

Beyond the future: Fortune telling as constituted in the media

B003412

MSc in the History and Theory of Psychology

The University of Edinburgh

2011

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## Abstract

This paper utilizes discourse analysis (DA) to research how fortune telling is constituted in the news media. As current paranormal belief research is largely inconclusive (Wiseman & Watt, 2006), this paper addresses the problem of constitution as outlined by discursive psychologists (Potter & Wetherell, 1987) and seeks to better understand how paranormal objects, using fortune telling as an example, are constructed. After analyzing forty-three news articles regarding fortune telling, this paper argues that fortune telling is constituted of several mundane themes that are not reliant upon the consideration of paranormal attributions as real or fake. It further explains that fortune telling is a more complex object than it is currently treated as in parapsychological research.

## **Beyond the future: Fortune telling as constituted in the media**

### **Introduction**

Paranormal belief, as a topic of research, is one of the most difficult areas within psychology to study. A large part of this difficulty lies in its lack of standard definition. Defining paranormal belief, though some have attempted to draft a working definition, is considered to be a “conceptual minefield” for psychologists (Irwin, 2009). Despite these attempts at a definition, the understanding of paranormal belief is still hazy as a single definition of paranormal belief has yet to be widely accepted by the psychological community. This, however, has not stopped psychologists from researching the topic anyway.

To gain better understanding, researchers commonly attempt to study belief in the paranormal through the use of belief scales. Generally, the scales take the form of surveys or questionnaires. These belief scales are utilized to research a wide swath of hypotheses in a multitude of studies. Examples of these hypotheses include the cognitive deficit theory (Smith, Foster, & Stovin, 1998; Messer & Griggs, 1989) the social marginality theory (Rice, 2003; Wuthnow, 1976), the locus of control theory (Tobacyk & Milford, 1983; McGarry, 1981), and the probability judgment theory (Blackmore, 1997). But, as mentioned, the paranormal belief scales developed so far lack a solid, standard definition of paranormal belief. Therefore, as a result, they also lack clarity and a defined construct to measure (Irwin, 2009). Due to this, researchers cannot agree on how to interpret the data they collect from their scales (Wiseman & Watt, 2006). Multiple reviews of the full body of paranormal belief scale research reveal that most of the research on these hypotheses comes up inconclusive (Irwin, 2009; Wiseman & Watt, 2006; Vyse, 1997).

Critics of paranormal belief scales point out that one of the issues present in their design is that of constitution (Lamont, 2007b). The concept of constitution is discussed in early discursive psychology by Potter and Wetherell (1987) as a problem with the use of scales in the measurement of attitudes and beliefs. Theoretically, these scales are meant to “compare different people’s attitudes to the same object” (p. 50). However, Potter and Wetherell point out that “sameness of wording does not necessarily mean that respondents will understand the terms or formulate the object of thought in an identical way” (p.52). That is, different respondents may have different understandings of the object being discussed. There is no guarantee that each respondent will respond to the object in the same way; the respondent’s understanding of the object may not match that of the scale’s creator or even another respondent. In short, paranormal belief scales may not be measuring what it is that they were designed to measure due to a problem in how paranormal belief is constructed

within them. To combat this problem, we as researchers need a better understanding of how people constitute, or construct and think about, the objects that they profess belief in.

The method of discourse analysis (DA) allows for just such an observation of how an object of thought is constructed. It allows for topics to be looked at within social context and “allows for a significantly more detailed examination” of the texts being analyzed; this results in an analysis that is “more firmly grounded in the data”, making it a suitable method to address our needs (Lamont, 2007a; p. 35). DA provides a more thorough and in depth examination of the objects which are discussed. It has the ability to closely analyze rhetorical functions and devices used in the construction of objects in discourse; in other words, it has the ability to look at what the language in written and spoken conversation is *doing*, such as “to order and request, persuade and accuse”, as well as the ability to look at the intricacies of how that language is executed (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; pg. 31). It subsequently also offers a “transparency of analysis” that is beneficial as it allows a kind of reliability, granting the reader direct access to the data so that the reader may draw his/her own conclusions rather than simply taking the researcher’s word for it (Lamont, 2007a; 35). For these reasons, DA is the method of choice for the following research.

