

ARTICLE

'The constant hum of the engine...': A story about extraordinary interdisciplinary dialogues in spirituality and wellbeing

Sara MacKian

The Open University, UK

ABSTRACT

Spirituality is problematic, contested and controversial, yet popular. Across health and social care services practitioners are now being encouraged to pay more attention to the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices which patients and service users may bring with them to consultations. However, it remains a problematic concept due to its subjective, and occasionally contentious, nature. If spirituality is to serve as a useful construct, then, the challenge for us all is to become a little more comfortable with some of its more uncomfortable dimensions; to develop an openness to pushing its boundaries, exploring its potential and recognising its rightful place in our modern disenchanted and secular age. I use this paper to explore reflections on how and where we may encounter the spiritual in unexpected ways, as I believe that only by being open to these challenges, can we begin to understand the full diversity of ways in which spirituality might play a role in therapeutic encounters and more broadly in supporting wellbeing. In doing so, I hope to stimulate critical but creative engagement with a varied spiritual dialogue, encouraging practitioners to put the spirit –and *their* spirit– right back at its heart. This a research-based paper incorporating original data alongside personal reflections on the experience of researching in this field. The paper has been developed from my keynote address at the 4th Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference in London in 2017.

KEYWORDS

spirituality,
wellbeing,
spirit,
Spiritualism,
otherworlds,
therapeutic
landscapes,
research,
participant
observation

Publication history:
Submitted 15 Nov 2018
Accepted 10 Dec 2018
First published 24 Nov 2019

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Sara MacKian, Senior Lecturer in Health and Wellbeing, The Open University, UK. A geographer by training Sara's research is wide ranging but the driving theme is a curiosity for how people and organisations interact around issues of health, wellbeing and meaning-making. Recently, she has been exploring the use of alternative spiritualities by individuals and organisations to enhance wellbeing and the role of spirituality more broadly in contemporary British society. Using social science and art combined, she explores the relationship between the real and the imaginary, the body and the spirit, this world and the otherworldly. She has a particular interest in qualitative methods and creative approaches to social science research and learning. [sara.mackian@open.ac.uk]

INTRODUCTION

In a recent survey Giorgos Tsiris (2017) found that spirituality enjoys an ambivalent relationship with music therapy. Whilst many therapists acknowledge their own spirituality can play an important role

in what they do, and recognise spirituality is something which has relevance to all aspects of human life, at the same time there is widespread reluctance to admit the spiritual fully into the therapeutic relationship. This, it seems, is largely due to fear of it resulting in all sorts of opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict, possibly even undermining professional credibility.

It's the same story across health and social care services. Practitioners are increasingly being encouraged to pay more attention to the diversity of spiritual beliefs and practices which patients and service users may bring with them to consultations, but often feel poorly equipped to engage with this, fearing they may be judged, their intentions misinterpreted, or their professionalism questioned. What it means to be spiritual, or to practice spirituality, is so unique to each individual that practitioners working in therapeutic relationships –fearful of causing offence or upset– may feel it is simpler just to leave spirituality at the door.

Notwithstanding such difficulties, spirituality appears never to have been more popular. Schools are being encouraged to think about the spiritual development of young people as being an equally vital part of the curriculum as cognitive, physical and emotional development (see for example Benson et al., 2012). Palliative care specialists emphasise supporting each individual in their own unique search for meaning and purpose at the end of life (see, for example, Nelson-Becker, 2013). Even the corporate business world is infused with the language of spiritual fulfilment in the workplace and spiritual leadership (Gotsis & Grimani, 2017). In our downtime we are increasingly encouraged to lose ourselves in mindfulness or creative self-expression through art, poetry and, of course, music in a bid to embrace and act upon our own spiritual needs (Graham, 2012).

However, despite spirituality being so widely promoted across a diverse range of secular contexts, those tasked with taking the spiritual seriously often find it an ambiguous and challenging mission. Tsiris' research reflected, therefore, a wider pattern whereby spirituality is something we are increasingly pursuing in numerous areas of practice, theory and everyday life, yet is at the same time something we fear, are wary of, and are reluctant to engage with. Why is our relationship with spirituality so problematic? What might a more constructive and creative relationship with the spiritual look like, whilst retaining a critical approach befitting our various practice, professional and theoretical backgrounds? And why was I – a geographer – invited as a keynote to help explore such questions with a gathering of music specialists at The 4th Nordoff Robbins *Plus* Research Conference in London in 2017? To help answer those questions in a meaningful way for this paper, please let me take you on a journey. It's a journey through time and space, through countries and disciplines. It is a journey which has led me to extraordinary encounters with numerous 'otherworlds' (including the world of music therapy!), and one during which my willingness to explore and acknowledge the place of spirituality in our modern world has grown considerably.

MY JOURNEY INTO OTHERWORLDS...

I was brought up in a household where spirituality and religion were never discussed. My dad had been raised a strict Catholic, educated by monks and spent evenings and weekends helping out at his local church. But he fell out with Catholicism in his 30s, fell out with his parents as a result, and developed a deep hatred for – and rage against – all organised religion. The result was we had no religious texts or stories in our house, no discussion of God or anything mystical, and sadly the spiritual in all its

varied forms was somehow thrown out with the bathwater of the religion he now despised. So deep was his pain that I grew up thinking spirituality only existed in relation to religion, and that all religion was evil. Yet, somewhat ironically, his own grandmother had been a spiritual healer and had eased many people's suffering over the years, including that of her grandson and myself.

A further plot twist to my father's religious and spiritual defiance was that, thanks to his work travels, I grew up in two very different countries, each infused with its own rich and unique pagan history still palpable in the landscapes and cultures of both – histories which he embraced fully (an irony lost on me as a child). So I always had one foot firmly planted in the otherworlds of Norse mythology, wise women, nature spirits and the ethereal beings of the Mabinogion – things I would later come to recognise as important characters in my own spiritual story. But for now, I remained my father's daughter, stubbornly seeing only the negative fallout from religion, and therefore blind to this thing called spirituality.

