As the first invitee to this Portrait section trained as a scholar of religion and situated in a department of religious studies, I was interested to see how previous scholars trained in anthropology and sociology positioned themselves in relation to “religion” as an object of study. It seems we all do so gingerly. Although I was trained as a historian of Christianity with a specialization in American religious history, I have self-consciously positioned my historical research in an interdisciplinary space between psychiatry, anthropology, and religious studies since the early nineties in order to study the contestations surrounding unusual experiences. During the last decade, I have been identifying myself less as a historian and more as an interdisciplinary scholar attempting to bring both humanistic and cognitive social scientific methods to the study of historical experiences and events. From this vantage point, I would argue—like Bloch (Volume 1, 2010)—that “religion” is not a natural kind, but a complex cultural concept; that a theory of “religion” per se is impossible; and, in keeping with the way Bloch positions himself as studying ritual as a form of communication, I would position myself as studying how people appraise experiences and, more recently, events. Like Kapferer (Volume 4, 2013, I am interested in the light that religion can shed on more general processes, specifically the appraisal of events at various levels of analysis and the role of unusual experiences in the emergence of new social formations.

Background

I came to these views and questions over time from a non-religious upbringing in a culturally Protestant American family, which left me alternately fascinated and puzzled by intense forms of
religiosity. In college, a course on theories of religion impressed me with the seriousness of both religious thought and thought about religion and led me—in typical baby-boomer fashion—to try out any number of religious options during the next several decades. Had I thought of myself as an ethnographer, I could have construed this process as fieldwork, though anthropologists would rightly have accused me of “going native” way too many times. But through these explorations, my indigenous secularism never entirely left me and that, coupled with a year in medical school before I decided to focus on religion, most likely laid the groundwork for entering empathetically into diverse religious and spiritual perspectives and—at the same time—attempting to explain them from a naturalistic point of view.

As a graduate student in the history of Christianity and American religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School I took the sorts of theory courses that had drawn me to the study of religion in the first place, while at the same time focusing my research on practices, such as Catholic devotion to consecrated wafers and Jesus’s bodily wounds, that were foreign to me. The theory courses repeatedly returned to Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, but also to Anthony Giddens in social theory and Turner, Spiro, Geertz, and Ricoeur on symbols. My dissertation on changes in nineteenth century Catholic devotional practices integrated a bit of anthropological theory (Turner and Spiro on the bi-valence of symbols), but mindful of the advice of my dissertation committee – Jerald Brauer and Martin Marty – and the general ethos of religious studies in those days, I shied away from trying to explain experience in naturalistic terms. When I was hired to teach American religious history—not theory—at a Methodist theological school, I delved into Methodist history and discovered that its rapid expansion was fueled by unusual experiences. In class I skimmed over that material quickly, not knowing how to make sense of it.
Having no explanation for such experiences and having been encouraged in any event to avoid “reductionism,” I set aside issues of experience and explanation, focusing instead on the role of piety and practice in the lives of ordinary people: first immigrant Catholics, then Protestant women. Then in the late eighties, when a friend shared her experiences of lost time and alternate selves at the height of the multiple personality (MPD) “epidemic,” her sincerity opened a new world of interpretive possibilities. Comparisons soon came to mind between the phenomena associated with MPD in psychiatry, spirit possession and shamanism in anthropology, and the experiences of early Methodists and others in the history of Christianity. This insight galvanized my career, reshaped my research agenda, and provided me with a cross-disciplinary framework within which I could combine my love of theory and my fascination with unusual experiences. In retrospect, the idea of “multiple personality” also offered a guiding metaphor for thinking about selves in more fluid terms, for bringing multiple points of view into a common conversation and, most recently, for offering naturalistic explanations of experiences in my own voice without obscuring the perspectives of those I am studying.

