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Uncertainty in the study of belief: the risks and benefits of methodological agnosticism

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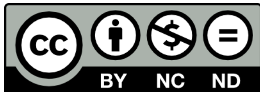
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Abstract

The study of religious and spiritual beliefs raises complex epistemological and methodological questions for interpretive social scientists concerning our ability to understand the everyday lifeworlds that belief-based communities inhabit. The primary focus of recent debates has been on the long-standing methodological insider/outsider dynamic, defined in terms of religious belief or affiliation, which intersects with other social categories such as gender or ethnicity. We contribute to this debate by considering a relatively neglected position, methodological agnosticism, which informs our study of religion and spirituality in the workplace. We argue that an agnostic position can be methodologically productive as a research strategy, but this must be counterbalanced by awareness of the fieldworker risks, which include emotional distress and identity threats. Agnosticism also encourages greater epistemological reflexivity as it implies 'not knowing' in relation to both metaphysics and social scientific knowledge construction. Through this we highlight the productive nature of uncertainty in the study of belief as an epistemologically and methodologically constructive standpoint.

Keywords: methodological agnosticism, belief, religion, workplace spirituality, reflexivity.

Introduction

Belief is central to understanding societies and cultures. But the study of religious and spiritual belief as an aspect of cultural life raises complex epistemological and methodological questions for interpretive social scientists, as well as for entire disciplines (Stewart, 2001; Engelke, 2002). Discussion of the tensions between secularism and belief in research has become more common (Stewart, 2001), as reflexive methodologies encourage greater personal revelation and writing the self into research. Researchers who study belief have offered detailed accounts of the challenges involved in understanding the everyday lifeworlds that belief-based communities inhabit. Some write of being 'converted' from skeptic to believer, to the benefit of their scholarship and personhood. Other accounts emphasise the researchers' violent rejection of the local theology and condemnation of its social or psychological effects on practitioners. Some are relatively open in explaining how their religious beliefs affected the data collection process (Hornsby-Smith, 2002; Quraishi, 2008; Heelas, 2008), while a rare few describe their religious conversion during fieldwork (Jules-Rosette, 1978).

Such tensions can limit the possibilities for developing fieldwork relationships. Researchers seeking access to religious communities are often categorised as representatives of secular humanism, even when they follow a faith (Peshkin, 1984). Acceptance of this positioning by potential respondents can result in failure to negotiate entry to a community (Gilliat-Ray, 2005). Members of religious communities may see the process and outcomes of secular social research as a challenge to the cultural norms that the organization is based on, and therefore refuse access. Faith community members can also express theological-ideological objection to secular social research epistemology, as it 'would potentially cut across the mechanisms of authority and structure which govern the life of the institution' (Gilliat-Ray, 2005: 19). These tensions also affect the researcher's academic standing within their intellectual community, as they are obliged to position themselves in relation to their professional peers' expectations of secularism or atheism; failure to do so means that data collection and analysis may be viewed as epistemologically unreliable and methodologically flawed (Barker, 1995).

In this paper we make an argument for agnosticism in the study of belief, as an identity position that offers a middle ground in the negotiation of these tensions through expression of

an alternative to the binary of belief and disbelief. The term agnosticism, usually credited to mid-19th century English natural scientist Thomas Huxley, carries theological, philosophical and sociological meaning. Here, however, we are mainly concerned with its connotations in relation to social research methods. The term 'methodological agnosticism' was developed by Smart (1973), following Berger (1967). Smart suggests sociologists ought neither to confirm nor deny the existence of the gods that research respondents take as the foundation of their worldviews. Agnosticism enables claims to truth made in the name of religions to be bracketed as impossible to resolve, unknowable in a social scientific sense but respected philosophically. We suggest that this metaphysical position needs to be given more prominence in methodological reflection on the processes of researching religion, and in the social construction of knowledge about belief systems. Agnosticism provides a way of locating a researcher's own faith position before, during and after fieldwork (Smyth & Mitchell, 2008), that is productive in terms of methods and the construction of knowledge. We argue that agnosticism offers the basis for a fieldwork strategy that avoids both offense and incorporation. In addition, it provides a philosophical position from which to gain a greater understanding of the belief system under study. Agnosticism thus constitutes both an identity position and an epistemological principle.