Fast forward 20-odd years, and my journey into *researching* spirituality began by chance, as result of a detour off another path. Up to that point I had spent my academic career exploring long term illness. I had started this way back in the 1990s with an exploration of people's experiences of living with a particular long-term chronic illness – M.E., or post viral syndrome (MacKian, 1995). 1990s Britain, much like today, was an increasingly individualised, neoliberal world, with a gradually shrinking welfare state. M.E. at the time was widely ridiculed in the media and dismissed by most doctors (as it still is by many), because it defies simple clinical diagnosis, has no really proven effective treatment and –as yet– has no cure. Yet it has a profound impact on the worlds people live in, and as a geographer, my research has always been driven by a curiosity with how people experience and navigate the world. For people living with M.E., some parts of their worlds shrink as they become ever more distanced from the normal social and economic worlds they participate in as fully functioning healthy individuals. Other parts expand, as they become embedded in routines of medical surveillance and carve out new territories around self-help and day-to-day coping (MacKian, 2000). These were the landscapes I was exploring, and they opened up new worlds to me I had not come across before.

DISCOVERING THERAPEUTIC LANDSCAPES

A broad geographical literature has emerged since the early 1990s exploring the idea of 'therapeutic landscapes' (Gesler, 2005). These are places identified for their apparent healing benefits, often emerging from our human capacity to relate at an instinctual level to certain surroundings. They may be sites specifically designated for healing purposes, such as shrines, hospitals or spas (Andrews, 2004; Gesler, 1996; Hoyez, 2007); or simply locations of natural beauty considered 'good for the soul', such as mountains, forests or lakes (Conradson, 2005; Lea, 2008). However, people living with chronic illness cannot always visit such healing places. Instead, they have to make do with their own, often restricted, everyday landscapes, and carve out therapeutic opportunities and places within those. So I was interested in how people cultivated their own therapeutic landscapes to map onto, and sometimes challenge or distort, their everyday worlds. For some people a particular doctor would suddenly take centre stage and their worlds quite literally would revolve around them. For others, a new social world would open up, as they connected with people in similar situations through support groups and virtual networked communities (MacKian, 2004).

As my research with long-term conditions continued over the years, something else started to appear on these maps. Living with a debilitating illness can restrict everyday life considerably; it drives people to the edges of their known worlds, and some embark on intrepid exploration of new territories, take alternative routes previously ignored, or turn back down a long-forgotten path to see what might have grown there in their absence. One thing in particular struck me that was making an increasing appearance in people's new worlds: spirituality. But this was not a turning to God and prayer spirituality, nor was it connecting with a conventional church or religious community for support, but something quite different. Mainstream medicine was failing these patients. They were left feeling let down by the gods of science, uncomfited by what mainstream religion could offer, and were turning elsewhere in a bid to make their lives more manageable. This alerted me to the myriad quests people were engaged in to obtain cure, or simply some care and consolation in such unsettling circumstances. Sometimes these would come through fairly conventional approaches; at others they came through more alternative and otherworldly means. People started telling me about appointments for reiki, trips to see crystal healers, and conversations with angels. Suddenly my attention was diverted from the illness to the mysterious things which seemed to open up around it, and I wanted to include these in the therapeutic landscapes I was studying.

I was particularly interested in this because, despite these being important features of patients' therapeutic landscapes, there was a widespread reluctance to incorporate them into their wider treatment strategies. When I interviewed Jess about her experiences of living with M.E. she told me how she had started attending her local Spiritualist Church for spiritual healing:

Someone actually spent 20 minutes working exclusively with me... made me feel valued as an individual again.

As mentioned earlier, my great grandmother happened to be a spiritual healer, so this was not an entirely new concept to me, but this was the first time someone had mentioned it in a research encounter. For Jess, spirituality was an important part of the therapeutic landscape, but when I asked her if she had talked with her GP about her healing, she replied with horror:

NO!... Despite that he and I get on well together... I've never discussed spiritual healing with him... I just feel that if it was put on an official form by the GP, such as to support application for benefits, I would be considered crazy and I don't see why I should have that said about me when folk that practice other religions would possibly be respected for their beliefs and the comfort they derive from that.

But Jess is not alone. The author Francesca Brown, during physical confinement brought on by M.E., found her experiential world opening up and expanding in unexpected ways when she began seeing and communicating with angels. Whilst bedridden with illness, she became aware of blue lights circling her bed, which she subsequently identified as healing angels, and they provided her with practical and otherworldly tips to help her towards recovery. The huge success of Francesca Brown's subsequent book (2010), and the growing popularity of other authors with similar experiences of

angelic or spiritual aid in recovery (such as Lorna Byrne's (2010) *Angels in My Hair*), suggests such dimensions to patients' worlds should be acknowledged as legitimate and vital parts of their therapeutic landscapes, even if others may not consider them valid.

In our modern, rational world our obsession with the material and tangible aspects of life –and the forces and relationships that arise out of these– leaves us reluctant and ill-equipped to engage with that which we cannot rationalise. I was finding, therefore, that many decide *not* to share this aspect of their carefully crafted therapeutic worlds with their mainstream health care providers. Yet as we entered the 21st century, there was a 60% rise in reported extraordinary 'spiritual' experiences and encounters in normal everyday contexts, including such things as communication with deceased loved ones, spirit guides and angels. Before we start dismissing this as precisely the sort of nonsense that gets spirituality a bad press, it is worth reflecting on the fact that counsellors and end-of-life carers often have sympathetic approaches to patients or family members experiencing visions or messages from deceased loved ones around the time of death and bereavement (Cooper, 2018). Indeed, palliative care nurses often report similar experiences themselves. Such encounters appear to be independent of any prior held religious beliefs and are culturally fairly universal. Nonetheless, recent research has noted that there is less ready acceptance of such mysterious spiritual encounters beyond the contexts of death, dying and bereavement (Roxburgh & Evenden, 2016).

