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Crossing spiritual boundaries: encountering, articulating and representing otherworlds

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Abstract

There is a growing critical social science literature around contemporary expressions of alternative spirituality. However, this literature appears to have overlooked a core feature of these spiritual experiences. For many contemporary alternative spiritual practitioners, spirit plays an active and ever present role in their everyday lives and relationships. However, the critical social science discourse has failed to adequately engage with this. Instead the dominant approach has been to suggest spirituality today is about a personal journey to the divine within, usually sustained by the purchase of widely available protean commodities such as crystals, Buddhas and weekend retreats. In this discourse the 'spirit' at the heart of spirituality has effectively been killed. It is my belief that this is in part a reflection of the inability of social science to encounter, articulate and represent such otherworldliness. Based on my experiences of participatory fieldwork with individuals and groups engaged in a wide range of spiritual practices, I suggest critical social science needs to be able to engage with the enchanted worlds which arise out of many contemporary spiritual experiences with respect, sensitivity and a little creativity. These practitioners are actively seeking connections between 'this' world and 'otherworlds' and it is time for critical social science to acknowledge the 'extra-geographies' that arise out of this. In this paper I reflect upon the methodological implications of this, and present a conceptual framework which might help us to articulate and represent the spatialities of these very enchanted spiritualities.

> *'People today consult psychics and fortune-tellers, ...hold séances, ...read tarot cards, ...such beliefs and practices are not some legacy of a bygone age, nor a minority endeavour, but part of the very stuff of modern Western urban culture. They are strangely commonplace' (Pile, 2006. 307).*

The close of the twentieth century saw a collapse in Christian church attendance and widespread commentary that religion in the West was dead (see for example Bruce, 2002). It has been suggested that an individualised approach to spiritual pursuit now characterises contemporary society, with people increasingly distancing themselves from institutional religion and claiming to be 'spiritual but not religious' (Roof, 1999). This has prompted a rather pessimistic prognosis for the social condition of our purportedly secularised society (Lasch, 1979; Turner, 2011).

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However, the apparent death of religion in Western societies coincided with a 60 per cent rise in reported 'spiritual' experiences (Hay and Nye, 2006). For these more individualised spiritual pursuits are also characterised by an interest in more esoteric, otherworldly ways of touching the divine, and a desire to establish direct contact with spirit (Hart Wright, 2002). Many of these attempted contacts may be one-off encounters – a palm read at Blackpool pleasure beach in the hope of catching a glimpse into the future – however, for many millions across the Western world these practices are ongoing, sustained and very personal attempts to cultivate otherworldly relationships within the contours of everyday life (Ivakhiv, 1996; 2001). Once established, these relationships have an influence on how the people who perceive them live out their lives. They are part of their reality. Whilst the rational Western mind may prefer to dismiss any notion of otherworldly beliefs as superstitious nonsense, these encounters and relationships are in fact a part of our decidedly magical modernity (Jenkins, 2000), and as social scientists we should therefore take seriously their presence in our social and spatial worlds.

In this paper I explore how as critical social scientists, we can encounter, articulate and represent such otherworldly relationships. Drawing on fieldwork experiences, I reflect upon how as academics we engage with the otherworldly as a research subject. I suggest that in-depth participatory methods can facilitate our empirical and theoretical insight, and I present a conceptual framework for helping us to represent these seemingly intangible worlds in a manner acceptable to critical social science.

Encountering otherworlds: participating in 'extra-geographies'

> *'What is the nature of these spirits and the world they apparently live in... a false comfort, a useful fiction, or is there something real and sturdy about them?' (Stafford Betty, 2006. 38).*

My encounters with the otherworldly began through empirical research exploring contemporary alternative spirituality (MacKian, 2012)[1]. Within this broad arena, my particular focus was on those spiritual experiences and practices which were aimed at cultivating an active relationship with spirit, a subset which appears to have been curiously neglected in the social science literature to date. In most academic accounts spirituality is portrayed as something an individual does by themselves, through exploration of the 'inner self' (Heelas, 2008). It is seen as something predominantly pertaining to particular routines or practices, bounded in space and time and distinct from the everyday. Numerous authors stress the material and earthbound orientation of contemporary spirituality (Bruce, 2002; Hanegraaff, 1998; Heelas, 2008), and there is often the suggestion that it is about self-interest and consumer culture rather than any 'authentic' articulation of spiritual beliefs (Carrette and King, 2005; Voas and Bruce, 2007). Spirituality in this conceptualisation is judged to have little to do with anything sacred or supernatural, with any notion of 'otherworldly' relations being dismissed as the preserve of the 'paranormal' not the 'spiritual' (Heelas, 2008).

