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"Between Realness and Unrealness": Anthropology, Parapsychology and the Ontology of Non-Ordinary Realities

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ABSTRACT

This article 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.

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No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded (James, 2004, p. 335).

Just as it is possible to have any number of geometries other than the Euclidean which give an equally perfect account of space configurations, so it is possible to have descriptions of the universe, all equally valid, that do not contain our familiar contrasts of time and space (Whorf, 1956, p. 58)

Introduction

This paper gives a brief overview of some of the dominant approaches to the anthropological study of non-ordinary realities (Harner, 2012, pp. 48-49), specifically in relation to the paranormal, defined as referring to experiences and phenomena 'considered impossible according to the established scientific world-view.'¹ It will examine some of the deficiencies in the dominant

¹ <http://www.spr.ac.uk/page/glossary-paranormal>

paradigms of Western academia in relation to its engagement with the paranormal, before suggesting some alternative frameworks for conceptualising the ontology of non-ordinary realities. This paper will also discuss the historical development of an approach to the study of paranormal experiences, phenomena and beliefs that integrates the findings and methodologies of both anthropology and parapsychology, a discipline explicitly concerned with the ontology of the paranormal.

The problem of the paranormal as an area of anthropological investigation

As an area of investigation, the paranormal poses some quite specific problems for anthropology. Perhaps most prominent is the ontological problem, that is whether or not paranormal phenomena are in some sense 'real,' and whether paranormal experiences can be said to be 'of something' with an existence independent of the human psyche.² The problem emerges as a consequence of anthropology's embeddedness within the wider academic/scientific enterprise, which, on the whole, takes materialist positivism as its default ontological framework, often to the exclusion of alternate frameworks (Sheldrake, 2012).

According to such a perspective, which actively constructs itself in opposition to the 'supernatural,' the 'non-ordinary' and the 'irrational' (Comte, 1853), the paranormal simply cannot exist, except perhaps as the result of cognitive illusion, or psychological and physiological pathology. This position, of course, contradicts the beliefs of a vast proportion of the world's cultures (as well as subcultures within mainstream 'Western' cultures), where we find possession by spirits, witchcraft, sorcery and shamanism, belief in ghosts, gods and angels, amongst other magico-religious practices and beliefs, still very much alive (Castro *et al.*, 2014).

This begs the question of how the ethnographer should interpret and report the paranormal beliefs and experiences of their informants. Should we accept our informants' accounts as truthful, delusional, or as deceptive, or should we attempt to explain these experiences in *emic* or *etic* terms? Such problems also arise in the context of the ethnographer's own experiences in the field (Young & Goulet, 1994). How should ethnographers report *their own* anomalous experiences, should they occur, while engaged in fieldwork? It is hoped that some of the ideas explored here might point in the direction of novel solutions to these problems. We will now briefly survey some of the major theoretical and methodological approaches to such issues.

Reductionist Approaches

In keeping with the dominant ontological framework and scientific methodologies of Western academia, most approaches to the study of the

² Though this in itself is a problematic cut-off point. Carl Jung, for instance, speculated that the 'psyche' might extend far beyond the confines of the individual (Jung, 2007).

paranormal, religion and the supernatural have tended towards reductionism, offering explanations in terms of processes that *do not* pose a threat to the established mechanisms of material and social science - functionalism, pathology and psychopathology, and psychological and cognitive reductionism - even if these abstract explanations fail to *fully explain*, or even *adequately describe*, the beliefs and experiences of our informants (Turner, 1993).

