

Toward an experiential approach for researching religious experiences

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Over the last decade the experiential approach has been used by some researchers in order to increase their understanding of religious systems (Jules-Rosette, 1975; Katz, 1982; Maquet, 1975; Peters, 1981). In his study of Tamang shamanism, Peters (1981) undertook an apprenticeship with a shaman in an attempt to experience what the participants said they did. Katz (1982) chose to participate in the healing dance of the Kung, finding that this experience provided him with insights into the nature of healing, and thus motivated healers to share more of their knowledge. Jules-Rosette (1975), in her study of rituals and symbolic meanings in an African church, had a conversion experience that led her to become a member, changing her emphasis from being a participant observer to being a "observing participant".

Similarly, a significant number of person-centered ethnographers are recognizing the role of subjectivity and the researcher-participant relationship as a source of increased knowledge and understanding (Briggs, 1970; Crapanzano, 1980; Dwyer, 1982; Rabinow, 1977). These studies suggest the need to consider researchers as "positioned subjects" who have particular lived experiences that both enable and inhibit particular kinds of insight (Rosaldo, 1983). Supporting the use of the researchers's experiential data in the research process, Reinharz (1984) writes:

If the experience of the research is omitted, then the discipline is limited to the study of observable behavior and responses to instruments and contrived situations such as questionnaires. Studies built on such a foundation lack both the experience of the researcher and of the subject since the information concerning the subject is not experiential but an artifact of research procedures (p. 337).

In this paper I propose that an experiential approach is fundamental for an understanding of religious experiences. Through an experiential approach it is possible to capture the complexity of religious experiences without degrading, reducing or devaluating them. In order to illustrate and validate my arguments I will use my research experiences on Puerto Rican Espiritismo, a healing system based on the belief that human beings can communicate with the spirit world (Núñez Molina, 1987; 1989). The main purpose of this study was to describe the process of becoming a spiritist healer in order to discover the major dimensions of the spiritist model for educating healers. In this paper, I am going to emphasize the methodological issues related to my study.

I will begin by offering a background of Puerto Rican Espiritismo and describing its belief system.

Puerto Rican Espiritismo

Espiritismo (Spiritism) has been extensively studied in an attempt to evaluate and understand its success in helping Puerto Ricans (Comas-Díaz, 1981; Garrison, 1977; Harwood, 1977; Koss, 1975, 1980). Based on the belief in a spirit world that has the capacity to intervene in human affairs, Espiritismo is practiced by Puerto Ricans living in the Island as well as those living in the United States. It is utilized by lower-class as well as upper-class individuals (Núñez Molina, 1987). Illiterate people as well as those with a college education are also believers in Espiritismo. It functions as a religion for some Puerto Ricans, as a healing system used in moments of crisis for others, and as a "philosophy" and "science" for

those who are academically oriented. The development of Espiritismo in Puerto Rico was influenced by the ideas of Allan Kardec (1804-1869), a French philosopher and educator who wrote several books about what he called "Spiritismé". Kardec (1978) defined it as the science that studies the nature, origin and destiny of spirits, and their relations with the corporeal world. Kardec's Spiritismé was introduced in Puerto Rico in the second half of the 19th century by Puerto Rican intellectuals who returned to the Island after studying in Europe (Yañez, 1963).

Espiritismo began to develop in Puerto Rico as a middle class movement led by intellectuals and academically-oriented Puerto Ricans (Rodríguez, 1978). They were more interested in Espiritismo as a philosophical system which provides a framework for social and moral development. Some of them were attracted to Espiritismo because of its "scientific" orientation and emphasis on psychical research.

However, there was also another group of Puerto Ricans, generally from the lower class, who were interested in Kardec's Spiritismé not because of its "scientific" and philosophical orientation but because this system offered a framework for understanding healing and treating illness. They syncretized Espiritismo with popular Catholicism, curanderismo, herbal medicine and other healing practices derived from the Indian and African heritage. In the process they adapted Kardec's Spiritismé to their own reality and needs, creating a unique healing system.