Indeed, despite increasing numbers claiming to have decidedly mysterious spiritual encounters in our modern world, often when spirituality is discussed in a public context the general approach appears to be one of trying to *demystify* it. Fearful of causing offence, generating fear, misunderstanding or even ridicule, attempts are made to contain it in what are deemed 'appropriate' spiritual contexts, or to sanitise it in some way in order to bring it into safer secular contexts. So schools talk about encouraging the spiritual growth of young people, yet remain highly unlikely to discuss children's otherworldly encounters, despite their natural proclivity and openness to them (Hay & Nye, 2006). Whilst bosses lay on sanitised corporate training programmes on spiritual leadership in the workplace, their city workers turn to psychics after office hours for advice on investments and job opportunities (Bartolini et al., 2013; Leach, 2009). So, our very modern, rational everyday lives are still marked by searches for the mysterious and remain haunted by a sense of the unknown. Despite my own ontological openness to it, this all felt very new to me, so I had some learning to do about the unfamiliar otherworlds opening up before me in my research encounters. The best way to do that appeared to be to incorporate participant observation into my research methodology.

ENCOUNTERING THE OTHER

I can empathise with Jess' reluctance to raise her spiritual healing with her GP. Once when discussing my latest interviews about angel healing at work one colleague retorted almost angrily: "Angel healing? What's *that*? ...angels don't exist do they, so how can they *heal*? That's just ridiculous!" To me, however, it does not matter whether we can rationalise such spiritual beings and encounters, or whether we define them as 'real' or 'not real'. In the experience of people who use angel healing, the *effects* are undoubtedly real and *that* is what is important. My concern is with exploring and understanding the worlds people live in, rather than the theoretical worlds we *think* they should live in. So, unlike my colleague, I am willing to accept angels at face value if my research participants tell me they are part

of their world. I am not afraid of *not* ‘knowing’ what we are dealing with. Whatever angels may or may not be, they are the very essence of what these individuals are seeking a therapeutic connection with. As such this essence has to be given explicit recognition by talking about it, locating it within the co-produced relations of social life, and putting it on the research (and practice) agenda, however uncomfortable an overtly rational world may find that. But this raises challenges for those of us wishing to engage with it in professional contexts seriously and respectfully.

As Jess suggested, if a practicing Christian or Muslim told their doctor prayer helps with their pain, this would not be ridiculed, regardless of the doctor’s personal religious views. It would be accepted as a legitimate part of their worldview and incorporated, with due respect, into their care plan. A similar inconsistency seems to exist in academic research, as illustrated by my experience a few years ago at a conference in the North of England where I presented my work. The speaker before me shared findings from participatory ethnographic research in Brazil where he had joined his research participants drinking hoasca tea as part of their spiritual ritual to enhance a sense of divine connection and transcendence. There were lots of nodding heads in the audience as he spoke, and supportive noises, indicating approval of his clear commitment to his research – despite this commitment involving taking a drug which is illegal in the UK. Yet when it came to my presentation, and I began to talk about my experiences of participating in mediumship development workshops and learning to read the Tarot as part of my participatory research into alternative spiritualities, some members of the audience were horrified. I was questioned about getting too close to my research community: How could I possibly remain objective? Had I gone over to ‘the dark side’? I can only interpret that attitude as being reflective of an ongoing colonial hangover. These audience members appeared happy to exoticize and romanticise what they considered to be ‘other’ ‘far off’ spiritual beliefs and practices, whilst remaining blind to the value of exploring equivalent spiritual mysteries on their own doorstep.

Travel distances aside, my participatory fieldwork approach was no different to my colleague’s at that conference. Just like the anthropologists of old who would throw themselves into village life with far-off tribes to experience first-hand the communities they studied, I was mapping what was a new and foreign world for me, and in order to do so I was adopting the most appropriate methodology. Far from going ‘to the dark side’ through my participatory research, the very fact that I had no prior grounding or expectations about what I may discover in my research encounters left me equally deserving of ‘outsider’ status in the world of my research participants as my counterpart with his tea-drinking Brazilian shamans.

However, the attitude of these conference delegates simply reflected a wider reluctance to engage sensitively with spirituality in its full diversity at the time from practitioners and academics alike. There appeared to be an unwritten rule that we can respect and be curious about alternative spiritualities if they are ‘othered’, but if they occur on our doorstep, particularly involving people who are white, middle class British (predominantly women), then it is quite acceptable to be dismissive and even ridicule their beliefs and practices:

One can study the daily horoscope and call it spirituality. One can study women’s outrage and call it spirituality. One can offer educational videotapes on techniques of masturbation and call it eroto-spirituality... Dying modernity seems to be “into” spirituality. (Oden, 1994, p. 14)

The dominant narrative in social science literature at the time was one about individualised consumption, with an emphasis on dismissing spiritual pursuit as just another shallow and essentially meaningless consumer trend, based on self-interest and ubiquitous consumption. There are “few words in the modern English language”, wrote Carrette and King (2005, p. 30), “as vague and woolly as the notion of “spirituality”. In a consumer society it can mean anything you want, as long as it sells”.

‘Spirituality’, claimed such authors, is nothing more than ineffectual ‘watered down religion’, essentially meaningless because it does not follow the strict doctrines of religion as we know it. But is the story about spirituality necessarily a religious one, or can we find another more suitable narrative to frame it? Through my research I was hearing a story about connections and continuity, rather than isolated consumption. It was a very different story and one which invariably started with the words: “I’m not religious, but...” For the people I spoke to, their spiritual narrative did not revolve around seeking religion or flexing their credit card to buy isolated ‘time out’ from the everyday. This was not something people were putting time aside for in specially allocated locations, like prayers in church, yoga asanas in a village hall, or creative writing classes in a hillside retreat. This was something that infiltrated every aspect of their daily life, it was embedded *into* the everyday, and was, as one participant stated, about “reaching for the unseen” (MacKian, 2012). Fundamentally, this spirituality was not about buying gadgets or following the latest fad, it was in fact focused on seeking and cultivating a highly therapeutic reciprocal relationship with ‘spirit’.¹

Yet none of the academic commentary at the time was engaging with the notion of spirit (you certainly would not find it in the indexes of books). Similarly, although healthcare practitioners were being encouraged to think of spirituality in its broadest sense –from God and the scriptures, to painting and poetry– nobody seemed to be talking about ‘spirit’ (however it may be defined), apart from a few fringe practitioners interested in paranthropology and anomalous experiences (see, for example, Hunter, 2010).

