Researching Spirituality and Meaning in the Workplace

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Abstract: In this paper we begin to address the topic of researching spirituality in the workplace. The notion of spirituality at work has been an increasing focus of attention in the academic literature over the last 10 years or so, with several special editions of journals being dedicated to the topic. However, we find at least two areas of this work so far to be problematic. One aspect relates to the apparent ambiguity relating to the term 'spirituality' in itself and, especially, in comparison to the use of the word 'religion'. Another aspect refers to the motives and drivers behind the study of workplace spirituality and the search for 'higher meaning'. In essence, we find the predominant objectives behind the research to be highly instrumental. Sometimes this seems to be deliberately espoused but sometimes it is more hidden. This paper attempts a preliminary critical review of the field with a special emphasis on the issues it raises for the researcher. In particular, we seek to show how the way in which 'spirituality' is conceived and constructed directly affects decisions related to methodological choice and (ultimately) to research design itself. We close the paper by reflecting on the importance of the topic and yet the dangers inherent in appearing to trivialise its nature.

Keywords: organisations; spirituality; critical management; meaning and work; religion; research methods; protestant ethic; essential self; methodology

1. Background

There has been an increase of focus within organisations on matters of 'meaning' and purpose. For instance, Companies such as AT & T, Apple Computers and DuPont are including a new question in their search for vision "What is our higher purpose?" (Channon 1992) We intend, initially, to investigate this question, be it a "slogan" or a heartfelt plea, and in doing so attempt to unpack the many different interpretations within the literature as to what a higher purpose might be, and more importantly, to whose benefit and gain?

Writers and academics; have explored a variety of avenues in regard to 'meaning'. One such avenue is the notion of "spirituality". Special issues of journals have been devoted to thinking about spirituality within an organisational context and many books have addressed similar themes (most recently at the time of writing *'The Pleasures and Sorrows of Work* by Alain De Botton 2009). This paper aims to discuss the academic and methodological problems encountered when researching meaning and spirituality in organisation and critically examine some of the current spirituality research, most pertinently Smith and Rayment's 2007 SMP fitness framework. Not only do we consider the methods of research used by most research to be unlikely to gain any 'truth' or sufficient insight into spirituality, we also consider the research as methodologically weak concerning ontological and epistemological assumptions. Additionally, we examine attempts to force the concept into a 'definition' and explore other possibilities of treating the concept as 'undefined'.

The paper will first explore the many permutations of thought behind the notion of spirituality (the "s" word) through a general discussion of theorists and then a more detailed look at Smith and Rayment's SMP Framework (2007). Then it will go on to discuss the variety of uses within the field of the "word" (or definition) in two sections; as an ontological assumption (naming what we believe exists) and then exploring epistemological assumptions within a methodology and method context. In this paper we will discuss existing research and then use that to question our own underlying thinking regarding organisational spirituality; does it belong in the workplace? – Or/and is it unavoidable?

2. The "S" word

The Spirituality, Leadership and Management Network (2003) explain that human capital is the most important asset of a business. 'Human capital' being:

> *'Human knowledge, human skills and human spirit as well.'*

> And: *'……To nurture and value the human spirit is an integral part of leadership'.*

Spirituality is seen in the majority of mainstream literature as a way to find meaning in their work, a meaning that extends further than economic gain. In response to 10s of millions of world citizens that are hungering for: *'transmaterial mind-expanding, soul-enriching and heart centred values'* spirituality offers the opportunity for employees to bring their 'whole selves to work' (Moxley, in Neal 1999). If this spirituality is allowed to be expressed (Lips-Wiersma and Mills 2002) on an individual level, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) identify enhanced creativity, increased honesty and trust within an organisation and increased commitment. Whereas Neal, Lichtenstein and Banner (1999) propose that spirituality and the trust in the control inherent in life itself will allow people to loosen their grip on reality in order to let new wisdom in and for societal transformation and paradigm shift to occur. This position is further built upon by a consideration of Jungian psychology and the archetypal depths and power of the collective unconscious, and the therapeutic potency of images, myths and symbols.

