in extract 3), and upgrade previous turns to establish their knowledge and understanding of the event (such as the scratching gesture and description provided to determine the

extraordinary character of the 'dog scratching' sound in extract 8). This study also examined events that occur in external space, however, the broader data set suggests that internal paranormal experiences are frequent and also regularly shared with others through embodied action. It is, therefore, suggested that further research which examines the sharing of embodied paranormal experience through multimodal activities would provide further insight into how these events are shared and categorised (Ironsides, 2016). Furthermore, an examination of how individuals assert their knowledge and understanding of an event, and demonstrate their acceptance or resistance to this, would provide valuable insights into how the paranormal potential and character of an event are established, as well as contribute to the body of research concerned with epistemic rights and domains (Heritage, 2012; Mondada, 2013).

As discussed at the start of this paper, the purpose of this study is to examine the interactive resources by which groups come to collectively understand experiences as paranormal, and the role that empty space has in these encounters. In their research Waskul and Waskul (2016) identify that individuals rarely come to an immediate conclusion that the event they have experienced is uncanny, but reach this

understanding through retrospective and 'minded' practices they engage with when accounting for these events. This research complements these findings by examining the interactional practices that occur as groups collectively establish the 'strangeness' of an event, and like Waskul and Waskul's study demonstrates that the uncanny qualities of an event are not immediately realised. Instead they are established through multimodal practices which invite others to notice, negotiate and make sense of potentially paranormal events.

Footnotes

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.

² The transcription system has been adapted from the Jefferson method to incorporate a description of multimodal activities and environmental occurrences relevant to the interaction taking place. These are included in bold italics alongside the verbal.

³ Extracts have been annotated with the following letters for ease of reference: “T” details a *that* reference, “G” details a gaze shift, and “P” details a pointing gesture.

⁴ A communication tool used by paranormal groups to communicate with spirits. The presence of a spirit is indicated by the planchette or glass moving to different letters or numbers on the board in direct response to questions from participants.

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