Spirit’s omission from the sociological and practice-based commentary may be because it’s hard to get a handle on precisely what ‘spirit’ might *be*. It may reflect a fear of the unknown, a worry about being seen to be dabbling in things that are not ‘real’. We can see people attending yoga retreats, we can tally up sales of self-help books. We can ask patients about their religious practices or provide them with paints and pencils to express their spirituality. But how can we ‘know’ the mystery of this thing called spirit in the same way? Perhaps the only way is to embrace it, accepting that even if we cannot *know* it, we can simply *accept* it as something that has material impacts and social consequences, even if it is itself immaterial and most likely way beyond our realm of personal experience.

Well... we may *think* it’s beyond our personal realms of experience, but let me tell you a story. Story telling might feel out of place in an academic journal, nonetheless, even in research we may rely on storytelling “to make strange phenomena intelligible, to reduce the anxiety produced by the unfamiliar” and to deal with the challenge of threats to our sense of self (Polletta, 2006, p. 12). We can ‘tell a story’ because it excuses us from having to judge or accept responsibility for the way it is interpreted. So, I will tell you a story. This is a true story that happened to me. I am aware, as Polletta

¹ In my research at the time ‘spirit’ was variously defined by participants depending on the individual. It served, nonetheless, as a useful catch-all word for a range of ‘otherworldly’ entities, including the spirits of the deceased, nature spirits, angels, gods and goddesses, or a more general ‘universal energy’.

suggests, we tend to be a little ambivalent about stories in a research context. On the one hand, we value them for their authenticity, passion, and capacity to inspire; yet on the other, we worry over which stories should be privileged and whether stories are actually reliable in any meaningful way. However, I will let you be the judge of that.

Once upon a time... somewhere in the midst of my fieldwork on a train from Macclesfield to Milton Keynes, I had direct first-hand experience of a sense of the material presence of an immaterial spirit in the everyday. As I sat staring out of the window, anxious about the meeting I was heading to, I received a text message from Mark², one of the participants I was interviewing for my research.

He told me I would soon face a challenging meeting with a difficult senior manager. But the good news was that his spirit guide had given him a message for me. I was to look over this person's left shoulder when I got into the meeting and I would receive a sign that spirit was looking out for me and that everything would be ok.

I knew straight away who this manager was, the renowned departmental bully I was due to meet with that afternoon, who, it seems, liked nothing better than to give people a hard time and undermine their achievements. So as I walked into that meeting –several hundred miles from where Mark lived, in the private office of a member of staff on a university campus that he had never visited– I was curious as to how this thing called spirit could possibly have anything useful to contribute to the situation. As I sat down, pulse already racing in anticipation of what lay ahead, I remembered Mark's message. With little hope, but the curiosity of a fully committed participant observer in my research nonetheless, I looked over her shoulder. Immediately I received the 'sign'. There on the shelf directly above her left shoulder was a little china dog, with one word written across its chest: 'Bitch'.

It had an immediate impact on me – I felt psychologically strengthened and ready to stand up to her once and for all. This little china dog with its single word emblazoned on its chest described her controlling impact on colleagues perfectly, and in that moment, I knew she wasn't going to be able to control me anymore. Regardless of the fact that the 'message' was somewhat vague (though highly appropriate), and the dog on the shelf a very mundane physical object (that she had put there herself), it seemed to me that in that moment I had experienced something of the sensation of what it must be like to live in a world and feel the presence of 'spirit' supporting me.

I'll never know how the precise circumstances behind this 'coincidental' event came to be, but it reinforced in my mind as a researcher that I have to take these experiences, and their impacts on practitioners' lives, seriously. It shows that spirit is routinely understood to have presence and agency, even though it is unseen. It is experienced as directly manifesting concrete material effects and powerful emotional affects which influence people's actions and understandings in the physical and social world. Furthermore, I now had first-hand experience of just how profound and empowering this can be to experience.

² Mark is this participant's real name as he chose to be fully identified in the research.

It also told me something very useful about how we go about our fieldwork as social scientists. Had I relied solely on observing Mark giving similar messages to other people, I wouldn't have had the opportunity to spontaneously experience something decidedly otherworldly in the way that he and my other research participants routinely do. I had been told about spirit moving in mysterious ways, but until I had my own story to tell, I couldn't understand what it *felt* like.

I had now drunk my very own hoasca!

This story helps to illustrate why I feel it's so important to take seriously experiences of spirituality informed by a relationship with 'spirit', even if I have no firm beliefs myself on what that might be or mean. My story of the dog helped me as a researcher to get a grasp on what it means for my participants to experience spirit as a kind of omnipresent power that stands as a proxy for all the unknown and mysterious alliances and relations that are part of our sense-making apparatus of social life. It showed me how people's relationship to the world, with spirit in it, takes on additional enchanted dimensions as every aspect of everyday life becomes informed by it. So, when Mark told me: "It's there always, in the background like a reassuring hum of a ship's engine." I had some idea of what this extrasensory hum might feel like. With Mark's 'hum of the engine', his everyday geographies are informed by a constant awareness of, and readiness to sense and see spirit. Prepped by his message to me, I had recognised the hum of the engine in that drab university office on a grey and rainy afternoon.

Spirituality, therefore, can be something which is about individualised picking of products off the shelves of the spiritual supermarket (Mark owned crystals and Tarot cards, he attended meditation events and Mind Body Spirit fairs); but it's also something which can be read off connections in the social and physical landscapes within which that individual lives and experiences their spirituality every day. Knowing this demands we find another way of knowing the spiritualities of everyday life, because sometimes it brings *otherworlds* into this world, not just physical commodities or classes you can sign up for. Like the hum of a ship's engine which vibrates and resonates with our embodied beings providing comforting evidence of continued progress, Mark's spiritual connection provided a reassuring presence. As a Tarot reader who works with spirit guides, these guides bring with them a therapeutic sense of security as Mark goes about his readings, but also his daily life. Additionally, as illustrated by his message to me, this hum can make uncanny and unexpected connections with others who may not themselves experience it routinely.

