



# Manifesting Spirits: Paranormal Investigation and the Narrative Development of a Haunting

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## **Abstract**

Using a paranormal investigation of a reportedly haunted hotel as a model, I propose a five-phase narrative development process that integrates media representations of ghosts, place-based tales of hauntings, and accounts that emerge through processes of interactive interpretation. By attending to both preexisting and emergent supernatural stories, the model illustrates how idiocultures function as mediating structures between established narratives and accounts that result from shared experiences. The narrative account of a haunting is thus a product of interpretive processes in which established ghost stories serve as resources for the collective co-construction of an account that both resonates with external expectations and supports idiocultural authority structures. Ultimately, idiocultural factors have greater influence upon the final narrative than folklore, media, or place-based supernatural tales.

## **Keywords**

narrative, ethnography, paranormal, supernatural, idioculture

This article examines paranormal investigators' interpretive co-construction of a narrative that explains what is "really" going on in a purportedly haunted

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location. Using a particularly active paranormal investigation as a model, I present a five-phase narrative development process that explains how preexisting cultural representations, situational factors, and the particulars of a group's idioculture all influence the final narrative account of a haunting. My analysis reveals how paranormal investigators make sense of their experiences by drawing upon cultural knowledge, place-based meanings, and personal experiences. In so doing, it illuminates more general processes by which small groups interactively construct narrative accounts in ways that are both congruent with external standards of believability and supportive of internal power relations. The proposed model highlights the importance of idiocultures (Fine 1979) as intermediary structures that affect how macro-level social and cultural factors influence the micro-level interpretive processes through which a narrative account is developed.

## **Literature Review**

According to Gubrium and Holstein (2009, 2), storytelling is a "socially situated practice" (2) in which narratives are both constructed and constructive. Narratives are constructed in the sense that either individually or in collaboration with others, stories "are assembled to meet situated interpretive demands" and are constructive in that narration is "a way of fashioning the semblance of meaning and order for experience" (Gubrium and Holstein 1998, 166). As a socially situated practice, storytelling involves "narrative work" that takes place in particular "narrative environments." Narrative work is "the interactional activity through which narratives are constructed, communicated, and sustained or reconfigured." It involves collaborative processes of story production and negotiation through which a meaningful account is crafted. Narrative environments are the "contexts within which the work of story construction and storytelling gets done" (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, xvii). These contexts include the spaces in which narratives are produced as well as the organizational and cultural conditions in which narration takes place.

Narratives also incorporate preexisting cultural representations, such as those found in folklore and media. Ghost lore, for example, includes many themes that influence public expectations of what a "real" haunting should look like (Bennett 1999). In folkloric tales, hauntings frequently result from improper burial, traumatic or sudden death, unfinished business, revenge, and attachment to material objects, among other causes (Davies 2007; Finucane 1996). These tales also describe a set of sensory cues—such as the smell of perfume or the sound of footsteps—that indicate the presence of a spirit (Davies 2007). With a recent "spectral turn" (Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007, 206) in popular culture, these representations are readily

available to the public, especially in the form of reality-style paranormal investigation shows. These shows emotionally invest viewers in the hunt for ghosts (Koven 2007) and model for viewers the best methods to use when searching for spirits (Molle and Bader 2013). In short, they normalize beliefs both in the existence of ghosts and the ability to communicate with these spiritual beings. The importance of these shows is indicated by the fact that most of the investigators I interviewed reported that shows like *Ghost Hunters* and *Ghost Adventures* were the driving force behind their desire to participate in paranormal investigation.

Reality-style paranormal investigation shows also perpetuate folkloric tropes in which ghosts are more likely to haunt certain types of places. Sites of war, slavery, untimely death, criminal activities, or burial are all commonly featured in such stories. Likewise, liminal spaces—such as attics, basements, stairways, and doorways—also frequently feature on these shows. Visitors who are familiar with these representations arrive at these locations with expectations that predispose them to interpret sensory experiences in such locations as evidence of a haunting. As Bell (1997, 831) says, we “give ghosts to places” by relying upon existing supernatural narratives as interpretive resources when attempting to make sense of our personal experiences in purportedly haunted locations. In this way, the meaning of a narrative environment is preconstructed for paranormal investigators, especially if the location they intend to investigate has been featured on one or more paranormal television shows.

My research integrates these insights about the importance of folklore, media representations, and place-based narratives with microsociological work on idiocultures. Fine (1979, 734) defines an idioculture as “a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction.” Fine describes idioculture as a “mediating element” (1979, 737) between external conditions and the decision-making processes of group members. Idioculture is formed through a shared history among group members and is rooted in a common set of goals and values. Through negotiation, members develop a “consensual meaning system” (Fine 1979, 744) that guides their actions and interpretations, usually resulting in behaviors that are congruent with idiocultural beliefs and customs. This negotiation is not entirely democratic because idiocultures are structured by status hierarchies and “knowledge regimes” (Fine 2010, 362) that influence which interpretations are perceived as legitimate. Accounts that reinforce idiocultural status systems and knowledge regimes are highly likely to be accepted as fact by group members, while those that deviate from or challenge either of these idiocultural elements will most likely be perceived as illegitimate.

In the context of paranormal investigation teams, two knowledge regimes are at the crux of the narrative sense-making process: the “sensitive” and “scientific” approaches.<sup>1</sup> Sensitive approaches rely upon assertions of knowledge attained supernaturally by, for example, telepathically communicating with the spirit of a deceased individual. Investigators who claim to be psychic often encourage other group members to place faith in their intuitive ability to gather factual information directly from the spirit(s) present in a location, rather than relying upon data collected technologically (Ironside 2016). Wooffitt (2001) explains that psychics also often incorporate direct reported speech—statements allegedly quoted from the spirit with whom they are communicating. The use of reported speech increases the perceived credibility of statements by presenting information as though it is coming directly from someone with authoritative knowledge (Riessman 2008; Sawin 1992). Moreover, by claiming only *they* have the ability to communicate with the spirits, psychics create an “epistemic asymmetry” that gives them control over the presentation of supernatural “facts” (Wooffitt et al. 2013).

In contrast, scientific truth claims are based on empirical data that are presented as unbiased, objective evidence. As research in the sociology of knowledge shows, the appearance of scientific objectivity is accomplished using three strategies: (1) exclusion or invalidation of data that diverges from commonly accepted theories; (2) reordering of nonlinear scientific discovery processes into a logical progression; and (3) using an impersonal writing style that presents data as unbiased fact (Gilbert and Mulkey 1984; Latour and Woolgar [1979] 1986; Woolgar 1975). Similarly, paranormal investigators create the appearance of scientific credibility first through extensive use of complex technological tools to collect empirical data during investigations (Molle and Bader 2013). Second, they use “scientific” (Hill 2010) language about “energy,” “fields,” “waves,” and other such terminology to make supernatural claims sound more scientific. Third, scientific investigators commonly express skepticism toward the majority of supernatural claims and attempt to “debunk” (find natural explanations for) such claims if possible. These efforts position the investigators as rational people who seek logical explanations before concluding that a location is haunted. Finally, scientific teams that present the results of their investigations in a public forum such as a website frame paranormal investigation as a scientific endeavor by using impersonal, technically precise language that mimics the style of scientific reports.

