

D I S K U S

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On being a stranger in their midst

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ABSTRACT

I conduct my work and research as a stranger, rather than an outsider (following Simmel's distinction). When I began research I chose this stance as a methodological framework, partially due to my lack of personal affiliation to what I was studying. For my continuing research and work these reasons are reinforced by the requirements for ethical research of my employer. These are, however, not merely default positions; I have learned that being a stranger has research benefits.

In a sensitive field it can be helpful to become a trusted stranger rather than an outsider. The stranger is close enough to understand, yet in a contested milieu, the independence associated with a peripheral and essentially extraneous position (to the group's functioning) may be considered safe, and even imbued with integrity and credibility. Moreover, in a scenario where one may research several faith communities, it has the added benefit of potentially affording credibility in a milieu where affiliation (becoming an insider) can become a stigma, and limit other avenues of access. Finally, the stranger's perspective is helpful in taking a step back and analysing the wider social situation and dynamics in order to contextualise the research. But, of course, integrity and credibility have to be earned, and building rapport and reputation is a key step.

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When I joined the British Association for the Study of Religions' (BASR) panel entitled 'Interrogating integrity? Insider and outsider social research with faith based groups', about the insider/outsider debate among social scientists, I knew that I had something to say. The insider/outsider debate is considered to be passé by many, as research has shown the value of being an insider – faith and identity are no longer considered compromising research values. Nonetheless, my position on this panel was to be on the side of the outsider, although as I shall explain below, I am not merely an outsider. I am also a stranger. Georg Simmel described the stranger as a newcomer, 'the man who comes today and stays tomorrow, the potential wanderer'.¹ Whereas the outsider is 'other' rather than 'one of us', the stranger has the potential to, over time, become 'one of us', if the stranger is welcomed to do so and chooses to stay. The stranger may not plan on staying in the long run, but those who are hosting the stranger may not know this. In my case I think of the stranger as the person who arrived a while ago, and is planning on staying for the foreseeable future on a long-term lease. But before I elaborate on the stranger, I should explain that I am also a somewhat unusual academic.

My work at Inform combines academic research and public engagement (www.inform.ac). Inform is an independent charity that was founded in 1988 by Professor Eileen Barker with the support of the British Home Office and the mainstream Churches. It is based at the London School of Economics. The primary aim of Inform is to help enquirers by providing them with information that is as accurate, balanced, and up-to-date as possible about alternative religious, spiritual and esoteric movements. This is done by using social science methodology. This work necessarily makes the scope of my research wide, which means that I engage with a variety of religious groups and communities, their detractors, former members, and others whose lives and/or work might be affected by them. At the other end, the information has to be succinctly communicated to enquirers, who may include members of the general public, the media, lawyers, a range of government departments and police.

Whereas I may be an 'outsider' to the groups, communities and networks I encounter, my research and work for Inform places me firmly within the so-called 'cult scene'.² In the latter my status is somewhat more ambiguous, considering that the research and work I have been involved in has on occasion affected parts of the cult scene in some ways, directly or indirectly. Of course I would argue that my position within the cult scene is that of an academic, and I have other homes that are a better fit (such as institutional and academic networks). Yet I acknowledge that my presence (through research and work for Inform) also constitutes a presence within this cult scene. I am not arguing that I am a believer or 'cult member'; I am stating that my research and work place me actively, daily, within the social milieu in which I also conduct my research. I have not gone native, but I do spend much time in this milieu. Hence, I am of dual status. I am both an outsider (when researching individual groups, communities or networks of which I am

¹ See <http://www.cf.ac.uk/socsi/undergraduate/introsoc/simmel13.html>

² For more on the cult scene, see Barker 2001 and Beckford 1985.

not a member, follower, devotee or even believer) and a stranger (because I am, along with Inform, in the milieu, albeit not of the milieu).

Working at Inform is not significantly different from doing social science or even ethnographic research, except that the research field is wider than it is likely to be for most individual researchers.³ Consequently, in some cases the research may be quite superficial; there may be no need for in-depth research, there may be up-to-date and reliable experts on our network, or research access to the group may have been denied. In other cases Inform's original research may be extensive; there may be a need for in-depth knowledge, we may not be aware of existing experts, and/or there may be good access. In many cases research will continue, off and on, when access allows and when information is needed. The research is likely to include, when possible, content analysis of literature and online activity, questionnaires, interviews (by telephone or face-to-face), visits, and participant observation. The research is part of my day-to-day work, and my work is influenced by my day-to-day presence in the milieu. Although compared to some experts I may have only (very) superficial knowledge of many of the groups, the work and research, over time, amounts to an in-depth knowledge of the social processes and dynamics of the milieu of minority religious movements.

