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Quantitative Studies of New Age: A Summary and Discussion

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Introduction

Quantitative methods handle data by converting them to numbers and figures. Typically, quantitative studies handle many units of information. Quantitative data could, compared to qualitative data, seem bare and shallow. Qualitative methods, on the other hand, gather thorough and deep information about a limited number of subjects. Ideally, qualitative and quantitative methods complement each other, as they generate different kinds of knowledge.

One advantage with quantitative methods is that they allow us to generalize from the investigated groups/individuals: the data is constructed to be representative for larger populations. Another advantage, compared to qualitative studies, is that quantitative methods allow analysis of relationships between different variables. Statistical methods, for example factor analysis or similar methods, can be used to inform a totally different order of understanding than is possible with qualitative methods.

Quantitative studies may use different sources of data: various forms of records or statistical material, documents, or live observations. The most common data source for quantitative studies is, however, survey studies (questionnaires, or, in some cases, standardized interviews).

This paper will summarize and discuss quantitative studies in relation to New Age. New Age is a young research field, and quantitative studies have, for reasons discussed below, often not been the first choice for researchers about New Age. However scarce, I have identified three different kinds of quantitative studies to be common in New Age contexts, and will review, compare and discuss the most important studies in each group:

1. *Surveys distributed to individuals identified as being New Age-oriented*, aimed at investigating beliefs, practices, attitudes, background or other variables about these individuals.
2. *Studies using other kinds of material*, for example observations of the number of New Age participants and church participants in a certain town, or content analysis of books or newspapers to find out to what degree they may be New Age oriented.
3. *Surveys intended to be representative for whole populations*. These studies could be used for identifying, among other things, New Age orientations, New Age believers or New Age practitioners, although this is often not the primary goal.

I also intend to identify and discuss the problems with existing quantitative studies of New Age, and discuss possibilities for future research.

Surveys of New Age individuals

There have been a few quantitative surveys of individuals identified as being New Age-oriented. The most well-known study in this group was conducted by Stuart Rose in 1994-95.

He distributed 5 350 questionnaires to subscribers of the widest-selling New Age magazine in UK with each questionnaire containing 205 questions. Nine questions were open-ended and the rest were tick-box type with preset answers. Often, however, space was allowed to insert individual answers, making also qualitative interpretation and categorization possible, the result then being coded for statistical analysis. The answer rate was 17 %, with 908 questionnaires returned. The purpose of the study was “to put a finger directly on the pulse of what the New Age is all about” (Rose 2005, 9-11). The questions dealt with the respondents’ views on New Age and spirituality; use of certain practices like meditation, acupuncture, channelling, or healing; use of astrology and experiences of paranormal phenomena; participation in New Age workshops, lectures, festivals or retreats; subjective positive or negative changes with adoption of New Age ideas and practices; ecological awareness and political ideas; use of drugs; teachings, ideas or books which had influenced the respondents most; and the respondents’ sex, civil status, age and occupation (Rose 2005, 355-357).

The study has many similarities with another survey conducted in Sweden in 1995 (Frisk 2000; Frisk 2003). A questionnaire was distributed to all people participating in activities arranged by five different New Age groups. These groups were chosen on the ground that their activities scored high in another study investigating what activities were most commonly mentioned in a Swedish New Age advertisement magazine (Frisk 1997). The groups chosen centered around channelling, rebirthing, A Course in Miracles, healing and energy work. The questionnaire focused on five questions: who is engaged in the New Age environment (gender, age and education); how is one engaged (beliefs and practices); “conversion” (e.g. circumstances at time of first contact with New Age, and parents’ world view or religion); life style (vegetarianism, use of alcohol, tobacco, drugs); and politics and society (e.g. voting in political elections). The answer rate varied between 60-85 %, depending on the attitude of the workshop leader and his/her willingness to let the research project be presented (Frisk 2003). Like Rose’s questionnaire, the most common type of answer was of the tick-box type with possibilities to add independent answers, with some open-ended questions making some qualitative interpretations possible.

