

“Oooh...that’s a bit weird”:  
Attempting to rationalise the irrational  
and explain the unexplainable

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**Goldsmiths Sociology Research Papers**

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IBSN 1-904158-67-6

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First published in Great Britain 2005 by  
Goldsmiths College, University of London,  
London SE14 6NW.

Additional copies of this publication  
are available from the  
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Goldsmiths College, University of London,  
New Cross London SE14 6NW

# "Oooh...that's a bit weird": Attempting to rationalise the irrational and explain the unexplainable

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In this paper I aim to explore how people make sense of their anomalous experiences in contemporary society. Using data collected from unstructured interviews with six women I consider the ways in which these experiences are conveyed, articulated and constructed.

## *Definition and context*

Anomalous experiences can be conceived as 'uncommon experience[s]... [or encounters] that, although... experienced by a substantial amount of the population... [are] believed to deviate from ordinary experiences' (Cardeña et al, 2000: 4). Sometimes also called paranormal experiences, this label includes phenomena such as hallucinations, apparitions, out-of-body experiences, near death experiences, hypnagogia<sup>1</sup> and mystical or spiritual experiences. Experiencers often report dramatic or profound after-effects and sensations such as fear, elation, wonder and revelation. This profundity has led to them

being perceived, by some, as 'exceptional human experiences' (White, 1995). However, it is difficult to speak collectively of anomalous experiences, as they are diverse and wide-ranging. Irwin (1999) has insightfully noted that 'paranormal' or 'anomalous' is often synonymous with 'as yet unexplained by science' and the diversity of category membership reflects this. Nonetheless, despite this diversity, it is useful shorthand, which allows me to group a sometimes indistinct variety of experiences that have had amazing, profound, strange, awe-inspiring and thought-provoking effects.

It is important to consider the complex relationship between anomalous experiences and Western society. Paranormal phenomena are a source of fascination and an enduring part of popular culture in contemporary society (Campbell & McIver, 1987; Cardeña et al, 2000; Wooffitt, 1992). One example of this is the fairly recent dramatic increase in

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1 Commonly refers to visions, sounds and images that occur during the phase of consciousness between sleep and wakefulness (Mavromatis, 1987)

television programmes such as 'Most Haunted'. However, whilst these phenomena are enjoyed as entertainment, they are not usually afforded significance by the 'cultural guardians of society' (Campbell & McIver, 1987: 44). In this sense, 'authorised' or 'official' culture is preserved, reinforced and maintains dominance through some formal institutions (e.g. education, political). This authorised culture does not tolerate or lend credence to paranormal phenomena or anomalous experiences. Thus, anomalous experiences are perceived to be of superficial importance to reality<sup>2</sup> and are not bestowed with a significant role in official culture. Increasingly, in secular societies, such as those of North Western Europe, where there is a distinct emphasis on the external, the material and the 'waking conscious self'; we learn to marginalise anything that is not of immediate and unproblematic access to this waking self and subsequently prioritise our external actions (Shohet, 1989).

This is not to suggest, however, that the picture is unambiguous. There are alternative views in contemporary society, and knowledge is not merely defined by a secular worldview. Formal or orthodox religion, mainly Christianity (but also Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Judaism<sup>3</sup>) provide members of Western society with access to other worldviews that do not necessarily 'fit' with generally accepted, secular, official and transmitted (both formally and informally)

knowledge regarding 'facts' about the world around us. Furthermore, the rise of the 'New Age' movement and alternative spirituality (Roof, 1999) have contributed to possible frameworks for understanding. Such terms are used to refer to a wide range of alternative religious/spiritual practice, where an individual's outlook is formed by drawing on the numerous perspectives and array of beliefs available (Norlander et al, 2003). However, views or frameworks such as these are considered unconventional as they still contrast with secular science (and, in some ways, orthodox religion), remain distinct from transmitted authorised knowledge (aside from religious education) and do not permeate dominant intellectual consciousness. In other words, such frameworks are not afforded the authority to make definitive epistemic claims or provide wholly accepted explanations about the way the world is.

### *Sociological neglect*

Anomalous experiences are studied in psychology<sup>4</sup>, most notably parapsychology (see Irwin, 1999; and Cardena et al, 2000 for a comprehensive introduction to and overview of the area). But there has been a reluctance to treat anomalous experiences as legitimate subjects of study within sociology<sup>5</sup>. However, this oversight may be too hasty. Indeed, scientific research has invariably sought an explanation of what it is that 'causes' anomalous experiences. For instance,

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2 In the West, reality is exclusively demarcated by the experience that takes place during waking hours. However, some recent sociological work on sleep gives us a reason to question such a conceptualisation (see Williams, 2001, 2002, 2003; Williams & Boden, 2004).

3 Clearly this is not an exhaustive list of formal religions practised in UK society. The point is to note that formal religions such as these provide an alternative to secular ideas.