Belief System

The foundation of the spiritist belief system is the view of a spirit world which is constantly interacting with the "material world" (mundo material). The spirit world is believed to be inhabited by spirits who are classified according to a hierarchy of moral development (Harwood, 1977). The spirits at the lowest level of this hierarchy are identified as ignorants because they are too attached to the material world and interested in harming human

beings. At the highest level, the evolved spirits or "spirits of light" (*espiritus de luz*) have achieved a great degree of spiritual perfection, being able to protect people from the negative influence of the ignorant spirits.

Communication between the spirits and human beings is an essential element of *Espiritismo*. Individuals capable of contacting the spirit world are called mediums: they serve as intermediaries between the spirit world and the material world. In theory every person is an actual or a potential medium because a medium is considered a natural capacity. Yet, in order to become a medium, an individual has to be involved in a process called "*desarrollo de facultades*" (development of faculties). The "*facultades*" are the different capacities that a medium needs to communicate with the spirits in order to get help from them.

"*Espiritistas*" believe that ignorant spirits can be the cause of physical as well as mental illness. These spirits can control the thoughts and actions of an individual, making him or her experience an "*obsesión*". The individual who is experiencing an "*obsesión*" is under the influence of an ignorant spirit, subjected to that spirit's will. The influence of these ignorant spirits can also produce physical disturbances, ranging from headaches to major illness.

The Practice of *Espiritismo* in Puerto Rico

The most important event in the practice of *Espiritismo* is the spiritist meeting. Most of the spiritist centers have a similar physical set up. Usually there is a long tablecloth which is occupied by the group leader (*Presidente*) and the experience mediums. On the table there may be a goblet of water, flowers, cigars, statues of different Catholic saints, incense and other paraphernalia. Generally, the room is adorned with pictures of Christ, the Virgin Mary and other religious personalities.

Usually, the session begins with a reading from the book *El Evangelio Según *Espiritismo** (The Gospel According to Spiritism) written by Allan Kardec.

Another book that is used in almost every spiritist meeting is the Collection of Selected Prayers, which contains prayers asking for the presence of spirit guides, the education of ignorant spirits, and for the health of the sick, and others.

After this first stage, the mediums prepare for the working of "causas" that are affecting the visitors. The causas are the actions and influences of the ignorant spirits upon an individual. The working of causas is a process which involves several tasks. First, a medium identifies the particular problem of the individual, classifying it in two major categories: material or spiritual. When the causa is material it means that the individual's problem is not caused or influenced by the spirits. Usually, the mediums will refer the person to a health professional. They may also offer a treatment based on their knowledge of herbal treatment. However, when the causa is identified as spiritual, the healing process is oriented toward educating or "giving light" to the spirit who is totally or in part responsible for the problem.

Second, when the causa is spiritual the role of the medium is to divine which of the symptoms that the person is experiencing are produced by the ignorant spirit. After this has been done, the medium is prepared to be possessed by the spirit in order to create the opportunity for a dialogue between the spirit, the other mediums and the affected individual.

This dialogue has two major functions. First, as the spirit expresses its feelings against the person, one can become aware of why the spirit wants to harm him or her. Usually, ignorant spirits are trying to take revenge for something that the person did to them when they were alive in this life or a past one. The second, but most important, function of the dialogue is to educate or give light to the ignorant spirit so that it will not continue doing harm. If the ignorant spirit decides to follow the medium's advice, then it means that the causa has been lifted up. The healing process is not completed until the ignorant spirit repents for all the evil it has caused.

The mediums also involved the person in the working of the *causa* by asking him or her to perform a number of activities and rituals that are supposed to be effective in giving light to the spirit. For example, a medium can prescribe rituals such as the lighting of candles and the reading of prayers. At the same time, the individual is transform his\her character because ignorant spirits affect the people who do not have enough strength to resist their influence.