Approach

The academic approach is, however, very important. Religion is a sensitive topic, and the Internet a space where anyone can become an information-provider about beliefs and communities they love or hate. In cases where access is limited, and information scarce (no online presence, or published texts), triangulation may not be possible. A single voice may be the only information source. Yet, as long as it is established what kind of information is lacking (e.g. the group's own account), what has not been found (e.g. evidence for certain allegations), and the data that is available has been carefully evaluated (e.g. the available accounts do not come from a representative sample and have strong biases), then information that has been made available can be given context that enables some to better understand its value. It is important to establish and explain the value of certain data, and to understand that when dealing with different and varied accounts, the 'truth' does not necessarily lie in the middle. Social science methods provide valuable tools for researching and working in a sensitive and often controversial field where many accounts are contested.

Methodological agnosticism allows the researcher to note who believes what under what circumstances, and what the social consequences of particular beliefs might be, without passing theological judgement.⁴ It is the perfect tool for the stranger, as she is not relegated to the status of outsider by virtue of having an opposing or incompatible belief (such as atheism, or a distinct other

³ In the period April 2013-March 2014 Inform dealt with 296 enquiries concerning 96 different groups, including 21 enquiries about groups that we, at that time, classified as 'unknown'. There were also 19 enquiries about general themes/topics. For more details, see Inform's annual reports on <http://inform.ac/about-inform> (accessed 18/3/2015).

⁴ For a detailed discussion on methodological agnosticism, see Barker (1995).

religious belief). Agnosticism (at least in ethnography) allows for an ambiguity; insiders may see a possibility that this stranger may yet 'get it' and join the fold. For the stranger, methodological agnosticism allows for an open mindedness that enables engagement with possibilities. It allows a level of 'what if ...' rather than a pre-emptive negation of the beliefs, which encourages *verstehen*. The term *verstehen* was used by Max Weber to describe the social scientist's attempt to understand both the intention and the context of social action (Tucker 1965), hence to understand more than merely the human action in itself. Fiona Bowie refers to this level of engagement as cognitive empathetic engagement, and regards it essential in research that involves non-empirical beliefs, as it allows for participation in experiential aspects of beliefs without insisting they are scientifically viable (something the 'insiders' might not prioritise). In her words, it "...requires imagination in order to enter into the world of the other, to 'try it on for size'" (n.d. p.8). Remaining agnostic on the metaphysical aspects allows for a focus on social aspects, and striving for *verstehen* allows for a more holistic narrative that provides explanation and insight beyond mere social action. The stranger can observe and experience culture as an interpretive resource and report on internal narratives and intentions that contextualise social behaviour.

The Position

A stranger can become, by design or accidentally, involved in what happens within a certain milieu or community – the stranger could get caught up in disputes, accusations, blaming, scapegoating, conspiracist narratives, etc. Whereas the outsider is designated as 'other' and may never become familiar enough, the stranger has developed rapport, and occasionally some enduring relationships – she is more tied in. This can have positive consequences (it enables *verstehen*) and negative consequences (being pulled in to politics and disputes that may affect the rapport with certain parts of the milieu).

An essential aspect of the work of Inform is that we try to meet and interview people on all possible sides, representatives of the religious groups/communities, members, as well as former members, and critics. This can be tricky as occasionally some will refuse to meet if they know you have spoken with certain individuals 'on the other side'. (However over time they may change their minds, it is important to always keep the door open.) Although this position does not provide an in-depth inside perspective, we do report the in-depth inside perspectives of others. It also gives us access to outsider perspectives, and enables a decent understanding of a variety of views and perspectives. Ongoing contact provides the opportunity to keep an eye on changes and trends over time. This ongoing contact and presence, however, is also what distinguishes the stranger from the outsider.

Both the outsider and the stranger may navigate the cult scene and observe at length without offering advice, opinions or lobbying for any one issue. However, the stranger is more likely to invite questions about her allegiances, viewpoint, and objectivity as a result of being a more permanent presence within the locale. Inform receives funding from government bodies and mainstream churches, often raising questions about positionality – and in some cases even encouraging conspiracist narratives (which is not entirely

unusual in this milieu). Relative neutrality can be threatening to some (if you're not with them, you must be against them), and whereas the outsider can easily be marginalised as 'other', the stranger can be faced with frequent questioning in regards to beliefs and allegiances – 'where exactly do you stand on this?'

The position of the stranger, being in the milieu but not of the milieu, can be advantageous in some cases. The stance of being nobody's friend and nobody's enemy brings a sense of neutrality – it may even engender a sense of trust. A well-established and proven position of independence can be imbued with integrity and credibility. For example, those we engage with know we look for other angles and narratives, hence that we speak with all sides. Often this is, initially, considered a problem. Yet we have found that, over time, many have come to trust us (and our rules of confidentiality) and respect our position. (Although in some cases this is an ongoing effort, with good and bad moments.) People might even open up and say things they would not say to those closest to them. They know that you have in-depth knowledge about their community or situation – the stranger can become a trusted confidante.

