

# CHAPTER 11

## An Overview of Cold Reading Strategies

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### INTRODUCTION

The standard mainstream explanation for impressive mediumistic communications is in terms of deceptive practices called cold reading. For example, in commenting on Gary Schwartz's book *The Afterlife Experiments*,<sup>1</sup> which describes a number of experiments with mediums that are claimed to have produced evidence of postmortem communication, Hyman comments that "the readings he presents [ . . . ] for his case very much resemble the sorts of readings we would expect from psychic readers in general and cold readers in particular."<sup>2</sup> Wiseman and O'Keeffe similarly criticize findings reported by Schwartz, Russek, Nelson, and Barentsen on the grounds that "seemingly accurate readings can be created by a set of psychological stratagems collectively referred to as 'cold reading.'"<sup>3</sup> Of medium Rebecca Rosen, Karen Stollznow comments, "like [ . . . ] many others before her, [she] has her own techniques for cold reading, and possibly hot reading. However, Rosen's skills are far less impressive than those of cold reading experts."<sup>4</sup> Nickell claims that John Edward's successful television demonstrations were the result of his skill at cold reading and that Edward was also not averse to gathering information about clients in advance of readings.<sup>5</sup> Underdown<sup>6</sup> similarly implies that James Van Praagh relies on standard cold reading techniques when broaching topics with a studio audience, and Greasley<sup>7</sup> has provided a useful analysis of a mediumistic sitting that featured in

the British TV documentary *Is There Anybody There?* in terms of stratagems of cold reading (although they are not referred to as such). But these allusions to cold reading tend to be vague and inconsistent, and tend to overestimate the kinds of successes that are possible using some of the basic techniques involved. There are very few systematic descriptions of cold reading methods,<sup>8</sup> so this chapter is intended to provide such an overview, indicate under what conditions each of the different methods can be used, and specify what kinds of information can (and cannot) be produced by them so that researchers may be better able to evaluate whether cold reading is a plausible explanation in any given case.

The concept of cold reading is not new. It is often attributed to W. L. Gresham's 1953 work *Monster Midway*,<sup>9</sup> although Whaley describes it as "originally the argot of psychic mediums by 1924 [ . . . ] from the fact that the customer walks in 'cold'—previously unknown to the fortune-teller,"<sup>10</sup> and the stratagem was probably first hinted at in the writings of Conan Doyle through the instant face-to-face deductions of Sherlock Holmes, published from 1887. Ray Hyman's classic account of the effect describes it as "a procedure by which a 'reader' is able to persuade a client whom he has never met before that he knows all about the client's personality and problems."<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, this does not give us much insight into the actual process of cold reading, and a perhaps more useful operational definition is given elsewhere by Hyman:

The cold reading employs the dynamics of the dyadic relationship between psychic and client to develop a sketch that is tailored to the client. The reader employs shrewd observation, nonverbal and verbal feedback from the client, and the client's active cooperation to create a description that the client is sure penetrates to the core of his or her psyche.<sup>12</sup>

In practice, the techniques identified as examples of cold reading can vary in form from case to case, from a simple reliance on using statements that are true of most people<sup>13</sup> through to a broader definition that includes pre-session information-gathering about a client.<sup>14</sup> Techniques such as "fishing" (to be described later) are regarded as central to some accounts<sup>15</sup> but as separate, supplementary methods by others.<sup>16</sup> There is a real danger that such over-liberal and inconsistent application of the term "cold reading" will cause it to lose any explanatory power it has.

There are also clear indications that the cold reading "process" actually consists of a number of discrete and independent strategies. Hyman<sup>17</sup> hints at this when he distinguishes between two "types" of

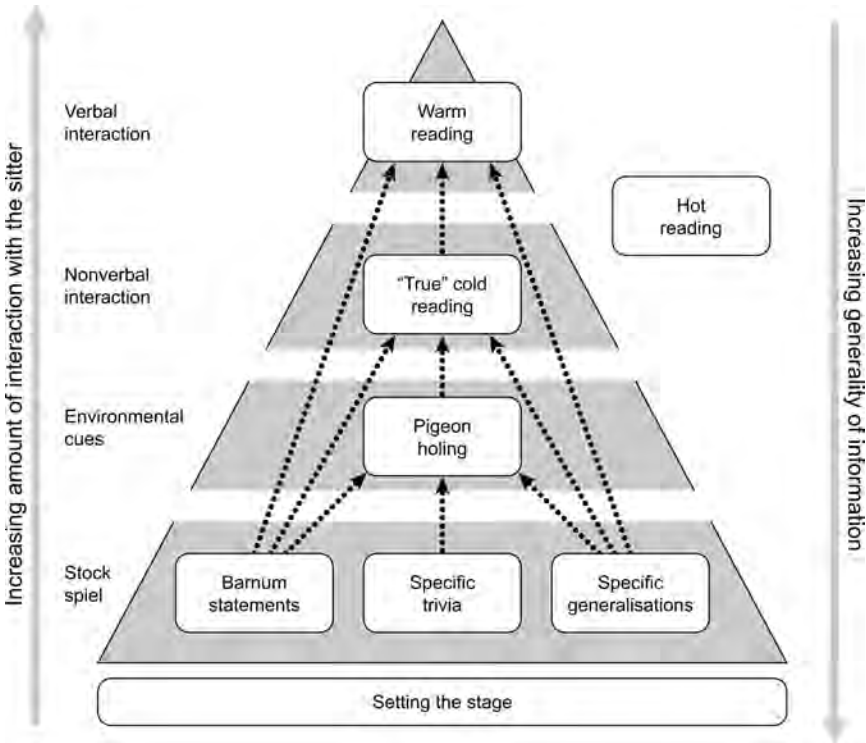
reading—static and dynamic—that exploit quite different psychological mechanisms. The former makes use of commonalities between clients to allow the reader to launch into a stock spiel that should apply equally well to all, whereas the latter depends upon interaction with the client to generate material that is more tailor-made to his or her specific circumstances. An attempt will be made in this chapter to identify and characterize the actual techniques brought to bear in cold reading, and to specify their interrelationships. The model that has been developed is informed by (1) a review of extant cold reading publications and (2) work with a professional pseudopsychic.<sup>18</sup>

There exists a substantial specialist literature describing the techniques involved in setting up as a pseudopsychic, running under titles such as *Money-Making Cold Reading*, *Cashing in on the Psychic*, and *Confessions of a Cold Reader*.<sup>19</sup> This literature is typically produced to allow the pseudopsychic fraternity to share resources and expertise, and is not intended to be generally available. Books are privately published or produced by specialist publishers of magic literature, and tend to be advertised in private circulation magic society catalogues and magazines. We have been able to build a reasonable pseudopsychic library from which to develop a description of cold reading practices as articulated by pseudopsychics themselves.<sup>20</sup>

An exploratory study was conducted in cooperation with pseudopsychic Michael Anderson<sup>21</sup> that allowed us to investigate the mechanics of cold reading *in situ*. Anderson had worked as a psychic reader in the United Kingdom for over 15 years but was at that time semiretired and was happy to share some of his expertise with us. A one-day exploratory study was arranged in which he was filmed giving separate readings to three individuals in the morning and in the afternoon reviewed the footage to give a commentary on the techniques being used. Three female volunteers acted as sitters<sup>22</sup> in “a preliminary evaluation of a psychic reader.” Two of the readings were very well received, suggesting that the pseudopsychic techniques being used were successful in persuading these clients that the reader did have paranormal access to information about them. Video footage was compared with theoretical accounts of cold reading as given in the literature with actual examples of the process in practice.