This is a problem that cannot be ignored, especially when reductionist models are taken as the *definitive* account of a particular magico-religious phenomenon. As an illustration of this problem, John Bowker gives the example of a functionalist interpretation of funerary rites. Bowker highlights the underlying assumptions of functionalist (and other reductive) approaches, which, he suggests, prevent the development of satisfactory frameworks for conceptualising the 'non-ordinary' components of culture and practice. He writes:

The fundamental mistake of social functional explanations conceived as primary is that they take as axiomatic [the] argument that funerals benefit the living not the dead [...] But this is an over rationalistic comment to the effect that the dead clearly cannot be benefitted, because in the twentieth century we happen to know that nothing continues through death (Bowker, 1973, p. 69)

Social functionalism assumes that there are no spiritual beings or forces, and that the only meaningful way to understand social reality is through social processes (usually unconscious) that function to maintain social cohesion. But is this assumption valid? Can we be *certain* that there are no non-physical entities or forces? Or that social cohesion is *all that matters*? This same problem applies to any number of approaches to cultural practices with an unseen or non-ordinary component. The beliefs and *emic* understandings of fieldwork informants are dismissed from the outset in favour of an interpretation that does not contradict the dominant (*etic*) academic worldview, which naturally raises the question of what the ethnographer is actually describing - how can social functional accounts be considered relevant, or true, to the lives of their informants if the central component of their beliefs and practices is negated from the first? Are we presenting an accurate account of an *emic* perspective, or simply describing what our own imposed framework permits us to describe, forcing us to ignore what really matters to our informants? This tendency within the social sciences is demonstrated particularly clearly in the following extract from the writings of A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (1881-1955), one of the founders of structural functionalism:

The usual way to look at religions is to regard them as bodies of erroneous beliefs and illusory practices [...] We do not believe that the rain making rites of savage tribes really produce rain [...] (1968, p. 143)

It comes down, then, to a matter of belief. *We do not believe what they believe, so we must develop a theory to explain their beliefs in terms that do not contradict our own beliefs.* To this end cognitive approaches seek to

explain supernatural beliefs as arising from biologically innate cognitive schemata, which developed to serve evolutionarily adaptive functions in our ancestors (Boyer, 2001). Similarly, psychological theories explain supernatural beliefs as the result of human beings trying to make sense of the world around them through the creation of invisible, ultimately imaginary, entities and forces as causal explanations (Tylor, 1930). Pathological models understand supernatural beliefs and experiences as the product of either physiological or psychological disorders, automatically reducing the supernatural to something that needs to be cured rather than explored.

As parsimonious as these explanations may seem, however, they nevertheless ignore some key dimensions of the non-ordinary, compromising their status as *complete explanations*. Significantly, they ignore the direct experiences of informants, which often seem too complex and meaningful to be accounted for in such simplistic terms (Halloy, 2010). Reductionist accounts of the supernatural within anthropology also frequently ignore the experimental parapsychological evidence for paranormal phenomena, which may suggest that certain magico-religious practices actually employ, or at least attempt to employ, psi phenomena, real or imagined (de Martino, 1968; Winkelmann, 1982; Giesler, 1984, 1985; Luke, 2010). Similarly, pathological interpretations tend to ignore evidence for the therapeutic benefits of certain paranormal beliefs and experiences, especially in regard to spirit mediumship (Moreira-Almeida *et al.*, 2008, p. 420; Roxburgh & Roe, 2011, p. 294), which would appear to refute dominant pathological models. At the very least there appears to be more going on here than the standard explanatory frameworks seem to allow for. I am not trying to suggest that evolutionary, cognitive, intellectualist, psychological and physiological factors are not involved at all, quite the contrary, but am rather suggesting that these might not represent *all that is going on*.

Bracketing Approaches

Bracketing approaches to the study of religion, and the supernatural more generally, have been especially popular within the social sciences because they allow for the rigorous academic study of the supernatural without the need to consider the ontological status of the objects of religious and supernatural belief. The question of the reality of the objects of belief is simply 'bracketed' so that attention can be paid to the social, political and functional aspects of a particular belief system. This is, in essence, the bedrock of the relativist framework, whereby the question of the ontological status of a set of cultural beliefs is bracketed out in favour of examining their 'social reality' - all social realities are valid in their own right, but they are *purely social*. This bracketed approach is summarised by E.E. Evans-Pritchard (1902-1973) in his *Theories of Primitive Religion*, specifically in relation to the question of the reality of spiritual beings. He writes:

As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration (Evans-Pritchard, 1972, p. 17).