When the **Presidente** considers that it is time to finish the working of **causas** , the meeting is closed with a prayer from the Collection of Selected Prayers called "At the end of the meeting".

Having described the belief system of *Espiritismo* , I am going to present a research model which emphasizes that in order to understand a religious system the researcher needs to experience the participant's reality.

The roots of my approach to the study of *Espiritismo*: A personal story

Research accounts in the social sciences have emphasized the analysis of results without enough reflexive description of how the researcher's cultural and personal background are influencing the selection of the research topic, the methodological approach, relationship with participants and the research process in general (Lawless, Sullive and Zamora, 1983; Nash & Winthrob, 1972; Polkinghorne, 1983). The general orientation among social science researchers is to write about their research as if they were not present or involved in the act of interviewing, observing, participating and interacting with the people studied. Usually research publications are totally dedicated to examining the Other ("the subjects") without including a description of the Self (the researcher) and how the interaction of the Self and the Other affected the research findings (Dwyer, 1982).

The researcher's personal experiences and reflection on the research process are most likely to be found in

peripheral places of a work, such as prefaces, postscripts, footnotes, acknowledgements and appendices. In doing this, researchers are disregarding their personal experiences and reflective stance in order to present an "objective" analysis of their findings.

What are the reasons that researchers in the social sciences have for not telling the "personal story" which evolves in the process of doing a study? Usually the personal story is not considered significant because of the assumption that the researcher's role is to tell the participants story not his or her own. However, I discovered that my personal story influenced the way in which I described and understood the participants' story. How would it be possible to tell the participants's story without making any reference to my own?

In addition, in telling the personal story, researchers take the risk of exposing and disclosing their "subjectivity" making it easier for the scientific community to point out the weaknesses and limitations of their work. This dilemma is very well described by Myerhoff and Ruby (1982):

The more the ethnographer attempts to fulfill a scientific obligation to report on methods, the more he or she must acknowledge that his or her own behavior and personality in the field are data. Statements on method then begin to appear to be more personal, subjective, biased, involved, and culture bound; in other words, the more scientific anthropologist try to be by revealing their methods, the less scientific they appear to be (p. 26).

Another reason for not telling the personal story is that most of the time researchers are guided in their writings by the model of the "good movie". In the scientific community there is a tendency to describe only "successful" accounts. At the end of the study, researchers seem to have found clear answers to all the questions addressed at the beginning. They do not seem to make any mistakes, nor to be confused during the research process. Similar to movie protagonists, researchers

appear to be omnipotent, always having complete control of the research activities. If a researcher is following the model of the "good movie" it is very unlikely that he or she will decide to tell stories that do not support the image of invulnerability.

Due to my strong conviction that the researcher's personal story is essential for understanding the research process, I will take the risk of telling it. This personal story is composed of prejudgments and assumptions that I brought to the study, moments of vulnerability in which my world view was challenged and biographical data that influenced the research direction .

My hope is that writing about the research process from a personal perspective will be helpful in illuminating the methodological issues that I confronted during this study

In doing a study about Puerto Rican Espiritismo, I became a native researcher not only because I am Puerto Rican but also because I have experienced this healing system from an insider's perspective. Native researchers have been defined as those who conduct research on the ethnic group of which they themselves are members (Fahim, 1982; Madan, 1975).

I was born in a small rural town in the mountains of Puerto Rico into an extended family and a community of strong spiritist believers. My world view and concept of reality has been heavily influenced by being a Puerto Rican who was socialized within the subculture of Espiritismo. Having participated in the activities of spiritist centers in my community since I was young, I have had the opportunity to experience Espiritismo from an insider's perspective.

My interest in the study of Espiritismo can be traced to my first contact with a spiritist healer when I was seven years old. At that time I was suffering from a condition that did not enable me to function normally. The doctors commented to my parents that there was a physiological basis for my condition and that I should be operated upon as soon as possible.