Therefore despite the fact that many spiritual practitioners often talk about a blurred boundary between 'this world' and 'others', this otherworldly element remains strangely absent in social science discourse. Perhaps this is due in part to the choice of methods employed to research it. Much of the literature focuses on measuring market based practices, from the buying of Mind-Body-Spirit books to signing up for a course of Reiki treatments. These 'transactions' are then neatly presented as expressions of consumer capitalism and narcissistic self-interest, 'quick fixes' with minimal spiritual substance (Carrette and King, 2005). Under such a neoliberal framing there is little attention given to what other meanings might be ascribed by the participants themselves, or to the wider social and spatial worlds of experience they might sit within. However, since the *meaning* of an act for the individual is important in governing what influence that act may have in their life and the lives of those around them, it is important we develop methods to seek out this meaning, and not only offer our own theorising of them (Wood and Bun, 2009).

By listening to what participants have to say, I quickly found that contrary to the rather instrumental, this-worldly nature of spirituality stressed in the literature, there was another dimension to be found, silenced by such accounts. Beyond whatever quick-fix earthly based benefits their spiritual pursuits may have given them,

I found many participants were explicitly seeking a relationship with a very *other*worldly 'spirit'. Furthermore, this spiritual relationship had a tendency to spill out into the broader fabric of everyday life. It was not only whilst on the treatment bed having Reiki that their link to spiritual energy was present, it was evident in the way they talked about every aspect of their lives. These encounters with otherworlds and their inhabitants (such as angels, guides and spirits) were very much a part of practitioners' everyday earthbound worlds, and profoundly influenced daily interactions with others and the spaces they moved through. Their everyday lives took on an added sacred and magical dimension which appears to have been written out of the social science discourse on contemporary spirituality.

Beyond the literature on alternative spirituality specifically, there has been more explicit engagement with the place of the otherworldly and intangible in everyday encounters. Indeed across the social sciences and humanities there has been a growing interest in the intangible, the uncanny and the ghostly which has prompted the emergence of a body of work around what Deborah Dixon (2007) termed 'extra-geographies' – those spaces of experience we cannot easily see or comprehend, yet which have a real resonance for how we experience the world. The extra-geographies literature is wide and varied, from ghost hunts in the modern landscape, such as Edensor's spectres lurking in 'disorderly urban margins' (2005: 835) and phantom agencies swarming in city buildings (Edensor, 2008 and 2011); to the identification and location of the socio-cultural ghosts of colonial history (see for example Cameron, 2008; Paterson, 2008; Routon, 2008). Discussion has covered present absences in the landscape of memories (Bell, 1997; Wylie, 2009); and the role that magic plays in the making of the modern city (Pile, 2006). Researchers conclude that these '[e]xtra-geographies are not idle daydreams. Rather, they become the touchstone for shared desires, concerns and anxieties, reaching into the very heart and soul of those who encounter them' (Dixon, 2007. 195).

Within this general genre, Dewsbury and Cloke (2009) explore the spiritual landscapes of Christianity, where they theorise 'the immaterial push of spirit alongside the materiality of landscape' (ibid: 695). Yet any such landscape of extra-geographies remains surprisingly under-explored in relation to alternative spiritualities. Still rooted very much in the familiar materiality of everyday life Holloway (2003) has shown how the careful placement of material objects, such as candles and crystals, alongside much more protean everyday objects, such as televisions and settees, is a core part of enframing 'a space-time' for alternative spiritual connection. In these particular geographies materiality clearly plays a fundamental part in meeting 'immateriality'. A popular means of grasping the elusive and unknowable immateriality in spiritual or religious practice is of course through the incorporation of material objects into rituals designed to open a channel between the material and immaterial worlds. Here particular objects become offerings to spirit, or become possessed by spirit as a mechanism – often in the form of sacrifice or gifts – to help spirit work in the earthly plane.