## AN EXPANDED MODEL OF COLD READING

The previously mentioned sources of information about the pseudopsychic technique suggest a model in which cold reading actually encompasses a number of discrete operations which appear to represent

Figure 11.1 **A1**

a hierarchy (see Figure 11.1). All these processes involve gathering intelligence about the client but are distinguishable on the basis of when and how transfer of information occurs, and of what form that information takes. Those at the base of the hierarchy require little, if any, interaction with the client, but the reading so-produced remains relatively vague or general and relies on the tendency of the client to interpret the material as personally meaningful. As the opportunity for interaction increases, so the reading can be made more specific to the client in attendance. Knowledge of all of the processes enables the reader to produce a reasonable sketch whatever situation he finds himself in, while being able to be increasingly impressive when circumstances allow.

Strategies that appear higher in the pyramid are somewhat dependent upon the use of those lower down for success; however, the reading *as a whole* does not represent a steady progression through the hierarchy. Rather, the reading is more likely to involve a number of switches from

technique to technique depending upon the information that is available. For example, if the initial conditions are such that the client immediately offers up personal information, the reader may decide not to begin with lower-order methods of generating material for the reading. In the remainder of this chapter, we will consider in more detail strategies that together seem to make up cold reading.

## SETTING THE STAGE

An important aspect of the persuasion process is to set the stage for the reading.<sup>23</sup> This includes careful consideration of how the reader presents himself, and how he manages the client's expectations of the sitting. Its purpose is threefold: (1) to persuade the client that the reader is genuine, (2) to engage the active participation of the client in the reading process, and (3) to provide plausible "outs" should the reading nevertheless not be a success.

With regard to presentation, the reader should appear professional and in control of the situation. Earle, for example, urges magicians interested in specializing in pseudopsychic effects to dress smartly and warns that "you will save about 80–90% of what you were spending on props, but you'll end up spending it on wardrobe."<sup>24</sup>

Readers work hard, both in terms of presentation and through verbal exchanges, to establish that they are in control of the situation; they emphasize that they have a track record of successful demonstrations so that their expertise is not in question—any "failures" must inevitably be placed firmly at the feet of the client. Thus it is already agreed that much of the burden for making the session a success falls on the client:

If something that the reader later says does not tally with the client's beliefs or does not make sense, the client has been prepared to treat the apparent confusion as due to the client's own failure to understand adequately rather than to the psychic's lack of knowledge.<sup>25</sup>

The reader also emphasizes the co-operative nature of the reading. Messages may come through the reader that are meaningful only to the client and that cannot be deciphered without the client's help. Earle, for example, notes:

The best readers always include a statement like, "I only see pieces, as in a jigsaw puzzle. It is up to you to put them together," or, "I may speak of a person being crushed by a house as in 'The Wizard of Oz', but you recognize it as a friend with overdue mortgage payments."

This attitude has the additional advantage of enlisting the active participation of the client. She is always searching for meanings to your statements and, when she makes the connections, will vividly remember them later.<sup>26</sup>

Although the reader has asserted his expertise, he can use the process of setting the stage to also prepare an “out” should the client not be able to understand elements of the reading, despite much effort—while the gift is infallible, the percipient and client are prone to misunderstand its “true” meaning. Lewis,<sup>27</sup> for example, draws a parallel with weather forecasting. Just as weather forecasters get it badly wrong on occasion without our rejecting their predictive methods, so even gross errors of prediction during a reading will not invalidate the method from which they were derived (i.e., the reader’s claim to be psychic). Underdown<sup>28</sup> describes the preshow rhetoric for John Edward’s *Crossing Over* television series as being concerned with lowering audience expectations in this way, explaining that some things the host says will make sense immediately but others will not, and also endearing the medium to them so that they are better prepared to do the necessary interpretative work with the latter. Once the client has been sufficiently primed to work hard to understand the meaning of the reading, the pseudopsychic can move on to generate material for them.

## THE STOCK SPIEL

A stock spiel reading, also known as a psychological reading,<sup>29</sup> is made up of prepared phrases that can be delivered not only without feedback from the client *during* the reading, but also without the reader having any contact with the client *before the session begins*. Such statements allow one to give a general description of the client, perhaps including some personal details but without focusing on any specific problems. They are of particular use in situations where the lack of contact will make the reading seem impressive, for example, if giving a reading over long distances or while screened from the client. We have assigned the statements that make up a stock spiel into three broad categories: specific generalizations, specific trivia, and Barnum-type statements.

### SPECIFIC GENERALIZATIONS

Couttie<sup>30</sup> coined the term “specific generalizations” to describe statements that ostensibly are very specific but still are meaningful to most

people. These items exploit the maxim that we are essentially more alike than different but that we are generally not aware of our similarity.<sup>31</sup> Jones effectively characterizes specific generalizations when he states:

Each of us likes to think of ourselves as unique, with problems and needs and goals that set us apart from all the others. We're not. Although we may mistrust generalities, whether we like it or not, there is a commonality about our fears, wants, and aspirations that make them predictable [...] Psychic readers recognise this, and use it to their advantage.<sup>32</sup>

Couttie even recommends that the reader give the client a general run-down on the reader's own life story, hopes, and fears, angled as though they were the client's, in order to illustrate just how impressively accurate this can be. Also included here is the traditional "cradle-to -grave" reading, which extends the principle of similarity to suggest that most of us go through the same stages in life, and at roughly the same ages. It has even been suggested that psychics make use of life-span development books for stimulus material, with Gail Sheehy's *Passages* being a common recommendation.<sup>33</sup> As well as going through similar life events, we can also relate to specific but relatively common events, such as the death of an older male with a heart condition, the death of a very young (or unborn) child, a divorce affecting someone the client knows well, and so on.