My parents were desperate and did not know what to do. A friend talked to them about a good spiritist healer who lived near my town. My parents decided to take me to the healer's house. I remember that the healer was a fifty-five year old man named Gumersindo. The first thing he did was to put a cup of water on a table. Then he laid his hands on my head and stomach, giving me some "pases" (spiritual cleansing). After this, he took the cup of water and said to me: "Drink it, thinking you will be cured". I drank the water as he told me, thinking it was the medicine that I needed to be cured. The last thing I remember from this experience was when my parents asked Gumersindo, "How much do we owe you". He responded: "It is free. The healing power has come from God and the good spirits. I am not responsible for it. Your child has been cured." He was right, from this moment my health problem completely disappeared.

This healing experience motivated me to study the therapeutic dimensions of Espiritismo. It also contributed significantly to the development of my experiential approach to the study of this healing system.

Vulnerability: The keystone of an experiential model

In this paper I am proposing a different paradigm for doing field work. This paradigm stresses the vulnerability of researchers which opens them up to the participant's reality. By accepting one's own vulnerability and thereby giving up the security of one's own world-view, one is open to being transformed by a culture through participating in its world-view (Katz, 1993).

Experiences of vulnerability seem intrinsic to field research, and perhaps to the enterprise in general. Katz (1993) described how, by questioning his own world view he was able to achieve a deeper understanding of Fijian healing. He recounts one experience of vulnerability when he was interviewing a Fijian healer possessed by a Vu (Traditional God), describing the confusion which resulted from not knowing how to define the situation. He decided

to acknowledge and accept this experience, thereby accepting the loss of his own world-view, including the assumption that spirits have no objective reality. As Katz (1993) writes:

It would have been more comfortable and comforting to dismiss the possession as only a dramatic act, reducing the levels of reality in the conversation . But believing as a Fijian that the Vu was there, while at the moments when my Western mind intruded believing it was not, not only kept me in a state of intense existential transitioning but also kept me open to unexpected learning.

I experienced my own vulnerability during research on Espiritismo (Núñez-Molina, 1987). A description of one of my experiences of vulnerability at a spiritist meeting follows:

Doña Gela, a Puerto Rican spiritist healer, is known in the community for her "spiritual injections". I talked with several of Doña Gela's clients and they felt as if they had been injected with a needle when she had touched a part of their bodies with only her finger. My initial reaction was to interpret the "spiritual injections" as produced by suggestion or by the use of some object. I decided to observe Doña Gela very carefully when she was working with clients in order to see if she was carrying something on her hands. She "injected" several people in front of me and I could not see anything in her hands or fingers. One day when I was doing participant observation at Doña Gela's center I had an experience that changed the perception about the reality of the "spiritual injections". After having worked with two clients, she looked at me and said: "You are very tired. You are working too much." She asked me to stand up in front of her, and began to massage my back and stomach. Suddenly I felt as if I had been injected in my stomach with a small needle. At that moment I tried to deny the experience, thinking that I was imagining it. However, after a few seconds I felt

another injection but this time it was of stronger intensity. My mind was telling me: "You are a researcher, keep your objectivity". Then Doña Gela took one of my arms and she pressed gently with one of her fingers on the middle of it. At this moment I had to move a little from her because the sensation that I felt was as if I had been injected with a bigger needle. It was kind of painful. I told Doña Gela: "These injections are too strong". Everybody in the room began to laugh and Doña Gela smiled at me, continuing her massage. When she finished I looked at my stomach and arm, and I saw three small red points at the places in my body where I was "injected".

This experience contributed directly to the development of a better relationship with Doña Gela and the other participants of my research. Through this experience I was able to experience and understand their reality. More importantly I learned to respect and value their experiences by accepting my own vulnerability and giving up the security of my own world-view.