Through sensitive and scientific truth claims, paranormal investigators construct “factual accounts” that define a location as haunted or not. As Smith explains, a factual account “is not just a record of events as they happened, but of events as they were seen as relevant to reaching a decision about the character of those events” (1978, 24). Factuality is also accomplished through

the “cutting out” of certain details so that one cohesive account may be constructed. These accounts are frequently presented as narratives, and although they appear to be objective reports of fact they are products of social interaction and symbolic interpretation. The perceived factuality of a given narrative is influenced by the authority of the narrator, which in turn is based on the narrator’s social status or claim to first-hand knowledge of the “facts” being reported (Fine 1979, 2010; Smith 1978). As with other narrative genres, stories of ghostly encounters are “highly situated, contingent, and emergent within a context of interpretation over time” (Waskul and Waskul 2016, 40). To illustrate the interactive coconstruction of a factual account of a paranormal investigation, I present a model of narrative development that is grounded in the experiences of one particularly active investigation. This model elucidates how cultural representations, place-based stories, and idiocultural dynamics shape the form and content of a narrative account of a haunting.

## Methods

### *Participants and Setting*

In the summer of 2013, I joined Upper Midwest Paranormal (UMP)<sup>2</sup> for the investigation that is the focus of this article. The demographics of the team reflect patterns present in the paranormal investigation community as a whole: mostly white and middle-class, with a roughly even gender split among team members and men more frequently in leadership roles. UMP is led by Matthew, a thirty-one-year-old white male who manages a scientific laboratory. Second in command is Chad, a thirty-six-year-old white male who works for a printing company. Samantha, a forty-two-year-old white female who works in a law office, and Heidi, a thirty-five-year-old white female hairstylist, round out the core members of UMP who participated in the investigation. Joining UMP for this investigation was Gabriel, a self-employed forty-seven year-old Hispanic male. Gabriel served under Matthew as a member of UMP before founding his own paranormal investigation team after moving to the East Coast several years earlier. He brought along one of his team members, a twenty-seven-year-old white male named Todd.

UMP strictly adheres to a scientific approach, which dictates that investigators collect empirical data and attempt to find naturalistic explanations before jumping to supernatural conclusions. The team relies upon a great deal of technology, including digital audio and video recorders and an array of gadgets that measure electromagnetic frequencies, vibration, barometric pressure, and many other environmental conditions. UMP disregards “data” acquired through alleged psychic abilities or tools of divination such as

dowsing rods, crystals, pendulums, and Ouija boards. This knowledge regime was established by team leader Matthew, who viewed paranormal investigation as an extension of his postgraduate training in biology. The skeptical, scientific approach introduced by Matthew and embraced by the other members of UMP informed all aspects of the team's investigations, including their visit to the Highwayman Inn.<sup>3</sup>

The Highwayman is a functioning hotel in the southern United States that has been featured on several reality-style paranormal television shows. In previous iterations, the Inn served as an illegal gambling house and brothel. Numerous deaths reportedly occurred on the property, including one murder in the late nineteenth century in which a hotel caretaker killed his daughter in the Inn's basement-level coal storage room. Before the father was executed for the crime, he allegedly declared he would haunt the Highwayman forever. Paranormal investigators and employees of the Highwayman claim to see apparitions of the father and the murdered girl in the basement. Although the doorway to the coal storage room is now boarded up, there are also reports of cries for help and strange beams of light emanating from behind the door. This has led some—including the hosts of paranormal television shows—to claim that the doorway is in fact a gateway to hell. Such claims have, in turn, spawned rumors that the basement was used for satanic rituals and animal sacrifices. These reports of satanic activity are unsubstantiated but are nonetheless part of the ghost lore that UMP reviewed prior to the investigation.

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The data presented here are part of ongoing research in which I have interviewed forty-eight paranormal investigators, observed five paranormal conferences, and participated in twenty paranormal investigations with multiple teams. The investigations in which I participated started late at night and continued into the early morning hours, and averaged approximately six hours from setup to completion. As an "active member-researcher" (Adler and Adler 1987), I participated in the same activities as actual paranormal investigators. When possible, I joined a team for a pre-investigation meeting in which they reviewed reports of supernatural activity at a location and developed an investigation strategy. Once at each location, I set up my own audio and video equipment, placed "trigger objects" (objects that ghosts might want to physically manipulate), and participated in "EVP sessions" (in which investigators asked questions and hoped to capture a ghost's responses on audio recording devices—EVP stands for "electronic voice phenomenon"). After each investigation, I reviewed audio and video recordings and provided clips of any seemingly anomalous sounds or images to the team for

their review. By participating in the tedious process of data review, I built rapport with team members, which enabled more naturalistic observation of investigations and facilitated interview requests.

With the permission of investigators, I audio recorded each investigation in which I participated. Teams encouraged investigators to wear a “control recorder” at all times during investigations as a means of cross-checking the origin of unusual sounds captured on other equipment. Using this technique, a growling sound that may have seemed demonic when captured on a stationary audio or video recorder could be debunked as a stomach noise by cross-referencing investigators’ control recorders. This practice also afforded me the luxury of collecting complete audio records of all twenty investigations in which I participated. Teams were aware that I was collecting these recorders for later transcription and consented to such use. In accordance with Gubrium and Holstein’s (2009, 35) emphasis on “in vivo illustrations of narrative practice,” I produced verbatim transcripts of each investigation and supplemented each with fieldnotes describing the physical location as well as the nonverbal actions of people present during the investigation. These “field transcripts,” as I call them, averaged nearly one hundred pages in length. The Highwayman Inn investigation resulted in an eighty-one-page transcript documenting five and a half hours of audio.

Early in my fieldwork, I became attuned to the “narrative competitions” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) that occurred when paranormal investigators disagreed over the interpretation of an objective physical event, such as a cold breeze or a knocking sound. To better understand these processes, I adopted a narrative ethnography approach. Narrative ethnography “focuses on the everyday narrative activity that unfolds within social interaction” (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, 24). Like Gubrium and Holstein (2009), I treated stories as “continuously unfolding accounts” (228) that are constructed in the context of an “interactional terrain” (30)—the dialogic processes of meaning making—as well as a “situational terrain” (32)—the physical setting and social conditions in which narratives are being constructed. To sensitize myself to the processes of narrative emergence and contestation, I read each field transcript multiple times, looking for instances where investigators tried to determine the cause of seemingly anomalous events. As I did so, I also became more aware of how these sense making interactions were influenced by preexisting cultural representations of hauntings, stories about the location being investigated, and power inequalities between potential narrators.