4 It should be noted however, that anomalous experiences are still marginalised to a degree by mainstream psychology.

5 I am arguing here that consideration of these experiences is marginalised and dismissed by sociology, not that no research has been conducted in this area.

the hard-line materialist view is that anomalous experiences and paranormal phenomena can be explained by differing levels of neural activity in the brain (Blackmore, 2002). However, assessing the ‘truth’ of this claim is inconsequential to this work (though this has been the focus of many other paranormal or parapsychological research projects). What is of concern is an understanding of how people assign meaning and significance to these experiences in a way that prioritises their subjective realities.

Some of the difficulty, however, may have been in how to think sociologically about private and hidden experiences, and how to access such phenomena. Methods such as ‘introspection’ (James, 1890) have been used in the past and, despite the scientific aversion to first-person methodologies as unreliable; introspection is currently the subject of renewed attention (though still a contested topic, conceptually and empirically speaking) in the field of consciousness<sup>6</sup>. It has been consistently argued that the most profound of these anomalous experiences (mystical or religious experiences) are characterised by ‘ineffability’ (James, 1902: 380), in that they defy expression and reason. Such experiences, it is argued, are too profound, too private and our language is ill equipped to capture the very sensations or quality of the experiences. Fromm (1951) suggested that we have forgotten how to draw on ‘symbolic language’, which used to adequately characterise experiences such as these. This forgetting may be in part

attributed to the available contemporary frameworks (outlooks/worldviews) that we have with which to think about such experiences.

I believe that the prevailing conception of anomalous experiences as irrelevant or peripheral to a study of society is misplaced. Anomalous experiences are always culturally defined (Cardeña et al, 2000); such experiences are also simultaneously articulated and constituted in a social context. All experiences are reported in a social context, assigned meaning by individuals and constructed by language and discourse (Foucault, 1977). This study was therefore concerned with how people articulated and made sense of their anomalous experiences.

### *Methodology*

I interviewed six women<sup>7</sup> about their anomalous experiences. However, revealing such experiences to strangers may be difficult as they often clash with dominant, secular and rational thought (Berman, 1981). Therefore the interviewees were all personal contacts and friends<sup>8</sup>, whom I was aware had experienced some form of ‘anomalous’ experience before I interviewed them. Although researching friends can have drawbacks, I believe that for the purposes of this topic it was both practical and fruitful. Yet this may not always be the case. Cotterill (1992) suggests that some respondents may find it easier to talk to a stranger. I was undoubtedly aware of this and at times I felt

6 There are numerous and varied references for this ongoing discussion a diverse selection of which includes, Cardeña, 2004; Dennett, 2003; Ginsburg, 2005; Goldman, 2004; Josephson, 2001; and Vermersch, 1999.

7 This was because I found that it was women who actively expressed an interest in taking part and talking about these kinds of experiences with me.

8 For a breakdown of their demographics see appendix 1.

that knowing my respondents may have been a disadvantage. Friendship is mutually defined and there is an investment for both parties in aiming to maintain the presentation of a consistent self in such interaction (Goffman, 1956) and not jeopardising the relationship. However, fostering a sense of trust is vital when discussing experiences such as these and one distinct advantage with interviewing friends is the instantaneous rapport and trust that have been nurtured prior to the research.

I listened carefully to how these women spoke about their anomalous experiences using a version of the Voice-Relational Method (VRM) (originally developed by Brown & Gilligan, 1992) and certain techniques associated with discourse analysis<sup>9</sup>, in order to observe how language was used to relate and construct experiences. Such techniques included identifying key words and themes to consider the representations and associations made. Furthermore, I sought variations in the text and scrutinised how conflicting ideas were or were not reconciled (Tonkiss, 1998). This ‘strategic borrowing’ of methods from discourse analysis involved paying ‘close attention to the details of talk and storytelling’ (DeVault, 1990: 108) and established epistemological distance from a realist approach. Somewhat problematically, VRM’s aim to access the respondents’ voice has, in the past, been seen as providing ‘transparent passageways into their experiences and selves...[and] direct access to their subjectivity and lived experiences’ (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003: 423). However,

Doucet & Mauthner (1998; see also Mauthner & Doucet, 2003) have successfully adapted VRM to ward off claims of a naïve view of language as a window to experience, illustrating that VRM as a method is not essentially realist. It is this version of VRM combined with discourse analytic techniques, and viewing the interview ‘as a topic rather than a resource’ (Seale, 1998: 204) that characterised my methodology. Such a technique enabled me to understand the way in which respondents employ discursive strategies to construct and (re)present themselves and their experiences during the interview interactions.