In spite of the different conditions of the two studies, several results coincide. Over two thirds in Rose’s study believe that Western society is entering a new era (Rose 2005, 23), while 69 % in the Swedish study believe there is a new age dawning (Frisk 2003, 246). 70 % in Rose’s study were women (2005, 84), as 83 %¹ in Frisk’s study (2003, 243). Rose finds a male bias towards the practice of meditation and ritual activities, together with social concerns, while there was, in his study, a female bias towards activities to do with healing, divination and bodywork. Women also appeared to be more involved in a greater number of core New Age activities than men (Rose 2005, 85). In Frisk’s study women scored much higher on belief questions than men (Frisk 2000, 70), and had also tried a lot more of the New Age activities (Frisk 2000, 75). Especially, more women had been engaged in healing, channelling, crystal therapy, reiki, tarot and affirmation, while there were more men in a largely intellectual activity as A course in Miracles (Frisk 2000, 75). Rose finds that almost 60 % of the respondents were in the age group between 35-54 (Rose 2005, 87), while Frisk finds that the average age of respondents was 42 years (Frisk 2003, 243). Frisk finds that although all kinds of education and professions are represented in the material, there is a small bias towards higher education and professions where higher education is needed (Frisk 2000, 59-60). Rose has similar findings (2005, 93). Great similarities were also demonstrated in the frequency of attending New Age events in a 12-month period: 85 % of the Swedish respondents

¹ The rate of women varied in the five different groups between 74 to 97 %.

participated in workshops twice a year or more seldom (Frisk 2000, 76), with 82 % in UK (Rose 2005, 101). A difference was found between the two materials concerning participation in lectures, which could maybe be attributed to the differences in materials: the Swedish material was gathered at times of lectures and other activities, but the British material consisted of readers. 47 % participated in lectures once a year or more seldom in Sweden (Frisk 2000, 76), and 74 % in UK (Rose 2005, 101). The engagement in New Age seemed, therefore, to be mainly private in both studies. Use of drugs seemed to be more frequent in UK: 38 % had used cannabis at some point in their lives (Rose 2005, 102), but only 18 % in the Swedish material (Frisk 2000, 77). Rose finds that 86 % of the participants believe that God is mostly present in the New Age ideas and activities (Rose 2005, 172), while Frisk finds that 97 % believe in either a personal God or a spirit/life force (Frisk 2003, 244).

A third study comparable to the studies of Rose and Frisk was done in 1999 by Dominic Corrywright. Corrywright's study was primarily qualitative, but also included a questionnaire in addition to participant observation, analysis of literature and interviews. The questionnaire was distributed at one seminar and one workshop (different contexts), and to readers of a New Age newspaper who in a previous readers' survey had indicated interest to participate in the research project. The response rate was 50-59 %, bringing in altogether 65 questionnaires, of which 60 were included in the database. Some questions were the same as in Rose's study, and the result of these roughly corresponded to Rose's results. Some interesting results were that no core set of beliefs could completely define the field of New Age spiritualities (although 82 % considered the area of healing and personal growth important), and that only 58 % considered the idea of a God or a Goddess important to their spirituality. This result is considerably less than in the studies of Rose and Frisk. Corrywright's sample was too small to allow use of statistical techniques (Corrywright 2003).

A fourth study was made by Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead in UK in 2001. They distributed a questionnaire to people active in the holistic spiritual milieu in one town, Kendal, UK. 252 persons filled in the questionnaire (2005, 153). They found that 80 % were female (2005, 94), 55 % were between 40-59 (2005, 107), and 57 % had a university or college degree (2005, 93). These results coincide with the results of Rose and Frisk. Other questions in the questionnaire included which holistic therapies the respondents had tried, and if they considered this to have a spiritual dimension or not; reasons for participating in holistic therapies; belief in for example God, reincarnation, heaven, hell, power of prayer, and healing power; definition of spirituality; and spiritual/religious experiences. 43.1 % believed humankind is entering a new age of spiritual evolution, 41.9 % believed in reincarnation, 57.6 % believed in God, 30 % in a personal God, 51 % in some sort of spirit or life force.² The figures are lower than for similar questions in the studies of Rose and Frisk, which could maybe be attributed to the fact that people with lower engagement in the New Age participated. This hypothesis is confirmed as only about half of the respondents in this study considered the different New Age activities to have a spiritual dimension (www.kendalproject.org.uk). This means, that several of the respondents were involved in these activities for other than spiritual reasons, for example health reasons, and therefore did not score higher on typical New Age belief questions.

