**Varieties of belief over time: reflections from a longitudinal study of youth and belief**

**Introduction**

The current generation of teenagers and young adults in Britain and most other Euro American countries is apparently less religious than the previous generation, at least if measured by church attendance and questions about belief in God and other forms of Christian doctrine (Brierley; Crockett and Voas) Insufficiently explored are complex notions of belief, transition, and change ( Garnett et al.). Tracing changing beliefs, attitudes, values and opinions over time has generally been the preserve of quantitative social scientists, asking people in established cohorts, panels or waves the same questions every few years to see how their views and values might have changed. Little research into change over time has adopted qualitative approaches, and we therefore lack more nuanced, richer insights beyond broad patterns.

This paper discusses how varieties of belief were identified in longitudinal research and shown to be fairly stable over time for young people in the study. I report here on the final phase of the project when, from 2009 through to 2011, I revisited a sample of the population I had first explored as a ‘snapshot’ during my initial fieldwork in 2003-05 when some were as young as 14 and as old as 83. I found then that people generally refer to ‘belief’ as a type of faith in deeply held, non-verifiable values or truth propositions that reflect their identities and sense of belonging to social relationships (Day 2011). The main contribution of the original study was to extend the idea of ‘belief’ to include both religious and non-religious forms and to show that when non-religious people claim a religious identity they often do so for significant social reasons. When I asked people what they believed in, they responded with either a straightforward religious answer (‘I believe in God) or non-religious answers (‘I believe in the love of my family’ or ‘fairness’, or ‘being good’). Throughout our semi-structured interviews I probed what they believed about morality, about the nature of existence and about what was important to them and affected them emotionally.

I concluded that people who are otherwise non-religious in belief and practice (often described by scholars as nominal or marginal) may sometimes self-identify as religious to mark forms of social beliefs and a sense of belonging. I offered an initial typology of ethnic, natal, and aspirational nominalism. These findings developed much disciplinary theory in both the European and North American schools of the sociology of religion that assert that most people are ‘unchurched’ but ‘believe without belonging’, while privately maintaining beliefs in God and other ‘spiritual’ phenomena as forms of invisible, privatised religion or individualised subjectivity

Smith, Faris et al. observed that much longitudinal research is either dated, focuses on specific religious groups, or consists of larger studies where religion and belief are not investigated in any depth. His own work with the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR) goes some way to correct this. His, and others’ works, have generally found that young people derive meaning, happiness and moral frameworks from social relationships, not religion, but Smith and others have predicted that such non-religious relationships would be insufficient to support people in difficult times or give them sufficient bases of meaning (Clydesdale; Mason et al.; Savage et al.; Smith and Denton; Smith and Snell ). Without larger religious or even non-religious metanarratives of, say, political or civic values and engagements young people, it is argued, may slip into existential meaninglessness, lacking fixed reference points and the currency of social capital. Terms such as meaning, belief, religion, change, and identity are all, of course, contested ideas that, I will argue, underpin but are rarely exposed in such studies.

In the case of the NSYR, Smith and Snell (266-267) report that young people who are more religious think about the meaning of life more than the non-religious. We are apparently to assume that this is a good thing. In the first phase of my research it was apparent to me that few people, young or old, thought about the ‘meaning of life’ as they preferred to focus on the present and their more urgent concerns of relationships, jobs and health. Noting the ubiquity of ‘meaning’ within studies of religion, for example, Robbins (218) warned of the tendency to impute or discern ‘meaning’ when it is perhaps the researcher, not the researched, who is seeking it: “meaninglessness is always something untoward, lobbed in unexpectedly”. The normative imposition of ‘meaning’ is not the only example of how Smith uses the study to promote a particular view of religiosity and what may constitute a good life. In the latest book of his NSYR analysis (Smith, Christoffersen et al.) he more openly engages with, as he titles it, ‘the Dark Side’, continuing his earlier argument that the young people he studied are morally adrift through their focus on happiness, family and friends.

