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Feeling spirits: sharing subjective paranormal experience through embodied talk and action

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Abstract: This article examines how subjective paranormal experiences are shared and understood through embodied talk and action. Paranormal experiences often possess subjective qualities, regularly experienced as “senses” or “feelings”; however, the ability to share these experiences collectively provides the opportunity to validate such events. Drawing upon video data selected from over 100 hours of recorded footage during UK-based paranormal investigations, this study uses conversation analysis to examine how individuals communicate their experiences to others and through this evoke a way of understanding their experience as potentially paranormal. It is argued that embodied talk and action invite others to not only see the subjective paranormal experiences of others, but to understand and become co-experiencers in these events.

Keywords: embodied action, collective experience, conversation analysis, paranormal, social interaction, gesture

1 Introduction

This paper explores the verbal and embodied practices that individuals use to communicate and share their subjective paranormal experiences. By their very nature, paranormal experiences possess subjective qualities often reported by those who encounter them as feelings, sensations or visions. Neppe (1982) suggests that the most frequent forms of subjective paranormal experiences include feelings, presences, extra-sensory perception, out-of-body experiences, and paranormal dreams.

Research into the cause of such experiences has predominantly sat within the realms of parapsychological and psychiatric studies with hallucinations (Neppe 1982), temporal lobe disturbance (Persinger 1984), and fantasy proneness (Parra 2006) being cited as potential reasons for such experiences to occur. Many of these studies have, however, predominantly been experiential and lab-based in nature, often overlooking the social and cultural basis of these experiences, and their role

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as meaningful events. Indeed, researchers such as Murray and Wooffitt (2010), and Hufford (2005) have called for the examination of experiences from a social and cultural perspective. This call for further research is perhaps supported by the significant number of paranormal experiences still reported in modern society, with research suggesting that over two-fifths of the population in Britain have reported an experience (Castro et al. 2014), and nearly one-quarter of Americans claim to have felt or sensed a presence (Alfano 2009). As such, paranormal experiences continue to feature in our everyday and extraordinary lives (Waskul and Waskul 2016).

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it intends to expand the limited research that has examined the ways in which individuals make sense of and account for their extraordinary experiences. Secondly, it intends to contribute more widely to the study of embodied action and its role in sharing subjective experience with others.

In this paper, I explore how subjective paranormal experiences are shared through embodied action. I start with an examination of relevant literature. I then present the analytical findings of this study, detailing how displays of vocal and bodily actions inform the communication and collective understanding of subjective paranormal experiences. The paper ends with a discussion and conclusion section.

2 Literature review

The relevant literature falls into two strands. Firstly, there is limited research that has examined the ways in which individuals make sense of and account for their extraordinary experiences. To date, research in this field has examined the retrospective narratives drawn upon by individuals to account for their experiences (Waskul and Waskul 2016), and how individuals present their experiences in relevant and meaningful ways (Hayward et al. 2015; Wooffitt 1991). Perhaps of most relevance to this study is the work of Woods and Wooffitt (2014) who, through their analysis of talk during UFO encounters, discuss the various verbal resources that are drawn upon to establish the uncanniness of these events. However, while Woods and Wooffitt (2014) study does explore instances of groups discussing UFO encounters, this is the only study to date that attempts to examine collective experiences and the social practices that inform them. It does not, however, examine the multimodal activities involved in these events. As such, there is a limited body of research that examines collective experiences, and the verbal and visual practices that are used by individuals to share and account for unusual events.

Secondly, there are studies of embodied action and its role in sharing subjective experience with others. As Hindmarsh and Pilnick (2007) argue, much of the sociological work that has focused on the body has tended to pursue research about the body, rather than its organization in embodied practice. As such, research has tended to focus on social representations of the body and its relevant meanings in different contexts including gender and sexuality, health and illness, and cultural and media studies among others (see Scott and Morgan 1993; Vannini and Waskul 2016). However, recent studies have started to focus on the lived experience of the body, and its organizational accomplishments within social action. This shift towards understanding embodiment has highlighted the important role that the body plays in interactive settings as a means of exhibiting joint understanding, displaying emotion, demonstrating subjective feeling, and exaggerating the verbal.

