Potent connections, mystery-work and the relational nature of retreat-going

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Abstract
Retreat-going has mostly been understood through the lens of the self. Retreat-goers abscond from their obligations and relationships, their jobs and family duties, in order to spend time working on themselves, steeped in discourses and practices which prioritize self-discovery and self-mastery. But accounts given by retreat-goers often also emphasize the relationships and connections with others. Recent theoretical developments in the sociology of personal life provide useful tools to describe these relationships. Drawing data from interviews (N = 27) with people who went on retreat, in this article I explore retreat-goers’ relationships via Jennifer Mason’s concept of ‘potent connection’. Specifically, I outline the ways in which uncertainty, surprise and mysteriousness characterize the relationships people made on retreat. Then, noting the importance of coordinated action in retreat-goers’ accounts, I describe how potent connections appear to be collectively produced, rather than just encountered – what I call ‘mystery-work’. This article extends the existing literature on retreats by adding further detail to the relational picture. Additionally, it suggests the generation of intense or ineffable relationships via mystery-work is a dimension of personal life that may be encountered in other contexts and that this is worth further study.

Keywords
personal life, potent connections, relationality, relationships, retreat-going, the self

Introduction
In much literature on the subject, retreat-going is seen as an acme practice of the self. Retreat-goers abscond from their obligations and relationships, their jobs, studies and family duties, usually to spend time working on themselves. However, after listening to people talk about retreat-going, as I did for this project, it is clear that relationships with
others play an important part in people’s experiences. These relationships are of interest for sociologists of personal life insofar as they develop outside of traditional sites for making and sustaining connections, like the family or the workplace, but are highly significant to those involved, sometimes even described to me as a sort of kinship, while also being understood as temporary bonds, where what obligations there might be end on the return trip home.

In this article, I draw on a novel dataset of interviews with people who go on retreat and explore retreat-going in two related ways. First, I view retreats as sites of connection, not just of self, and trace how ‘inner’ work gets tangled up with relational practices. Seeking to understand the sorts of relationships people make on retreat, I concentrate on a specific form of connection. It wasn’t simply that my participants talked about community or belonging in a general sense. They often described relationships they felt deeply but did not understand, which were important to them but, in some way, inexplicable, and they impressed upon me the significance of practices that allowed for such connections to come forth. I argue that Mason’s concept of ‘potent connection’ (Mason, 2018) aptly captures these connections. I go on to develop Mason’s concept with reference to the collective practices of retreat-goers, like group meditation or communal silence. Mason is interested in connections that are inexplicable, ineffable, or unpredictable. But she does not consider ways in which potent connections may themselves be the focus of intended action. My data suggest that such connections may indeed be worked at and I call this sort of work ‘mystery-work’. I anticipate this conceptual development will be of use to scholars of personal and everyday life.

Literature review

Extant scholarship offers a demographic profile for retreat-goers as being women in their forties with higher-than-average household incomes, who go on retreat for well-being, spiritual development and emotional balance, and who consider retreat-going as an aspect of ‘holistic’ or ‘spiritual’ tourism, where self-care and self-improvement become entangled with consumption (Attix, 2002; Hoyez, 2007; Lehto et al., 2006; Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Smith & Kelly, 2006). Retreat-going has been framed as an individualistic response to broad patterns of social change, including the rise of widespread anomie or alienation (Devereux & Carnegie, 2006), and as being fuelled by efforts to connect to an authentic self (Steiner & Reisinger, 2006a, 2006b).

I was interested in retreat-going across a range of settings, to explore similarities across differently-framed activities. I spoke to participants who had been on Ignatian (Catholic) retreats, which blended contemplation of holy relics with meditation, and with retreat-goers who combined yoga with bodyboarding. Some talked about life-long, focused engagement with Vipassana retreats, others about their time sampling Buddhist meditation, secular mindfulness, and tantra, progressing from one to the next. Until the turn of the twentieth century, whether Buddhists living in secluded monasteries or Catholics undertaking ‘desert spirituality’ (Tullio & Rossiter, 2009), the process of removing oneself from society for contemplation has been historically limited to a small number of dedicated religious practitioners. A diversity of retreat experiences is, arguably, a feature of contemporary retreat-going. Colonialism, and, later on, the rise of
Western counterculture, generated popular interest in personal enlightenment and opened up practices like yoga to Western consumers (Campbell, 2015; Pagis, 2019, p. 30). Usually, the circulation of such practices on the global marketplace saw them stripped of their original context, whether associated rituals, prayers or community activities, as they were repurposed for Western audiences (Pagis, 2019, p. 30).