However, in my research I have found spirit is also seen as an agent in such space-time framings, which suggests there are more subtle extra-geographies to be explored beyond the candles and crystals. Susannah for example, relies on the angels to ensure there is always an available parking space for her, and many spiritual practitioners will see the random appearance of a white feather as a sign that spirit is 'there' for them. These are not items placed by individuals; rather they are interpreted as manifested directly by spirit. This suggests we have to acknowledge spirit's magical agency between the material and immaterial if we are to truly understand the world as experienced by practitioners. For these individuals, spirit is at large in the everyday world around us – in parking spaces and feathers - and their particular extra-geographies stretch beyond the placement of their 'self' in a world of 'things' they manipulate around them. As a result, their relationship to the world takes on additional dimensions and even the geographies of everyday life have the potential to become inherently 'enchanted' (Bennett, 2001).

To see this however, critical social science needs to acknowledge the centrality of 'spirit' in these everyday stories of contemporary spirituality, and for such insight it seems we have to look further afield. The discipline of para-anthropology, drawing on a mixture of scientific studies of paranormal phenomena, and the psychological experiences of them, adopts as a starting point the inexplicable, intangible and otherworldly phenomena so often dismissed by more mainstream social science. Spirit is therefore central, however there is often a tendency to focus on the phenomena themselves, rather than their consequences, and para-

anthropology has therefore been criticized for failing to adequately engage with 'the subsequent effect of these beliefs and experiences on individuals, families, and society in general' (Dyne, 2010. 27). It seems perhaps that combining the insights gained by being sensitive to the present absences of extra-geographies, with para-anthropology's attention to the phenomena themselves, might push forward the research agenda on contemporary spiritual experience, and help us develop new ways of understanding such experiences in their entirety.

In order to do this we need to find ways of incorporating otherworlds into our conceptualisations of spirituality and of recognising the sociological consequences for those who experience them. One way of developing our understanding of the world as experienced by participants is through the use of in-depth participatory research. What is usually loosely referred to as 'participant observation' as a method for gathering data covers a spectrum from 'complete participation' at one end, through to 'complete observer' at the other (Gold, 1958). Across this spectrum there is considerable variation in terms of how covert or overt the researcher's approach is. Complete participation may be totally covert, with the researched community being unaware they are under observation. However it can also be carried out overtly, with research subjects knowing and understanding the full role of the researcher. At the other end, complete observation can also be overt, covert or somewhere in between. As a result, participant researchers may find themselves caught up in a complex and changeable game of deception (Peshkin, 1984; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Douglas, 1976); but despite the attendant difficulties Dawson (2010) suggests that participation in the rituals or practices of researched communities can support a degree of 'insider identity' and facilitate deeper understanding for the researcher.

The alternative spiritual 'community' is a loosely affiliated network of individuals, practicing largely independently, so becoming a participating member is relatively straightforward, and I used two types of participation. Firstly, I participated in events which one or other of my research participants was attending. In these my role would be overt, because they knew why I was there, but I would also participate. In such situations I would have an element of 'feeling alien' (Douglas, 1976), because I was identified as an academic. Secondly, I participated independently in events where I did not know anyone else attending. These I would attend as any other member and effectively 'left my notebook at the door'. In this latter type of engagement I wanted to be able to immerse myself in the feel of the event, experience being part of the social processes which emerged, and perhaps capture myself some of the intangibility which lay at the core of what participants experienced. To some extent *all* participants at such events appear to experience a level of uncertainty as to whether their experience is 'genuine', 'the real thing' or 'just my imagination'. In that sense, as a rookie otherworld tourist I am no different. Therefore even in those events I attended independently, I was not necessarily having to don a 'false front' as undercover researcher (Douglas, 1976), because I was rarely alone in feeling slightly 'outside' through lack of experience or understanding.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest in-depth research methods require a distinctive way of approaching and looking at the social world. It is important 'not to jump to quick conclusions', they say, and researchers have to take time to 'examine the circumstances in which people act' (ibid: 230). It is my conviction that a lack of attention has been given to the full accounts of contemporary spiritual practitioners about their worlds, and all too often quick conclusions have been jumped to as a result. This is partly due to the fact that there has been a preoccupation with judging the validity of claims made by practitioners about their experiences, at the expense of attempts to explore the meaning of those experiences in their worlds. After all:

> *'experiences do not have to be "explained", but simply "understood" as the way of experiencing the world that is natural and unremarkable, strange only to the outsider' (Knibbe and Versteeg, 2008. 49).*

Understanding living in the world *as experienced* by those who we research is therefore a very valuable thing for researchers, but something which is not easily achieved if we remain as observers on the 'outside'.