Turning back to the benefits of spirituality for the individual, Konz and Ryan in their spiritual analysis of the mission statements of Jesuit Universities (1999) say;

> *'Spirituality grounds people in their work and allows them to connect with the transcendent in all they do'*

Furthermore Barnet (1985) talks of a model of personal growth where:

> *'A Career becomes a path to personal enlightenment leading through the mastery of material skills to spiritual growth and self-knowledge.'*

The journey or path of an individual is referred to a great deal within spirituality literature, for example, liberating human spirit and creativity: 'via meditation, prayer and guided imagery, shamanic journeying and various yogic paths' (Csiskszentmihayli 1990). These paths and journeys are deeply personal to the individual and problems occur when there are conflicts of interest when an organisation will try to implement a 'workplace spirituality' in order to feel the benefits outlined by Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) for example.

There are also many issues regarding spirituality at an individual level. Palmer (1994), for example, speaks of the trend for many managers to be 'functional atheists' – the belief that 'ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me, I cannot expect God's help**.** I alone am the one who must make things happen.' Conversely, there is also the problematic, constricting and, dare we say, dangerous side of spirituality, whereby it is not so much about the reliance of an individual on nothing but themselves but the effect of spirituality at work on a person within an organisation.

We might draw attention to issues of excessive commitment to work that could result in employees ignoring the negative effects on their health, family and community. McCormick (1994), talks of the dilemma when "spiritual" ideas cause managers to feel and express compassion when the organisation calls for hard-hearted decision-making based solely on monetary criteria. In addition to this idea, Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1995) comment that global capitalism as a discourse is without meaning due to its ecologically unstable nature and so this conflict of roles, experienced by McCormick's manager, seems an inevitable experience due to the negative environmental factors of business. In agreement is George (2002) who calls for "a paradigm shift in thinking for some leaders and stakeholders" for organisations to embrace "spirituality". Perhaps overriding all discussions of workplace "spirituality" are Mitroff and Denton (1999) who propose that organisations who practise spirituality in order to achieve better results actually undermine both its practice and its ultimate benefit. Forray and Stork (2003) consider the subtext of spirituality by using the fictional device of the telling of two parables. Parable one sees a manager in line with 'New Age Corporate Spiritualism' (Nadesan, 1999) where the individual feels '*a sense of purpose and meaning in work*' and the person's work *'wasn't about what he actually did, but rather that he saw what he did as contributing to the larger community.'* In parable two, however, the story is kept the same yet the annotations are changed from illustrating how parts of the story showed spirituality and meaningful work to show instead how the individual was aligned with the ideological framework of terrorism, in this case Al Quaeda. In doing this, Forray and Stork show the problematic nature of a concept that is 'extra-rational' – where there is any commitment to spirit, *reason is silenced*:

> *"Any devotion to 'that which is unseen' masks the very material and negative consequences of those aims as they become manifest in our everyday lives." (Forray and Stork 2003)*

Forray and Stork's paper shows up an important issue within the spirituality at work discourse, as, like other mangerialist discourses, *'it cloaks its possibilities in the rhetoric of organisational goodness.'* (Forray and Stork 2003)

A warning is also issued by Boyle and Healy (2003) against organisations overly relying on the use of spiritual work as way of helping paramedics to cope in adverse situations:

> *"By encouraging workers to be more 'spiritual' and engage in individual spiritual work as an extension of emotional labour, an organization may disown its responsibility to provide adequate support systems for emotionally exhausted workers" (Boyle and Healy 2003)*

Brown (2003) succinctly summarises that at its best, spirituality can provide direction, connectedness and wholeness and, at its worst, it is the latest management fad (with sinister undertones) which, when unmasked, is likely to prove ineffective and ephemeral. However, as most of the literature is not backed up empirically it is hard to know which outcome is more likely. This paper aims to discuss the potential for empirical research on meaning and spirituality, the negative aspects, the sensitivity issues and the question regarding whether or why it should be studied at all.