I chose to focus on the Highwayman Inn investigation because the dramatic events that occurred that night stimulated multiple waves of narrative sense making. Moreover, as a location that had been featured on paranormal television shows, the Highwayman Inn allowed me to examine how media

representations influenced investigators' interpretations. Moreover, the struggle to define what "really" happened at the Highwayman illustrated the important role played by a team's idioculture in the establishment of one narrative account as the legitimated "true" story of the night's events. To analyze the interactive production and performance of narratives during and after the Highwayman Inn investigation, I used Riessman's (2008) dialogic analysis framework. This analytic approach enabled a holistic examination of the ways in which preexisting cultural representations of ghosts and hauntings, place-based stories about tragedies that occurred at the Highwayman itself, and in situ accounts intertwined to create one cohesive narrative of UMP's investigation.

## The Narrative Development of a Haunting

The collaborative development of a narrative account of the investigation of the Highwayman Inn took place in five phases: priming, emergence, contestation, coalescence, and crystallization. During each phase, cultural representations of ghosts and hauntings, place-based tales of crime and tragedy, personal experiences, and idiocultural power dynamics shaped the developing narrative.

### *Narrative Priming: Media Representations and the Walk-Through*

*Narrative priming* occurs prior to the events that will form the basis for a group's story. In this phase, individuals consume preexisting stories that shape their expectations and interpretations. For paranormal investigators, folkloric and media-based representations of ghosts and hauntings establish a general set of expectations for what a "real" haunting looks like. Place-based narratives, such as historical records and "deathlore" (Baker and Bader 2014) about a site, add important details about the nature of the alleged haunting of each specific property. Together, such tales prime investigators to expect particular types of supernatural activity to occur and therefore steer interpretations of subsequent events.

According to its portrayal on *Dark Forces*,<sup>4</sup> a reality-style paranormal investigation show, the Highwayman Inn is one of the most haunted sites in the United States.<sup>5</sup> The show describes the Highwayman as a "place that houses pure evil" and claims the Inn is associated with "organized crime, multiple murders, as well as satanic cult activity."<sup>6</sup> Much of the dramatized investigation of the location focuses on the story of the murdered child and her evil father. The hosts of *Dark Forces* repeat the claim that the boarded-up doorway in the

basement is actually a “portal to hell,” and allege that “devil worshippers” used the basement for satanic rituals. One host even claims that evil spirits inhabit his body and make him want to kill another cast member who is attempting to drive away demonic entities. By focusing on the murder of a child and emphasizing that it occurred in the basement of the Inn, *Dark Forces* reinforces cultural narratives that liminal spaces and sites associated with violent death or occult activity are more likely to be haunted (Davies 2007; Finucane 1996; Goldstein, Grider, and Thomas 2007; Waskul and Waskul 2016).

When I join the members of UMP for a preinvestigation meeting, their conversation centers on the claims about the Highwayman presented on *Dark Forces*. Like the paranormal investigators studied by Baker and Bader (2014), Matthew begins by recounting the deathlore of the location:

It was a hotel in the 1800s. There was a little girl who was murdered by her father in 1886. It's *believed* that she was beaten to death in the coal storage room in the basement. This is an actual documented murder. . . . *Supposedly* this girl is supposed to be wandering around the Highwayman Inn. [emphasis in original]

Matthew's use of the word “documented” indicates that he believes the veracity of the murder story itself, though his emphasis on the words “believed” and “supposedly” reveal lingering doubts about the claims presented on *Dark Forces*. This display of skepticism toward supernatural claims made on paranormal television shows is in keeping with the team's knowledge regime, which emphasizes rationality and skepticism.

A few minutes later, Matthew reasserts this skepticism when Samantha casually refers to the boarded-up coal storage room doorway as a “hell portal,” using the language with which it was described on *Dark Forces*. Trying to distance his team from quasi-religious interpretations presented by television hosts, Matthew questions the doorway's significance:

*Matthew:* They [the hosts] call it a doorway, but I wonder if it was just a fricken' hole in the wall that led to nothing.

*[Author]:* Well, it was for all of the coal, wasn't it?

*Samantha:* Yeah, that sounds right.

*Chad:* [to Samantha] Just like your Christmas stocking? [team laughs]<sup>7</sup>

In conjunction with Matthew's dismissal, Chad's joke at Samantha's expense serves two purposes: it reinforces Matthew's interpretation and therefore his status as the most credible narrator on the team, and indicates that uncritical acceptance of supernatural explanations—especially those that appear on

television—violates the team’s scientific knowledge regime. In response, Samantha concedes that *Dark Forces*’ claims about the doorway are probably “crap,” thereby signaling her loyalty both to the team’s knowledge regime and status hierarchy, in which Matthew is dominant. These statements during the preinvestigation meeting show that media representations may have primed the members of UMP to expect certain kinds of supernatural activity but these expectations were tempered by idiocultural factors, including the team’s knowledge regime and status hierarchy.

Nine days later on a hot July evening, the six investigators and I arrive at the Highwayman Inn. We are greeted outside by Jessi, a white woman in her midfifties who coordinates paranormal investigations of the property and claims to have psychic abilities, including the ability to communicate with the ghosts in the building. As Jessi escorts us through the building, she points out “hot spots” where paranormal activity allegedly occurs and tells colorful stories about the spirits that reportedly haunt these spaces. These include mobsters named “Butch” and “Blackie” who were shot in the bar area, a prostitute named “Miss Lulu” who died in a fire near the kitchen, a dancer named “Betsy” who committed suicide in the ballroom, and story of the hotel caretaker and his ill-fated daughter who died in the basement. Like the claims made on *Dark Forces*, Jessi’s stories reinforce the folkloric theme that violent and untimely deaths lead to hauntings. Furthermore, by linking the hauntings to distinct areas, Jessi “emplaced” (Gieryn 2000) spirits within the Highwayman and grounded her accounts in history and lore of the location itself. Along with the claims made on *Dark Forces*, Jessi’s stories identified focal points for UMP’s investigation and set expectations for the types of ghostly encounters investigators may experience.

### *Narrative Emergence and Contestation: The Investigation*

*Narrative emergence* begins when people overlay an unexpected experience with stories that attempt to answer the open-ended question, “What happened?” This phase of narrative development occurs in the brief period between the experience itself and the emergence of counternarratives that challenge initial explanations. As Gubrium and Holstein (2009, 60) note, “the work of meaning making is foregrounded in liminal circumstances” because multiple narratives emerge in short succession after such an event. During this time, participants in the sense-making process are afforded some “interpretive flexibility” (Pinch and Bijker 1984) as they draw upon multiple types and sources of evidence to overlay their experiences with meaning. In the phase of *narrative contestation*, people who experience, witness, or even hear accounts of unexpected events offer competing stories that offer distinct

explanations for what happened and why. Those with higher status exert their authority by proposing or endorsing narratives that represent their viewpoints. They challenge storylines that deviate from the group's knowledge regime, especially if these narratives are proposed by lower status members. During narrative contestation, multiple competing narratives coexist as possible explanations for what "really" happened. Because this process occurs so rapidly after the emergence of an initial account, I have combined the two distinct phases of narrative development into a single section for analysis.