A consumption-focused reading of this tendency to engage in a diverse set of practices would see it as being in keeping with the broader market processes of late modern capitalism (Sharma, 2014). It could be also described as ‘New Age’, a cultural movement that emerged from the 1960s counterculture, which encourages the search for connection with a ‘Higher self’ through a mix-and-match approach to any number of mystical and secular practices, including yoga, mindfulness, astrology, Jungian psychoanalysis, meditation, reiki and tarot (Heelas, 1995; see also Bender, 2010). Heelas described the New Age as ‘self-spirituality’ (1995, p. 2) because, while its constituent practices might straddle the secular and the mystical, they, above all, prioritize the truth of personal experience.

Critics like Foucault (1978) have examined the predominance of the self in contemporary society, and often take a mournful position on activities like self-help and therapy culture (Illouz, 2008), or ‘self-work’, seeing them as evidence of a loss of ‘social bonds and solidarities’ (Nehring, 2016, p. 55) or as a symptom of neoliberal approaches to care (Ward, 2015). Or, indeed, as evidencing a ‘moral imperative to accrue value to oneself’ (Skeggs, 2011, p. 499) through which the Protestant work-ethic has been ported to the province of the self (Gerrard, 2014). Taken together, these critiques implicitly or explicitly argue that the New Age ‘self’ spirituality, ‘self-care’, and, by extension, spaces like retreats, should be read as a symptom of social decline, even of pervasive narcissism (per Lasch, 1979), that have been generated as a commodified response to the loss of social institutions in late capitalism, and as contributing to or exploiting the ever more self-obsessed chatter of modern consumers.

The critical picture is complicated by empirical studies, however (Irvine, 1999; Pagis, 2015, 2015, 2019; Tavory & Goodman, 2009). Some studies show how community is mobilized in New Age groups as an expression of the self (Hetherington, 1994). Others find practices of the self that sit alongside community participation, sometimes easily, sometimes in negotiated ways (Tavory & Goodman, 2009). Michel Pagis brings many of these insights together in a series of detailed studies about Vipassana retreats (2009, 2010, 2015, 2019). Her participants undertook meditation retreats to transform the self, usually aiming to manifest a profound feeling of equanimity or peacefulness. Pagis showed how even an activity like silent meditation has important collective dimensions. Meditation in a group setting can involve ‘mimicking others, searching for cues, learning how to act, [and] performing for the teachers’ (2019, p. 65). While the critical literature has thus emphasized self-consumption practices, empirical work has evidenced some of the relational nature of retreat-going efforts, which I seek to expand upon in this article by drawing on a recently developed sociological theory of personal life.

**Retreats and the sociology of personal life**

Broadly speaking, the above scholarship tends to view the self as a cognitive or discursive product, as being something shaped by conversational interaction, narrative-based
practices, internal talk, or intellection (cf. Mead, 1934). The nature of the relational self has, in contrast, been the subject of considerable discussion in the sociology of personal life, and in the following section, I outline this article’s main theoretical contribution to this body of work. First, I make use of Mason’s (2018) work on ‘potent connections’, and second, I offer a development of her concept.

Mason (2018) builds on recent accounts of the self which emphasize embodied and affective dimensions over cognitive ones (May, 2013, 2017) with how we connect with others and with the world in important non-symbolic ways. She describes these relations as ‘affinities’ because they emerge outside of scripted ways of interacting, or, in non-cognitive terms, as sensory experiences or as bodily ‘kinaesthetic’ sensations. They are less easily quantified or conceptualized in traditional sociological frames and remain often overlooked in sociological work. Affinities can spring up between strangers, or with never-before-seen places, and are felt or experienced as intense connections, whether mysterious, surprising or enchanting. For example, while we might boil the sense of connection within a family down to blood-relatedness, Mason shows how kinship can exist outside of blood-relatedness, registered beyond the family unit through a powerful but essentially unclear feeling of connection (a mysterious sense of ‘family resemblance’, p. 60). Mason shows how, frequently, we sense our connectedness in ways that surpass or exceed conventional frames for understanding relationships; this latter aspect in particular gives them a startling, charged or ‘potent’ quality. Mason, thereby, introduces the concept of ‘potent connection’, which, I argue, provides a useful language to help think about the relational practices within retreat-going in a more holistic fashion, without obscuring how those relational practices are linked to, shape, or underpin the production of selfhood.

