

# D I S K U S

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## **Inside, outside and in-between: ambiguity, fieldwork and ethnography.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The extent to which researchers in religious fields claim membership of the group has long been a subject of debate in the social sciences. While many theoretical and methodological concerns have been thrashed out since the 1980s, which have resulted in a general consensus that prioritises “good research”, regardless of membership or position. However, in practice, the faith status of the researcher continues to raise its head, either from practitioner or scholarly quarters. In this short reflexive account I consider some implications of insider/outsider debates: I start by reflecting on recent conversations about my research status, and use these to explore the shadow the “Lurhmann effect” has cast on my relationships with British Witches and Wiccans and the ambiguous boundaries between inside and outside.

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### **PROLOGUE**

In the autumn of 2014, a week or so after the BASR Roundtable at the heart of this publication, a conversation drew my attention to some the ambiguities around my fieldwork status and relationships. I attended a book launch at *Atlantis*, an independent occult bookshop near the British Museum in central London. A hub for magical encounters since 1922, it has witnessed the meetings of many twentieth century Occultists and writers. We were celebrating the publication of a collection of writing by Cecil Williamson, the founder of the Museum of Witchcraft in Boscastle, Cornwall (Patterson 2014).<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of the BASR conference my attention was still focused on the dynamics around insider-outsider claims in research. I reflected on my long and fruitful friendships among these people as I watched Geraldine, the bookshop owner, and the editor, Steve Patterson, spontaneously re-

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<sup>1</sup>The Museum of Witchcraft was set up by Williamson in 1950 on the Isle of Man. Williamson sold the museum and collection to Gerald Gardner in 1954 and set out to find new premises. After some false starts, he arrived in Boscastle in 1960, and two subsequent owners later, it is still there.

enact an apocryphal meeting between Cecil Williamson and Gerald Gardner (author and promoter of the modern Wiccan movement) that had taken place in that room in the 1930s. Later, a friend asked how my work was going. I explained that I'd recently co-organised a debate on whether it was necessary to be a practitioner of a faith in order to carry out appropriate research. My friend passionately responded that this was an absolutely necessary condition. Somewhat surprised, I reminded her that I was not a practitioner, but an outsider. She shrugged, and said that I didn't count, I was no longer an outsider, and had become 'one of us', regardless of whether I was actually a Witch or not. While this may have been an embarrassing memory slip that forced her to include me as an insider, it made me highly conscious of the extent to which research boundaries are fluid and ambiguous, and assessed by those we research as well as by ourselves.

### **Introducing the borders**

There are well established discussions about the implications of insider status in social science research that have particular relevance for ethnographic fieldwork (see the introduction to this volume). These have run parallel to broad critiques around objectivity, knowledge and belonging. On this basis, the insider-outsider debate has been marshalled by various interests, such as the status of the self and subjectivity (Abu-Lughod 1993; Jackson 1996), the ethics of fieldwork (Bourgois 2012), or the politics of experience (Pearson 2001). In contrast to earlier aims of neutral objectivity, it has been suggested that insiders would generate privileged insights, in particular in faith based research (Arweck & Stringer 2002; Blain, Ezzy & Harvey 2004). These are valuable perspectives, however, insider status and belonging are not synonyms, nor does membership of a group guarantee reflexivity and awareness of about the dynamic processes of fieldwork.

In this article, I do not attempt to evaluate whether insider research is "better" or not, but to consider how my experiences have informed how I understand these issues. I reflect on my fieldwork with British Witches and Wiccans to show how relationships with participants, as well as within the academy, are dynamic and shifting. It is not always easy to identify who is on the inside or the outside at any given time, and the implications of these boundaries are unclear. As the accounts in this special edition demonstrate, fieldwork relationships between researchers and the people they meet are contingent and nuanced, and demands continual re-evaluation over time. These are not new observations. A useful starting point is Stoller's exploration of the "between", which provides valuable insights into the ambiguous status of fieldworkers (2008), as is Pat Caplan's exploration of her research trajectory between the 1960s-1980s (1988). Caplan does not specifically discuss insider status, but her account of the entanglement between her everyday life and the direction and scope of her research provides an enlightening perspective.

