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# The study of spirituality and consciousness through Bohm Dialogue

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## ABSTRACT

The International Network for the Study of Spirituality (INSS) has recently established a Spirituality and Consciousness Studies Special Interest Group, using Bohm Dialogue as the method for gaining knowledge and awareness. This article presents an overview of the rationale for the formation of the group. It explores the potential connections between spirituality and consciousness, and what might be gained by enquiring into the nature of a relationship between them. It also provides an explanation of Bohm Dialogue, and how it can be used as a process for enabling group participants to engage in a participative form of research which includes reflection on, and learning from, the sharing of subjective experiences.

**KEYWORDS** spirituality, consciousness, Bohm dialogue, post-materialist worldview, International Network for the Study of Spirituality.

## Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing interest in the phenomenon of consciousness which has been reflected in articles published in the *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* (Zappalà 2021, Walach 2017, Walton 2017). However, as with the term 'spirituality', understanding of what 'consciousness' means varies considerably. For some, spirituality and consciousness are close in meaning; for others, they represent very different aspects of reality and experience.

Following the successful 2021 INSS conference, *Spirituality in Research, Professional Practice and Education*, in which the concept of consciousness was included in several presentations, I was invited to convene a Special Interest Group (SIG) to study both spirituality and consciousness, what differentiates them, and what connects them. I was delighted to do so. The purpose of this article is to provide an account of the thinking and theoretical rationale underpinning the formation of the Spirituality and Consciousness Studies SIG (SaCS SIG). I also introduce the idea of 'Bohm Dialogue', which provides a framework for the conversations that take place within the SIG, and explain why this is seen to be appropriate.

## A growing interest in spirituality and consciousness

The use of spirituality as a concept, and its differentiation from religion, has been growing in recent decades. Forman (2004) offers a range of explanations for this. A major reason is an increasing feeling of disillusionment with science which, despite its many successes, has not been able to resolve many key problems and existential questions. Logical reasoning and empirical investigation are not always able to offer a satisfactory response to questions of value, meaning or purpose.

Additionally, Forman found that, despite the fact that many had become disillusioned by the doctrines and rituals of different institutionalised religions, they still had personal experiences which appeared to indicate a reality that existed beyond the material world,

unexplainable by science. Forman summarised his findings by saying that these new ideas of the spiritual challenged the traditional view of a separate 'God', and replaced it with the perception of a Divine Being directly available to all, and within which we are interconnected (2004, 208).

Ninian Smart(2000, 102) noted that this view of an Ultimate Being existing both beyond the cosmos, and at the same time within our own consciousness, was not new, and could be found within many of the great religious and spiritual traditions. He considered that subjective spiritual experiences should not be dismissed by science due to a lack of 'objective' evidence. Rather, we should critically explore these experiences from a first-person perspective, to generate a different kind of knowledge from that of science, and create an alternative means of enabling us to learn about who we are as human beings experiencing consciousness.

As attention has been paid to spirituality, so a similar interest is being shown about the nature of consciousness. De Quincy (2002, 6) states that it is 'our deepest mystery and our most intimate reality'. Classical Newtonian science assumes that consciousness is a by-product of the brain and hence, when the brain dies, consciousness disappears. We are nothing more than the material substance of which we are constituted. However, findings from quantum physics have shown that the nature of reality is more complex than classical science suggests. There is a proposal that consciousness may in fact be a fundamental property of the universe, and perhaps even primary. Thus, there is a growing challenge to the materialist assumptions of classical science, with many people exploring what the alternatives might be. The Galileo Commission (2019), a project commissioned by the Scientific and Medical Network, brought together more than 90 advisers from over 30 universities worldwide to contribute their views concerning the possibilities for a post-materialist worldview which integrates science, spirituality and consciousness (see also Lorimer 2019).

## **A post-materialist worldview that integrates science, spirituality and consciousness**

The Galileo Commission Report presents an ontological view of the world that challenges the traditional materialist paradigm which has dominated the Western world for many centuries. It supports the possibility that consciousness may be primary, and argues that, at a deep level, we may all be interconnected in an ultimate unity. Such a view is supported by new understandings derived from quantum non-locality and entanglement in physics, symbiosis and synergy in biology, and the collective unconscious in psychology. John Wheeler (1994), an American theoretical physicist (1911–2008), claimed that the evidence from quantum physics demonstrates that we live in a 'participatory universe' in which there is an inseparability of the knower and known.