Such an abstract impression is not the only way someone might be alerted to a sense of spirit's presence, however. Sometimes such a metaphoric hum might take on a more nuanced timbre, and the presence of spirit is revealed through a familiar tune resonating directly and obviously with the physical world of those for whom the message is intended. I will use examples from my latest research project with the Spiritualist community of Stoke-on-Trent to illustrate.

TALKING WITH THE DEAD IN STOKE-ON-TRENT

It is often assumed that Spiritualism is a religion of the past, enjoying its heyday in the first half of the twentieth-century and since fading into the margins of cultural obscurity. Yet, despite the image of Spiritualism now being overshadowed by images of Victorian seances and fraudulent mediums, recent research suggests that the British Spiritualist movement is still alive and well. Indeed, according to the 2011 Census it had enjoyed a 17% increase in numbers since the 2001 figures (Bartolini et al., 2017). One of the attractions of Spiritualism is the hands-on spiritual healing it offers. You may remember Jess, the woman I mentioned earlier with the M.E., it was a Spiritualist church she had turned to for healing. Such is the therapeutic value of this form of healing that it has even been trialled on the NHS (Soundy, 2015). But direct intentional healing of this sort is just one part of a broader narrative, so it is useful to put it into its wider context to gain a fuller understanding of the intrinsically therapeutic nature of Spiritualism as a whole for some people.

Spiritualism describes itself as a science and religion based on the belief that the soul continues to live following the death of the physical body when we 'return home' to 'the Spirit world'. For Spiritualists communication with 'Spirit'³ is possible through the channel of trained mediums, and Spirit is also believed to channel healing through the hands of trained healers. But the whole philosophy of Spiritualism is based on a narrative of healing, because mediumship –talking with the dead– is also seen as a healing practice. The therapeutic value of mediumship seems to lie in its ability to link the past, the deceased, the dearly departed, with the here and now, and the everyday inevitability of more tomorrows. Life goes on, the world keeps turning, and mediumship helps to heal the ruptured wounds of bereavement by bringing the energy and spirit of loved ones right back into the most mundane of everyday places.

Our research took place in Stoke-on-Trent⁴, perhaps one of the least likely places you might expect to encounter divine intervention. Stoke-on-Trent, famous for its Victorian pottery industry and making the world's finest bone china, now lives in the shadow of its past glories. Affectionately nicknamed

'The Potteries', this area is now perhaps most famous for having been labelled 'Brexit capital' in 2017. On a slightly less prosaic note, Stoke was also the setting for Arnold Bennett's *Anna of The Five Towns* (1902), where he describes it as both squalid and enchanting "for those who have an eye to perceive it":

The entire landscape was illuminated and transformed by these unique pyrotechnics of labour... weird sounds, as of the breathings and sightings of gigantic nocturnal creatures, filled the enchanted air (p. 39) [...] nothing can be

³ When referring specifically to Spiritualism, I have capitalised 'Spirit'. This is to reflect the centrality of spirit as an active agent in Spiritualist belief and philosophy and is generally how Spiritualists themselves would write it. It does not, however, necessarily denote a singular spirit –as in 'the Holy Spirit' of Christianity– as Spiritualists themselves will differ in terms of how they would define 'Spirit'. Furthermore, these definitions will vary depending on context. For example, some Spiritualists will believe Spirit is quite literally a 'God' presence; others will believe Spirit is a universal energy linking us all. Additionally, Spiritualists may refer to Spirit as both the all-encompassing *and* the individual 'souls' which are *a part of* 'Spirit'. Finally, to be 'in Spirit', that is having moved beyond the corporeal world, does not necessarily imply a distancing (such as 'heaven above' might), as 'Spirit' is considered to be all around and present at all times.

⁴ 'Spirited Stoke: Spiritualism in the Everyday Life of Stoke-on-Trent (SpELS)' ran from October 2014 to May 2016. It was funded by AHRC AH/L015447/1 and assisted, administratively and financially, by The Open University's Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies and the OpenSpace Research Centre.

more prosaic... yet be it said that romance is even here – the romance which, for those who have an eye to perceive it, ever dwells amid the seats of industrial manufacture, softening the coarseness, transfiguring the squalor, of these mighty alchemic operations. (p. 9)

Despite this once “enchanted air”, Stoke is now dominated by its struggle to reverse industrial and economic decline, and the City Council is trying desperately to reinvigorate the city and its popular image by drawing on its industrial heritage. But this exclusive emphasis on its material pot-based past overlooks another important and continuing aspect of Stoke’s cultural heritage, namely Spiritualism. For Stoke-on-Trent serves as something of a mecca for Spiritualists. The umbrella organisation for Spiritualists in the UK is the Spiritualists National Union (SNU), and the longest serving President of the SNU was a man called Gordon Higginson. Gordon was born in 1918 in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, and his mother, Fanny, was already an established medium at Longton Church. Like her, he went on to serve there until his death. Longton is one of six confederated towns which together make up the city of Stoke-on-Trent. In the 1960s, whilst the number of potbanks was declining daily, there were twelve very active Spiritualist churches in the city. This, together with it being the home of Fanny and Gordon Higginson, made Stoke the national hub of a thriving Spiritualist movement.

Today three very active Spiritualist churches remain within a seven-mile radius in the city, enjoying packed out congregations for their services and active engagement with the local community. Particularly popular are the weekly healing sessions, provided free in exchange for a minimal contribution towards healers’ travelling expenses. Similarly popular are the regular demonstrations of mediumship and attending these demonstrations is experienced by many as being inherently healing, whether or not they personally receive a message from Spirit. Music plays a key role in the construction of these therapeutic experiences, so I wish to focus now on two ways in which music feeds into the healing and therapeutic landscapes of Spiritualism.

1. Using music as a message to Spirit

As might be expected in a religion, weekly church services are a key feature in Spiritualism. Spiritualist divine services on Sundays would be familiar in many ways to anyone who has attended a Christian church service, with gentle organ music playing as people take their seats, followed by the singing of selected hymns during proceedings. During the week, however, services are based around demonstrations of mediumship, and the hymns are replaced with more popular musical choices. The lyrics of these songs will invariably mention ‘spirit’, ‘angels’, or ‘eternal love’, and the tune will be something that encourages people to get engaged, energised and singing along. Robbie Williams’ ‘Angels’ is a particular favourite in Stoke-on-Trent, as he was Stoke born and bred.

