

INSIDER RESEARCH INTO 'EXPERIMENT WITH LIGHT': UNCOMFORTABLE REFLEXIVITY IN A DIFFERENT FIELD

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ABSTRACT

In this article based on ongoing research, I discuss the difficulty of separating my personal experience from my research into 'Experiment with Light'.¹ I argue by reference to the work of Labaree,² Pillow³ and Boff⁴ that the inherent complexities of researching a process which itself seeks 'Truth' requires the researcher to be reflexive to the point of discomfort. I show how the dilemmas Labaree identifies in insider research signal Pillow's uncomfortable reflexivity and move her analysis beyond the context of race and gender to the religious context, where it serves a different purpose. I conclude by reference to Boff's theory that in the field of this type of religious ethnography insider is preferable to outsider research and suggest areas for further enquiry.

KEYWORDS

Quakers, Experiment with Light, insider, reflexivity, research methodology, mystical experience

THE DIFFICULTY OF SEPARATING PERSONAL EXPERIENCE FROM RESEARCH

By examining my own experiences as I research Experiment with Light,⁵ I enquire how the research I am undertaking may be influenced by my own insider position, as my roles change and my insidership moves backwards and forwards. I illustrate Labaree's conclusion that insidership is better characterised as a continual process of introspective enquiry which researchers can use to monitor their position, view and conclusions.

In ethnographic research, reflexivity is used as a tool to consider how the researcher's own autobiography informs the research, but as Pillow has pointed out, reflexivity is often used in a comfortable way, not much different from other approaches.⁶

What Labaree discusses as insidership ultimately in his conclusion echoes the reflexivity which Pillow discusses.⁷ For me, insidership and reflexivity are not separate: I became an integral part of my own data.

I review the extent to which my reflexive practice is uncomfortable and what kind of research that produces. I argue that, in religious ethnography uncomfortable reflexivity serves a different purpose from that in other fields.

Leonardo Boff's theory, as expounded by Dawson, says that there is a 'divine Centre' or spiritual foundation underlying human experience, which may be accessed in mystical experience. I conclude that the difficulty of separating personal experience from research and the uncomfortable reflexivity which that difficulty engenders are partly because of the nature of the research. This is because the research is into a practice which can produce the mystical experience Boff discusses. I also conclude that in this type of religious ethnography insider research is better than outsider research.

EXPERIMENT WITH LIGHT

Experiment with Light, devised by Rex Ambler in 1996 following his study of early Quaker writings, is usually undertaken in 'Light groups', although some Experimenters do practise individually. It consists of a forty minute meditation, with six steps interspersed with periods of silence to further enter the meditation or reflect between each step. The meditation is usually led by a tape or compact disc, but in some groups one member reads it. Usually, but not always, the meditation is followed by silence for individual personal reflection, making notes or drawing. Finally, participants share what has come up for them.

There is no typical experience of an Experiment with Light, the experience is ethereal and ephemeral. Experimenters bring their personal life experiences to the Experiment and get their own very different experiences from it: some Experimenters see, some hear, some are in the experience and some just suddenly become aware of something.

Experimenters do not specifically seek 'convincement' or encounter with God, because they do not want to assume that God will come when called,⁸ but, through Experimenting, they come to find truths about themselves, the nature of their relationships, their values and what gets in the way of living their lives truthfully and, in the words of one interviewee, 'in right relationship with God'.

INSIDER RESEARCH

Labaree discusses the hidden dilemmas of being an insider participant observer: the perceived advantages of accessing and understanding the culture under research are not absolute; there are ethical and methodological dilemmas.⁹ Insiderism contains hidden dilemmas relating to unintended positioning, shared relationships and disclosure and often conflicting negotiations concerning the process of entering the field and disengagement from it.¹⁰

Labaree also maps the boundaries of insiderism: he rejects the simple dichotomy of insider versus outsider and the incomplete explanation of a continuum from insider to outsider, preferring instead a frame of multiple insiders/multiple outsiders,

depending on the researcher's position in relation to the researched at any given time. Insidership and outsidership is neither ascribed nor achieved, but the researcher moves backwards and forwards between the two.

Multiple Insiderness in the Interviews

Generally, whilst researching, I am multiple insider and outsider: I am inside Quakers, I am inside Experiment with Light, but outside particular Light groups; I have access to the people central to the Experiment, but I arrive as a stranger in the homes of the people I interview.

One example of this was in undertaking the interviews: within a very short space of time I positioned myself, as Labaree identifies, as multiple insider and outsider, moving from insider to outsider and back to insider again at the beginning of each of the interviews. I would first introduce my research questions, then mention that I had the support in my research of Rex Ambler and Diana Lampen.¹¹ In this way, I was as inside of the Experiment as it was possible to be. I then, however, explained to the interviewees that as a Quaker and as an Experimenter, I would very likely understand what they would be explaining to me, but that, as I wanted to capture as nearly as possible what they understood rather than my own interpretation, I would be asking questions to which they might expect me to know the answers. In this way, I was reminding the interviewees that I was a Quaker and an Experimenter, but also that I was present in the role of 'Researcher'¹² who intended to explain the phenomenon to outsiders.

The Intermingling of my Roles: Merging Data and Practice

To maintain credibility as a Researcher investigating a process which brings Quakers in touch with their spiritual foundation requires a level of Quaker 'Truth' where it becomes all but impossible to separate the roles of Researcher and Quaker-Experimenter.