According to existing literature, fortune telling is considered to include a number of different paranormal items that can, supposedly, allow a fortune teller special knowledge about the future; such items include psychic ability, extra sensory perception (ESP) and many different divinatory arts (e.g. Tarot card reading, tea leaf reading, astrology, etc.) (Irwin, 2009). This has led to a simplistic understanding of fortune telling where, according to parapsychological research, belief in fortune telling is constituted as belief that abilities to read or foretell the future are real or genuine. This is demonstrated in how it is treated by some paranormal belief scales, such as the “Extraordinary Beliefs Inventory” which includes only three questions that are considered to indicate belief in fortune telling, two of which make references to “some people” who can “actually” predict the future and the third which asks if there is “truth in astrology” (Otis & Alcock, 1982 as quoted in Irwin, 2009; p.188-189). In light of the problem of constitution in paranormal belief scales, however, I wish to argue that fortune telling belief may actually incorporate more than the concept of whether or not the paranormal phenomena currently attributed to it is actually real. To do so, we need to better understand how fortune telling as an object is constructed. As such, this study aims to look at how fortune telling is constituted in contemporary media using DA as a method to address this need. Fortune telling, as we shall see, involves more than what parapsychological research currently gives it credit for.

## Data and Methods

Through a process of rigorous online searching and a series of preliminary readings, a final total of forty-three news articles relevant to the research topic of fortune telling were selected to comprise the data for analysis. These news articles were collected from multiple different online newspaper services ranging from major international news outlets (e.g. TIME, USA Today, BBC News) to local American news sources (e.g. The Salem News, BelAir Patch, Folsom Telegraph). All of the chosen news articles were selected with a specific time frame criterion in mind. As a result, all of the articles chosen for analysis were published within the last decade with the earliest articles dating from 2002. This time frame was decided upon for two reasons: first, to keep the analysis relevant to the current, modern time period and second, the discourse most relevant to the research question occurs within this time frame. These sources were also selected for their intended audience, the average news reader, and their wide availability. This makes the news articles relevant and attainable to the whole of society rather than any certain subset population. This ensures that the analysis will be relevant to society at large as well.

In style this analysis is similar to other DA work done on newspaper articles (MacMillan & Edwards, 1999; Wallwork & Dixon, 2004) and is also similar to historical analyses done on scientific boundary work in psychology (Lamont, 2007a). The focus of the analysis is in the same vein as other analyses conducted regarding expressions of paranormal belief and skepticism (Lamont, 2007b) and historical analyses of psychology and paranormal phenomena (Lamont, 2010), all of which also use DA. The method of the analysis was conducted similarly to that discussed in discursive psychological theory (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Edwards & Potter, 1992). As to the procedure, the selected forty-three articles were subjected to several series of close readings in which they were progressively organized into contexts, coded according to themes relevant to the research question, and analyzed for the function of rhetorical devices. The organization of the data is reminiscent to that of the concept of interpretative repertoires; that is, an attempt “to look systematically” at “recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events, and other phenomena” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; p. 149). Similar work to the present study using interpretative repertoires includes the work done on scientific discourse by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). The present study is similar to interpretative repertoire work but not exactly the same in the way the themes are organized; a proper repertoire “is constituted through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions” (Potter & Wetherell, 1987; p. 149). As all of the articles are written in largely the same way

stylistically, as they are all newspaper articles, language and word choice were focused on more specifically in the analysis. For this reason, the term “themes” shall be used in place of “repertoires”.

Each article was analyzed individually as described above. The following cited extracts were chosen to be exemplars of the full body of data. They highlight the most prevalent themes present across the breadth of the chosen articles. Though the analysis depicted within this paper focuses solely on the chosen extracts, these should be considered, again, as exemplars of the full analysis conducted on the whole collection of articles. The discussion will then look at the exemplary analysis as a whole and consider what information these themes give us in regards to the research question; that is, how fortune telling is constituted in the media. It will take into account how fortune telling was treated previously by other research and show how the present analysis can expand our understanding on the topic.

### **Analysis**

After the initial reading and selection of articles, there were then further readings conducted in order to organize the data. During these organizational readings it was apparent that the articles discussed two different distinct news topics, or contexts, though both were related to fortune telling. The first context reports on local American legislation and regulation of fortune telling. The decision was made to look exclusively at American examples of fortune telling legislation due to the researcher’s better familiarity with, and understanding of, the American law system as opposed to that of other countries. The second context regards the effect that the current economic recession has had on fortune telling. Due to this, the decision was made to analyze each context separately in regards to the research question. The legislation context was analyzed first.