A fifth important study was made by Pehr Granqvist and Berit Hagekull in 2000. They constructed a scale to assess New Age orientation and to test an emotional compensation hypothesis. The study group included 193 participants from upper secondary school classes,

² These figures indicate that "spirit or life force" was not always interpreted as "God" in this study. The problem with terminology and formulating adequate questions and answer possibilities is further discussed below.

Christian youth orientations and New Age establishments in Stockholm. Using factor analysis, the New Age orientation scale was shown to be unidimensional. New Age orientation was also found to be linked to attachment insecurity and emotionally based religiosity, and the writers conclude that attachment theory may make an important contribution to highlight predisposing factors for New Age orientation. Of the New Age sample – 50 persons – 76 % were female with the average age of 34.9 years. The participants were drawn from vegetarian cafés, alternative bookstores and health medicine centers, assumed to be of interest to individuals exhibiting a significant New Age orientation. The response rate was 83 %. The New Age orientation scale was constructed as 22 questions, based on ten partly overlapping content areas: 1. Intuition as a reliable source of knowledge 2. A belief that a new age is approaching 3. A belief in the efficacy of alternative treatments 4. A belief in parapsychological and occult phenomena 5. An emphasis on personal development and spirituality 6. A favourable evaluation of pseudopsychological and –physical jargon 7. An emphasis on nature and cosmos as animate 8. An emphasis on Eastern holism, activities, and beliefs 9. A favourable evaluation of religious syncretism and of practices of “forgotten” cultures and traditions 10. An emphasis on being an open seeker. Efforts were made to coach each statement so that only the most dedicated seekers would agree strongly, distinguishing between those who believed that, for example, acupuncture, herb eating, or psychotherapy may be beneficial, and those who thought that primal and reincarnation therapies and reiki healing were at least as effective as regular medical treatments: and between those who believed that there might be some truth in the psychoanalytic notion of projection as a defense mechanism, and those who believed that the world around is mainly a projection screen. The response possibilities were six, on a scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree (Granqvist and Hagekull 2001).

A sixth statistical study was made by Daren Kemp, who in 1998-99 investigated three New Age Christian groups in UK (2003, 235). Among other kinds of material, also a postal questionnaire was used (2003, 3), with a response rate of nearly 60 % (2003, 13). The purpose of the study was to find out if there is a movement of New Age Christians. The data confirmed this hypothesis to a great extent, but as this movement is not conscious of itself as a movement, the hypothesis was rejected for the time being (2003, 3). The questionnaire – which seemed to vary a bit between the groups - included, besides background questions as age, sex, and education, direct questions about adoption of New Age ideas or practices (for example reincarnation, astrology, and Tarot cards), and also questions about the nature of God and Christianity (2003, 223-234). Some questions were copied from Rose’s study. The writer concludes that the New Age Christian groups shared many characteristics with New Age groups, although to a lesser degree, and may well be contrasted with the evangelical grouping used as a control group (2003, 212).

The last study summarized here is the one made by Michael York on New Age and Neo-Paganism. Michael York distributed in 1990 a questionnaire both to participants in a New Age lecture, and to a few Neo-Pagan groups, with the purpose to develop a profile on New Agers and Neo-Pagans respectively. He also had three control groups.³ Questions included the usual background questions, but otherwise mainly centered around attitudes to issues like nuclear energy, abortion, and AIDS, as well as familiarity with and attitudes towards New Age, Neo-Pagan movements and new religious movements. 45 % of the questionnaires to the New Age group were returned, altogether 50 questionnaires. 69 % of the respondents were between 30 and 49, and 71 % female, a result which is comparable to the other studies.

³ The control groups seemed peculiarly chosen: among them a centre for people facing the challenge of AIDS, and a group of ten lawyers plus one non-lawyer husband.