The fieldwork incident in my prologue highlights some of the blurred edges around my own status. My responses have greater resonance in the specific

context of carrying out research amongst British magical practitioners, where the legacy of Tanya Luhrmann's research in the late 1980s continues to shape discussions about the relationship between researchers and participants (1989). Luhrmann's work led to claims, from London's magical practitioners as well as researchers, that she had betrayed the trust of her research participants, by pretending to be a Witch to gain admission to a group for initiates. My work differs from Luhrmann's in many ways, but fundamentally I do not examine magical belief or practice, but rather the construction and negotiation of historical knowledge at a time of historical upheaval for many British Witches and Wiccans. I use both of these to explore the dynamic processes of carrying out research, and work as a reminder that our research relationships must be continually scrutinised. What it means to be an insider or an outsider is neither stable nor fixed. Nor is our membership of any given group solely of our own making, but is also constituted through the perceptions of research participants or other scholars. These conversations prompt me to pay attention to the ways in which I am perceived, as well as the claims I make.

### **Inside and outside fieldwork terrains**

While the practitioner-researcher has become an accepted figure, it remains difficult territory for many researchers, even those who share the faith of their participants. Some aim for an ambiguous voice that leaves their status open to interpretation (for example, Ezzy 2004), although this kind of compromise may conjure the image of an insider reluctant to be open about their beliefs, which seems to contradict claims to either special insights or reflexivity. I see myself as an outsider on the basis that I am not a Witch or other kind of magical practitioner. I do not consider this claim compromised by the 'witch-stones' arranged on my bookshelf, or my array of charms collected throughout my fieldwork. Nor do I want to deny the possibilities of alternative forms of consciousness. However, these provide distractions from my research focus on the production of the past in the present. In turn, my own group membership is an academic one: I am an anthropologist with scholarly interests in this sprawling territory, and believe I have a rigorous and reflective approach to the complex relations of research practice. The information I seek is public, rather than secret. I am interested in how historical knowledge and evidence are constituted and shared, rather than esoteric matters of magical consciousness that other researchers have focused on (Greenwood 2000; 2009; Luhrmann 1989; Magliocco 2004; Pike 2001). My close friendships make me feel as though I belong in my fieldwork sites, but I am propelled by my interests in how Witchcraft histories and the past are engaged through an active sense of historicity. Intellectually, as well as emotionally, my feet are firmly in the scholars, the "outsiders", camp, although I am suspicious of such polarising classifications.

However, these are slippery categories, and it is never simple. I have been hanging out with Witches, Wiccans and other Pagans and Occultists for fifteen years, and I have gained valuable and trusted friendships, my status as a Witch or not is of marginal relevance. I am quick to inform new people I meet

in the field that I am a researcher, and take the opportunity to remind others of my slightly odd status: I'm not a practitioner, I'm a researcher. But it is always more complicated. Not only have I have built lasting friendships, much of my fieldwork took place in the Museum of Witchcraft, where some tasks, like working on the cash desk, or carrying out archival work in the upstairs rooms, certainly made me appear an insider to some visitors. The slippery territory between belonging and insider membership needs a watchful eye. As Narayan observed in the 1990s, we are simultaneously insiders and outsiders, and occupy multiple positions at any given time(1993). My conversation at the book launch, echo Aimee Joyce's observations about how we may be labelled by those in the field in ways other than we anticipate (Joyce 2014), have nudged me to reconsider the "Luhmann effect" on my own fieldwork.

A recurrent feature of research with modern British magical practitioners is the impact of Tanya Luhmann's fieldwork, even at a distance of nearly two decades. Her exploration of the part "interpretative drift" plays in magical perceptions of the world is often underplayed in contrast to concerns that she misrepresented herself to participants. Amongst researchers of Pagans, Witches and Magicians, the "Luhmann effect" remains a code for the knotty problems of insider and outsider status. Arguably, ethical problems with her research revolve around her betrayal of trust by using material obtained in initiated, oath-bound sessions, rather than by her dismissal of magical knowledge and assertion that "I never have, and do not now 'believe' in magic" (1989, 18). Luhmann observes that while she "was honest about her enterprise", she was also "rather relieved when people forgot what I so carefully told them" (1989, 17). This suggests that boundaries between the researcher and the researched can be drawn in straightforward ways. Such an approach lacks awareness about the ambiguities of ethnographic practice. It has been suggested that she failed to acknowledge her own "interpretative drift" (Lewis 1996; Hutton 2004; Pearson 2001; Pike 1996), compounded by an adherence to methodological atheism (Ezzy 2004, 118).