The analysis<sup>10</sup> is structured in such a way as to illustrate the marked distinctions between respondent’s accounts, which broadly fall under three types. The first response type, ‘*Rationalising the irrational*’ was characterised by tensions, contradictory and competing discourses, and a sense of struggle in the narratives of four of the women. The second type, ‘*Between rationality and religion*’ still illustrated clear tensions, but was characterised more clearly by the presence of a religious discourse. Finally, the third type, ‘*Retreating from rationality*’, demonstrated a more competent integration of ostensibly anomalous experiences with religion and spirituality drawn on as resources and productive frameworks for understanding. Although this was only a small-scale project there are various interesting issues that these findings raise. The three-part spectrum of responses indicates that there are tensions

9 Potter & Wetherell (1987) and Gilbert & Mulkay (1984) are often associated with the development of this method.

10 The analysis was an iterative process, the emergent ideas of which were facilitated by reference to existing literature (e.g. Berman, 1981; Bruner, 1986; Laing, 1982). This reflexive method was interwoven into the analysis and therefore the research findings are articulated by wider theoretical issues present in this body of literature.

present in the cultural resources that the respondents drew on in order to try and understand their experiences. It is also possible that there is something missing from the secular, lay scientific, rational discourse when employed as a resource for understanding anomalous experiences.

**Response 1: Rationalising the irrational<sup>11</sup>**

The first part of the spectrum focuses on the four narratives of CJ, Sophie, Claire and Rebecca, who discussed anomalous experiences such as hypnagogia, sleep paralysis, potentially prophetic dreams and intuitive knowing. The four respondents, displayed confusion and difficulties in comprehensively assimilating the ‘reality’ of their experiences into the identities that they constructed during the interviews. The central ideas<sup>12</sup> I have identified in these four narratives point to a tension between competing and conflicting resources that the women use in order to try and make sense of their experiences. The women simultaneously draw on and distance themselves from secular or rational (herein lay scientific) explanations and anomalous (herein paranormal) frameworks for these experiences. Furthermore, they attempt to rationalise their experiences and reflect on the credibility or ‘reality’ of an experience, dependent on how convincing and weighty its evidential status is.

All four of the respondents try to rationalise their experiences but this process is not straightforward. They draw on the comfort of

a rational explanation and try to reason their experience intellectually (Polanyi, 1962), whilst simultaneously making references to the subjective quality of their experience and their feelings connected to it. Indeed, the sense of a struggle is consistently communicated by the presence and articulation of these tensions. In the first example, Claire talks about a dream that she had and identifies a ‘real’ event that it could be linked with and she articulates the story in a way that conveys a degree of significance being afforded to this experience.

*“Lying on a beach, in my dream, lying on a beach with X and on the sand, beautiful sunny day, gorgeous...and then just seeing a jumbo jet go by and crash in the sea in front of me, and it was horrible, and then erm, that happened, that dream was shortly before 9/11...so that started me thinking, ‘oh, is there, is there predictive elements to dreams?’”*  
 Claire

Subsequently, however, Claire dismisses the inaccuracies of the dream’s correspondence to exact waking events.

*“If I’m honest I don’t think I’ve ever seen a definite link I’ve never really been satisfied that there is...but it does sort of set me thinking ‘I wonder’ er...but if I look back at it now logically I don’t really think there was”*  
 Claire

11 In quotation excerpts... indicates a pause in the respondents’ speech, whilst (...) represents where I have cut and pasted examples from different stages of the interview.

12 Clearly I have had to be selective about these ideas, especially in terms of limited space and so their centrality is due to my interpretation.

Claire begins her reflections by dismissing any 'paranormal' explanations for this dream, i.e. that the dream was precognitive (it contained knowledge of something before it occurs). Simultaneously, however, she does articulate contemplation of the dream being precognitive. She talks about applying logic to her experience, yet the idea of a precognitive dream is not an accepted or logical component of the dominant form of knowledge in Western society. Whether this experience was 'really' precognitive is not at stake here. What is of interest is that the resource that Claire draws upon to understand or explain her experience ensures that she distrusts and discounts it (Berman, 1981; Laing, 1982). Indeed, the reliance on dreams as prophetic is no longer part of Western culture, whereas in previous eras it was a trusted, even actively sought out, resource (Van de Castle, 1971). Claire's articulations are illustrative of an unclear and inconsistent position, conveyed through the appearance of holding contradictory and confused beliefs about these phenomena. In drawing on the (authorised) lay scientific discourse to frame her experience, Claire cannot explain what happened because this rational thought denies the existence of other possibilities and the experiences that accompany them (Berman, 1981; Laing, 1982).

The other respondents articulate similar manifestations of uncertainty. For instance, CJ reports anomalous visions or 'sightings', where she sees an object 'out of the corner of her eye' when in 'reality' there is no-one/nothing there. CJ communicates a belief in ghosts – a notion she refers to as 'common sense' – whilst dismissing any ghost-based or paranormal explanation for her 'unexplainable' experiences, which she

prefers to rationalise.