In making these arguments we draw on a long standing tradition of agnosticism in the social sciences, including the positionality of Max Weber who claimed to be inadvertently agnostic, describing himself as 'unmusical religiously' (Swatos & Kivisto, 1991), and William James (1982[1902]), who was committed to practising agnosticism. Peshkin (1984) suggests agnosticism offers a pragmatic position that enables researchers to dissemble more effectively and thereby enter or stay in the field as long as they exhibit 'proper behaviour' and refrain from challenging community doctrine. Agnosticism as a philosophical position also enables the researcher to maintain critical distance in analysis of the social and cultural dynamics of belief systems. However, this implies a high degree of instrumentality, as well as the overt practise of deception, which is ethically problematic, particularly in highly regulated institutional settings where researchers must commit to full disclosure to respondents either during or after fieldwork (Christians, 2005).

Our argument is founded on the study of belief in the workplace (Authors, 2003; Authors, 2004; Authors, 2012; Author 1, 2007; Author 1, 2008; Author 2, 2010), involving fieldwork in a variety of settings and using a variety of qualitative, ethnographic methods. Here we

focus on the use of participant observation as a method of data collection, as this was both intellectual and embodied, requiring us to make frequent decisions under pressure as to the level of participation we were willing to commit to. Our use of methodological agnosticism, initially inadvertently and then purposefully, highlights the potential for emotional distress if the researcher practices 'reciprocal exposure' (Bolognani, 2005) of the self alongside participants. We illustrate this by analysing a peer debriefing undertaken following one such fieldwork incident. However, despite the subjective risks during fieldwork and analysis, we suggest that methodological agnosticism offers a means of negotiating identity and constructing knowledge that is productive.

Belief in the field and in social research

Since William James wrote his conceptual and methodological landmark *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), social researchers have been alert to the importance of experience in generating social scientific understandings of religion and faith (e.g. Eliade, 1968; Engelke, 2002). For James, experience means prolonged or continuous practice performed repeatedly over time, such as praying or visiting a temple, as well as extraordinary moments that are intensely felt and quite sudden, such as a revelation or epiphany. Contemporary scholars continue to emphasise the importance of embodied and enacted experience in defining faith and analysing its effects on cultural life (Heelas, 2008; Lynch, 2007). Participation in the phenomena being studied therefore constitutes a key approach to developing understanding of belief, as well as in 'building open, collaborative research relationships' (Lynch, 2007, p. 9) with participants.

The question of how one's own beliefs shape what can be learned, apprehended or understood in fieldwork settings is a central preoccupation, especially for qualitative researchers (Barker 1983, 1987, 1995; Engelke, 2002; Ferber, 2006; McCutcheon, 1999; Spickard *et al.*, 2002). Ethnographers, for example, argue that physical presence and embodied participation in religious or spiritual rituals is a prerequisite for achieving interpretive depth, for it is only through this that the researcher is able to appreciate 'how it was' for participants (McGuire, 2002; Corrywright, 2004). This methodological position implies that 'religious belief carries with it a certain privilege to understand religious experience' (Engleke, 2002, p.8), so direct experience through the self helps analyse the other. Advocates of such 'experience-near' (Geertz, 1974) methods are not attempting to

understand the ideological or discursive claims associated with belief systems from an objective position in a positivist sense. Researcher participation is simply a means to discovering the meanings that religion or spirituality has for believers as a subjectively meaningful framework. However this methodology can be problematic if research is conducted within a social science discipline based on secular tenets of logic and empiricism (Stewart, 2001).

Participation in belief can also be ethically problematic. Some researchers decline to engage in religious practices because it would imply they are committed to the belief system they are studying (Neitz, 2002). Professional distance, during and after fieldwork is therefore recommended as a way of maintaining professional authority (Engelke, 2002). This reflects the discipline's modernist secular foundations as a post-Enlightenment human science that challenges religious authority (Hann, 2007). This issue of distance/closeness is can be especially difficult to negotiate when presenting scholarly work to non-academic or policy audiences (Barker, 1995). Finally, researchers have also found that participation in faiths does not necessarily mean believers will treat the researcher as an insider, since they can still be perceived as untrustworthy or inauthentic (Sutcliffe, 2000).