#### **Articles Describing Legislation Context**

As mentioned the legislation context, comprised of twenty-three separate news articles, concerns discourse involving the passing of laws regarding the regulation of fortune telling for profit in the United States on both the local city and county level. The laws discussed revolve around consumer protection as well as the rights of the fortune tellers themselves. The information these articles focused on were statistics regarding the prevalence of fortune telling in various situations and interviews from law enforcement officials, law regulators, practitioners of fortune telling, as well as other individuals who either agreed or

disagreed with the practice of fortune telling for profit. While coding this context, three different themes of fortune telling were discovered; that of fortune telling as business, fortune telling as fraud, and fortune telling as counseling. Within each of these themes, interesting rhetorical work was found, as described below.

**Fortune telling as a business.**

Extract 1: Fortune telling is big business. One in seven Americans has consulted a psychic or fortune-teller, according to a recent survey. In some parts of New York there are psychics and tarot card readers on almost every block, charging anything from \$5 (£3) to over \$100 (£63) for a consultation. And practitioners say business is booming against the backdrop of the recession, perhaps as growing numbers of people seek both recreation and reassurance that a brighter future awaits them. (Prentice, 2010)

Extract 2: But several conditions must be met. Such businesses cannot operate within 1,000 feet of a school property line or be located within 1,000 feet of a church, place of worship or even another fortunetelling establishment. The Board of Appeals may also require conditions, limitations and restrictions necessary to preserve harmony with adjacent uses and to promote public health, safety and welfare, according to the ordinance. “We put the proper restrictions in place,” Bennett said of the ordinance. “Everybody has a right to make a living.” (Tyler, 2011)

Extract 3: Christian Day, who owns occult-based stores Hex and Omen, both in downtown Salem, says he’s the largest employer of psychics in the city. He fought for the cap to be lifted three years ago and says, “I think it’s absolutely been for the best.” Day says 80 percent of his income at Omen, which opened this year, is driven by psychic readings. “The ordinance opened the door for me, and in my opinion it’s been a boon for the city,” he said. “It’s a form of entertainment that reaches across all of these different markets.” Day, who is a Destination Salem board member, says internal marketing data shows that 85 percent of Salem visitors surveyed said modern witches were an interest. “There are a lot more psychics along Essex Street than ever before. At one time,” he notes, “Las Vegas was nothing but one casino and a zoot-suit fair. We want to be a destination for psychics.” (Roman, 2010)

First within these extracts we see fortune telling described as a business: it is outright called a “big business” which is “booming” (extract 1); regulators such as a “Board of Appeals” describe “such businesses” as “fortunetelling establishments” (extract 2); fortune telling is discussed using business related terms by an “employer of psychics” in “occult-based stores”, who is quoted as saying that fortune telling “reaches across all of these different markets” (extract 3). Second, fortune telling as a business is described as making money: these businesses are “charging anything from \$5 (£3) to over \$100 (£63) for a consultation” (extract 1); regulators state that “everybody”, including the owners of these businesses, have “a right to make a living” (extract 2); “80 percent of” one fortune telling business owner’s “income” is “driven by psychic readings” (extract 3). Furthermore, and perhaps most interestingly, fortune telling is framed here as a popular and positive business: it is an avenue of entertainment as “growing numbers of people seek both recreation and reassurance” and it is a popular past time as “one in seven Americans has consulted a psychic or fortune-teller” (extract 1); as “a form of entertainment” in a tourist town (which is seen when the “Destination Salem board” is said to be concerned with the “marketing data” generated by its “visitors”), the business of fortune telling has been “a boon for the city” with “more psychics...than ever before”, so much so that is compared to the development of Las Vegas, a highly popular tourist hot spot for various forms of entertainment (extract 3); with “proper restrictions” in order “to preserve harmony”, regulators deem that fortune telling business owners “have a right to make a living”, indicating a modest sum of money rather than making a fortune (extract 2). (The distinction between the two, making a modest income versus making a fortune, will be relevant in comparisons between themes later on.) The topic that is absent from these extracts is that of whether fortune telling’s paranormal attributes are real or not; there is no discussion regarding the reality of paranormal abilities such as precognition or ESP. So what we see in these extracts, within this context of legislation, is that the conversation surrounding fortune telling displays it as a business for profit which is positive and prevalent and, more importantly so, which does not need to be talked about in regards of the reality of the paranormal.