Wiseman and O'Keeffe<sup>34</sup> refer to this practice when attempting to explain successes during Schwartz's experiments, noting that many statements that do not appear especially general can nevertheless be true of a surprisingly large number of people. Associating the generalization with something that is unique to the client (e.g., by presenting it as a concern for a deceased relative) serves to draw attention away from its broad applicability. Dewey and Seville<sup>35</sup> provide a useful listing of what they term "common themes and specific generalities," including that most women have worn their hair much longer or shorter than it is now, have some aches or pains in their feet that are exacerbated by particular shoes they own, feel they are not as photogenic as others, see themselves as romantic despite past experiences, have kept a diary in childhood, and have been badly sunburned at least once.

Blackmore<sup>36</sup> has investigated the suggestion that clients underestimate the likelihood that something that is true for them would also be true for others (and hence can easily be guessed by the psychic), which she terms the "probability misjudgement" theory. In support of this theory, she

found that almost a third of her survey sample of British *Daily Telegraph* readers were willing to agree that each of a number of statements were true of them, including that their back was giving them trouble, they were one of three children, they owned a tape or CD of Handel's *Water Music*, they had been to France in the past year, they had a scar on their left knee, or they had a cat. However, she found that respondents estimated that these things were more likely to be true of others than themselves, contrary to the illusion of uniqueness. More systematic research on this topic would be valuable.

### SPECIFIC TRIVIA

Other statements, labeled here as “specific trivia” (although Webster refers to them as “platitudes”),<sup>37</sup> are so trivial that they become memorable only if they come true and even then are impressive *by virtue of being true* rather than because of what they can say about the client. For example, Anderson often used the prediction that the client would see something in a shop that they would have an urge to impulse-buy, safe in the knowledge that if no such event occurs, the prediction will be forgotten. Martin<sup>38</sup> suggests peppering the reading with examples of what he terms “out of the blue” items such as: a minor car problem; some appliance breaking down, strained relationships with someone close, a recent minor hitch in finances, a driver of a green car, and a recent sleepless night. Rowland similarly offers a box of unsorted old photographs, old medicines well past their use-by date, at least one toy or book kept as a childhood memento, consecutive issues of a magazine no longer subscribed to, and an item of clothing that was bought new but has never been worn.

Use of specific trivia encourages a “scatter gun” approach in which the reader makes a large number of statements in the expectation that at least some will make their mark, and by virtue of their accuracy will be more memorable to the sitter. Stollznow, for example, reports that during a single show, Rosen gave 72 different Christian names, greatly increasing the likelihood that some would be meaningful to audience members.<sup>39</sup>

### BARNUM-TYPE STATEMENTS

Barnum-type statements are general personality descriptions that apply to almost everyone.<sup>40</sup> Dickson and Kelly<sup>41</sup> have defined the Barnum Effect as the tendency for people to accept such statements as accurate descriptions of their own unique personalities. The original Barnum



statements were derived by Bertram Forer from descriptions he found in newsstand astrology books.<sup>42</sup> The full reading of 13 statements is:

You have a great need for people to like and admire you.

You have a tendency to be critical of yourself.

You have a great deal of unused capacity which you have not turned to your advantage.

While you have some personality weaknesses, you are generally able to compensate for them.

Your sexual adjustment has caused some problems for you.

Disciplined and self-controlled outside, you tend to be worrisome and insecure inside.

At times you have serious doubts as to whether you have made the right decision or done the right thing.

You prefer a certain amount of change and variety, and become dissatisfied when hemmed in by restrictions and limitations.

You pride yourself as an independent thinker, and don't accept others' statements without satisfactory proof.

You have found it unwise to be too frank in revealing yourself to others.

At times you are extraverted, affable, sociable, while at other times you are introverted, wary, reserved.

Some of your aspirations tend to be pretty unrealistic.

Security is one of your major goals in life.

It is claimed that the descriptions are readily accepted because they are sufficiently vague to allow the subject to read into them what they want;<sup>43</sup> indeed, the Barnum effect is so-called in reference to the American showman Phineas T. Barnum, who is alleged to have attributed the popularity of his circus to there being "a little something for everybody," a comment that may also apply to Barnum statements.<sup>44</sup>

The phrases recommended by pseudopsychics vary little from those used in the psychological literature to investigate the Barnum Effect,<sup>45</sup> and indeed Earle actually recommends Forer's original statements as crib material.<sup>46</sup> It has been consistently found in experimental studies that subjects are willing to accept such statements as being uniquely true of them and appear unaware of the likelihood that they could apply equally well to others.<sup>47</sup>

Two mechanisms in particular are thought to be at work: (1) clients will tend to remember only the correct statements and (2) clients will interpret statements in a manner that makes them more accurate than they originally were.

For (1), Dutton has claimed:

Even where there are negative or undesirable elements in a Barnum description, subjects have [ . . . ] a strong tendency to notice and remember only a percentage of available items. This is selectivity of attention [ . . . ] confirmations are remembered, often quite vividly, whereas less plausible aspects of the description are paid correspondingly less attention.<sup>48</sup>

And Hyman notes of selective recall, “both laboratory research and what we know about actual psychic readings predict that the client will remember mainly those things the psychic said that were consistent with the overall script.”<sup>49</sup> However, despite Hyman’s claim, there is virtually no experimental evidence to suggest that clients of psychic readings tend to recall more of the reading elements that they rated as accurate than those items rated inaccurate, and much more research is needed to evaluate this assumption.<sup>50</sup>

For (2), it is commonly claimed that subjects will impose their own meaningful interpretation on the statements, embellishing them with their own specific detailed experiences that will make the generalizations seem more accurate than they really were.<sup>51</sup> This can be accounted for in terms of schema theory, which suggests that subjects are likely to unconsciously impose a particular structure on the communication that will invest it with a particular and relevant (to the percipient) meaning.<sup>52</sup> Dean and colleagues describe this tendency as the “Procrustean effect” after the Greek mythical figure who would stretch his guests’ limbs or sever them in order for them to fit his bed.<sup>53</sup> Communications are similarly stretched or truncated to fit the client’s circumstances.

Randi gives a nice example of a reading being interpreted such that it becomes more specific than the original statement. As a guest on a Canadian TV show, he witnessed the psychic Geraldine Smith give the rather vague prediction “I’m seeing the month of January here—which is now—but there would have to be something strong with the person with January as well.”<sup>54</sup> Although skeptical of the reading as a whole, the host of the show noted on reflection that Smith had actually determined that his birthday was in January. In fact, no mention had been made of what type of association with January was being referred to—the client was left to fill in the gaps.

Clients may even alter their perception of people or events to have them fit with the reader’s predictions:

For example, if a girl is told that her life will be influenced by an imaginative, sensitive man, she may start attributing artistic qualities

to the basketball player she has been dating, even though she never previously thought of him as being a particularly imaginative or sensitive person.<sup>55</sup>

Delaney and Woodyard<sup>56</sup> offer a nice experimental illustration of this. Participants were given a personality sketch ostensibly based on their star sign (in fact, descriptors were randomly allocated) and then a short questionnaire asking about their actual personality to be compared with the astrological predictions. Responses suggested that their self-description had been influenced by the astrological sketch.