Despite these professional risks, many researchers occupy belief-based identity positions in the field. Some argue that data collection can and should involve full participation. The practice of belief becomes as aspect of the research methods which the religious scholar may use to collect data through embodied participation (Engelke, 2002). Jules-Rosette argues that her conversion during fieldwork was crucial as a source of personal transformation that profoundly affected data collection and analysis; she 'could no longer examine faith healing, confession, or tests of the spirit (such as exorcism) as exotic ritual happenings that had no bearing on [her]' (Jules-Rosette, 1978, p. 555). Similarly, during her ethnographic study of a Japanese workplace, Kondo's (1990) identity was partially redefined through participation in religious practices during a retreat with co-workers. Kondo argues that this process was not conscious, controlled or decisive; instead her 'sense of self was reformulated as a situated outcome of assimilated esoteric knowledge and the acquisition of meaningful identities' (Kondo, 1990, p. 25).

These accounts highlight how experience-near study of belief involves both the researcher's outward or external participation in the cultural practices associated with belief systems, and

inward or internal participation by experiencing affective emotional and embodied sensations. Even if the researcher starts fieldwork with the intention of limiting participation to the level of ritual engagement, complete immersion over a long time period can prove to be an existentially 'serious undertaking' (Sutcliffe, 2000, p. 218) beyond the control of the researcher. Joining a belief community involves accepting the norms of that group to some degree; as Peshkin (1984) notes, he could reject requests to convert but he could not behave in ways that challenged doctrine. This ambivalent position caused considerable discomfort, as Peshkin was unable to follow his everyday humanist ideals when confronted with, for example, a respondent in emotional distress. The identity risks associated with close observation are also illustrated by Barker's (1983) story of meeting two members of the religious movement that she was studying whilst on holiday with her partner. After chatting to the religious believers over coffee, Barker asked her partner when they were alone again what he thought of them, to which he replied 'they seemed rather nice – but *you* – you were so different!' (Barker, 1983, p. 133).

The experience-near study of belief, even when commitment is absent, may affect relationships with others beyond the researcher's professional community, as they witness unsettling changes in the fieldworker's way of being. This illustrates the dynamic nature of external and internal participation and the difficulties in confining either to specific places and times. Furthermore, while the researcher might start out with the intention of confining participation to ritual practices, social or cultural immersion may lead to changes in beliefs and identity. These changes are particularly likely in the study of spiritual, rather than religious belief systems, where distinctions between non-believers and believers are more blurred as a consequence of how membership is constituted through, for example, elective consumption (Redden, 2005).

However, it seems that the primary risk lies in is the accusation of 'going native' and the consequent loss of professional credibility. Barker (1983) describes how she was assumed to be a member of the religious movement she was researching, leading academic peers, policymakers, and relatives of movement members to question her credibility as a social scientist, casting doubt on the quality of her research, leading to difficulties in publishing and not being taken seriously when attempting to inform policy. Religious participation, even when framed as a methodological strategy, is often viewed sceptically in the social sciences

and wider society as evidence of the researcher's psychological, social, or intellectual weakness (Harding, 1987).

Researching religion and spirituality is also made complex because of the highly emotive personal implications of involvement. Participation is not confined to events, experiences and situations that arise externally, but also stimulates internal experiences which are related to fundamental understandings of self, being and identity (Smyth & Mitchell, 2008). By turning her own subjectivity into an 'inner laboratory' (Roberts, 2001), the researcher makes herself vulnerable by accepting the possibility of self-risk and self-change while exploring how belief is enacted (Ponticelli, 1996; Bruner, 1996; Roberts, 2001; Davidman, 2002). In addition, analysis of religious belief takes researchers into areas of high social or political sensitivity (Barker, 1995; Gilliat-Ray, 2005). In the next section we explain how this combination of personal and professional risk is experienced in the field of management and organization studies, through exploring processes of professional and personal identity construction involved in our research.

