

What Discernment Traditions Might Tell Us About The Nature of Consciousness

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In this presentation I would like to explore the possibility that consciousness and the Self is are experiential phenomena, as distinct from the classical anthropological understanding of the Self as a cultural category, and from the dominant materialist understanding of consciousness purely as a byproduct of physiological brain functioning.

The notion of the Self as a cultural category has been prevalent in anthropology since (at least) the work of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss (1872-1950), but I would like to suggest that mind and Self are something more than this.

That is not to say, of course, that culture plays no role in the development of Self conceptions and theories of mind. Indeed I shall argue that, rather than being the source of Self concepts, culture is best understood as a filtration system through which experiences are given meaning and interpreted.

Often, however, cultural notions of mind and self become fixed, and are passed on as given fact: they can be taken as normative, prescriptive, descriptions of all that is potentially possible, for example: mind is bounded and individual, or consciousness is limited to the brain.

In such situations individuals who experience alternate modes of mind and Self may find that their own experiential understanding of their nature is at odds with the normative models of their host culture (unless, of course, their culture takes into account a wider perspective of the nature of Self and consciousness). This is nowhere more obviously demonstrated than in the context of post-industrial Euro-American society, where the dominant paradigms of materialist science define consciousness, and consequently the Self, as little more than an epiphenomenon of physiological brain function - as a byproduct (cf. Crick, 1994) couched in culturally specific understandings.

I would like to suggest that through adopting an understanding of mind and Self as experiential phenomenon, it is possible to move away from such overly reductive explanatory models, because embracing the experiential dimension of consciousness and Self requires that we consider the implications of the types of Self-experiences being reported across a broad spectrum of the population.

These ideas have emerged from my own ethnographic fieldwork with a private non-denominational spiritualist home-circle in Bristol, UK, where mediums experimentally and experientially explore the nature of consciousness through the practice and development of trance mediumship, which involves the incubation of altered states of consciousness during which ostensible spirit personalities communicate with sitters in the context of séances (Hunter, 2012; 2016). Ultimately, through the development of this practice, mediums (and sitters) adopt models of the Self and mind that seem to exceed what anthropologists have called the ‘Western’ conception of the Self, as well as the exceeding the standard models of mainstream materialist science.

What we seem to be dealing with, then, is a greater degree of *intra*-cultural variation in experiences and conceptualisations of consciousness and self than the standard Western/Non-Western dichotomy seems to allow for (cf. Spiro 1993:144-145), and it comes down, at least in part, to first-hand experience.

10.6 Mediumship and Folk Models of Mind and Matter

My fieldwork was based at a private, non-denominational spiritualist home circle in Bristol called The Bristol Spirit Lodge. The Lodge was originally a wooden shed at the bottom of the founder's garden, but has since moved into a specially built extension on her house. The Spirit Lodge was established specifically so that Christine could apply her ‘house-wifey DIY knowledge of science’ to understand the experiences she had during the séance in Banbury, where she saw strange lights floating around the seance room, heard unusual raps and bangs, and ultimately heard a voice that she recognised as belonging to her deceased father.

Mediumship development at the Lodge can, therefore, be thought of as an on-going experiment in which both mediums and sitters construct their own understandings of the nature of consciousness, and of reality more generally.

The following extract from an interview with Christine demonstrates how 'belief' at the Lodge is not a fixed position, but rather represents an ongoing process of learning, interpretation and re-interpretation. Indeed, in a recent interview Christine explained how she has a problem with the word 'belief' being applied to her, explaining how she thinks she is 'generally mistrusting' and that without evidence she has 'difficulty believing in anything.' Her conclusions about the nature of mind, Self and the body, therefore, are founded upon her own experiences with mediumship, and are constantly developing as she incorporates new experiences into her world-view. She says:

[Mediumship] expands the thinking. It certainly expands the possibilities. I wasn't thinking any of this when I started six years ago. You learn all the time, I mean I'm doing three, four, Séances a week and have over a thousand Séances with all different people, all different mediums and all different situations. I am fascinated by it still. I am not one least bit satisfied that I've learned anything. I want more! Yeah, I want more and more and more. Because it's just a bigger subject than any other I've hit on (Interview with Christine 16/06/2012).

A few of the key ideas that, according to my interview data, have arisen from this experimental process of experiential learning include the idea that consciousness can survive the death of the physical body, that mind and self are partible, that is made up of different components, that the body and the mind are permeable (spirits can come and go, for example), and that mind and body are somehow separable. More generally, they also come to the conclusion that reality is non-physical, and that consciousness is a fundamental property of the universe. We will now explore these themes through extracts from ethnographic interviews with members of the Bristol Spirit Lodge.