Apart from being good research practice, the testimony to Truth¹³ means that, as a Quaker and to be credible to Quakers helping with my research, I had, and have, to be as completely open and honest as is possible with all the people who help me with the research: those I interview and observe and other people who have given me time and information and provided contacts.

Personally, I prefer this as a way of being, but there emerged occasions when the truth¹⁴ conflicted with promises I had given as a Researcher: I had, for example, promised anonymity to all the interviewees and to members of the Light group I am observing, 'Group A', but interviewees asked questions about whom else I had seen and what other interviewees had said; this was an ethical dilemma. It is also possible that the answer to questions I am asked might influence what I am observing and contaminate the research; this is a methodological dilemma. In short, as Researcher and as Quaker, I needed to find a way to deal truthfully and as completely as I could with my interviewees' questions without compromising the research.

Despite its potential to provide data far more extraordinary than anything I have come across in the course of the research, for two reasons I intended the group in my own Meeting to be outside the research. As a matter of ethics, my relationship with

the other members pre-dated my research and they had not given prior consent to being researched. I also wanted to protect myself—my relationships with the other members are very special to me and I didn't want to lose that *and* I wanted to be able to share all my issues with my friends without any complications.

In the event, what I did when faced with interviewees' questions was to answer the questions out of my own experience, that is, out of my Experimenting in the Light group in my Meeting, which I had said I wanted to keep out of the research. So I answered as Quaker-Experimenter out of my religious practice,¹⁵ not as Researcher. I would not have maintained a sufficient level of trust if I had avoided or declined the questions.¹⁶

As part of the testimony to Truth, it is expected that Quakers should speak only out of their own direct experience and not, without specific reason, repeat others' views or cite their experiences. Replying out of my own experience, despite my avowed intention of keeping my own group outside the research, therefore potentially gave additional credence to my position of Researcher, because I was demonstrating a much-valued Quaker way of behaving.¹⁷

My honesty with the interviewees was not, however, 'complete' as I privileged prior promises (of confidentiality and anonymity) to other interviewees. Even when I answered out of my own personal experience, I was using information about Experimenting in the Light group in my own Meeting. This was potentially contrary to my promise to my fellow Experimenters, albeit that I was not revealing any of their personal experiences. This was a multi-layered ethical and methodological dilemma, involving promises to those I was researching and my own Light group, dealing with contradictory Quaker expectations and ultimately compromising by relying on my religious practice.

At all times in the interviews and participant-observation, I am present as Quaker-Experimenter as well as Researcher and I have to demonstrate by my behaviour that I fully understand how a Quaker and an Experimenter should behave, with respect for the interviewees' concerns and with integrity. Although I was initially satisfied that disclosing my own experience was the right response, I now feel uncomfortable about it; I chose between my Researcher's promise and my undertaking as an Experimenter and have to justify to myself that the Experimenter's undertaking is not broken in the most important respect (personal confidentiality) either.

REFLEXIVITY

McCutcheon defines the reflexive stance as 'a position which addresses the manner in which all observations are inextricably linked with the self-referential statements of the observer',¹⁸ and that the reflexive approach agrees in part with the empathetic approach to research ('it is indeed important to study inner states and experiences of free, creative human beings') and the explanatory ('there is a significant gap between researcher and subject').¹⁹ Pillow goes further in saying that to be reflexive not only contributes to producing knowledge that assists in understanding and gaining insight into the workings of the social world, but also provides insight into how that knowledge is produced; a reflexive focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious

through personal accounting of how his/her self-location, position and interests influence all stages of the research process.²⁰

In responding to Patai's question 'does self-reflexivity produce better research?',²¹ Pillow identifies and challenges four common trends in present-day uses of reflexivity: reflexivity as recognition of self; as recognition of other; as truth and as transcendence. She argues that these four trends work together to lead the qualitative researcher to a catharsis of self-awareness, a confession,²² to claiming to transcend his or her own subjectivity, thus validly representing those researched,²³ instead of addressing the real issue of the impossibility of such 'valid', 'objective' representation.²⁴

Uncomfortable Reflexivity

Pillow reviews the work of Lubna Chaudhry,²⁵ Kamala Visweswaran,²⁶ Elisabeth St Pierre²⁷ and Sofia Villenas,²⁸ who are interrupting reflexivity, 'rendering the knowing of their selves or their subjects as uncomfortable and uncontainable' and engaging in what she terms 'uncomfortable reflexivity': 'a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous', attempting self-critique whilst at the same time being as aware as possible of its inevitable shortcomings.²⁹ These authors acknowledge, find, discuss and challenge the limits of existing understanding of what is acceptable research practice while at the same time highlighting the need to engage in critical reflection about how the reflexive work of subjectivity and representation is done. They confront the use of power in interpretation.³⁰

For example, through her unsatisfactory attempts at writing up her research, St Pierre identifies 'out of category' or 'transgressive' data, including 'emotional data, dream data, sensual data...and *response data*', 'a challenging use of reflexivity' through data which is not normally discussed in research reports, and Villenas, who is both Xicana and a university professor, uses a play on words to describe her struggle against her own complicity in adopting and gazing through Western male eyes: 'Mr. Anthropology meets Ms. Postpositivism who's going out with Mr. Feminisms but Re-encounters her Ex-otic who is now Critically married to a Xicana'.³¹ These uncomfortable practices present work in an unfamiliar way and do not neatly come to any objective truth nor transcendence of subjectivity.