*"I like to be quite practical and quite 'there's a reason for this' (...) I mean I believe in ghosts (...) that's kind of common sense (...) but I wouldn't like to see one, and I just like to think other people know about them, I'm sure they happen, ok (...) so when I do see something [anomalous sighting/vision] I don't try to you know 'oh wow, what was it?' I just think, I'm tired or you know, I've been looking at the TV or it must be this, or it must be that and then it's forgotten about and I kind of move on"*  
CJ

CJ lists a series of possible (rational) explanations for her experience, conveying a desire to actively seek a 'normal' explanation for her anomalous experience. Yet this rationalising process serves to 'explain away' the experience and dismisses the possibility of attributing significance to it. Any potential meaning is thus somewhat stifled in this articulation.

In contrast to CJ's assertions about ghosts, Sophie and Rebecca's narratives construct a more nuanced and complex stance in relation to lay scientific discourse and paranormal and religious discourses. They simultaneously draw on and dissociate themselves from lay scientific and ostensibly paranormal explanations of their experiences in order to construct their own understanding in this context. In this example, Rebecca narrates a 'clairvoyant' (distant knowing) anomalous experience when she talks about linking an overpowering smell with an intuitive knowing about her granddad's death.



*"I smelt something really horrible, like, like something decaying, like shit, you know, horrible, horrible, (...) but I, I mean I was at work, so, I know, I mean maybe if I was somewhere else you'd think 'oh', but I was in an office in a clean, you know everything's the same, and it came, and it lasted about five minutes or something and I think I felt like I was getting a headache, I felt really sick actually. And then about, and not long after, maybe my dad rang or something and he sounded upset and I mean I knew because my granddad had been ill"*

Rebecca

What frames this experience is the need for it to be credible, for it to be validated (Laing, 1982). She retells the story appealing to reason, explicitly stating that she was in a clean office and the smell could have had no mundane source. Constructing the story in the most convincing and believable manner mitigates against scepticism and challenges that could potentially discredit her reported experience. Her narrative further displays a duality between lay scientific rationality and paranormal notions. Other respondents explicitly recognised and articulated this tension,

*"On one hand, I have this, I have this... erm you know this experience that for me is extremely credible and, and feels real, but on the other hand I have this culture that's imposing on me that is, that's telling me that this, this is a very irrational experience and you can't logically explain it through experiments and you know, truth, you know, but... even though I don't believe in those*

*kinds of areas, part of me can't escape them so, erm, so I'm sort of split between that"*

Sophie

Here Sophie articulates what appears to be a tension in the linguistic and cultural resources she has to understand her experiences. The limitations of these tools have the effect of positioning anything that falls outside of generally accepted knowledge boundaries as 'silly' or stupid. Furthermore, conveying complete and serious acceptance of paranormal explanations in this context would seem to imply a lack of intelligence and therefore be undesirable and embarrassing. Because individuals do not want to be judged as 'uneducated', gullible or foolish they publicly position themselves with some distance from these views, which do not conform to authorised versions or explanations. To do otherwise would be to invite ridicule.

*"It's a bit strange and a bit embarrassing (...) I just think... I don't like saying these kind of things because people just think that you're a bit mad you know (...) and a lot of people wouldn't believe you, or may believe you but they think you're being a bit silly"*

Sophie

The responses in this spectrum-type display a duality and a sense of battling dialogues; whereby accepted lay scientific knowledge and experience simultaneously collide and coexist. The contradictory notions they articulate often seem to be tested by the respondents, at the moment of interaction, and the answers or words used, construct a position that becomes tenable for that individual within that context. Furthermore,

these responses have mixed success in communicating certainty, integration or contentment about these experiences; neither do the resources these women use come across as comprehensive or adequate frameworks for facilitating their understanding. Finally, for these four respondents any mention of religious interpretation or connotation is notably absent from their narratives.

### **Response 2: Between rationality and religion**

With additional resources for understanding at her disposal Jane's interview narrative represents an intermediate position on the three-part spectrum of responses. Her narrative also displays a tension between the lay scientific and paranormal discourses demonstrated by the four respondents in the previous section. However, there is a difference that distinguishes Jane's responses from the four previous respondents quite significantly in that she also draws on a religious discourse in a fragmented way to understand her experiences. Nonetheless, this additional resource does not result in certitude, and Jane's narrative conveys a sense of struggle with competing, contradictory explanations and the tensions between them. Jane had M.E. for several years and here she talks about the 'healing' she experienced at a religious event. She also talks about possible episodes of hypnagogia.

Jane makes repeated references to notions of the weird or bizarre, especially in relation to her 'healing' experience. She relays the story of her 'healing' to me, about how she attended a religious event and that she came away feeling that she had been cured. Jane's understanding of this experience is not

straightforward. In this extract, she refers to her original 'healing' claim as 'bizarre'.