Risks and Challenges

In one case, Inform had become a trusted avenue for ex-members of a guru, and as word spread within online discussion groups that information can be given to Inform in confidence, more ex-members got in touch. Over time it became clear that sexual abuse had taken place, and, with permission of one of the victims, Inform contacted police in regards to her case.⁵ It then came to light that the police already had a case against this guru, with a few victims involved. We alerted our contacts, and several more women joined this case. A significant number of our contacts did not want to be formally involved in this case. In some cases they gave Inform permission to use redacted information to pass on to police to help build the case, in other cases they preferred to steer clear altogether. Having good relations with the police officers involved, and a relationship of trust with the ex-members, helped Inform collect information that was vital to the police investigation. The guru was arrested. Then the Crown Prosecution Service joined, and it became clear to them that Inform had significant amounts of information about this case. Against the advice of the police officer involved they summonsed Inform to court for full disclosure of all files relating to this guru. As this would have breached the anonymity and confidentiality of well over a dozen contacts, over half of whom did not want to be involved with this criminal case, Inform refused to disclose files. At great risk and cost we fought the summons in court to maintain our contacts' rights to anonymity and confidentiality, and Inform won. The judge sided with Inform in what he referred to as a legal 'fishing expedition', which he deemed unnecessary considering we had already shown more than willing to help this case by providing all the information we could.

The fact that we speak 'with the other side' can be very threatening to some, and this can have a significant cooling effect for some rapports – in some

⁵This case is also discussed in Katz (2014) and Van Eck Duymaer van Twist (2015).

cases there are concerted efforts to get us to change our story or not present our information. In the case mentioned above, the guru's legal defence constructed an argument at a certain chapter in the legal case that Inform was at the heart of a conspiracy to discredit the guru in an effort to further our 'anti-cult' agenda and curtail his religious work. They argued this was part of a religious persecution, and we were at the heart of it. Other groups have threatened legal action in efforts to stop us providing information about them to enquirers. Inform's position within the cult scene has been considered controversial by others as well, not only by religious groups within this scene. Questions have been raised in Parliament,⁶ and there has been much debate over whether Inform is too close to 'the cults' to be 'objective'. Such arguments are often supported by organisations that actively work to curb the practices of what they consider to be a social problem: immoral 'cults'. As reported in *The Telegraph*:⁷

Inform is the result of research carried out by Professor Eileen Barker at the London School of Economics. It has been criticised by other cult watchdogs, including Mr Sackville's own Family Action Information Resource (Fair), because she refuses to condemn all "new religions" as cults. "The Government is taking non-judgemental advice as an excuse for its non-action on cults," says Sackville.

But Professor Barker is short with her critics. "We are not cult apologists," she says. "People make a lot of noise without doing serious research - so much so that they can end up sounding as closed to reason as the cults they're attacking. Besides, I imagine Fair was disappointed not to get our funding."

But such dynamics, although always present on some level, are specific to certain groups or communities, and can change over time. For example, neo-pagan groups in this country felt besieged by associations with Satanism and the occult during the 'Satanic ritual abuse' scare in the 1980s and 1990s.⁸ They began using Inform (and eventually trusting us) in their battle to be distinguished from so-called Satanists and occult practices. Pagan associations and individuals would frequently ask the media and institutions to contact Inform for information, suspecting that their insider voice would be considered too biased. Such a development happened in other cases as well, groups who had initially been wary or even antagonistic towards Inform eventually decided that it was better to have dialogue, as we were fairer than the tabloids – and even though we would not say exactly what they wanted us to say, it was at least more balanced and representative than the other information out there.

Concluding Thoughts

⁶ See discussions on Hansard, for example

<http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1989/mar/13/religious-cults-government-funding> (retrieved 18/3/2015).

⁷ See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/4253550/Cult-advisers-in-clash-over-clampdown.html> (retrieved 18/3/2015).

⁸ For more information on the Satanic ritual abuse moral panic, see La Fontaine 1998.

Whereas the stranger tends to have more credibility than the outsider, and is more likely to build a constructive rapport and reach a good level of *verstehen*, she is also more likely to be questioned on issues of positionality ('where do you stand', 'but 'what do *you* believe'). Being in the milieu, but not of the milieu, means that the stranger can get caught up in a variety of social dynamics, some of which can be stressful and problematic. But although this can be uncomfortable, it is part of the research, and part of what helps build a real understanding of the social environment that the religious groups navigate. Such knowledge helps build an understanding of the context in which such communities are acting and reacting. Understanding this, and one's role in it, is an essential part of research in a complex field.

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