Such reports and discourses were contrary to what I generally found. My objective in returning to the field in 2009 was partly motivated by a desire to investigate that contradiction further. Primarily, I wanted to see how my theories of religious and non-religious belief drawn from the first phase of my research were useful in explaining what I found when I returned. Second, I wanted to explore whether young people’s beliefs had changed as they aged and experienced significant life changes and, third, whether those beliefs and the relationships they were based on were sufficient to have sustained thus far the young people I would re-visit.

This paper relies only on part of those data that specifically deal with young people’s beliefs and identities and, due to length and scope restrictions, does not offer comparisons with the older people who also formed part of that study. The examples discussed below were chosen as representative of the three main styles of religious and non-religious belief identified in the study’s first phase and then further developed during the re-study: propositional, felt (embodied and emotional) and performative.

My main finding discussed here is that those three distinct varieties of religious and non-religious belief operate interdependently to sustain young people as they move through significant life transitions. Although I identified those facets in earlier research it was only when revisiting my former informants that I was able to see how the salience and sustainability of those beliefs endured over time and in what circumstances they changed.

**Method**

***Data gathering***

During the initial fieldwork (2003-2005) I directly interviewed and through observation studied people aged from their early teens to early eighties living in towns and villages in northern England, deliberately trying to capture and contrast the beliefs of three generations. In common with the demographics of England & Wales, most were white and most were from middle to lower socio-economic groups. In the follow-up study (2009-2011) I planned to re-visit as many of the original 68 informants as possible. I expected and achieved a high retention rate - 38 people or 55.8% - mainly because when I interviewed them initially they agreed I could contact them in the future for further research. I had their home addresses and telephone numbers from their original consent forms and continued to maintain local networks. Of the 38 original informants I revisited I formally re-interviewed 22 (32%) and followed three in-depth as case studies.

In my initial research I developed unique and indirect methods for researching belief without asking overtly religious questions (Day) or recruiting people on the basis of their interest or involvement in religion. Semi-structured interview techniques allowed informants to share long, elaborate ‘belief narratives’. These probed broadly issues of meaning, morality, and transcendence. Questionnaire surveys were inappropriate, as they could not capture the nuances linking belief to social relations. Using the same indirect methods in the follow-up study, we had extended conversations, focusing on what they believe now and how their beliefs may have changed relative to their earlier narratives. Following the initial re-interview phase, I created in-depth case studies with three individuals and their wider social networks. People were selected through considering such significant criteria as age, gender, social class, whether they had moved from the original location and what sort of transitions they might have experienced. One was a woman in her 80s, who had remained in the same location and whose husband had died in the interim period. Another was a male university student who had moved to a different part of the country and a third was a young woman who had become pregnant at 16, soon after our initial interview, and then married and had another child in the same vicinity as she had lived previously. The aim was see how beliefs are shaped, resourced, performed and ‘embodied’ [[1]](#footnote-1) across time and places and required several visits to talk with them and their wider social networks of family and friends.

One immediate ‘problem’ that arose presented methodological challenges which began to shape and inform the research questions and analysis: how important was ‘place’? The resolution of that problem occurred through fieldwork and through adopting a multi-sited research strategy that developed a notion of place as more than a territorial space, but also as a network of social relationships encompassing both ‘place’ and ‘time’. The research approach therefore rested on rich, embodied, emotional, long-term research relationships requiring a variety of ethnographic techniques (Hammersley and Atkinson) as the research progressed.

***Interpretive framework***

It was more plausible to consider belief more in terms of socially-constructed ‘worldview’,

as Smart so described in his The way people described beliefs was not typically through coherent, cognitively based belief statements, but stories with real characters, plots, and emotional content: what I termed ‘holistic belief narratives.’ Like Good in his exploration of narratives of illness, I was to learn that rich examples, emplotment, characters, and multiple viewpoints are characteristic of such narratives. People did not typically articulate their beliefs in grammatically grand language or in flat, rehearsed creedal monotones; their belief narratives were polyvocal, enlivened with the stories and voices of other people, alive or dead, who meant something to them in whom they ‘believe’.