A new ontology requires a new epistemology and methodologies. To date, much of the research that has assumed the new ontology of a participatory universe, where consciousness is primary, has attempted to provide evidence using a traditional positivist scientific epistemology and methodologies. For example, many studies undertaken into paranormal experiences use the same experimental methods that belong to a positivist research paradigm. There is, of course, an important place for large-scale quantitative studies, the aim of which is to demonstrate that consciousness does not reside totally in the brain. There is a limitation, though, to what can be achieved if the effort to persuade people of a new participatory ontology uses a methodology based on the separability of researcher and researched, and relies on positivist concepts such as replicability, and statistical significance.

There exists an internal contradiction which may adversely affect the willingness of others to accept evidence of something they may not themselves have experienced.

Similarly, the intuitive sense of a spiritual dimension that exists beyond that which is experienced by the five physical senses, cannot be proven using conventional scientific ways of knowing. We need to envision an expanded science, which allows for the investigation of intersubjective knowing that emerges from the shared personal experiences of individuals. If we are to develop an epistemology and methodologies that are congruent with a participatory ontology, and aim to achieve a self-reflective and interdisciplinary science of consciousness and spirituality, there are implications for the researcher (scientist). That is, the researcher (scientist) has to include themselves in the inquiry. As soon as researchers see themselves as standing apart from the theories of spirituality or consciousness that they are advocating, or the research in which they are involved, then there is a lack of congruence.

The fact that we all experience consciousness cannot be denied. Without consciousness, we are not able to use our five senses, nor are we able to communicate with others in the material world. A precondition of a science of consciousness is that the scientist is experiencing consciousness. Experience of consciousness is the grounding on which all other research is built. So, if we are to investigate properly the idea that consciousness is fundamental or primary, and that we can access deeper structures of reality through *gnosis*, then it requires the researcher to be prepared to share with others what is going on within their own consciousness; be prepared to share at least some aspects of their own 'inner world'.

There is not the same level of unanimity about our experience of spirituality. Some will deny the validity of the term, stating that it indicates a reality beyond the material, which is a controversial claim. Nevertheless, as Forman (2004) demonstrates, it is a concept that is experientially meaningful to many people, and consequently merits in-depth consideration.

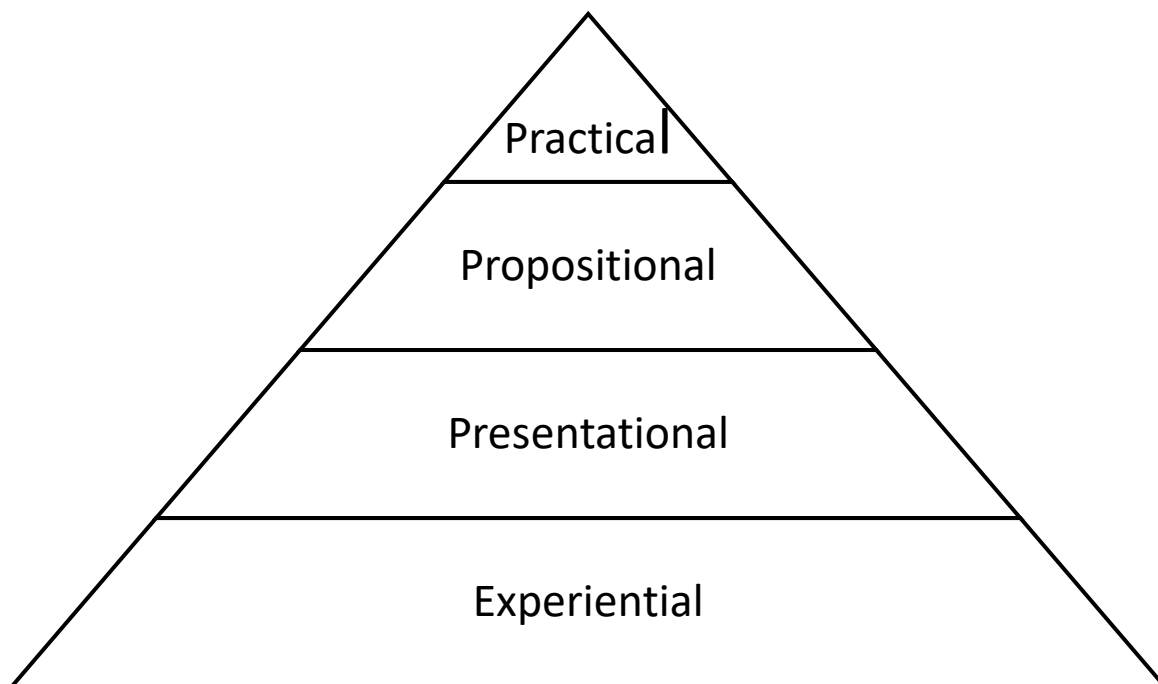
We will not create an expanded science of spirituality or consciousness that moves beyond the materialist worldview if researchers continue to see themselves as existing independently of their research. To do otherwise, though, requires a level of vulnerability, and a willingness to trust, that many find difficult; indeed, the fear generated by thinking about doing this may inhibit involvement.