As sociologist Tia DeNora (2000, p. 44) tells us, music’s meanings “are constituted in and through use,” and taking part in this aspect of the service does quite literally raise the spirits. Everyone who is able to do so is invited to stand and join in. You do not have to be able to sing, you can ad lib, harmonise or even just clap along, but it is very much a collective experience, and at the end, as everyone takes their seats, it’s like new life has been breathed into the congregation. Regulars know that along with that new life, the musical interlude will have brought with it visitors from Spirit, eager

to communicate with loved ones; for Spiritualists here are using music purposively to open a channel of communication with an otherworldly Spirit they feel will resonate with their chosen tracks. The sense of community created by the act of collective singing also helps to bind the congregation together in a common cause and has given everyone a chance to make a noise in front of others. Spirit, we are told, likes to hear the voices of the people it wants to connect to, and having aired their voice once already, even the shyest of audience members may now feel more able to respond, should their dearly departed come calling.

This, however, is not a one-way communication. Music, it seems, can also be carefully chosen by Spirit to communicate its own messages. Just like the china dog embodied a 'message from spirit', so a particular piece of music might provide the channel through which to carry a specific meaning to someone at the right time and place.

2. Spirit using music as a message

Mediums are always at pains to stress that they will ask Spirit for 'evidence' when conveying their message. It is not sufficient to state 'Spirit says your grandma left you some earrings'; because many grandmothers have bequeathed countless pairs of earrings on passing. The medium will require something unique and meaningful for that *particular* grandchild; something that makes the message personally resonant and unquestionably 'real'. 'Your grandma left you the earrings she used to keep in a purple pouch on the broken shelf under the radio in the kitchen' would be much more powerful if it accurately reflected the reality for the recipient of the message. Such evidence in giving messages can come in many forms, like a purple pouch or a particular shelf; but of particular interest here is that sometimes it comes in the form of a piece of music, and it is the connections and meanings associated with it which help to signal the strength and evidential basis of the communication.

One of the mediums in our Stoke-on-Trent study, Alfie⁵, told me how he was woken one night by the sound of Michael Jackson's *Smooth Criminal*. Not the entire track, just a single line on repeat, but the words were sounding slightly distorted. He realised this was a sign that someone was trying to communicate with him and would not let him rest till he had acknowledged the message that started to come through: "He would not leave me until I got up and wrote down these things. I thanked him for coming and asked him to come again on another occasion but that I needed to sleep. With this he left me."

The message, it transpired, came from a young man, known to Alfie's daughter and son-in-law, who had died at the age of 21. His message was that he had been reunited with his great-grandparents in the world of Spirit, and he wanted his family to know he was ok and that it was time to move on and stop grieving. As mentioned mediums will always ask for evidence from Spirit and this lad told Alfie more about his maternal great-grandmother, including details about what happened at her funeral. Of particular interest here is that her name was Annie and she was well known for making Staffordshire oatcakes.⁶ Suddenly the music Alfie had been woken by made sense. The line of the song that had

⁵ Alfie is a pseudonym.

⁶ Oatcakes, like pancakes but made with oatmeal and yeast, are a Stoke-on-Trent delicacy.

woken him was 'Annie, are you ok?'; but the words he had been hearing in his slightly distorted state were 'Annie get your oatcakes', a line that the young man used to joke about.

Music often appeared in Alfie's messages from Spirit. Once when he was demonstrating mediumship in a church service, he received a communication for a man in the audience whose son had died through suicide. Alfie was being shown the father sitting in his son's room surrounded by red and white football paraphernalia, feeling very angry and wanting to tear the room apart with frustration, trying to understand why his son had not talked to him about his feelings. Alfie said that the energy from the young man in Spirit was overwhelming, and he sensed that both father and son found it difficult to express their emotions.

He was then made aware of a mobile phone by the son, who wanted his father to check it for a message from a girl which would help to explain his actions. Alfie asked the father if he had his son's phone because there was a message he should check. The father said he had been to the coroner's court that day, and had been given his son's belongings including his phone. He had not checked it but said he would. As Alfie was receiving this information from the young man in Spirit he also heard the song *Delilah* by Tom Jones. Being in Stoke-on-Trent, home to Stoke City Football Club (who play in red and white), Alfie assumed this was a reference to the football team, as Stoke's fans sing that song at games. He also passed this information on, but the father said his son was not a Stoke City fan, although the team he did support do play in red and white. Although Alfie says Spirit 'never get it wrong', he dismissed the song at the time thinking he must have made a mistake, but the following week Alfie met the man again. He told Alfie he had found the message on the phone and it helped to explain why his son had taken his own life. As for the song, he said "I've listened to that song, and the lyrics say it all."

In my final example, Alfie was driving to do a reading at someone's house when he became aware of someone singing the Shirley Bassey classic *I am what I am* – but it was a male voice. He arrived at the home of the lady he was reading for and sat in the living room with her and her parents. He then became aware of the presence of a man in Spirit who claimed to be an accountant. He described the man to the lady who said it sounded like her father-in-law. At that point, Alfie's attention was drawn to a dress hanging on the back of the door in the room, and the man in Spirit told him to say "he'd look good in that." Slightly perplexed, Alfie did as he was told – at which the family started to laugh and said "He would! He was a drag artist at weekends!" With that statement Alfie suddenly heard the male voice again singing *I Am What I Am*, and he told them what he was hearing. With tears in her eyes the young woman replied "My husband will be so pleased, that was the song his dad sang at the start of his show."

DISCUSSION

Music is not just what it is, it's what it means and what it can do for people. One of the things work on music can teach people is what joins them rather than what separates them. (Sir Simon Rattle, *Rhythm Is It!*)⁷

⁷ Quoted on: <https://www.communitydance.org.uk/DB/animated-library/rhythm-is-it?ed=14058>

In therapeutic relationships of any sort music serves as a trigger, a door for opening the release of emotions, and potentially as a guiding sign towards healing (Neudorfer, 2018). Without passing judgement on what may or may not be happening in the shared exchanges between mediums, Spirit and their sitters, or in the singing congregations in church services, it is clear that these co-produced experiences of spirituality, wellbeing and music (though probably far removed from any therapeutic explorations of the spiritual which may routinely be used in music therapy practice) nonetheless can serve powerful therapeutic functions.