The analytical framework developed in my earlier work provided a robust method of multi dimensional interpretation through considerations of content, source, practice, salience, function, time and place. The practice of using multidimensional models for religiosity is widely accepted, beginning with Malinowski’s analysis of the Kula’s beliefs and behaviours (1961 [1922]) and his later reflections (2002 [1935]) on the ritual properties of language. Glock and Stark proposed that the religiosity of a congregation could be analysed by considering five dimensions: belief, practice, experience, knowledge, and consequences. In considering how their model would apply to an analysis of belief, rather than religiosity, and to a person, rather than a congregation, I encountered some problems in analytically separating belief

from knowledge, experience, or consequences. Further, my informants’ narratives did not correspond to such distinctions or cognitive ‘belief systems’ as described by, for example, Borhek and Curtis.

multidimensional approach to analyzing religion. In the final phase discussed here I added two new dimensions of time, and place (See Figure 1) to my original model.

(Insert Figure 1 here.)

Throughout the empirical examples described below, I use the seven dimensions listed in my model to help explain variations and consistencies. Dimensions were created inductively as the research progressed and were intended for hermeneutic purposes. Thinking about ‘Content’ helped me focus on the ‘what’ of belief. This dimension is the only one sociologists usually find when asking people what-oriented questions, such as “do you believe in God/Jesus/Life After Death” and so on. Respondents may say yes, no, or maybe, without divulging what they mean by it or if it matters. In more in-depth conversation, the content discussion can be developed to understand how that belief may be practised. For some people, that may mean attending church, while for others it might mean something else, such as volunteering in the community. As so much of what we study about religion relates to how beliefs are formed, and therefore how they might change, the sources of beliefs were explored. What then became significant in conversations was whether, and how, those beliefs mattered. Many people might agree that God might exist, but find this makes no difference in their lives, whereas for others such a belief gives them ultimate meaning. A certain belief may or may not function as a personal guiding principle or have a wider social effect. Finally, to historicise and contextualise beliefs I wanted to know when, where and how they were held, sourced, and practised, and whether changes in time and place provoked changes in belief content, practice, salience or function.

The efficacy of the multidimensional framework will be more fully illustrated as it is applied in the analysis of my empirical data below.

**Belief in theory**

The following is a brief review of the theoretical approaches to belief that informed this work. A more lengthy and detailed overview is found in recent work: (Day 2011, 2010.)

Tylor’s classic definition of religion as ‘a belief in spirits’ remains dominant within the sociology of religion. As Lambeck (21) noted: Tylor’s theories ‘remain congenial to many contemporary thinkers and [are] indeed almost a part of western ‘‘common sense’’ on the subject’.

In contrast, Durkheim, placed ‘practice’ on an equal footing with belief and argued that

 sharing common beliefs and practices was what defined religion or, ultimately, the

experience of worshipping the wider entity of society.

The theoretical grounding in the sociology of religion is largely Tylorian and Weberian, with

assumptions about beliefs in spiritual beings and a search for meaning

being somehow inherent and irreducibly both human and religious (See, for example, Berger, Davie, Luckmann).Several anthropologists have argued that ‘belief’ has an historic and spatial specificity. Needham criticized the way belief had been used indiscriminately by, primarily, anthropologists and philosophers. Ruel showed that ‘belief’ meant different things to different people at different times, drawing on the Religious Studies scholar William Cantwell Smith , who discussed how ‘belief’ in Christianity changed over time from something denoting trust, reciprocity, fidelity and love to a more contingent, or propositional form.

Ruel (27–9) identified four fallacies about belief: that it is central to all religions, in the same way that it is central to Christianity; that belief guides and therefore explains behaviour;

that belief is psychological; and that it is the belief, not the object of belief, that is most important. He offered a way of thinking about belief that profoundly influenced future scholars (see, for example, Robbins) by suggesting a distinction (103)

 between ‘‘belief in’’ (trust in) and ‘‘belief that’’ (propositional belief).’ Ruel concluded it is

best to use the term ‘belief’ as we might use ‘faith’ if what we mean is ‘trust’.