3. Fear of the "S" word

> *"Spirituality in the Workplace is about individuals and organisations seeing work as a spiritual path, as an opportunity to contribute to society in a meaningful way" (Smith and Rayment 2007)*

> *"[It] can be most characteristically described as the inner experience of the individual when he senses a 'beyond', especially as evidenced by the effect of this experience on his behaviour when he actively attempts to harmonize his life with the 'beyond'" (Clark 1958)*

The majority of mainstream literature shows a plethora of definitions varying in ambiguity as to what may be defined as spiritual activity/behaviour within organisation. As seen above, Smith and Rayment (2007) apply a definition that should be embedded within organisation and management: a "spirituality" that should be included within an individual's work-life and working environment. Clark (1958) was cited in a paper by McCormick (1994), as a definition of what "spirituality" might be. However, this definition was originally intended for a description of what one might mean when considering the term 'religion'. This demonstrates the ambiguity and, indeed, the variety of spirituality definitions, leading to a concern of a lack of clarity within the field. Brown (2003) criticises the use of the term "Organizational Spirituality" as being 'opaque' due to the multitudinous definitions in the literature. Additionally, within this discussion of terms and language, the definition of "spirituality" as an organisational concept might be substituted by, for example; religion, (i.e. the reverse of how Clark's definition has been used above), morality or ethics? However, the issue of multiple definitions, addressed and criticised by Brown (2003), should not necessarily be seen as a negative point within the field, as variety does not necessarily mean a lack of progress, a point which we shall discuss in more detail later on.

4. Spiritual beings

The consideration of spirituality as a resource or tool by Smith and Rayment (2007) and, for example, like Ashmos and Duchon (2000) that should be encouraged, has been criticised by Bell and Taylor as not taking into consideration the political nature of organisation and the subsequent power issues in relation to this (Bell and Taylor 2003).

Bell and Taylor (2003) consider spirituality at work to be based upon, or at least derived from, Weber's "Protestant Ethic", translated as:

> *"..The concept of religious vocation or calling into a secular context... work was portrayed as a means of gaining salvation and workers were expected to act selflessly for a greater good."* (Quoted in Bell and Taylor 2003)

A pertinent change happened in the last half of the 20th century, where the principles of Protestantism changed for the majority of the working masses. Work at this point was stripped of its meaning (Berger 1964). The value of hard work for the glory of God and subsequent preservation of the soul,

not to mention the moral, social and ethical self-improvement the modern-day notion of spirituality is said to provide, for many, disappeared.

Bell and Taylor (2003) draw upon the similarities of Weber's "Protestant Ethic" and the discourse of workplace spirituality by citing Fox (1994), who says that *"all work can be spiritual"*. Novak (1996) remarks that *"capitalism is a source of vocation"* and La Bier (1986) sees workplace spirituality as a *"pragmatic solution to careerist orientation"*. Noting this, they outline a tension between what many spirituality scholars are advocating: that spirituality can be "brought in" and a critical view that we should question where this spirituality is coming from, and who is set to gain the most from it. In other words, *whose spirituality?*

This directly flags up a major criticism of the functional/managerial spirituality in the workplace literature. Insofar as the work organisation is seen as a neutral context in which spiritual growth is simply located. This can be understood as just another method for the exploitation of labour, introducing and continually mystifying the elusive concept of spirituality as a discourse which can develop a more meaningful experience for the individual and a higher purpose for an organisation. Whilst at the same time de-emphasising the significance of non-work domains, Bell and Taylor see the discourse of spirituality at work to be more in-line with Goffman's (1968) *"Totalizing Tendency"* or a sacred version of Foucault's panopticon. The organisation is not so much turned into the traditional panopticon metaphor of a "psychic prison" (Morgan 1997), but perhaps a 'mental mosque' or a 'constricting/identity constituting cathedral'.