After UMP and I finish setting up equipment and placing trigger objects on the main floor of the Highwayman Inn, we grab more equipment (audio and video recorders) and trigger objects (a Bible, a rosary, and two crosses) and follow Jessi to a weathered wooden door leading to the basement. As we arrive at the door, Jessi turns to the team with a stern look on her face and says in a somber tone:

Alright people. I'm not trying to blow this out of proportion, but I cannot stress this enough. This down here is a totally different horse than what you're dealing with upstairs. Upstairs is cranky old mobsters. Down here is them too, but something else. People wind up getting emotions that are not your own. You get angry. You get pissed. You get mean. You get agitated. If this happens, *please* tell somebody in your group, and you come out here and you shake it off. I don't want to be jack-slapped. I don't want to be hit. And I've seen stuff like this. [emphasis in original]

With that, Jessi slides the rusty metal latch to the left and pulls on the door, which squeaks as it swings open. We enter, our feet scuffing against the dirty floor as our eyes adjust to the dusky light of the basement.

Much like she did earlier, Jessi begins reciting a litany of claims about evil spirits who throw objects at people, manipulate investigators' emotions, and occasionally appear as "shadow people" (dark human-shaped forms with no discernible features). Stopping at the room that *Dark Forces* claimed was the site of satanic rituals, Jessi states that the mafia used the room "for interrogating and killing people" and reports that a paranormal investigator "broke down and ran out of here, cryin' and sobbin' like a little bitty baby the other day." Next, she leads us through a narrow pathway that stops near the boarded-up coal room doorway. Jessi motions toward the ground and states, "This is where I lost my preacher the other day. He fell down back there. His stomach was cut, his face was cut, his shoulders and fingers was all cut up." Adding her own account, she continues, "I brought him in here because a couple of days before I had been punched [in] my chest. Two weeks ago. It's been non-stop."

As Jessi speaks, Heidi suddenly disappears from my right peripheral vision. A second later I hear the thump of her body hitting the concrete floor behind

me, like someone dropping a heavy canvas duffel bag. I spin around to see Heidi laying on her back, approximately four feet back from where she was standing a moment earlier. In a quivering voice that conveys shock and fear, Heidi utters, “What the hell?!?” Jessi rushes over and states, “You got knocked, didn’t ya?,” implying that Heidi was attacked by a malevolent spirit. Heidi musters another “What the hell?” and begins to breathe heavily, as if she is about to cry. Matthew hurries from further down the basement corridor to help Jessi lift Heidi to her feet, and the two escort her out of the basement. In a daze, the remaining investigators (Chad, Samantha, Gabriel, and Todd) and I drift together at the site of Heidi’s experience to discuss what occurred:

*Chad:* Was she just standing there? Was that not a trip backwards?

*Marc:* No, that was definitely a push.

*Samantha:* She got pushed. Didn’t you see her chest?

*Chad:* I didn’t see anything. I was over here [motioning further down the corridor, near the coal storage room].

*Samantha:* She got pushed. Her chest went back and she landed on her ass.

*Gabriel:* Where was Heidi when she got pushed?

*Marc:* Right here. That’s right where Jessi was when she said she got punched.

*Samantha:* Heidi got knocked on her ass.

In this excerpt, Chad, Samantha, and I engage in “collaborative editing” (Marvasti 2002) of the developing narrative. We each add a new detail or reinforce one another’s accounts in order to collectively arrive at the story that Heidi was pushed down by some supernatural force or entity.

A moment later, Gabriel offers a naturalistic counter-narrative. He points to the ground where Heidi stood, remarking, “Look at how uneven this all is. You can’t jump to paranormal [explanations].” By linking his counter-narrative to the physical properties of the setting, Gabriel positions himself as a rational observer who is seeking a natural interpretation of events instead of rushing to a supernatural conclusion. Although his account aligns with UMP’s avowed adherence to a scientific epistemology, Gabriel is met with resistance from Samantha, who raises her voice and says, “She got shoved in the fuckin’ chest! She flew back! It was not a slip. She did not catch herself, like when you slip.” Samantha’s assertion is based on claims to have personally witnessed Heidi’s posture as she fell backwards. Despite not witnessing the incident, Chad interjects in support of Samantha, saying, “I know. It’s not like she tripped.” In doing so, Chad effectively sponsors Samantha’s supernatural account, protecting it from Gabriel’s counter-narrative by virtue of his status as the highest-ranking member of UMP present in the basement at the time. Gabriel does not challenge Chad’s statement.

A few minutes later, Heidi and Matthew return to the basement. Heidi is too shaken up to recount the incident, so Matthew provides his perspective, saying, “It looked like she was backing up and then she slipped. And I was like ‘What happened?’ And then I could see by the look on her face that she didn’t slip. I was like ‘Okay, let’s just get up and get out then.’” In his account, Matthew frames himself as a rational person by “warranting” (Childs and Murray 2010), declaring that he sought a natural explanation before accepting a supernatural alternative. He also signals his allegiance to the team’s scientific knowledge regime by asserting that he reached this conclusion by assessing observable data—in this case, Heidi’s facial expressions. Matthew’s position as team leader insulates the supernatural narrative from challenges by lower-status investigators like Gabriel, who again offers no rebuttal. This first narrative contest results in a tenuous commitment to a supernatural narrative that reinforces the team’s status hierarchy even as it contradicts UMP’s adherence to a skeptical, empirically based epistemology.

A second dramatic incident involving Heidi soon spurs another narrative contest. After taking some time to collect ourselves and refocus, we begin an EVP session in the room *Dark Forces* described as the site of satanic rituals and Jessi claimed was a mafia torture chamber. After ten uneventful minutes, I hear what sounds like shoes scuffing on the concrete floor, followed immediately by two heavy thumps similar to those I heard during Heidi’s first experience. As Samantha screams in fear, Matthew spins to his left to grab Heidi as she leans backwards against a concrete wall and stares blankly at the floor. Jessi rushes over to help Matthew guide Heidi toward the basement exit. As they go, Samantha announces, “You guys, I’m gonna puke!” She springs to her feet and runs toward the basement door. Concerned for her well-being, I run behind her and yell ahead to Matthew, “She’s gonna puke! Watch out!” Matthew kicks the basement door open just in time for Samantha and me to run past into the humid night air.

While Samantha runs a short distance away to vomit on a hillside, Matthew sits Heidi down just outside of the basement and leans her back against a wooden fence post. I ask Heidi what happened, but she is too groggy to speak so Matthew provides his perspective:

*Matthew:* She got pushed backwards. When I turned and looked, it looked like she was—like she would have fallen down but something was pinning her to the wall or holding her up. And then I grabbed her and lifted her up.

*Marc:* Oh really!?!

*Matthew:* I never felt any resistance.

*Marc:* So she didn’t hit the ground?

*Matthew:* No, she didn’t hit the ground. But I don’t know if she was actually holding herself up by her legs, or if she just had this...

At this point Matthew trails off, as though he cannot fully accept what he seems to believe: that an unseen entity or some kind of supernatural force attacked Heidi for a second time.