Experience

*Experience, Trances, and Visions* (Princeton, 1999) was the first major fruit of this shift in focus. It traced the historical interplay between experiential forms of religion (mostly Protestant and post-Protestant in the Anglo-American context) and scientific theories (medical, physiological, mesmeric, psychological) generated by insiders and outsiders in order to explain (and for the most part discredit) such experiences over the course of two centuries. It began with eighteenth-century debates over the unusual experiences of Methodists and ended with early twentieth-century debates over and comparisons between hypnotically induced dissociation in women (often very devout) diagnosed with hysteria and the unusual experiences of spiritualist mediums,
mystics, and Pentecostals. The historical work led to three key insights: (1) Experiences of this sort are unstable and can morph experientially and hermeneutically through suggestion and encounters with others who variously explain, condemn, or encourage them. (2) The categories used to characterize these experiences, e.g., hysteria, mysticism, spiritual, religious, occult, are ideologically laden, theoretically unstable, and difficult to study apart from a history of discourse. (3) It is important to figure out how to constitute historical or ethnographic objects of study in such a way that our academic categories do not interfere with tracing this morphing of experience at the level of discourse (categories and theories) and practice.

In recognizing that there were similarities between experiences that scholars variously characterized as dissociative, shamanistic, and religious, I became aware of the problems created by assuming that “religious experience” referred to something clearly defined and stable, rather than something that emerged as the result of a complex interpretive process. That insight shifted my focus from the historical study of “religious experience” to the study of experiences that people or groups explained in very different ways, e.g., an experience that Methodists might explain as “falling under the power of the Holy Spirit,” mesmerists might explain as the effect of a “mesmeric trance” induced by a powerful preacher, and a physician might explain as “catalepsy,” a bodily disorder. This shift in my object of study allowed me to analyze not only how individuals’ interpretations of their own experiences changed over time, but also how their contemporaries both inside and outside their own immediate social group interpreted their experiences.

While working on Fits, Trances, and Visions, I struggled to constitute my object of study and had difficulty explaining to others what the book was about in any positive sense. Having already rejected terms such as religious, mystical, visionary, or ecstatic, as modifiers of the
experiences in question, I considered alternatives such as trance and dissociation. However, because those I was studying also used these terms, adopting any of them aligned me either with the explanatory commitments of a present-day discipline or with my historical subjects. To avoid such alignments, I constituted my object of study with a more generic description of the sort of experiences that interested me. By focusing on “subjects whose usual sense of themselves as embodied agents is altered or discontinuous” (Taves 1999: 9), I could then consider how and why people characterize, respond to, and in some cases seek to induce these alterations in their sense of self.

As a result of the book, I was invited to write the entry on religious experience for the second edition of the Encyclopedia of Religion (Taves 2005). The essay traced the various roles that the concept of religious experience has played in modern discourses on religion and the controversies that emerged around it beginning in the 1970s. These controversies led scholars of religion influenced by the linguistic turn within the humanities to critique “sui generis” notions of religious experience, which—they claimed—set religious experience apart from other sorts of experiences studied by scholars in the humanities. These critiques, which led scholars of religion to reject the study of experience as passé or to study it only as a discursive construct, placed me in an odd position. While, on the one hand, I shared their critique of sui generis claims, their attempt to explain experience simply in terms of discourse struck me as inherently implausible. While my own work so far had focused on the history of discourse about experience, I sympathized with past attempts to explain experiences of otherworldly presences in naturalistic terms. Moreover, in contrast to most of the critiques of “religious experience,” my work focused on explanations of particular kinds of experiences, not experience (religious or otherwise) in general. Many of the features of these experiences (e.g., a loss of a sense of self or a sense of
another displacing one’s self) recurred in different periods and cultural contexts, where they were sometimes considered religious and sometimes not. In my own mind, it seemed clear that such experiences could not be explained simply in terms of one factor, whether biological, personal, or cultural, but rather provided intriguing contexts for investigating the interplay between them.

In 2004, prompted by a colleague interested in the newly emerging cognitive approaches to the study of religion, I plunged into the scientific literature on dissociation and hypnosis in order to reinterpret a turn-of-the-century medium in light of more current scientific research. The paper (later published as Taves 2006) sparked lively discussion at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion, as well as teasing comments about going over to the scientific “dark side.” Owing to my focus on experience, the paper led to invitations to give lectures at conferences on cognitive science and religion and eventually the decision to tackle the touchy issues surrounding the study of religious experience directly in Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things (Princeton 2009). There I argued that we should disaggregate the concept of “religious experience” and study the wide range of experiences to which people have attached religious significance. Focusing on the underlying form of particular experiences would allow us to compare experiences that shared that feature under different conditions and analyze the processes through which particular experiences are perceived, assessed, and valued at various levels from the intrapersonal to the intergroup.