Underlying this discussion are many tensions. One tension is the emphasis placed upon the individual when it comes to spirituality at work. As we have indicated, spirituality at work focuses on the journey of the individual. This individual-based notion or approach brings with it many theoretical tensions and potentially steps into the dualism of structure and agency. In other words, the individual, as a part of the organisation is seen as having an 'essential self' that has potential spirituality that must be released and enabled, with the organisation being seen as a politically neutral provider of opportunities. This tension leads directly into the considerations of Goffman's (1968) *"Totalizing Tendency"* and Foucault's ideas on panopticon and the shift of pastoral power. (People no longer known by the church but doctors, families, education and employers having intimate knowledge of them and, thus, the micro-technologies related to this knowledge.)

As noted by Bell and Taylor (2003) the majority of spirituality literature focuses on the non-rational, informal and intuitive aspects of organisation. However, a tension arises when attempts are made to model, produce frameworks or create methods for "better" or "more productive" behaviours associated with the concept of spirituality at work:

> *".....in trying to understand and define spirituality they are obscuring rather than elucidating their intended subject".* (Bell and Taylor 2003)

We believe, therefore, that "spirituality" as an undefined concept or notion is still a valid phenomena for research. However, it is of upmost importance that as researchers within a field we "kick back" or diversify from a conceptualisation (and often vague definition; Benefiel, 2003) of spirituality at work.

Whereas previous conceptualisations of spirituality at work have attempted to:

> *"...solve the meaning of work by making work mystical only then to demystify and resolve it."* (Bell and Taylor 2003)

We would argue that no demystification is needed, or at least, not yet. And definitely not in the manner previously seen. We agree with Brown (2003) that the spirituality discussed previously in the paper and critiqued by Bell and Taylor may not "exist" or fulfil the outcomes that they propose. However, our discussion of spirituality as a notion will be implicit in organisation as we believe that human beings are implicitly spiritual. To unpack this further it may be useful to consider the work of Ian Mitroff on what he considers to be 'spiritual' and to examine the fruitful tension this develops with Bell and Taylor's ideas in regard to spirituality being the re-enunciation of Weber's "Protestant Ethic".

Both Mitroff and Bell & Taylor agree that spirituality was historically experienced and celebrated in religious denominations (Christian, Muslim, Hindu etc). However, Mitroff strongly disagrees that workplace spirituality should have anything to do with religion, whereas Bell and Taylor see the

discourse of spirituality at work to be a re-enunciation of the "Protestant Ethic" in-line with New Age values (New Age religions being another severely criticised notion by Mitroff (2003))

Mitroff is critical of any contemporary spirituality being related to religion, acknowledging that spirituality is to be seen as both "above and beyond denominations". Moreover, using Wilber (1985) he speaks of how spirituality at work should stand as being broadly inclusive, without condoning or endorsing a spiritual experience or the activity of spiritual practice in a particular way. Religion, Mitroff states, imposes a particular form of God or a particular way of worshipping and living. Mitroff proposes that spirituality should be seen as a potential universal religion; being both universal, timeless and the ultimate source and provider of meaning and purpose in our lives.

This is a different conceptualisation of what spirituality could be in organisation to Bell and Taylor's view of it as a re-enunciation of the "Protestant Ethic" aligned to "New Age" religious values. We believe this is demonstrable of the tension we have noted in relation to the spirituality at work discussion overall, and is important to discuss if you are to explore the notion of spirituality further. For example, is a person in an organisation constituted as a docile body (via the Foucauldian notion of pastoral power) or, drawing on Goffman, is the *"Totalizing Tendency"* providing an overarching system of meaning legitimating the social order through reference to sacred power? This would restrict:

> *".... the possibility of retaining something of one's self from the organisation, making the constitution of identity through 'recalcitrance' (1968) more difficult for the individual to achieve." (Goffman 1968, cited in Bell and Taylor 2003)*

Alternatively, using Mitroff's research, many spoke of wanting to bring their "whole selves" to work. In other words, a person has a self with which they may actively pursue a spiritual journey.