Still shaken by what had occurred, I return to the basement and tell the others what Matthew said. In response, Gabriel once again asserts a naturalistic counter-narrative, this time with the support of his teammate Todd:

*Gabriel:* I was watching her, and it looked like if you suddenly leaned back, you'd go right against the wall. And that's what it looked like she did.

*Chad:* The question is did she get *pushed* or did she just kinda—

*Gabriel:* Lose her balance. . . . It could have been just her losing her balance. But don't forget, when your adrenals are really pumping and you're not used to the situation we're in, your mind can go to a lot of different places.

*Todd:* Like where she got quote-unquote "pushed"—I'm not calling her a liar, but the exact spot she was in you don't even have to lift your toes up very far and you already lose balance.

*Chad:* Yeah, it's angled, I know. [pause] The only other interesting thing about that whole thing [the first incident] is she felt like she was thrown down. [emphasis in original]

As before, Gabriel positions himself as a rational, objective observer. He points out the physical features of the floor that could have caused Heidi to fall backwards and implies in the phrase "your mind can go to a lot of different places" that other investigators are too clouded by fear to logically assess the situation. Similarly, Todd's use of scare quotes around the word "pushed" and the disclaimer (Hewitt and Stokes 1975) that he is not calling Heidi a liar frame his skepticism as resulting from objective observations rather than personal bias. Despite Todd's efforts to strengthen Gabriel's counternarrative, by the end of the interaction Chad pivots back to a supernatural explanation. His assertion that Heidi "felt like she was thrown down" undercuts Gabriel's and Todd's interpretations while simultaneously echoing Matthew's earlier statement that "she didn't slip." Ultimately, this second narrative contest illustrates how important idiocultural authority structures are to the perceived credibility of accounts. Explanations that contradict the team's knowledge regime but are endorsed by high-status member are more likely to be accepted than those that are congruent with the knowledge regime but championed by lower-status members or people who are marginal to the idioculture.

While Gabriel, Todd, and Chad wait for Matthew to return, I walk back outside and find Samantha sitting with Jessi on a grassy embankment.

When I arrive, Samantha is reporting waves of nausea as well as emotional fluctuations between deep sadness and violent rage. Crying and distressed, Samantha says she feels like she is channeling the spirit of a mobster who once owned the Highwayman Inn and wants to “punch Chad in the fuckin’ face.” Affirming Samantha’s belief that her emotions are being manipulated by spirits, Jessi turns to Samantha and says, “You’re pickin’ up on *their* emotions. These aren’t all your feelings” [emphasis in original]. This affirmation resonates with Jessi’s earlier warning that we might experience unusual emotions while in the basement and her claim that another investigator recently fled the basement in tears. Having never experienced anything she perceived as a psychic event, Samantha continues to express disbelief and distress. In response, Jessi validates Samantha’s feelings by comparing them to her own emotional experiences during psychic episodes:

*Samantha:* This just doesn’t make any fuckin’ sense to me at all!

*Jessi:* When you’re feelin’ it, you know it’s real.

*Samantha:* This is not me! This is not me! I’m not, I’m not—I don’t even believe in this shit!

*Jessi:* When you’re going through it, you know it’s real.

In absence of Matthew and Chad, Jessi becomes Samantha’s primary source of validation. By appealing to truth claims grounded in feelings instead of empirical data, Jessi orients Samantha toward a sensitive style of interpretation. This puts Samantha at odds with UMP’s scientific knowledge regime and creates idiocultural conflicts that play out over the next two phases of narrative development.

### *Narrative Coalescence: Postinvestigation Reflection*

In the fourth phase of development, *narrative coalescence*, those who experienced, witnessed, or heard about an incident reflect upon it, telling and retelling multiple versions of events. As members of the group fill in details from their own perspectives and confirm one another’s accounts, their interpretations coalesce to form a single group narrative that they begin to treat as an objective account of events.

UMP’s investigation of the Highwayman continues until 1:30 a.m., at which time the team and I collect our equipment and load it into their full-size SUV. While Matthew and Chad gather equipment in the basement, I join Samantha and Heidi, who are sitting on crumbling concrete steps in front of the Highwayman. They begin recounting the night’s events:

*Heidi:* The first time it happened it was like someone grabbed me like this [grabs the outside of my upper arms just below the shoulder], picked me up and threw me down. And then the second time it happened, somebody went like this [punching toward my sternum] really hard on my chest.

*Samantha:* That's what happened to Jessi a week or two ago. She said it was because we took the Bibles down [to the basement].

*Heidi:* Well, and Matthew said when he turned around it looked like someone was holding me against the wall.

Notably, Samantha draws upon Jessi's story as a source of validity, while Heidi's phrase "Well, and" pivots the conversation toward Matthew's account, indicating that she is more confident in his interpretation of events. In addition, her physical performance of the narrative invites Samantha and me to relive the emotional and embodied experience of the two incidents, which Riessman (2008) notes is a means by which narrators increase the perceived credibility of their tales. Their conversation also shows that both women's accounts are coalescing around a supernatural explanation, though they rely upon different forms of truth claims in reaching this conclusion.

A short time later, Gabriel and Todd leave in their own vehicle while I join the others for a thirty-minute drive back to our hotel. Right after we all climb into the SUV, Samantha attempts to draw attention to the fits of rage she experienced by stating, "I wanted to kill you all." Rather than responding with concern or interest, Chad makes light of Samantha's proclamation, saying, "Maybe it's 'cause you have your period. They [evil spirits] were getting absorbed up in your tampon."<sup>8</sup> Picking up on this theme, Matthew chimes in, "Hey, maybe you still got some up in there. You keep that shit!" With this comment, the SUV erupts in laughter. The derision directed at Samantha indicates that high-status team members doubt her claims that she was channeling angry spirits during the investigation and are therefore beginning to exclude her from the narrative development process. As Smith (1978) reports, those who are deemed mentally unstable are cut out of the sense-making process because their grip on reality is questioned. In Samantha's case, because her claims are based on feelings instead of empirically verifiable data, they contradict the team's knowledge regime and are consequently dismissed.

To orient the team's developing narrative back to physically observable events, Matthew shifts the conversation to Heidi's experiences:

*Matthew:* The first time she got pushed it looked like her legs came out from under her. It didn't look like she got pushed backwards from my perspective because she was on a slope. I thought she just stepped back and lost her footing and just slipped.

*Chad:* No, 'cause the slope wasn't enough to slip.

*Matthew:* It wasn't slippery. So quickly this is going through my head, along with the shock on her face. I'm like, "Alright, maybe I should help her up."

*Marc:* Well, Heidi said the second time—when she hit the wall—she doesn't remember anything from the time she got hit to when she was sitting outside.

*Heidi:* Yeah, I couldn't really talk. It hit me in the chest so hard it knocked the wind—

*Matthew:* So it wasn't on the shoulder this time? It was on the chest?

*Heidi:* Yeah, it was like a true slam.