Researching belief in management and organization studies

In contrast to researchers in other areas of the social sciences, management and organization studies scholars have been relatively slow to acknowledge the resurgence of religions and spiritualities as a socio-cultural presence. The literature on belief and management is relatively small but extremely varied, for both popular and academic audiences, and is often most concerned with the recent management fashion of 'workplace spirituality'. Popular accounts and many academic analyses promote a functionalist or managerialist version of belief based on the claim that individual and organizational performance improvements will result from workplace initiatives to encourage employees to develop their religious beliefs (Authors, 2003).

Some researchers do acknowledge the methodological challenges associated with this. For example, Lips-Wiersma (2003) notes the challenge in separating personal from professional. She argues that researchers need to articulate their spiritual or religious identity as a means of enabling reflection on how their beliefs influence research. However, she assumes that researchers in this field adhere to a religion or have spiritual beliefs, arguing that if they did not it is unlikely that they 'would invite... research participants to discuss their spirituality or

religion or elaborate on something they might have mentioned that relates to these themes' (Lips-Wiersma, 2003, p. 409). The implication here is that insider experience of belief systems enhances the authenticity of the knowledge that is generated, such that the researcher's internal participation enhances understanding (cf. Quraishi, 2008). For Lips-Wiersma, the fully participative study of workplace spirituality constituted an aspect of her own spiritual self-discovery: 'By articulating my own beliefs in relation to my research I felt I was not just enhancing the quality of the research... what I wrote also affected whom I was becoming' (Lips-Wiersma, 2003, p. 417).

This perspective is based on a sacred philosophy of knowledge, assuming the need for an experienced supernatural reality beyond the material and social. This valorises research conducted from a believer's perspective, to suggest that understanding must involve belief in the existence of a spiritual reality beyond the empirically observable (cf. Reason, 1993). It rejects the notion that knowledge about belief systems may be gained by exploring their material-objective or social-constructive properties. Similarly, Fornaciari and Lund-Dean (2001, p. 337) assert that 'concepts such as soul, spirit, faith, and morality are not measurable in conventional ways and are by definition non-reductionist. These concepts cannot be observed and recorded... and defy consensus as to their very meaning, making quantitative research operationalization nearly impossible... forcing these concepts into old methodological "clothing" has rendered their research study sterile and meaningless, and defies the very heart of what spirituality researchers investigate'. Gull and Doh (2004) further assert that 'in [the Cartesian-Newtonian] system of thought, the logical, the empirical, and the rational dominate, and therefore the focus is on (and greater importance is given to) the objective, the external, and the material aspects of reality.... [This has] caused us to believe that all that is important is the external, the material, the objective, and the empirically substantiated: It has caused us to create a world without depth' (Gull and Doh, 2004, p. 129).

For these researchers, religious and spiritual beliefs are 'creations of the human spirit which express insights and grasp realities in a manner that cannot simply be explained away' (Pals, 1999, p. 186) physiologically, psychologically or sociologically. This creates a particular tension for researchers trained in the positivist tradition, as they struggle with the possibility that belief cannot be understood using their methods of scientific observation, but it also implies that methodological agnosticism is an illegitimate positioning. As Rousseau (2009, p. 346) declares, 'I cannot accept a closed canon or treat as real something not systematically

observable. Yet I am aware that our senses and cognitive limitations constrain what we experience. These limits in turn circumscribe the observations that science can make; its capacity for observation and interpretation far surpassed by reality's as-yet-unknowable complexity. As we pursue what is empirically knowable at present, there is reason to quest for deeper ways of knowing, as found in mysticism and physics at its imaginative best'.