Anthropologist Thomas Ots, rejects the idea of 'observation' as a method in fieldwork and makes a plea for 'experiencing participation' instead (Ots, 1994), and I certainly believe I gained insight by experiencing rather

than just observing. Sadly, it seems the dominant approach so far adopted in this field suggests that most researchers remain less keen to get stuck in, preferring to laugh about the research experiences of those who do. At an academic conference I have seen the geographer Julian Holloway use video footage from his ghost hunts and vigils – with which he demonstrates how easily participants, including himself, get pulled into performing the fear and surprise at otherworldly phenomena such as unexplained noises or furniture moving apparently under a ghostly influence. Holloway's intention was not to present such phenomena for ridicule, yet nonetheless the academic audience seemed more interested in dismissing or laughing at the very notion, rather than understanding the psychological and sociological processes we see enacted around them, and the consequences of that.

During my research I had direct firsthand experience of an 'otherworldly' presence and the impact that can have in an everyday context. I was told by a research participant that I would soon be facing a challenging meeting with a difficult senior manager who would try to prevent my progress. He told me his guide had given him the message that I should look over this person's left shoulder after sitting down and I would receive a sign that everything would work in my favour. As I sat in the meeting room – several hundred miles from the location of my research participant, in the private office of a member of staff on a university campus that participant had never visited – I looked over the manager's shoulder and received the 'sign'. There on the shelf directly above his left shoulder was a lone mug carrying the slogan 'Keep Calm and Carry On'. It was sound advice in the circumstances and helped me psychologically to negotiate the meeting successfully. Regardless of the fact that the 'message' was somewhat vague, and the mug probably a permanent fixture on this manager's shelf, it nonetheless seemed to me in that moment I had experienced something of the sensation of what it must be like to live in a world where spirit is perceived as 'being there' and 'helping out' (Bennett and Bennett, 200). However unknowable the precise circumstances behind this 'coincidental' event might have been, to borrow the words of Jennifer Mason (2011), this very intangibility made it both 'fascinating' and one of those moments of 'being hit'. Had I relied solely on observing this participant giving similar messages to other people I would not have had the opportunity to spontaneously experience something decidedly otherworldly in the way that he and other research participants routinely do. Although such intangibilities are impossible to pin down and verify as 'real' through the research tools at our disposal as social scientists, we *are* able to engage with their impact for research participants and therefore to present them as legitimate knowledges for us to do something with.

It is clear to me that serious empirical investigation of these enchanted worlds and landscapes remains hindered by the lenses through which we choose to view them. It is important therefore to consider carefully the methods we use to encounter intangible unknowns, and perhaps to be open to somewhat unorthodox ways of knowing as part of our 'data collection'. In the humanities, and anthropology in particular, there is a long tradition of this, and a greater propensity to engage in the worlds of research participants to develop understanding (such as in Tanya Luhrmann's (1989) classic study of witchcraft in England). Perhaps our social science studies of contemporary spirituality could benefit from a similar approach, rather than hiding constantly behind familiar discourses of neoliberalism and individualised consumption. This brings me to my next concern, the way in which otherworldly research is received in the critical social science community itself.

Articulating otherworlds: crossing boundaries in academic research

> *'I was deeply sceptical about the existence of paranormal phenomena, and had confined them to a mental file-drawer labelled "not true, but fun to talk about at parties"' (Wiseman, 2011. 3).*

Richard Wiseman is a highly successful psychologist, with a background in magic, and perhaps has a different set of ethics governing his approach to his research. As a social scientist however I maintain that an element of respect is a valuable part of what I do. Reading Wiseman's words made me uncomfortable because of his very dismissive and judgemental tone. I also do research on gay men's health, and reflecting on why his words made me feel so uneasy, I replaced the words 'paranormal phenomena' with 'gay men'. None of my peers would countenance someone being so dismissive of homosexuality as a research topic, whether or not they themselves happened to be gay. That Wiseman feels the need to distance himself personally so strongly

from the start is perhaps indicative of the fact that we almost always find ourselves 'suspicious or curious' about the beliefs of people who study religion or spirituality (Hay and Nye, 2006: 82). Yet this curiosity and suspicion is rarely so openly expressed in relation to other fields of study. I am often asked if I am 'taken in by any of it', the implication being that to align myself with such beliefs personally would undermine my credibility as a researcher. Yet I have never been asked if I am 'taken in by' gay men's claims about their sexuality. I have found therefore the lack of respect amongst my academic peers for the mysterious intangible unknown which lies at the heart of my subject matter has meant that I am frequently met with bewilderment, confusion, disbelief or ridicule in academic circles, and I feel this attitude raises ethical questions about how we do this research and how it is received.