Interest in embodied action has emerged in a range of settings including medical practices and institutions (Heath 2002; Hindmarsh and Pilnick 2007), museums (Vom Lehn 2006a, 2006b), work practices (Goodwin 2000; Mondada 2009), learning environments (Moore 2008), and in the home (Wiggins 2010). In most cases these studies examine how the body is used in collaborative settings to engender joint understanding of an activity, object, or experience. For instance, in Heath's (2002) study of doctor–patient consultations, he reveals how patients express suffering through demonstrating and enacting their symptoms. Through the use of embodied gesture, such as grasping their temples while describing a painful headache, patients are able to display the particular qualities and engender a sense of distinctiveness for their suffering. These displays are produced within the ongoing sequence of interaction, and patients afford opportunities to enact and demonstrate symptoms with and within talk. In doing so, patients are able to engender a joint understanding of their experience of suffering and pain with their doctors.

Other studies have also shown how the body is used as an interactive display to understand objects and exhibits (Vom Lehn 2006a), and through embodied action and talk experiences are framed in particular ways (Vom Lehn 2006b). In Vom Lehn's (2006a) study of the "Body Worlds" exhibit, he also observes how visitors use their own bodies to relate to and display an understanding of the ailments with others. Thus, embodied action does not only constitute the production of action using the body, but may act as an interactive resource through which inner experience may be evoked and shared with others.

This paper examines the role of embodied action in the context of paranormal experiences; however, in doing so it seeks to contribute further to our understanding of the ways in which the body is used during interaction to communicate and share experiences with others.

3 Data and methods

This study draws upon video data of subjective paranormal experiences as they occur in group settings. The data was collected during my involvement in paranormal investigation groups between 2006 and 2010, and was captured prior to my knowledge that it would be used for research purposes. It, therefore, provides a unique opportunity to examine naturally occurring visual data of experiences that by their very nature are often allusive and spontaneous in nature. Seven paranormal investigations from locations across Scotland and North Yorkshire are drawn upon for this study. In each case the groups are attempting to communicate with spirits through a variety of different practices including using a Ouija board, séances, and technology to provoke interaction with a spirit.

Paranormal investigation groups have become increasingly popular in the last 10–15 years, influenced largely by the rise in paranormal TV shows (Hill 2010; Eaton 2015). The purpose of these groups is to visit reputedly haunted locations and, through spiritual or scientific means, document and experience paranormal events (Eaton 2015). In doing so, they regularly record their activities on video as a means of documentation, and thus provide a rich set of visual data of experiences taking place.

The focus of this study is to examine the vocal and embodied actions that inform how these experiences are shared and communicated with others. To achieve this, conversation analysis was adopted as the primary method due to its potential to reveal the “ways in which the body, in and with talk, features in the complex production of intelligibility of social action” (Heath and Luff 2012: 295). Transcripts are provided using an adapted version of the Jefferson system (Ten Have 2002) to enable the analysis of talk alongside the multimodal activities and external events that impact upon interaction (see the appendix).¹ Video stills are also provided in a similar manner to Heath et al.’s (2010) work to illustrate embodied action in practice. Extracts have been annotated to provide easy reference to relevant features, a description of which can be found in the footnotes.² Informed consent and ethics approval were gained for this study.

¹ 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.

² Extracts have been annotated with the following letters for ease of reference: “G” details a *gaze shift*, “EG” details an *embodied gesture*, and “ER” details a verbal *embodied reference*.

4 Paranormal experience and embodied action

As discussed, paranormal experiences are often subjective and as such are experienced by the individual, often materializing as “feelings” or “senses.” Like medical encounters, where the difficulty of sharing the experience of pain and suffering with another is prominent (Heath 1989; Heath 2002), in these situations demonstrating embodied paranormal experiences presents similar interactional challenges. Unlike referring to and establishing a joint understanding of physical objects which are visible and tangible, such as the museum exhibits examined in Vom Lehn’s (2006a; Vom Lehn 2006b), subjective paranormal experiences are experienced internally, often by one person and have no visible quality to use as a point of reference. The data that will be explored in this section will therefore examine instances where individuals produce various embodied talk and action in an attempt to communicate these experiences.

4.1 Displays of embodied experience

The following two data extracts present instances when a subjective experience is encountered by one participant, and is then communicated through vocal and bodily actions to other group members. In the transcript (Extract [1]) presented below, the group are participating in a Ouija board session.³ Prior to the opening line (42), participant C has produced a gaze shift (G in Extract [1]) off towards the door, over his left-hand shoulder, he then looks around the group. Shortly after this he looks to his left again, grabs his upper left arm and rubs it with his right hand (44–46) (EG in Extract [1]), and he then looks towards participant B. Following this he gives the description of feeling as if he has been “touched” on the arm (presumably by an unseen entity) (47) (ER in Extract [1]).