10.7 Interview Extracts and Commentaries

The following extracts are taken from interviews with mediums and sitters at the Bristol Spirit Lodge between 2011-2013, and have been transcribed directly, word-for-word, from audio recordings made at the time. Through looking at some of the ideas expressed by my informants concerning the nature of consciousness and the body, as well as descriptions of interactions with

spiritual beings, it is hoped that we will begin to see the emergence of key features of the ethno-metaphysical system of the Bristol Spirit Lodge.

10.7.1 Survival of Consciousness after Death

In this extract Sandy, a nutritional therapist in her late forties and medium at the Lodge, describes how her experiences developing mediumship over the past four years, have led her to a firmer understanding that personal consciousness survives the physical death of the body:

Um, I'm much more relaxed [...] I've been able to think about what I believe in. It never occurred to me before, I just didn't think about it. And, uh, it's changed the pace of my life. It's changed, um, my knowledge of continuation, after we've died, and it's given me comfort in that way. The funny thing was before it ever happened, um, I knew my brother and my grandmother still existed, but it never occurred to me that anybody else did either. Because they were the only two people I knew who'd died, then I knew they were still about, but that's as far as I'd ever thought it, I'd never looked into any of it ever, I'd just never considered any of it ever (Interview with Sandy 23/03/2011).

It was only after being introduced to mediumship by Christine, and subsequently developing trance mediumship herself, that Sandy came to realise that consciousness survives after the death of the body. It is interesting to note that Sandy claims to feel more relaxed as a result of her new found awareness of survival - she has been transformed by her encounter with, and practice of, mediumship. Similarly, in this quotation Emily, a 33 year old mother of two and office worker who has recently begun to develop physical mediumship, explains how her experiences with mediumship have led to a reassurance of her own belief in survival:

I think it has proven that there is more to 'life' and I guess I'm not worried about death [...] I also feel like I am contributing to getting the message and something evidential 'out there' to help people

believe in the reality of continuing life, as I believe this to be, and come closer to understanding what exists around them. I feel that it's amazing and it should be shared! (Interview with Emily 12/02/2013).

Emily first became seriously interested in mediumship following a health scare that prompted her to question the possibility of life after death. Her experiences with mediumship development have helped to diminish her concerns about dying. Again, like Sandy, Emily is reassured by her mediumship development. In the words of William James, reassurance that death is not the end of life, and a more relaxed attitude towards it, are tangible 'fruits' of their mediumistic experiences.

10.7.2 Spiritual Augmentation

One of the most interesting ideas that has emerged, in my opinion, is that spiritual beings can be useful, that they can actually help in everyday life in a variety of ways. I refer to this as an augmentation, a positive symbiosis. In her study of Afro-Cuban Spiritism, for example, Diana Espirito Santo argues that mediumship is a 'type of partnership between a person and a series of spirits' and that the 'person' of the medium is a 'meeting-ground for the unique abilities of each of the spirits belonging to her spiritual cordon' (Espirito Santo, 2011:102). Spirit mediumship can be thought of, therefore, as a process whereby the medium's person is expanded through the incorporation of other spiritual beings, thus creating what could be considered a composite, or multiple, personhood, and an example of the extended mind. Here Sandy explains how the spirits help her to keep a clear mind, assisting in the recall and implementation of knowledge and information:

[The spirits] help me keep a clearer mind, and therefore I am able to make better decisions. I can utilise information that I've got [...] I did a degree in nutritional medicine, years ago I was a nurse and a mid-wife, and there's a lot of information in my head somewhere, but I can actually tap in on information that I've not used in years and years and years [...] the knowledge is mine but it can be used more efficiently (Interview with Sandy 23/03/2011).

Similarly Christine explains how she interacts with her spirit guide Fuzzy Critter (also known as FC). Fuzzy Critter plays an important role in the organisation of the Séances at the Lodge, and directs Christine on occasion in order to get the ‘energies right.’ She explains:

As time when on in trusting Fuzzy Critter, and these telepathic voices, I did get to a point where I knew it was separate from me [...] It was a separate personality. The words he uses are better than mine [...] his language is different to mine [...] His general way of working, it’s not me, in fact sometimes I’ll argue with him [...] I have a sense, he seems to approach me from this side of my shoulder, this side of my head [left]. I, in my own mind, feel that he’s a bit like a fluffy owl sitting on my shoulder [...] Sometimes it’s annoying if I’m doing housework and he wants to communicate with me, and I get this feeling. It’s a bit like having something playing with your hair, or whispering in your ear when you’re trying to do something (Interview with Christine 18/11/2009).