### **Fortune telling as fraud.**

Extract 4: “Every reader in this room is legitimate,” said Doug Johnson, a psychic at Pyramid Books who wants candidates to show their experience and training before becoming licensed. “But there are nuts out there | people that are not mentally there.” The city took up the issue almost a year ago, mainly to prevent fortunetellers from

blatantly ripping off consumers by demanding lucrative payments in return for lifting a curse or removing a "black cloud." (Cassidy, 2007)

Extract 5: But they ran into trouble trying to define the practice of fortunetelling and opted to scrap a line referring to it as casting spells, removing curses, and administering potions to "recover property, stop bad luck, give good luck, put bad luck on a person or animal ... shorten a person's life ... make one person marry or divorce another, induce a person to make or alter a will, (or) tell where money or property is hidden. "Fortunetelling is divination," Amy Ravish said. "It's the use of skills and tools to do psychic counseling. What you're talking about really sounds strange." (Cassidy, 2007)

Extract 6: "He definitely believes part of his cultural heritage is the ability to foresee the future, or at least have inklings about what the future holds," Quereshi said. The Court of Appeals didn't go that far, but it did reject the county's argument that fortunetelling is "inherently fraudulent" and that it doesn't amount to protected speech. The judges made their point in a bit of a jab at two professions that are more common in the Washington region. "While we recognize that some fortunetellers may make fraudulent statements, just as some lawyers or journalists may, we see nothing in the record to suggest that fortunetelling always involves fraudulent statements," the court wrote. (Glod, 2010)

Here we see a different depiction of fortune telling. First, we see how the extracts frame the object as fraud: some fortune tellers are described as "blatantly ripping off consumers" by claiming to be "lifting a curse or removing a 'black cloud'" (extract 4); regulators attempt to define fortune telling as "casting spells, removing curses, and administering potions" to achieve a list of outcomes such as to "recover property" or alter "luck" (extract 5); one Court of Appeals is quoted outright as stating that "some fortunetellers may make fraudulent statements" (extract 6). Second, we then see fortune telling described as harmful: fraudulent fortune telling is forceful and greedy by "demanding lucrative payments" for "removing a 'black cloud'"(extract 4); fraudulent fortune tellers specialize in fear by "removing curses and administering potions" which are designed to such manipulative ends as "to put bad luck on a person...shorten a person's life...[and] make one person marry or divorce another" (extract 5); there is a comparison of fraudulent fortune tellers to "some

lawyers or journalists” who also “may make fraudulent statements” which can result in detrimental outcomes for the people who might get caught up in the actions of such duplicitous individuals (extract 6). However, in addition to these points, there is also some boundary work present, delineating a difference between fraudulent forms of fortune telling and legitimate forms of fortune telling. Regardless of the presence or absence of true paranormal abilities, some fortune tellers are still framed as legitimate: though a Court of Appeals “didn’t go that far” as to agree or disagree with one fortune teller who is described as believing that “his cultural heritage is the ability to foresee the future”, it still ruled that they found nothing “to suggest that fortune telling always involves fraudulent statements” allowing him to continue practicing his craft (extract 6); a fortune teller, arguing in favor of stricter legislation, makes the claim that “every reader” present with him at the hearing “is legitimate” as compared to other, fraudulent psychics whom he calls “nuts” and who are “not mentally there” (extract 4); in writing up a law on fortune telling, one town had to “scrap a line” from their definition of the object when a “legitimate” fortune teller (referenced in extract 4) made the claim that the definition of fortune telling as “curses” and manipulative “potions” “really sounds strange”, thus separating what she does, that is “divination...for psychic counseling”, as different (extract 5). In neither extract 4 or 5 do the fortune tellers make claims as to whether or not the paranormal abilities they are referencing are genuine: “experience and training” needing to be shown does not indicate need to show true paranormal ability (extract 4) and the “divination” for “psychic counseling” similarly makes no mention of having real or fake paranormal attributes, just an association with them (extract 5). We see then, also within the discussion of regulation for fortune telling, that fortune telling can be described as both a fraudulent and legitimate object. But either way it is discussed, it does not necessarily require it to also be discussed as a real or fake paranormal phenomenon.