Similar ideas have some lineage in studies of spirituality, where a difficult-to-define sense of mystical relatedness is commonly discussed in studies of religion and culture (e.g. Gallagher & Newton, 2009; Higgins & Hamilton, 2020; see also Olavson, 2003 in the context of raving and dance culture). These are often conceptualized via Turner’s (1974) notion of ‘communitas’: the experience during collective rituals of a sense of connection, brotherhood, or the disappearance of social differentiation – where the group is configured as ‘unstructured or rudimentarily structured [as a] communion of equal individuals’ (p. 360). Links could be drawn between ‘communitas’ and Mason’s potent connections. Both concepts describe relationships emerging ‘outside’ of patterned social interaction, and explore fluid or transient bonds rather than calcified, settled or structured relationships. Both forms of relationship are conceived of as having an extra-linguistic dimension, insofar as language, for Turner, is associated with the social structures that are suspended in ‘communitas’ and Mason is interested in an experience of non-cognitive, affective, or sensory connectedness, which often evades easy linguistic description. However, I find Mason’s concept more flexible for my purposes. Mason considers intense negative (or ‘toxified’) connections to be just as important as enchanting ones (for example, the intense feeling of disquiet at realizing you are related to an unlikeable person). Mason also considers how we make potent connections with the non-human, for example, the weather and with the environment (pp. 123–125), offering a way to think about relations on retreats in terms of the more-than-human connections which we experience. In what follows, the concept of potent connections allows me to describe the
relationships and connections with others that thread through what Bender (2010, p. 2), in another context, refers to as ‘numinous, unexpected experiences, mystical experiences of “flow,” and daily synchronicities, dreams, and the like [which shape] the worlds in which spiritual practitioners live’. But Mason’s frame also provides scope to talk about equally powerful connective charges or flows of feeling and belonging in the more mundane facets of retreat-going, which may be just as significant as this ultimate experience of mystical connectedness. Her work is well-suited to demonstrating consistencies across a range of retreat experiences, from the spiritual to the secular, such as those that comprise my dataset.

Drawing these literatures together, I add to Mason’s concept by suggesting that potent connections can come about as the result of intended, collective efforts, or what I call ‘mystery-work’. Mason does not discuss the accomplishment of affinities in this way as she is chiefly concerned with how sensations of relatedness emerge outside of patterned behaviour or intended lines of action. My data suggest that a sense of mysterious connectedness can also be the result of people working together, changing their practices and their relations to others in order to create opportunities for mysterious connections to emerge.

Methods

The data I draw upon in developing my argument were collected during a one-year project exploring how people went on retreats, the sorts of practices they engaged in on retreat, and what was important to them during their time there. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 21 retreat-goers and six retreat owners who had also been on retreats themselves (17 women and 10 men). Here, I focus only on the accounts of the retreat-goers. All but two participants were white – one woman was British African-Caribbean, and one woman was British Asian. Participants ranged in age from their mid-twenties to early seventies, although roughly half the participants were in their forties and fifties and just under a third in their thirties.

All participants had been on retreats before, which served as the primary criterion for inclusion. I left the definition of retreat up to participants to explore commonalities across a range of retreat and retreat-going practices, to discern what we might find of similarity in these shifting and heterogeneous spaces. As mentioned above, this led to a diverse sample, both in terms of the retreats attended and of frequency. Retreat types mentioned included: mindfulness (5), energy healing (4), Buddhism (4), well-being (2), Ignatian meditation (2), secular meditation (2), Christian (2), nature (1), shamanism (1), transcendental meditation (1), Vipassana (1), Ayahuasca (1) and yoga (1). The frequency of retreat-going also varied within my sample. Five participants only attended a retreat once. Just over half of the remaining participants (12) went on several retreats but engaged with one specific type of retreat in particular (for example, Clarissa habitually went on a Vipassana retreat once a year). The remaining participants (10) engaged in a variety of different types of retreats and discussed two or more different retreat experiences in their interviews (for example, Wanda went on Christian retreats, Ignatian retreats and mindfulness retreats).
Advertisements were placed in online fora and on social media. Once an initial round of recruitment had taken place this way, I then recruited via snowball sampling. I did not ask questions about social or economic status, nor did participants often refer to such matters in their answers. The sample, though, did seem to reflect the argument in the literature regarding the target market of holistic tourists, and I would suggest that they were mostly middle-class. The data do resemble what we might find in the broader population of retreat-goers, though generalizability is not possible here. At the same time, this narrow sample in terms of ethnicity, age and class limits the interpretation of the data and poses further questions regarding how I can extend my analysis, which I will return to in the conclusion.

The shortest interview lasted 45 minutes and the longest interview lasted 2 hours and 13 minutes. The interview questions were open-ended but focused on three general areas: what participants did to prepare for a retreat; what participants did while on a retreat; and what participants did after the retreat. In some cases, participants provided detailed descriptions of their practices and experiences in these areas, but others told stories about how retreats were situated in their lives more broadly. Most of the semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants face-to-face in a location of their choice, usually a public cafe, and were mostly conducted in the Northwest of England (several other interviews were conducted in London, and one in Southwest England). Eight interviews were conducted via Skype. All the interviews were transcribed professionally and checked for accuracy by the primary researcher, who also coded the interviews using qualitative analysis software (NVivo 12).

The coding process was conducted via thematic analysis first, and then a more targeted pass through the data was conducted, to find examples of both commonality and difference within the key areas identified by the initial sweep. On the first pass, I noticed the importance of self-directed activity, like self-improvement and healing, in participants’ stories. Another area that soon became apparent was the importance of other people, as participants frequently emphasized the significance of a sense of community and connectedness. After further reflection, and an additional pass of the data, I spotted the connections between self-work and other people, and on that basis developed my analysis around the interrelatedness of these two themes, which led to the conceptualization of the importance of experiences that seemed to be left deliberately unexplained and mysterious. I then looked back at the data a third time, coding for mystery and potent connection.