Many tensions underlie these positions and this reveals the political nature of the organisation and the polysemic nature of the discourse of spirituality at work. A warning can be issued, however, if one views spiritual matters through the lens of Bell and Taylor's use of Foucault and his ideas on the panopticon. Similar to the negative considerations mentioned previously, perhaps if Mitroff's managers and executives were to bring their "whole selves" into work it would be another aspect of their life that would be constituted by the dominant discourse? More specifically, if a person's life is viewed as full of alternative discourses constituting them in various situations in life, then to bring deep emotional and spiritual feelings into the workplace might mean the person's "whole self" may be "wholly constituted" or "wholly aligned" to the organisations values and goals!

We believe it to be more useful to view the theoretical dance between docile body and essential self as a tension. The discourse of spirituality questions the enlightenment notion of modern man (man without God) yet still finds itself leaning toward a modernistic view of identity with the consideration of the 'essential self'. This is set in contrast to postmodern or poststructural views of identity or self which see the person as being constituted by discourse and knowledge/power the latter is beyond our current discussion, but will be addressed a later paper.

5. Spirituality in the workplace, a critical review of Smith and Rayment's (2007) SMP global fitness framework

> *"..It is not because Skinner does not understand his pigeons or his people as well as Bohr understands his particles, but because we are, reasonably enough, suspicious of people who make a business of **predicting and controlling other people.**" (Rorty 1981)*

So far we have explored views of spirituality as being beneficial to the individual, the organisation and even as a catalyst for societal transformation. We have also attempted to provide a brief overview of the negative and potentially dangerous side of spirituality. To investigate these issues further, we will look in more detail at one particular advocate of organisational spirituality: Smith and Rayment's (2007) Global SMP framework for implementing spirituality in the workplace.

The SMP framework is a response to the lack of models for business in respect to spirituality (Harris, 2005) and is based on Senge's (1998) systemic thinking that all things are interconnected and, therefore, should be considered whole. The paper proposes a *"... a framework that incorporates the spiritual dimension into a holistic approach and guides leaders on all the areas to consider in this*

approach" (Smith and Rayment 2007). The goal of the framework is to aid leaders in becoming "Spiritually Fit" in the way Warren (2005) uses the term, as a manager who has the skills and ability to nurture spirituality successfully in an organisation.

The framework is a 3x3x3 (3D) typology, giving a total of 27 cells the front segment being the "Organic Level" – individual, group or society; an "Holistic Level" - physical, mental and spiritual; and a consideration of the manager or leader's "Fitness Plane" – Strength, Stamina and Suppleness. In this particular paper Smith and Rayment focus on the back segment of the framework, although the interconnectedness between all the cells is still an important consideration. This back slice relates to the spiritual nature of leadership. These spiritual aspects look at implications at the levels of society, group and the individual and how they are dealt with by the leader in terms of strength, stamina and suppleness. Strength, within this particular domain, is specifically related to a particular manager's ability to appreciate and nurture the spiritual dimension of others and their own spirituality. Stamina is an attribute regarding the leader's ability to consistently maintain their own beliefs and to maintain the spiritual dimension within the workplace. Finally, Suppleness is the concern for managers to embrace the many forms of spirituality and to communicate with people who have a variety of spiritual beliefs, including none. The onus is on the leader to maintain sufficient levels of each attribute to implement a spiritual aspect within the workplace. However, "spirituality" is a complex notion, and although Smith and Rayment offer a definition it is sufficiently vague:

> *"Spirituality is a state or experience that can provide individuals with direction or meaning or provide feelings of understanding, support, inner wholeness or connectedness….."* *(Smith and Rayment 2007)*

The definition goes on:

> *"It is about care, compassion and support of others; about integrity and people being true to themselves and others. It means individuals and organisations attempting to live their values more fully in the work they do"* *(Smith and Rayment 2007)*

Here the specific definition of what is termed 'spiritual' is clarified. However, the concept could still be confused with other considerations of humanism, religion or an increased consideration of ethics in the workplace. An interesting section of the paper discusses *'what forms of spirituality are acceptable in organisation?'* Love of a football team or a particular musician, a live singing performance and so on. Many consider these activities provide them with direction, meaning and connectedness with others. We believe this is only a brief overview of the vast range of diverse activities, emotions or beliefs that may be considered "spiritual". However, Smith and Rayment propose that the leader or manager, who is spiritually fit, should be the person to decide what should be part of an organisational spirituality. Moreover, Krishnakumar and Neck (2002) propose the functional benefit of the spiritual ideas of employees, because, once decided by management as appropriate, leaders should help relate these ideas to the company's values and harness them to organisational goals.

It is acknowledged that it is difficult to convey the complete essence of spirituality, and that a definition might be useful to *some* leaders. We would argue that it is nigh on impossible to convey a complete description of something as personal as spirituality. It would be no more likely than proposing a framework for understanding the concept of "love". However, on a critical level, what does this definition enable us to see about the authors' supposed function of the framework? What if we go back to the first definition by Smith and Rayment and replace the word Spirituality in the phrase "Spirituality is a state or experience that…" with *'Culture', 'Community'* or *'An ethically informed mission statement'* or even; *'A prestigious and large monetary bonus system?'* Do we arrive at a similar definition for each term?

At this point it is possible to consider several questions, for example: What are the implications of introducing a framework for implementing spirituality in the workplace? Moreover, with a (rightly) vague definition of spirituality what are the likely outcomes of such an endeavour? Also, is management expecting to align the fanatical supporting of Newcastle United with organisational targets (Alan Shearer for CeO?) Or, is it a genuine attempt to nurture a caring and contemplative individual? This raises the question of whether a caring and contemplative person's beliefs can be aligned with an organisation that does not aspire to these qualities (Steingard and Fitzgibbons (1995).

So far our discussion of spirituality has not been based on one clear concept of spirituality. As Brenda Freshman (1999) says in her conceptual paper, the topic of analysis here is not so much about definitions of "Spirituality in the Workplace" but, "what other people are writing about when they refer to 'spirituality in the workplace'". Moreover, as noted by Brown (2003), the majority of work on spirituality is discursive and not "backed up" by empirical research. This leads us to question how a concept of workplace spirituality might be considered on an ontological level (i.e. naming something we believe in) and then at the epistemological level in the research methodology of a researcher?

We shall begin with a consideration of 'What is Spirituality?' tackling the ontological assumption of its definition as an abstract term. More importantly, for us, is an investigation of the use of the term within the "reality" of an organisation.

6. Methodological problems with the "S" word

6.1 Spirituality as a naming word

As noted above the definitions of spirituality are multiple and although drawing on similar themes there are a variety of different attempts to restrain it into a definition. A more productive endeavour would be to consider each definition as part of the explanans (from the Latin word to *make plain* or *flatten out)* in a way that questions our assumptions about the thing to be studied. The explanandum is the grammatical object that might undergo a 'flattening out' etc (Burrell 1996).

In response to the critique of multiple definitions of leadership (Yukl 1989), Alvesson and Deetz propose that a common definition of leadership is not practically possible, and would not be very helpful if it was, as it may obstruct and obscure new ideas and creative ways of thinking. Rather, they propose a different question which is:

> *"What can we see, think or talk about if we think of leadership as this or that?" (Alvesson and Deetz 2000)*

This premise can be applied to the question 'What is Spirituality?' If we consider an idea of a spirituality as one which may be quantified and implemented within an organisation, then how does this affect the way we view spirituality in the workplace? From a critical research perspective it might inspire a research project aimed at viewing the micro-power issues of adopting an overarching managerialistic concept; for example, see Kunda 1992, Parker 2000 in response to corporate culture. On a more general level, as researchers of 'critical' orientation, we see that at the level of research methodology that the ontological and (latterly) the epistemological role of language (and, thereby, definition) as an action, therefore, can only be understood in a specific context. We believe concepts and words get their meaning through the metaphorical context in which they are employed and are not carriers of abstract truth set to be used against reality. (See again Alvesson and Deetz (2000) for a detailed discussion).