*Matthew:* It was the weirdest fuckin' thing I've seen. I wish I had a video camera on, 'cause from my eyes it looked like she was *pinned* against the wall.

*Samantha:* I saw that, Matthew.

*Matthew:* Her feet were not on the ground, but she was still being held up. And she was looking at me like this. And I was like "What the fuck!?! Stand up." It was the weirdest thing I've ever seen. [emphasis in original]

This conversation illustrates the importance of idiocultural status position as a source of legitimacy in the narrative development process. As team leader, Matthew controls the conversation and selectively incorporates information provided by Chad and Heidi when this information supports the coalescing supernatural narrative. When Chad suggests that the floor was not sloped enough to cause Heidi to slip, Matthew reiterates that it "wasn't slippery"; likewise, when Heidi says she was hit in the chest during the second incident, Matthew asks for clarification. He allows Samantha to play a supporting role when she confirms that she also saw Heidi pinned against the wall, but her ability to steer the narrative is greatly curtailed. Meanwhile, Gabriel and Todd's naturalistic counternarrative is never introduced by Matthew or other UMP members. This inattention suggests that accounts offered by marginal participants are given less credence than those of core members, even if these accounts align with a group's epistemology. It also shows that counter-narratives are especially vulnerable to exclusion if those who champion these alternative explanations are absent during the critical early phase of narrative coalescence.

The final encounter in this phase of narrative development occurs the following day when the seven of us review video footage of Heidi's second incident. The video clearly shows Heidi's head and legs moving a moment before she hits the concrete wall but does not definitively prove why she moved. The inconclusive nature of the footage allows for both skeptical and supernatural interpretations, as shown in the following exchange:

*Matthew:* Watch her head. See her foot.

*Chad:* [to Heidi] So your foot *did* go up. You went up—

*Matthew:* She had one foot on the ground, though.

*Gabriel:* Like she lost her balance.

*Matthew:* She made it all the way back to the wall.

*Gabriel:* Well, she's not far from the wall. [emphasis in original]

Consistent with the previous evening, Gabriel sticks to a naturalistic account. By this time, though, Chad and Matthew are committed to a supernatural narrative and therefore Matthew rebuts Gabriel's counternarrative. Meanwhile, Heidi sits silently on the bed and defers to Chad and Matthew's interpretive authority to define her experience.

On a second viewing of the video clip, Gabriel again proposes a naturalistic explanation. This time Matthew cuts Gabriel out of the narrative process, as indicated by his use of "your" after Gabriel's comment:

*Matthew:* Your head moves before your feet do. Your head goes back and then you see your feet go forward. Your foot, I should say. The other foot is back still. So I don't know if what happened when you got pushed back if you were able to step back with one but your other foot was like this [mimics left foot kicking out in front of body]. 'Cause that seems to be the motion that we get.

*Gabriel:* It's like an off-balance thing, 'cause that's how I get when I'm off balance.

*Matthew:* But *your* head moves first. *Your* head moves out of frame. [emphasis added]

In this exchange, Matthew uses his higher status to present his version of events as the only legitimate interpretation. Even though Gabriel's counternarrative resonates with the team's scientific knowledge regime, it is "silenced" (Gubrium and Holstein 2009) by Matthew's decision to ignore Gabriel and respond only to Heidi in the above exchange. This is in keeping with Fine's analysis of idiocultures, in which he concludes that "potential cultural items are more likely to be accepted into a group's idioculture when proposed by a high status member" (1979, 742). Matthew's leadership position gives him the power to propose a supernatural explanation that seemingly contradicts the team's scientific epistemology without concern that he will be a target for derision.

### *Narrative Crystallization: Purification and Boundary-Work*

During *narrative crystallization*, the narrative is purified of any remaining deviant elements through "boundary-work" (Gieryn 1983), in which some

explanations are excluded and delegitimized while others are treated as factual representations of an experience. The final narrative conforms to the group's knowledge regime and status hierarchy, and is reified as the "real" account of events.

In a series of follow-up interviews several weeks after the investigation, Matthew, Heidi, and Samantha all still adhere to supernatural explanations.<sup>9</sup> However, each draws the boundaries of legitimacy in slightly different ways. In his interview, Matthew discursively positions himself as rational by highlighting his identity as a scientist and "warranting" (Childs and Murray 2010) his account by pointing out that he twice reviewed the video evidence:

In regards to what happened at the Highwayman, the scientist in me is always playing it over and over in my head: what I saw, what I didn't see, other possibilities that could've caused what happened. But after everything that happened, and after thinking about it over time and reviewing the video that we do have of the second time, I *do* think she was pushed. I don't think I can come up with a plausible reasoning for what happened to her after reviewing the video. [emphasis in original]

Matthew also attempts to lend scientific legitimacy to his explanation by proposing that Heidi's experiences may be explained by psychokinesis (the ability for someone to move an object using only mental energy), a theory that he emphasizes "is something that has been *somewhat* accepted in *certain circles* of physics" [emphasis in original]. He frames Heidi's experiences as empirical evidence of the supernatural, thereby eliminating any apparent conflict with his team's scientific knowledge regime.

By suggesting that psychokinesis is at least marginally accepted within the established scientific community, Matthew also draws a boundary between his explanation and other supernatural claims, such as those made by Samantha and Jessi. To further purify the developing narrative of accounts rooted in claims of psychic spirit communication, Matthew delegitimizes Jessi's version of events by impugning her character, implying that she may be drug addicted or afflicted by psychoses:

She's taking the sensitive route and saying she's connected to the spirits . . . and she's getting information through her "gift." . . . I mean, take it from my perspective: I just met you. I don't know who you are. I don't know what sort of psychoses you have, what drugs you're on. And so you *believe* that things [spirits] are irritated. Okay, great. That's one theory. That's a hypothesis we can test. [emphasis in original]

These kinds of personal attacks are common in scientists' rebuttals of theories and findings that contradict their own, and serve to protect the scientist's

preferred explanation by discrediting those who challenge this theory (Gilbert and Mulkey 1984; Pinch and Collins 1984).

Even though she was the one who allegedly experienced the two attacks by some supernatural entity or force, Heidi's confidence in the supernatural narrative is largely based on the fact that the two highest ranking members of her team, Matthew and Chad, endorse such an explanation:

It's hard for me to rationalize it. For me, I guess I *have* to look more toward the paranormal aspect of it, which is very difficult for me to do but I have no other rational explanation for it. . . . And when you have Matthew and Chad actually going, "Okay, I saw it with my own eyes and I have *no* other way to put an explanation on it," that makes it even easier for me to go, "Okay, I think this *could* have been a paranormal experience that I had." Because people who definitely would have tried to find a more rational explanation for it are unable to do that. So that makes it a little more valid to me. [emphasis in original]

It is also important to note the role gender plays in Heidi's explanation. She subordinates her ability to make sense of her own experiences to two "rational" men, thus reinforcing the team's authority structure and reproducing a gendered hierarchy that treats men as unbiased sources of truth (a point I return to in the conclusion). Like Matthew, Heidi also questions Jessi's credibility, saying "she doesn't understand our scientific approach" because she is "much more spiritual" in her approach to paranormal investigation. By drawing a boundary between "scientific" and "spiritual" ways of knowing and treating the former as more valid, Heidi reaffirms the legitimacy of UMP's knowledge regime and purifies the narrative by dismissing Jessi's account of what occurred at the Highwayman Inn.