- (1) Alley Cat
 42 E: [(I think they’re turning it up) the problem with
 43 cats are
 44 **[(C looks to left again towards the door and ←G**
 45 **grabs left arm. D Looks towards the area that ←EG**
 46 **B and C are looking in)**
 47 C: [Uh I just got- [felt like I got touched ←ER

³ It is a tool used by paranormal groups to communicate with spirits.

also transpose the embodied experience to someone else (Heath 2002; Vom Lehn 2006a) – in this case by literally replicating the gesture on her hand. However, even though the gesture has been performed on a different participant, this same participant is the one to question the properties of the experience asking B if it was “on your legs” (line 113). By repeating the gesture B confirms the location of the experience and reaffirms its properties – through repetition of the stroking gesture on her arm. Additionally, it is of interest to note that as B produces this gesture on C, A interrupts B’s talk at “th-” and states “hands and arms” (116), following this with a statement that she too has experienced the same event (118, 119). As such, a shared understanding, and indeed a shared experiencing, of the event occurs between these two participants. Following this, the group proceed to the next stage of questioning the spirit using the “touching” experience to inform the context of their next request.

In the four data extracts examined above, embodied gesture is used by participants to demonstrate and make visible the experiences that are subjective in nature. By situating these embodied gestures in and within talk, the subjective experiences are shared with other group members. In each of these instances the experience is questioned by other members of the group (in Extract [2], it is suggested that it could be the cats in the room that caused the experience and in Extract [4], C displays uncertainty about where the event occurred), and in response to this, further embodied gestures are produced to confirm the locality of the experience. In the context of the business at hand – attempting to contact spirits – positioning the experience in a particular space has the potential to imply significance towards it. If, for instance, it occurs in an area for which there is no explanation for the “poke” received by A, or the “stroke” received by B, the experience may possess transgressive or unusual properties.

4.2 Spatial relationship and experience validity

To consider how an experience is located in space further, let us consider the sequence of interaction in each section again. In both cases the gesture and verbal descriptor of the experience follow a shift in gaze away from the business at hand, towards a point of interest (Ruusuvuori 2001). This is followed by a tactile gesture and description of the event.

In Extract (1), the initial point of interest is the space located over C’s left shoulder; however, as he produces his disclosure of the experience, the point of interest shifts to his upper left arm. In Extract (3), the point of interest is initially

located to C's left indicated by the gaze shift in lines 105 and 106, and then shifts to the gesture produced by C on A's arm. In each case the gesture produced visually demonstrates the experience on the body (either on their own body or as is the case with Extract [4] on another body). These are accompanied by a verbal referral to the experience expressing the nature of the event, in each case the feeling of being touched.

However, the participants remain ambiguous in their description of who or what produced the event (i.e. they do not explicitly state that the experience came from a paranormal source). This ambiguity leads to a further discussion regarding the event and in each case an analysis of the properties and/or validity of the experience. While this is more explicit in Extract (2) (A suggests that C's experience could be caused by the cats in the room), in Extract (4) C's question regarding the location of the experience could also determine the potential validity of it. For example, if it had been on B's legs, which are under the table, rather than her hand which is clearly visible, the explanation for what may have caused this event could be different. Therefore, the spatial origin of the event in subjective experiences becomes an important consideration in determining its transgressive properties and, as such, its paranormal potential.

Let us consider some further examples of this in the data. In Extract (5) below, the group have been engaging in a seemingly two-way conversation with the spirit of a little girl, through a K2 device in the center of the room.⁴

- (5) Little Girl
- 63 B: can you run around the room for us [as fast as you can
- 64 A: [It's chilly here-
- 65 A: it chilly here [yeh yeh ←ER
- 66 I: [I'm getting really cold here ←ER
- 67 [I turns to A and then
- 68 *turns back to centre)*
- 69 I: it's really cold
- 70 C: My elbows really cold [on this side ←ER
- 71 B: [hh hh
- 72 C: it has been fo [r
- 72 B: [are you making us cold
- 73 A: [it's

⁴ It refers to a piece of equipment used by paranormal groups which measures electromagnetic fields and is believed to indicate the presence of a spirit through the illumination of lights on the device.