> *"Conceptions are always contest for meaning. Language does not name objects in the world; it is core to the process of constituting objects. The appearance of labelling or categorizing existing objects is derived from this more fundamental act of object constitution through language." (Deetz 1996)*

Therefore, the same definition may then be informed by different uses within a metaphorical context and, thus, have many different meanings. On the other, normative, side of the argument, however, is a claim that a singular definition is needed if cumulative knowledge is to be built up about a particular concept.

Another way to consider the problem of definition is Austin's (1961) 'Representational Problem'. Most of the discursive, non-empirically researched papers appear to address the question *'What is the meaning of the word 'Spirituality'?'* That is, an abstract definition stripped of its specific domain. Metanexus, a research organisation focusing on transdisciplinarity and the religion/science debate have disregarded the term 'spirituality' due to its abstract use by many disciplines (www.metanexus.net). This abstract definition describes a concept apart from the socially constructed context and is of no use to the critical researcher. Instead, the question *'What is Spirituality?'* concerns the application of theory to a given social context. We argue that this is a more useful way of viewing the concept. Traditionally, it is the abstract definition which contextualises the applied use of

the term. However, we consider this tradition to be of little use when researching a sensitive and context dependent issue such as spirituality.

> *"The more universal and totalizing the definition proposed the greater (the) variation in meanings and language use. Further, the more dominant the definition, the more likely that the 'phenomenon' is only understood as it is preferred by some limited and dominant group" (Cited in Alvesson and Deetz 2000, see Calas and Smircich 1991, Martin 1990).*

The political concern of definitions is of crucial importance when considering methodology and method for critical research. A definition relies more on the repression of alternative meanings than a rigorous attempt to provide an all-encompassing description of every possible interpretation, as this could potentially take a lifetime and a lot of paper! Drawing from Alvesson and Deetz (2000) at a practical level, elite/a priori definitions that try to fix research themes (imposing upon an ambiguous social contextual experience) ultimately will lock researchers into closed, conservative and uncreative modes of thinking. It is to the study of this social contextual experience that we now turn as we consider the implications of epistemological assumptions within methodology and method.

6.2 Researching spirituality

> *"Most versions of critical research are oriented towards investigating themes that are more hidden, that do not materialise so easily, or that are not fully registered and experienced by the subjects involved." (Alvesson and Deetz 2000)*

Examples of previous research methods in spirituality have used questionnaires (Ashmos and Duchon, 2000), analysis of mission statements as enunciations of culture (McCormick 1994) and, more usually, interviews (Krishnakumar and Neck 2002, Lips-Wiersma and Mills 2002, and Mitroff 1999). We propose a research method that will allow a deeper understanding of the contextual experience of participants and spirituality: one that runs alongside interviews as a way of better understanding the situation and as a way of gaining greater experience. Unlike typical methods where a researcher enters a situation with a method and methodology and takes away "knowledge" (or not) of the thing they intended to study, we view it as more of a self-exploration, or a self-reflexion of our experiences within situations. Typically research methods with this approach might be called ethnographic or even self-ethnographic. However, we believe that presentation of our work at conferences will provide an excellent opportunity to discuss the problem of method in our study.