## PIGEON-HOLING

Stock spiel statements are necessarily general, even though interpretation by the client is claimed to make them seem more impressive. To provide more specific assertions, the reader must narrow down the number of topic areas that could possibly be relevant by assigning the client to a particular category and generating a stereotype for that subpopulation that will inform him of the kinds of interests or concerns to concentrate on. Such classification seems to occur along two main dimensions, which are somewhat mutually dependent: what type of person the client is and what type of problem she is concerned with. Pigeon-holing makes use of information leakage, which occurs very early in the reading situation and requires little, if any, subsequent feedback.

## THE CLIENT

The reader classifies the client prior to or very early in the reading by scanning the environment for sources of intelligence about her. The main distinctions are made according to the sex and age of the client, and at one extreme may simply use a narrowed version of the cradle-to-grave reading, or other stock spiel, determined by information given up by the sitter. For example, Couttie describes how:

Up to the age of twenty or twenty-five the main concerns are sex and relationships of different sorts. From then to the mid-thirties the concerns are mainly about jobs, money and the home. For the next ten years there is a shift towards worries about children's futures, parental health, rethinking careers and so on. From about forty-five onwards there are worries about personal health, one's own

marriage, a desperation about the direction of one's life, concern about grandchildren and so forth.<sup>57</sup>

Further information can be gleaned from the client's clothing, physical features, carriage, and manner of speech, all of which can point more specifically to her past history and future aspirations. In discussing his practices with us, Anderson commented that the initial impressions of the client, as she enters the room, exchanges greetings, and seats herself, are particularly important because the client is off her guard at this point, unaware that the "reading" has begun, and so is prone to leak more information about herself than she would during the actual reading.

If the reading is held in the client's home, then themes found in collections of ornaments, pictures, or books will also indicate some hobbies, interests, and aspirations. These will help the reader to assign the client to a narrower and presumably more accurate category. When taken to an extreme, the classification can be quite specific, for example, by exploiting the discovery of hobby stickers on cars that indicate membership in particular clubs or societies, or necklaces bearing initials.<sup>58</sup> The reader should not necessarily ignore obvious sources of intelligence. As Hobrin notes, "you may be surprised to learn the number of people who forget that they are wearing their birth sign or name around their neck. They say familiarity breeds contempt; I'd say that it breeds forgetfulness [ . . . ] never overlook the obvious."<sup>59</sup>

## THE PROBLEM

By pigeon-holing the sitter, and padding out the reading with general statements drawn from the categories described previously, the reader is able to tell the client some quite impressive facts about her personality and life history. However, as Jones notes, "a perception of accuracy is not sufficient to make a reading satisfactory in the minds of most clients"<sup>60</sup>—the primary function of a reader in most instances is to act as a counselor.<sup>61</sup> Clients come to the reader with a problem for which they seek comfort and advice; even "sensation-seeking" clients will identify a specific problem or question that is uppermost in their minds and wait to see what the reader has to say about it. Strategies intended to determine the client's problem again rely on the assumption that we are more alike than different. The problems that occur in life belong to a finite (and small) number of categories, each of which has only a limited number of specific problems associated with it. The number of categories

**Table 11.1**  
**Commonly Used Problem Area Categories**

<b>Earle (1990)</b>	<b>Hyman (1977)</b>	<b>Jones (1989)</b>	<b>Ruthchild (1981)</b>	<b>Hobrin (1990)</b>	<b>Rowland (2002)</b>
Love		Sex	Sex Love Children	Love life Marriage Children	Love, romance and relationships
Money		Ambition Career Money	Social standing Ambitions/ goals Financial security	Social life and recreation Work and professional prospects Financial prospects	Money Career and progression Ambitions
Health		Health Expectation	Health Immortality	Health and possible long life	Health and wellbeing
_____	(travel)	(psychic potential)	(character assessment)	(character assessment)	Travel Education

commonly used varies from psychic to psychic (see Table 11.1), although some of the items may represent subdivisions of larger categories. Jones's grouping of human problems under six categories has been contrived in part to give the acronym THE SCAM when the letters are rearranged.

Utilizing the population stereotypes noted previously allows the reader to assess the probabilities of each problem area being applicable in this case. By ranking them in this way, the reader can quickly deal with each of the most likely worries. By mentioning all of the possible problem categories, he can be sure to have covered the one most relevant, even if only in the most general of terms.<sup>62</sup> This will make the reading seem successful to the client because, according to Jones, she "will assign immediate significance to any mention [ . . . ] of her problem or worry, while she will pass over as unimportant other problems or worries [ . . . mentioned . . . ] in the same reading."<sup>63</sup>

Hyman analyzed 18 hours of tapes of the English medium Christian Dion and found that he similarly categorized problem areas and cycled through these in the readings he gave: emotional or romantic status; career change or promotion; organization of life; move, always overseas

(because England is part of an island); travel, either visiting or someone coming to visit; legal or financial matters, or property problems; pregnancy; and health.<sup>64</sup>

## “TRUE” COLD READING: USING NONVERBAL FEEDBACK

The techniques described up to this point do not exploit information available through interaction with the client but depend instead on general truths and impression formation by the reader. When feedback *is* available during the reading, there is the opportunity to further refine these categories using what we have termed “true cold reading” (see Figure 11.2). This process has been likened by Hyman to the Clever Hans phenomenon<sup>65</sup> because it exploits subtle behavioral cues emanating from the questioner during the course of the interaction to arrive at an appropriate reading.

It is achieved by introducing each topic (personality characterization or problem area) in a generalized form and noting the client’s behavioral response to its introduction. If it is positive, then the sketch can be elaborated a little further until another choice has to be made and the client is asked to unwittingly provide more feedback, which steers the course of the reading. If the response is negative, then the reading is either moderated or the reader may “opt out” back to general categories to try the next one in the list.<sup>66</sup>

When successful, true cold reading can follow a tree-like path, from broad trunk to branch to twig as the implicit choices made nonverbally by the client become more particular, resulting in end points that give very specific information indeed; and the client will tend to remember only this end point, not the stages that led to it. Earle<sup>67</sup> illustrates the process by using Barnum statements as his starting point but goes on to provide alternative elaborations according to the feedback he receives. Greasley uses the term “post affirmative boosting” to describe the elaboration of statements that receive a positive reaction, which he illustrates with the following example:

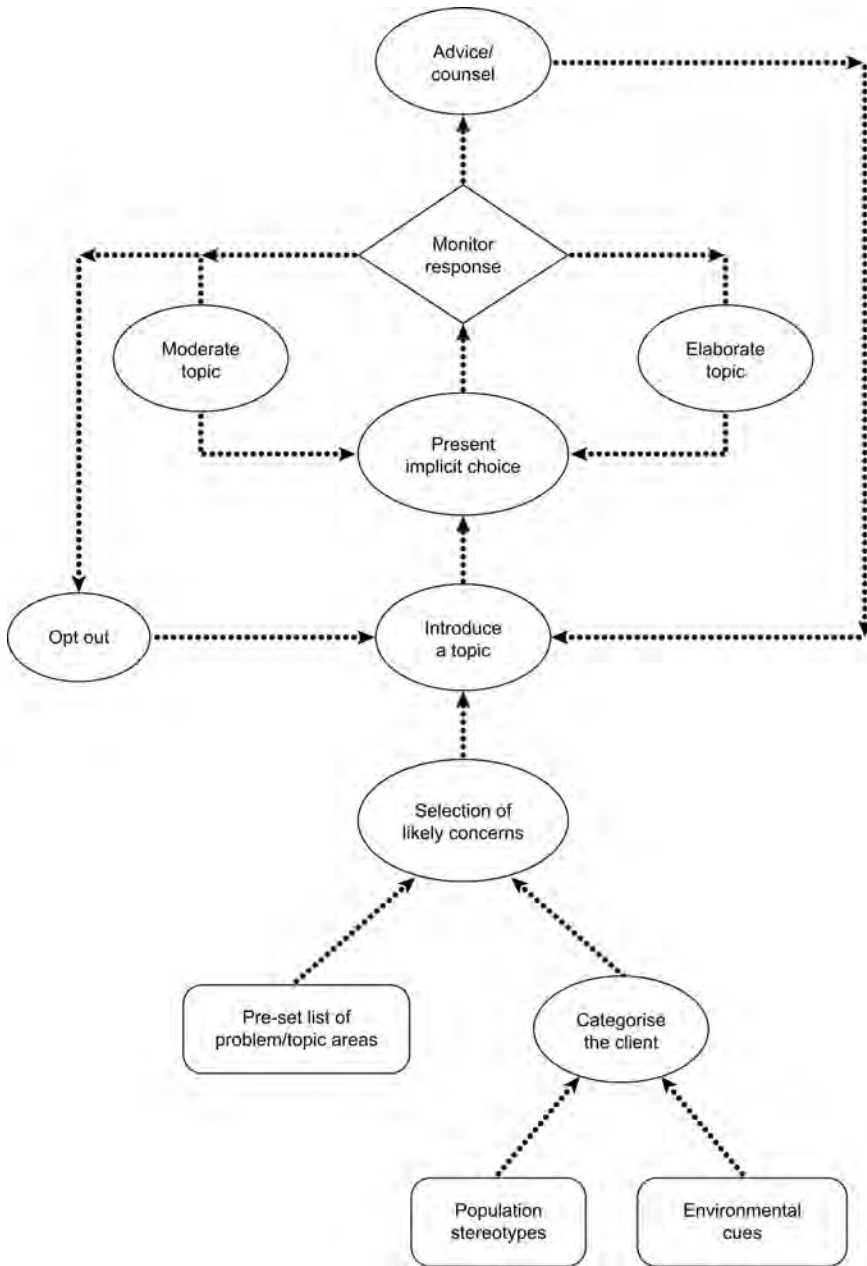
Medium: *I think he would have been a bit hesitant about [spiritualism], wouldn't he?*

Mother: *Yes.*

Medium: *He'd have thought it was a load of rubbish wouldn't he?*

Mother: *Yes he does.*

Figure 11.2 Flowchart to illustrate the process of cold reading



In our study with Anderson, different feedback in two of the readings turned a “holiday” into “just a day out with friends” after negative feedback, but a trip “outside Europe . . . India or Egypt . . . don’t be surprised if you end up galloping around the pyramids on a camel!” when the client expressed great interest in the topic.

The decision as to how to proceed depends on an ability to “read” the client’s responses to what is being said, exploiting the social conventions that exist for managing a dyadic communication. In normal conversation, the speaker looks intermittently at the listener, especially toward the end of utterances, to determine whether the listener is still interested in what is being said, and to gauge whether the listener wishes to take a turn as speaker.<sup>68</sup> The listener reacts to this cue by producing behaviors that indicate essentially whether she is happy for the speaker to continue, whether she wishes the speaker to change the topic of conversation, or whether she wishes to take a turn as speaker. These behaviors, known as back-channel signals,<sup>69</sup> can be expressed through a number of modalities. For example, interest is typically indicated verbally through vocalizations that include uh-huh’s and similar grunts, facially through smiles, and posturally through head nods, forward or sideways lean, and drawing the legs back.<sup>70</sup> Negative reactions can be signaled through frowning, lowering the head or turning the head away, as well as adopting characteristics of a closed posture, such as folded arms. Pseudopsychics can use these (generally unconscious) responses to gauge the appropriateness of what they are saying. In the pseudopsychic literature, commonly recommended measures indicating acceptance include eye blinks, leaning forward, dilated pupils, slight head nod, and blushing. There are fewer signs for negative reactions, possibly since absence of all of the previously mentioned signs would be taken as a negative reaction, but the few noted in the literature include slight frowning, folding arms, and looking away.<sup>71</sup>

Many of the cues are quite subtle (e.g., some readers have suggested synchronizing breathing patterns with the client so as to be sensitive to changes in that pattern), and their practical utility may be overstated. Jones<sup>72</sup> suggests the use of some props to more sensitively monitor clients’ reactions: a glass-topped table will allow one to observe foot movements and see the client’s hands in her lap; swivel chairs that have been treated with water to encourage slight rust will squeak as weight is redistributed; prohibiting audio recording of readings but allowing the client to jot down notes provides a ready-made feedback channel indicating where the hits were, even to the extent that one may be able to read what was written.

There are likely to be considerable differences between individuals in the way they react to true or false statements. This can be overcome by



taking measures of what constitutes a positive and/or negative response before the start of the reading-proper by using questions to which the answer is known or will be given without suspicion. Hobrin<sup>73</sup> uses an introductory patter with questions like “Have you had a reading before?” and “Did any of it come true?” which are designed to provide such behavioral benchmarks.

## WARM READING: USING VERBAL FEEDBACK

The essence of cold reading, then, is the use by the reader of nonverbal feedback from the sitter to help him decide between a number of already-known alternative routes for the conversation. This requires the client unwittingly to deliberate between implicit choices produced by the reader, in what might be termed “closed questioning” (e.g., “Do you have children?”). By contrast, in what we have called warm reading, the emphasis is on the client to provide answers to “open questions” to which the reader need not know the range of possible answers (e.g., “What are your children’s names?”).