However, on reflecting on these matters, my own questions were: Is this a good reason for not seeking to create an expanded, intersubjective science of spirituality and consciousness? And: Should we address this issue up front, and see how we might move beyond it?

If we decide the challenge is in fact either too difficult, or not desirable, then let us make that decision clear. Then we can retreat to conventional forms of research. We need to realise, though, that if we stay with apparently 'safe' research methodologies, they will not generate the kind of knowledge we need to move us beyond the materialist mindset that currently dominates. My view is that, when you are at the frontiers of extending knowledge, whether that is an exploration of either the physical or psychological worlds, there are inherent risks that must be accepted if progress is to be made.

## **Epistemology**

Considerable work has been done by John Heron (1996) to develop the idea of an extended epistemology, which reflects a participatory ontology. Heron declares that there are many ways in which individuals come to know, that extend beyond abstract, intellectual thought. His extended epistemology includes four ways of knowing: experiential, propositional, presentational and practical (Heron 1996).



**Figure 1:** Heron's (1996) Extended Epistemology

Experiential knowing is gained directly through daily living, and the experience of living in the world in relationship with others. Presentational knowing is expressed through creative, artistic means, such as drama, dance, storytelling, and music. Propositional knowing is the conceptualisation of ideas, which is the dominant mode of knowing in contemporary Western society. Finally, practical knowing is demonstrated through active engagement in the world,

Heron introduces his extended epistemology in the form of a pyramid (see Figure 1), with 'experiential' providing the foundation. The rationale is that experiential knowing forms the basis for the other three. Presentational knowing is an aesthetic way of responding to experience; whilst propositional knowing consists of concepts and ideas that are grounded in experiences and the aesthetic responses to those experiences. Finally, practical knowing is the outcome of the other three ways of knowing, manifested as a skill or ability to act in the world, thus offering action that is of social value. (For further discussion of Heron's work in the context of spirituality, see Hunt 2021).

## Methodologies

Heron, in collaboration with Peter Reason, has over several decades, developed the idea of co-operative inquiry as:

a way of working with other people who have similar concerns and interests to yourself, in order to understand your world, make sense of your life and develop new and creative ways of looking at things, learn how to act to change things you may want to change, and find out how to do things better'<sup>1</sup>.

Cooperative Inquiry offers a form of expanded science that has been used to explore personal experiences of spiritual and subtle domains (Heron 1998), and has considerable

<sup>1</sup> See: [https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/avina\\_heron\\_reason2.pdf](https://wagner.nyu.edu/files/leadership/avina_heron_reason2.pdf) [Accessed 3 March 2022]

potential for developing the study of consciousness and spirituality. It is probably the most developed methodology, both experientially and intellectually, where there is a congruence between ontology, epistemology and methodology.

