
http://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/4757

Copyright © 2004 Taylor & Francis Ltd
It is posted here for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.
Objectivity and the Supernormal: The Limitations of Bracketing Approaches in Providing Neutral Accounts of Supernormal Claims

Jeremy Northcote

ABSTRACT  This paper contends that bracketing approaches to the sociological study of supernatural, paranormal and occult proponents do not truly ‘bracket’ the reality-claims made by those being studied, but instead impose ontological limits on what can be considered ‘supernormal.’ It is argued that such boundaries and definitions tend to rule out alternative ontological perspectives of the kind that researchers typically encounter amongst religious, paranormal and occult proponents. It is also argued that, unlike earlier reductionist approaches to the supernormal, the bias of bracketing approaches is not necessarily based on an underlying sceptical outlook of researchers, but rather reflects an inherent ontological limitation within the sociological enterprise itself. It is recommended that bracketing should be replaced by a reflexive, dialogical approach that emphasises the ontological positioning of social analyses with respect to supernormal claims.

Introduction

For many years social analysts investigating religion, the occult and the paranormal tended to be sceptical of ‘supernormal’ claims. Investigators sometimes openly stated such scepticism in their accounts, but more often than not their scepticism operated in a more subtle manner, taking the form of symbolic or functional perspectives that tended to (often implicitly) reduce supernormal conceptions purely to psychological or social constructs. But in recent years researchers of the occult, the paranormal, religion and various ‘alternative’ religions have increasingly championed the notion that social analysts can, and should, avoid taking a position on the validity of supernormal ideas. This perspective is generally referred to as the ‘bracketing’ approach.

Despite the apparent progress made by recent social analysts in moving away from positioned accounts, I contend that current bracketing approaches, like past approaches, do not offer a solution to the problem of bias in sociological accounts of the supernormal. The problem is that bracketing approaches, which claim to only deal with the social aspects of religious and
quasi-religious activities and leave the empirical validity of such activities an open question, inevitably make a demarcation between ‘social,’ ‘physical’ and ‘supernormal’ reality that invalidates certain ontological claims (such as those that make little distinction between social, physical and paraphysical reality). However, I will argue that this bias is not necessarily a problem of analysts being unable to remain impartial (although this can sometimes be the case), but that, despite their best intentions, bias is built into the very assumptions that underlie social analysis itself. I will contend that there is no easy way out of this dilemma, but that a more reflexive and dialogical approach can at least highlight the limits of impartiality inherent in any particular analytical approach and acknowledge alternative, ‘emic’ perspectives concerning the supernormal.

From Sceptical Bias to Bracketing

In order to understand the bracketing approach and its limitations, it is necessary first to examine the more blatant ‘positioned’ perspectives that the bracketing approach sought to replace. Of these perspectives, the most dominant has been that of the ‘Humanist’ social analysts who, in either an open or veiled manner, present sceptical accounts of supernormal claims.¹ The sceptical bias that such analysts exhibit towards the supernormal can be seen on the occasions when, having not ignored the area altogether or reduced it to a curious oddity, they adopt a general pattern of discrediting proponents of such ideas, portraying them as irrational, gullible, fantasy prone, pseudoscientific or downright fraudulent (Eglin, 1974: 324).

Even the more sympathetic treatments of supernormal proponents have tended to be characterised by a reductionist tendency that treats supernormal ideas as purely social or psychological constructs without a basis in objective reality. Such reductionist approaches have been common since the early days of sociology and anthropology. For example, nineteenth century social theorist Karl Marx regarded supernatural ideas as a ‘false consciousness’ – referring to them, in fact, as the “opium of the people” (1957[1844]: 42). Marx argued that the dominant class has long employed such ideas as tools of manipulation to subordinate the masses. Another influential social theorist, Edward B. Tylor, saw modern-day beliefs in ghosts and other such phenomena as survivals of our primitive past, and held that people in our own society who believed in such things were just as irrational, ignorant, and childlike as the natives of less advanced cultures (1979[1873]).