A particularly good example of just such an approach in action can be found in the recent work of anthropologist Nils Bubandt (2009), whose ethnographic research in North Maluku incorporated the testimony of spirits embodied through traditional spirit mediums. In North Maluku the spirits of deceased elders and political leaders still play a significant role in contemporary political life when they are brought back to offer their views, opinions and expertise on important matters. Bubandt argues, therefore, that spirits ought to be treated as 'methodologically real' in the field setting, he writes that this allows the ethnographer to get on 'with the business of studying the social and political reality of spirits' and allows for the recognition that 'the invocation of spirits does make a difference in the field' (Bubandt, 2009, p. 298). Bubandt does not suggest, however, that spirits necessarily be thought of as ontologically real (indeed he specifically contrasts his approach with that advocated by Edith Turner, see below). His approach is purely pragmatic, but it does overcome some of the issues associated with Western academia's problem with non-ordinary reality, simply by bracketing out the question of whether it is real or not, and examining its social consequences.

Much as with the reductionist approaches discussed above, however, there are also limitations with bracketing approaches. Northcote (2004), for example, argues that the very process of 'bracketing' necessarily forces the ethnographer to make an ontological decision of their own: they must decide for themselves which aspects of the cultural practice they are investigating are 'normal,' purely social and so amenable to investigation, and which are 'supernormal' and so must be bracketed out (Northcote, 2004, p. 89). He then argues that, for those who are enmeshed within a 'supernormal' reality (our potential fieldwork informants), even the social dimensions of life are understood to be directed by non-ordinary entities and forces, and so the two spheres cannot logically be separated in an ethnographic account. Sociologist Peter Berger explains this inseparability of the ordinary and the non-ordinary in the field:

Whatever else these phenomena may be they will *also* be human projections, aspects of human history, social constructions undertaken by human beings (Berger, 1971, p. 65)

Bracketing, then, requires the ethnographer to impose their own *emic* ontological limitations on the beliefs and practices of their informants, arbitrarily dividing up an integrated holistic system, or 'synergy' (Wilson, 1987, p. ii). So, are there alternative ways of approaching the ontology of the non-ordinary that do not rely on bracketing, or dividing our informants' coherent models of reality? The following section will briefly survey three epistemological positions that leave open the possibility for alternative ontological systems parallel to that of Western materialist-scientific-rationalism. It is the authors hope that these ideas might point towards novel directions for future experimental ethnographic research and writing in the anthropology of religion.

Fostering Ontological Uncertainty: Active Agnosticism

The epistemologies outlined in this section pave the way for a destabilisation of ontological certainty, which could conceivably help in the development of a more culturally sensitive and ontologically receptive approach to non-ordinary reality, an approach that does not rely on bracketing as a means of engaging with the supernatural 'from a safe distance.'

Intermediatism

Charles Fort (1874-1932) was famous in the early decades of the Twentieth Century as a collector of accounts of strange occurrences, from apparent poltergeist activity through to mysterious flying objects and rains of frogs, which he found ample evidence for in newspapers and scientific journals, and which he compiled into four extraordinary books (Fort, 2008). In order to accommodate such unusual phenomena (which he called 'damned facts' because of their outright rejection by mainstream science), Fort developed the philosophy of 'intermediatism.' Fort defined intermediatism as a position in which 'nothing is real, but [...] nothing is unreal [...] all phenomena are approximations in one way between realness and unrealness' (Fort, 2008, p. 14; Steinmeyer, 2008, p. 170; Kripal, 2014, p. 259). In this characteristically playful way, Fort sought to deconstruct the rigid boundaries between the real and the unreal, and instead placed all phenomena, from the mundane to the extraordinary, on a sliding spectrum where all things fluctuate between the real and the unreal. From this perspective nothing can be said to be entirely 'real' or 'unreal,' everything is in flux.