Another experience of vulnerability: Spirit possession

In the beginning of my study I was doing an ethnographic study at a spiritist center. I was particularly interested in observing the possession experiences of the people who were participating in the meeting. I sat down in the back in order to have the opportunity to observe the whole group. The meeting began as usual with the reading of prayers. After that, the meeting was oriented to work the "causas" or the influences of ignorant spirits.

Suddenly I began to feel anxious and my body began to tremble, especially my hands. I felt the presence of another being near me who was trying to communicate through me. It was not a good feeling.

I did not know what to do. I felt limited by my role as a researcher. I was also afraid of getting possessed by an ignorant spirit. At first, I tried to concentrate on what was happening in the meeting but it was very difficult to do that.

The people around me began to notice that I was not feeling right. At the same time, a spiritist medium was talking about an ignorant spirit who was causing problems to one of the participants. He described the physical characteristics of the spirit and how the spirit cause people to vomit. Before the medium said this, I was feeling a desire to vomit. I began to feel very anxious about what was happening within me. I decided to raise my hand and to ask the medium for help. I told him that I was feeling the vibrations of a spirit and I asked him what I should do. He asked me to go to the front of the white table (the altar). I stood up and went to the front. The medium put some Florida water in my hands. Suddenly I felt the impulse to raise my hands and to move them very fast around my body in a circular motion. The "spirit" began to talk through me and declared that he was very confused and in need of help. The medium talked to the spirit for a few minutes and the spirit went out of my body. After this, I began to feel good again. I was calm and peaceful.

Through this experience I felt the tension between being a researcher and a participant. My possession experience opened new avenues for understanding this experience within the spiritist system. From that moment on, I was seen by the group not only as a researcher, but also as a medium in development. Other participants were more open to me. I understood that being vulnerable to the events of the field is the best way to know it.

There is a need to know more about the meaning of the experience of possession from the perspective of the spiritist healer. As Lewis recommends to researchers on spirit possession: "Let those who believe in spirits and possession speak for themselves!" (1971, p. 29).

The reality of the spirits

Generally, researchers who have studied Espiritismo make the implicit or explicit assumption that spirits do not have objective reality and proceed from there to

analyze their data. One of the spiritist healers in this study could not imagine that someone can begin serious research on Espiritismo with the assumption that spirits are products of the medium's mind. He argued that it is impossible to understand the process of becoming a healer if one makes this assumption from the beginning.

Being a native researcher and having a different epistemology from Western researchers, I find it more appropriate to examine Espiritismo from an emic perspective, remaining at the level of the medium's construction of reality, without trying to make interpretations beyond the data-collected. My goal was not to examine their experiences by using a framework borrowed from Western psychological theories but to examine them based on the healer's world views. Because it is the way in which they experience reality that interests me I do not find it helpful to analyze spirits as creations of their minds, nor to compare spiritist concepts with Western psychological concepts .

Similarly, Csordas (1985) suggested the need to include the sacred reality in the study of religious systems, presenting the question of "whether religious phenomena can legitimately be translated into psychiatric terms or whether in some cases they must be analyzed with respect to the structure of sacred..." (p. 105). This dilemma is crucial for a better understanding of religious experiences. The tendency is to translate these experiences into psychological terms with little consideration about the spiritual dimension.

The research model that we are proposing is based on the paradigm of multiple or alternative realities (Bentov, 1977; Berger, 1977; Rogers, 1980). This paradigm emphasizes that ordinary reality is one of a number of realities and states of consciousness, as opposed to the conception that there is one reality with which everyone should be in contact in order to be considered "normal" and "mentally healthy". Mental health within Espiritismo is the capacity to live in a world of alternate realities controlling the possibility of connecting with each of them at will.

The reality of the spirits is not something that can be proved or denied. We never will be able to prove if spirits are objectively real or not. However from a psychological perspective, the spirits can be conceived as psychic truths. The fact that people have experiences with spirits is enough to consider them as phenomenologically real. For spiritist healers, the reality of a transpersonal or spiritual realm becomes a lived experience, not just a simple belief. For them spirits are not abstract concepts or symbols for explaining reality. They can see the spirits, hear their voices and experience their reality in the possession trance.