I respected any experiences shared with me by research participants as a legitimate part of their world, but found such respect was not always forthcoming from other academics, as reflected in this conversation with a colleague:

> Me: I'm interviewing people about their experiences with angel healing.
>
> Colleague: Angel healing? What's that?
>
> Me: It's where the healer channels energy from angels.
>
> Colleague: But angels don't exist do they, so how can they heal? That's just ridiculous!
> [Followed by laughter].

According to my university's code of ethics, researchers have to 'treat all those associated with their research with respect.' Regarding this conversation about angel healing with my incredulous colleague, my sense is that she would have liked me to laugh it off with her, to vindicate her own anxiety at the very idea that someone might believe in angels. However, if I had done that, I would have failed to show my research participants respect. These otherworlds are part of our contemporary social landscape and we cannot go on being arrogant enough to dismiss them or ignore them, or to act with suspicion towards those who choose to research them. My concern is not whether angels 'exist', but what as a social scientist I can learn about the worlds of those for whom they do. I am not necessarily interested in 'the truth'; I am interested in meaning. A belief in angels or spirit guides is essentially no different to a belief in God, and whether or not I believe in God or the spirit guides should not impact on my ability as a social scientist to study it respectfully, for I am evaluating experiences, not truth claims. I maintain it does not matter if it is spirit as an agent, or someone's projection of spiritual agency onto some earthly phenomena, which is under scrutiny; we can learn sociologically from both, and understanding both perspectives can help us 'reach our fullest comprehension of our mutual humanity' (Schieffelin, 1996. 84).

I am working therefore within an interpretative paradigm and am interested in how people 'make up' their worlds (May, 1997), based on certain shared meanings around the existence of spirit in the everyday, rather than attempting to establish the veracity of those understandings. Nonetheless, I repeatedly find that reviewers of this work cannot let the question 'is it real' go unanswered. Such a desire for validation of research participants' beliefs would not be considered essential if this were an interpretative study of more mainstream religious traditions. They would simply be accepted as an interesting set of cultural experiences and practices worthy of exploration as part of the social world. Furthermore, it is often suggested to me that I need to declare my position. Yet I have never been asked about my sexuality when writing about gay men's health, nor asked to justify my study of sexuality by considering whether it is a biological phenomenon or a social construct.

As a social scientist it is possible to adopt open-mindedness if not necessarily like-mindedness (Dawson, 2010), leaving aside questions of what might be classified as 'real' and what might be consigned to the drawer marked 'not true' Furthermore, as Sociologist Charlie Emmons says:

> 'even to the extent that anomalous experiences are not "real", they can still be real in their consequences, which is why no social scientist should ever condemn the study of any such subject' (5 February, 2009)[2].

I believe therefore we need to reassess how otherworldly research is articulated and received, to allow a more open-minded investigation of the meaning and impact of otherworldly spiritual pursuits. One way of achieving this might be to ground our empirical findings from the intangible otherworldly in the social and material geographies of everyday lives, which brings me to the final section of this paper where I discuss a spatial framework which allows us to do precisely that.

Representing otherworlds: seeing landscapes of 'extra-geographies'

> *'When I'm connected it's as if I'm taller and my head pokes through an invisible cloud layer and above that cloud layer is the same world but with spirit in it. It overlays everything, it's always there. Sometimes when I don't feel connected I have to remind myself, it's there. I just need to stretch to find it' (Kathryn).*

Sensations of space and our place in the world are transforming, indeed in Zygmunt Bauman's (2000) 'fluid modernity' space is seen as largely irrelevant. Space, he claims, may be traversed in no time, cancelling the distinction between 'far away' and 'down here': 'Space no more sets limits to action and its effects' (Bauman, 2000. 117). This apparent irrelevance of material space stresses the importance of alternative spatial configurations which arise out of new liquid ways of being and doing, the most obvious of which might be the phenomenal growth of 'virtual' space online, where we are intricately connected in apparently infinite directions at the click of a button. Our relationships become stretched and distorted, undermining the power of physical space and linear time, and freeing our imaginations in terms of how we might live in the world and engage with it. Within studies of spirituality it is suggested that the internet offers a significant 'blurring of the boundaries between the virtual and the real and a consequent questioning of the nature of the latter' (Partridge, 2004. 140). However, whilst the emerging 'cyberspiritualities' offer a loosening of the hold of physical space over spiritual exploration, studies tend to focus on the mechanics of how social relations and religious meaning are established, maintained and mediated via electronic platforms (see for example Brasher, 2001), rather than hypothesising how such a fluid spiritual realm may reflect practitioners' relations with *other* virtual connections rooted in another dimension entirely. Thus whilst Bauman's irreverence for material space has been seized upon by those studying contemporary spiritual behaviours in cyberspace, there has been a lack of attention given to the implications of such conceptual fluidity for our comprehension of other non-physical dimensions, and social science continues to fail to adequately engage with the sorts of fluid spatialities implied by Kathryn's cloud layer.