E-Prime and The New Agnosticism

Drawing on Alfred Korzybski's (1879-1950) writings on general semantics, and taking inspiration from Benjamin Lee Whorf's (1897-1941) work on language and the construction of reality, the novelist and philosopher Robert Anton Wilson (1932-2007) sought to implement and popularise the use of E-Prime, a mode of using the English language that rejects the use of the verb 'to be' in all of its forms. In this way, E-Prime avoids definitive statements of certainty in favour of uncertainty, and a capacity for change (Wilson, no date). For example, rather than saying 'The sky is blue,' E-Prime would say 'The sky appears blue to me.' Wilson also proposes what he calls a 'new agnosticism,' sometimes also called 'model agnosticism' or 'creative agnosticism,' he writes:

In this state we "are" model-relativists [...] and [are] actively creative; all perceptions (gambles) are actively known as gambles. We consciously seek to *edit less* and tune in more, and we look especially for events that do not neatly fit our model, since they will teach us to make a better one tomorrow, and an even better one the day after. We are not dominated by the "Real" Universe [...] (Wilson, 1987, p. 231).

Like Fort's sliding spectrum between the real and the unreal, Wilson suggests that all perceptions are gambles, and our models to explain them are

ultimately gambles too. Wil son's 'new agnosticism' is an epistemology of probabilities, uncertainty and indeterminism.

Possibilianism

Possibilianism is a recent term coined and popularised by neuroscientist and author David Eagleman. According to Eagleman's possibilian philosophy, which seeks to inspire creativity and exploratory wonder in the scientific enterprise, scientific researchers are encouraged to enter into the 'possibility space,' a frame of mind in which the researcher celebrates 'the vastness of our ignorance [and is] unwilling to commit to any particular made-up story, and take[s] pleasure in entertaining multiple hypotheses' (Jansen, 2010). Again, this playfulness in considering multiple possibilities is perfectly suited to the study of the paranormal, and resonates well with Charles Fort's intermediatist philosophy and Robert Anton Wilson's implementation of E-Prime and the 'New Agnosticism.' According to this perspective, all models are understood as 'made up stories' (scientific or otherwise), and all are open to creative and critical exploration.

Although only a very brief sketch of some quite complex ideas, some of these frameworks for the destabilisation of ontological certainty could be of practical use for the academic and ethnographic study of non-ordinary realities, allowing us to engage with them on their own terms without the need to impose arbitrary brackets, or to distinguish between what *is* suitable and what *is not* suitable subject matter for social-scientific research. It would be intriguing to see further experiments with these ideas in ethnographic writing and to further explore what their implications might be for theory construction. The next section of this paper will briefly outline the historical development of *paranthropology* as a means of investigating non-ordinary reality, an emerging field that is particularly well suited to an exploration and implementation of some of these ideas.

A Brief History of Paranthropology

The call for a cross-pollination of anthropology and parapsychology is not a particularly new idea, indeed it has precedents throughout the history of anthropology (see Schroll & Schwartz, 2005; Hunter, 2009; Luke, 2010; Laughlin, 2012), beginning with the efforts of folklorist Andrew Lang (1844-1912) in the late Nineteenth Century to promote what he termed 'comparative psychical research.' Lang saw distinct similarities, across both time and space, in narrative accounts of paranormal experiences and phenomena, which led him to conclude that something more than mere 'hallucination,' 'delusion' and 'trickery' is going on. He wrote, for instance, of similarities in descriptions of apparent spirit manifestations cross-culturally:

[...] from the Australians [...] in the bush, who hear raps when the spirits come, to ancient Egypt, and thence to Greece, and last, in our own time, in a London suburb, similar experiences, real or imaginary, are explained by the same hypothesis. No 'survival' can be more odd and striking,

none more illustrative of the permanence, in human nature, of certain elements (Lang, 1894, p. 19).