Whilst highlighting the complexities of doing engaged qualitative research, Pillow concludes that practising uncomfortable reflexivity interrupts uses of reflexivity as a methodological tool (of power) to get better data. Instead, Pillow's uncomfortable reflexivity aims to present research in such a way that it goes beyond the claim to give better, less distorted accounts, so that it questions its own interpretations, allowing readers to speak back to the text,³² and challenges the reader to analyse, question and re-question his/her own knowledge and assumptions brought to the reading.³³ She cites Visweswaran's comment that uncomfortable reflexivity is about being accountable for people's struggles for self-representation and self-determination—including our own selves—and she says that the qualitative research arena would benefit from more 'messy' examples.³⁴

I review below some of the aspects of my insidership influencing my research (and vice versa some of the ways the research influenced my practices and behaviour) and I look at whether I work to the standard Pillow criticises or whether I do in fact

practice uncomfortable reflexivity. In Pillow's frame, this merging of data and practice is recognition of self, recognition of other, but is it any more than autobiography and does it add to the research? I am not yet at the point of analysing my data and so it is too early to say whether I take it to a truth claim or try to transcend it. All I can say at this stage is that it feels uncomfortable not to be able to separate the research from my practice and I need to consider further during the data analysis and writing processes what the merging of the two means and how to express that meaning.

The Mirror

My initial approach to the research unconsciously mirrored the process of the Experiment. About six months in, I realised that, despite abandoning an earlier deliberate attempt to use the Experiment as a tool,³⁵ the process of the Experiment was influencing the way I was conducting my research.

<i>Experiment</i>	<i>research</i>
discernment	grounded theory
Spirit led	opportunity/snowball sampling
unlocking meaning	mindmap
sharing	interview

Figure 1. *The research mirrors the Experiment*

The Experiment is a process of discernment: Experimenters begin to understand who and what they are, how they fit into the world (and possibly the greater scheme of things) and what that should imply for the way they conduct their lives. This is mirrored by my choice of grounded theory:³⁶ the analysis follows what the research uncovers.

The Experiment is 'Spirit led': Quakers believe they should not themselves determine or direct decisions in business meetings, for example. In silence and worship, they discern what the 'Spirit' wills and this emerges as Friends minister and the Clerk captures it in a 'minute' which is then read back to, amended and agreed by the whole meeting without a vote.³⁷ In the Experiment, Experimenters wait to learn and understand more about themselves. The 'Spirit leading' was mirrored in my choice of opportunity and 'snowball sampling'.³⁸ I found one contact, who distributed the letters I had prepared and enveloped without revealing her address list to me, and from there was led to others, as the letters found their way without any further intervention from me.

The Experiment unlocks meaning for the Experimenters: what Experimenters discover are the implications of what has emerged from the process of discernment. This was mirrored in my use of 'mindmaps' as an interview plan, for analysing and for planning writing.

'Sharing' is when Experimenters talk to each other after the meditation, about what came up and what it might mean. This was mirrored by the interview process: the Experimenters who agreed to be interviewed shared with me what their

experiences of the Light, Quakerism and their lives was and is; they described spiritual emergencies, numinous and mystical experiences and told me what they mean by 'God'. It was very like confession.

At this point, I could see that I was deeply affected by the object of my research (the Experiment), which was moulding the way I was conducting it: six months in, I discovered I was using an Experiment with Light-type process for my research. Had I not become aware of this, first, I might not have been able to adjust for the fact that my sample of interviewees was skewed towards those who had been central to dissemination of the practice and, secondly, I might have missed something which a more rigorous approach would uncover.

In so interpreting and seeking to transcend this mirroring of research approach and the process of the Experiment, I seem to be in the frame Pillow criticises, but the insight should, as Patai challenges, improve the research. I have, as Dandelion indicates is also the case with other Quaker researchers,³⁹ worked to my theological preference, for example in answering interviewees' questions out of my own experience, and I need therefore to look to uncomfortable reflexive practice to check this.

Participant Observation

Even in the role of Researcher, it was not entirely possible for me to resist the process of the Experiment when observing a Light group. The research began to impinge on other aspects of my life.

Although I was a participant in the context (Quakerism), I was at first dubious about using the description 'participant-observation' for my observation of Group A, since I was observing, not participating in their Experiments. After the second observation, however, it became apparent to me that I was in fact participating: on the drive home, I suddenly understood something quite profound about my relationship with one of my friends.

This continued throughout the data-gathering phase of my research. During the course of the fifth observation, I could feel something palpable in the room. I felt it at my forehead, then it moved through my heart chakra to my solar plexus, as an involuntary response to something happening in the room. The sharing revealed that something extraordinary had happened: two of the group had the same image in the Experiment and a third said she would take away a completely different sense of herself.⁴⁰ On the drive home after the eighth observation I was thinking about something fundamental about my relationships with all my friends and colleagues, which was neatly illustrated by something my third interviewee had told me. I cast a poem in my head and wrote it down when I got home. The next day I realised it must have been as a result of Group A's Experiment.⁴¹

So, I participate as well as observe, albeit sometimes the participation is delayed until the observation is finished. In fact, I realised by the seventh observation that I was actually observing (watching, concentrating, noting) in order not to sink completely into participation during the silences in the meditation. At the same time, I noted the physical effect on me of the Experiment I was observing and reflected on the state of my own spiritual practice.⁴²

I was drawn into the practice of Group A, whilst the Group saw me as Researcher; I am overt as Researcher, but covert as Experimenter since the Group were not aware of it and I did not participate in their sharing. The implication is that, from my own spiritual involvement in their Experiments, I experience their practice as powerfully based spiritually, thus potentially compromising my ability to consider the research question as to how far the Experiment necessarily functions as a transformative experience. Even this comment itself, however, appears to assume transcendence of what I recognise.