Another question which is interesting in our context is one about belief in God. 33 % believed God to be an impersonal force, 6 % a real personality, and as many as 52 % marked the possibility of “other” (the remainder marked “don’t know”) (York 1995, 179-221)

Studies based on material other than individual questionnaires

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead counted in the year 2000, mostly by personal observation, participation in holistic spiritual activities and church worship respectively in the town of Kendal, UK. As they also needed longitudinal data to test their hypothesis of an on-going spiritual revolution, they used national church statistics for determining earlier participation rates in church worship, and for the holistic spiritual milieu interviews with long-standing participants in this milieu, old brochures and flyers, and the trade listing phone directory in the UK. Their conclusion was that in a typical week in 2001 there were five times as many people involved in the congregational domain as there were in the holistic milieu (7.9 % against 1.6 %). But if the holistic milieu continues to grow at the same rate as it has done since 1970, and if the congregational domain continues to decline at the same rate as it has done during the same period, a spiritual revolution will take place within the next 30 years, the holistic milieu being larger than the congregational domain (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 33-48).

There are also other quantitative studies of religious participation, but where New Age or holistic spirituality was categorized together with new religious movements⁴. One such study was conducted in Sweden in 1999. All known religious/spiritual congregations or groups received a questionnaire⁵ with the question how many people participated in any worship or social gathering during a specific Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Only 0.3 % of all participation visits were visits to New Age/new religious movements groups (Skog 2001, 21). There are, however, reasons to suspect that not all holistic spiritual groups were found. For example, no alternative therapeutic groups were involved in the study. Also, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are traditional days of activity for the traditional religions (Christianity, Islam, Judaism), but many forms of holistic spiritual activity are taking place between Monday and Thursday. This would concern, apart from alternative therapy, for example courses in yoga, meditation, or qi gong. Another factor to keep in mind, is that one third of the questionnaires sent out to the alternative groups were not returned, for unknown reasons. As the questionnaire was directed towards religious groups, several “spiritual” groups may have found no reason to answer (Frisk 2001).

Other studies may also include quantitative data or methods, but not as major parts. One example is Elizabeth Puttick (2005), comparing Mind-Body-Spirit book publishing from 1998 to 2002, exploring the central role of publishing and the media in the recent explosion of holistic ideas and practices into the mainstream. Another is Lars Ahlin (2001), who analyzed articles related to New Age in one Swedish national morning newspaper and one weekly magazine from 1975-1995, classifying them in different categories.

Surveys of whole populations

⁴ Some sociologists do not make any difference between New Age and new religious movements, see for example Paul Heelas (1996).

⁵ As the questionnaire was distributed to groups, not to individuals, the study is presented in this section.

There have not been many national or international studies with the purpose of identifying people with an explicit New Age-orientation. One national survey, representative of the Dutch population, was, however, made in Holland in 1998, by Dick Houtman and Peter Mascini. This study was designed to measure Christian, New Age and nonreligious orientation respectively. New Age was operationalized by several variables. The variables were, first, degree of involvement in reincarnation, astrology, New Age, yoga and oriental religions, and degree of agreement with beliefs in holism, spiritual transformation, syncretism and perennialism. Those involved in the first five practices proved to agree most strongly with the other items as well, which suggests that both series of questions seemed to measure roughly the same. A second kind of question dealt with personal conviction about type of transcendental consciousness (a personal God, higher force controlling life, don't know and there is no God or higher force). Christians were expected to choose the first alternative, New Agers the second, and non-religious persons the third and fourth. A third type of question asked about church membership. The respondents were then, based on these three kinds of questions, classified into four religious types: non-religious (35 %), Christian (44 %), New Age (14 %) and a mixed Christian/New Age type (7 %) (the last type was excluded from the final analysis). The purpose of the study was to study secularization and religious change. The conclusions were that there are no indications that the decline of the Christian tradition has been caused by a process of rationalization, but that decline of the Christian tradition and the growth of nonreligiosity as well as New Age are caused by increased levels of individualization (Houtman and Mascini 2002).