Returning to the media representations that the team reviewed prior to the investigation, Heidi draws parallels between her experiences and events depicted on *Dark Forces*:

I hate to say that it puts more validation in some of the things that *Dark Forces* have said about the place 'cause I think those guys are just *so off the wall* with the things they say. But when you look at the things that they've had happen to them there and you're like, "Okay, well that's not far off from what we've had happen." [emphasis in original]

Much like Matthew's statement that he accepted a supernatural explanation only after thoroughly reviewing video evidence, Heidi's claim that she usually thinks that *Dark Forces* is "off the wall" in its depiction of hauntings positions her as a rational person who is aware that paranormal television shows' dramatized representations are unreliable sources of data. Nonetheless, because

her expectations were primed by the team's review of the show, Heidi's perceptions of her own embodied experiences are influenced by representations of the Highwayman Inn on *Dark Forces*. She selectively defines certain aspects of the show as legitimate evidence while displaying skepticism about the show in general. In so doing, Heidi contributes to the crystallizing supernatural narrative while protecting herself from the kind of ridicule Samantha faced during the narrative priming phase, when she gave some credence to the show's claims that there was a "hell portal" in the Highwayman's basement.

Neither Matthew nor Heidi ever brought up Samantha's psychic claims in our interviews. Despite this lack of support from her teammates, in our interview Samantha remains convinced that she channeled multiple spirits during the investigation of the Highwayman Inn. Referring to the experience as "brain rape," she asserts, "I personally think that Tony Soprano and some young girl were talking out of my mouth. There's nothing I can do to prove that to you. And honestly, I don't even care to." Rejecting the team's scientific epistemology, Samantha relies instead upon her own feelings and Jessi's claimed psychic abilities as her primary sources of validation:

I felt like a very feminine young girl. Like a girl about in her twenties, with kind of wavy hair. And [I felt like] Tony Soprano, um, fat. Real fat in the middle, like just a big fat stomach. And it was weird 'cause I was describing these people to Jessi and she goes, "Well, that was"—what'd she say—"Butch." She goes, "He's the fat one." And then she said that girl was probably Betsy, and I'm like, "Don't tell me that this is real!" 'Cause that's the part that I thought was just in my head.

Like the psychics studied by Wooffitt (2001), Samantha's use of reported speech attributes factual claims to a person who claims to directly communicate with spiritual entities. Samantha treats Jessi as a credible narrator despite her awareness that doing so makes her seem, in her words, "either crazy or full of shit" in the eyes of her teammates. Her obstinate refusal to defer to UMP's scientific knowledge regime and to Matthew's ability, as team leader, to control the development of the group's narrative poses such a threat to the stability of UMP's idioculture that Samantha was kicked off of the team not long after the Highwayman Inn investigation. This act purifies the narrative by silencing the last remaining counternarrator.

One month after the investigation, Matthew produces a written report detailing the team's investigative efforts as well as the apparently supernatural events that occurred. This report further crystallizes the narrative by validating Heidi's experiences and dismissing Samantha's claims. To bring Heidi's two incidents into line with the team's knowledge regime, Matthew

highlights the physically observable elements of her experiences, including her vocalizations and facial expressions. This reframes emotional experiences as observable phenomena, thereby packaging “irrational” emotions as empirical evidence leading to a “rational” supernatural conclusion:

The shock and hurt that can be heard in Heidi’s voice and seen in her face after each event would require years of acting classes to procure unnaturally. Heidi was not under the influence of any balance altering chemicals during this investigation nor is she a clumsy person that randomly falls down. This event is unexplained and it is UMP’s unequivocal opinion that Heidi was physically pushed two separate times while investigating the Highwayman Inn by something paranormal. . . . UMP uses the term “paranormal” as it is defined, which is an experience or event that cannot be explained by current science.

Matthew’s report concedes that “Samantha 100% believes that she was being affected by something outside of herself” but suggests that her experiences were actually caused by stress and exhaustion:

The stress of the situation (lack of sleep and other issues) combined with . . . witnessing Heidi get pushed down not once but twice, could have sent Samantha to an emotional space she is not familiar with. Since we have no audio or video evidence to back up any claims that Samantha was being affected by some outside force, UMP cannot conclude that Samantha was affected by an outside force.

As with Smith’s (1978) analysis of the construction of factual accounts of mental illness, Samantha’s interpretations of her own experiences are ultimately dismissed by calling her emotional stability into question. Matthew chooses not to mention the physically observable elements of Samantha’s emotional experiences—her nausea following Heidi’s second incident, for example—and thereby marginalizes Samantha’s claims by portraying her as a hysterical woman.

In addition, Matthew uses several techniques to increase the appearance of scientific objectivity in the report. First, he uses impersonal, precise language that makes the conclusion seem to be based on observable facts alone (Gilbert and Mulkey 1984). Second, he states that Heidi’s experiences cannot be explained by “current science,” implying that they may be explainable in light of future scientific discoveries and should therefore be granted a sort of honorary scientific legitimacy. Lastly, by valorizing rationality and devaluing emotional experiences, Matthew grounds his appeals to legitimacy in a cultural discourse that affords hegemonically masculine ways of knowing—rationality, unemotionality, and technological mastery—the highest legitimacy (Connell 1987; Kendall 2000).

UMP's final report illustrates the critical role played by idiocultural dynamics in the formation of a crystallized narrative. The supernatural narrative presented in this report seems, on the surface, to contradict the team's scientific epistemology. Despite this, it became the definitive account of what "really" happened because it was endorsed by high-status team members (especially Matthew) and reframed supernatural claims in ways that rendered these unthreatening to the team's scientific knowledge regime. Power relations between group members, as well as those between members and nonmembers, affected which accounts were incorporated into the crystallizing narrative and which were excluded. Likewise, accounts that aligned with or were adapted to the group's knowledge regime became part of the official narrative while those that could not be adapted were silenced. Preexisting cultural representations of ghosts and place-based tales of haunting influenced the formation of the crystallized narrative to the extent that they reinforced the idioculture's status hierarchy and knowledge regime. In the end, all of these factors led to a final narrative in which the Highwayman Inn was defined as truly haunted.

## Conclusion

As shown above, narratives develop in a five-phase process. Storylines are informed by established narratives that prime those involved in an experience to interpret events in particular ways. Once an interpretation emerges, it is almost immediately contested in an interactive environment in which no one interpretation yet holds sway. The perceived validity of each account is judged on the basis of the narrator's status relative to the other parties involved and the proposed storyline's adherence to the dominant epistemology of the interacting group. Considerations of status and epistemology constrain certain storylines while enabling others to coalesce into a dominant narrative. Through exclusion of all alternative accounts, this dominant narrative becomes the only legitimated way of explaining events; it ascends as the "true" story of a group's experience.