Warm reading tends to be opportunistic, with the reader remaining alert to any personal details given up by the sitter at any time during the session from when she enters the room to when she leaves it. Some of this information will be freely volunteered by the client if the reader has successfully developed a rapport with her, through mirroring her body language, appearing friendly and sincere, and expressing a wish to help with her problems. The client can be encouraged to speak—or to continue speaking—by reproducing the back-channel behaviors typically adopted by the listener in conventional conversational dyads.

However, this haphazard method is unlikely to naturally produce all the information the reader wants to know. Other data will have to be teased out through “fishing.”

## FISHING<sup>74</sup>

Hyman<sup>75</sup> defines fishing as “a device for getting the subject to tell you about himself,” but as well as being rather vague, this definition tends to overlook the important characteristic of fishing—that the client doesn’t realize (or at least recall) that she is the supplier of the information.

Corinda, for example, describes it as “A process of verbal conjuring [ . . . in which] you have to make them tell you what they want to know—and yet they must not know they have told you.”<sup>76</sup> Like cold reading generally, fishing is better defined operationally, and we will consider three versions here. In its crudest form, fishing involves simply asking the client for required information. Lewis,<sup>77</sup> for example, offers the following patter:

“Do you drive a red or a silver car? No? Well I see someone close to you who has a car like that.” Also, “Is there someone around you who wears a uniform? No? You know there are different types of uniform? I think I’m seeing a nurse’s uniform. No? I sense someone bringing you news of some sort, the person bringing the news wears a uniform. You will get benefit from the news, and so will a family member.”

Where the client answers in the affirmative, the reader will be credited with a perspicacious hit. Where unsuccessful, the reader is able to moderate the prediction, for example, by widening its applicability or transforming its meaning altogether. In the preceding case, the acquaintance in uniform smoothly becomes only the uniformed mail carrier delivering a message from the acquaintance!

More subtly, fishing can involve using questions framed as if they were statements. Here the client is encouraged to elaborate openly on a topic (which of course she has been privately doing for all elements of the reading) as the reader feigns difficulty in quite comprehending the meaning of his message or is apparently looking for confirmation for a received message. Novella refers to these as “try-ons” and suggests remarks like “I’m getting the feeling that . . .” or “I want to say that . . .”<sup>78</sup>

Here we reproduce a conversation contrived by Couttie to illustrate how this is likely to work.<sup>79</sup>

psychic: *I’m getting something about a car crash?*

client: *Yes . . . my brother.*

psychic: *Because he keeps talking about his shoulder. He’s saying “It doesn’t half hurt.”*

client: *He had head injuries*

psychic: *That’s right, dear, his head and shoulder are hurting. It was your brother wasn’t it?*

client: *Yes, that’s right.*

psychic: *He's saying "I was a fool for not doing up my seat-belt." He didn't do up his seat-belt did he?*

client: *No he didn't, that's right.*

psychic: *No, we haven't met before have we? I couldn't know your brother was in a crash unless I was in contact with him, could I?*

The reader's initial statement is a fairly safe specific generalization, which by the way it is presented stimulates the client to give up information that would be extremely difficult to guess at (i.e., that the sitter has a brother who died in a motor vehicle crash). It is important that the reader gives the impression that whatever information the client volunteers is already known to him. In reality, such readings are much more chaotic than presented here, as the reader switches between topics and leaves much longer delays between fishing and feeding back the fish. This increases the likelihood of the client misrecalling that the reader brought up the topic of her brother without any prompting from her.

Another equally useful form of fishing is seeking information about one topic while ostensibly giving information about another. For example, the statement "I get the impression that someone close to you, probably someone in the family, was quite ill recently, does that sound right?" apparently relates to health. In fact, the client need only mention a spouse or partner, or son or daughter, for the reader to know that he can safely talk about relationship and family matters, and events that make sense only in relation to them. Ideally suited to this purpose are throwaway items like specific generalizations and specific trivia noted earlier. Once again, such information can be stored to be presented later in a modified form. To ensure that the client forgets where the details have come from, the reader employs some misdirection and changes the topic of conversation, usually with the help of predictions derived from stock spiel statements. After a suitable delay, the conversation can revert back to the original topic, and this "new" information can be divulged.

## HOT READING

Although most readers do not generally need to resort to it, information about the client can be gathered in advance of the reading using methods collectively termed "hot reading." Hyman describes one form of hot reading:

If the reading is through appointment, the reader can use directories and other sources to gather information. When the client enters the

consulting room, an assistant can examine the coat left behind (and often the purse as well) for papers, notes, labels, and other such cues about socioeconomic status, and so on.<sup>80</sup>

Where the reading is held in the client's own home, this advance scouting for information can be very calculated, for example:

At some point, get up and say that you want a [ . . . ] glass of water. Go into the kitchen and fill the glass. You are alone in the kitchen and you can stay there only a few seconds. But while you are there, find the calendar or notepad that is usually pinned up near the phone, the refrigerator or the back door. On it you will find a wealth of information about appointments, scheduled events involving your host or his family, peoples' names, phone numbers, etc. [ . . . ] if you can get to the medicine chest, look for prescription drugs. Pain killers, tranquilizers, sleeping pills, drugs used in geriatric cases, all tell you something about his life [ . . . ]

Remember that any means is considered fair by the psychic hustler. You are trying to piece together a picture of your host's life and you are using every means to achieve the desired end. Everything is a clue, even the number of toothbrushes in the bathroom. You are doing nothing more than a detective does when trying to construct a picture of a victim's life, but of course your goal is entirely different. The detective is out to catch the culprit, but your aim is to set up the mark.<sup>81</sup>

Lyons and Truzzi<sup>82</sup> illustrate how organized this can be when they list professional and "underground" sources that are often intended for the private detective market but can be exploited by pseudopsychics. These books include titles such as *How to Get Anything on Anybody* and outline methods for locating individuals and finding out about them.<sup>83</sup> Jones has devoted whole chapters to describing how information supplied by a prospective client in booking an appointment can give insight into their circumstances. For example, he lists 11 pieces of information that may be found on a check, should the client pay in advance.<sup>84</sup> When presented within the framework of the psychic reading, information derived from these sources can be accurate and specific enough to be difficult for the client to account for except in terms of the reader's claimed psychic ability.

Researching one's clients in advance of a reading has become much easier with the wide availability of the Internet. For example, Stollznow

suggests that Rebecca Rosen might have resorted to Googling clients or consulting Facebook photographs and other online sources of biographical details to gather information about them.<sup>85</sup> With platform or studio demonstrations of mediumship, there may be an opportunity to gather information from prospective clients through confederates that can be woven into subsequent readings. Nickell claims that John Edward may have used hot reading in this fashion.<sup>86</sup>

Keene also describes how the network of pseudopsychics themselves can be used as an information-sharing resource by exchanging files containing personal details of regular sitters. Among themselves, mediums often refer to such files on sitters as their “poems” or “poetry,” to be meditated upon immediately prior to a sitting.<sup>87</sup> These poems often adopt a standard format:

A cross beside a name means the individual is dead; a circle, that he’s alive. A heart next to the name indicates someone with whom the sitter was in love. “G.G.” next to “Blue Star” would mean that a medium had assigned the sitter a girl spirit-guide named Blue Star.