Although the cultural relativism that emerged in the field of anthropology in the 1920s and 1930s signalled a shift away from the
application of these evolutionary perspectives to native peoples, supernormal proponents do not seem to have benefited from this new-found respect for traditional, non-Western, ‘spiritual’ beliefs. Perhaps the reason they did not benefit was because, unlike their ‘native’ contemporaries, supernormal proponents were regarded as part of our own society, not of some foreign cultural system, and consequently they were expected to know better (Dolby, 1979: 28).

But even in their studies of non-Western societies, the impression one gets of most cultural relativists, even contemporary ones, is that their mode of analysis tends to undermine the supernormal truth-claims made by those being studied. They are undermined because of the way these analysts tend to reduce supernormal ideas to entirely symbolic, structural or functional constructs, thereby giving the impression that such claims have no basis whatsoever in objective reality.²

Sociologist Peter Berger makes some insightful observations concerning the ontological bias evident in reductionist approaches, arguing that they provide “quasicientific legitimations of a secularized world view” (1974: 128). He contends that functionalist explanations, for example, “flatten out” supernatural phenomena to the point that, …any manifestations of transcendence are, strictly speaking, meaningless, and therefore can only be dealt with in terms of social or psychological functions that can be understood without reference to transcendence (1974: 129).

Berger argues that functionalist explanations should be employed only in certain types of inquiry, such as in “investigations of the social-psychological mechanisms by which this or that worldview is maintained as plausible in the minds of its adherents” (1974: 128). The application of such theories as total explanations for the origin and nature of those claims is in Berger’s view illegitimate. Instead, Berger calls for approaches that “bracket” such reality-claims, leaving the question of their validity open within the account. Berger asserts:

The scientific study of religion must bracket the ultimate truth claims implied by its subject… Anyone engaged in the scientific study of religion will have to resign himself to this intrinsic limitation – regardless of whether, in his extrascientific existence, he is a believer, an atheist or a skeptic (1974: 125).
Ideally, a bracketing approach does not make a judgement one way or the other about the ontological status of a supernormal claim, but simply presents a perspective on the phenomenon “from within” (Berger 1974: 129), that is, from the point of view of proponents. Such an approach had earlier been recommended by anthropologist Edward Evans-Pritchard, who wrote:

As I understand the matter, there is no possibility of knowing whether the spiritual beings of primitive religions or of any others have any existence or not, and since that is the case he cannot take the question into consideration... It was precisely because so many anthropological writers did take up a theological position albeit a negative and implicit one, that they felt that an explanation of primitive religious phenomena in causal terms was required, going, it seems to me, beyond the legitimate bounds of the subject (1965: 17).³

Social analyst Graham Watson also calls on analysts to “suspend judgment on the status of informants’ knowledge claims” with respect to magical and religious conceptions, lest we “find ourselves accounting for what we take to be our informants’ true beliefs in terms of their correspondence to what we hold to be real” (1991: 83).⁴ He warns:

Our anthropology of knowledge would then become merely the anthropology of erroneous belief, while the work done in constituting ‘true knowledge’ as ‘true knowledge’ would remain hidden from us (1991: 83).

Watson declares, however, that this position “does not entail judgmental relativism,” for the bracketing approach does not preclude the possibility that there may ultimately be either an empirical or non-empirical basis for informants’ reality claims.⁵ Instead the emphasis should be on the manner in which participants express and debate those claims irrespective of their empirical basis.

The call to bracket judgements about the truth or falsity of supernormal claims has been made by Andrew Greely (1975), Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch (1982: 184), and David Hess (1993), amongst others. But there are inherent ontological biases in bracketing approaches that have not generally been acknowledged by analysts, which I shall now outline in some detail.
The Limitations of Bracketing

I hold that there is a fundamental bias in bracketing approaches that arises from the fact that an analyst taking such an approach must inevitably make a decision about where to place the ‘brackets,’ and hence must define some aspects of supernormal belief or activity as being social in nature and the remainder as not, which is itself an ontological claim. For example, Peter Berger declares:

> Whatever else these phenomena may be, they will also be human projections, products of human history, social constructions undertaken by human beings (emphasis his) (1990[1969]: 52).