I am My Own Data

I became an integral part of my data in the research context, as well as in my Experimenting.

The minidisc recordings have provided other data. When I left the fifteenth interview I was extremely dissatisfied that I had not established a better rapport; I felt the interview had not gone at all well. I went so far emotionally as to be very, very angry with myself. The following day I interviewed someone else from the same Light group and what she described to me was nothing less than stunning. I came away from the interview utterly captivated by the privilege of being allowed to share it.

When I came to listen to the discs, however, there was little difference between the two interviews; indeed, the fifteenth provided better information on some aspects and both interviews sounded just as cordial and engaged as each other. I also had very helpful subsequent e-mail exchanges and extra data from the fifteenth interviewee. On second positioning, made possible by the minidisc (listening as a third person later to myself as interview participant), it was clear my intuitive, emotional response was not justified. I had objective evidence of my reactions: I had created the possibility of observing myself. In a sense, the minidisc helped me to 'transcend' my subjectivity, but of course there is an element of subjectivity, even in this observation and the conclusion that I had 'transcended' my own emotion.

While undertaking participant observation, I am multiple insider and outsider: I am inside the same room as Group A, but outside their contemporary Experiment (since I observe instead of closing my eyes and following the words on the tape and since I do not 'share' any experience with the participants), but I *am* inside the Experiment in a delayed time frame, subsequently making notes of the effect of the meditation on me, as I do contemporaneously in my own group, and even later understanding what these effects mean for the rest of my life (relationships, behaviour, and so on). In practice for me also, as Labaree reviews, the boundaries are situational, defined by the perception of the researched⁴³ and the research affects my life as much as my own understanding, behaviour and spiritual practice affect the research: there are many dilemmas to negotiate.

Several of my interviewees said that my questions were very difficult and searching and as a result of that and partly as preparation for writing a paper, some time later I asked another researcher to interview me with my own questions and I taped this. In the fullest sense I had become my own data.

I am the data in my research in many ways: I am Researcher researching, but also Quaker-Experimenter being researched (by my Researcher identity). I participate

when I observe, even though I become aware of this only afterwards. The research process mirrors my own practice and my own practice mirrors the research.

The Implications of Being My Own Data

I started to have numinous experiences, not only whilst Experimenting in the Light group in my own Meeting, but also in Buddhist meditation and spontaneously when I was staying away from home during the course of interviewing. In particular, one occurred the evening I was going to the fifteenth interview and I had two very vivid dreams later that night. These experiences began to make me understand myself better and prepared me for the wonder of the sixteenth interview the following day. They occurred as a result of my paying attention to the interviewees over a number of months and led me in turn to pay *more* attention to the interviewees: the process was iterative.

Since research constraints included not wanting to influence Group A's practice by interviewing them during the course of my observing them, I was prevented from uncovering and reporting their physical and emotional responses to each Experiment; only those they chose to share with each other were available to me. Being my own data helped to fill this gap.

Taking the example of the fifth observation when two of Group A had the same image, I did not know whether the Group members found it extraordinary, but on re-reviewing the recording I heard the sense of wonder and awe in the two voices as they described what had happened in the Experiment. As a result of my having felt something palpable in the room, I listened more closely to the recording, noting as I transcribed their words that they had not spoken in complete sentences even though their meaning was entirely clear. My physical response to that particular Experiment had flagged its importance. My sense of the importance of that Experiment was subsequently borne out in later Experiments when one of the two Experimenters had a similar image again on several occasions and referred to the earlier occasion, until eventually she understood what it represented and the profound implications for her life.

Weaving myself into the text required this extra level of search into the evidence to show that it was not just my highlighting something I thought was important and that I was not unduly influenced in my conclusions by my own participation. It is not enough to say merely that I felt something palpable in the room, but I had to analyse the Experimenters' responses to explain the effect the experience had on them. This 'response data' caused me to think further, reach deeper into the data and illustrate more.

I doubt that an outsider would have felt the palpable energy in the room. Although I could be accused of imputing something to the Group, to add my response to the account gives a more complete understanding of what happens in the Experiment. Here I am claiming what Pillow decries as merely using a methodological tool to get better data, but I am also questioning my interpretations and as a result going back to the data I already have time and again to mine it more completely, producing the better research to answer Patai's challenge.

QUAKER ETHNOGRAPHY AND REFLEXIVITY

'Insider/outsider' and 'reflexivity' in Quaker scholarship has been discussed before, but not addressed in the framework of Pillow's and Labaree's challenges. From an anthropological perspective, Collins argues that the insider/outsider issue disappears because, comprising a multiplicity of voices, we (that is, Quaker insider researchers and the Quakers we research) each become simultaneously insiders and outsiders, making the distinction redundant.⁴⁴ I go further in illustrating Labaree's more subtle frame of multiple insider/multiple outsider.