*"I did sort of talk to them [her friends – at the time] and said 'I don't know what's going on, but I feel different, I think I might be healed', or whatever erm, which feels like a really bizarre thing to say... erm... well, it is"*  
Jane

This is particularly marked by the way in which she reports her experience. She reconstructs the past talking about the 'healing' at the time it occurred. She then displays discomfort with this interpretation and puts some distance from this view, which is revealed in this excerpt.

*"I'm not unreligious now but, I was a lot more into that whole scene I guess erm, so it seemed a lot more normal to be able to say 'I've been healed by God of my illness', whereas now to say that to somebody feels a bit like 'oooh... that's a bit weird'"*  
Jane

Jane talks about her 'healing' in a way that communicates embarrassment and positions her in accordance with accepted lay scientific and more rational beliefs. She constructs her former (divinely driven) 'take' on her experience as illogical and inconsistent with her current self. However, her current construction, which has less religious emphasis, seems to provide her with insufficient elucidation for understanding.

Jane talks about there being no physical proof that anything changed in her, only her personal testimony. This aptly reflects cultural ideals with regard to the lack of credibility

and validity afforded to subjectivity or personal experience versus the superiority of rational, logical accounts and the burden of proof (Bruner, 1986; Laing, 1982; Polanyi, 1962).

*"It goes back to 'it's not logical' erm... and 'you can't explain it' and I don't, I don't like having to tell people who don't know me that well or didn't know me then... that that's how I got better, because it feels like it belittles the illness, and if I got better that way then it, I wasn't really ill. Erm... it'd have been a lot easier if I'd have grown a leg or something coz then they couldn't argue with it (laughing)"*

Jane

However, she talks in contrasting ways about these experiences. For instance, in talking about her hypnagogic<sup>13</sup> experience, she tries to explain it in lay scientific terms first – 'I think it's some sort of weird thing that your brain does' – and then draws on paranormal possibilities.

*"Because I've mentioned ghosts about four times, must mean that there's part of me that thinks 'ooh, is this something like that?'. ... But I like to think of myself as more intelligent than that (giggles)"*

Jane

Notably, however, she distances herself from ghosts by associating them with people who are less intelligent than her, thereby reflecting a dominant cultural belief, that rationality equals intelligence (Berman, 1981). The lay scientific discourse has a dominant part to

play in framing Jane's experiences, but this is tempered by concepts that are not usually associated with science. For example at one point she talks about her intuition and instinctive knowing (Belenky et al, 1986). She tells me that although she listens to this instinct, she prefers to 'be able to back it up with something... and you can't do that with weird experiences'. These examples serve to illustrate how Jane's religious resource sometimes offers her an additional resource for understanding but that she does not position herself firmly within religious dimensions and draws on conflicting and competing ideas. The characterisation of tensions is still evident in her narrative.

### **Response 3: Retreating from rationality**

The third response illustrates how Maisie, in contrast to the others, narrates her experience drawing more extensively on religious discourse. During the interview she constructs a story of acceptance and assimilation regarding her anomalous experiences. More specifically, the religious framework she employs offers her a structure through which to make sense of her experiences and integrate them into her outlook and identity. Furthermore, she does not display discomfort with unconventional ideas about instances of intuitive knowing or her spiritual experience which she discusses here.

Maisie often refers to herself as an intuitive person or as having access to a way of knowing that is deeper and not consciously considered. She talks about this in a generic way, saying 'I think there is more to people than is available on a conscious level', and

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13 She does not refer to her experience as hypnagogic.

she refers to herself as intuitive, describing this in the following way,

*"But I often say 'well, I, I know this, but I don't know why I know it or how I know it and I might have dreamt it but I think I know this... fact', and more often than not it's borne out, but I have no... no... clear recall of how I obtained that information erm and I can't substantiate it with any evidence"*

Maisie

Maisie speaks of placing value on and trusting in this way of knowing, in opposition to dominant ideas in the West that tend to sideline or ridicule such controversial ways of knowing. This knowledge does not rely on tangible evidence, logic or rationality but often manifests a deep sense of subjective conviction for an individual (Belenky et al, 1986). Despite this, Maisie incorporates the notion of 'fact' and 'evidence' into her story about intuition. Indeed, she goes on to illustrate and 'substantiate' her story with examples, notwithstanding her previous claim that she cannot back up her assertions. One such example is given below.

*"Like on a course I'm doing and somebody'll say 'well, why is so and so not here' and I'll, just comes into my mind a reason and I think 'well, I don't know if I've dreamt this, I've not written it down anywhere, as far as I'm aware I can't remember having a conversation, but I think this is where this person is.'"*

Maisie

Notably, she systematically runs through an almost algorithmic process, where she discards each possible rational option, one by

one. In this sense her articulation is still entrenched within the context of a lay scientific discourse (Berman, 1981) as she presents her claims so that they are taken seriously – as if to demonstrate her thinking at the time – and therefore sound more credible. Here, Maisie appeals to reason and constructs her story for a potentially sceptical response. Interestingly, and at odds with lay scientific ideas and accepted explanations, she talks about her intuitive 'self' quite wistfully, as something she values and is at ease with.