Lang considered these cross-cultural similarities to be particularly important observations (not least because they seemed to provide independent, cross-cultural, evidence for certain phenomena), and as such he was critical of both his contemporaries in anthropology and members of the *Society for Psychical Research*, for not sharing ideas and insights: the anthropologists were unwilling to take the literature of psychical research seriously, and the psychical researchers were unwilling to investigate accounts of ostensibly paranormal phenomena documented in the ethnographic literature. In spite of Lang's pioneering efforts, it wasn't until much later in the Twentieth Century that a real interdisciplinary dialogue finally began to take shape (see Swanton, 1953; Weiant, 1960; Huxley, 1967).

In 1968 a posthumously published book by Italian philosopher and anthropologist Ernesto de Martino (1908–1965) presented a synthesis of the findings of anthropology and parapsychology. De Martino was an early advocate of interdisciplinary collaboration in anthropology, and some of his research was funded by grants from the Parapsychology Foundation in New York (Ferrari, 2014, p. 21). One of his most significant observations with regard to the paranormal was that laboratory investigations of psi phenomena regularly ignore the emotional and environmental contexts within which psi experiences naturally occur. He wrote that 'in the laboratory, the drama of the dying man who appears [...] to a relative or friend, is reduced to an oft repeated experiment – one that tries to transmit to the mind of a subject the image of a playing card, chosen at random.' This, he suggests, represents 'an almost complete reduction of the historical stimulus that is at work in the purely spontaneous occurrence of such phenomena' (de Martino, 1968). In other words; the drama of real life is ignored in the parapsychological laboratory experiment. It is precisely at this juncture, so de Martino suggests, that the ethnographic methodology of anthropology succeeds in illuminating the nature of the paranormal as embedded within social life. Specifically, ethnographic accounts can document the social drama in which ostensible psi experiences and phenomena manifest in their most elaborate forms, i.e. the socio-cultural conditions within which such experiences most frequently occur (whether or not they are genuinely 'paranormal'). De Martino's contribution to the development of an anthropological approach to the paranormal was an important one, though it is very often overlooked by contemporary Anglo-American researchers, primarily because of the scarcity of English translations of his work.

Interestingly, as a slight side note, in 1969 the famed anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901-1978) was the main driving force behind the incorporation of the *Parapsychological Association* into the *American Academy of Sciences*. Mead had taken part in parapsychological laboratory experiments using Zener cards with psychologist Gardner Murphy (1895-1979) in the 1950s, and was particularly interested in understanding the social and psychological dynamics of psychic sensitives, and so was keen to see parapsychology taken seriously as a valid area of scientific inquiry. Like de Martino, Mead saw the potential for

research into the socio-cultural and psychological conditions that give rise to ostensible psi experiences.

Other significant contributions to this developing trend in anthropology were later published in the book *Extrasensory Ecology* (1974), edited by Joseph K. Long (inspired partly by his own unusual experiences while conducting fieldwork in Jamaica in the 1960s), and in another important edited volume published by the *Parapsychology Foundation* in the same year (Angoff & Barth, 1974). Both books brought together papers from leading theorists in anthropology and parapsychology and were groundbreaking in their presentation of a seriously reasoned anthropological evaluation of the evidence from parapsychology. Both books took seriously the implications of the parapsychological data for theory development in anthropology, with contributors from both sides of the paranormal debate, and were the seeds for what would eventually emerge as the anthropology of consciousness in the 1980s (Schroll & Schwartz, 2005). Indeed, Joseph K. Long served as the president of the *Association for Transpersonal Anthropology* (1980-81), and for the *Association for the Anthropological Study of Consciousness* (1984-86), which immediately preceded the emergence of the anthropology of consciousness.

In 1989 the *Society for the Anthropology of Consciousness* was accepted as a member of the *American Anthropological Association*, and has subsequently developed as an anthropological sub-discipline with a stated interest in altered states of consciousness and consciousness studies, shamanic, religious, and spiritual traditions, psychoactive substances, philosophical, symbolic, and linguistic studies, and anomalous experiences (<http://www.sacaaa.org/>). It could be argued that the roots of the anthropology of consciousness go right back to the early pioneering work of E.B. Tylor and Andrew Lang, whose interests in the experiential origins of supernatural beliefs set a clear precedent for the movement.