- 74 I: [it's
 75 **[(I turns to area where A and B are sitting)**
 76 A: I think she's sat next to us [I think she's breathing
 77 **[(I turns away looking**
 78 **scared)**
 79 A: on our arm ←ER
 80 I: oh god
 81 B: okay well tha[t-
 82 D: [i just got the absolute [shiver- ←ER
 83 **[(K2**
 84 **flickers to third light)**
 85 D: when you-

The group infer through these interactions that the spirit of a little girl would like to play. Based on this, B, who has been asking the spirit questions, asks the spirit to “run around the room” (63). As she does this A announces that “it’s chilly here” (65) and I, who is sat to her right, disengages with the activity of communicating with the spirit, and instead quickly turns to face A. I also states, “I’m getting really cold here it’s really cold” (66–69). This is followed by C also claiming that her elbow is feeling cold (70). Indexical expressions such as “here” and the description of coldness occurring on specific areas of the body, display the locale of the particular experience within the ongoing activity (Heath 1989) – it is occurring at a particular moment in time, in a specific location. The expression of feeling cold on its own, given that the group are sitting in a dark old building, late at night, may not be seen as particularly unusual. However, the accompanying indexical expressions indicate a specificity about the event which could suggest an uncanny quality (i.e. it is not the whole room that is feeling cold, but specific spaces in it). In line 76, A offers an explanation for the coldness experienced by several participants, stating that she thinks the spirit is sat next to “us” (referring to between A and I), and breathing on them. This is followed by D describing feeling an “absolute shiver” following A’s explanation (82).

In a different instance, in Extract (6), the group are engaging in a Ouija board session and have asked for the spirit to answer whether it would like the group to “go” (4). After 8 seconds, B grabs her right arm and announces that she is “feeling really cold” (7). She then waves her left hand above her right arm and produces an indexical expression “just here” (7). Following this, C grabs the thermometer located on the table.

- (6) Dog Scratching
 1 A: Can you move it to the candle for yes or away from the
 2 A: candle for no
 3 **(3.0s)**
 4 A: Would you like us to go
 5 **(10.0s)**
 6 **(B grasps her right arm with her left hand after 8s)**
 7 B: I'm feeling really cold [just here its ←ER
 8 **[(B waves her hand**
 9 **in front of her above her right arm) ←EG**
 10 **(3.5s)**
 11 **(C uses his right hand to grab the thermometer and**
 12 **measure the temperature)**

After 3.5 seconds, C, reading from the thermometer, states that “it’s quite hot” (22). This is supported by D, who goes on to say that the room is indeed warmer than before (25). In doing so, the properties of the event described by B, a coldness above her arm, gain a further potential for exhibiting unusual qualities: that is, a coldness in a specific space, within a room that is hot, if not warmer than it was previously.

- (7) Dog Scratching
 22 C: [it's quite hot
 23 **[(C stops places the thermometer back on**
 24 **the table)**
 25 D: it's hotter yeh it's muc[h warmer
 26 C: [mm::

In each of these extracts, the noticing of the experience is fairly explicit even if the nature of it remains fairly ambiguous (i.e. they do not at any point commence the turn by suggesting that a spirit is responsible for the experience). However, through a display of vocal and bodily actions a connection between the description of the experience and its locale are made, and thus its unusual (potentially paranormal) qualities are suggested. In addition, by accompanying the verbal reference of an experience with an indexical expression and a tactile or deictic embodied gesture, the properties of the experience are made visible and accessible to other members of the group. By understanding not only what the experience is (i.e. a touch, coldness, etc.), but where it is located, a shared understanding of the experience starts to emerge.

4.3 Repeating embodied experience

As discussed, vocal and bodily actions are used by participants to display the location and properties of an experience. Through these actions the properties of an experience that is subjective and essentially “invisible” to others, is made visible and relevant (Heath 2002). However, as discovered in Extracts (2) and (4), on occasions there is an incongruence between the subjective experience of one participant and the objective understanding of it for another. In Extract (2), for example, this is demonstrated when C repeats the embodied gesture of touching his upper left arm following the suggestion by A (74) that the experience could have been caused by the cats in the room (and as such a non-paranormal explanation). As he repeats the gesture, rather than just rubbing his arm, he grabs a precise point on it, thus upgrading his response (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987) to “No like it was right- it was up on my arm right there” (77). The repeated gesture offers a precise locale for the experience, accompanied by an indexical expression to illustrate this. In doing so, he enforces the unusual qualities of the subjective experience that occurred (i.e. he was poked in his upper left shoulder, away from the cats that are on the floor). Figure 1 illustrates the initial embodied gesture (46), and the repeated gesture (77).