Within each of the five phases outlined above, narrators attempted to make sense of their experiences by drawing upon cultural representations and place-based narratives of ghosts and hauntings. These resources included folkloric tales, reality-style paranormal investigation shows, and stories of murder, crime, untimely death, and other macabre details rooted in the ground (sometimes literally) beneath the property being investigated. These stories were filtered through the idioculture of the group, which ultimately played the most important role in legitimating certain interpretations and dismissing others. The perceived validity of any account—and therefore its likelihood of becoming part of the crystallized narrative—was determined by three considerations.

First, accounts were assessed on the basis of their *cultural resonance*. That is, did an explanation make sense in light of preexisting cultural narratives about similar events? For paranormal investigators, this meant evaluating an emerging narrative's resonance with folklore and media representations of ghosts. Heidi, for example, perceived a correspondence between her experiences and those portrayed on a reality-style paranormal investigation show, and therefore felt more confident that she was indeed attacked by a supernatural force of some kind. Likewise, Samantha's belief that her emotions were being manipulated by evil spirits in the Highwayman's basement echoed similar stories presented on *Dark Forces*. When emergent accounts such as these correspond to culturally legitimated ways of understanding such experiences, they are more likely to be perceived as valid (Bennett 1999).

Second, participants evaluated proposed explanations on the basis of their *situational relevance*. The credibility of stories was judged in terms of their consistency with established stories about the location in which an incident occurred. At least initially, members of UMP used Jessi's accounts about evil spirits at the Inn as resources for explaining what happened to Heidi and Samantha during the investigation. The likelihood that Heidi and Samantha's experiences would be interpreted as supernatural was also increased by the fact that the incidents occurred in a basement, a liminal space commonly featured in ghost stories (Davies 2007; Waskul and Waskul 2016). More specifically, they took place in areas of the basement where Jessi said similar events had recently occurred. As a result of the situational relevance of these events, initial sense making framed them as the results of physical and emotional manipulation by evil spirits.

Finally, and most importantly, accounts that achieved both cultural resonance and situational relevance needed to gain *idiocultural legitimacy*. This legitimacy rested on two considerations. First, narratives were judged in terms of their *epistemological congruity*. Stories that did not readily align with an idioculture's dominant epistemology were either rejected or brought into alignment through interpretations that reframed the stories in ways that conformed to the group's knowledge regime. The rejection of Jessi's claims of psychic knowledge illustrate the former tactic, while Matthew's reframing of Heidi's experience as possible empirical evidence of psychokinesis is exemplary of the latter tactic. Second, a narrative's legitimacy was evaluated on the basis of its contribution to *status reinforcement* within the idiocultural group. If a narrator was a nonmember or marginal member of the group, their stories were more likely to be dismissed even if they met all of the other criteria for legitimacy. The rejection of Gabriel and Todd's naturalistic counter-narrative may be explained as the outcome of their marginal status, which inhibited their ability to assert control over the narrative development process. On the other hand, if a narrator held high status within the group

or—alternatively—a high status group member endorsed a lower status member's account, the story was highly likely to be integrated into the dominant narrative, even if aspects of the story deviated from one or more of the above-listed criteria. Matthew's control over the narrative and Chad's sponsorship of Heidi's claims both illustrate this final point.

It must also be noted that the gender of narrators seemed to influence which accounts were taken seriously. Through a series of discursive "manhood acts" (Schrock and Schwalbe 2009), the men in UMP's core team—most notably Matthew—attempted to elicit deference from women and assert control over men. Male control over the developing narrative silenced the voices of women—namely Samantha and Jessi—whose more emotional self-expressions were coded as irrational. The team explicitly used Samantha's status as a woman as a discrediting attribute in their association of her psychic claims with menstruation, and more generally relied upon a discourse that invalidated her claims on the grounds that she was overly emotional during the investigation. Jessi's exclusion likely resulted in part from her outsider status relative to UMP; however, her claims to possess psychic powers put her at odds with UMP by asserting that (feminine) intuition was a greater source of truth than (masculine) scientific reason. Heidi's accounts were accepted because they were validated by male team members and adapted to fit a scientific explanation. Along with their marginal status in the group, Gabriel and Todd's gender may have worked against them by making their counternarrative seem threatening because it was espoused by men. Ironically, their masculinity may have hindered their ability to influence the narrative because the patriarchal authority structure of UMP did not want to cede any interpretive control to other men. The outcome of this process illustrates how patriarchy functions as a mechanism of narrative control at the idiocultural level.

Because this model of narrative development is illustrated by the particulars of a single team conducting one paranormal investigation, it would be useful to apply this model to other kinds of paranormal investigation groups. Although in my research I found that teams were consistently dominated by a scientific epistemology, other researchers may discover that more psychically-oriented groups reach narrative consensus through different avenues. Beyond the topic of paranormal investigation, future research may find that different cultural or idiocultural factors are more important determinants of legitimacy in other circumstances. Likewise, studies may uncover variations in the phases of narrative development presented here. Although the model presented suggests that consensus will be achieved, it would be fruitful to investigate how narratives develop in situations where consensus is difficult to achieve, such as an idioculture in which two or more people refuse to relinquish control over the narrative process. Alternatively, research into idiocultures with egalitarian

status relations—especially between people of different genders—may show that narratives develop differently in absence of power struggles. The narrative development model is intended as a starting point for examining how idiocultures mediate the relationship between preexisting cultural representations, place-based meanings, and emergent understandings in service of the production of narrative realities.

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### Notes

1. For stylistic reasons, hereafter I omit the scare quotes around “sensitive” and “scientific.” This is not meant to indicate any belief in the veracity of investigators’ claims to either psychic abilities or scientific credentials.
2. The name of this team is a pseudonym, as are the names of the location and all participants in the investigation.
3. Along with the name, some specific details of the property and its alleged haunting have been changed to ensure its anonymity. The essential form of supernatural claims pertinent to my analysis is retained.
4. *Dark Forces* is a pseudonym.
5. Reality television shows are not the most reliable source for credible accounts of hauntings, as they are prone to exaggeration in search of ratings. Nonetheless, I use *Dark Forces* in my analysis because the Highwayman Inn’s appearance on the show was an important factor in UMP’s decision to investigate the site and served as the team’s initial source for supernatural claims about the location.
6. To maintain the location’s anonymity, I have not included citations or references for the episodes of *Dark Forces* from which these quotes are excerpted.
7. Some minor details in this excerpt were changed to protect the anonymity of the location and participants. The tone and most of the original content of the interaction have been retained.
8. For reasons that are not pertinent to this analysis, Chad was aware that Samantha was indeed menstruating during the investigation. Chad’s statement also draws upon a common folk belief that women have increased intuitive abilities during menstruation.
9. Despite repeated attempts, I was unable to conduct follow-up interviews with Chad, Gabriel, and Todd.

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