I wanted to use this paper to encourage reflection on how we can engage with spirituality therapeutically in a critical but creative way both theoretically and practically, professionally and personally. My aim is to give readers permission to play, to push the boundaries, to embrace mystery. By exploring some of the challenges and enjoyments I have encountered working with spirituality as a social scientist and sharing some of the insights that I've gained about modern society's relationship with a spirituality infused with a sense of 'spirit', I hope to encourage a continued conversation about spirituality in academic and practice discourse that does not shy away from its more problematic and intangible aspects. This was a conversation started during those few snowy days at the Nordoff Robbins *Plus* conference in London in 2017.

A month after presenting my keynote on which this paper is based, I was driving back from having dropped my partner at the airport. I was feeling somewhat bereft and lonely when a familiar voice came on the radio. Lars Ole Bonde, my co-keynote speaker at the conference, was being interviewed on an episode of Radio 4's 'Soul Music'. Each programme in this series explored one piece of music, with guests talking about its significance in their lives. Bach's *Ich Habe Genug* was the track being discussed on this programme⁸, and Lars Ole said:

It talks to you like a friend would talk to you. It comforts you like a friend would comfort you.

He suggested the song was one of acceptance, and

whether you call it god or paradise, or you call it beauty or transcendence, it doesn't matter so much to me, but it's all there in the music.

Lars Ole continued by describing the paradox of listening to sad music such as this:

If you can find the right sad music that mirrors your mood it has some sort of transformative effect on you. What starts as suffering, when it is mirrored, it becomes tolerable, it becomes something you can actually live on with, and it inspires hope for the future.

In that moment, that voice and the music provided me with a tangible reminder of the engine's constant hum. It brought back all the positive energy and excitement the conference had sparked, and I felt suddenly less alone, more connected. Lars Ole's 'mirroring back' is precisely the role of music in

⁸ The programme can be heard at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09l07ly>

the encounters described by Alfie. They were all pieces of music that embodied some key aspect of the stories, the emotions and relationships between people now separated through death. These musical associations helped them to reach for the unseen and touch the intangible. That is perhaps why so many people describe mediumship as a healing experience. It forces them to face the sadness of loss, yet mirrors that loss with the blessing of having known that person, of having lived *with* that person, and so makes living *without* them slightly more tolerable, something they can gradually come to live with.

To return to the very beginning, and Tsiris' survey of music therapists, spirituality may be so difficult to embrace in therapeutic practice contexts simply because it is so difficult to grasp precisely what it is. Though numerous scholars and practitioners have tried to define it, classify it, pin it down, and mark out its territory, it will always inevitably remain somewhere just out of reach. We continue to pursue it, yet however hard our rational world may try to package or define spirituality it continues to defy these attempts, because ultimately it is all about mystery and the unknown. It's about being open to possibilities of new and potentially challenging experiences. Whether it is a Marian vision or an ecstatic reaction to an overture, the spiritual lifts us out of our mundane comfort zones and encourages us to see and sense the world differently, often in ways which are beyond description using the words and names we have at our disposal. But perhaps that does not matter, as

Things die a little when we name them. So instead, we think of them. We dwell in them. We let them dwell in us. (Ben Okri)⁹

So as hard as spirituality and its accompanying experiences might be to understand, describe, name and accommodate, perhaps we do not have to after all. Perhaps we just need to dwell in it, let it dwell in us, and continue to share our stories. For the more we tell our stories, the less otherworldly it will all seem and the easier it may be to embrace its full therapeutic value. I encourage us all, therefore, to stretch our comfort zone a little when thinking about how we might engage with the spiritual to enhance wellbeing in our own lives and the lives of others.¹⁰

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to Giorgos Tsiris and Gary Ansdell for the invitation to join the 2017 Nordoff Robbins *Plus* conference as a keynote speaker. I am also grateful to all those who attended, joined in the conversation, and made it such a rewarding experience.

REFERENCES

- Andrews, G. (2004). (Re)thinking the dynamics between healthcare and place: therapeutic geographies in treatment and care practices. *Area* 36(3), 307-318.
- Bartolini, N., Chris, R., MacKian, S., & Pile, S. (2013). Psychics, crystals, candles and cauldrons: alternative spiritualities and the question of their esoteric economies. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 14(4), 367-388.

⁹ Thank you to Giorgos Tsiris for these words which he shared in an email thread discussing the conference and the spiritual reflections that had emerged from it.

¹⁰ To explore in more detail a conceptual framework for a therapeutic understanding of spirituality see Chapter 8 in MacKian (2012).