### **Fortune telling as counseling.**

Extract 7: Not surprisingly, Bettencourt of Witch’s Hide is applauding the move that allowed her to hire psychics for her shop. While she’s sure it will increase traffic to the store, she says the decision to offer readings was not a financial one. "We take it very seriously here," she said. "It's not an entertainment thing. Some people go in looking for a real answer." (Roman, 2010)

Extract 8: Szafranski shares her concerns. “We’re dealing with people’s lives. Sometimes they come to you and they are suicidal, they are lost and looking for guidance. I’m very upset by it,” she said, “and not just because of the money.” (Roman, 2010)

Extract 9: A woman who reads tarot cards says she’s not a fortune teller, she’s a “spiritual counselor...motivated by fundamental religious principles and beliefs,” so a Virginia county cannot demand that she pay \$300 business tax or restrict her business to an industrial zone[...] King insists she belongs in her current building, which also hosts psychologists and marriage counselors. (Abbott, 2009)

We see a third form of fortune telling is present in the discourse. First, we see fortune telling described as counseling: one fortune teller, who does not consider her practice “an entertainment thing” describes her clients as going in “looking for a real answer” to the serious enquiries that they have (extract 7); another fortune teller discusses how some clients are mentally ill, sometimes “suicidal”, and that they go to fortune tellers “lost and looking for guidance” (extract 8); still another fortune teller insists that she is not a fortune teller at all but a “spiritual counselor”, setting herself apart from the business aspect of fortune telling by claiming that, due to her counseling status, she should not be forced to pay “business tax” and placed in an “industrial zone” (extract 9). Secondly, we see here that fortune telling as counseling is framed as claiming motivations that are driven by something other than money: even though hiring more fortune tellers “will increase traffic” for one shop, the owner claims that it was “not a financial” decision that inspired her to do so (extract 7); the changes in legislation have made one fortune teller “very upset” but she insists it is “not because of the money” (extract 8); the “spiritual counselor” is described as claiming to be “motivated by fundamental religious principles and beliefs” (extract 9). Furthermore, fortune telling as counseling is depicted as fulfilling a role that is more serious and beneficial than previously seen: the “psychics” hired to give “readings” for the “real answers” that people seek take their jobs “very seriously” (extract 7); fortune telling as counseling is described as “dealing with people’s lives” when they come “looking for guidance” in such dire times as when they are feeling “suicidal” (extract 8); the “spiritual counselor” claims she “belongs” in a building “which also hosts psychologists and marriage counselors”, thus claiming membership with other professions that aide and help people with their problems (extract 9). Again we see a lack of conversation concerning whether the paranormal attributes that are associated with

fortune telling are “real” or not. We instead see discussion of what these fortune tellers consider their profession to be categorized as. Thus, still within the legislation context, fortune telling can also be discussed as beneficial counseling that is different from other fortune telling businesses and yet still has no need for discussion of the presence, or lack, of genuine paranormal phenomena.

### **Articles Describing Recession Context**

The recession context, comprised of twenty separate news articles, focuses on the effect that the economic recession has had on both fortune telling practitioners and clients. Due to this, these articles focus more on anecdotal evidence and quotations from fortune tellers and clients than the articles did in the previous context; there is very little, if any, reference to regulators or regulation here. This collection of articles includes stories from multiple different countries including the United States, the United Kingdom, and Canada. It is important to note, however, that the country of origin did not change the similarity of tone and themes within the articles. Having found the three different themes of fortune telling as business, fraud, or counseling in the first context, the second context was analyzed to determine if these same categories were also present. Though both fortune telling as business and fortune telling as counseling were present in these articles, there was very little reference to anything considered fraud in the previous legislative context short of a few small quotes: one is a recommendation from a fortune teller to potential clients to be “very wary of [a] psychic off the street” (Chang, Trachtenberg, & Ibanga, 2009); the other is a quote from an established fortune teller where he states that he “wouldn’t do something like putting an egg in a cemetery for \$20,000 to make somebody’s lover come back” which hearkens back to the references made to curses in the previous context (MacQuarrie, 2009). So, though there are small indications of the existence of the fortune telling as fraud theme in the recession context, there is not enough to give a thorough analysis on.

This lack of conversation on fraud makes sense within this context however; as opposed to the legislative context which focused more on ways to protect consumers and prevent fortune telling fraud from occurring, the recession context is more concerned with reporting on how the recession has affected fortune telling establishments which are already considered legitimate. In addition to this, focus is also placed on the positive effects that these legitimate fortune tellers have had on their customers. The first context is more concerned with the pros and cons of regulation, whereas this context is more concerned with the effect of trying economic times. However, as the discourse does lead us towards the themes of

fortune telling as business and fortune telling as counseling, analysis of these two themes shall be focused on below.