The problem here lies in the fact that, according to many supernormal proponents, even the apparently socio-cultural aspect of supernormal related activities are ultimately constituted by supernormal factors. For example, during my research into the controversies that surround paranormal and occult ideas (see Northcote, 2001), many proponents told me that their interest in various supernormal phenomena had been shaped by supernormal experiences, and some even claimed that it was ‘guided’ by supernormal forces. Wicca enthusiasts, for example, sometimes cited a ‘calling’ (usually via visions and dreams) from ‘the Goddess’ who outlined their life’s mission and in some cases granted them special powers. One self-declared witch and medium told me:

> I had a dream where the spirit of the Goddess came to me and told me the purpose of my life. This was at a major crisis in my life and became a great turning point for me. I found out that my purpose in life is to help others and help in any way I can, and that is what I’ve been doing ever since (quoted in Northcote, 2001: 138-39).

The notion of ‘a calling’ has a long tradition in Western Christianity, and has also been embraced by a whole range of alternative religious and quasi-religious proponents. Some UFO enthusiasts also cite guidance (in their case, guidance by extraterrestrial beings) as being an important factor underlying their involvement in UFO research and influencing their life generally. Indeed sociologist Charles Emmons notes that many ufologists “come to be aware that they are being chosen and perhaps directed by the UFO phenomenon” (1997: 68).
Many proponents even see apparently indisputable ‘sociological’ aspects of involvement such as social organisation and social status as being determined or manipulated by supernormal forces. Social analysts, for example, are familiar with the claim often made by religious and quasi-religious leaders that their authority and the organisational structure of their social groups have been divinely ordained. Such claims are often employed to justify the ecclesiastical and patriarchal hierarchy that prevails in some established churches, and also with the ‘charismatic’ authority held by some ‘sect’ leaders and the segregated group structures they construct. Similar notions concerning the divine foundation of social structures can be found amongst paranormal adherents. For example, I have heard UFO proponents claim that the growing ‘movement’ of popular interest in UFOs is being orchestrated by extraterrestrials in order to prepare the citizens of Earth for official extraterrestrial contact. Similarly, some New Agers I spoke to believed that the burgeoning interest in spiritual ideas is the result of a general evolutionary awakening of humankind’s ‘spiritual consciousness.’ Meanwhile, some Christian evangelists/fundamentalists attributed popular interest in spiritual and occult matters to demonic manipulation – part of Satan’s ongoing battle with God.

Now an approach that demands that the ontological basis of claims be bracketed can run into trouble at this point, because such claims challenge the very notion that social processes are involved at all, or at least they challenge orthodox social scientists’ views that distinguish between natural (or supernatural) processes and social processes. Consequently, the extent to which socio-cultural factors are involved itself becomes one of the ‘ontological’ issues in dispute, and as such it too should rightly be bracketed. The problem here is not only that a bracketing approach generally fails to eliminate ‘clashes’ between the analyst’s perspective and the perspectives of those being studied, but it may also undermine the strength of the analysis by providing, at best, a very limited perspective and, at worse, one that has completely misrepresented the processes involved. Consider, for example, the possibility that people’s thinking and behaviour are indeed based on various supernormal forces, but that this factor has been bracketed out of the analysis. In this scenario a bracketing approach will falsely attribute mundane sociological explanations to behaviour that is in actuality shaped by supernormal forces. Alternatively we could consider the possibility that Skeptics are correct in identifying processes such as mass delusion, irrational tendencies and myth making as the basis of supernormal knowledge/belief. In this scenario a bracketing approach will miss the elements of self-deception.
and/or ‘irrationality’ that are involved in social processes related to belief in the supernormal.

For these reasons I question Collins and Pinch’s declaration that it “would make not one jot of difference to the analysis” (1982: 184) to know whether psychic phenomena are ‘real’ or not. Rather it seems to me that a bracketing approach does make particular ontological assumptions about reality that fundamentally shape the analysis and often conflict with the claims made by those being studied.

In general, I see such bias as unavoidable, for it is built into the very foundations of social analysis. The heart of the problem lies in the very demarcation of socio-psychological reality as a distinct sphere from other kinds of reality - particularly from physical reality (Latour, 1993). In fact it appears to be the case that intrinsic to any social analysis is the imposition of boundaries that define socio-psychological processes as distinct from natural-physical processes (and certainly as distinct from any supposed ‘supernormal’ processes). The construction of ontological difference therefore lies at the heart of the social scientific enterprise. Moreover, there is a fairly clear-cut division of labour that prevails in academia: natural reality is regarded as the province of the natural sciences, who are granted sole authority to define the attributes of the physical world; and what is not of nature is designated as the field of inquiry for the social sciences. The only issue that seems to be in dispute with regard to this division is where natural reality ends and socio-psychological reality begins.