Despite the subtitle of his chapter ('Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy'), Collins reviews the development of the insider question in anthropology and does refer to the continuum of the insider/outsider question, but, except insofar as the chapter looks back to the research, does not seem to move on to a continual process of introspective enquiry which he uses to monitor his position, view and conclusions. On the contrary, as Nesbitt points out, in order to distance himself as ethnographer from himself as Quaker, Collins referred to himself in the third person in his doctoral thesis⁴⁵ and, although his thesis attempts complex reflexivity, it is not the uncomfortable reflexivity Pillow reviews.

Tarter had an extraordinary mystical experience which led her to a new understanding of the earliest Quakers and their writings. She wanted to interweave her spiritual autobiography with her academic research into the earliest Quakers' physical responses to mystical experience, but her PhD supervisor said she would refuse to work with her if she did so. Nonetheless, Tarter did at the last minute decide to make reference to it in her thesis and was acclaimed for it by the board which examined her work.⁴⁶

Whilst thoroughly reviewing the ethics of insider research, Dandelion's sociological perspective does not address the reflexive approach at all,⁴⁷ despite his research leading him to change the Meeting he attended (as was also the case for Collins). There is a clue in Tarter's experience to Dandelion's silence on reflexivity. She was writing in 1992 and at that point it was academically unacceptable in her discipline in the USA to use the word 'I' in academic work.⁴⁸ Dandelion was similarly constrained by the academic mores of the times in the UK.⁴⁹

From her background in theology and education, Nesbitt undertakes a review of reflexivity and Quaker ethnographers⁵⁰ and cites one of the same sources as Pillow (Chaudhry).⁵¹ She looks at whether being a Quaker and ethnographer involves or develops similar attitudes and skills, concluding that the ethnographer's own religious commitment should be addressed in discussions of reflexivity as it can direct their research and affect their approach to fieldwork. She comments that Dandelion's typology of covert/overt insider to the context/insider to the group needs to be extended to accommodate the researcher's journey, with shifting insights and patterns of allegiance. Of these four Quaker ethnographers, Nesbitt demonstrates the most developed understanding of reflexivity, but she does not, however, research Quakers and does not go as far as Pillow in advocating uncomfortable practices.

Pilgrim describes how a 'spiritual emergency' led her eventually to research and that the research led to increasingly uncomfortable questions for her personally and

concludes that her research led her to recognise her personal requirements in terms of spiritual rigour and discipline. The research process challenged the construction and reproduction of her Quaker identity and its ability to give meaning and shape to her life and the effects continued after the research ceased,⁵² but (apart from describing how she was led to the research) she does not reflect on how her Quaker identity influenced the research.

Insider perspectives are considered throughout Dandelion's collection of Quaker scholars' creation of theory,⁵³ but with the exception of Tarter, the scholars do not reflect on the implications for their research of their personal journeys. Their personal journeys may provide interesting background to the Quaker reader, but it is no more than the 'confession' that Pillow suggests does not answer Patai's challenge.

This article goes beyond what other Quaker ethnographers have done, in that it does address insiderness and reflexivity within the frameworks Labaree and Pillow review.

ONTOLOGICAL BASE, 'TRUTH' AND ROLE SEPARATION

The difficulty in separating the roles of Researcher and Quaker-Experimenter, which has led me into this uncomfortable reflexivity, is at least in part because of the nature of the research. Boff's theory goes some way to explaining this.

For Boff, spirituality comprises:

cultivating the interior space of experience from where all things are connected and reconnected, transcending watertight compartments, capturing totality and living reality beyond its opaque and, at times, brutal facticity as values, evocations and symbols of a more profound dimension.⁵⁴

Boff is not discussing Experiment with Light, but the quotation describes exactly what the Experiment with Light process does and the effects it has on Experimenters' lives.⁵⁵

Spirituality's effectiveness is, for Boff, measured by the extent to which it facilitates 'mystical encounter' between individual subject and divine object. This encounter is not willed by the individual, but is something that comes because there is a spiritual foundation, 'divine Centre', greater Reality, or ontological base, underlying everyday human experience, or existential superstructure.⁵⁶

The 'conscious self', acting in the external world, meets the 'deep self', the inward dimension of the self most directly related with and inscribed by the divine presence, to form the 'personal centre'.⁵⁷ Mystical experience unites the 'divine Centre' with the 'personal centre', overcoming humankind's spiritual estrangement by reintegrating existential superstructure (human experience) with ontological base (spiritual foundation) enabling the existential superstructure to become more transparent with the ontological base:⁵⁸

Transparence is the term that translates the inter-retro-relationship...of immanence with transcendence. Transparence is transcendence within immanence and immanence within transcendence.⁵⁹

Boff also says that mystical experience corrects any false consciousness by disposing the individuated self to 'veracity', being true, existentially, to the way things really are, ontologically.⁶⁰

The testimony to Truth is central to British Quakers—the other testimonies, the ways in which Quakers are called corporately to witness in the world, spring out of the testimony to Truth and the testimony to Truth springs out of Quakers' encounter with and understanding of the divine.⁶¹ So both Boff and Quakers arrive at the same point, Boff apparently from a purely theoretical process and Quakers by experience.

Without understanding and living the Truth that Quakers believe springs from divine encounter, I would have no credibility as a Researcher in the context not only of Quakers, but specifically of Quakers deliberately practising a method of finding Truth.

Boff's theory indicates why I may have been having difficulty separating my personal experience from my research. Two of my research questions concern religious experience and transformation. 'Veracity' or Quaker 'Truth' result from religious (or mystical) experience and so I must display Truthfulness in order to access the information the interviewees might otherwise decide I cannot be trusted with. I must also question my own responses and mine the data deeper to find further evidence, if it exists, to determine whether or not those responses were only my imaginings.