Michael Donahue published in 1993 a study intended to investigate the relation of New Age beliefs to the religiousness of average Protestant believers in the US. A survey, measuring a variety of religious, social, personal, and demographic factors, was distributed to nationally representative samples of pastors, coordinators of Christian education, Christian education teachers, adults, and youth in six denominations. The survey also intended to include New Age beliefs. Donahue was, among other things, interested in whether a scale of New Age beliefs could be factor-analytically defined. A total of 561 congregations participated (62 % of those invited), and 65 % of the randomly chosen adults chose to participate. A total of between 3 450 and 3 500 respondents answered each question, altogether 504 questions. Some items were selected as potentially related to a New Age ideology. The author exemplifies with: a) human nature is basically good b) I believe in reincarnation c) I believe in astrology d) through meditation and self-discipline I come to know that all spiritual truth and wisdom is within me e) I am in charge of my own life – I can be anything I want to be f) it is possible to communicate with people who have died g) an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any church. By factor analysis, Donahue showed that there emerged a consistent New Age belief factor, consisting of these seven belief statements. There was also a question about the relation between God and the world. There were some interesting findings about relations between New Age beliefs and religiousness, for example that a theologically liberal position is associated with these beliefs. New Age beliefs as astrology and reincarnation was infrequent (7-9 %), but attitudinal statements supportive of New Age ideologies (“human nature is good”, “I am in charge of my own life”, or “all spiritual truth is within me”) were endorsed by nearly a third of the respondents (Donahue 1993).

An early investigation of the religious and spiritual lives of the “baby boomers” – the generation born between 1946 and 1964 – was made by Wade Clark Roof at the end of the 1980's and beginning of the 1990's. Not discussing the concept of New Age in itself, Roof, however, showed that exposure to the counterculture (involvement in drugs, rock concerts and

demonstrations) was related to several other items often discussed in connection to New Age. Roof conducted telephone interviews with a representative selection of the American population in four states, and then in-depth interviews with some of the subjects, thus combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The response rate was 60 %. Questions included social background, religious participation, moral values, and attitudinal items. Roof cross-tabulated many items in different ways. Roof showed that the religious involvement of the boomers changed drastically over time – as children they were as religious as the generations before them, but in their early twenties the great majority had dropped out of the religious institutions. This phenomenon Roof showed to be related to degree of exposure to the counterculture. Instead, however, the baby boomers practiced other spiritual ways. 14 % practiced meditation (as much as 29 % of the better educated), 60 % preferred to explore many different religious teachings (69 % of the better educated) while 28 % preferred to stick to one faith. 26 % believed in astrology, and 28 % in reincarnation. Those most exposed to the counterculture were far less likely to be conventionally religious – and much more likely to think of themselves as spiritual (Roof 1994).

There are also the national market polls in different countries, which sometimes include questions that could be related to New Age. For example, MORI, the British national market poll organization, in January 2006 found that 28 % of the British population believed in astrology, 43 % in telepathy, 56 % in premonition/ESP, 18 % in fortune telling/Tarot, and 23 % in reincarnation (www.mori.com/polls/2006/s060117.shtml).

Internationally, in the last years or decades, two large quantitative studies have been conducted, partly related to religion, spirituality, and moral values. A few of the questions could relate to core themes of New Age. One is the European Values Study, which expanded to be the World Values Survey, conducted in 1981, 1990 and 1999/2000 in several countries, also making longitudinal comparisons possible (Halman et al. 2005, 11). In the year 2000, 44.2 % of the Europeans were found to believe in telepathy, 24.4 % in reincarnation, and 19.1 % claimed to have a lucky charm (EVS 2000⁶). For the part of for example Sweden, one could note that in 1982 17.4 % believed in reincarnation, in 1990 19.8 % and in 1999 22.3 % (www.worldvaluessurvey.org/services/index.html).

Also the European RAMP study (Religious and Moral Pluralism) in the 1990's (Gustafsson and Pettersson 2000, 11-13) had a few questions of interest for our purpose. Examples of questions that could relate to New Age is for example questions about reincarnation, belief in horoscope and lucky charms, and one question about spirituality. Much of the result is not yet published, but the question about reincarnation scores quite low in this study, compared to the EVS study (Barker 2004). The reason for this is further discussed below. Concerning spirituality, 50 % of the European people do consider themselves to be a spiritual person. Eileen Barker's analysis shows that various different things are means by spirituality (Barker 2004).

Problems with quantitative New Age studies

What is New Age? Who is a New Ager?

⁶ Data kindly supplied by professor Thorleif Pettersson, Uppsala University.