In most cases analysts have followed the lead of orthodox scientists in delineating the boundary between the natural and the social. As sociologist Roy Wallis writes: “Sociologists maintained a deferential attitude towards prevailing scientific orthodoxy, accepting that in respect of the esoteric content of science, scientists knew best” (1979: 5). This deference is reflected in the way that social scientists tend to treat established scientific ideas as ‘natural’ and supernormal ideas as ‘social.’ Hence they have tended to exercise ‘selective relativism’ in their examination of supernormal ideas. With selective relativism only deviations from accepted knowledge are viewed as being socially constructed (and supernormal claims are usually seen to fit this category), whereas commonly accepted ‘facts’ about reality - defined within a Western scientific framework - are not (Latour, 1993: 105; Brown, 1995: 7). Sociologist Bruno Latour notes this relativistic bias in past analyses of supernormal ideas when he remarks:
It was certainly possible to analyze a belief in flying saucers, but not the knowledge of black holes; we could analyze the illusions of parapsychology, but not the knowledge of psychologists (1993: 92).

Anthropologist Greg Myers (1990) is critical of such selective approaches. He writes:

One should use the same modes of explanation for belief in witchcraft or phrenology as for belief in electromagnetic waves or neuroendocrinology. The particular explanations behind these beliefs may, of course, be different, but one can’t say, in this approach, that the nineteenth-century public believed in phrenology for cultural reasons, whereas we believe in neuroendocrinology because it is true (1990: 20).

As a consequence of the questionable nature of such selectivity, some analysts have begun to urge a more radical form of relativism that does not privilege truth-claims made by scientists over others. Sociologists Harry Collins and Trevor Pinch (1982) can be considered the principal advocates of this approach to the sociology of the paranormal. However, I would consider even their relativist position to constitute a distinct bias. On the one hand, they make a significant concession to parapsychologists in their study by treating their experiments (or some of them at least) as scientific and rational - a bias that sociologists Michael Mulkay, Jonathan Potter and Steven Yearley (1983) have criticised Collins and Pinch for. On the other hand, whatever concession Collins and Pinch allow parapsychologists in terms of ‘scientific’ status, they tend to take away when they argue that empirical reality has no bearing on the content and form of scientific ideas. This is a radical application of the ‘underdetermined thesis,’ which holds that any number of interpretations of a single ‘fact’ are possible (Knorr-Cetina & Mulkay, 1983: 3), and hence universal factors do not determine the interpretations that people make.

The perception that relativist approaches dismiss objective reality as a foundation of people’s knowledge, prompted one paranormal enthusiast/academic to discourage me from taking a ‘relativist’ or ‘postmodern’ approach in my own research into the politics surrounding paranormal ideas (Northcote, 2001). Such a perspective, he claimed, undermined any notion of paranormal claims having an empirical validity. The inference here seemed to be that he wanted paranormal ideas to be judged in the same way that scientific ideas are typically judged - that is, as empirically
valid. In other words, he did not want science to be demoted, but rather, paranormal research to be promoted.

We can see, therefore, that attempts by relativist theorists to dismiss the influence of the ‘natural world’ on social behaviour altogether does not represent a significant step towards constructing a ‘neutral’ position with regard to the study of supernormal ideas. In fact, I have come to accept that “in a postconstructivist world there are no neutral positions” (Hess, 1993: 155).

Towards a reflexive, dialogical account of the supernormal

Given my contention that ontological bias is unavoidable in bracketing approaches, we might wonder how social scientists who endeavour to present a fair-minded account of supernormal ideas can proceed in such circumstances. First, in my opinion it is possible for analysts to be both biased and fair-minded in their accounts, as long as other ontological possibilities (particularly those that accord with the views of the people being studied) are described and given their due respect. In this way a balance can be achieved between emic perspectives and analysts’ own positioned perspectives. In fact, a recognition and declaration of the analyst’s lack of neutrality and the inclusion of alternative positions and voices is, in my opinion, not only the best course for the analyst to take in order to produce a fair-minded account of the people being studied, but it also helps analysts and readers alike to better understand the assumptions underlying the positions of both the analyst and those being studied. What is required, in other words, is the exercise of reflexivity through a dialogical approach to social inquiry.