This ontological base is present only for an insider religious ethnographer. It causes the merger of research data and practice and leads to uncomfortable reflexivity, which in turn creates better research but leaves open questions (without which the reflexivity would not be uncomfortable).

INSEPARABILITY

It seems that it is not possible to separate the research process and the personal religious experience in the same timeframe: the research happens when it is time-tabled and the religious experience comes unbidden, albeit all the more frequently when in the field, since the nature of research into the Experiment invites spiritual learning and spiritual encounter.

According to Boff, the divine and personal are intermingled. It should not, then, come as a surprise to me that my personal and religious experience is inseparable from my research and that this becomes uncomfortable in practising the reflexivity necessary to reveal my own position. My research is itself an enquiry into religious experience, requiring my giving my undivided attention to others' religious practice, in which I then begin to participate: a magnification effect.

I plot my activity in the field against Labaree's review and affirm his conclusions. I also note that the dilemmas he flags mark the uncomfortable reflexivity Pillow reviews. At the interface of my research and my personal practice, there are signs of the discomfort Pillow highlights, but I show tendencies to claiming that I can manage my multiple identities and overcome them.

My intention is that, by gaining a greater understanding of myself, of the processes of Experiment with Light as they act upon *me*, of the process of research on my religious experience, and therefore of interviewees' understanding of their experiences

and meanings, I can better enquire of the next interviewee, or better observe on the next occasion and better understand in my subsequent analysis of the data. I cannot, however, if I am true to the attempt to work to Pillow's uncomfortable practices, claim absolutely that I achieve either *better* data and understanding or *correct* representation, only that I am entangled in the process of attempting to determine where I stand and to note any improvement.

Indeed, there is a tension between the framework of Boff's theory (and Quaker ways of behaving⁶²) and Pillow's seeking to move beyond comfortable practices. I seem in this discussion to be claiming that my exercising Quaker Truth maintains my credibility, yet I am aware that, however hard I seek to live a Quaker Truth, inevitably I fall short. This does indeed feel uncomfortable.

MOVING UNCOMFORTABLE REFLEXIVITY INTO A DIFFERENT FIELD

The field of religious ethnography does not have the same power play as research in settings where race or gender are determining factors, yet I have found that uncomfortable reflexivity is required anyway and the account is incomplete without, as Pillow and Labaree say, monitoring and questioning my own position.

Unlike the practice Pillow reviews, I do not feel that I am exercising power in order to represent other Experimenters or the nature of the Experiment, on the contrary I feel so enmeshed in the practice of Experiment with Light that I look to informants who are less close to the practice to explain aspects of it to me and I find the research process deeply influenced by the Experiment I am researching. I do not yet know the effects I have had on my interviewees' and participants' Experimenting; only further research would uncover this.

Pillow is the reader who reviews researchers practising uncomfortable reflexivity in researching identity and experience of that identity; she is not researching a practice or process. I am describing my own uncomfortable reflexivity in relation to a practice and am therefore in the position of the researchers Pillow reviews. I therefore cannot know whether I practise it to the extent that readers speak back to the text and question their own assumptions, since I am not in the position of reader. I do know, however, that this uncomfortable reflexivity in researching a religious practice shows how I am inveigled (albeit initially unconsciously) into the process of that practice as I research it, with an iterative and magnification effect absent from Pillow's review. Pillow's researchers found themselves exercising the colonising power of the academy, Western male gaze on indigenous, Asian and southern US women; I find my academic gaze more influenced by the object of my research. In all this, I move Pillow's review of uncomfortable reflexivity on from the fields of race and gender to that of religious ethnography.

The uncomfortable reflexivity I practise in research in a religious field serves a different purpose from that practised in other fields: my experience not only leads me to examine my informants' experience more closely, with parallel continual questioning and rechecking of my observations and what they may mean, but it also leads me into the process I use to conduct the research: the iterative and magnification effect of the spiritual adds a dimension not present in other fields.

I therefore conclude that insider research into a spiritual process, and attempting to be true to that process in the research, is necessarily uncomfortable. I also conclude that insider research in the field of this type of religious ethnography is preferable to outsider research because of the depth to which the continual enquiring takes the reflexivity: this depth includes a spiritual dimension resulting from the ontological base which an insider researcher can feel; for an outsider this sense is absent, since by definition, if the sense is felt, the researcher has become an insider.

FURTHER RESEARCH

I expect that further ethical and methodological dilemmas will emerge and that iterative questioning and further attempts to reveal my position will be required in the analysis phase of my work. New challenges will include how I interact with members of Group A once the participant observation ceases and as, consequently, our roles in relation to each other subtly shift.

Although my study goes beyond what other Quaker ethnographers have done, it does throw up two more general areas for further qualitative enquiry. The first is the meeting of spiritual enquiry processes within other groups (Buddhist, Sufi, Catholic, Shaman, and so on) with the process of uncomfortable reflexive insider research into them. The second is the question of the extent to which an outsider researching a similar spiritual process might, in practising uncomfortable reflexivity, acquire degrees of insiderness as the research progresses: in starting from an outsider perspective how does Labaree's frame of multiple insider/multiple outsider (depending on the researcher's position in relation to the researched at any given time) unfold?

NOTES

1. 'Experiment', 'Experimenter', etc. (capitalised) are used to denote 'Experiment with Light' or its practice, a person practising the Experiment, etc.