**Fortune telling as a business.**

Extract 10: As the economy tanks, Usleman's business is booming. "It's more types of people I have never seen before," says Usleman. "Men in the business world, high-powered jobs, stock market, Wall Street." Since last fall, she says she began to see a new type of client -- a "logical, [A-type] of personality." Many of them are "just completely lost," says Usleman. (Romans, 2009)

Extract 11: Mr. Fahey believes the increased business is a result of television shows like "The Medium," or "Ghost Whisperer," which have allowed people to feel more comfortable with psychics. Still, he said business has boomed for him since 2005, near the time the housing market collapsed. He is surprised by the level of clientele that now seek his advice — among them accountants, bankers, lawyers and doctors. (Williams, 2008)

Extract 12: Yet not everyone in the business of futures is benefiting from the recession. Angela, a certified psychic from Sacramento, Calif., who has been doing readings for 21 years, says she started to notice a drop-off in calls beginning last November. While she used to give 10 to 15 readings a day, at \$20 each, today she's down to just one or two. "It definitely got harder," she says. Many of her clients have had to cut back on visits, just as they've cut back on other spending. (Colvin, 2009)

Within this second context we can again see fortune telling, first, depicted as a business: fortune telling is called a "psychic business" (extract 10); it is discussed as a "business" which has "increased" (extract 11); it is also called "the business of futures" (extract 12). Second, the growth of the business of fortune telling is described as directly affected by the recession: while the "economy tanks" during this period, fortune telling "business is booming" (extract 10); this "business has boomed" ever since "the housing market collapsed" (extract 11); conversely, there are also some fortune tellers who are not "benefitting from the recession" and report a "drop-off in calls" seeking readings, putting them "down to just one or two" readings a week (extract 12). Furthermore, as a result of this change in growth, there are also reported changes in the clientele base: one fortune teller

reports “more types” and “new types of people” are coming to her, describing them as having a “logical, [A-type] of personality” and holding “high-powered jobs” (extract 10); another fortune teller professes to be “surprised by the level of clientele that now seek his advice” which include high profile professions such as “lawyers and doctors” (extract 11); a different type of change is also described as some clients “cut back on visits” as part of their attempts to “cut back on other spending” due to economic hardship (extract 12). Once again, any discussion of paranormal attributes and claims of genuine or non-genuine accounts are absent from these extracts. So fortune telling, even within the context of recession, can still be considered a business regardless of it being “real” or not.

### **Fortune telling as counseling.**

Extract 13: "People are calling them more often now to talk to them about their concerns about their career, their concerns about the economy," Fiedler said. Fiedler said her soothsayers are not giving financial advice or suggesting to anyone how to invest their funds. "Instead, they are helping them make decisions about perhaps what they should be considering when it comes to changes in their career or changes in their economic situation. They are really helping to relieve anxiety," she said. (Chang, Trachtenberg, & Ibang, 2009)

Extract 14: Aguilar lost the restaurant he owned for a decade last year and is now unemployed, with mounting debt and creditors calling. He says he wants to know whether he'll be able to regain his financial footing. "I'm just trying to find some kind of reassurance that my life isn't over. Even though things look really bleak and really bad, it's really nice to hear someone say, 'Hang in there. Things are going to be OK.'" (Colvin, 2009)

Extract 15: He paused to reflect on the reasons people seek spiritual guidance, especially during trying economic times. "I have no idea if it works," he said as he placed his book on the table before him. "I know there are a lot of things I can't explain, but sometimes things come together serendipitously. And sometimes it's just our minds trying to make sense of chaos," he said, while his wife worked. He cited an unstable economy as a possible motive for people searching for direction, even though a session could be pricey. "I think people are looking for comfort and answers that aren't available through more mundane sources," Lewis said. (Serviss, 2010)

From these extracts we can see, initially, fortune telling discussed as counseling within the recession context: fortune tellers are “helping” their clients to “make decisions” and are quoted as saying that they point out what their clients “should be considering when it comes to changes” to their “careers” and “economic situation[s]” (extract 13); clients go to these fortune tellers to “find some kind of reassurance” that their lives aren’t “over” (extract 14); these “people searching for direction” seek out fortune tellers for “spiritual guidance” (extract 15). Secondly, we see that practitioners who describe fortune telling as counseling also describe their clients as driven to seek this alternative counsel due to the recession: clients are found to “more often” be talking to fortune tellers regarding “concerns about their career, [and] their concerns about the economy” (extract 13); a specific client, who “lost the restaurant he owned for a decade last year” during the recession, is cited as wanting “to know whether he’ll be able to regain his financial footing” (extract 14); a bystander, the husband of a psychic, claims that an “unstable economy” and “trying economic times” could be “a possible motive” for “minds trying to make sense of chaos” by seeking fortune telling services (extract 15). Furthermore, the theme of fortune telling as counseling is framed as emotionally beneficial to the clients who seek it out: fortune tellers describe themselves as “not giving financial advice”, but instead “really helping to relieve anxiety” in their clients (extract 13); clients claim that when “things look really bleak and really bad” then it is “really nice to hear someone”, in this case a fortune teller, “say ‘Hang in there. Things are going to be OK’” (extract 14); the husband states that despite the fact that he has “no idea if it works”, people are still going to fortune tellers “looking for comfort and answers that aren’t available through more mundane sources” (extract 15). Thus, it does not appear to matter whether fortune tellers are displaying true paranormal abilities or not. Rather, they are providing a type of emotional relief that their clients cannot find elsewhere. Once again, within this context of the recession, the discourse displays fortune telling as a type of beneficial counseling that is not reliant upon the reality of the paranormal.

