

D I S K U S

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Introduction

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ABSTRACT

Research among spirits, ghosts and deities is the topic of this special issue of *Diskus* about studying non-ordinary realities. The articles were developed from presentations delivered at the annual conference of the British Association for Study of Religions held at the Open University in Milton Keynes in September 2014.

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Though anthropologists have discussed the study of experiences “behind the veil” of non-ordinary reality since decades (e.g. Harner, 1982), it is still regarded as contested field. On one side it is not for us to judge as Lewis already wrote (1971). But, as Glass-Coffin recently wrote in the *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* (2013) cultural relativism has ‘allowed a side-stepping by the more fundamental question of the transpersonal’. Anthropologists tend to contextualise the local accounts, ‘domesticating and dismissing them, colonializing knowledge even as they claim to honour the truth of the Other’ (2013, p. 117).

In this special issue we discuss different ways to look at this problem which is at the cutting edge between anthropology and study of religions. It is based on a panel at the 2014 annual conference of the British Association for Study of Religions held at the Open University in Milton Keynes co-organised and chaired by David Wilson and Bettina Schmidt. The key presenter at this panel was Fiona Bowie. Her article gives a general approach to the study of non-ordinary reality through a form of cognitive, empathetic engagement. Linked to narratives of personal transformation Bowie shows us a way to analyse encounters with non-ordinary realities. She argues that when we are studying psychic phenomena the narratives of those involved are often central to the research. Whereas direct evidence or data of non-ordinary realities can be

hard to come by, the often transformative effects of encounters with spirits, or of an awareness of consciousness existing outside the physical body, are amenable to study. Transformational encounters often form a key element in the narratives of research subjects, and these narratives, both published and oral, provide a rich source of data. Her lecture inspired various discussions, on and off the panel, which is also visible in this special issue of *Diskus*. Several of the authors refer to her work while others engage with her approach in a more indirect manner.

The issue begins with methodological discussions of the study of non-ordinary entities. Jack Hunter presents an overview of the fields of transpersonal anthropology, the anthropology of consciousness and, the most recent development in this lineage, paranthropology. After outlining the contributions of these fields to the development of a new approach to the investigation of so-called non-ordinary realities Hunter highlights the need for ethnographers to participate in the transpersonal practices and experiences. With link to the work of Fiona Bowie and Edith Turner, Hunter argues that one must learn to 'see as the Native sees' in order to truly grasp the experiential foundations of religious and spiritual belief, and escape from the hegemonic dismissal of alternative ontologies.

Jonathan Tuckett leads the discussion in a different direction. He argues that scholars have come to use many terms to describe beings that to a certain mind frame are difficult to grasp. However, all these terms despite their laudable attempts to escape older prejudices nevertheless fail to justify themselves as social scientific concepts. Each of them implicitly appeals to a conception of reality that it is presumed that the "believers" under study have in some deviated from. Based on a phenomenological analysis Tuckett argues that this is a vestige of rationalism, the view that there is only one form of rationality against which all others are to be measured. The continued use of such concepts fails not only to appreciate the multiplicity of rationalities but also to meet the standards of social scientific rationality.

The following articles link the methodological discussion to specific case studies. The article by Bettina Schmidt looks at mediumship within the context of Spiritism in Brazil. She discusses the concept of semi-consciousness within the academic and the emic debate. Mediumship, hence the communication between humans the spirit world, is the core of Spiritism. In anthropological literature it is often categorised as altered states of consciousness, however, people experiencing it reject these categorizations. Referring to interviews with Brazilian spiritists the article discusses their interpretation within the wider academic discourse surrounding this kind of experience.

Beth Singler's article uses the case of the Indigo Children to show an alternative inspired by the Indigo Children's approaches to non-ordinary entities. Her articles highlights that the issues that arise around the study of, and interaction with, self-described enlightened beings in the case of the Indigo Children are parallel to those around studying more familiar beings such as spirits, ghosts and deities by the scholars.

The last two articles make interesting methodological contribution to the debate. David Wilson's article which looks at spiritualist mediumship and the debate on association and disassociation argues that in Western medical tradition, mediumship has often been characterised as a form of illness. This attitude persists but has become more sophisticated; for example, eighteenth century comparisons with epilepsy might now be replaced with suggestions of dissociation. While in some cases this can be seen as positive these analyses remain opposed to mediums' own accounts, which involve the development of relationships with distinct, real others, and not with 'other' aspects of the medium's own personality. He suggests therefore that comparisons between mediumship and dissociation can, at best, only partially illuminate.

Fiona Bowie's article concludes the issue. Her work focuses on her research on afterlife which she uses to illustrate the cognitive, empathetic engagement outlined above.

Bibliography

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