A person will act in the world according to their understanding of it – including the possible presence of the otherworldly. Since we all have different relationships and experience the world in unique ways, every individual could quite conceivably be perceiving and experiencing different spaces and places whilst ostensibly inhabiting the same ones. Hence numerous 'places' will occupy any one 'space', and we cannot understand '*an* individual' acting in '*a* world', as there are multiple interpretations and presentations of each. It is my contention that scholars of alternative spirituality have failed to explore this in sufficient detail as yet, because they have focused on the things in the world they think they understand (the alternative health centres, communes and consumer objects), rather than the enchanted and often otherworldly spaces they are experienced within.

In order to elaborate upon the importance of this conceptually I begin with the premise that we all exist in three basic overlapping and interlocking worlds of experience – the subjective, the socio-cultural and the physical (Werlen, 1993; MacKian, 2000). For those actively incorporating a spiritual element in their fluid world, we also need to add 'the spiritual' – or Kathryn's layer above the invisible clouds. To return to Susannah's parking spaces - these exist for her physically, in terms of the concrete car-park; subjectively because she needs to know she can park her car when she arrives at her destination; socio-culturally as a system for dealing neatly with cars when not in use; and spiritually in that each time she finds a space it manifests a message direct from spirit to show her she is being looked after. These of course are not consciously moved between, they blend seamlessly together in her experience of parking, and the physical presence of a space becomes a spiritual sign from another world, whilst simultaneously retaining its socio-cultural significance as a convenient place to leave the car. The four worlds co-exist in everyday experience

therefore, but separating them out for conceptual purposes draws our attention to the need to take account of the roles of each one in any particular experience or encounter. Susannah's parking spaces demonstrate that being empirically and conceptually sensitive to the practitioner's worldview involves an acknowledgement of the crossing of the boundaries between previously distinct conceptual categories – this worldly and otherworldly - and in order to achieve this we cannot insist on keeping hold of drawers with the pre-prepared label 'not real'. Figure 1 outlines the unique contribution of each dimension to experience.

**Figure 1:** Worlds of experience (adapted from MacKian, 2012)

World…	The experience…
Subjective	Here we make sense of the world through our own unique interpretations. This is where the individual turns within, but it also affects how they choose to engage physically and socially with the world.
Socio-cultural	This consists of shared constructs and public discourses. This is the world in which we share links with others, even if we do not form a physical bond as a result. The socio-cultural world can have a powerful effect on the subjective world and of course helps to shape our physical world.
Physical	This is the solid and visible world of concrete space. However, although most contacts may be considered to be of the face-to-face, 'going there' variety within the physical world, a subjective or socio-cultural link with a particular physical thing or place is as important as actual bodily movement to it.
Spiritual	An individual may 'go to' this world through meditation or bring it into their physical world, through for example channelling or divination. Sometimes it may invite itself into the everyday physical and subjective world, such as visits from angels, guides or ghosts.

The inner-life model of spiritual pursuit, the personal journey within, only really takes account of the subjective world of experience, lifting it out of its practical or otherworldly context. The analysis of spirituality which situates all spiritual practice within a framework of individualised consumption emphasises a physical and socio-cultural framework, whilst giving little voice to subjective or spiritual dimensions. We need to incorporate *all* these worlds into our analysis; we cannot isolate just one aspect, because things – like parking spaces - exist in multiple worlds.