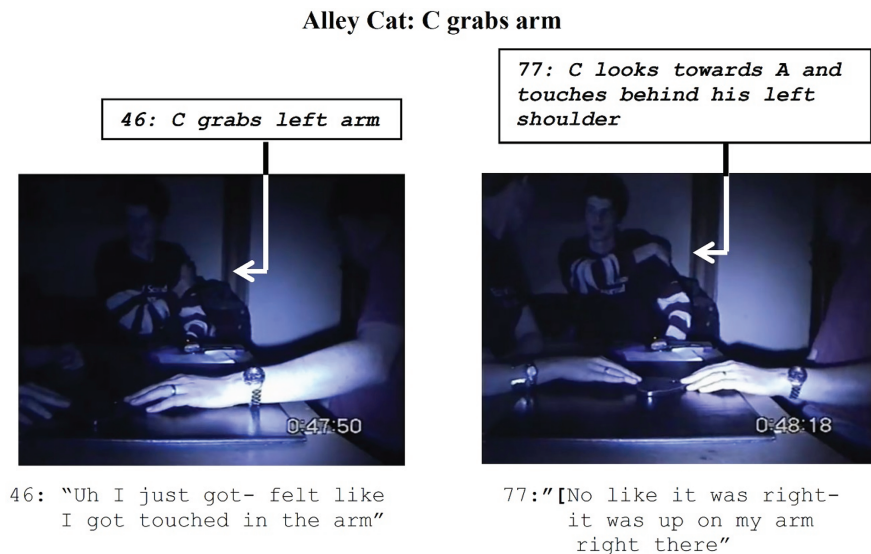


Figure 1: Alley Cat: C grabs arm.

Likewise, in Extract (3), participant B demonstrates the feeling of someone stroking her hand by producing a stroking gesture with her finger on participant C's hand. However, when C asks if the experience occurred on B's legs, B repeats the action to show that it occurred on her hand, not her legs. Before she produces this action, she responds "no no like th-" (115), producing the stroking action as she reaches "th-", which presumably was meant to be "this" or "there". However, A overlaps her turn with the statement "hands and arms". A's expression, "hands and arms", serves the function of describing the locale of the experience, but also, as will be explored in the next section, demonstrates a shared understanding of it. Like Extract (2), the repetition of the gesture accompanied by an indexical expression reinforces the unusual properties of the experience, aligning one participant's subjective experience with another's objective understanding of it. Figure 2 illustrates the initial embodied gesture (108), and the repeated gesture (115).

Scratching: Repeated scratching gesture by B

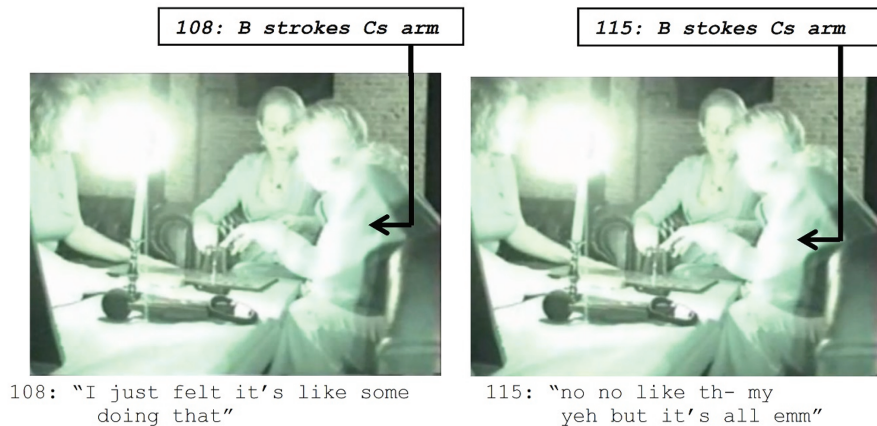


Figure 2: Scratching: repeated scratching gesture by B.

The repetition of an embodied action to illustrate an event is common through the data when the validity of a claim is brought into question. These actions, therefore, not only highlight and make visible an experience, but display properties of the experience that are framed in a certain way. In each of these cases, by repeating the embodied gesture and emphasizing its location on the body, participants are able to frame it in the context of "unexplained." Therefore, embodied talk and gesture enable subjective experiences to not only be seen by others, but also be understood in a particular way (Vom Lehn 2006a). When a

misunderstanding of an experience occurs between participants, the repetition of gestures alongside talk provides a resource to repair the trouble that this may present (Olsher 2008).

4.4 Establishing shared understanding of experiences

In addition to participants repeating embodied gesture to illustrate properties of their own subjective experience, on occasions the data highlights moments when different participants express their own embodied experiences in response to the first participant's disclosure of the event. For instance, as discussed previously in Extract (5) following A's statement that she is "chilly", I also claims that she is "really cold" (66); C describes that her "elbows really cold" (70); and D states that she "got an absolute shiver" (83). Similarly, in Extract (8), following C rubbing his arm and claiming that he has been "touched in the arm" (47–50), D crosses his arms, and produces a shivering gesture while rubbing both his arms (57–58).