- Bartolini, N., MacKian, S., & Pile, S. (2017). Spirit knows: materiality, memory and the recovery of Spiritualist places and practices in Stoke-on-Trent. *Social & Cultural Geography*, 1-24.
- Bennett, A. (1902). *Anna of the five towns*. California: CreateSpace.
- Benson, L.P., Scales, P.C., Syvertsen, A.K., & Roehlkepartain, E.C. (2012). Is youth spiritual development a universal developmental process? An international exploration. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 7(6), 453-470.
- Brown, F. (2010). *My whispering angels*. Ireland: Hachette Books.
- Byrne, L. (2010). *Angels in my hair*. London: Arrow Books.
- Carrette, J., & King, R. (2005). *Selling spirituality: the silent takeover of religion*. London: Routledge.
- Conradson, D. (2005). Landscape, care and the relational self: therapeutic encounters in rural England. *Health and Place*, 11, 337-348.
- Cooper, C. (2018). Considering anomalous events during bereavement as evidence for survival. In D. Klass & E.M. Steffen (Eds.), *Continuing bonds in bereavement: new directions for research and practice* (pp. 201-213). London: Routledge.
- DeNora, T. (2000). *Music in everyday life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gesler, W. (1996). Lourdes: healing in a place of pilgrimage. *Health and Place*, 2(2), 95-105.
- Gesler, W. (2005). Editorial: Therapeutic landscapes: an evolving theme. *Health and Place*, 11, 295-297.
- Gotsis, G., & Grimani, K. (2017). The role of spiritual leadership in fostering inclusive workplaces. *Personnel Review*, 46(5), 908-935.
- Graham, C. (2012). Self-help meets God: a classic approach. *Library Journal*, 137(18), 38.
- Hay, D., & Nye, R. (2006). *The spirit of the child*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Hoyez, A.C. (2007). The 'world of yoga': the production and reproduction of therapeutic landscapes. *Social Science and Medicine*, 65, 112-124.
- Hunter, J. (2010). Anthropology and the paranormal: what's the point? *Paranthropology: Journal of Anthropological Approaches to the Paranormal*, 1(1), 2-3.
- Lea, J. (2008). Retreating to nature: rethinking 'therapeutic landscapes'. *Area*, 40(1), 90-98.
- Leach, B. (2009). City workers turn to psychics for advice. Retrieved from <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/finance/recession/4277426/City-workers-turn-to-psychics-for-advice.html>
- MacKian, S. (1995). *The health of major's citizen: inclusion, exclusion and disengagement*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, UK.
- MacKian, S. (2000). Contours of coping: mapping the subject world of long-term illness. *Health and Place*, 6, 95-104.
- MacKian, S. (2004). Mapping reflexive communities: visualising the geographies of emotion. *Journal of Social and Cultural Geography*, 5(4), 615-631.
- MacKian, S. (2012). *Everyday spirituality: social and spatial worlds of enchantment*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Nelson-Becker, H. (2013). Spirituality in end-of-life and palliative care: what matters? *Journal of Social Work in End-Of-Life & Palliative Care*, 9(2-3), 112-116.
- Neudorfer, A. (2018). Spirituality and music therapy: an action research project in clinical music therapy within the context of an anthropological theory of spirituality. *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy*, 10(1), 52-66. Retrieved from <http://approaches.gr/neudorfer-a20160424>
- Oden, T.C. (1994, September 12). Blinded by the 'lite'. *Christianity Today*, 14-15.
- Polletta, F. (2006). *It was like a fever: storytelling in protest and politics*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Roxburgh, E. C., & Evenden, R. (2016). 'They daren't tell people': therapists' experiences of working with clients who report anomalous experiences. *European Journal of Psychotherapy and Counselling*, 18(2), 123-141.
- Soundy, A., Lee, R.T., Singh, S., Shah, P.R., & Roberts, L. (2015). Experiences of healing therapy in patients with irritable bowel syndrome and inflammatory bowel disease. *BMC Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, 15, 106. Retrieved from <http://bmccomplementalternmed.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12906-015-0611-x>
- Tsiris, G. (2017). Music therapy and spirituality: an international survey of music therapists' perceptions. *Nordic Journal of Music Therapy*, 26(4), 293-319.

Ελληνική περίληψη | Greek abstract

«Το συνεχές βουητό της μηχανής...»: Μια ιστορία για ασυνήθιστους διεπιστημονικούς διαλόγους στην πνευματικότητα και την ευεξία

Sarah MacKian

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Η πνευματικότητα είναι μεν προβληματική, αμφισβητήσιμη και αμφιλεγόμενη, αλλά είναι και δημοφιλής. Σε όλες τις υπηρεσίες υγείας και κοινωνικής πρόνοιας οι επαγγελματίες ενθαρρύνονται πλέον να δώσουν μεγαλύτερη προσοχή στην ποικιλομορφία των πνευματικών πεποιθήσεων και των σχετικών πρακτικών που ενδέχεται να φέρουν οι ασθενείς και οι χρήστες υπηρεσιών. Ωστόσο, η πνευματικότητα παραμένει μια προβληματική έννοια λόγω της υποκειμενικής και ενίστε αμφιλεγόμενης φύσης της. Αν η πνευματικότητα

μπορεί να χρησιμεύσει ως χρήσιμο κατασκεύασμα, τότε η πρόκληση για όλους μας είναι να νιώσουμε λίγο πιο άνετα με μερικές από τις πιο άβολες διαστάσεις της: να αναπτύξουμε μια ανοικτότητα ώστε να σπρώξουμε τα οριά της, να διερευνήσουμε τις δυνατότητές της και να αναγνωρίσουμε την ορθή της θέση στη σύγχρονη απόγοητευμένη [disenchanted] και κοσμική εποχή μας. Χρησιμοποιώ αυτό το άρθρο για να διερευνήσω σκέψεις για το πώς και το πού μπορεί να συναντήσουμε το πνευματικό με απροσδόκητους τρόπους, καθώς πιστεύω ότι μόνο αν είμαστε ανοιχτοί σε αυτές τις προκλήσεις μπορούμε να αρχίσουμε να κατανοούμε την πλήρη ποικιλία των τρόπων με τους οποίους η πνευματικότητα μπορεί να διαδραματίσει κάποιον ρόλο στις θεραπευτικές συναντήσεις και ευρύτερα στην υποστήριξη της ευεξίας. Με αυτόν τον τρόπο, ελπίζω να ενθαρρύνω την κριτική αλλά και δημιουργική δέσμευση απέναντι σε έναν ποικιλόμορφο πνευματικό διάλογο ενθαρρύνοντας τους επαγγελματίες να επαναφέρουν το πνεύμα –και το πνεύμα τους— πίσω στην καρδιά του θέματος. Αυτό είναι ένα ερευνητικά βασισμένο άρθρο που περιλαμβάνει πρωτότυπα δεδομένα μαζί με προσωπικούς αναστοχασμούς αναφορικά με την εμπειρία διεκπεραίωσης έρευνας στο πεδίο. Το άρθρο αναπτύχθηκε βάσει της κεντρικής μου ομιλίας στο συνέδριο «4th Nordoff Robbins Plus Research Conference» που πραγματοποιήθηκε στο Λονδίνο το 2017.

ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

πνευματικότητα, ευεξία, πνεύμα, Πνευματισμός [Spiritualism], άλλοι κόσμοι [otherworlds], θεραπευτικά τοπία, έρευνα, συμμετοχική παρατήρηση