The basic problem with all studies of New Age is the question of definition, as there is no common agreement about what New Age is. As it is an etic notion, not even self definition by different individuals or groups could be used as a criterion. Some scholars have focused on one essential trait as the characteristic trait of New Age, e.g. healing (Frisk 1997; York 2005, 29), self spirituality (Heelas 1996), or the literal significance of the concept of New Age, that a new age will be coming (Melton 1988, 35-36). New Age has also been likened to a “smorgasbord”, where everyone is free to compose his or her own plate (Frisk 1997). But what is presented on this “smorgasbord” in the first place – what is New Age and what is not – has remained problematic.

The studies reviewed in this paper all define and operationalize New Age in different ways. Different questions are asked in different studies, focusing some beliefs and practices concluded by the researcher to be typical for New Age. Michael Donahue is aware of the problem, when he suggest that further research should focus on finding a more cohesive measure of New Age beliefs (1993).

Against this background, one of the major advantages of quantitative methods is the possibility to construct statistical scales, shown by factor analysis or other similar methods to measure one single dimension. In this way, different items could at least be shown to belong together, thereby suggesting that a kind of definition of New Age orientation could be possible. This perspective is demonstrated by Granqvist and Hagekull in the paper discussed above as well as in the study by Michael Donahue. Also Houtman and Mascini could, by statistical methods, show that those affirming to be involved with five certain practices, also agreed most strongly with certain statements. It could, however, be questioned whether the orientations thus shown accurately capture New Age or are wide enough to include, for example, followers of spiritualism or some Eastern religions as well (Kemp 2004, 84). This method seems to capture “something” in any case, but if this “something” should be called New Age or not could well be a subject of discussion.

Structurally, the great difference between, for example, a Christian congregation and New Age, is that New Age has no organization and no membership. Not only is there a problem with what should be considered the characteristics of New Age, but also where to draw the borders between individuals who are supposed to be engaged in New Age and individuals who are not. Daren Kemp remarks rightly, that studies cannot be compared on a similar basis, if no agreement of a tool of measuring New Age affiliation is found (Kemp 2004, 83). As there are no clear borders of New Age, individuals could be engaged on different levels, some much engaged, and some just a little. As the different surveys, discussed above, found the respondents in different ways, the respondents in the different studies represented different levels of engagement in New Age, which will inevitably have caused some of the major differences. Subscribers of a New Age magazine differ from participants of New Age lectures and workshops on engagement level, and even more may participants in alternative therapies differ from each other and from participants of New Age lectures and workshops (further discussed below). How Granqvist and Hagekull found their New Age sample from “New Age establishments” in Stockholm is not even discussed in their paper (Granqvist and Hagekull 2001). But as the latter individuals were several years younger than the samples of Rose and Frisk, there must have been some important difference. The one study where choice of respondents was not a problem, was the one made by Daren Kemp, as he investigated groups with clear membership.

The study of Heelas and Woodhead included people who used holistic therapies, but who did not consider these activities spiritual. It could be discussed if these people should be included in the New Age at all. According to Stuart Rose, one third of the British people tried out alternative therapies between 1984 and 1987. The holistic therapies clearly overlap and are a part of New Age, but not everyone participating in these therapies could be considered a New Ager. Stuart Rose writes that an individual can purchase therapies without subscribing to the more expansive New Age ideologies which might incorporate them. Rose claims that it is not possible to separate out different types of healing processes and label some New Age and others differently, but that it is possible to create a differentiation between the two by addressing the reasons why individuals choose the healing processes they do. The difference, says Rose, clearly rests in the motivations each individual has in adopting their healing path. If there is an effort to reach what is claimed to be the Higher Self, and if this is accompanied by feelings of unconditional love and compassion combined with a sense of Self-responsibility,⁷ then it can be argued that the motivation is indeed New Age. However, if the same healing processes are used simply to repair or entertain the body, they should not be seen as being used for New Age purposes. Just because a person might treat themselves with acupuncture and aromatherapy does not automatically make either the treatments or the user New Age (Rose 2005, 198-202).