Following Needham, Ruel and Smith, Asad claimed that scholars such as Geertz (and, implicitly, Weber) adopted meaning-centred, order-based, universalistic definitions of religion without showing how, and under what conditions, such meanings are constructed. Asad argued that religion, and belief, were historically contingent and shaped by powerful leaders who authenticated and legitimized certain forms of belief and not others. Asad argued that, with the advance of Enlightenment and the rise of science, religious leaders in the seventeenth century shifted the emphasis of religious adherence from observable practice to private religious belief where an ‘emphasis on belief meant that hence forth religion could be conceived as a set of propositions to which believers gave assent’ (40-1)

Robbins (2007) reviewed Ruel, Smith and Asad and agreed (15) that it is a ‘propositional’ sense of ‘believing that’ which causes problems in cross-cultural comparisons and ‘among those anthropologists and other comparativists who have carefully considered “believing” in the “believe that” sense, none see it as a cross-culturally valid concept, while some do see the “believe in” concept or something like it translating quite well’.

The above discussion briefly sketches alternative ways of conceiving belief from a propositional form to one that is more felt, internally and subjectively as both emotional and embodied. And yet, as I will discuss below, the need to give assent to certain propositions is important to some people at certain times and in certain places. It also became evident that propositional belief was a part of other experiences of belief, both felt and what I will discuss finally as performative.

Using empirical examples below, I discuss how I found all three varieties of belief present and how their varying salience changed according to the sources of belief and the time and place in which they were experienced.

**Propositional beliefs**

As discussed above, many scholars of religion have stressed that propositional beliefs are central to Christianity with its emphasis on truth claims. I hope to show here, through examples of William and Joe, that propositional beliefs are just one variety of belief that may serve people well at certain times.

*William and the limits of reason*

When I met William, age 20, in his university town, he still resembled the young boy I had interviewed six years earlier, when he was 14. Then, he had been bullied constantly: “basically I always came home with bruises on my arms in year 7,” William told me over lunch in his favourite café near his university.

I wasn’t surprised to hear about the bullying. When I had first observed him in the classroom in 2003 he was 14 going on 30. There was something already old, weary and nervous about his expression. As he sat at a table with three other boys, I watched them whispering to him with nasty expressions on their faces. They weren’t his friends. He had no friends. He told me during our interview back then that he played a lot of computer games at home, alone.

Six years later, that had changed abruptly. The day he arrived at university he vowed never to play computer games again. It was an anti-social activity, he explained, and as he had arrived in a new place he wanted to have a new social life. The milieu of the university and the nature of shared living accommodation provided him with an instant, new social world into which he was determined to participate wholly.

His social and emotional life was wholly vested in his friendships. His new companions were helping him finesse what he referred to as his ‘beliefs’ through long, often late-night conversations. William explained that he did not think his beliefs have dramatically changed, but he is trying to understand them better through articulating them with other people: “I’m kind of like trying, currently I'm kind of working through these arguments with people over belief” The example he gave concerned the rights and wrongs of altruism: belief, in that context, was non-religious but philosophical and intellectual and while socially-embedded through conversations with friends, it did not resonate with belief as emotional or embodied or as a means of belonging. The content of this kind of belief was more akin to a ‘propositional’ belief, where a particular truth claim might be proposed and then argued. And yet, a ‘propositional’ form of belief also arose when we discussed his periods of depression. At times like that, he said, he sometimes wished he had been raised to believe in God because belief in God must be reassuring for some people. Unfortunately, he concluded with a sad shake of his head, he knew that were he to turn to religion it would be because it was a tool – “and not really believe in it”.

Here, again, he is drawing on a truth claim – ‘does God exist?’ That kind of propositional belief would have, returning to my interpretive model, an emotional salience and calming function for William had he been able to intellectually accept it. It would therefore be incorrect to discuss his desire for a propositional truth claim as wholly intellectual in this case when its purpose was to produce emotional well-being. This point arises again, below, as I turn to the case of Joe.