For Sandy and Christine, then, spiritual beings provide a practical service through giving advice and helping to focus lines of thought and inspiration, perhaps echoing the classical notion of the daemonic muse. Transpersonal psychologist Alex Rachel has even gone so far as to speculate on the possibility that human consciousness has evolved along side, and under the symbiotic influence of, non-physical entities (Rachel, 2013). Christine recently explained the importance and practicality of this symbiotic relationship between spirits and the living, and how the modern world has forgotten something fundamental:

Mankind [is] missing something that is their natural right [...] The world is crap and we are missing a link that we are entitled to [...] Ancestors can offer their advice, their support, for real (Interview with Christine 25/02/2013).

10.7.3 Porous Bodies and Field-like Selves

These kinds of experience appear to hint at a model of self that is somewhat different to the usually assumed 'Western' model of the person, which Clifford Geertz defines as:

[...] a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against its social and natural background (Geertz, 1974, p. 31)

Experiences with mediumship would appear, therefore, to lead towards a different perspective on the nature of the person, one that has classically been labelled a 'Non-Western' model of personhood, which is contrasted with the Western model, as just outlined, in that the person is conceived as porous and susceptible to the influence of external agents (Steffen, 2011; Smith, 2012, p. 53). This conception of the person as porous comes across most strongly in Lodge members' descriptions of the body. Christine says:

I think we just flow through each other. Or, we've got very blurred edges, we appear to be solid, but only our eyes are seeing this solid, this light reflection which causes us to appear solid. We're not. So, our boundaries aren't where we think they are. We are here to experience whatever this is, this life-form, this stage of life is. We are here [...] to experience, or to perceive things as solid and individual and it's a very little tiny part of a very big life. I think. Possibly (Interview with Christine 16/06/2012).

Christine conceives of the boundaries of the person as extending beyond the confines of the physical body, which itself only *appears* to be solid. According to this perspective the 'solid' and the 'individual' are, to a certain extent, illusory. With a porous body, then, it is possible for things to flow in and out of the person. Anthropologist Fiona Bowie has characterised this through describing the body, in the context of Spiritualist trance séances, as a 'shared territory, holding the physical life-force of the medium and the conscious intelligence of visiting spirits' (Bowie, In Press,

p. 14). In further discussions, Christine has described her model of consciousness as being somewhat 'like an onion,' that is 'a whole split into millions and trillions of consciousnesses that can act together' (Interview with Christine 25/02/2013). This kind of pluralistic understanding of consciousness and the person seems to recur throughout the ethnographic literature.

There is also a belief amongst Lodge members that the physical body itself can, on occasion, dematerialise completely. This extract from a report by Jerry (a regular sitter and developing medium at the Lodge), on witnessing a physical mediumship demonstration, describes his difficulty in coming to terms with the apparent dematerialisation of the medium's physical body:

I've been trying to think of words to adequately describe what I felt and saw, but it's impossible really. I was sitting next to the cabinet, so when I was asked by Yellow Feather to move in front of the cabinet I was able to do this quite easily, despite it being in blackout conditions at the time. When Yellow Feather asked me to feel the chair, where [the medium] had been sitting, he wasn't there! His chair was empty! The spirit team had, they said, dematerialised him. I found this hard to believe. But [the medium] is a big lad and I was sitting right beside the cabinet, and no-one walked past me. So where was he? (Jerry, October 2011)

All of this seems to suggest that the classical anthropological distinction between Western and Non-Western personhood conceptions is incorrect, and that there are huge variations in the way that consciousness and the body are understood and experienced even within a single 'dominant' culture. This is not the same as saying that the members of the Bristol Spirit Lodge necessarily partake of a socio-centric conception of the self, as perhaps exemplified by the frequently cited example of Japanese notions of an 'interdependent' self 'as part of an encompassing social relationship [in which] one's behavior is determined, contingent on, and, to a large extent organized by what the actor perceives to be the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others in the relationship' (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 227). It is not this kind of social-self concept that I am referring to, because in most cases the members of the Lodge appear to possess what might be considered a normal 'Western' notion of the self in terms of kinship relationships and everyday social interactions. Where they differ is in the porosity of the self: the belief that the self can be

influenced by non-physical entities, that the physical body is not permanently bounded and may be entered by non-physical beings as well as, on occasion, dematerialising completely, and that the mind/self can leave the physical body during specific altered states of consciousness. What we seem to be dealing with, then, is a greater degree of intra-cultural variation (Rasmussen, 2008, p. 33) in experiences and conceptualisations of mind, self and body than the standard Western/Non-Western dichotomy seems to allow for (Spiro 1993, pp. 144-145), and this calls for further investigation (Lillard, 1998).

