Application of an ethnographic methodology for the study of spirit possession

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Abstract

In my own doctoral thesis I argued the case for a revised epistemology for Spirit Release Therapy (SRP) according to the conceptual framework of F.W.H. Myers, the 19th century co-founder of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR). In my thesis I support the adoption of the radical empiricism of William James (1912) and a participant / observer method in anthropological research according to the model proposed by social science theorist Paul Diesing (1971). Whilst my thesis was limited to examining Myers’ conceptual framework, I was unable to examine in any great detail the participant / observer method other than make brief references to some anthropologists, such as Alberto Villoldo (2005) who have applied it in their field work on shamanism and soul loss. A central theme of my thesis is the proposition that personal experience of spirit possession is an essential factor in a revised epistemology that enables scientific enquiry to accommodate possession phenomena. This may seem to be a radical approach in the extreme and one that would understandably be rejected by all but the most adventurous (or mad) researcher. However, this proposition is not as outlandish as it may at first appear, and in this article I apply (in retrospect) the ethnographic methodology proposed by anthropologist Fiona Bowie (2010) of the Afterlife Research Centre at Bristol University to two cases that I have encountered in my own clinical practice. The first case is one of possession where a client who was undergoing hypnosis for personal development became an instrument of communication for a discarnate entity. The second case is where I became possessed by a discarnate entity as part of my own experiential learning in how to direct earthbound souls to the Light. There are very real difficulties in transcribing personal experience into a scientific framework, and this second case is representative of this difficulty. It was so difficult in fact that the only way I could report it was in the third person. Such was the intensity of the emotions experienced that even to this day I find it extremely difficult to convey the experience to others. This is the emotive power of what Bowie would call the ethnographic method.

Are Spirits Real or imagined?

The primary question raised by Frederick Myers in the late 19th century was whether man has a soul and whether it survives the death of the body (Myers, 1903a). In my own thesis on Myers work I pose a related question; ‘do discarnate spirits have an ontological status or are they the products of the creative imagination?’

1 Unpublished thesis can be viewed online at http://pages.bangor.ac.uk/~rsp823/.
If the possession hypothesis is to be upheld, there are certain assumptions and ontological factors that need to be established before the hypothesis can be tested. Should it be true that spirits influence the living, whether they are spirits of the dead, spirit guides, angels, demons or elementals, then it implies that there must be a realm where the discarnate consciousness of spirits exists. If there is not a realm where the consciousness of spirits exists then it can only be left to say that all notions of spirits or spirit realms are hallucinations or delusions created by the human imagination, and this is the prevailing view of mainstream psychiatry. This view is challenged by the evidence presented by research conducted with spiritualist mediums (Schwartz, 2002) and healers (Sicher & Targ, 1998). Evidence is also revealed in the consulting rooms of practitioners of Spirit Release Therapy (SRT) (Baldwin, 1995; Crabtree, 1985; Fiore, 1987; Hickman, 1994; Modi, 1997; Naegeli-Osjord, 1988; Wickland, 1924), and it is in this area where spirits are released from the living under clinical conditions that Bowie’s ethnographic method of cognitive and empathic involvement may have true value.

**Methodological parallelism**

Whether there is a spirit realm that is on a continuum with our known physical universe according to Myers (1903b), or a part of William James’ pluralistic universe (1909), or another dimension that is beyond our concept of space and time, is a question that continues to reach into every debate about the nature of objective reality. Contemporary psychology has created for itself a methodological parallelism that appears to run along three parallels rather than two. Mainstream psychology is concerned with cognition and behaviours that are epiphenomenal. Parapsychology challenges the mainstream by attempting to produce theories to explain psi phenomena without discounting epiphenomenalism. It could be argued that psi research is really a black sheep of the mainstream because it needs to be accepted, just as the infant psychology of the 19th century needed to be accepted by mainstream science. In complete contrast however, is research that recognises the possibility that consciousness is fundamental and not produced by or is dependent on a brain. This is the stance that Myers took, and it is the stance that some modern researchers such as Russell Targ (2004) and Charles Tart (2000) have adopted in their search for theories to explain the nature of consciousness itself. A solution to the impasse created by psychology may be the ethnographic method proposed by anthropologist Fiona Bowie (2010) which requires the researcher to engage with the object of study in ‘cognitive, empathetic engagement’ (ibid, p. 4).
**The hypnotised client**

It was not my intention to investigate the ontological status of discarnate entities in my early career as a hypnotherapist trained in Ericksonian hypnotherapy. The therapeutic method involved helping a client solve a psychological or emotional problem by way of accessing their own hidden resources. The following is taken from my original unpublished account of the case of a young man who came to me for help with his self-confidence:

As the young man was coming out of his trance he made an observation that he experienced an odd sensation that someone else wanted to speak; someone other than himself. I asked him if he was willing to go back into trance in order that we may investigate this odd sensation and uncover its meaning. He agreed and re-entered his trance state. After a very few moments he opened his eyes and looked at me. His entire countenance had changed from a shy young man to that of an older and wiser person. His physical features hadn’t altered, only his expression and the gleam in his eyes. There was wisdom in those eyes. He introduced himself as Xiang Pi, a Chinese scholar from the 14th century AD.