2. Labaree, R.V., 'The Risk of "Going Observationalist": Negotiating the Hidden Dilemmas of Being an Insider Participant Observer', *Qualitative Research* 2.1 (2002), pp. 97-122.

3. Pillow, W.S., 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure? Rethinking the Uses of Reflexivity as Methodological Power in Qualitative Research', *Qualitative Studies in Education* 16.2 (2003), pp. 175-96.

4. Dawson, A., 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness: Leonardo Boff's "Trans-Cultural Phenomenology"', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19.2 (2004), pp. 155-69.

5. To date, I have undertaken semi-structured interviews of 21 Experimenters from around the UK and participant observation of a group ('Group A') from their first Experiment. I took notes, but I also recorded the interviews and observations on minidisc and then reviewed the discs, making notes or transcribing as appropriate.

6. Pillow uses the analysis of reflexivity as respectively 'recognition of self', 'recognition of other', 'truth' and 'transcendence' in dismissing comfortable reflexivity; these map on to McCutcheon's empathetic and explanatory approaches, mentioned later in the article.

7. There seems little difference between Labaree's positioning of insidership as a continual process of introspective enquiry which researchers can use to monitor their position, view and conclusions (Labaree, 'The Risk of "Going Observationalist"') and Pillow's assertion that a reflexive focus requires the researcher to be critically conscious through personal accounting of how self location, position and interests influence all stages of the research process (Pillow, 'Confession,

Catharsis or Cure?', p. 178). Although, of course, outsiders do practise reflexivity as well, my position as an insider encompasses both.

8. For example, one participant in Group A had an outburst to this effect at the group's first Experiment together. Also, one interviewee was very critical of such an inherent expectation (Field notes).

9. Labaree, 'The Risk of "Going Observationalist"', p. 116.

10. Labaree, 'The Risk of "Going Observationalist"', p. 116.

11. Diana Lampen makes and distributes the tapes and CDs for leading the Experiment.

12. 'Researcher' (capitalised) is used to denote my role as researcher.

13. I use 'Truth' (capitalised) as the term for the Quaker testimony to Truth: *Quaker Faith & Practice: The Book of Christian Discipline of the Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain*, London: The Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) in Britain, 1995, 20.45: 'The Quaker testimony to truthfulness is central to the practice of its faith by members of the Religious Society of Friends. From the beginning Friends have believed that they could have direct and immediate communication with God which would enable them to discern right ethical choices. They soon experienced common leadings of the Spirit which became formalised into testimonies... Arising from the teachings of Jesus as related in the writings of John and James: "Let your yes mean yes and your no mean no", Quakers perceived that with a conscience illuminated by the Light, life became an integrated whole with honesty as its basis'.

14. I am using 'truth' (not capitalised) to indicate 'the disposition to speak or act truly or without deceit': Onions, C.T. (ed.), *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3rd edn, 1970. This is, of course, a part of 'Truth'.

15. This was as a result of a way I have of testing what I should do and was based on advice from senior academics at the British Sociological Association's Postgraduate section of the Sociology of Religion subgroup (SOCREL-PG) at the January 2003 conference. Dr Sophie Gilliat-Ray (Cardiff University) gave a paper (not published) on the practicalities of researching, including how to face one's own personal limits of physical and emotional endurance. In the subsequent discussion panel a very senior academic in the field of Sociology of Religion pointed out that we (both the postgraduates and senior academics) all had our own religious faith and practices and that we could therefore find a place of refuge within ourselves, if no external refuge were available.

16. For example, in the nineteenth interview, the interviewee was much exercised by the fact that the group in which he had been involved had not been sustainable and asked me about other groups' practices. Had I not addressed his concern, his frustration might have led to withdrawal of his goodwill in co-operating in the interview. I was concerned not to identify any other group at that stage and so again I answered out of the experience of my own group, explaining how it had become sustainable only at the third attempt.

17. Dandelion has written extensively on the importance of conformity with Quaker ways of behaving (Dandelion, P., *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers: The Silent Revolution*, New York, Ontario, Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 1996, pp. 100-10). Plüss similarly concludes from her research that idiosyncratic conduct is illegitimate within Quakerism (Plüss, C., 'A Sociological Analysis of the Modern Quaker Movement', DPhil., University of Oxford, 1995, p. 118).

18. McCutcheon, R.T. (ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, London and New York: Cassell, 1999, p. 9.

19. McCutcheon (ed.), *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion*, p. 8. McCutcheon is here using 'subject' in the sense that elsewhere scholars of reflexivity use the word 'object' (see, for example, Hufford, D.J., 'The Scholarly Voice and the Personal Voice: Reflexivity in Belief Studies', in McCutcheon [ed.], *The Insider/Outsider Problem*, pp. 294-310 (294): '...the scholar is always the *subject* of scholarship in the grammatical sense, that is "the doer of the action" and those we study are the *objects* of our scholarship'); consequently elsewhere in this article I am using 'subject' to describe the researcher and 'object' to describe those researched (and the Experiment itself).

20. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 178.

21. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 176.

22. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 181.
23. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 187.
24. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 192: 'usages of reflexivity, particularly the four common validated strategies of reflexivity I review, may reinstitute and reproduce exactly the hegemonic structures many of us are working against'.
25. Chaudhry, L.N., 'Researching "My People", Researching Myself: Fragments of a Reflexive Tale', in St. Pierre, E., and Pillow, W.S. (eds.), *Working the Ruins: Feminist Poststructural Research and Practice in Education*, New York: Routledge, 2000, pp. 96-113.
26. Visweswaran, K., *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994.
27. St. Pierre, E., 'Methodology in the Fold and the Irruption of Transgressive Data', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 10.2 (1997), pp. 175-89.
28. Villenas, S., 'The Colonizer/Colonized Chicana Ethnographer: Identity Marginalisation and Co-Operation in the Field', *Harvard Educational Review* 66 (1996), pp. 711-31; *idem*, 'This Ethnography Called My Back: Writings of the Exotic Gaze, "Othering" Latina, and Recuperating Xicanisma', in St. Pierre and Pillow (eds.), *Working the Ruins*, pp. 74-95.
29. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 188.
30. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 188.
31. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', pp. 190-91.
32. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 190, citing Chaudhry.
33. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 189, citing Visweswaran.
34. Pillow, 'Confession, Catharsis or Cure?', p. 193.
35. I contemplated using the Experiment with Light itself as a method of discernment in assisting the conduct of my work (by way of private Experiment carried on alone, as distinct from Experiments in my own Meeting) but I rejected the idea after the first attempt on 12 February 2003; what emerged in the Experiment was not the research, but the nature of my relationships with my fellow M. Phil. students.
36. For example, Glaser, B.G., *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*, Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press, 1978; Strauss, A., and Corbin, J., *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, London: Sage Publications, 2nd edn, 1998.
37. *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 3.02-3.07.
38. Singleton, R.A., Straits, B.C., and Staitis, M.M., *Approaches to Social Research*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2nd edn, 1993, p. 165. Snowball sampling works by respondents identifying further respondents.
39. Dandelion, P. (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory: Insider Perspectives*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004, pp. 226-27.
40. Field notes, 20 April 2004.
41. Field notes, 2 June 2004.
42. Field notes, 18 May 2004: 'Is the note-taking a deliberate displacement to stop me going into a meditative state?' I noted during this observation how the tension was leaving my body: 'SIGH (me)'; 'I shift in chair slightly'; and 'I am letting the tension go from my neck'. I also reflected on the state of my own spiritual practice: 'As I drove over I was looking forward to the Light group, the meal out—perhaps more than to my own [Light group] tomorrow'; 'As I was driving over I was thinking about not having meditated for some time and in the light of the articles in the *JCR [Journal of Contemporary Religion]* does this mean I'm letting my all-being awareness of the Divine fade?'; 'On the way home I want to play beautiful spiritually enriching music'; 'I haven't been "doing joy" in Meeting last Sunday (& Sunday before?)' (The *Journal of Contemporary Religion* articles included the one on Boff, referred to on pp. 292-93 of this article.)
43. Labaree, 'The Risk of "Going Observationalist"', p. 101.
44. Collins, P.J., 'Connecting Anthropology and Quakerism: Transcending the Insider/Outsider Dichotomy', in Arweck, E., and Stringer, M.D. (eds.), *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, Birmingham: The University of Birmingham Press, 2002, pp. 77-95 (92).

45. Nesbitt, E., 'Quaker Ethnographers: A Reflexive Approach', in Arweck and Stringer (eds.), *Theorizing Faith*, pp. 133–54 (143–44).
46. Tarter, M., "'Go North!'" The Journey Towards First-Generation Friends and Their Prophesy of Celestial Flesh', in Dandelion (ed.) *The Creation of Quaker Theory*, pp. 77–98 (95).
47. Dandelion, *A Sociological Analysis of the Theology of Quakers*.
48. Tarter, "'Go North!'", p. 95.
49. Private conversation, 27 July 2004.
50. Nesbitt, 'Quaker Ethnographers', pp. 133–54.
51. Nesbitt cites Chaudhry's earlier publication of the article (Chaudhry, L.N., 'Researching "My People"', *Researching Myself: Fragments of a Reflexive Tale*, *Qualitative Studies in Education* 10.4 [1997], pp. 441–53) and Pillow cites the later book chapter (Chaudhry, 'Researching "My People"', pp. 96–113).
52. Pilgrim, G., 'Taming Anarchy: Quaker Alternate Ordering and "Otherness"', in Dandelion, (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory*, pp. 206–25 (206–07, 224–25).
53. Dandelion (ed.), *The Creation of Quaker Theory*.
54. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', p. 161.
55. One example was the seventh interviewee's coming into an awareness of Truth, being laid bare by an eviscerating light, being 'convicted' and as a result no longer being able to tell even the smallest 'white lie' for social convenience, nor to eat meat.
56. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', p. 161.
57. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', p. 160.
58. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', p. 161.
59. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', p. 161.
60. Dawson, 'Mystical Experience as Universal Connectedness', pp. 160–62.
61. *Quaker Faith & Practice*, 20.45: 'The Quaker testimony to truthfulness is central to the practice of its faith by members of the Religious Society of Friends. From the beginning Friends have believed that they could have direct and immediate communication with God which would enable them to discern right ethical choices. They soon experienced common leadings of the Spirit which became formalised into testimonies...'
62. Although British Quakers are very open about what they believe, Dandelion argues that they are very conservative in modes of behaviour (see Dandelion, P., 'Research Note: Implicit Conservatism in Liberal Religion: British Quakers as an "Uncertain Sect"', *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 19.2 [2004], pp. 219–29 [220]).

AUTHOR DETAILS

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