Granqvist and Hagekull (2001) also note this difficulty and try to distinguish between people who believe that, for example, herb eating is beneficial, and those who believe that reiki healing is at least as effective as regular medical treatments. Their way of differing between engagement levels in alternative medicine, however, differs quite radically from the way of Stuart Rose referred to above.

It is clear that it is the individuals with lower engagement in the New Age which are the most difficult to track down and find criteria for. What should be the minimum criteria for New Age participation? In the EVS study, 24.4 % were shown to believe in reincarnation. This result could be used for claiming that about one quarter of the population in Europe is New Age oriented. Of course, this conclusion is arguable.

Questions and answers?

Quantitative studies are often characterized by a distance between the researcher and the respondent. The respondents often just receive a paper with questions and different possibilities of tick-boxes. There is nobody to interact with, to discuss different interpretations, reservations and nuances in questions and answers with, and no one to ask for clarification. Small differences in formulation of questions and possible answers might generate huge differences in results. One example is the study of Heelas and Woodhead, discussed above, where 57.6 % answered that they believed in God, but on another question in the same study 30 % answered that they believed in a personal God, and 51 % that they believed in some sort of spirit or life force. Thus it seems that almost one third of the people believing in a higher power would not have been found if there had been only one question formulated as a yes- or no question about belief in God. In a qualitative study, however, by discussion and communication, different nuances of belief in God or spirit had definitely been identified.

⁷ To describe New Age in this way is peculiar to Rose (2005).

Another problem with formulation is also that questions may be leading. It is easy to predict the answer to a question formulated as “Do you believe that spirituality can be experienced without love, or is love always present in spirituality?” (Rose 2005, 169; 355). Formulated in another way, the result would surely have come out differently.

Quantifying may mean different things. In the most uncomplicated cases, you simply count for example how many books are sold. In other cases, there are definite yes or no answers, for example a question in a survey if you are a man or a woman. This kind of question is of course easier to answer than another kind of yes and no question, as the one about belief in God. In more complicated cases, the respondent may be asked to measure, for example, how important God is for him or her, by using a scale from 1 to 5. A question about, for example belief in God, could generate completely different answers, if there is a simple yes/no possibility, or if there are possibilities of several different answers. One well-known example of this is the EVS question about reincarnation, where the respondent was asked whether or not he/she believed in reincarnation. In another question, the respondent was asked about belief in resurrection. This resulted in some people marking belief in both. In the RAMP study, however, the respondents were asked to choose between reincarnation and other possibilities, with the result that less than half of the respondents affirmed that they believed in reincarnation compared to the EVS study (Barker 2004). Thus the way answers are permitted may radically influence the result.

Sometimes there are indications that something may be wrong with the question or the response alternatives. Michael York asked about belief in God, and received 52 % marking the response “other”. This means something must have been wrong in the formulation. What did the respondents mean by “other”? In this case, qualitative interviews could have been interesting as a complement.

Formulation of questions and possibilities of answers is thus very important in quantitative studies, and might be a crucial source of error. There are also different possibilities to account for the results, which might make a bias. As in qualitative studies, where quantitative studies include open ended questions, the answers have to be interpreted and categorized, with the same dangers of mistake or misrepresentation.

Another important source of error to do with representativity in quantitative surveys is “falling off”, i.e. that some people choose not to participate. Quantitative studies are supposed to be representative for whole populations. Questionnaires do show different frequencies of answer depending on, for example, the way of distribution. Stuart Rose got back only 17 % of the questionnaires he distributed, and of course we have to ask: what about the 83 % who did not answer? Are the 17 % who answered representative of the whole group, or not? A common example for a case where the respondents clearly would not be representative for the whole group, is if the questionnaire would be sent in electronically. The actual respondents would, in this case, be sure to be younger and more often male than in the group as a whole.

Lack of longitudinal data

Some data does not say much when standing alone. Is x % little or much? We need comparative data to make the figures mean something. In some cases, for example to be able to say something about increases or decreases, longitudinal data is absolutely necessary.

Longitudinal data is, however, often lacking for New Age, as New Age is a new research area. We have almost no reliable data before 1990. Heelas and Woodhead needed longitudinal data for their study, and tried to create it with different methods like studying old phone directories, old brochures and flyers, and interview long-standing participants in the holistic spiritual milieu. However creative and interesting an attempt, their method was of course not very reliable. To measure the same thing, the method has to be the same. These possibilities are so far lacking in studies of New Age, but may open in the future, of course if the same surveys are systematically used again.