*"And erm... so I'm perfectly... happy with the idea that I can pick up information without it actually being consciously processed... erm and I also would like, sometimes would like to think that there's a kind of... collective level of information... that if you are open to... that dimension... and I do think it is like a kind of dimension of, er reality, um, existence, whatever, erm... then it's possible for that, for the barriers to be permeable and that you, you know erm... information can, can pass through and you can have information that you don't consciously know where you got it from"*

Maisie

It is the way in which Maisie's account conveys a comfort and integration of these potentially controversial ideas that illustrates a marked difference between her narrative and the other respondents. This is perhaps in part due to the resources that Maisie has to draw on to understand these experiences and also to an extent the integration of a religious dimension into the activities in her life.

Furthermore, this distinction between Maisie

and the other respondents may be marked by two further possibilities, the first is the nature of our relationship (she is my mother) and secondly, she is of a different generation to the other respondents. The first of these issues means that there are very different dynamics at work in the interaction, compared to the other interviews, merely on the basis of our roles for each other as mother and daughter, but also in the closeness that we inhabit. And the second issue, that of age, means that Maisie may be subject to different pressures and the desire to communicate differently from the younger respondents (for instance, there may be a weaker compulsion to present a conformist position and more scope for experimental and controversial ideas when it comes to constructing an understanding of anomalous experiences).

Maisie's narration regarding God and religion is a complex tapestry, interweaving the secular notions, references to ideas associated with orthodox religion (Catholic) and the language of contemporary spirituality. At some level this reflects the very complexity and contradictory co-existence of these ideas in contemporary society (Besecke, 2001). She also refers to God as a positive and spiritual part of her journey through life. At one point in the interview, Maisie describes an intense 'God experience' and communicates a sense of significance.

*"I experienced something like that [a connection with 'God'], which, but it was, something I had sought over a long period of time and erm... and felt it really powerfully and just sat and did not want to move, felt erm a peace that I hadn't experienced ever before and a warmth and*

*acceptance, and... a sense of reality other than myself and or, another person"*  
 Maisie

When she is talking about making sense of this experience she switches from 'you' to 'we' as if to ground her experience in a common or collective human experience that is general knowledge – she appeals to and talks about it as if it is a timeless shared belief.

*"Well, I think it was probably, erm... an insight into... something for which we all long, however we describe it, which is a sense of union and a sense of communion and a sense of peace, that, that... is about feeling at home with oneself"*  
 Maisie

Such characteristics are commonly cited in the literature about transcendence, spirituality or religiosity (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead, 2005; James, 1902; Jung, 1995; Norlander et al, 2003; Underhill, 1911). As I listen to Maisie talk about her spiritual experience I am aware that there are longer pauses in her narrative, she often stumbles over words, selects one word and then replaces it with another as if she is struggling to find suitable language. She reflects on this during the interview, communicating a sense of frustration and exasperation, 'I can't explain it any other way...I think perhaps I'm struggling to find other ways of framing my experience...I think sometimes words get in the way'. This could be seen to be an instance of what James (1902) termed 'ineffability' – that there is something about the quality of these experiences that is too profound to be articulated. Equally, Fromm (1951) argued

that words impose a logic on such experiences that is awkward and ill fitting. Nonetheless, Maisie did articulate her experiences in some way and conveyed a sense of integration in her interview that marks her out from the other respondents. Might this then be pointing to a flaw in the dominant secular or lay scientific discourse that makes this an ineffective resource for dealing with these kinds of anomalous experiences? Or is just the contradictory, coexistence of competing resources in contemporary society?

### **Illuminating the 'lack' in rationality as a resource: The void in rationality**

The stories of these women are characterised by their tensions. This would seem to suggest that employing lay scientific resources for understanding these experiences is in some way inadequate to facilitate smooth and uncomplicated understanding. This was communicated by the tensions in the respondents' talk, which suggest further that lay scientific resources do not offer explanations that resonate with subjective experience. Furthermore, the generic construction of these experiences in lay scientific terms as implausible, delusional or impossible means that these stories have to be more believable, more credible and more unquestionable than stories of ostensibly 'ordinary' experiences. Indeed, these findings would also seem to suggest that unless the women have alternative resources (in this case religious/spiritual) at their disposal, and

as an accepted frame of reference in their worldview to make sense of these experiences, then the impression that is communicated is one of a confused and contradictory perspective. Whilst this interpretation may seem ambitious and bold, given the small number of participants, it is equally tentative and exploratory.