### **Discussion**

Belief in the paranormal is reportedly a widespread phenomenon within society and it has grown even more prevalent in recent years (Vyse, 1997; Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2009). Due to these facts, it is important for psychologists to develop a better understanding of what paranormal belief entails. In the study of paranormal belief, however, one of the most difficult problems has been the inability of researchers to agree upon how it is constituted (Irwin, 2009). There are many differing opinions on the paranormal and more

importantly no single, clear definition. There is, additionally, a prevalent treatment of paranormal objects by belief researchers as simplistic and reliant upon the discussion that these extraordinary phenomena must be either real or not real (Otis & Alcock, 1982; Tobacyk & Milford, 1983). So far, though, the paranormal belief scales designed with this constitution of paranormal belief have led to inconclusive results (Wiseman & Watt, 2006). After considering the critiques of discursive psychologists regarding the problem of constitution in belief scales, a better understanding how the paranormal is constituted by people is needed. In order to do this, the method of DA was used to analyze fortune telling, as an example of a paranormal object, and look more closely at how it is constructed in the discourse. As a result, we can see that fortune telling is not as wholly reliant upon discussion of the paranormal and is furthermore not reliant upon discussion of whether or not fortune telling's paranormal attributions are even real, as was previously assumed.

As seen above, there is a wide range of objects that are involved in the constitution of fortune telling in the media. Through the analysis, at least three different themes have become apparent in the classification of fortune telling; there is fortune telling as a business, fortune telling as fraud, and fortune telling as a type of counseling. Fortune telling here is framed as much more versatile and utilized in several different applications. In addition, these themes also are described as having several associated forms and functions: we see fortune telling as a business which is described as a popular and positive source of revenue and entertainment; we see fortune telling as either fraudulent, which is described as a harmful crime that preys on consumers, or as a legitimate practice; finally we see fortune telling as a type of counseling which provides a beneficial service that aids and gives reassurance to its clients. This is similar to other observations by researchers, who also utilized DA, of psychologists using discourse to make persuasive claims that holding paranormal beliefs is harmful (Lamont, 2010). The fascinating find in the current study, though, is the fact that harm is framed in the discourse to be only one of several possible functions fortune telling can have. Furthermore, we can also see in the discourse differing interests of fortune tellers within each of the themes; these motivations are what discursive psychologists call "stake" (Edwards & Potter, 1992). Within each of these themes, differing stakes are presented in the form of different treatments of money: the business of fortune telling is framed both as seeking modest amounts of money for its services as well as seeking to expand or increase its income; fraudulent fortune telling seeks to swindle victims out of gross amounts of money; fortune telling as counseling, as opposed to the previous categories, is described as not having

interest in the money, but rather having stake in other motivations such as aiding people or religious beliefs.

Overviewing all of these finds from the analysis we see that fortune telling, as constructed by news media outlets that are intended to be relevant for a wide audience of readers, is a complex object with multiple different attributions and objects associated with it. Fortune telling here appears to be able to affect people's lives in multiple ways and fulfill several different roles. It can be a source of income, it can be a source of entertainment, it can be a type of crime, it can be light hearted and inconsequential, and it can be serious and beneficial. This is contrasted from the simplistic ways in which fortune telling is constructed in some paranormal belief scales. In one scale, for example, several questions are included regarding fortune telling, but they only concern the "validity" of fortune telling (Randall & Desrosier, 1980). Such scales treat fortune telling as a flat, trivial object whose only attribution is predicting the future due to special, paranormal abilities. In light of the findings here, it seems that past views of fortune telling may be missing many other important attributes that are unrelated to the paranormal.