**Potent connections on retreat**

All retreat-goers told me stories about the work they did on themselves. Many also mentioned the relationships they made in the same breath, corroborating studies by Pagis (2019), Bender (2010), Irvine (1999) and others that have traced the link between self-work and community in such ‘alternative’ spaces. Listening to my participants, however, I was struck by how these relationships were often emotionally charged, uncertain, difficult to describe or straightforwardly magical (‘potent’, in Mason’s terms). In this section, I give a flavour of the connections which appeared in my data.
Lorelei (37) told me of staring into an anonymous meditation partner’s eyes: ‘I did not see them; I saw their soul. And it made me cry tears of joy.’ Wanda (43) told me about a connection made on a silent retreat with the neighbour boarding in the room next door: ‘We would go walking together in silence, and had a very close relationship that, actually, when we could speak at the end of it, it just carried on how it had been.’ For Madeleine (46), the sense of connection with women on a tantra retreat emerged through an experience of intense embarrassment and shame: ‘On the last day, we had to strip till we were naked to twenty cheering women, and it was the hardest thing I’ve ever had to do [. . .] my journey with those women taught me so much about myself.’

Nested within these kinds of stories about self-insight are potent connections – visceral, charged emotional connections, some enchanting, some toxified – with others. Stories about self-insight were often difficult to unpick from stories about connection. Brent (38) went on a well-being retreat to Portugal organized by his personal trainer which mixed a programme of cardiovascular exercise, yoga, Pilates and healthy eating. During a walk through the hills, Brent talked with another retreat-goer about her life. Out of nowhere, he told me, a profound and spontaneous sense of connectedness sparked in Brent: ‘She was just sharing her experience, and then, “Oh, my God,” I said, “I feel like I’m just looking at my own book”.’ This is a classic moment of cognitive self-reflection, where Brent ‘finds himself’ by looking in the mirror of another person. But he told this anecdote to me as being just as much about an emotional shock, an unanticipated and powerful experience of resemblance in a stranger, the startling quality of which causes him to exclaim and interrupt the conversation. Brent told me about another experience that took place after dinner one evening:

I remember getting upset and saying ‘God, I’ve just, I’ve just realised I’ve been living with friends, they’ve told me that they’ve caught me in the morning in the bathroom berating myself.’ And I had, I didn’t know I was doing it. Before the retreat, my friend actually pulled me aside one day and said, ‘We need to have a conversation.’ And he said, like, ‘I don’t like what I’m listening to.’ He says, ‘You need to stop it. I don’t know why you’re doing this to yourself, but you need to work it out.’ And that day where I was sharing it with the group of people who don’t know me, I was in floods of tears. And suddenly these arms are around me.

Brent describes two potent connections in this poetic anecdote – one between himself and his friend, and between himself and the loving group of retreat-goers. The first, very literally connected with self-reflection insofar as it involves Brent looking in a mirror, is powerful inasmuch as it has a hard, even aggressive quality to it, both in the criticism he dispenses to himself and in his friend’s ‘tough love’ approach – pulling him aside and telling him off (berating him, as he was berating himself). The second connection is an expansive, nurturing relationship with the group of retreaters, centred on the flow of tears, the circulation of compassion, and about ‘suddenly’ providing supportive physical contact. Brent’s problem is, in a way, a problem of self-knowledge – he had poor self-esteem, a bad idea of himself. When telling this story, Brent impressed upon me the sheer surprise he felt at the group’s empathy; there were tears in his eyes and a trembling in his voice. It moved him still to recount the felt connection he experienced. And from how he told it, with surprise even now: it was clear that he could not believe it.
Mason (2018, p. 16) discusses the emotional charge of feeling the proximity of a parent long after their death and, despite all the evidence to the contrary, ‘the searing emotional and sensory-kinaesthetic intensity and power of such affinities with the absent presence of the dead come from the absolute and felt knowledge that these in/tangibilities cannot be self-invented’. There is a similar mix of rational incredulity and emotional certainty in Brent’s story. His self-hatred is shattered by a startling moment of collective care, which he struggles to explain and justify but which cannot be undone, unfelt, or challenged. Potent connection, here, short circuits self-reflection by interrupting the self-image he has been producing through his own self-talk (literally to himself in the mirror, and through his inner dialogue). Emotional experiences of group care, expressed among relative strangers, are a common feature of support groups (Francis, 1997; Irvine, 1999). Linda Francis (1997) describes how support groups manage their members’ difficult emotions through scripted talk directed, ultimately, at transforming their identities. And the retreat-goers might have drawn on equivalent scripts in their care for Brent. But his reporting of the moment itself is oriented far more towards bodily contact, touch and a flow of collective tears, to the collective feeling and its intensity in him, than it is to the self-description he provided or to the words they used.