Strictly speaking, hot reading should not be included under the banner of cold reading as on occasion it has been,<sup>88</sup> since it does not entail the reader coming into the reading situation “cold” (i.e., knowing nothing about the client in advance). However, when used, the information gained in this way is not baldly given up but is interwoven with information derived from the other strategies to give a broader reading, and so arguably should be included in any model dealing with the interaction of different cold reading strategies.

## WHY SHOULD SUCH READINGS BE SUCCESSFUL?

Although the cold reading may be capable of generating quite accurate information, due in part to the client’s effort to find meaning and her tendency to forget what is not true and to embellish what is, it can be argued that this only partly explains the success of the psychic reading. Hyman notes that although it is unlikely that the pseudopsychic reading will generate information that is truly new to the client, it may still have utility for her, as “she may have a new insight into the conflicts and problems that precipitated the consultation. And new alternatives for coping with the situation may have been opened up.”<sup>89</sup> Dean has commented that “For every Western astrologer who concentrates on prediction there are probably another two who concentrate on psychology and counselling.”<sup>90</sup>

There may still be a stigma attached to visiting a mental health worker or counselor, particularly among the working classes. According to Ruthchild,<sup>91</sup> visiting a psychic may provide a socially acceptable alternative forum for talking through one's problems and concerns. Pseudopsychics are generally aware of their role as counselors and often echo the Hippocratic admonition to "first do no harm," avoiding offering independent advice but preferring instead to provide nonjudgmental support for the decision already reached by the client. One of Gresham's cold readers explained:

What these poor people need is self-confidence and belief in themselves. If I can give them that, then the dollar or two they pay me is the greatest bargain they've ever had. And besides, what most of them need is just a little advice from somebody who's been around. You'd be surprised some of the things the women tell me that they'd never tell their family doctor. And oftentimes I'm able to set them straight, just by letting them know that other people have the same problems and that they're not liable to become social outcasts just by having these problems.

Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that readers can be quite skilled in the art of counseling. Lester<sup>92</sup> has noted a number of commonalities between the psychic reading and other more orthodox forms of therapy, which left him impressed with the readers' competence at the counseling process. Sechrest and Bryan<sup>93</sup> found the advice offered by astrologers to be realistic, and concluded that such consultations were unlikely to be damaging and probably represented a great bargain. Thurstone and Reed surprisingly found that psychic readings given at a distance by anonymous psychics were rated by paying clients as a more valuable source of counseling than more orthodox psychological techniques.<sup>94</sup> This suggests that a reader may be able to provide a valuable service even if his claim concerning the source of his information is untrue. There is great scope both to further consider the interpersonal expertise that the reader may possess, which may contribute to any therapeutic effects, and to determine what criteria the client applies when evaluating the reading. This promises to be a fruitful area for future research.

## NOTES

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4. Karen Stollznow, "Running Hot and Cold: ‘Psychic Medium’ Rebecca Rosen," *Skeptical Inquirer* (2011). Online: [http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/show/running\\_hot\\_and\\_cold\\_psychic\\_medium\\_rebecca\\_rosen/](http://www.csicop.org/specialarticles/show/running_hot_and_cold_psychic_medium_rebecca_rosen/). Accessed September 5, 2012.

5. See Joe Nickell, "John Edward: Hustling the Bereaved," *Skeptical Inquirer* 25, no. 6 (2001): 19–22; Joe Nickell, "John Edward: Spirit Huckster," *Skeptical Inquirer* 34, no. 2 (2010): 19–22.

6. James Underdown, "They See Dead People—Or Do They? An Investigation of Television Mediums," *Skeptical Inquirer* 27, no. 5 (2003): 41–44.

7. P. Greasley, "Management of Positive and Negative Responses in a Spiritualist Medium Consultation," *Skeptical Inquirer* 24, no. 5 (2000): 45–49.

8. Notable exceptions are Ray Hyman, "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers That You Know All about Them," *Skeptical Enquirer* 1 (1977): 18–37; I. Rowland, *The Full Facts Book of Cold Reading*, 3rd ed. (London: Ian Rowland Ltd., 2002). See also Chris A. Roe, "Cold Reading Strategies," *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 34th Annual Convention*, (1991): 470–80. A useful overview is also given by S. Schouten, "Applied Parapsychology Studies of Psychics and Healers," *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 7 (1993): 375–401.

9. W. L. Gresham, *Monster Midway: An Uninhibited Look at the Glittering World of the Carny* (New York: Rinehart and Company, 1953), Chapter 7, "The Romany Trade."

10. B. Whaley, *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Magic* (Oakland, CA: Jeff Busby Magic Inc., 1989), 173.

11. Hyman, "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers," 20.

12. From Hyman, "The Psychic Reading," 428, in T. A. Sebeok and R. Rosenthal, eds., *The Clever Hans Phenomenon* (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1981): 169–81.

13. See, for example, D. L. Dutton, "The Cold Reading Technique," *Experientia* 44, no. 4 (1988): 326–31.

14. For example, see Couttie, *Forbidden Knowledge: The Paranormal Paradox* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 1988); C. Hunter, "Cold Reading: Confessions of a ‘Psychic,’" (2007). Online: <http://www.scienceandreason.ca/skepticism/cold-reading-confessions-of-a-psychic/>. Accessed September 5, 2012.

15. See, for example, James Randi, "Cold Reading Revisited," in K. Frazier, ed., *Paranormal Borderlands of Science* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1981).