The anthropology of consciousness also has roots in slightly more recent trends in intellectual thought, including specifically transpersonal psychology (cf. Lajoie & Shapiro, 1992), and, slightly later, transpersonal anthropology (Schroll & Schwartz, 2005, pp. 6-24). Transpersonal anthropologist Charles Laughlin defines transpersonalism as 'a movement in science towards seeing experiences had in life, that somehow go beyond the boundaries of ordinary ego-consciousness, as data' (Laughlin, 2012, pp. 70-74). Such experiences may include any number of ostensibly paranormal experiences and alterations of consciousness, as well as including more common (though not necessarily any less meaningful) experiences such as dreaming (Laughlin, 2011; Young, 2012), *deja vu*, synchronistic coincidences and so on.

Typical methods in the anthropology of consciousness include active and immersive participation in rituals and other performances, and a deliberate attempt to attain the states of consciousness that are important to the particular society under investigation. This might include, for example, consuming culturally significant psychoactive substances (cf. Jokic, 2008), or participating in other forms of consciousness alteration and ritual in order to

move towards a comprehension of the 'experiential' component of alternate worldviews. Indeed, Charles Laughlin has defined the transpersonal anthropologist as one who is 'capable of participating in transpersonal experience; that is, capable of both attaining whatever extraordinary experiences and phases of consciousness enrich the [socio-cultural] system, and relating these experiences to [...] patterns of symbolism, cognition and practice found in religions and cosmologies all over the planet' (Laughlin, 1997). Laughlin's broader 'biogenetic structuralist' approach has also gone on to inspire other anthropologists, notably Michael Winkelman, who has applied similar methodologies to the study of shamanic practices and experiences (Winkelman, 2000). Winkelman has also put forward the suggestion that the anthropological debate over magic might benefit from parapsychological insights - essentially suggesting the possibility that magical systems around the world might be tapping into psi for their efficacy (Winkelman, 1982).

Other approaches to the study of the transpersonal and paranormal within a broadly anthropological framework have also developed. Patric Giesler, for example, has proposed a methodology for investigating the social and cultural factors involved in the manifestation of psi phenomena, as and when they occur in the field, which he terms 'psi-in-process.' Such an approach attempts to overcome the limitations of classical laboratory based parapsychological research by conducting experiments in the field, as de Martino had earlier suggested, with minimal reduction of the natural environmental setting. Giesler's own research has, for instance, investigated psi phenomena in the context of Afro-Brazilian spirit possession rituals using standard parapsychological tests. For example, in an experiment with mediums from the religious groups Candomble, Caboclo and Umbanda, Giesler modified parapsychologist Helmut Schmidt's classic random number generator psychokinesis (PK) experiments by using culturally meaningful target symbols rather than standard Euro-American symbols (which had little relevance to Giesler's experimental participants). Giesler's results were significantly above chance and were suggestive of PK (mental influence on physical systems), albeit on a small scale (Giesler, 1985). Such an experimental approach takes a significant step away from anthropology's more traditional bracketing out of questions of ontology, indeed Giesler takes the opposite perspective and suggests that:

[...] one of the purposes of anthropology is to explain the ontology, development, and function of the beliefs, practices, and claims of magico-religious experiences [...] it should assume that psi *could* exist and then proceed etically on that assumption (Giesler, 1984, pp. 287-328).

Another particularly important book in bringing about a new anthropological approach to the paranormal, and specifically in taking the extraordinary experiences of ethnographers themselves seriously, was David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet's *Being Changed by Cross-Cultural Encounters* (1994). In their introduction Young and Goulet suggest that their book attempts to do three important things, which have direct relevance to our subject matter here, they are:

(1) [to] provide personal accounts by anthropologists who have taken their informants' extraordinary experiences seriously or who have had extraordinary experiences themselves, (2) [to] develop the beginnings of a theoretical framework which will help facilitate an understanding of such experiences, and (3) [to] explore the issue of how such experiences can be conveyed and explained to a 'scientifically-oriented' audience in such a way that they are not automatically dismissed without a fair hearing (Young & Goulet, 1994, p. 12).