Other stories began about self-work but dwelt on or were interrupted by accounts of potent connection. Sometimes, these were brief but no less meaningful brushstrokes in the picture respondents painted of retreat life. Rebecca (41) told me about her surprise when a retreat-goer decided to interrupt a session about self-belief to connect, dramatically, with the natural world: ‘She just said, “I’m really loving Sharon’s stuff, but actually, I just need to go and jump in the river.” [laughs] And I was like: “Go for it!”’ Anastasia (26) talked in soft tones about how other retreat-goers helped soothe her after long and difficult stretches of inward reflection: ‘Jim made me a cup of tea and ended up talking about how he was in the choir when he was a boy, and I was like, “Oh right, well, sing to me”, and then he started singing. It was a really lovely experience.’ Other times, potent connections were reported as being more interesting than the retreat itself. Olivia (39) went on a woodland nature retreat during which she isolated herself from others to contemplate ‘insights’ that nature offered her in a shamanistic manner. But after Olivia told me this, she confessed she grew bored soon after the retreat started. She made a twig sculpture in a clearing of the wood. The next morning, she found that another anonymous retreat-goer had built on her sculpture by adding some foliage of their own. Olivia added to the sculpture again, which prompted the mysterious retreat-goer to add to it again the next night, and the sculpture developed over the course of the retreat in this reciprocal fashion. ‘I had nothing to do,’ she said, ‘so I would go and see Stick Man [her name for the sculpture] in the morning to see what had been added. It was literally the highlight of the day.’ She laughed as she recounted this anecdote; Stick Man was a magical development and the most captivating thing that happened to her in the woods. These accounts show how exciting connections with nature and with other retreat-goers were equally as significant as focusing action and attention on the self. The dynamism here echoes the ‘shifting patterns of articulations of self and community solidarity’ described by Tavory and Goodman (2009, p. 280) in the context of New Age gatherings. My participants reported self-work in its ebbs and flows, taking place through and alongside the irruption of intense relationships with others, and, in some cases, giving way to them.
Simon’s (59) narrative started with a tumultuous crisis during which he lost his job, divorced his wife, and was unemployed for a year before he discovered meditation, Buddhism and retreat-going. Simon felt retreat-going was a way to put himself back together and that he walked a well-trodden path – in essence, a story of spiritual awakening (DeGloma, 2014). He had, as DeGloma puts it, ‘seen the light’ (2014). Simon used anecdotes about relationships to imbue this narrative with a sense of destiny. Having spent the day meditating next to a young woman (a stranger) in silence, Simon told me that, when the meditation had finished in the evening, he and the woman went swimming in a nearby lake. Not through agreement but chance. He could not explain why or how they ended up walking or swimming together spontaneously: they swam out under the moonlight, all the while remaining in total silence. He paused in his delivery of this story both before and after he said: ‘We didn’t speak the whole way’, adding his own silence to the interview to demonstrate the importance of the felt connection and its mystery:

We went back up to the retreat house in silence. And we went in, in silence, sort of dripping wet and panting. God knows what anybody else thought. And then we had a cup of coffee in silence and went to our separate rooms. And we didn’t talk about it the whole of the rest of the retreat.

Simon stressed how surprising this impromptu swim had been for him. His tone and delivery impressed upon me the enchantment and wonder that such a connection should emerge out of nowhere, as if it had a sense of destiny about it, and, equally, that it felt inexplicable. The swim led to what Simon described as ‘a common bond’ with his companion, ‘that nobody else would understand or care about’, something which persisted after the retreat and developed into an enduring international friendship.

Brent, Olivia and Simon’s stories, and, particularly, the freighted way they were told to me, tie together self-work with the emergence of connections that were unplanned and spontaneous, and yet also meaningful in a mysterious, uncertain way. My data suggest these relationships themselves were just as valuable to the retreatants as their self-oriented reflections. By dint of the fact people are generally strangers to each other, and never have to see each other again, retreat-going is conducive to self-work insofar as it allows people to experiment with self-production with relatively little risk (as in support groups, see Irvine, 1999). The same features are also, arguably, conducive to the emergence of new relational experiences – whether of care (as in Brent’s case), creativity and play (Olivia), or companionship (Simon). The lack of others’ biographical information or persisting obligations to them provides retreat-goers with a relational blank slate for novel, unexpected connections to emerge. This might explain why retreats are particularly fertile spaces for potent connections to spring up between members, even as the self comes into central focus.

