

Phenomenology, Reflexivity and Research in the Anthropology of Consciousness

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In very broad terms, phenomenology posits that humans try to make sense of phenomena and it studies how we do so, focussing on the bestowal of meanings upon phenomena. The primary aim of philosophical phenomenology is to investigate and become directly aware of phenomena that appear in immediate experience, thereby allowing the researcher to describe the essential structures of these phenomena. Phenomenology attempts to free itself from unexamined presuppositions.

The position taken by rationalists is that the rational alone is real, but to the phenomenologist of religion, the rational alone is not enough. The phenomenologist needs to accept the faith of the believers as the sole religious reality - avoiding imposing personal value judgments on the experiences of the believers. In other words, the primary focus of the phenomenologist of religion is the description of how believers understand their own faith in order to gain insight into the phenomenon itself.

The religious experience cannot be pigeon-holed into purely psychological, sociological, or neurophysiological explanations. Garry Trompf writes:

... phenomenology is more scientific for being open-ended in its methodical stance, and in its refusal to accept social scientific strait-jacketing, when both the limitations of words and the richness of phenomena make all attempts to reduce reality to the merely psychological, socio-economic, political, and so on (in order to manage it theoretically) look like abortive escape-routes from complexity...¹

In order to undertake a phenomenology of religion, the researcher needs to suspend disbelief and to fully engage in the study but without necessarily accepting the totality of an informant's world as his/her own. This is referred to as 'bracketing'. What the researcher 'brackets' is the doubt that the world and its objects might be other than how it appears to him or her. One engages in the suspension of disbelief. By suspending personal judgements of what is 'right' or 'wrong' one pursues the eidetic vision, the universal essence or 'whatness' of being, thus remaining open and aware that people have a different sense of what constitutes reality.

This approach is particularly useful in comparative religion when it is combined with the classic anthropological method of investigation: participant observation. In

researching consciousness studies that deal with phenomena such as alternative states of consciousness, particularly those dealing with spirit possession, trance states, and dreams, the phenomenon itself is made the object of study and the method is participant observation.

Research in the Anthropology of Consciousness

Many anthropologists are now engaged in the study of consciousness and are adding cross-cultural perspectives to areas that were previously the domain of theologians, religionists, and psychologists. Approaches range from considerations of consciousness as socially constructed to outright declarations that spirit worlds *do* exist, separate and apart from human consciousness.

Most are approaching consciousness studies, and reports of 'spirit worlds' with great caution, tiptoeing through the minefield of disdain which is the general reaction to such topics. Many use multi-disciplinary approaches to interpret their findings. Some anthropologists, such as Ian Edgar and Douglas Price-Williams, are focussing their attention on specific types of consciousness, such as dreams or spirit possession. Both Edgar² and Price-Williams³ point out the interactive nature of socio-cultural beliefs about dreams and the content and amount of dreams experienced by individuals. Indeed, dream imagery does not occur within a social vacuum and often the meaning of a dream is not established until the social meaning is established.

Some researchers, such as Daniel Halperin⁴, are investigating memory and consciousness. After talking to many ritual participants who regularly experience spirit possession in different forms during the Northern Brazilian *Tambor de Mina* rituals, Halperin discovered three principal discourses concerning memory and states of consciousness during possession, centring particularly around whether possession was 'conscious' or 'unconscious'.

Wallace Zane⁵, noting the difficulty of categorising the all-embracing term 'altered states of consciousness', limited his own study to ritual states of consciousness, as these have a sacred place in the cultures in which they occur. His intention was to avoid the old assumptions that spirit possession is due to either illness or socio-economic causes. Zane focused his attention on the Spiritual Baptists and other Caribbean religions and applied his own model for analysing spirit possession. He concluded that separating ritual states of consciousness from non-ritual states of consciousness helps to avoid the pitfalls of assuming illness is the cause (as so many researchers have done in the past). This still allows for 'culturally relevant pathological manifestations of spirit possession and mass possession'. Ritual states of consciousness can then be specifically described by culture categories and compared cross-culturally.

I shall now briefly discuss the notion of reflexivity and how this fits into the study of consciousness.

Reflexivity

In reflexive anthropology, one is conscious of being conscious, reflecting on one's own process of observing. Part of the methodology of obtaining data includes being conscious of the effect of subject on object, and object on subject; that is, on the process of bi-directional influence. One is constantly engaged in this process of self-reflection while conducting research, which sometimes leads to a conflict between the logical academic self and the worldviews of informants, if the two collide. In engaging in long-term, in-depth study of a particular group of people and, as anthropologists do, living in direct day-to-day contact with people engaged in going about their everyday business, it would be rare that an anthropologist would not be resocialised to some extent, into an alien way of life. After a short time in the field, behaviours that are noticeable at first, become a normal part of life, and so the anthropologist becomes enculturated. Part of this enculturation includes imbibing social values and behaving correctly according to that culture's norms. In this way, one becomes part of that which is being studied. It is a natural next step to become so totally involved that one is accused of 'going native'. And, in fact, many anthropologists do not realize how much enculturation has taken place until they have left the field, suffered from culture shock on re-entering their own culture, and placed the two cultures side by side for comparison.

Until recently, 'going native' was looked upon as undesirable and the aim was to gather data in an objective fashion, without absorbing insiders' knowledge subjectively. Now, however, some anthropologists are endorsing this step and advocating 'radical participation', or 'going native'. Studying mentality from inside, writes Edith Turner, is "a legitimate and valuable kind of anthropology which is accessible if the anthropologist takes that 'fatal' step towards 'going native'".