16. See, for example, Whaley, *Encyclopedic Dictionary*.
17. Hyman, "The Psychic Reading."
18. A pseudopsychic can be defined here as a person who produces information or effects that are claimed to be the result of special psychic abilities but that are in fact generated through normal means.
19. Hobrin, *Money-Making Cold Reading* (Sheffield, UK: Magick Enterprises, 1990); M. Ruthchild, *Cashing in on the Psychic* (Pomeroy, OH: Lee Jacobs Productions, 1978); B. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers: Advanced Professional Pseudo-Psychic Techniques* (Bakersfield, CA: Jeff Busby Magic Inc., 1989).
20. We would like to thank the late Professor Robert Morris and Professor Richard Wiseman for their assistance in gaining access to these materials.
21. A pseudonym has been used to protect the pseudopsychic's identity.
22. The terms "sitter" and "client" are used interchangeably here to refer to an individual who has solicited a reading from a professional psychic. In this chapter, we have adopted the convention usually found in the pseudopsychic literature, in which the reader is given as male and the sitter female. This has been done merely for ease of description and need not reflect any sex biases in mediumship, although the vast majority of pseudopsychic books have been written by men, and Jones (*King of the Cold Readers*, 16) claims that eight out of 10 readings are for women.
23. Rowland, *The Full Facts Book*, refers to this as "The Set Up," and describes eight strategies that can be used in combination to encourage the client to actively cooperate.
24. L. Earle, *The Classic Cold Reading (Companion Audio Tape)* (United States: Binary Star Publications, 1990).
25. Hyman, "The Psychic Reading," 430.
26. L. Earle, *The Classic Cold Reading* (United States: Binary Star Publications, 1990).
27. M. Lewis, *Confessions of a Cold Reader* [Audiotape] (Martin Breese Magicassettes, 1991).
28. Underdown, "They See Dead People."
29. See, for example, Hyman, "The Psychic Reading."
30. Couttie, *Forbidden Knowledge*.
31. See, for example, C. R. Snyder and H. L. Fromkin, *Uniqueness: The Pursuit of Human Difference* (New York: Plenum Press, 1980).
32. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers*, 10.
33. G. Sheehy, *Passages: Predictable Crises of Adult Life* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1976). This text is cited by, for example, Rowland, *The Full Facts Book*, and M. Ruthchild, *Psychotechnics: A Scientific Approach to the Psychic* (Pomeroy, OH: Lee Jacobs Productions, 1981).
34. Wiseman and O'Keeffe, "A Critique of Schwartz."
35. H. Dewey and T. K. Saville, *Red Hot Cold Readings* (Annapolis, MD: Herb Dewey, 1984).



36. Susan Blackmore, "Probability Misjudgement and Belief in the Paranormal: A Newspaper Survey," *British Journal of Psychology* 88 (1997): 683–89.

37. R. Webster, *The Mail Order Psychic* (Auckland, New Zealand: Brookfield Press, 1990).

38. R. Martin, *The Tarot Reader's Notebook* (Albuquerque, NM: Flora and Company, 1990).

39. Stollznaw, "Running Hot and Cold."

40. See, for example, A. Furnham and S. Schofield, "Accepting Personality Test Feedback: A Review of the Barnum Effect," *Current Psychological Research and Reviews* 6 (1987): 162–78; G. Tyson, "People Who Consult Astrologers: A Profile," *Personality and Individual Differences* 13 (1982): 119–26.

41. D. H. Dickson and I. E. Kelly, "The 'Barnum Effect' in Personality Assessment: A Review of the Literature," *Psychological Reports* 57 (1985): 367–82.

42. B. R. Forer, "The Fallacy of Personal Validation: A Classroom Demonstration of Gullibility," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 44 (1949): 118–23.

43. See, for example, C. Layne and G. Ally, "How and Why People Accept Personality Feedback," *Journal of Personality Assessment* 44 (1980): 541–46; Tyson, "People Who Consult Astrologers."

44. cf. P. E. Meehl, "Wanted: A Good Cookbook," *American Psychologist* 11 (1956): 262–72. Less kindly, however, the choice of term may be a reference to Barnum's claim that "There's a sucker born every minute." See C. C. French, M. Fowler, K. McCarthy, and D. Peers, "Belief in Astrology: A Test of the Barnum Effect," *Skeptical Inquirer* 15 (1991): 166–76.

45. C. A. Roe, "Pseudopsychics and the Barnum Effect," *European Journal of Parapsychology* 11 (1995): 76–91.

46. Earle, *The Classic Cold Reading*.

47. For reviews, see Dickson and Kelly, "The 'Barnum Effect' in Personality Assessment"; Furnham and Schofield, "Accepting Personality Test Feedback."

48. Dutton, "The Cold Reading Technique," 327–28.

49. Hyman, "The Psychic Reading," 433. A similar view is espoused by R. Hester and W. Hudson, *Psychic Character Analysis: The Technique of Cold Reading* (Baltimore: Magic Media Ltd., 1977), 6. Rowland, *The Full Facts Book*, 44, claims "the fact that clients will remember what was said inaccurately is well known."

50. See C. A. Roe, "Subjects' Evaluations of a Tarot Reading," *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 37th Annual Convention* (1994): 323–34.

51. See, for example, T. Corinda, *13 Steps to Mentalism*, 2nd ed. (Bideford, UK: Supreme Magic Co. Ltd., 1984); Hyman, "Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers."

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54. Randi, "Cold Reading Revisited," 107.

55. Hester and Hudson, *Psychic Character Analysis*, 6.

56. J. G. Delaney and H. D. Woodyard, "Effects of Reading an Astrological Description on Responding to a Personality Inventory," *Psychological Reports* 24 (1974): 1214.

57. Couttie, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 137.

58. Hester and Hudson, *Psychic Character Analysis*.

59. Hobrinn, *Money-Making Cold Reading*, 12.

60. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers*, 22.

61. D. Lester, "Astrologers and Psychics as Therapists," *American Journal of Psychotherapy* 36 (1982): 56–66; D. G. Richards, "Exploring the Dyadic Counseling Interaction," *Proceedings of Presented Papers: The Parapsychological Association 33rd Annual Convention* (1990): 273–88.

62. Corinda, *13 Steps to Mentalism*.

63. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers*, 23.

64. Talk given to the National Capital Area Skeptics on March 1, 2003, at the University of Maryland–College Park. Reported in H. E. Hester-Ossa, "The Psychology of 'Psychic' Readings Theory: Practice and Showbiz of Talking to the Dead," *Skeptical Eye* 15, no. 1 (2003): 13–14.

65. Hyman, "The Psychic Reading." See also Sebeok and Rosenthal, *The Clever Hans Phenomenon*; O. Pfungst, *Clever Hans: A Contribution to Experimental, Animal and Human Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1911).

66. Rowland, *The Full Facts Book*, refers to this as "forking."

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71. See, for example, Ruthchild, *Psychotechnics*.

72. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers*.
73. Hobrin, *Money-Making Cold Reading*.
74. Also (more commonly) known as “pumping”; Whaley, *Encyclopedic Dictionary*.
75. Hyman, “Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers.”
76. Corinda, *13 Steps to Mentalism*, 341.
77. Lewis, *Confessions of a Cold Reader*.
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79. Couttie, *Forbidden Knowledge*, 136.
80. Hyman, “Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers,” 405.
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84. Jones, *King of the Cold Readers*, 54–56.
85. Stollznaw, “Running Hot and Cold.”
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88. See, for example, Hyman, “Cold Reading: How to Convince Strangers”; Randi, “Cold Reading Revisited.”
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90. G. A. Dean, “Does Astrology Need to Be True? Part 1: A Look at the Real Thing,” *Skeptical Inquirer* 11 (1986/7): 166–184, 168.
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