The collective production of mystery

A key finding in the extant literature on retreats and like spaces is the role played by the group on the production of self, and the data I offer thus far corroborate this finding. But I also found that people worked to produce collective experiences of potent connection, often intense sensory or atmospheric ones. I frame this as ‘mystery-work’.
It was common for retreat-goers to report a sense of responsibility and obligation to the group. Gloria (64) saw the retreat as a break from a demanding family life, as a place she would go to take care of herself and relinquish the responsibilities of family, but then immediately described retreat-going as a new set of responsibilities: ‘You have a responsibility to make [the retreat] as good as it can be for everyone – you’re not just going there to make yourself feel better, you’re going there to actually help the whole process.’ Gloria’s comments, which equalize the importance of self and group, corroborate Tavory and Goodman’s (2009, p. 281) finding that for the participants of New Age gatherings, the ‘notion of solidarity and individuality as a zero-sum game was usually alien to members’ understandings’. One phrase came up time and again in descriptions of retreat-goers’ obligations: ‘holding space’. Siobhan (48) said: ‘Holding space is like providing a container for challenging stuff’ that other people present ‘and not judging it’. When people held space, they constrained their own actions to help other people: ‘You’ve got to create a safe energetic atmosphere where if somebody starts crying in one of the sharing groups, you’re not going to judge them for crying, you’re going to comfort them but in a detached kind of way’, said Lorelei. Lorelei told me holding space was ‘practising the art of meditation on another person’. Ruby (71) told me it was distinctly collective: ‘Don’t forget,’ she said, ‘everyone’s contributing to it’. At first glance, holding space seems to require one to constrain the self to produce an appearance of self-detachment which others can use in their own self-work. It is collectively-oriented work through which the self lets itself become the background for the other to carry out their own inner work, resembling the ‘collective solitude’ that Pagis (2019) describes in Vipassana retreats.

Although many of the stories about holding space were oriented around the self, my participants also pointed out how it could lead to the generation, circulation and discharge of intense emotional energies and atmospheres. This is where I suggest holding space becomes about mystery-work. Anastasia told me how, during one sharing circle, one retreat-goer would not stop talking ‘from his head’, breaching the group’s conventions with an outpouring of individualistic self-talk (that might elsewhere be aptly described as being ‘egoistic’: see Tavory & Goodman, 2009). This built up an air of frustration in the room so that without warning, another retreat-goer staged an intervention. ‘Phil just shouted at Gary, he said: “I don’t care what’s in your head. I want to see your fucking soul!” and Gary just burst out crying, then Phil burst out crying, and just the way that Phil was kind of like just holding him.’ Phil’s actions are about ‘holding’ the retreat space as in the examples above insofar as Gary is shocked into compliance with group norms for self-disclosure, but rather than just corralling his talk into a better more disciplined form, Phil’s actions seem to emerge from and lead to the mutual release of an affective charge in the room, the outpouring and flow of viscerally felt emotions, and to physical and emotional intimacy. Thus, the sharing circle itself, the energy in the room as Gary talked inappropriately about himself, and Phil’s violent intervention each represents efforts towards a collective atmosphere that is expressly aimed at generating a non-cognitive, cathartic flow of feeling (hence, I describe it as mystery-work). Arguably, the potent connections between Gary, Phil and the group at this moment (the affective atmosphere) is not a side-show but what they came on retreat to do. The experience is not something which could be understood only through reference to self-work for the
outburst and the flow of tears across the room is something surprising which springs forth unexpectedly, even as the possibility for this surprise is exactly what the affective work is intended to achieve.

Other retreat-goers told me stories along these lines, where the fruits of collectively-oriented self-work were described as being really about emergent ineffable, magical or sensual connections. Madeleine told me how, simply by abiding by the imposition of a day of silence, she stopped ‘talking about how unhappy [she] was’ and began to experience a profound, sensory connection with nature. She said: ‘I was like 40 or something, I’ve never had a day of silence in my life, and for the first time I actually noticed the beauty of the light on the water [she took a long pause to look out the window] and then afterwards I went to the hotel, and they had coffee and scones and I was like tasting coffee for the first time, smelling it, and the freshly-baked warm scones.’ By keeping the collective silence – holding back her otherwise habitual self-talk – Madeleine tried to maintain her immersion in an intense world of sensations whereby mundane things suddenly appeared enchanting and magical, even when she moved back to the hotel. Alan (63) attended and ran retreats centred around sweat lodges. He told me that in the intense heat and pitch darkness of a sweat lodge, people often experience a profound connection with nature, feeling as if they are melting into the muddy lodge floor, merging with the earth, or ‘have visions of plants growing out of their bodies’. These intense experiences fall in the register of the mystical. But, just as in Madeleine’s secular example of an expanded sensorium, Alan pointed to the initial role of collective agreements in bringing them about. First, the participants undressed in a playful group activity: ‘you strip off, laugh, giggle, toss the jacket and tie’. Then, again as a group, participants mentalized the expulsion of their own ‘negative energy’:

We go round the lodge at the fire at the beginning and everyone is encouraged to throw their negative energy into the fire. One by one. One guy said, ‘I have no negative energy’. Nonsense. Everyone has some. And I don’t care what your shit is, James, but it’s yours, so toss that shit into the fire.