In the context of Western societies generally, the dominant mode of thought is heavily influenced by a secular and scientific precepts. This discourse privileges rationality, logic, the premise of cause and effect, and description and explanation (Bruner, 1986). In this sense, the scientific method and lay scientific discourse is normatively the most highly valued route to explanation, understanding and knowledge. Indeed, the concept of the paranormal is present within contemporary Western societies but it is not a serious or authoritative alternative to scientific truth or rationality; neither is religious or spiritually derived knowledge the dominant framework for understanding. Laing (1982) argues that science<sup>14</sup> seeks rational explanations for paranormal and anomalous phenomena or insists that they are impossible or implausible. However, the application of logic and rationality to anomalous experiences seems to 'explain away' what happened, leaving a gulf between such explanations and their subjective experience, which each respondent constructed as real enough<sup>15</sup>. According to some (e.g. Blackmore, 2002) science has

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14 It is worth noting that there is clearly a distinction between the discipline of science and mainstream secular, lay scientific thought. But it is also pertinent to point out that the latter is a direct result of the former and that scientific or rationally pursued knowledge, rather than religious or spiritual 'truths', carry the most weight and act as the dominant 'norm' within North West European societies.

15 This is not to suggest, however, that all these experiences are anomalous phenomena, or that they are 'real', but that 'something' subjective is being experienced and articulated by the respondents and this is what is important here.

tended not to acknowledge the subjective (internal) side of human experience, preferring instead to focus on the external (objective) world or the ‘matter’ of humans. However, the conceptual split between internal and external is an artificial construction. By marking a precise distinction between ‘in here’ and ‘out there’, Descartes cemented the cornerstone of the technological paradigm (Berman, 1981). This duality is manifest not only in the way in which people try to understand their experiences, but also in the way in which they see themselves as separate from the world, as detached. It is this imposed detachment that, for Laing (1982) that warrants the disavowing of experience through a scientific paradigm.

***Lost for words***

Several commentators argue that the prominence of rational thought has meant that vital ways with which to make sense of our world have been lost or forgotten. Berman (1981) has termed this a loss of ‘participating consciousness’. This outlook was one in which humans belonged and were connected to their world. This pre-scientific or mediaeval worldview placed humankind at the centre of God’s universe, where everything had a purpose and operated in accordance with divine intention. Berman (1981) suggests that this loss of connection with and holistic view of the natural world has resulted in a repression of the body and the unconscious mind. One example of this is perhaps the loss of frameworks such as mysticism to understand and make sense of these kinds of

experiences, affording them a clear purpose and meaning.

However, dominant thought has not really perceived these changes as loss. For the most part, the secularisation of society is seen as a necessary part of industrial and technological development and has been viewed as desirable, inevitable progress; ‘as a prerequisite of freedom... [and as] a positive gain in maturity’ (Roszak, 1972: xxi). But the tension between rationality and experience in the respondents’ narratives and their general inability to make sense of their experiences does highlight a possible void. This is identifiable in the way that the respondents often struggled to find language which represented or depicted their experiences. James (1902) suggested that something about the quality of such profound experiences evades description, but perhaps it is also due to limited and inadequate culturally available discourses<sup>16</sup>.

It has been proposed that the language of symbolism previously used to convey such things has vanished from common knowledge (Fromm, 1951). This language consisted of metaphorical, mythical and analogous linguistic strategies that engaged the emotions and the imagination. For Bruner (1986), this language is the language of storytelling. He contends that whilst we are familiar with the language of science ‘we know precious little in any formal sense about how to make good stories’ (Bruner, 1986: 14). There is however, a tension, a duality in these women’s narratives, as they all draw on other resources to articulate their

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16 Having said this, something is going on here – respondents and experients do articulate something about these experiences.

experiences. They make attempts to include ghosts, superstition and sacred notions – which are not wholly consistent with a secular, rational and lay scientific discourse. The articulation of ghosts and superstition points to an inherited culture of fascination (currently witnessed in popular culture) with magic, myth and legend (Laing, 1982) – or folk resources. The resource of religious discourse, on the other hand, is two-fold.

### *Dissociation from the 'weird'*

A minority of the respondents draw on the formal religious discourses of Christianity and Catholicism, but there are also references to an 'alternative' (in relation to formal religion) discourse of spiritual journey and transcendence. Within the sociology of religion, it has been proposed that in addition to the New Age phenomenon, there is also the existence of a 'reflexive spirituality' (Roof, 1999), used as a resource for meaning and understanding by contemporary spiritual practitioners. Some have even claimed that this notion of 'reflexive spirituality' is in operation as a language, as a cultural resource for expressing transcendent meaning in society (Besecke, 2001). However, the availability of this language may be limited to a minority with at least a modicum of religious allegiance (tradition, inheritance, upbringing), and even more generally, a hospitable and receptive wider cultural climate. This position attests that a more integrated approach to religion and rationality is possible, and though the dominant and privileged forms of knowledge remain 'rational', informed by materialist science, this may change. Indeed this is an issue of current debate. There are those who believe that the death of the sacred is unfolding in the West (e.g. Bruce, 2002).