Although the Spirituality and Consciousness Studies SIG may wish to draw specifically on this methodology in the future, it was agreed that, initially at least, we would use 'Bohm Dialogue' to encourage a relationship between reflection and action. This method was created by David Bohm, and explained in his book *On Dialogue* (1996). William Isaacs developed it further in *Dialogue and the Art of Thinking Together* (1999). These two books explain clearly and in detail the theory informing Bohm's approach to dialogue, including how it creates a method for evolving knowledge and wisdom, and reveals an effective way for 'humanity to discover meaning and to achieve harmony'<sup>2</sup>

Using the ontological view of the world that he had gained through working in quantum physics, and with an awareness of the Greek origins of the term (*dia* meaning 'through'; *logos* meaning 'word'), Bohm devised dialogue as a means of 'collective participation' which allows for the 'harmony of the individual and the collective, in which the whole constantly moves toward coherence' (Bohm 1996, 32).

Dialogue as a method supports a more open culture, in which thoughts and experiences can be shared with mutual respect. Groups of people learn to think together; the outcome is that ideas and ways of perceiving reality are generated that no one person would have had on their own.

Isaacs (1999) identifies four key dialogical skills:

#### *Listening*

The effectiveness of dialogue depends on the quality of the listening that takes place. There needs to be a commitment to subdue one's own thoughts, theories and feelings, and listen at a deep level to what others are saying. There is also the aim of listening to the whole – the practice of collective listening to that which lies beyond individual contribution makes it possible to access new levels of insight.

#### *Respecting*

The need to value the right of another person to have their point of view, and to take it into consideration, even if it does not relate to one's own way of seeing things. Differences in views will be inevitable, but the process of challenging a point of view, and giving an alternative, should be done without diminishing or critiquing the other person for holding that view.

#### *Suspending*

A critical aspect of dialogue is about being prepared to become aware of, and suspend, deeply held assumptions, theories and certainties, in order to be able to go deeper into any area being spoken about. This is essential if the 'wisdom in – and beyond – the room' is to be accessed. If we can suspend our views, and truly listen to, and reflect on, what others are saying, then a deeper order can become visible that allows us to think in new and different ways. It creates space for the previously unseen.

#### *Voicing*

Voicing is the ability to speak in response to what is engaging you in the present moment; involving you as a whole person, and not feeling that you have to censor your own truth. Rather than repeat well versed arguments and theories, there is a need to 'tune it' to what is going on in the groups, through the silences as well as the contributions, and to be able to express what is going on deeply within you, whatever

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<sup>2</sup> David Bohm (1996) *On Dialogue*, back cover.

that may be. We learn to improvise, and by this means, create something new in the group, thus experiencing the freedom of open communication in creative dialogue.

## **Groundrules**

Participants, often very used to discussions or lively debates, where people can be so enthusiastic to contribute that they interrupt each other, can be challenged by the reflective nature of Bohm Dialogue. They are used to contributing views, but perhaps not so much to listening to what other people have to say at a deep level. It can sometimes be difficult to get into a very different mode of conversing, so it is useful to agree a set of Groundrules at the outset, in order for the ethos of dialogue to become embedded in the process. Everyone takes responsibility for maintaining the Groundrules, and suggestions for amendment can happen at any time. The following Groundrules were proposed as a base-line and agreed during the establishing of the SaCS SIG, but can be added to or changed at any time. The main aim, though, is to establish a way of communicating that enables the essential principles of Dialogue to be integrated and enhanced throughout the conversational process. This allows for the full benefit of the 'synergy', learning and wisdom, which comes from accessing deeper aspects of ourselves in the company of others, to be realised to its fullest extent.

1. Demonstrate respect and non-judgementality at all times.
2. One person speak at a time; avoid side conversations.
3. No one person should speak for very long at any one time (a 'normal' limit of 2 minutes is assumed). Avoid 'soap box' presentations.
4. What takes place in the silence is as important as the content of the speaking. Aim for a silence between each contribution (perhaps a minimum of 20 seconds), to allow for true listening and reflection to take place.

## **Concluding comments**

The SaCS SIG has met on four occasions. We are finding enormous benefit in meeting together using the principles of Bohm Dialogue. In the next issue of this journal, I will aim to present an overview of what has emerged from the process during the first eight months, and consider its potential for wider expansion within INSS.

## **Notes on contributor**

Dr Joan Walton is Senior Lecturer in the School of Education, Language and Psychology at York St John University, UK. She has a specific interest in participatory forms of research, including action research and co-operative inquiry. She is a member of the Scientific and Medical Network Board of Directors, and of the Galileo Commission Steering Group, and is a Director and Trustee of the International Network for the Study of Spirituality.

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