The Ordinary and the Non-Ordinary

Of the book’s four chapters on religion, experience, explanation, and comparison, the first proved to be the most controversial. The controversy arose not in response to the chapter’s central claim—that we should recast “religious experience” as “experiences deemed religious”—
but in response to my attempt to get out of the definitional problems surrounding religion-related terms. While I was clear from the outset that attempts to theorize “religion” as an abstract concept were problematic, I initially planned to stipulate a second-order definition of the adjective “religious” in the usual religious studies fashion. As I drafted the manuscript, however, I could find no way to avoid the confusion engendered by the use of diverse and often overlapping second-order definitions of (e.g.) “religious,” “magical,” and “sacred” (Taves 2009: 148-149, 161-162). Not only do stipulative definitions make it hard to distinguish between first and second-order use of terms, they make it appear that we are studying the same thing when we often are not and obscure common objects of study that we label differently.

Rather than endlessly working to sort out our different technical uses of these complex cultural concepts, I concluded—much as I did in FTV—that my interdisciplinary aims were better served by specifying the experiences of interest in broader, more generic terms that would allow me to analyze how people characterize and work with the experiences in practice. In light of recurrent scholarly references to “special” objects, actions, and beliefs in their attempts to define religion, magic, and the sacred, I suggested that studying experiences people mark as “special” or “non-ordinary” provided a broader, more generic way to capture experiences of interest without presupposing how people interpreted them.

When I made this suggestion, I had not yet read the work of Ellen Dissanayake (1990: 92-101), who made much the same suggestion from the vantage point of art history, nor was I aware of Bloch’s (2008) article proclaiming “Religion is Nothing Special,” which came out about the time RER went to press. As I later clarified (Taves 2010: 176-177), I agree with Bloch that “religion is nothing special because, viewed from an evolutionary perspective, it is ‘an indissoluble … aspect of human social organization.’” My claim, however, was that “while
religion may be nothing special in relation to other cultural activities from which it has belatedly been distinguished, *specialness* is special in so far as making things special [in Dissanayake’s sense] is at the heart of cultural activity” (Taves 2010: 177). It is important, however, to distinguish between *making things special* and *perceiving things as special or non-ordinary*. The former is a more distinctly—although undoubtedly not exclusively—human activity and the latter a more general biological capacity possessed by many if not most organisms, upon which *making special* is premised, although as I concluded based on two subsequent articles the relationship between consciously making and perceiving things as non-ordinary is complex.

In these two articles (Taves 2013a, 2015), I demonstrated how we could tease apart classical definitions of religion to break down “the sacred” and “religion” into more basic processes that are involved in making and/or perceiving things as non-ordinary by distinguishing between the generic schema that structure a definition and the specific features that mark it as “religious.” Taking cues from Durkheim’s definition of sacred things as “things set apart and forbidden” and Tillich’s definition of religion as ultimate concern, I recast setting apart as a means of making things *salient* and taboos and claims of ultimacy as means of signaling *significance*. From the early twentieth-century debates between animists, pre-animists, and their heirs, I contrasted theorists, such as van der Leeuw and Weber, who explored the range of ways that people attach non-ordinary powers (e.g., mana and charisma) to all kinds of things including deities, with the Durkheimian tradition, which explored the way that people generate and enter into non-ordinary worlds. I recast the non-ordinary powers of the “mana” tradition and non-ordinary worlds of the Durkheimians in relation to two different aspects of imagination: inventiveness, the capacity to generate novelty in response to different environmental circumstances, and pretense, the ability to enter mentally in a “pretend” world.
These definitional traditions, when teased apart, thus pointed to three core processes that link cognition and culture and that, taken together, may be sufficient to account for the extra-ordinary attributes that classical theorists associated with religion: processes of imagination, which allow us to generate both novelties and alternate realities; process of setting apart, which single out some things as more salient than others; and processes of valuation, which assess their significance and oftentimes rank and order them. I stressed, however, that the three processes do not uniquely specify anything as religious or sacred or occult or magical, but rather are core processes that people draw upon when they perceive things as non-or-extra-ordinary.