This methodology and philosophy of knowledge constructs the fieldworker's internal participation in belief systems as a prerequisite for achieving understanding on which to base a sacralised analysis. This perspective is related to the tradition of experiential participative action research, developed by Reason (e.g. 1993, 1998), which suggests that research is a sacred as well as scientific process. He asserts that the world is an inherently sacred space and therefore that 'our experience, our knowing and our action, at its best, will also be sacred' (Reason, 1993, p. 274). Research participation is therefore seen as a methodological and 'spiritual imperative' (Reason, 2005, p. 39), a necessary transformation process that leads individuals to experience a higher level of awareness (Reason, 2007) and produce better scholarship. Spiritual beliefs and practices are regarded as compatible with, rather than antithetical to, the generation of credible knowledge.

This sacred philosophy of knowledge is problematic in several respects. First, it assumes that supernatural belief is a universal construct, 'a dimension of the human being that is shared by all persons' (Hicks, 2002, p. 382), thereby denying the legitimacy or even possibility of agnosticism or disbelief. Second, it implies that the non-believer is less able to understand belief or analyse it. This is obviously exclusionary, as only people who hold spiritual or religious beliefs can be involved in their study. Third, by constructing a binary division between belief and non-belief, a sacred philosophy of knowledge tends to obscure the numerous and complex differences between belief systems, which mean that being a believer within one, e.g. Catholicism, potentially precludes understanding of another, e.g. Buddhism (Pals, 1999). Fourth, a sacred philosophy of knowledge elides important distinctions between the study and the practice of religion (McCutcheon, 1999). Finally, there is limited evidence of critically reflexive practice within this methodological position, leaving researchers open to the charge that they are seeking to smuggle their commitment to religiosity or spirituality into their scholarship (Segal, 1999).

Yet we are also uncomfortable with an entirely secular or reductive atheist (Stewart, 2001) philosophy of knowledge that positions the researcher as a detached, critically-distanced observer of social or political phenomena. This framework suggests religion is no different from any other human activity or socio-cultural system. Belief is dedifferentiated (Weber (2009[1919]) and placed alongside all other human social constructs. Concepts such as soul, god or spirit are regarded as having no reality beyond the social, their role purely to produce a sensation of the divine in our minds and social interactions (Durkheim, 1915). The focus of research is therefore purely on assessment of the political, economic, social or psychological function or significance of beliefs.

Some researchers in our field assume the impossibility of studying the 'inner experience of "pure spirituality"', and suggest focusing instead on 'the domain of practical applications and measurable outcomes' (Heaton et al., 2004, p. 63) that belief can contribute to in managerial organizations. In a similar vein, King asserts that 'the robust literature in psychology illustrates that valid and reliable measures can be devised and that the construct of religion can be fruitfully studied' (2008, p. 218). These secular epistemologies assume the non-existence of the supernatural and assert that religion can only be approached as a human enterprise; they are thus methodologically atheistic. In so far as it happens at all, external participation in ritual practices is seen as an adequate means of achieving interpretive depth, without the need for internal participation in order to experience the phenomenon from the point of view of someone who accepts its authenticity.

A secular philosophy of knowledge is also evident among critically oriented researchers who see workplace spirituality and the attempted management of belief as the latest in a series of fashions that show the progressive colonization of selfhood by employers (Brown, 2003). The presence of anything belief-related in workplaces is an unwelcome incursion into private identity formation (Tourish and Pinnington, 2002), a means of generating compliance and commitment to satisfy managerial interests and maintain ideological support for neoliberal capitalism (Carrette and King, 2005). These interpretations, often informed by Marxist and Foucauldian perspectives, regard religious and spiritual belief systems as ideologies that preserve the status quo through promoting false consciousness.

A secular philosophy of knowledge therefore assumes belief to be an exclusively human projection. This has two implications: it suggests that belief is epiphenomenal, an effect