A reflexive approach to the study of paranormal enthusiasts is in fact precisely the path suggested by Hess, who proposes that the analyst’s own position should be subject to the same degree of critical examination that the positions of enthusiasts themselves are subject to. He states:

I am advocating a form of reflexivity that goes beyond textual experimentation to a critique of the social, cultural, and political assumptions of both the discourse of the Self and that of the Other (1993: 155).

Hess argues that reflexivity must not be restricted to purely epistemological and representational issues, but must encompass “a critique of the political and ideological assumptions of one’s own discursive community” (1993: 156). The need to subject the analyst’s own position to critical scrutiny relates, I
contend, to two issues: first, that analysts themselves are embedded within academic discourses that, as I have argued, are prone to certain biases; and second, that analysts - indeed, the entire scientific enterprise - are part of the wider culture and, hence, subject to the same ‘cultural politics’ as that which surrounds the controversy over supernormal ideas.¹⁴

The importance of reflexivity has also been emphasised by social theorists such as Jurgen Habermas (1984) and Pierre Bourdieu (1977), who argue that through the exercise of reflexivity,¹⁵ unquestioned ‘doxic’ elements can be exposed. These theorists proceed to the erroneous conclusion, however, that the influence of these unquestioned elements can be negated through bracketing. Habermas, for example, talks of a “hypothetical approach to phenomena and experiences,” which are “isolated from the complexity of their life-world contexts and analyzed under experimentally varied conditions” (1985: 206-7). But, as I have argued, it is naïve to think that any utterances can be isolated from the complexity of people’s ‘life-world.’ This is because life-world assumptions not only underlie the conceptual frameworks through which ideas are expressed, but also the implicit rules that govern reflective thought and even the desire to engage in reflection in the first place.

Such are the realisations made by ‘Foucaultian’ scholars, who focus on the way that all thought and practices - including self-critiques - are embedded in complex networks of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980). In fact, some theorists suggest that subtle, pre-existing biases and interests can obstruct a reflexive analysis to such a degree that analysts are not able to transcend their position in order to ‘objectively’ examine their biases at all. Steve Woolgar makes the point, for example, that the claims produced by a reflexive approach should rightly be subject to critique themselves, and so on, resulting in an “infinite regress” (1983: 254).

But while I agree that it is not possible to transcend one’s bias to the point of neutrality, I hold that it is possible to be sufficiently aware of one’s bias - at least relationally (that is, in relation to other ideas) if not objectively - that one can at least understand the limitations of one’s perspective. By recognising the partiality of his/her account in relation to alternative perspectives in this manner, the analyst can stake out the ontological assumptions that characterise his/her position (as much as their reflexive capacity allows), and then proceed, somewhat experimentally, with what amounts to a positioned account.

In my view, then, the main problem with the types of analyses discussed above is not that the analysts conducting them adopt certain biased positions, but that they generally fail to present their analysis as a positioned one. Instead, the implication often is that theirs is a neutral treatment of the
supernormal question. A declaration of one’s positioning, however, constitutes the first step towards avoiding this problem, even if the study itself tends to undermine the ontological validity of participants’ positions, or even makes moral judgements about those positions. This is where reflexivity must be employed, not as a means of ridding social analysis of bias, but as a means of making the analyst’s own position overt. If such a ‘reflexive partiality’ is employed, the analyst should ideally be able to construct his/her account without any hidden agenda or false pretensions.

If all analytical positions are biased, however, and all that is required of analysts is that they make their biases as explicit as possible, does this mean that analysts can take any position they please? Some analysts would answer in the affirmative. Social analyst Daniel Hodges (1974), for example, goes so far as to advocate an approach that openly incorporates assumptions about the supernatural, either positive or negative, into the analysis. Further, Hodges argues that the inclusion of various assumptions in the analysis serves to generate new propositions about the nature of belief.