- (8) Alley Cat
- 42 E: [(I think there turning it up) the problem with
43 cats are-
44 [(C looks to left again towards the door and ←EG
45 grabs left arm. D Looks towards the area that
46 B and C are looking in)
- 47 C: [Uh I just got- [felt like I got touched ←ER
48 [(C continually rubs his arms whilst looking at B)
49 [(D looks towards C)
- 50 C: in the arm
51 D: did you?
52 B: really
53 C: literally poked yeah like
54 D: [oo [ooo
55 B [okay that's strang [e
56 D [excellent
57 [(D crosses both of his arms over his body in ←EG2
58 "shivering" gesture and rubs both his arms)

Finally, in Extract (9), after B produces a stroking gesture on C's arm to demonstrate her embodied experience, A also claims "I just felt it on there" (118) and produces a similar stroking gesture on her own hand (119).

poked in the upper left arm. Finally, A describes also being stroked on the arm following B's disclosure in Extract (9). By imitating these embodied experiences, participants reveal that they understand the subjective experience of another, but also through this display in some cases that they too have experienced a similar event. By sharing and validating each other's claims through their own similar embodied experiences, the event progresses from individual to social. The group become involved in "experiencing" the event and the process of establishing its paranormal potential through this.

4.4.1 Vocal imitations as shared understanding

It could also be suggested that expressions of shared understanding can be seen in the vocal utterances of participants to ongoing events. While in the examples examined above participants demonstrate shared understanding by producing a repetition of the gesture or verbal description of the initial event properties, in the cases shown below participants vocalize reaction tokens (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2006) as an experience takes place. These are often in the form of a non-speech sound (such as "ooo" or "whooo"). For example, in Extract (10) below, two participants are discussing an unusual feeling that they have encountered in the basement. While talking about the history of the building they are investigating, B announces that she is "feeling it again" (70); both participants then proceed to vocalize a sequence of exaggerated non-speech sounds as they encounter the event (73, 76, 77).⁵

(10) Basement

- 69 A: know a passageway or tunnel here [or
 70 B: [I'm feeling it again
 71 B: [just now
 72 A: [yeh just on the
 73 B: it's coming through just now Oo [oooooo Oooo ←
 74 A: [Jee:::sus Christ
 75 B: that's it just gone [right through
 76 A: [Ooooooo ←
 77 B: hh. Ooo [oo ←
 78 A: [what is going on with that Tracey cause it's-

⁵ The two participants in this section of data have been feeling an unusual sensation in the basement for several minutes before this particular data extract. It is this sensation that they refer to in line 70.

- 79 A: real[ly
 80 B: [oh my go::d

Likewise, in Extract (11), while the group are participating in a Ouija board session, the planchette starts to move in spiral circles. D, B, and E all produce an overlapping prolonged “whooo” sound as this occurs.

- (11) Spirals
 148 **[(Planchette starts spinning in circles, the groups**
 149 **fingers try to follow it. A looks back to the board)]**
 150 C: °the darkness is coming°
 151 D: w [uuuhh HHH Oooooooo ←
 152 B: [Whooooo::: () again Hh [hh ←
 153 E: [Whooooo::: hh hhh hhh hh h h yeh ←
 154 A: [it's a spira
 155 C: hh hh hh [hh hh
 156 A: [circle are we

In the examples above, the reaction tokens produced by different members of the group allude to a sense of surprise towards the event unfolding. The prolonged “ooooo” that we see in each case, often accompanied by additional utterances, is suggestive of a surprised or shocked reaction to the event. However, as suggested by Goffman (1978), and built upon by Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2006), the “exclamatory imprecations” (Goffman 1978: 798) or reaction tokens (Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2006) are not necessarily involuntary emotional responses, but interactionally organized performances. We see in each case that reaction tokens are produced following a change in the ongoing activity.

In Extract (11), for instance, they are produced when the properties of the experience change – the planchette moves in a spiral rather than in a circle. The reaction tokens are therefore produced in context and evoke a “feeling” towards the new activity, framing it as something that is surprising in the context of the business at hand. However, in addition, the reaction tokens are produced by more than one participant and are produced in a similar imitative way to the first. For example, in Extract (10), the first “ooo” token (73) is repeated by a different participant later in the conversational sequence (76). Likewise, in Extract (11), participants D, B, and E all produce a “whooo” type sound in reaction to the Ouija board at the same time (although D’s turn is positioned slightly before the others).