rather than a potential cause or thing in itself, and it implies that belief can be reduced to something else, whether an ideology, a neurosis or a social binding (Aldridge, 2000). In seeking to interpret belief only in terms of its social, political or psychological significance, these analyses are reductionist (Eliade, 1968), casting the believer as close to a cultural dupe and the researcher as the ultimate arbiter of the significance of experience. A secular philosophy of knowledge is also ethically problematic for scholars, as it encourages the development of an instrumentally split identity, dividing the social scientific self in the field from privately held spiritual or religious beliefs[1]. Researcher participation must be confined to the external level, as an engagement with outward manifestations of belief. It denies any authenticity to religious experience in the moment, precluding a faith-based explanation of events or behaviours that goes beyond the empirically observable and naturalistic (Porpora, 2006). Just as the sacred philosophy of knowledge constructs a problematic privileged position based on insider experience and belief, the secular philosophy of knowledge suggests an authoritative outsider position. This is founded on denial of the possibility that religion or spirituality has any significance beyond the human, and a demand for disbelief in order for the researcher to be credible. In our own research practice we have found both sacred and secular methodologies to be problematic. We have therefore chosen to try to embody an agnostic identity position, to emphasise the possibility of not-knowing.

Practising agnosticism

Agnosticism is a methodological position that promotes the performance of a delicate balancing act that involves demonstrating empathy with believers, rather than sympathy (Barker, 1983). However, 'becoming part of the data' (Barker, 1995, p. 290) does not mean that the researcher has to become a believer. As a philosophical position and fieldwork strategy founded on doubt (Smart, 1973) it is realised through non-committed participation (Heelas, 2008) involves being uncertain about faith, creating an identity related and methodological aporia that generates important questions about fieldwork and the knowledge its analysis generates. The credibility of the position rests on the possibility that social scientific study of belief can be based on bracketing the possibility of whether or not belief systems have an ontological reality independent of social actors who believe in them (Berger, 1967). This leaves open the possibility of supernatural experience through according it a potential ontological equivalence to the material and the social, constructing belief systems as aporetic, infinitely complex, impossible to know, and always open to question. The

possibility of assuming the role of the neutral observer is thus ruled out. However, it also precludes the adoption of a privileged believer position.

> To be agnostic does not mean one is a disbeliever (as is meant by the term atheism), but, instead, it means that one is in the position of not having sufficient information from which to make a decision on matters of truth. Admitting not to have the knowledge, then, necessitates a different sort of scholarship from that of those who claim to possess the privileged knowledge of either the empathetic *or* the explanatory observer. (McCutcheon, 1999, p. 7)

Not understanding, not knowing and being non-committed, are therefore bases for fieldwork and an intellectual position which enable both interpretive depth and productive analysis. Fieldwork is a process about which it is impossible to be categorical and clear, as are the religious or spiritual encounters and the beliefs that inform communities under study. The ethnographic principle of simultaneous involvement and detachment involves the researcher switching between 'withness-thinking' and 'aboutness-thinking' (Ybema & Kamsteeg, 2009).

Methodological agnosticism requires the researcher to remain as neutral as possible concerning the truthfulness of claims made by believers or non-believers. Yet such a position can prove difficult to defend. Declarations of not knowing are precarious in fieldwork because they leave the researcher open to challenge from participants based on their perceived lack of commitment to the local (or indeed any) belief system. The occupation of a non-committed position introduces uncertainty into social encounters which other participants may seek to reduce by trying to locate the researcher either as a believer or a non-believer. It also suggests that the researcher is not fully competent in the accomplishment of a convincing self (Scott *et al.*, 2012). Such challenges and doubts can be upsetting and threatening to everyone's sense of self and the integrity of the social setting. While this may be experienced by researchers working within both sacred and secular philosophical traditions, our experience is that they are particularly associated with the stance of methodological agnosticism.

One of the techniques that we have adopted to deal with these tensions is peer debriefing (Erickson and Stull, 1998). Following fieldwork, the researcher meets with a colleague to reflect on experiences. The role of the debriefer is to stimulate examination of the encounter

on the participant's self. This technique helps us to obtain reciprocal support in dealing with the challenges associated with research, and to reflexively explore the effects that fieldwork encounters have on our professional and personal identities. It also enables us to identify specific moments during fieldwork when participation moves from external to internal, or when not-knowing becomes significant. However, revisiting the moment is not simply a means whereby the researcher can achieve distance from events and their effects; there is always the possibility of becoming a different person as a consequence of fieldwork engagements and reflection on them. Debriefing thus also highlights the precariousness and vulnerability associated with methodological agnosticism.