Both Dan Rose⁶ and Michael Jackson⁷ discuss the subject of radical participation. Jackson suggests that "it is necessary to adopt a methodological strategy of joining in without ulterior motive and literally putting oneself in the place of other persons, inhabiting their world" in order to break the habit of using a linear communicational model.⁸ Anthropologist Jay Ruby concurs with this approach. In his opinion, "we are able to see ourselves anew when we experience others vicariously through the experience of being an ethnographer"⁹. Indeed, the success of fieldwork is measured by how well anthropologists can become 'not themselves' while at the same time retaining their original identity.

In the past few years, a number of anthropologists (Edith Turner¹⁰, Paul Stoller¹¹, Jeanne Favret-Saada¹², Larry Peters¹³, Felicitas Goodman¹⁴, Jean-Guy Goulet¹⁵, among others) have recounted their own 'strange' experiences while in the course of conducting fieldwork over extended periods of time, revealing an interesting list of unexplainable experiences.

Paul Stoller spent several years in Nigeria, West Africa, in an attempt to understand sorcery and healing. He became apprentice to a well-known sorcerer

and tells of being attacked by spirits sent by a Songhay sorcerer, causing him temporary paralysis of his legs in one instance. After repeated visits to the Songhay over several years, he finally fled in fear. Canadian anthropologist, Jean-Guy Goulet writes that while sitting quietly around a fire in a teepee with a group of Dene Tha Indian elders in Canada's north-west, he saw someone fanning the fire, only to realize, with a start, that the person he was watching was himself.

French anthropologist, Jeanne Favret-Saada, who investigated today's witchcraft beliefs in the Bocage, a rural area in western France, became embroiled in the daily lives of people who said that they were bewitched¹⁶. She became the object of witchcraft during her fieldwork, and learned how to resist it. Favret-Saada wrote that one cannot study witchcraft without agreeing to take part in the situations where it manifests itself, and she was never able to choose between subjectivism and objectivism, an issue, she remarks, which creates unwelcome problems for those who favour a totally objective ethnography.

Recently, Young and Goulet gathered together an intriguing collection of papers from anthropologists who have had equally strange experiences while engaged in fieldwork¹⁷. The various explanatory models offered by these people range from neurological explanation¹⁸ to the daring statement by Turner that spirits do indeed exist¹⁹. Turner admits to visibly seeing an opaque object, "something between solid and smoke" emerging from the back of a patient for whom a healing ritual was performed, during a Ndembu (Zambia) *ihamba* ritual in which she took part.

Not all anthropologists are willing to go as far as Turner, but some are ready to take an 'as-if-it-were-true' approach to the existence of alternate realities and spirit realms, and base their working premise on a 'spirit hypothesis'. That is, if one begins with the premise that spirits exist, or may exist, we can approach the data we collect in a new way, without necessarily accepting supernatural explanations.

Indeed, after significant contact with any group, it is easy to slip into the discourse and worldview of that group, so wariness is needed in order to avoid gullibility and acceptance of unnecessarily metaphysical explanations for phenomena. Researchers need, as Garry Trompf puts it, "cunning and a sense of discrimination" while at the same time seeking to avoid "prejudgmental scepticism"²⁰. When conducting the type of research which throws the researcher into the midst of any religion the researcher also needs contact with non-believers for reality testing.

By openly reporting and discussing 'strange' experiences of a metaphysical nature while engaged in fieldwork we avoid running the risk of discarding vital sources of ethnographic knowledge. What needs to be worked out now, is the epistemic content that is produced in such a manner. But first, reports and discussions of experiences will have to be forthcoming. Some anthropologists have begun this process, and have employed multi-disciplinary approaches, looking to medical models, psychological models and neurophysiological models in addition to anthropology, in order to understand their own fieldwork experiences and those of their informants.

But anthropologists are not the only researchers pursuing this task. Eugene d'Aquili, a professor of psychiatry, and Andrew Newberg, a researcher in nuclear medicine and brain visualisation are connecting religious and mystical states with neuropsychology²¹. They offer a model based on the principle of selective stimulation and differentiation of various brain structures accompanied by limbic stimulation to explain most religious experiences. Yet they insist that to attempt to explain a person's experience of God using only a model such as theirs is arrogant reductionism.

Similarly, August Reader, a professor of ophthalmology, determined that the visual system, the brainstem and the autonomic nervous system are the anatomical areas concerned with some spiritual experiences. The occipital lobe is of major importance for the 'White Light' experience and the temporal lobe for visual imagery. Stimulation of an area of the right temporal lobe reproduces images typical of those of near-death states, as well as of angels, the Virgin Mary and other archetypal forms. Yet Reader is also extremely reluctant to accept a purely medical model to explain the profound spiritual experiences that he himself has had.

Far from being the sole domain of charlatans, psychotics or medieval mystics, experiences termed 'spiritual' or 'supernatural' are now (finally) being openly discussed in academic circles as an increasing number of people admit to having had such experiences. It is only by discussion of these events using a multi-disciplinary approach, that we may begin to seriously explore the nature of the spiritual experience.

Rudolph Otto wrote (in 1923) that "orthodoxy is the rational, head of religion", which has been valued over the "non-rational, heart of religion"²². This, says Otto, can give a "one-sidedly intellectual and rational interpretation". Some anthropologists are pursuing the non-rational heart of religion and combining this perspective with the Western scientific rational approach. In doing so, they are creating a paradigm shift - what Sperry and Henninger call a new "macromental outlook". This new paradigm, they insist, does not open the doors to the supernatural or any form of unembodied mind or spirit. Rather, it is just the opposite, it takes beliefs "out of the realm of supernatural and otherworldly uncertainties" and bases them on more realistic grounds, "consistent with science and empiric verification"²³.

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