This leads on from the problematic nature of ontological assumptions within previous projects and the problems inherent in these assumptions (more specifically definitions). During 'fieldwork' investigating spirituality, therefore, it is important to disregard general categories, frameworks and efforts to standardise meanings and instead focus on:

> *"Local patterns, where the cultural and institutional context and meaning-creation patterns are driven by participants (or jointly by participants and researchers)" (Deetz 1996)*

Participants should provide meaning and behaviours (etc) to study. We are not making the assumption that the researcher is an expert and so should decide what is 'going on'. We propose that the researcher should not go into the field with a pre-supposition of what spirituality is for other people. By all means it may be an opportunity to invite people to discuss issues about spirituality but, it should not turn into a 'spirituality hunt' by a researcher looking for a new research angle. One must be sensitive within the research to the situation in which the organisational members find themselves as they may never before have discussed issues so close to their heart.

This sensitivity extends to the researcher's role within the organisation. As a critical researcher, we propose, it is important to establish an open attitude, and a postponement of closure by constantly reflexing and re-problematising aspects of organisational life, avoiding discursive closure (where potential conflict is suppressed) in the field and when writing up the research.

Drawing on Alvesson and Deetz (2000) the challenge is to concentrate on local actor's meanings, symbols and values whilst continually reflexing as researchers regarding the multiple meanings and vast number of perspectives in relation to the topic. The challenge is, also, to avoid a framework that forces the material into a particular theory and language. A dominant voice might obscure the

ambiguities and varieties of the empirical situation and the multiple ways in which it can be accounted for.

Perhaps ultimately, though, it is important to consider and clarify the researcher's emotional (and spiritual) commitments and research identities within the empirical field. To go out and "experience" and to "do" work with people in organisations and then to reflex (fold the experience back onto ourselves)in order to drive the inquiry forward.

7. Summary

7.1 Reflections/ creed?

In summary, we need to be sensitive both theoretically to the notion of spirituality and, at the same time, sensitive to the way we research the emotional interactions of participants. We also need to attempt to be continually reflexive in our writing up of our research. The latter requirement has led us to reflect upon our own 'spirituality'.

We believe that spirituality at work is implicit in organisation because organisation involves people. Hence, we are claiming that being human involves a spiritual dimension. However, we feel it necessary to be playful with the concept of spirituality and 'kick back' against the majority of definitions and conceptualisations we have encountered in the literature. Some would criticise us, perhaps, for being vague or un-rigorous in our endeavours. We would not accept this. We believe treating spirituality as an ill-defined, undefined and even 'mind-less' (Boyle and Healy, 2003) concept, in itself, provides sufficient purchase for inquiry.

As Boyle and Healy (2003) have suggested, future research in this area needs to be cautious of adopting theoretical approaches that restrict the way in which spirituality is both conceptualised and practiced within organisational contexts. Specifically, we argue that there is a tendency towards dualistic thinking in the literature: the docile body versus the essential self. Whereas the docile body is determined and constructed by the discourses within which they find themselves (be it God, power, politics, or family and so on), the essentially free individual determines their own journey on the basis of choices and beliefs (we see this as the basis of the 'essential self' position). As researchers, we seek to develop an awareness and sensitivity to a variety of positions, even to a melding of ideas, whilst at the same time being alert to our own beliefs and values concerning the spiritual nature of humanity. After all, it would be arrogant to suggest that it is possible or even desirable, to achieve a level of detached observation when researching a topic as acutely personal and subjective as spirituality in the workplace. We recognise that this is an ambitious project. Schervish (1996), for instance, pointed out that social science is limited in its power to explore such issues partly because it does not use ideas that come from spiritual life.

Quite apart from the practicalities of designing our conceptual or methodological frameworks, we might also question the appropriateness of researching into the topic at all. To illustrate this point, we close with an overview of the questions raised by Margaret Benefiel (2003). Benefiel alerts researchers to the potential side-effects of giving a recognised place to spirituality within an organisational context. Side-effects include the possibility of trivialising spirituality by reducing it to practices that impact the 'bottom line', that focus on the material aspects, and that could lead to cynicism if organisational spirituality is deemed to be a 'failure'.

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