10.7.4 Animism/Panpsychism?

The final aspect of this ethno-metaphysical system that I want to touch upon is the notion of 'panpsychism,' broadly defined as the idea that consciousness is inherent in all matter (Velmans 2007:279). It should be stressed that members of the Lodge would not necessarily describe themselves as 'panpsychists,' but elements of their beliefs would seem to fit comfortably under this heading. Here Christine explains her understanding that even seemingly inert tables possess an element of consciousness:

It's funny because [...] I think that table has an element of consciousness in it. I think it belongs to something. I think it's part of something. I think it's got vibrations. It's got a something. I don't know how aware it is, but people, or certain psychics, can pick up the memory of that table - the history of that table, the tree it belonged to. You know, if you get sensitive enough you can do all that stuff. I can't, but it has a being, a something. That table does! If that's got consciousness, that's it, it's beyond me, it really is beyond me where it starts, where does it come from? I don't know where it comes from, I haven't a clue, and it gets more and more complicated as you look into it and wonder about it [...] I don't know what consciousness is and I've got no idea. I don't know where it comes from. I definitely, I think it's everywhere, but, everything is conscious to different degrees [...] maybe it collects together and becomes stronger. I don't know (Interview with Christine 16/06/2012).

Christine's experiences assisting the development of mediums at the Bristol Spirit Lodge have ultimately led her to an understanding of consciousness as a fundamental property of reality, and as ubiquitous throughout matter. This understanding has emerged from a combination of anomalous experiences in the séance room, and the metaphysical teachings of the spirits she converses with through entranced mediums. For Christine, séance phenomena are an expression of the fact that matter and energy are the same thing. Consciousness, as an aspect of physical existence, therefore, must also be energy, and so consciousness must be present in everything to a greater or lesser extent. She explains how mediumship is simply the 'energy of people that have died interacting with the energy of people who are alive' (Interview with Christine 25/02/2013).

10.9 Preliminary Conclusions

The often cited distinction between so-called 'Western' and 'Non-Western' models of the self and person appears to represent a dichotomy that does not fit with the ethnographic data (La Fontaine, 1985; Spiro, 1993). To assume that there is a neat divide between 'bounded' and 'porous' models of the person, and to suggest that these represent discrete 'Western' and 'Non-Western' categories, is an oversimplification of something that is far more fluid and varied. Experiences with mediumship development in sub-urban Bristol, for example, have led my fieldwork informants to develop models of mind and self that would classically have been defined as 'Non-Western.' What we appear to be dealing with, therefore, is a much greater degree of intra-cultural variation in understandings about the nature of consciousness and its relation to the body than the standard dichotomy seems to allow for, and this variation derives, to a large extent, from first-hand personal experience (Luhmann, 2012, xxii).

In the context of the Bristol Spirit Lodge, mind and matter are understood to be causally interconnected and frequently overlapping. Discarnate, non-physical, spirits can interact with physical bodies, and the material world can be influenced by conscious intention, for example in the practice of psychic surgery. Ectoplasm represents a half-way substance between the physical and the non-physical: it is believed to be extruded from the physical body so that it can be manipulated by non-physical spirits. The human body can, on occasion, even be dematerialised completely under the influence of spiritual entities, and consciousness can exist beyond the confines of the physical brain, and return to our world to communicate through trance mediums. All of this suggests a hugely different conception of the nature of the 'self' to the often assumed 'bounded, unique[...] distinctive whole' (Geertz, 1974) of the Western notion of the self.

To conclude this talk, it is clearly important to take experience seriously in the study of folk-psychology, ethno-metaphysics and supernatural belief. Through attempting to understand the experiential foundations of belief in, for example, survival of consciousness after death, the permeability of the body and pluralistic models of the self, we can move towards a more nuanced understanding of different cultural and sub-cultural systems. Ideas that might, at first glance, appear outlandish need not necessarily be classified as irrational or unscientific, but can be understood as logical conclusions drawn from first-hand personal experiences interpreted rationally (Hufford, 1982; Turner, 1993; Bowie, 2013). Once we are able to move beyond the hegemonic dismissal of alternative modes of understanding the relationship between the mind and the body, we open ourselves up to a much wider range of possibilities regarding the nature of consciousness (Cohen & Rapport, 1995, p. 13; Samuel & Johnston, 2013).