Conclusion

Quantitative methods are uniquely valuable to religious studies in at least two ways. One, they supply information about size of different religious phenomena in relation to general populations. By longitudinal studies then, quantitative methods may supply empirical evidence for increases or decreases of different variables over time, supplying empirical data to, for example, validate larger sociological theories about social and religious change. Two, by using statistical techniques on a quantitative material, additional knowledge is generated by possibilities to relate different variables in different ways. By for instance factor analysis, different items could be empirically shown to belong together.

So far, however, the unique potential of quantitative methods has not been much used in the existing studies of New Age. The main problem is that most scholars of New Age are not statisticians, and do not employ anything beyond the most rudimentary statistical techniques. Further use of quantitative methods could often have thrown much more light upon relations between different variables, than is the case in most studies. Therefore, the most important thing for future quantitative studies of New Age is to start using and integrating the statistical techniques available in another way than has been done up to now.

The problem of defining New Age is at the core of the studies discussed in this paper. To be comparable, surveys have to study the same thing. However, New Age is not an easy phenomenon to define. Definitions are not “right or wrong”, but rather “more or less useful”. To use different definitions of New Age may not be wrong, depending on the purpose of different studies and other circumstances. But what is definitely needed – and often today lacking – is reflection about the definition problem, and the standpoint taken has to be a conscious choice. From that departure point, there may come into being different ways of thinking about the definition problem, different perspectives about how to conceive New Age, and a reflected and conscious choice from each researcher to use a certain perspective in each study. In this matter, quantitative statistical methods might in future play an important role, as there thus are empirical ways to show at least that certain different clusters of beliefs or practices are related.

However, some voices have been heard recently, claiming that maybe there is no such thing as “New Age”, that it might be a scholarly or media construction (see Sutcliffe 2003). From this specific standpoint, it could be questioned whether there is a point to label any statistically defined cluster of beliefs or practices as “New Age” or not. Personally, I would argue for the value of identifying, by statistical techniques, different orientations in popular religiosity, but that the concept New Age in itself may today be meaningless (Frisk, forthcoming). More research on popular religiosity as a whole is needed, starting from perspectives of the grassroots and not from a construction of what New Age or something else

should be. In this research, large quantitative studies, using all the possibilities of statistical techniques, would be a most valuable contribution.

As there is no defined New Age membership, another difficulty with the quantitative studies reviewed here is that there are different levels of engagement in New Age. This circumstance has also to be illuminated from different angles. As far as my understanding goes, New Age engagement could only be discussed in terms of more or less. As in the case of defining New Age, a more conscious reflection and discussion about this matter has to take place, before choosing material for a study than has been the case in several of the studies reviewed here. Statistical methods may also here be used, to account for different levels of engagement and presenting the data in different ways.

A subculture related to New Age, where different levels of engagement are visible, and where more research definitely is needed, is the area of alternative or holistic therapies. More work needs to be done on the different possibilities of attitude and perspective which are possible for an individual here, the differences and similarities between different therapies, and the potential relation to New Age. It may be possible, like Stuart Rose attempts, to differ between a mere physical motivation and a motivation which “goes further”, but what this “further” may mean needs to be further investigated.

As time passes, the possibilities for longitudinal studies about New Age will increase, as will the possibilities to say something empirically grounded about increases or decreases of different elements related to New Age. This is also an important area where work needs to be done.

Finally, there needs to be more communication and cooperation between quantitative and qualitative studies of New Age. Used together, they could add up to much more than the sum of both. Qualitative studies could be used to refine questions in quantitative studies, which could be used to add figures to the qualitative ones. So far, research has often stopped with one kind of study.

To sum up, large quantitative research projects about New Age are definitely called for. More reflection and awareness is needed concerning questions of definition and selection. Further, full use of the potentials of statistical techniques would add new dimensions to the study of New Age, especially if supplemented with qualitative studies. And, ideally, this research should encompass popular religion as a whole. In this way, new ways of understanding what a phenomenon like New Age might be, may dawn.

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