I was fascinated by this and engaged this person in conversation. His manner was polite and formal but with a hint of friendliness. He thanked me for inviting him and suggested that we continue our conversation another time. After the client returned from his trance he related his experience to me. He explained that he felt very restful and relaxed, and it seemed as if he were in a long corridor with someone at the other end who was speaking, although he couldn’t quite make out what was being said. I conveyed to him the essence of what had taken place and we agreed that the experience was both interesting and stimulating. We agreed to participate in further investigations.

I had two or three more conversations with Xiang Pi on matters of importance concerning the client’s circumstances and those of others to whom I was providing therapy. All the time the client was in deep trance. We discussed things that concern us and I found the conversations most stimulating and rewarding. Then one night Xiang Pi asked if I minded and could he invite someone else to talk to me. I agreed and as Xiang Pi withdrew the young man’s countenance returned to that of a man in deep trance, as was usual. After a few short moments he sat up and opened his eyes. Again his countenance changed and I knew I was facing yet another person. This one was different from Xiang Pi and he looked at me with even greater wisdom coming from his eyes. He smiled a genuine smile and introduced himself as Lao Tzu. The name meant nothing to me but I welcomed him with the same courtesy with which I had welcomed Xiang Pi and we entered into conversation. At the conclusion of that first conversation with Lao Tzu he bade me
farewell and referred to me as ‘fellow traveller’. Although I had no idea who he was, this address as fellow traveller gave me a sense of being honoured.

For several days the young man was pleased to accommodate my interest in the Chinese philosopher whilst he remained in trance and I had many opportunities to engage Lao Tzu in conversation late into the night. He began to offer advice on the book I was writing and suggested areas that could be expanded upon and that I should summarise each chapter. He knew exactly what I was writing, and sometimes even offered very specific advice on points where I was having difficulty explaining myself. The information was valuable to say the least and I was given terrific insights to the workings of something that still didn’t have a name. That was to come later.

Having done all I could do on the book at that time, I started college to qualify to go to university. One day in a class on counselling, the lecturer passed out some handouts that included a quote from Lao Tzu. I was astonished to find the name of the person I had been having conversations with here in print. I asked the lecturer who this Lao Tzu was. She replied that she didn’t know. A fellow student said he knew and suggested that I may like to borrow a book that he had in his possession. The next day he gave it to me. It was the *Tao Te Ching*. My astonishment was complete.

When I got home the first thing I did was to ring my client and ask him to come over. When he arrived I asked him, “Who is Lao Tzu?” He replied, “Isn’t that the Chinaman you talk to when I’m in trance?” I said, “Yes, but who is he? Do you know who he is?” He replied that he had no idea. Then I showed him the book.

The comment on the back cover stating that the *Tao Te Ching* was the most widely translated book second only to the Bible was the ultimate astonishment. We had no idea that the name of Lao Tzu was synonymous with one of history’s wisest and greatest philosophers. To be honoured in this way by such a great mind was indeed to be privileged.

I asked him to go into trance and prepared myself to talk to Lao Tzu, but this time my apprehension was that of a schoolboy preparing to meet a head of state. As his trance came to its deepest, Lao Tzu emerged, and his expression spoke volumes. His eyes shone and the smile occupied every muscle of the young man’s face. “Why didn’t you tell me who you were?” I asked. He replied, “Is it not always better to discover things for yourself?”
An observation worthy of comment is that most of the translators of the *Tao Te Ching* are sceptical of the authenticity of the work as being of the one man, and whether or not Lao Tzu actually existed. Well, needless to say I have it on good authority that the man did exist, and still does – in a dimension that is connected in some way with our four-dimensional space-time continuum.

The important element of this case is the fact that neither the client nor I had any prior knowledge of who Lao Tzu was. Secondly, the thoughts that were entering my mind as I was writing a monumental work of philosophy whilst I was an uneducated layman were being put there by a discarnate consciousness. The client was being possessed by the consciousness of Lao Tzu to the degree that he could speak by use of the host’s brain infrastructure and body. In contrast I was merely being influenced in my thoughts and ideas. This was my first experience of positive possession (invited) in the case of the client, and creative inspiration in my own subjective experience.

**Running Bear and the heavenly host**

The next case is the result of a request from a client for me to help her deal with episodes of unexplained anger. She entered easily into trance and I was confronted by the consciousness of a very angry man who wanted to kill. I did not know how to deal with this and took it upon myself to learn. I attended an experiential training course in spirit release methods, and the following account is from an unpublished autobiography written in the third person:

Running Bear, Medicine Chief of the Blackfoot tribe of the Sioux Nation, stood before the host. For as far as his eyes could see were all the bluecoat soldiers and their generals, and all the medicine men, chiefs and warriors who had perished in the Indian Wars of North America. His rage consumed him and he wept. He had been summoned to the Light after a hundred and fifty years of roaming the earth, bound by hatred and his quest for revenge. The Light was all around. There was nothing but the Light, the soldiers and the warriors. A disembodied voice said, “It is time to forgive. The soldiers ask your forgiveness for what they did to you.” Running Bear raised his hands in a gesture to embrace the host and, with exasperation from the depths of his tortured soul, cried at the top of his voice, “AND WHAT ABOUT MY PEOPLE?”