A more recent development is the notion of *paranthropology*, a term first coined by the linguist Roger W. Wescott (1925-2000) in Joseph K. Long's *Extrasensory Ecology*, but more recently expanded upon (see Hunter, 2012, 2012b and 2015 for further elaboration). In many ways, *paranthropology* takes Young and Goulet's introductory comments as its starting point and develops them through the incorporation of parapsychological insights and the approaches and methodologies employed by transpersonal anthropologists and anthropologists of consciousness. In particular *paranthropology* takes inspiration from the experiential anthropology of Edith Turner (1992; 1998), who has emphasised the importance of immersive participation and direct experience in understanding the 'non-ordinary.' Fiona Bowie's notion of 'cognitive empathetic engagement,' has also been particularly influential.

Anthropologist Fabian Graham differentiates *paranthropology* from more traditional methods in the anthropology of religion according to the way in which the two approaches relate to the *objects* of religious and paranormal beliefs. While the anthropology of religion has tended to focus primarily on systems of religious *belief*, bracketing out or negating the ontological status of the objects of such beliefs, a paranthropological approach accepts the *possibility* that the objects of supernatural beliefs *may* have some form of independent ontological reality, and proceeds from that position. Graham writes:

[...] paranthropology [defines] itself in relation to the phenomena themselves, and not [in relation] to the belief systems, scientific or religious, that have evolved to support the phenomena (Graham, 2012, pp. 20-21).

Paranthropology, therefore, takes a bold step in attempting to interpret systems of supernatural belief from the perspective of those who subscribe to them, from the perspective of direct experience and engagement with the phenomena themselves. In studies of spirit mediumship, for example, a paranthropologist will take seriously their informants beliefs about, and experiences of, spirits in an attempt to gain a more rounded appreciation of what such beliefs and experiences mean (see Blanes & Espirito Santo, 2013, and Hunter & Luke, 2014) for ethnographies that attempt to do this). Fabian Graham's research, for example, has involved in-depth interviews with Underworld deities in traditional Chinese spirit mediumship practices (Graham, 2014).

Further to this, and in line with the immersive approach recommended by Edith Turner, and transpersonal anthropologists such as Charles Laughlin, the paranthropologist will attempt to participate, as far as possible, in the rites, rituals and performances under study in order to develop an 'insider,' or at least 'near-insider,' perspective (Bowie, 2013). A truly rounded study of spirit possession, for instance, cannot be complete without an appreciation of its experiential and sensory dimensions (Pierini, 2014), which certainly play a central role in the development of traditions of practice and belief (Hufford, 1982; Shushan, 2009). Such an approach might also fall under the banner of what parapsychologist David Luke has called 'first-person parapsychology' (Luke, 2012a). My own research amongst trance mediums in Bristol, for instance, involved my participation in mediumship development sessions, during which I had certain experiences that *felt*, at the *very least*, as though a portion of my body (my left arm) was occupied and controlled by 'something that was not me' (Hunter, 2011, pp. 138-139). These kinds of experiences demand our serious attention if such practices and beliefs are to be understood in any meaningful way. They cannot be ignored.

It is at this juncture that anthropology and parapsychology might consider swapping notes. For instance, parapsychological research has found links between the strength of psi effects in the laboratory and the beliefs of experimental participants, with strong belief in psi producing stronger psi effects in the laboratory (cf. Schmeidler, 1948; Batchelder, 1984; Smith, 2003). This *might* go some way to explaining the intensity of the anomalous experiences reported by ethnographic fieldworkers immersed in magico-religious cultural systems. For example, Bruce Grindal's (1983) experience of a corpse re-animating during a divination session, Paul Stoller's (1989) attack by a rival sorcerer, Edith Turner's witnessing the extraction of a malevolent spirit during a healing ceremony (Turner, 1998), or Diego Escolar's (2012) encounter with luminous entities in the desert, all of which are of a much greater magnitude of weirdness to the psi effects documented in parapsychology's laboratory experiments. Perhaps cultural expectation, coupled with the immediate belief and psycho-physiological state of the ethnographer, were contributing factors in these highly unusual experiences? It is a possibility.