Of course, there will be those who reject the incorporation of supernormal assumptions in social analysis. Anthropologist Jacques Maquet, for example, writes:

> Anthropology is neither a spiritual path, nor a search for nonordinary powers; it is a discursive discipline of knowledge. The warrior’s quest and the sorcerer’s endeavour belong to other realms and thus cannot provide guidance for anthropology… (1978: 362).

While Maquet seems to be setting limits here in terms of where the experimental boundaries of social analysis lay, to me this seems to be a somewhat arbitrary matter, although one that I will leave for others to debate. At any rate, in my opinion Hodges’ argument is not so much a call for radical experimentalism in social analysis as it is an affirmation of what analysis already is - namely, an experimental account that is based upon certain ontological assumptions that the analyst has made. I would stress, however, that I am not necessarily advocating that social analysts incorporate supernormal or sceptical assumptions in their mode of analysis, but rather that they understand that their own position could be just as biased and experimental as that taken by less ‘neutral’ theorists.

Recognising the ‘bias’ of one’s position is, however, only the first step in constructing a fair-minded account. The second step is to acknowledge the viewpoints of ‘insiders’ in the account. This has the effect of putting the analyst’s own position in perspective and providing some ‘balance’ between
the analyst’s ‘etic’ perspective and insiders’ ‘emic’ perspectives. The inclusion of such emic perspectives constitutes the ‘dialogical’ aspect of analysis.\(^{16}\)

Precisely what social analysts mean by a ‘dialogical’ account varies,\(^{17}\) and can be taken to indicate such aspects as: (1) the dialogical manner in which data is gathered (for example, discussions and interviews with informants); (2) the dialogue between researcher and informants over the way in which data is collated and interpreted; (3) the dialogical form in which etic and emic views are presented in the account; and (4) the manner in which the final account ‘speaks’ to different positions (in terms of the assumptions and judgements the analyst makes about his/her own position and those of others). A dialogical approach that incorporates these various aspects can go a long way towards presenting the kind of ‘balanced’ account of the supernormal that I am recommending. I will now explain these points in a little more detail.

The first aspect – concerning the dialogical manner in which data is gathered – is important because it can help illuminate the view “from within” (as Berger puts it), for it is generally through talking to people that the analyst comes to understand alternative points of view (although in saying this, I do not mean to downplay the importance of other fieldwork methods such as participant-observation and the reading of folk narratives). The second aspect – concerning the dialogue between researcher and informant over the construction of the analysis – can be an important aid not only in the effective design of ethnographies, surveys and other research genres during the methodological phase, but it can also aid in evaluating the analyst’s findings from an insider perspective during the analytical phase.\(^{18}\) The third aspect – concerning the dialogical form in which etic and emic views are presented within the account – is important in terms of offsetting the analyst’s own position against the positions of those being studied, so that the reader can easily discern between the analyst’s etic position and the insider’s emic position.\(^{19}\)

Before I address the fourth aspect of dialogical analysis, I would point out that I am fully aware that those social analysts who do not seek to explore ‘insider’ views on the supernormal in their studies might question the usefulness of incorporating the dialogical techniques outlined above. This is where the fourth, more general, aspect of dialogical analysis has relevance, because it emphasises the way that all accounts intrinsically ‘speak’ to alternative perspectives, even if what the analyst is saying does not explicitly address those perspectives or is principally intended for proponents of those perspectives. It is when the analyst is aware of this dialogical aspect of his/her account, and this awareness is made manifest through acknowledgment of
alternative perspectives (through the kinds of dialogical techniques outlined above), that the account can be framed in a more open-ended, rather than definitive, manner - or, at least, this is how the account will tend to be interpreted by its readers.

By acknowledging that alternative points of view exist, proponents are at least given some space for reply. The provision for this space is particularly important given the power wielded by social analysts, whose authority in society – particularly in comparison to that held by many ‘fringe’ proponents of supernormal ideas – is generally such that they can (and indeed, as I have indicated, often do) effectively invalidate the claims of proponents altogether. In a sense, then, I am suggesting that social analysts have a responsibility to at least acknowledge alternative viewpoints in their studies because of the considerable authority that they hold in the wider society.