*Joe: unreasonable and reasonable Catholic beliefs*

Joe, like William, was also 14 when I first interviewed him. He, too, had a close-knit circle of friends at university. Most were not, as was he, Catholic or church-attending Christians but that did not seem to matter to him. Like William, Joe’s propositional beliefs had not changed over time or place, although he was confronting a cognitive crisis that might have a dramatic effect. There were certain doctrines of the Catholic Church with which he had begun to disagree strongly, particularly concerning sex outside of marriage, contraception, and the Church’s opposition to condom use in Africa as a means of combatting HIV-AIDS. The Church’s line on those issues reflected a truth claim about sex and morality in which Joe no longer believed. Referring to the Church’s sex-based doctrines, Joe said, “I think that they should realise that, and just adapt into the times, sort of thing. But I still like go to church and I still believe”. This was not a contradiction, but a distinction he was drawing between different truth claims. He rejected one about contraception, but accepted others, particularly about life after death.

Referring again to my interpretative model, I suggest that relying on propositional, truth claims concerning heaven increased in salience for him during the previous few years as he faced his grandparents’ long-term illnesses and deaths. One of the ways he coped with those experiences was to rely on propositional belief. He said:

I'm also religious, like, Catholic so, there’s that belief that death isn’t as bad as, like, some, sort of, fear it to be, and that, and also, with the fact that my grandparents were both, like, fairly badly ill, like, it kind of, was like a help to know that, it was like them escaping, because the last few sort of months for both of them weren’t pleasant.

His belief in heaven was shared by his family with whom he was very close. While, therefore, we could say Joe rejected one form of Catholic propositional belief, concerning sex, he wholly accepted another propositional belief. His belief in life after death was a propositional belief drawn from the source of Catholic teaching whose ‘content’, again returning to my interpretive model, ‘functioned’ in a particularly ‘salient’ way to comfort him and his family at a certain ‘time’. The above examples suggest that propositional belief is vulnerable to change in certain circumstances. William debated it with his friends and would, as an intellectual, refine it, as he heard better argument or evidence. The ‘content’ of propositional belief was dependent on its sources and the extent to which the believer might invest authority in that source. In a similar way, Joe’s propositional beliefs in the nature of sex and sin had changed as he learned more about the adverse consequences of those beliefs in practice when they affected the course of HIV AIDs in Africa. The content of that belief was conveyed by a source – the Church- whose leaders were losing authority for him as he considered the effects of their teaching. I compare that to his belief in heaven, whose source was the Catholic ‘religion’, rather than contemporary church leaders. The salience of that belief and its function of comforting him and his family was a significant consequence of that belief. I therefore propose that my interpretive model helped show how propositional beliefs may change when they are primarily intellectual and can be proved or disproved by logical rhetoric or evidence from trusted sources. When, however, they relate to truth claims that are embedded in important, trusted social relationships they may sustain.

**Felt belief**

Recent work on the long-neglected emotional quality of religious belief, experience and identity (Riis and Woodhead) on the materiality of belief (Morgan) and its historical, cultural variations (Lindquist and Coleman) have successfully demonstrated that some varieties of belief are not primarily propositional but mostly emotional and embodied. The faith Joe has in his family was the one that seemed to sustain him during the grueling period of his grandparents’ illness and death. They were a close family and Joe found it particularly difficult to witness his mother’s grief. When I asked him how he had coped with the strain of their illness and death, he said it was through his family relationships and his faith:

I think mainly the, just having the family around to support, like having people to talk to, especially like my brothers because, I don't think it’s as easy going to my mum to talk to because she was already going through a lot more anyway, like, having my brothers there just to chat to about things, just, but also like,

Joe ‘believed’ in his family in the sense that he had a faith in them. That faith acted as a felt, emotional resource that guided and reassured him. While he also mentioned, as described above, the content of his ‘propositional’ belief in the doctrine of ever-lasting life, both varieties intersect, overlap, and support the other. Neither has to be considered more authentic or salient, as it is their co-existence that functions to support him. Joe and his family are a little like the fishermen Malinowski observed in the Trobiand islands. By watching fishermen engage in magic rituals as they prepared to set out to sea, Malinowski concluded that the fishermen were not taming some distant gods, but through the group ritual were helping each other overcome their fears. Fishing in the calm waters of the lagoon did not require magical assistance, but venturing into the dangerous waters of the open sea or, in Joe’s case, of grief and loss, required additional group and spiritual resources. Such a turn to socially-mediated supernatural assistance may occur just as significantly amongst the religious as the secular, as I found with Charlotte, below.