The "Luhmann effect" has cast a shadow over subsequent research with British magical communities. In part through the publications that have pondered her contribution to anthropological and Pagan studies, but also with the persistence with which I encountered her presence in the field. During my doctoral fieldwork I met practitioners who knew Luhmann, or knew someone who knew her, or had been in the initiatory group she had joined. Less specifically, many conversations referred to rumours of some anthropologist behaving improperly while doing research with Witches in London. They shared a concern that Luhmann's research material transgressed the oath-bound and confidential contexts from which it was gained, rather than her lack of a magical viewpoint and an insider perspective, although these often become synonymous in the telling. It continues to provide a key illustration of the problems of "outsiders" attempting to carry out research in magical communities (Pearson 2001; Pike 1996). Pearson claims that as a Wiccan embarking on research into her own community she was going "native in reverse". She stated that by starting on the inside and working outwards she would gain a more nuanced and insightful understanding of modern Pagan practices. Pearson's response also suggests surprisingly clear boundaries

between inside and outside status (2001). Lurhmann's lasting impact on my research, is visible in my persistent reminders that I'm not a Witch, I'm a researcher, even when I learn that I've become an insider out of longevity if not belief or practice.

Despite the shadow of the "Lurhmann effect", in reality I encountered few people in the field who found my non-practitioner status problematic. More scholars than practitioners have expressed concerns, more often from those who claim methodological privilege through their own insider status. The twenty year span between Lurhmann's research and my own saw a significant expansion of magical and Pagan communities. During this time opportunities for public expression and debate increased, popular publications on Witchcraft and other Pagan and Occult themes proliferated, while the Internet provided a burgeoning opportunity for writers and discussions. The research landscape had transformed. It became possible to collect material at open events: open meetings between different magical traditions were ordinary events, alongside a new industry of conferences that supported lecture circuits, social networks and a renewed rich seam of Pagan consumerism. Likewise, carrying out research at the Museum of Witchcraft did not require initiation into a closed group, and my questions about the literature and material culture I encountered were readily answered. On the whole, magical practitioners were more concerned that I would not gain the "right" kind of information on historical knowledge as I was not asking experts, only ordinary people. One Witch did consider my lack of initiatory status a serious problem that would undermine my research. As he strongly believed that all knowledge about witchcraft history could only be understood through orally transmitted stories handed down inside closed, initiatory groups, it proved a fascinating perspective on historical knowledge.

Finally, I did not remain static over this time: I completed my thesis (2005) and took small steps further inside the academy. My knowledge continues to be challenged and to develop, and my networks amongst magical practitioners have expanded. As Gemma observed, I was no longer easily identified as an outsider. Any pretensions to ignorance that had shaped many of my initial conversations in the field would now look absurd. Furthermore, my friends' lives had not remained static either. Over fifteen years some have become pillars of the Pagan community, in positions of authority and responsibility. Others have left the Pagan scene all together, but continue to provide reflective insights, and new friendships are forged along the way. My research findings are my own, but these are dialogic, the boundaries between what "I" analyse, and what "they" tell me, are at times, porous. In combination these reveal the multiple and complex conversations that take place in and around fieldwork as part of rich and dynamic processes, where the specificities of insider and outsider status are less significant than other factors.

### **Conclusions: belonging, insider status and the in-between**

These reflections are part of a meandering and incomplete conversation I have with myself about the field, ethnography and my status as a researcher. I

have no outright conclusions about the claims of insider-outsider research dynamics. The comment at the book-launch about my own status and how I was perceived, at that moment, as someone who 'belongs' to the group was valuable. It revealed something of the friendships I have made along my carefully cultivated fieldwork journey. It encouraged a recognition that I am part of relational networks, which will define me at different points, as well as how I define myself. I remain a non-practitioner, yet recognise the critical instability in which fieldwork and ethnography is continually negotiated. The boundaries between inside and outside become blurred. Nevertheless, I don't suggest this is some kind of open, all-accepting, free-for-all. My anxieties at being perceived as another anthropologist, capable of betrayal, make that clear enough. Perhaps Luhrmann's disregard for any interpretive drift in her own fieldwork experience demonstrates the extent to which claims for authority must be navigated. It highlights the attention that must be paid to the shifting locations of the researcher, while serving as a reminder that the focus of research is, as both Caplan and Narayan ultimately observe, beyond the immediate experience of the ethnographer. Explicitly tracing and showing encounters and dialogues provides a way to negotiate the immersive and persistent in-between.

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