In a recent exchange, Barrett (2014) critiqued my use of “specialness,” arguing that “meaning seems to drop out of her analysis of specialness at the most basic level, leaving behind a highly abstract quality whose unconscious ascription is allegedly responsible for the ‘singularization’ of something as a bearer of special value (Taves, 2009, pp. 481-49).” In my response to his target article (Taves 2014), I conceded that I had been using the term less frequently, because—like his preferred term “meaning”—it allows us to gloss over important distinctions. Just as we can distinguish between semantic meaning, which is descriptive, and foundational meaning, which involves value, so too we can use “special” to signify both something that is set apart from other things in its class (and, thus, salient) and something that has particular value (and, thus, significance). Both “meaning” and “special” are useful terms to watch for “on the ground,” so to speak, where they highlight features of interest; but both can obscure the distinction between salience and significance if we do not carefully analyze the manner in which they (“meaning” and “special”) are used.

In light of this distinction, I would say that things that are salient stand out from things in their class and are therefore perceived as special (insofar as we want to use that term), in the
sense of being non-ordinary. Stimuli may be salient, that is, grab our attention, for many different reasons, all of which involve potential value, including potential survival value (evolved salience), potential cultural value (learned salience), or simply because they are unfamiliar (novel salience) and their potential value is unknown. But salient stimuli have to be appraised in relation to the environment (context), past experience, and the goals of the organism in order for the organism to determine their significance.

Broken down in this way, I was able to relate the distinction between ordinary and non-ordinary to the distinction between intuitive and minimally counterintuitive widely employed in the cognitive science of religion (Taves 2015), which to date has been primarily interested in identifying and explaining pan-cultural cognitive constraints on religious thought and action. Thus, in conceptualizing deities and other culturally postulated superhuman agents as minimally counterintuitive (MCI), CSR researchers situated them within a larger class of representations that involve violations of pan-cultural ontological categories. In CSR terms, we could say that MCI concepts stand out as non-ordinary because they add something unexpected to the way we have evolved to predict how things will behave. This makes the concepts more salient than things we would expect. If they are rich with possible inferences, we would assess them as potentially significant and, most likely, explore and develop the inferences using our imagination. Such concepts would, thus, be perceived as non-ordinary across cultures.

In focusing on universals, however, CSR researchers do not always explicitly stress that they are setting aside research on concepts—sometimes referred to as counterschematic—that violate cultural or idiosyncratic expectations and, thus, are crucial in accounting for cultural and individual differences. Within cultures or between individuals, violations of counterschematic concepts would also stand out as non-ordinary. Analysis of the interplay between concepts at
these levels promises to provide us with a better understanding of how cultural and individual differences emerge.

When I initially proposed that we think about “specialness” on a continuum from the ordinary to the singular, some scholars of religion assumed that I was simply substituting “special” for sacred or religious and objected that there are many things people consider special, such as their children, that they do not consider sacred. My goal, as I reiterated in subsequent publications (Taves 2010a,b), was to cast a wide net that would capture the range of things people consider non-ordinary in order to focus on (a) how and why people perceive some experiences as non-ordinary and (b) how and why they understand and respond to such experiences (Taves 2013b,c). In doing so, I was continuing my efforts to position the study of experience within an interdisciplinary space and, at the same, time elaborating and extending the building block approach I advocated in RER.

A Building Block Approach to Complex Cultural Concepts

In sketching what I mean by a building block approach and how I gradually extended it to include “complex cultural concepts” (CCCs) more generally, I am using “we language” to acknowledge my collaboration with Egil Asprem, a scholar of Western Esotericism who came to UCSB as a post-doc in order to extend this method to the concept of “esotericism” and work with me to further develop it. As we are conceiving them, CCCs are abstract nouns with unstable, overlapping, culturally determined meanings that vary within and across cultures and adjectival forms, such as religious, spiritual, sacred, magical, superstitious, esoteric, occult, and paranormal, that can be used to characterize experiences, practices, objects, etc. We are using formations to refer to any social entity, e.g., schools of thought, traditions of practice, social movements, social networks, and academic disciplines. CCCs are often built into formations, in
which case they take on specialized meanings within and for those formations. The key terms of our various disciplines, traditions, and schools of thought all have specialized meanings inside these formations. A building block approach (BBA) to CCCs is a method for learning more about how formations—and the CCCs that constitute them—emerge and function. It works by (1) taking apart the CCCs, that is by disassembling, fractionating, or reverse engineering them into more basic components, and then (2) tracing how people individually or in groups have assembled them into various formations. We can break this down into four phases: CCC identification and disassembly followed by BB identification and reassembly (for the most recent iteration, see Asprem, under review).