The value of subjectivity

We consider that it is necessary to redefine the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity in order to do research which has the purpose of describing and understanding people's religious experiences. In this "new paradigm research", the dichotomy between subjectivity and objectivity disappears, leading to a new concept of what it means to be scientific. To be objective is to let the phenomenon unfold as it is, without wanting to change, control, reduce or analyze it. To be objective is to have an open attitude toward the phenomenon, that allows it to manifest as it really is, not as I want it to. As Colaizzi wrote: "objectivity is fidelity to phenomena" (1978, p. 52).

Objectivity can not be achieved by the elimination of the investigator's personal features but by his/her having a clear understanding of his/her influence on the research (Reinharz, 1984). As Beteille and Madan wrote:

To seek to eliminate the supposedly distorting role of the observer's subjectivity, if at all possible, would destroy the most precious of our tools-- the fieldworker himself (1975, p. 6).

As a researcher one is always present in some way, there is no such thing as an independent observer. Scientific knowledge is gained from a particular point of view or perspective without which the symbols of science

would be meaningless . As Polanyi writes: "There is personal involvement of the known in all acts of understanding but this do not make our understanding subjective ... Such knowing is indeed objective in the sense of establishing contact with a hidden reality ... "(1958, pp. VII-VIII). From this perspective researchers become more scientific by recognizing their subjectivity, not by repressing or denying it. It is essential to include our subjective assumptions as part of the research because all knowledge has its roots in personal experience. In this sense, knowledge becomes a fusion of subjectivity and objectivity, eliminating the dichotomy that has been created in the social sciences.

Conclusion

The experiential approach have several advantages. It may help researchers achieve insights that have been overlooked by others (Maruyama, 1981). This model may offer alternatives for collecting, analyzing and understanding data in a way which is more consonant with the culture that is being studied.

In addition, the experiential approach may reduce the bias against religion that exists within the field of psychology. Since Freud's conception of religious experiences as a sign of mental illness, psychologists have resisted to examine the therapeutic potential of religion (Freud, 1928; Fromm, 1967).

The degree of researchers' connectedness with and subsequent understanding of a culture may depend to some extent on their accepting their own experiences of vulnerability. Moments of vulnerability can become an essential resource for decreasing the experiential and epistemological gap between a researcher and the people studied. A female Korean shaman, talking about being a healer and becoming possessed, made the following argument trying to describe this gap:

You, though you say you are trying to understand how I became a mudang (shaman) and what it's done to me, you will never understand me... You see, there cannot be any real understanding between the

possessed and the nonpossessed... The possessed have had experiences that the non-possessed cannot begin to comprehend no matter how they try. At best, they can only see what your possession is doing to you and to them (her family) socially. They cannot really understand your inner feelings or experiences (Harvey, 1979, p. 199).

The degree to which I was an "insider" in this study is not very clear to me. Although I am not a spiritist, I share the world-view and epistemology of my participants to a great extent. I understand and respect the realities articulated by the spiritist healers not only due to a scientific attitude but also because sometimes I have been able to participate to a certain degree in these realities.

To some degree I have also been involved in the process of becoming a spiritist healer. Years ago when I began to visit spiritist centers as a researcher I was not sure if I should continue participating in this way at the spiritist meetings. I was afraid that my degree of participation will be seen by other researchers as a sign of being too personally involved. I felt that they would disqualify me as a researcher arguing that I did not have enough "objectivity" to study Espiritismo.

After some time of reflection, I realized that my experiential approach to the study of Espiritismo could be one of my unique contributions as a researcher. I felt that my personal experiences as a researcher would not necessarily be an obstacle or limitation but rather an asset and a resource for understanding Espiritismo as a healing system.

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