Alan said that negative energy should not be allowed to circulate in the group, where it does not belong, because it disrupts the spirit of the lodge and can cause people to panic, particularly in the intense heat. Ritual purging, the use of heat, the notions of energy use and misuse, the lodge’s design and the efforts of organizers to secure a particular group-wide energy or atmosphere could each be considered part of the mystery-work that is collectively undertaken here. These involve group-oriented, collectively-agreed understandings and group-oriented collectively-agreed actions (disrobing together, purging negative energy together) through which some material of the self is left by the door for the retreat to succeed. The success is about a collective sensation and the experience of a powerful connection, a melding with the earth. Although the silent mystery-work Madeleine carries out seems different to Alan’s more voluble example, at base, both involve collectively-coordinated work which is aimed implicitly or explicitly at bringing about intense, strange and magical experiences of connectedness with oneself, others and nature.
A key dimension of mystery-work is the collective generation of a sensory atmosphere. Martin (68) describes the experience of arriving at his retreat in terms of a bodily impact: ‘It’s quite a shock to the system – it’s a very strong atmosphere’, produced by the collective efforts of the other retreaters. This collective behaviour ‘shocks’ Martin, registering via a sensory, bodily orientation to the space and of how one has to shift one’s disposition to tune into the space and get comfortable. Differently, Juliette (49) told me that every time she left the Zen-Buddhist retreats she felt almost indescribably calm, and when I asked her if this was due to group meditation she said: ‘Meditation, yes, but it’s also the environment, It’s just . . . I don’t know [long pause] I think you have to go there to experience it [pause] when you walk in there, it’s just amazing.’ The atmosphere of the temple generated by the monks was hard to put into words but it was so impactful it moved her, irrespective of her meditation practices (which, she sheepishly confessed to me, were not very effective: ‘I’ve always tried to do meditation, erm, but I’m not really that great at it!’). These examples suggest mystery-work could be understood as what Lewis (2020) calls an affectively oriented community practice. In Lewis’s study, collective practices relating to sound conjure up powerful nostalgic atmospheres. Here, group silence, meditative detachment, holding space, and similar practices seem intended less to produce specific feelings and more to provide a ‘container’ (Siobhan, 48) or ‘safe energetic space’ (Lorelei, 37) for powerful but hard-to-pin-down energies to circulate: potent connections, what Mason calls ‘forces, flows and energies, entanglements and evanescent coalescences’ (Mason, 2018, p. 188) that are tangible but evade straightforward categorization.

One final example ties together several features of mystery-work discussed above and shows how retreat-goers might hope to generate specific kinds of potent connection but do not always succeed. Robert (55) gave an account of transcendental meditation retreats. During this retreat, participants would practise a verbalized form of meditation in the hope of quieting their minds. After pairing up, one person would speak out whatever was in their head for five minutes, uninterrupted. Then, a bell would strike, and the other person would begin. They would continue, taking it in turns. Robert told me that as the retreat goes on, and retreat-goers continue to verbalize their inner dialogue to each other:

It drives you nuts after a bit. The atmosphere thickens, you feel it in the room. People start . . . odd things start to happen. Somebody might collapse in hysterical laughter, or somebody might burst into tears.

Robert described how, alongside the promise of insight into the self, people were motivated to attend this sort of retreat by the hope that a ‘direct experience’ might occur. This direct experience was described by Robert as a profound spiritual experience of ego-loss which connects the participant to a sense of universal being, or of being connected to everything. Although he never had a direct experience, he told us that when such experiences did occur, they seemed to be the result of collective energies: ‘The atmosphere becomes more and more intense because if that direct experience is going to occur, it always happens towards the end, as the pressure mounts.’ When his neighbour had a direct experience, Robert told me that ‘there was no question of it, he fell back laughing. He had got it and it was clear something extraordinary had happened.’
Robert gives an account of collective practices through which selves are produced (narrated, examined, and worked on) that also generate a range of potent connections, from a ‘thick’ or sometimes feverish atmosphere, charged up with and shot through by ‘odd’ or inexplicable feelings, to bouts of mysterious laughter or tears, to an indescribable connection to ‘the universe’. Potent connections are both a byproduct of collective self-work and, explicitly, the point of the activity. His account seems very different to Lorelei’s picture of a ‘safe energetic space’, given the intensity he lends his description (a space that ‘drives you nuts’). Nonetheless, there is an underlying consistency to these accounts: the group-wide, collectively-agreed suspension of habitual patterns of interaction – which includes coordinated action taken on the self and the interruption of conventional or everyday responses to others (and their acts of self-narration) – to allow for new as-yet-unknown energies, feelings and sensations to flow and circulate. Whether these are the shocks of inexplicable laughter, as in Robert’s account, the safely-held flow of tears, in Anastasia’s example, or a melding with the earth, as in Alan’s story. My participants articulate the idea that, on retreat, people are working together on something they do not fully understand – something that sits beyond their ordinary frame of reference and their everyday scripts (which they must suspend and hold off as a group). This is not simply about a mystical sense of equality, brotherhood or community (Turner, 1974). In mystery-work, retreat-goers suspend the known, hoping to collectively let in or encounter the unknown. I have highlighted the relational dimension of this activity.