As such, co-participants appear to align their responses to the event by producing an imitative sound based on the first speaker. In doing so they display a joint recognition that this change in activity is something that is significant, or indeed unusual. By producing imitative reaction tokens in response to a change in the activity, the group establish themselves as co-experiencers (similar to findings about co-cultural memberships by Wilkinson and Kitzinger 2006). They have both recognized and reacted to the experience in the same way as others, and as such demonstrate their shared understanding and experience of the event.

Embodied talk and gesture do not only, therefore, highlight subjective experience and make their properties visible to others. By illustrating the properties of subjective experiences, they also make these accessible to others, and as such invite others to share their understanding and experience of the event through talk and bodily conduct. For example (as in Extract [5]), if a participant describes feeling cold in a particular area and illustrates this through their verbal reference, it becomes possible for others to understand the exact nature of the individual's experience. As a result, the experience and its properties become visible and relevant, and this provides a platform for other similar experiences to be shared and discovered. In addition, as discussed, the experience of an ongoing event is shared by participants through reaction tokens that imitate and as such infer joint understanding of its qualities. By jointly recognizing the changes in an activity as "surprising," the group evoke unusual properties for an experience, and as such it becomes significant to the business at hand. Given the disputed nature of paranormal experiences, the potential to jointly discover and share experiences could be seen as essential in claiming validity of these – i.e. the same experience shared by several participants is more significant than that encountered by a single individual.

4.5 Embodied experience as a resource for mitigating non-responses

There is evidence to suggest that producing talk about embodied experiences may also act as a resource to mitigate non-response from a spirit. Given that the activity of communicating with spirit relies on their presence, a non-response is potentially problematic. It could imply that the spirit is either ignoring the request, unable to respond or is simply just not there. As such, the interaction and activity the group are participating in is put in jeopardy. However, as demonstrated in the extracts below, the expression of an embodied experience may help in navigating these potentially troubling moments in interaction by

shifting the focus of attention. This presents parallels to studies on medium–sitter interactions, in which topical shifts are produced by mediums following potential trouble in the relevance of the information they have offered to the sitter (Wooffitt 2006). In such cases, mediums evidently shift a topic from the trouble talk to a new topic, producing a turn that is repair-orientated. In doing so, the medium is able to manage potential threats to their authenticity and credibility that may arise through invalid information.

In the extracts presented here, shifts towards embodied experience talk often occur when a relatively significant period of time has elapsed between a request to the spirit, and a non-response. For instance, in Extract (12), participant A asks the spirit if it would like the group to “go” (4). After a period of 10 seconds, B states that she is “feeling really cold” (7).

(12) Dog Scratching

- 1 A: Can you move it to the candle for yes or away from the
 2 A: candle for no
 3 **(3.0s)**
 4 A: Would you like us to go
 5 **(10.0s)**
 6 **(B grasps her right arm with her left hand after 8s)**
 7 B: I’m feeling really cold [just here its
 8 **[(B waves her hand in front of**
 9 **her above her right arm)**

In Extract (13), the spirit is asked if they are “still here” (102), using the Ouija board. After 8 seconds B produces a shift in gaze (105). This is followed by her expression of an embodied experience of being touched on the arm (108).

(13) Scratching

- 102 B: are you still here
 103 A: [()
 104 **[(A looks at B)**
 105 **(After 8s B turns quickly to look at A and then**
 106 **looks down to her left. C follows her gaze)**
 107 A: yeh
 108 B: I just felt it’s like some doing [that
 109 **[(B strokes**
 110 **Cs arm and then looks at A)**

Additionally, in Extract (14) below, a shift towards embodied experience can be seen when a potentially troublesome request is presented to the spirit – to run around the room. In this particular case, other than the spirit proceeding to fully manifest and run around the room, the ability for the group to know whether this has occurred is limited. However, in line 64, A produces overlapping talk at the same time as B continues her request, stating that it is “chilly here”. This is preceded by several other members of the group also stating that they are feeling cold. By presenting potential evidence of a spirit response through the form of an embodied experience, A and those that follow are able to mitigate the trouble that B’s initial request could engender.

(14) Little Girl

- 63 B: can you run around the room for us [as fast as
 64 A: [It’s chilly here-
 65 B: you can
 66 I: [I’m getting really cold here it’s really-
 67 **[(I turns to A and then turns back to centre)**
 68 I: cold

In each instance, following a period of non-response to the request for a spirit to produce a particular activity, an embodied experience is presented by a member of the group. While it is not possible to authenticate the claims of embodied experience, it is interesting to note that the presentation of an embodied claim at moments of trouble provides continued evidence of spirit presence. As such, embodied experience with spirit may be recruited as a resource for displaying continued access to the spirit and the relevant experiences this infers. Thus, the activity of communicating with spirit remains relevant.