One debriefing in particular illustrates the arguments we are making here. One of us attended a 'spirituality in the workplace' seminar event. This formed part of an ongoing research project that involved both of us attending 'spiritual management development' workshops over a number of years. These workshops usually take place over 2 or 3 days in rural locations, and require corporate managers to explore their spiritual and religious beliefs with a view to encouraging higher levels of work performance in themselves and colleagues. The workshop referred to here was unusual; it lasted only one day, in central London, but was facilitated by one of the most renowned 'guru' practitioner/authors in the field.

The researcher attending the workshop has moved between atheism and agnosticism for most of his adult life. This had been somewhat problematic in previous fieldwork, but he had not been directly challenged about it. During this workshop, however, the facilitator singled out the researcher to participate in a 'visioning' exercise. This took place in a room with around 20 strangers, participating to different degrees in the day's events. The researcher could in principle have refused. There are several reasons why he did not: first, we ask respondents in our research to reflect on their sometimes painful experiences at this kind of event and it seems unethical to refuse to engage in it ourselves. Second, it was an ideal opportunity to participate fully in the kind of spiritual development we attend such events to observe, enabling data collection. Third, the researcher was curious about what his personal reaction would be to the exercise. Fourth, the facilitator presented a challenge that he would have regretted not taking up as an opportunity missed. Finally, the researcher felt a moral obligation to both his co-researcher and the other people in the room attending the seminar.

The visioning exercise consisted of a series of rapid fire questions about what barriers there are to creating our own heaven on earth through work. The facilitator stood throughout, the researcher sat, and keywords were written on a flipchart. Through the interrogation about barriers and their sources, a set of core values and desires were refined, indicating where the person is unhappiest and what he would like to change. Once engaged, it is very difficult to withdraw; the interaction becomes increasingly personal and emotional; and the individual's (lack of) faith in a higher power is repeatedly raised as a means of achieving happiness in life and work. The exercise seems designed to reveal fragilities and aspects of self that are difficult to explore in any setting, let alone a seminar room of new acquaintances. In addition, for many of the seminar participants there were colleagues in the room with hierarchical power over them at work.

We then met in the evening for dinner after this workshop to discuss the research project. During an uncomfortable and upsetting conversation about the seminar, we decided to conduct a more formal debriefing a few days later, because both were concerned that the experience described here had been a disturbing one. The author who participated spoke that evening and during debriefing about feeling exposed, unsettled, violated existentially and intellectually, and his wish to leave the workshop at that point, mid-way through, to avoid speaking to the other participants, and to abandon data analysis based on the seminar.

During the debriefing and then while writing this paper, we realised that we have both had similar experiences during many fieldwork episodes. Our beliefs have been questioned by respondents during interviews, co-participants at spiritual personal development workshops, while presenting our work and selves at academic conferences and in job interviews. We have both felt existentially or socially uncomfortable during fieldwork, and we have both taken those feelings back into professional or domestic settings. In short, our experience of fieldwork in this area has made us question our beliefs such that we have oscillated between disbelief, doubt, and belief, metaphysical and epistemological, in a range of social contexts.

As we have already indicated, interrogation of the researcher's religious and spiritual beliefs is not confined to fieldwork experiences. The stance of methodological agnosticism also helps to explain the responses to our published work that we have experienced from colleagues who are interested in knowing 'whose side' we are on (Becker, 1967). Ambiguity and uncertainty are rarely considered legitimate positions within scholarly work, since

academic reputation is based on the development of a clear, consistent and knowledgeable position (Scott *et al.*, 2012). Non-commitment or 'not knowing' is a fundamentally precarious intellectual position which others may seek to challenge and is inherently difficult to defend as scientific, thus making publication of reflexive analyses more difficult. Methodological agnosticism is also a lonely stance since the avoidance of believing in belief, or indeed not-believing, to an extent precludes the possibility of belonging (Day, 2011) to a community. It can therefore provoke similar feelings to those described as foreignness or strangeness (Agar, 1980) by ethnographers.