*Charlotte: love is all you need*

When I first met Charlotte in 2004 she was a nervous, unhappy-looking 14-year-old who told me in our two interviews about being bullied and made to feel unpopular by the other students. She found solace in her what she described as conversations with her deceased grandfather and, although she said she was not religious, she enjoyed reading the bibles and diaries of her deceased grandmother. That encounter helped me theorise then about the nature of so-called ‘religious experience’ amongst the non-religious (Day 2011) and how the non-religious beliefs of non-religious people can be understood as a faith-based ‘belief in belonging’. I was therefore particularly curious to see, when I returned to the field in 2009, how she had been faring. The initial update from her former teacher was not encouraging. She had left school early, without completing year 11, because she had become pregnant. My heart sank as I imagined the lonely, sad girl struggling to cope without friends or possibly other social support: another ‘teenage mother’ statistic with all the attendant problems of social deprivation and without strong forms of emotional or ontological support. I sent her a letter along with other letters requesting interviews with my former informants, but I was not surprised that it was unanswered. What did surprise me was a comment from one of her former classmates, Gemma, whom I interviewed a short while later. She often saw Charlotte, she said, wheeling her pram around town with not one but two children. They sometimes chatted and she seemed very happy, Gemma said. A few weeks after that interview I received a text message from Charlotte inviting me to visit her.

When I visited her at her council flat on the outskirts of Bradford, I was unsure about what I would confront. The door was opened by a smiling young man who introduced himself as Peter, her husband. He led me up the stairs into the flat where Charlotte rushed out from a nearby room and hugged me. She looked happy and healthy. The flat was simply furnished in second-hand, good condition furniture - comfy small sofa, dining table, and pine chairs. Family photos and neatly hand-printed copies of her love poetry to Peter were displayed on walls and a main window. Peter made me coffee and I met their three-year-old son, Callum, and six-month old daughter, Sophie. For the next two hours we talked and played with the children while I caught up on their accounts of the previous five years. Some were harrowing: Charlotte had been abused by her father when she was 13 and 14. She met Peter at a college she attended when she left school and told him about her father. Peter confronted the father, convinced Charlotte to press charges, and her father was convicted and jailed. Her mother and siblings were angry at her and for some time the family was estranged. More recently, however, they had re-established contact and smoothed things over. The father had learned from his experience and was genuinely sorry, Charlotte explained.

During the next year of fieldwork I maintained close contact with Charlotte. Peter continued to thrive in his work, Callum settled in pre-school, Sophie grew more lively and beautiful, and, despite several crises involving her siblings, Charlotte remained calm and apparently happy. On a few occasions we discussed her beliefs concerning religion- those truth claims I would describe as ‘propositional’ - and how those might have changed over time. Nothing much had changed as far as her non-religion was concerned. She still described herself as not religious and did not engage in any religious practices. The topic had no salience for her and her practice of mentally communing with her deceased grandfather was never described with religious terminology. I was therefore somewhat surprised to learn that she was helping her sister plan a religious funeral for her still-born baby.

 “She wants a really big funeral in a church”, she told me. I asked if her sister was religious.

“Oh, no, none of us are religious”, she said. She then explained that this was their biggest problem in planning the funeral. How would they find and approach a church for the service and the burial, as the family had never attended church? The exchange reminded me of Davie’s (21-36) argument about vicarious religion: although people may not attend church, they may still turn to the church in times of need. And yet, as salient as church-behaviour might suddenly emerge for Charlotte and her family, without the background of church practice she lacked the sources to engage with the church and receive the benefit of what might for others be a prime function of religious practice: community support.

Nevertheless, Charlotte had discussed the matter in depth with her sister and knew exactly what she wanted. There would be a horse-drawn hearse, and two doves. The baby would be buried, not cremated, preferably in a church near where they lived so they could visit the grave. The picture she painted was filled with cultural artefacts and symbols drawn from rich resources of story-books, magazines, or movies.