Conclusion

My main aim in this paper has been to examine the bias that has characterised social analyses of supernormal ideas. I have argued that, due to the particular discursive orderings that underpin academic inquiry, most accounts produced by social analysts will inevitably reflect certain ontological biases and that even bracketing or relativist approaches are not immune to such problems. Given these difficulties, I have recommended: first, that analysts construct their positions reflexively; second, that they represent their work as a positioned experiment rather than as an objective, definitive account; and third, that they view their accounts as something of a dialogue with alternative positions - positions that, as far as possible, are acknowledged within the account. I contend that it is only when such steps are taken that supernormal claims can be fairly represented in an analysis.

Precisely how the recommendations I have suggested in this paper might be achieved in practice, however, is something that requires further discussion. For example, how could even the best intentioned ‘dialogical’ researcher take into account the multiplicity of perspectives that tend to exist on matters such as the supernormal, even within the confines of small groups or communities? Another issue is how much space is reasonable to reserve within the account for a discussion of insider perspectives in order to give them a fair hearing (particularly if the study does not principally set out to explore such perspectives). Is a paragraph or section in an article sufficient? Should a book set aside an entire chapter for this purpose?

Clearly there are many issues to be considered regarding the manner in which, and the extent to which, a reflexive, dialogical treatment of
supernormal perspectives might feature in analytical accounts. However, the recommendations I have put forward in this paper should serve as useful guidelines to the manner in which social analysts can go about constructing their accounts so that some form of inclusive dialogue can be achieved.

As I have indicated in my discussion, the advantages of taking such an approach lie not only in the extension of charity to supernormal proponents, but also in the improved understanding it should give analysts regarding the ontological limits of the social scientific enterprise more generally. Indeed, I hold that the understanding that can be gained from such an approach has broad relevance to all facets of social inquiry and not just those areas dealing with supernormal ideas, for it can help illuminate the modus operandi upon which all social analysts engage their subject matter.

In this respect, it is important to realise that the issues I have discussed here are not unique to the study of supernormal claims, for the problems of dealing fairly and accurately with emic perspectives, and defining the relationship of social inquiry to ‘ultimate reality,’ are two of the central issues that social analysts must deal with whatever their area of study. Yet the areas of religion, the occult and the paranormal present a particularly clear platform for addressing these issues, for they are arenas where some of the most basic ‘truths’ that underlie Western thought (including the social scientific enterprise itself) are contested in a relatively ‘raw’ fashion. They are arenas, therefore, that can expose the limits and excesses of knowledge-claims in a most transparent manner.

Rather than shying away from these thorny issues then, social analysts studying supernormal claims could take the opportunity to enrich their analyses through an active engagement with these issues, even if they risk undermining the foundations of their own inquiry. Recognising that social analysis is fundamentally dialogical in character rather than a ‘neutral’ inquiry represents, I contend, the first step towards such an engagement.

Dr. Jeremy Northcote completed a B.A. at the University of Western Australia in 1993, followed by a B.A. (Hons) degree at Curtin University of Technology in 1994. In 2001 he completed his Ph.D. thesis at Murdoch University titled, "The Paranormal and the Politics of Truth." He is currently carrying out independent research into the 'politics' of chronographic practices of ancient Jewish religious writers. Correspondence: 11 Silverton Ave, Butler W.A. 6036, Australia, email: jnorthct@hotmail.com

NOTES:

1 Examples of ‘open’ scepticism can be seen in the work of Marvin Harris (1974) and James Lett (1991).
2 A good recent example of such reductionism is the sociological account of crashed saucer beliefs by Saler, Ziegler and Moore (1997). See Northcote (1999).

3 This is in contrast to some sceptical comments Evans-Pritchard made earlier in his career in his (1976[1937]) study, *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*, in which he stated, “Witches, as Azande conceive them, cannot exist” (1976:18). As anthropologist Basil Sansom suggested to me at an ethnographic forum (Fremantle, Perth, May 1998) where I presented an early draft of this paper, Evans-Pritchard’s earlier work on Azande magical and supernatural beliefs may have been influenced by the more atheistic Oxford school, while his later work on Nuer religion (1956) came under the influence of Robertson-Smith and the divinity scholars at Cambridge, who held that primitive beliefs were ‘refractions of divinity’ (Sansom 1998:personal communication).