In taking things apart, we distinguish between building blocks, which simply refer to components of something more complex and, thus, are always relative to some level of analysis, and basic concepts (Sperber 1996, 67-70, 89), which, unlike the CCCs they enable, are translatable across cultures because they are grounded in evolved mental architecture and embodied interactions with the environment. These concepts tend to fly under our radar because we take them for granted, do them automatically, and rely on them continuously.

**Interdisciplinary Study of Anomalous or Unusual Experiences**

We can recast the study of anomalous, unusual, or nonordinary experiences in terms of the BBA. Thus, there is a range of disciplinary contexts (formations) in which scholars study unusual or anomalous experiences under various headings (CCCs), including shamanism, spirit possession, and altered state of consciousness in anthropology; paranormal experiences in parapsychology; anomalous experiences within psychology; mystical and religious experience in religious studies; and dissociative disorders and psychosis in psychiatry. These disciplinary formations, each with their own key terms (CCCs), have frustrated the interdisciplinary study of anomalous or unusual
experiences. Although anthropologists have been attempting to overcome this balkanization of research for some time, many within psychiatry and religious studies have resisted interdisciplinary comparisons on the grounds that some experiences are inherently pathological or religious.

Some psychiatric syndromes, as groups of signs and symptoms, can also be construed as CCCs that present difficulties parallel to that of “religious experience” in so far as both tend to conflate cultural categories, which carry an assessment or point of view, with the phenomenological analysis of form and, thus, stabilize clusters of types of experiences or symptoms by definitions rather than common underlying mechanisms. The National Institute of Mental Health has recently critiqued the categories in the APA’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on these grounds and launched a Research Domain Criteria Project to “transform diagnosis by incorporating genetics, imaging, cognitive science and other levels of information in order to lay the foundation for a new classification system” (Insel 2013).

Labeling “symptom clusters” by definition rather than by underlying mechanisms has resulted in the over-association of a wide range of seemingly involuntary experiences that are common in the general population with psychopathology. Thus, phenomenologically similar types of experiences that people do not feel that they willed, intended, or caused, appear in lists of anomalous, parapsychological, and religious experiences, as well as psychotic and dissociative disorders. The many scales devoted to experiences of various sorts suffer from the same difficulty. Thus, there are scales devoted to mystical, spiritual, transliminal, kundalini, near death, and paranormal experiences, as well as scales that focus on anomalous experiences, creative experiences, dissociative experiences, and schizotypy (or unusual experiences). Even
though each scale seems to assume that it is measuring something different, the scales share many questions in common.

The Appraisal of Anomalous Experiences Interview (AANEX; Brett et al. 2007), developed by Emmanuelle Peters and her team of psychosis researchers at King’s College, London, is markedly different. Since they are very aware that there are people in the general population who have unusual experiences who do not experience distress, never seek clinical help, and may indeed value and cultivate unusual experiences, they developed an interview protocol that allowed them to compare those who do seek help with those who do not. Studies using the AANEX interview are finding significant differences in the way that clinical and non-clinical populations appraise their unusual experiences (Brett et al. 2009). This suggests that appraisal processes interact with other variables, e.g., schizotypal tendencies, and play a crucial role not only in determining how unusual experiences are categorized but also how people respond to them and, thus, whether they disturb, enhance, or have no particular effect on people’s lives.

A building block approach to unusual experiences therefore allows us to distinguish between sensations and perceptions and the way they are appraised and, thus, to set up comparisons based on these components rather than on the experience as a whole. The chief difficulty with categorical views of psychotic experiences and sui generis views of religious experience(s) is that they insist on treating experiences as wholes and rule out—a priori—the comparisons that would allow us to (a) identify component processes and underlying mechanisms and (b) investigate how the interactions between them effect outcomes clinically, ethnographically, and historically.
Events

The chapter in RER on experience, which situated experiences people consider religious in the context of experience more generally, was a significant step forward, but left me unsure how to characterize the relationship between “experience” and “experiences” in cognitive terms. The chapter on explanation, which relied heavily on recent developments in attributional theory (Malle 2004), argued for the importance of integrating unconscious appraisal processes into a multi-level explanation of how people attribute meaning to their experiences, but left much underdeveloped, both theoretically and practically.