5 Discussion and conclusion

In this paper I have explored how experiences that are subjective, and therefore hidden from the social gaze, are made visible and relevant through embodied talk and action. Paranormal experiences are inherently seen as subjective, and as such a response to, and acknowledgement of, experience is perceived as immediate and reactionary. However, the data analyzed suggests that the disclosure of a subjective experience may be organized with and within talk to engender co-participation in the discovery of the event, and evoke a shared understanding of its properties.

As Vom Lehn (2006b) suggests, the display of experience does not necessarily reflect internal, subjective experience but is “produced in the light of the presence

of others” (Vom Lehn 2006b: 1352). This also supports studies that have shown the organizational accomplishments of embodied talk and gesture to display internal feelings such as suffering (Heath 1989; Heath 2002), and gustoral pleasure (Wiggins 2010). As such, a subjective experience while occurring on or in the body is displayed and transposed to others through embodied talk and gesture. In doing so, the properties of an experience (i.e. where it occurred) are made visible and shared with others, thus enabling these properties to be understood and shared by the group, shifting the experience from individual to social.

In the context of subjective paranormal experiences, embodied actions such as pointing, touching, and facial expressions enable these inherently individual experiences to be communicated and shared with others. Through these actions a “way of seeing” an event is also established, and as such the group understand and discover it in relation to its paranormal status. Therefore, as demonstrated in Vom Lehn’s (2006a; Vom Lehn 2006b) studies, embodied talk and gesture enable subjective experiences to not only be seen by others, but understood in a particular way. In the context of this study, by locating the experience in a specific location on the body removed from a “normal” explanation, uncanny or strange properties are implied (i.e. a participant is touched on the arm when there is no (living) person present to cause this). As evidenced in the data, when the “strangeness” of an experience is questioned, the repetition of these embodied gestures aids in confirming the properties of the event, and as such framing them within a normal/paranormal paradigm.

In addition to inviting others to see and understand subjective paranormal experiences, embodied action is also used as a resource to demonstrate a shared understanding and experience of the event. During these events, groups produce imitations of both embodied gesture and surprise tokens and in doing so establish themselves as co-experiencers. As such, this study supports the findings of Goffman (1978), and Wilkinson and Kitzinger (2006), who suggest that emotional exclamations act as interactionally organized performances.

Finally, this study comments on the prevalence of embodied experience at times when potential trouble arises in the course of interaction. In the context of paranormal experiences, when the source of the experience is essentially “invisible,” the embodiment of such encounters may provide a resource (paranormal or not) to evidence communication and interaction with spirit. Given the purpose of paranormal investigation groups, to collectively communicate with and gather evidence of spirit, embodied action may act as an important resource in achieving this. This research, therefore, supports previous studies in recognizing embodied action as an important interactional resource in collaborative work in institutional settings (Goodwin 2000; Heath 2002; Mondada 2009).

In conclusion, the purpose of this study was to examine the embodied practices that individuals use to communicate and share their subjective

paranormal experiences. As evidenced, embodied action is regularly produced during these events, enabling individuals to share and evoke a way of seeing their experiences collectively. In doing so, individuals are able to frame their experience in relation to its paranormal status and the ongoing participation in, and discovery of, paranormal events.

Appendix

Transcription key

A–Z	Indicates each group member.
[Indicates overlapping speech.
[Indicates overlapping action (bold).
hh.	Indicates an inhalation (the number of h's indicates the length of the inhalation).
hh	Indicates hearable aspiration, such as laughter and exhalation (the number of h's indicates the length of the sound).
wo::	Indicate a prolonging of the preceding sound (the number of colons indicates the length of the prolonged sound).
wor- word	Hyphen mid-sentence indicates a cut-off from speech.
word-	Hyphen at the end of a line of script indicates speech carrying on to the next line.
<u>word</u>	Underlining of a word indicates emphasis or rise in pitch.
word?	Denotes a piece of talk posed as a question.
CAPITALS	Indicate louder sounds.
°word°	Degree symbols indicate quieter sounds.
(0.5)	Within talk brackets indicate the length of a break between speech in seconds. During non-verbal interaction, the numbers within brackets indicate how long the interaction lasted for.
(text)	Text in brackets indicates unsure speech.
()	Indicates an unknown piece of talk.
<i>(Text)</i>	Bold italic text indicates a description of non-verbal actions and environmental details.

Transcription annotation

←	Denotes a relevant feature in the transcript (often referred to in the text).
G	Denotes a gaze shift.
EG	Denotes an embodied gesture.
ER	Denotes an embodied verbal reference.

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Bionote

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