Others consider a period of change taking place with contemporary spirituality spearheading a transition to a different relationship with the sacred (e.g. Luckmann, 1967, 1990; Campbell, 1999). Finally, there are those who remain agnostic (e.g. Heelas & Woodhead, 2005) on the issue, suggesting that there may be changes taking place in society regarding our relationship with the sacred, but the evidence that it is replacing formal religion and creating a 'spiritual revolution' is not currently convincing. Though it may be difficult to conceptualise or imagine, different epochs conceptualised their world comprising of different fundamentals. Moreover, future generations may see our worldview as the projection of a mechanistic framework onto nature, rather than nature actually *being* mechanistic (Berman, 1981). Indeed, it is 'not merely the case that men conceived of matter as possessing mind in those days, but rather that, in those days, matter did possess mind, "actually" *did so*' (Berman, 1981: 93).

These women are thus embedded in this current paradigm – as am I. Their discursive constructions operate within a context that equates rationality and reason with intelligence (Polanyi, 1962). In many senses it is clear that the cultural resources available will guide our individual understanding of these experiences. 'For example, the concept of a spiritual body, of discarnate spirits, of channelling, and of reincarnation all characterize the world views of various spiritistic groups in Brazil' (Targ et al, 2000: 238). Yet such ideas are clearly very different from accepted ideas in the West. Indeed, beliefs established on the basis of emotion, feeling, intuition, experience or 'sensing' are disavowed by the authorised culture in



Western society (Laing, 1982).

*“To accept a belief by yielding to a voluntary impulse, be it my own or that of others placed in a position of authority, is felt to be a surrender of reason”*  
(Polanyi, 1962: 271)

Even if this is something that individuals do privately, it is not commonly admitted in social contexts where intelligence, intellectuality and critical thinking are highly valued. Such admissions would invite ridicule and lambaste<sup>17</sup>. Anomalous experiences are therefore constructed as irrational, ‘not normal’, ‘weird’ or ‘bizarre’<sup>18</sup>. This highlights how powerful the concept of ‘normal’ can be in regulating an individual’s public discourse (Foucault, 1989). It also highlights the legacy and domination of scientism – “a conception of science that reifies and idealizes science such that all other ways of adducing knowledge are deemed to be poor relations”

(Watson, 1998: 209) – in Western societies for defining experience and knowledge.

This research raises the question of whether there are limitations with contemporary secular or lay scientific discourse, as a resource for sense making of apparently profound or exceptional human experience. Whilst anomalous experiences remain ‘trivial’ to a study of society (and marginalized within mainstream disciplines) any understanding of this potential void is forfeited. This is not to suggest in a crude sense that science is not a valuable resource, but just that it may have limitations in relation to the subjective sense of these experiences. Clearly my conclusions here are tentative, with many opportunities for further work in this area, not least in the first instance, recognising the meaning and significance of anomalous experiences in people’s lives. As potentially life-changing experiences, research in this field merits sociology’s further attention and consideration.

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17 In this sense, such a conception may have more to do with the respondents’ demographics than any general claim – the respondents are predominantly white, heterosexual and mainly middle class.

18 This has links with the social construction of madness (Foucault, 1989), which for spatial reasons remain undeveloped here.

## Appendix 1

|               |                                    |                    |                                   |
|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Pseudonym     | Claire                             | CJ                 | Jane                              |
| Age           | 31                                 | 29                 | 30                                |
| Ethnic Origin | White British                      | White British      | White British                     |
| Religion      | Undecided                          | Catholic           | Catholic                          |
| Sexuality     | Heterosexual                       | Straight           | Straight                          |
| Social Class  | Middle Class                       | Lower Middle Class | Working Class                     |
| Reason        | Profession, education, background. | Parents, location  | Parents (not university educated) |

|               |  |  |                     |
|---------------|--|--|---------------------|
| Pseudonym     | Maisie   | Rebecca  | Sophie              |
| Age           | 54   | 26   | 26                  |
| Ethnic Origin | White British                                  | White British                                    | White European      |
| Religion      | Roman Catholic                                 | None   | None                |
| Sexuality     | Heterosexual                                   | Straight   | Heterosexual        |
| Social Class  | Middle class                                   | Middle Class                                     | Middle Class        |
| Reason        | White-collar employment, reasonable education. | Parent's occupation, education, consumer habits. | Parent's profession |

Respondent demographics were obtained prior to every interview and the responses are recorded verbatim. The reason column indicates the respondent's' reason for assigning herself to a particular class.

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