The uncertainty and discomfort such feelings provoke can however be productive. Willingness to participate in religious or spiritual ritual provokes unique intellectual and embodied experiences. Doubt as to the reality of the theology and the emotion, however, enables analytical understanding and therefore a more meaningful contribution to knowledge. It has also been for us the most ethical identity position to take during fieldwork. Through agnosticism, we have been able to be open about the requirement to maintain a professional persona, during and after fieldwork and, often at the same time, to be candid as to our understanding of the possible truth of the beliefs that we are interested in as cultural phenomena.

Conclusion: The productive nature of agnostic uncertainty

In this paper we have brought together two aspects of conducting research in faith communities: how to negotiate belief in the field, and the desire to achieve reflexivity and credibility in reporting research. Methods and methodologies have historically been neglected in the social scientific study of religion (Stausberg & Engler, 2011), but that is starting to change as the volume of fieldwork increases and religious belief re-enters the public square as a significant social or political practice (Dinham et al., 2009). Negotiating fieldwork access is often the first moment in which belief acquires pragmatic significance (Gilliat-Ray, 2005), especially if the faith community defines researchers as representatives of secular humanism and therefore committed to challenging cultural norms. There is no respite post-access, however, as fieldworkers continue to negotiate situated identities throughout data collection and analysis. Once out of the field, the researcher's positionality continues to be questioned, often suspiciously, by professional communities and other research users (Greeley, 1990). Finding a way through this suspicion involves navigating a

path between an unsatisfactory 'sacred science' that demands knowledge contribute towards maintenance of the sacred in life, and equally unhelpful disenchanted, secular, atheist, distanced, critical position that positions belief as pathological or delusional. We have explored the wide middle ground between these two positions, framed by the notion of agnosticism, to argue that not knowing in the field and during analysis is a credible position that enables productive engagement with respondents and others interested in our research.

In pursuing this argument, we want to encourage greater methodological reflexivity in our own scholarly community of management and organization studies and to contribute to the developing inter-disciplinary debate on researching belief. For more than a decade scholars from a range of disciplines have reflected on the intersection of aspects of identity and their varied effects on data collection or analysis. How we 'match' or 'place' ourselves in relation to respondents is clearly significant for researchers themselves (Egharevba, 2001; Hornsby-Smith, 2002), but it is also important in considering reliability of data (Bolognani, 2005; Egharevba, 2001; Quraishi, 2008), and maintenance of credibility (Ryan et al., 2011). Following Carter's (2004) lead in arguing for an identity 'gap' as a positive methodological strategy, we have suggested here that agnosticism can create a form of 'thin rapport' (Smyth & Mitchell, 2008) to simultaneously show and protect ourselves. It is however crucial to remain engaged with the substance of belief and maintain belief-based reflexivity. We suggest that adopting positions such as nomad, tourist, *flaneur* or *bricoleur* (Harvey, 2011) during fieldwork put too much distance between researcher and researched, implying that belief is separable as a cultural phenomenon and within the control of the researcher.

As Gilliat-Ray (2005) emphasises, reflexive accounts of the research act may be driven by personal interest, a desire to encourage debate within the scholarly community, and an ethical imperative to locate social science research in its wider context. We have explored the possibility of a productive agnosticism, as a way of positioning the self during fieldwork and of framing research analysis. We see this productivity in two main areas. First, agnosticism enables us to engage sympathetically with a range of belief systems to enable a more empathic understanding of their cultural significance. This has always been a key challenge for researchers, and is now especially salient when religious belief is in a more prominent public position than during the 20th century. Second, when agnosticism is carefully translated from research methodology to epistemology (in other words, to inform the production of a more uncertain or situated form of knowledge), we can bridge the gap between the sacred and

secular temporarily without losing sight of the religious experience or its cultural significance. Research on religion does not need to accept the credibility of the sacred, but equally researchers cannot simply write belief into secular social or cultural theory, ignoring the differentiated status believers attribute to it. Agnosticism provides a way of acknowledging and respecting this differentiation without committing to it as metaphysical truth. Doubtful belief may be one of the most thought-provoking methodological positions a researcher can take.

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