In more recent work (Taves and Asprem, under review), we argue that situating experience and experiences in relation to research on event cognition allows us to conceptualize the relationship between “experience” and “experiences” in more precise cognitive, information-processing terms. Event cognition is premised on the observation that we continually segment the flow of information into chunks, creating “event boundaries” and, within those boundaries, “events” (Radvansky and Zacks 2011; 2014: 29-31). Thus, in cognitive, information-processing terms, “experience” (in the abstract) refers to the flow of information in so far as we are aware of it, whereas “experiences” (in the plural) refers to events that are segmented out of the flow of experience such that each experience is perceived to have a beginning and an end. What we refer to colloquially as “experiences” are simply personally experienced events that are particularly salient.

If, as the research on event cognition suggests, humans rely on what cognitive psychologists refer to as “event models” when verbalizing event narratives, events offer a platform for integrating theoretical work on framing processes (Goffman 1974), which sociologists have elaborated in relation to social movements (Johnson and Noakes 2005), as well
as attributional processes (Spilka et al. 1985), which social psychologists have elaborated in
totality to dyadic interactions (Malle 2004) with the unconscious appraisal processes that
cognitive psychologists elaborate within a predictive coding framework.

This more integrated approach has significant implications for historians and
ethnographers. First, it allows us to better understand the relationship between “original”
experiences and later narratives by recognizing that post-hoc narratives rely not on the original
event model (also known as the “working model”) but on an event model (the remembered
event) generated at the time of narration. This means that historical or ethnographic
reconstructions of experience events must proceed in two steps, moving first from a public event
narrative to the hypothetical mental representation of the event at the time of narration, and
second from this mental event to a hypothetical earlier working model of the initial event,
whether internally or externally generated. The insertion of a hypothetical mental model at both
points in the process does not make the historian or ethnographer’s reconstructive task easier or
more certain, but reminds us that the narration of experiences, however immediate, is always
post-hoc and, thus, always constitutes a new event in which memory and context interact anew
and, thus, a new data point in the reconstruction of historical processes.

Second, it allows us to understand how various features including background knowledge
(i.e., memory and “culture”) and appraisals (i.e., intentions and causes) can be incorporated into
experiences unconsciously and unreflectively (i.e., in the context of the experience event itself)
rather than simply attributed post hoc, and, once they are perceived, determine what else we
perceive as relevant in an event. This means that even at the level of the event model, events are
represented partially and from the subject’s point of view and, thus, do not provide an objective
view from nowhere.
Third, because the causal frameworks embedded in event models are generated through the appraisals of cues that the subject senses and perceives in their environment and within themselves, the cues themselves are often represented in event narratives along with tacit and explicit appraisals. Drawing inspiration from Malle’s (2004) analyses of how people explain events (Taves 2009: 100-111), we can use this distinction between cues and appraisals to divide a detailed narrative event into sub-events by asking “what happened” and “why it happened” from the point of view of the narrator as the event narrative unfolds. In many cases, this allows us to tease apart the cues that the subject senses or perceives (“what happened”) from the causes or reasons they implicitly or explicitly give for them (“why it happened”).

Although teasing these processes apart in historical and ethnographic narratives is conjectural and highly dependent on the nature of our sources, these distinctions allow us to take a more rigorous approach. If we only have one account and it is narrated long after the event, it may be impossible to distinguish appraisals that were built into the initial event from later reflections on the event. If we have multiple accounts of the same event recounted at different points in time, we can compare the versions by dividing the event into sub-events and interweaving the accounts so that we can compare the sub-events. Depicting the analysis in charts allows us to see what sub-events were added or deleted as the narrative was retold and analyze to what extent the narrator altered the way they described the sub-events over time. When the description of “what happened” remains stable across accounts, this allows us to identify a plausible early representation of the sensory cues that comprised the original event model. If some portions of the reasons they offer to explain the cues remain stable over time, this suggests that those reasons may have been closely connected to the initial unconscious appraisal of the event. Reasons that change over time likely represent the subject’s more conscious
reflections on the experience and, thus, can be analyzed in relation to the context in which the narrative was retold (for an elaboration on this method in relation to case studies, see Taves, forthcoming; Taves and Harper, forthcoming).