4 Watson uses the example of the Azande’s belief in witchcraft, which Evans-Pritchard studied in his famous (1976) monograph, *Witchcraft, Oracles & Magic among the Azande*. In his discussion, Watson makes the telling point that: “To the Azande, witches are as real as express trains are to me” (1991: 83).

5 ‘Judgmental relativism’ is to be understood in contrast to ‘epistemic relativism,’ which sociologists Karin Knorr-Cetina and Michael Mulkay distinguish as follows: “Epistemic relativism asserts that knowledge is rooted in a particular time and culture. …On the other hand, judgmental relativism appears to make the additional claims that all forms of knowledge are ‘equally valid,’ and that we cannot compare different forms of knowledge and discriminate among them” (1983: 5).

6 See, for example, the defence mounted by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops (1987) against criticism of the ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The ‘headship’ exercised by bishops is, they claim, consistent with (and is in fact directly descended from) the authority Jesus Christ gave to his apostles.

7 Max Weber defines ‘charismatic authority’ as the authority recognised in leaders who are seen to be “holders of special gifts of the body and spirit” – gifts that are “believed to be supernatural, not accessible to everybody” (1991: 245).

8 The authority that sectarian leaders possess can also be validated in a more direct manner by alleged supernormal factors. It may be proclaimed, for example, by a particular revelation, message or prophecy.
This perspective is one of the central ideas developed in James Redfield’s (1994) best-selling ‘New Age’ novel, *The Celestine Prophecy*.

As sociologist Barry Barnes puts it, “Culture can explain only what nature does not explain” (1983: 34).

Wallis adds: “To question the ‘scientific method’ was to undermine the foundation upon which one’s own argument was built” (1979: 5).

Such a perspective has become more tenable in recent decades, partly as a result of the doubt cast on the positivistic basis of scientific knowledge by philosophers such as Popper, Lakatos and, more vigorously, by Kuhn and Feyerabend (Wallis, 1979; Dolby, 1979).

Less radical applications of the underdetermined thesis propose that ‘facts’ do influence interpretation to some degree, but are still culturally mediated. As such, although they will produce different interpretations, they will not be ones that are independent of an external reality. Social analyst Sergio Sismondo (1996: 108) refers to this less radical approach as ‘perspectivalism.’

Similarly, social analyst Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued: “I contend that the internal tropes of anthropology matter much less than the larger discursive field within which anthropology operates and upon whose existence it is premised. A cultural critique of anthropology requires a historicization of that entire field” (1991: 17).

The notion of reflexivity that Habermas has in mind here is one that is intersubjectively produced through mutual critique, in contrast to the Kantian notion of self-reflection exercised by the individual (see Habermas, 1974: 144-5).

In fact, social theorist Jurgen Habermas argues that it is only through dialogue or “communicative action” that reflexive insight can be achieved (1974: 144-5).

See, for example, Dennis Tedlock (1979), James Clifford (1983) and Elaine Lawless (1992) for various formulations of what constitutes a ‘dialogical’ mode of social analysis.

Such a dialogue between researcher and informant has been recommended by ethnographers such as Jeff Titon (1988), Elaine Lawless (1992), Joke Schrijvers (1995) and Luke Lassiter (2001). Elaine Lawless, for example, remarks that she came to value such an approach after experiencing some fundamental disagreements with one of her informants over certain key interpretations in her study, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (1988). In one disagreement that is
particularly relevant to the present discussion, Lawless concluded that her informant, a female preacher, had a great deal of inner strength that Lawless attributed to personal factors. This contradicted her informant’s claim that her strength derived from God – a claim that the feminist-oriented Lawless viewed as “self-denial” (Lawless, 1992: 304).

19 I have left the question open here of whether such a dialogical format should reproduce an actual, ‘historical’ dialogue between the analyst and his/her informants (as recommended by Dennis Tedlock, 1979), or whether it should offer an ‘improvised’ dialogue involving a plurality of voices that aims to evoke rather than to represent (as recommended by Stephen Tyler, 1987). The debate over which format is preferable largely revolves around the issue of whether or not ethnographic writing can validly function as a form of ‘mimesis’ (see Pool, 1991).

REFERENCES:


Lawless, Elaine J. “‘I was afraid someone like you... an outsider... would misunderstand’: Negotiating Interpretive Differences Between