Parapsychology has also found a correlation between altered states of consciousness and paranormal experiences and phenomena (Kelly & Locke, 1999; Luke, 2011), which parallels anthropology's awareness of the ubiquitous use of altered states of consciousness in traditional shamanic and spirit possession practices (Bourguignon, 1973, pp. 3-38). More recent research also suggests a link between paranormal experience and the consumption of psychoactive substances (Luke, 2012b), which may have implications for anthropological approaches to shamanic practices. Could it be possible that shamans and other magico-religious practitioners are employing, or trying to employ, some form of psi ability in their practices, whether for finding lost objects or diagnosing illnesses, amongst other reasons? Might ritual systems and practices be geared towards the induction of altered states of consciousness as a means to facilitating such non-ordinary abilities, or to enable contact with non-ordinary realities, rather than for purely social-

functional reasons? There is clearly reason for further research examining the linkages between anthropology and parapsychology. If we wish to engage with questions of ontology in the anthropology of religion, and in the anthropology of consciousness, we may have to open ourselves up to such possibilities, even if they challenge our accepted view of reality.

Conclusion: Ontological Flooding

An ethnographic approach that makes use of tools that destabilise ontological certainty, at least in the context of the ethnographic text, but also experientially in the field, might lead to a more honest appreciation of the 'non-ordinary.' In a sense, then, what I am suggesting is an approach that is, in many ways, the opposite of the traditional bracketing approaches. Rather than bracketing out questions of ontology for fear that they might lead to truths ('damned facts' in Fort's terminology) that cannot, by their very nature, fit into the established order of Western academia's dominant ontology, I suggest that we essentially open the flood gates of ontological possibilities. This places all ontologies on an equal footing, so that while ontological bracketing protects and reinforces the mainstream 'consensus reality,' what we might call ontological flooding destabilises it, and opens it up to questioning, exploration and expansion - in essence such an approach places different ontological systems on an equally questionable footing.

Ontological flooding does not at all mean that we have to be any less critical in our approach. Many, if not all, of the same critical themes (gender issues, social functionalism, amongst numerous others), can continue to be examined and explored from the ontologically flooded perspective. The main difference is that we do not begin our investigation from the position of certainty that 'our ontology' is the only one that can really be taken seriously. Everything is equally possible, everything is equally questionable, and nothing is certain. This is just one of the positions from which the newly emerging field of paranthropology begins its explorations of the paranormal in the cross-cultural context (Hunter, 2012; 2015).

All of this could be seen by some as an attack on science and the scientific method, but this is not the author's intention. David Hay explains how, in the context of children's spirituality, though equally relevant here, science is often portrayed as displacing or repressing the true 'mysteriousness of existence.' He writes of how, if taught badly, 'science may indeed offer a restricted picture of the world, cut off from our holistic experience as human beings,' but Hay also points out that:

If it is well taught, with an awareness of the philosophical basis of the scientific method, this need not happen. This could mean, for example, considering how scientific explanations might be presented in terms of further questions or causes for wonder (Hay & Nye, 2006, p. 72)

What I am advocating, then, is a return to this kind of scientific wonder in the social-sciences, to questioning and exploring possibilities in the study of non-ordinary realities, and for questioning the assumptions that underly the

dominant approaches in the study of religion. This is an escape from the hegemonic strictures of a single ontological perspective that excludes what it does not 'believe in,' and is much more than a simple return to relativism. It demands a much greater openness, and an appreciation of 'ontological realities' rather than purely 'social realities.' I am not advocating that we necessarily 'believe' our informants, or that we naively accept their version of reality as 'true,' rather I am suggesting that we attempt to embrace a perspective that is equally critical of *all* explanatory frameworks. This approach emphasises complexity, and recognises the limitations of human comprehension. Could it be that there is *more going on* than our standard models allow for? It's a possibility.

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