By thinking spatially in this way we can begin to see the ways in which individuals might seek to open up pathways between the physical and the spiritual worlds and we can even map them. The map of Penny's world in Figure 2 shows how these overlapping layers of connection allow the 'otherworldly' and 'this' world to reinforce each other in multiple ways. In her work as an Australian Bush flower essence practitioner Penny drew on her affinity with the physical world of nature to provide healing essences to clients. She also had an almost constant awareness of nature communicating to her in a spiritual capacity, and a strong relationship with a number of spirit guides. She would often feel a guide holding her hand as she walked through nature or hear the nature spirits talking to her. Penny worked with a network of women in the UK and Australia combining their energies through healing and divination to help clients. The women in this network were identified initially through spiritual connection via her spirit guide, but quickly became mapped across her socio-cultural world as well, with physical face-to-face meetings, and virtual connections electronically via the internet, or spiritually via meditation or visualization. Penny's everyday world was therefore a complex mix of very earthly phenomena – such as consultations, email exchanges and walks in nature; and inherently

otherworldly phenomena, including her guides, nature spirits and psychic connections to distant others. She existed therefore in a world which simultaneously and often seamlessly combined her spiritual connections and experiences with the material and social worlds she inhabited.

Figure 2 – Mapping Penny's world
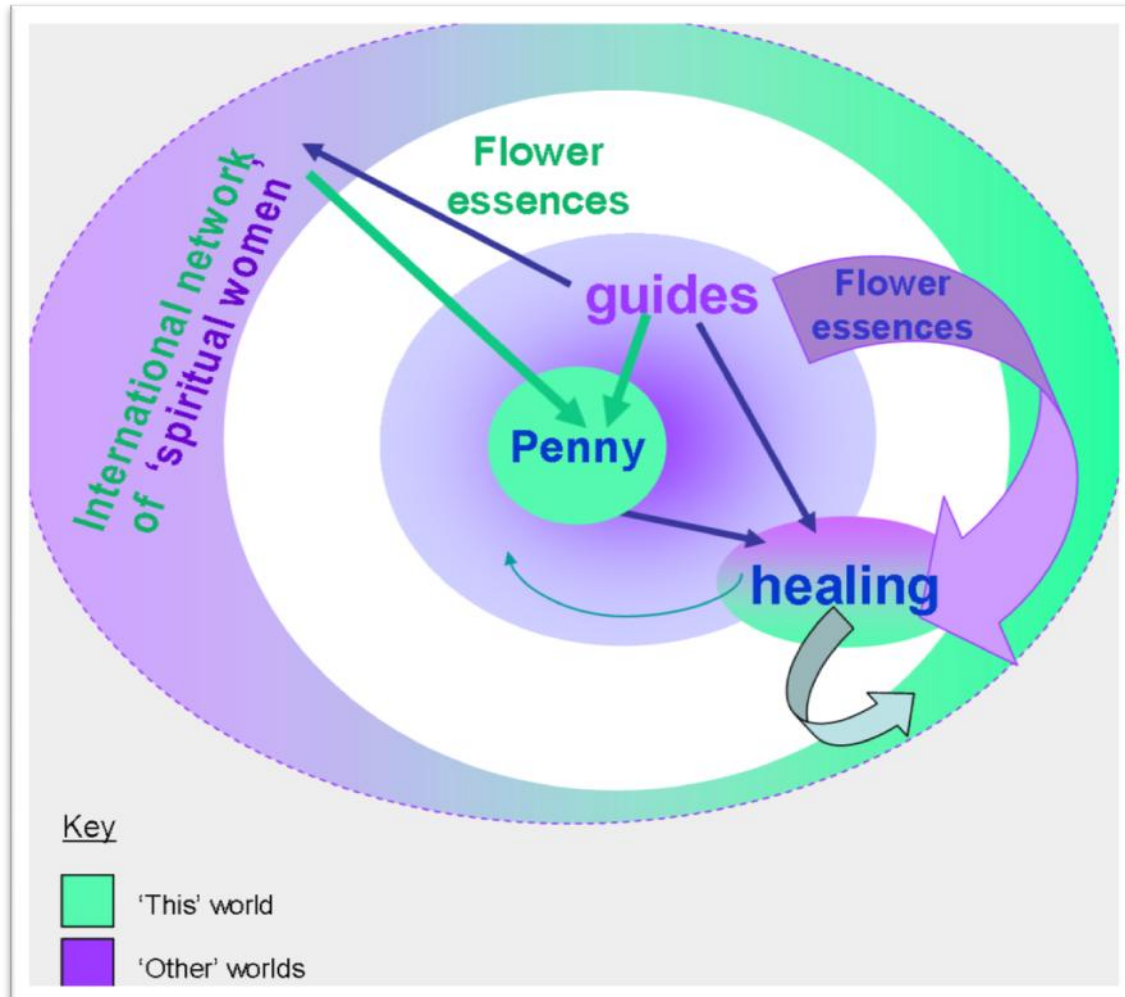
Exploring participants' experiences of such spiritual-material spaces allows a conceptualisation of everyday life as occurring within a rich constellation of subjective, socio-cultural, material and spiritual entities, jostling and interacting with each other in an all-at-onceness. Understanding contemporary spirituality in this way demands that critical social science acknowledges the place of enchanted otherworlds in our modern social landscapes. For those who regularly weave a 'spirit world' into their everyday living, it becomes a vital component in the fabric of their subjective, socio-cultural and material worlds. They look out for impressions of this unseen world in the physical world, and find them in the form of a guide's hand, a white feather or a parking space. These are presences that connect across the boundary between the tangible physical world of experience and the intangible, unknowable world of spirit; and these connections, or communications, are fundamental to the everyday worlds of those who experience them. Even if their existence might be condemned as 'not real' by scientifically verifiable criteria, these presences serve as markers of spatial transcendence and a connection between the physical and spiritual world. Hence:

> *'Researchers must be aware of the crucial point that spiritual believers orient themselves to a different social world than that constructed by many academic observers' (Corrywright, 2001. 197).*

Our research needs to acknowledge this because it has consequences for those involved, and for how we imagine the world to be (Dewsbury and Cloke, 2009).

Conclusion: imagining otherworlds

> *'To investigate mystery requires the imagination to conceive what is beyond the known and what is "obvious". The use of the imagination is thus important in scientific creativity' (Hay and Nye, 2006. 72-73).*

Roof (1999: 44) suggests, the flexibility at the heart of contemporary spirituality encourages 'creative, soul-searching processes'. In this paper I have proposed that similarly creative and possibly even soul-searching processes may be required of us as critical social scientists to encounter, articulate and represent the multi-dimensional experiences which emerge from contemporary spiritualities. I have suggested that ideas might be developed from disciplinary traditions which are perhaps less familiar to mainstream social scientists – such as para-anthropology. I have also recommended participatory research as a method for engaging with the otherworldly, for participation can at least result in the researcher forming a degree of empathy for the research subject as 'a way of life and not just a sociological category' (Calvey, 2000. 58). Finally, I have offered a way of mapping the worlds of spiritual seekers in order to gain insight into such a way of life in a way which can help us to acknowledge conceptually the implications of being in the world in this way, without necessarily having to take a stance ourselves on the validity or otherwise of a particular individual's claims.

Obviously I am not suggesting I have all the answers, but I do believe my ideas for a deeper, more sensitive awareness might drive research on spirituality forward in new, interesting and creative directions. These reflections may also open up new avenues for thinking across disciplinary and methodological boundaries in other contexts, as social science grapples with the complexity of trying to understand other contemporary worlds of experience which might also draw on alternative and intangible ways of being in the world.

As critical social scientists therefore we need to be able to push the boundaries of how we engage empirically with such intangible unknowns, and how we sensitise our interpretations to the personal and sociological consequences of them. Perhaps we may even, as Calvey suggests, begin to empathise a little more with such encounters as part of some people's way of life and not just as troublesome sociological categories. What I hope to have achieved in this paper is to open up a space for us to re-consider how we encounter, comprehend and imagine otherworldly experiences in social science research, for:

> *'however much we may strive toward a reality based on fundamental truths, there remains the trace of some-thing outside of this… the recognition of other worlds that arise beyond the survey and the map' (Dixon, 2007. 204).*

If we are to begin to really engage with these traces of some-thing, it is perhaps time for us to engage in a little creativity, to push the boundaries of our methodological comfort zones, and to admit that we can never really file away anything with complete certainty.

Endnotes

1. Fieldwork extended over the period from May 2007 to January 2011. I began identifying potential participants in the UK through advertisements in esoteric shops and at holistic events such as Mind-Body-Spirit fairs or workshops. As I began to build up contacts I also began to attend development workshops in various locations across the UK, for a range of spiritual techniques or skills, including mediumship, psychic development, crystal healing, Reiki and divination. Through immersion in online forums and groups I also recruited participants in the US, Europe and Australia.
2. Quoted from an online forum for the Anomalous Experiences Research Unit, University of York, England.

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Biography

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