We must, of course, consider that certain objects were purposely made more relevant within the discourse of these two contexts than perhaps would be made relevant elsewhere, due to the personal goals of the various journalists who authored the analyzed articles. Within the recession context the effects of the economic down turn on consumers is the main concern and within the legislation context consumer safety is the driving motive described in the discourse. Though there are similarities in the contexts, such as that both contexts deal with consumers and economic objects in some way, the recession context focuses more on the aftermath of the recession and its effect on clients and practitioners. In contrast, the legislation context focuses more on the debates contributing to the development of regulation and the aftermath following the passing of those related laws. The recession context has a larger focus on the clients who seek out these services regularly and how fortune telling counseling has been helpful for them. The legislative context is more focused on how fortune telling is viewed and handled by the law. As such, it focuses quite a bit more on fraudulent fortune telling, how it has hurt people and how it can be prevented. As a result of these concerns, it therefore stands to reason that objects such as function, money, and consumerism would be made more relevant in these articles.

However, even with the consideration of contextual bias, it is still important to realize here that in neither context is the discourse completely reliant upon discussion of the paranormal. Paranormal objects are, of course, present such as mentions of religious beliefs

(extract 9), professed beliefs in special abilities to foresee the future (extract 6) and divination (extract 5). These match items on paranormal belief scales which ask respondents to agree or disagree with statements such as “Some psychics can accurately predict the future” (Tobacyk, 1988 as quoted in Irwin, 2009; p.192) and “Some people can actually foretell your future by looking at the lines in your palm” (Otis & Alcock, 1982 as quoted in Irwin, 2009; p.188). However, these paranormal objects do not constitute the core of the discourse on fortune telling here. Rather than simply receiving some type of special paranormal knowledge, clients and consumers are described as getting other things out of fortune telling services: they can receive entertainment and a source of recreation, they can receive harm and stress, and they also can receive reassurance and a peace of mind that they cannot receive elsewhere. More importantly, clients are depicted as receiving these things without concern or discussion about if fortune telling really can or cannot read the future.

A large part of the discourse also revolves around a discussion of ways in which fortune telling can be a legitimate practice, also regardless of whether or not practitioners’ paranormal abilities are considered real. We see that this legitimacy can be given through the passing of laws by regulators to determine who and who is not a fraudulent fortune teller. We also see that this also happens through the comparisons of fortune telling to other legitimate professions by both regulators and fortune tellers. Fortune telling practitioners are compared to and put on par with lawyers, journalists, psychologists and marriage counselors. This allows fortune telling practitioners to claim certain group memberships with these other professions and so fortune telling is able to also claim similar attributes to them. Firstly, in grouping fortune telling with other professions that require a certain special expertise in their fields, fortune tellers gain a “category entitlement”, in which they too can be considered to have a certain special expertise that those not in their group do not have (Edwards & Potter, 1992; p. 160). Secondly, in grouping fortune telling with other, presumably, normal professions, this makes it also accountable as a normal profession. So we see fortune telling legitimized as a profession that is on par with other, every day professions, without consideration of their paranormal attributes.

Ultimately, we are able to see here that the discourse shows that fortune telling is constituted as a far more complicated object than it is in the current parapsychological literature. Belief in fortune telling cannot be just simply be equated with belief in the ability to tell the future through extraordinary, paranormal means. The discourse analysis of the news media shows that many other mundane objects make up how fortune telling is constituted. Fortune telling is a multifaceted object which includes several themes such as

business, fraud and counseling, several mundane objects such as money, clients, and emotions as well as several different functions. Though paranormal attributions such as discussion of telling the future are present in some capacity, it is apparent that fortune telling is not solely reliant upon these paranormal attributions. This is vitally important to our understanding of paranormal belief. In light of this research, it shows that our current understandings of fortune telling are inadequate as they do not take into consideration the other, mundane objects that also constitute fortune telling. This new information reveals the possibility that belief in fortune telling may not be so cut and dry. Similar to findings in other interpretative repertoire work such as Gilbert and Mulkey's (1984), we see that fortune telling as an object is constructed in an assortment of different ways which may not always be self-evident. Though perhaps not as grandiose as past interpretative repertoire work, this study still adds to the understanding of the variety of ways in which people talk about and construct the various items that they believe in. Though we cannot, of course, necessarily use DA to determine what exactly it is people believe in when they claim that they believe in fortune telling or the paranormal, we can still better understand how people construct these objects of belief.

## Appendix

### List of articles regarding legislation:

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