**Revelatory Events**

These lines of research come together in my most recent work *Revelatory Events: Experiences and Appraisals in the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (Taves, forthcoming), in which I analyze the role that unusual experiences played in the emergence of three spiritual paths (Mormonism, Alcoholics Anonymous, and A Course in Miracles) that generated very different social forms (a church, a self-help movement, and a network of students). Part I devotes three chapters each to the descriptive analysis of the role of experience in the process of emergence reconstructed from the point of view of participants (whether as followers or critics) as events unfolded based on the best real-time historical sources. Part II compares the three movements in order to explain their emergence as a creative process involving unusual abilities, small group interactions, and underlying motivations. In separating the descriptive reconstructions in Part I from the naturalistic explanations in Part II, I am differentiating between the reconstructive task of the historian who seeks to portray events from the point of view of historical actors and the social scientist who seeks to explain events from a naturalistic point of view. Taken together, the two parts offer a historically grounded study of the way people cultivate experiences and adjudicate their meanings over time and a comparative study that juxtaposes multiple explanatory points of view, including my own. At a personal level, it returns to the issues that drew me into the study of religion in the first place and to issues of voice and the interplay of voices that have preoccupied me since the eighties.
Theoretically, this project builds on my previous research, placing the process whereby people determine how experiences should be interpreted or categorized at the center and, thus, is situated in an interdisciplinary space that does not presuppose how the experiences or the formations that result from them will be categorized. In keeping with the theoretical work just discussed, it takes experience-related events in which it seemed to people as if an “other” were present as its stipulated point of analogy. Thus, while Lewis (2003) made a forceful case for studying the role of religious experience in the context of new religious movements, this study offers a broad theoretical framework for analyzing the role of “presence” experiences in the emergence of new social formations. This broader, more generic terminology allows us to apply the methods used here to new social formations regardless of how they characterize themselves.

In keeping with this open-ended framework, I do not assume that the key subjects—Joseph Smith, Bill Wilson, or Helen Schucman—were psychotic, delusional, or consciously deceptive, although critics have often characterized Joseph Smith in particular in that way. Instead, recognizing that we cannot rule out these possibilities entirely, I take up the more interesting challenge of explaining how they and their immediate followers might have sincerely believed (e.g.) in the existence of ancient golden plates, in the curative effects of a Higher Power, or that an internal voice was that of Jesus. Thus, in Part II, the chapter on “abilities” seeks to explain how Joseph Smith and Helen Schucman were able to dictate complex texts in a manner that convinced their followers that they were not the authors. The chapter first compares what it was like for Smith to “translate” the golden plates, while looking not at the plates but at a seer stone placed in a hat to block out the light, and Schucman to “hear” the words of the internal voice, which she “scribed” in shorthand and then dictated to a colleague. It then compares their abilities with those of highly hypnotizable subjects and novelists to ask how we generate
alternative first person selves that we sometimes view as real. The chapter on “interactions” focuses on the way in which the key subjects and their close collaborators frame their experiences in terms of otherworldly entities and powers, finding that in each case the groups developed agreed upon procedures that allowed them to be guided by the otherworldly entities along a path that the individuals within the group did not consciously envision. The final chapter on motivations takes a cognitive approach to goal-directed action that allows us to conceive of these otherworldly entities as split-off (non-conscious) aspects of individuals that were not only recognized by but motivated to think for the emergent small group as a whole.

The book can be read in several different ways: as an account of the role that “presence” experiences played in the emergence of the three social formations; as an illustration of methods that can be used to reconstruct the role of experiences in the emergence of new social formations; and as an explanation of the emergence of spiritual paths whose origins were attributed to guidance by otherworldly sources. Read in the first way, it is intended as a contribution to the study of emergent social formations that does not presuppose the final form that they took, but focuses instead on how key participants perceived the process as it unfolded. Read in the second way, it is intended to demonstrate how comparisons grounded in basic concepts—in this case “events” and “paths”—can revitalize comparative work and generate a more nuanced basis for explaining the processes involved. Read in the third way, it is intended as a contribution to creativity studies that draws from evolutionary psychology and the cognitive social sciences to better understand instances in which creative authority is attributed to otherworldly sources.

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Some anthropologists have used the term “fractionating” to identify “cognitively and behaviorally universal patterns” that are associated with a “folk category” such as “ritual” or “religion” or what we prefer to call CCCs (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014: 675; Boyer and

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Bergstrom 2008: 119). Although we have no objection to the term “fractionating,” we are not just searching for universals. We prefer reverse engineering because it is a term that is widely used for the process of taking apart something complicated in order to see how it was put together and, thus, envisions the reassembly side of the BBA.