The disembodied voice spoke again, “They ask for forgiveness for what they did to all your people. They are sorry. They knew not what they were doing. They fought
from fear and they knew nothing of the right way. They are here now, in the Light, and they know, and they are sorry.”

“How can I forgive?” asked Running Bear. “So much suffering and so much waste. What was it all for? How can I forgive?”

“They forgive you,” said the voice. “Here, in the Light, all is forgiven. You are here now with all others. We are all One. You have been separated from your brothers. Here we are all One. This is the Great Oneness. It is time. Say you forgive.”

Running Bear wept a grief for genocide. Such a grief that no one man should bear alone, could bear alone, and he opened his mouth to express his awe, “Such big medicine.” He tried to put aside his anger, his rage, the rage of an entire nation who had suffered immeasurably at the hands of the ignorant, the greedy, the fearful and the malicious, to one side, and he opened his mouth to speak words of forgiveness. It was hard, but he tried, “I.... I..... I forg..... I forgive....” He wept again and his body trembled. He fell to his knees and he forgave. When he had recovered enough to speak again, he said through gritted teeth, “What was it all for? So much suffering. Are we to start all over again?”

The disembodied voice said, “We are all One again. Your journey of separateness is over and you have come home. Rest now and be at One with all your brothers, red and white, in forgiveness and universal love.”

The disembodied voice said, “Now James, bring all of your consciousness back into yourself. Be centred and grounded and come back to full conscious awareness in your own time.”

James returned to conscious awareness and found himself once again in the room with nine other people. His body was still trembling from head to foot, his face was streaked with tears and his hands were burning. As he unfolded his legs from the lotus position on the sofa and put his feet on the floor one of his teachers sat in front of him and held his ankles to help ground him back into this material world. He had been to the Light to help return a lost soul - the soul of Chief Running Bear of the Blackfoot Tribe of the Sioux Nation. This is where his search for answers had led him. He was being trained as a spirit release practitioner by the UK division of the Hickman Academy for Depossession.
James had previously thought that he had experienced anger, but never in his wildest dreams could he ever have imagined such a rage could exist in the breast of a man. He asked his teachers, and the rest of the class, if he could excuse himself. He put on his shoes and coat and stepped outside into the grey drizzle of a January afternoon and walked a little. He found himself at a pub a short distance from the house where the course was being held and bought himself a large scotch. Never before had he experienced such a powerful emotion and he needed time to recover. In fact it took James all of two weeks to recover properly. After the course had finished he had gone back to work, but he would feel the pain of the experience for a long time to come. Each night for two weeks he would experience, with tears streaming down his face, in diminishing strength, the grief of genocide, and the anger of Running Bear. But in parallel with the pain of the experience, he felt the peace of Running Bear’s ritual of forgiveness. At last he had some real answers. If the ability to forgive had the power to overcome the grief and rage of genocide then there was hope for the world after all. Forgiveness was the key.

James’s experience, in fact the whole philosophy behind the experience, could still be irrelevant in relation to the real world in which he lived and worked. Was what he had experienced real, or was it just a figment of his imagination, or the result of suggestion whilst in a hypnotic trance? Scepticism of the mystical is something the modern world of technology and medicine have taught us all, and James’s own scientific training in psychology was still at the opposite end of the spectrum to his own spiritual healing powers. His faith in his powers and his faith in God had been shattered by his failure to help xxxxx. But two weeks after the healing of Running Bear, James was attending his local spiritualist church, and the visiting medium came to him and said, “I have an Indian here for you. He is big and he wears a beautiful war bonnet. He is giving you his peace pipe and he is smiling. He says ‘thank you’.” It was then that James knew that what he had experienced had been real. His own consciousness, his spirit-self had actually been in the mysterious Light and he had been the carrier of the spirit consciousness of Running Bear. He had rescued the Chief and taken him home. James’s faith in the mysterious workings of the mind of God had been restored and he knew. It was not a belief any more – it was ‘the knowing’, and he was well on his way, going with the flow of the mysterious cycle that had begun a year and a half earlier. This was the cycle that broke all boundaries, and he was beginning to understand (unpublished).

Possession experiences are life-changing and take the experiencer into realms that are beyond the intellect. Writing in a style that demands the objectivity of the detached observer is completely different from conveying the subjective reality of experience, and this is just one of the difficulties in presenting data from anthropological or psychological studies. I would argue that Bowie’s method of cognitive and empathic engagement with
the possession experience needs to be expressed as an emotive experience and should not be transcribed or translated into academic terminology. To do so would deprive the experience of its meaning and reduce it to a dry and meaningless phenomenology.

References