Conclusions

In this article, I have sought to introduce a novel theory recently developed in the sociology of personal life into the literature on retreats, a way of conceptualizing the relational aspect of retreat-going which has been a little undertheorized in the extant literature. In the first half of the article, I extended the scholarship on retreats (Norman & Pokorny, 2017; Pagis, 2019; Smith & Kelly, 2006) both by building on existing arguments concerning cognate spaces and by demonstrating the significance of relationships for retreat-goers in and of themselves, using the concept of ‘potent connection’. Through this, I underlined how potent connections might be entangled with forms of self-work, something particular to retreat-going. Sometimes, these phenomena play off each other, as they did in Olivia’s experience, where self-work is found wanting and gives way to the emergence of mysterious and exciting connections, or in Alan’s account, where self-work establishes the conditions for potent connections with nature to be made. At other times, the line between working on the self and working on connectedness was difficult to pick apart, as in Brent’s and Simon’s stories, or the two practices were arguably coterminous, as in Robert’s account of the collective efforts in generating ‘direct’ experiences, where the apex of work on the self was a mystical and ineffable sense of connection, rarely achieved.

Potent connections such as these were often experienced as unanticipated or inexplicable, but my data have suggested that such sensations are often implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, worked towards through work on the self, on others, on group relationships, on atmospheres and flows of energy, on feelings and talk and sensory experience, on nature and space, and so on. I term these efforts ‘mystery-work’ to capture
the breadth of these practices. Not all the potent connections described by my partici-
pants were strictly ‘mysteries’ or ‘mysterious’, and many might be better parsed as ‘mys-
tical’, ‘strange’, or ‘startling’. Many might have been easily explained away through
further rational reflection. But these connections were almost always presented to me in
the research interview setting as being surprising (in that they were unexpected), ineffa-
ble, magical or enchanting, often as if they were something the participants themselves
could not quite believe and which they used – alongside their more prosaic descriptions
of self-discovery – to communicate to me what it is about retreat-going that makes it so
captivating. Mystery-work captures both the sense that retreat-goers are collectively
working at an unknown relational ‘something’, and the sense of bewilderment, surprise
and magic when that relational ‘something’ emerges. With limited access to others’ biog-
raphies and few or no enduring obligations to them beyond the retreat itself, retreat-goers
are afforded something of a blank slate: that is, an opportunity to work as a group at
generating non-scripted (hence, surprising and mysterious) connections with others. The
breadth of the concept also offers potential for sociological work in personal life more
generally. My data corroborate Mason’s view that non-scripted, felt or affectively
charged connections are an important part of social and personal life, meaningful in and
of themselves, rather than merely addenda to social experiences like, for example, kin-
ship or community. Expanding on Mason’s concepts, however, I also suggest that potent
connections can be an objective of coordinated social action. This finding invites soci-
ologists to explore a new set of questions around what other practices are organized, at
least partly, around aims to generate potent connections, how, and with what effects. If
we can find mystery-work here, on retreat, a space that seems to be ostensibly oriented
around the self, it seems reasonable to suggest we might find it elsewhere. In that sense,
sociologists interested in self, identity, belonging and affect might find mystery-work an
instructive concept for uncovering the ways in which people are oriented, not only
towards knowledge production about self but also to the production of the hidden,
unknown, uncertain and mysterious.

The study is limited in terms of generalization. Although the sample was diverse in
terms of the retreat types attended, it was relatively homogeneous in terms of demo-
graphics, i.e. class and race. This leaves mystery-work open to the suggestion it is exclu-
sively the province of white Westerners with disposable incomes. Although financial
means were not always required to participate in retreat-going, particularly as many
Buddhist retreats worked with the concept of ‘dana’ (through which fees were waived),
given the existing critiques of many commodified spiritual practices like yoga and medi-
tation (Rindfleish, 2005; Sharma, 2014), I acknowledge this limitation and suggest fur-
ther work should explore the topic in more detail. Although there is limited scope to
satisfactorily answer that question in this article, doing so would better place retreat-
going in the context of contemporary social life, more substantially orient the concept in
terms of possible social inequality, and help to integrate it with the literature on con-
sumption in this context. This article opens up a broader question too, and further
research on the collective dimensions of experiences that are enjoyed for their opacity,
mystery, uncertainty and magical nature, rather than their instructiveness, self-develop-
ment, and self-knowledge would help to enrich the sociological picture of contemporary
relational personal life.
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