Charlotte’s non-religious beliefs did not impose any psychological conflicts. The infusion of a ‘traditional’ church-based religious ceremony with contemporary, popular motifs was, for her, an uncomplicated hybrid. Her beliefs in the importance of her family, sometimes against almost insurmountable odds, was a form of emotional, embodied ‘felt’ belief that did not require validation from religious authority or intellectual assent. They were experienced subjectively but produced inter-subjectively through social relations. Often relying on deeply-held truth claims, felt beliefs do not act independently from propositional beliefs. Together they fuel transformations that, through repeated practice, become performative.

**Performative belief**

While thus far I have discussed propositional and felt beliefs, there is another kind of belief I have identified that, while relying on propositional and felt aspects, combines them to create something new. What I term performative belief refers to beliefs that are brought into being through rituals or social acts and are then repeated to reinforce their salience and function. The idea that belief has a performative function draws on Durkheimian theories that belief is produced through the ecstasy of collective human ritual action. Through his work with Mauss he argued that concepts and classifications arose from social relations: ‘The first logical categories were social categories; the first classes of things were classes of men into

which these things were integrated’ (93).

The Durkheimian approach was to argue that beliefs were produced (what

I would describe as ‘performatively’) through rituals of belonging

rather than interpreting ritual as a mirror or performance of already-existing beliefs.

In my previous work I have described (Day 2011) how the process of self-identifying as Christian on the UK census is a performative act, bringing into being and reinforcing the belief that Christianity is a social marker relating to ethnic, natal and moral identities. I also theorized (98-114) that people’s recounting of their experiences sensing the presence of deceased loved ones were performative belief rituals serving to create beliefs in life after death and continued relationships and belonging.

This version of belief is not pre-formed, but created - like the beliefs shared by Malinowski’s fishermen - through social interaction. I am therefore not relying strictly on the idea of ‘performance’ as suggested by, for example, Goffman (15) as: “the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants”. That approach rightly draws attention to the act of creating an image to influence others, but my reading of ‘performative’ incorporates the act of creating and influencing one’s own identity through social interaction and therefore relies on the performance of others as well as oneself. I begin with Austin’s observation that some linguistic performances are performative in creating a changed state of affairs, for example when during a marriage ceremony the couple is declared by the officiator to be married. The focus here, I note, is on the officiator and not the other participants. Butler developed the idea of performative by arguing that performative acts are created through repetition. Such acts, I suggest, must be read in their social contexts relative to other relationships and authorities. As Firth anticipated and Bourdieu argued: social realities are not created through Austinian linguistic utterances alone, but through the symbolic power already present, if unacknowledged, within specific social relations.

In the case of Duncan, below, his social relationships affected both his religious and non-religious beliefs and through those beliefs, his identity,

I first met Duncan when he was 15, and then again when was 20. As we began our later conversation, he wanted to emphasise how much he had changed, and why. The first he mentioned was his new emotional relationship with a woman he described as spiritual. He said:

Well, obviously the biggest change in my life would have been meeting my fiancée, and getting married, and that's, that's changed me a lot, it's made me a much calmer individual, and, thinking more and more the future and the long-term things now instead of short-term.

That change in social relationship affected how he saw himself as a person, and also seemed to have affected the content of his religious beliefs, their salience, and their function. At 15, he was unequivocal that he did not believe in a god, and nor did he want to. When I asked him then what he believed in, he had replied quickly:

 Not any religion! Big Bang theory. Tricky question! Science. Theory of universal consciousness. Quite complex.... everything has a consciousness. Humans take that to create their own consciousness.

Five years later he reflected on what he had believed as a young teenager:

well...when I was younger, I was...more...inclined towards atheism. I mean, but I, believe really that's more just a rebellion at a young age for me. I'm not gonna say that I believe in any strict one religion now, or, but I do believe in something. I would, I would probably just call myself agnostic. And, I can't really say, why I believe in something. It's just something that I feel. And, I feel that I can't relate it to any one religion because...um, I feel those religions almost make what I can feel kind of...impure by – well not so much impure - but they tell me, 'this is definitely God, this is definitely what God wants, this is what God's done'. Whereas I prefer to think of a God, as, more of a passive being. I don't know what God may have done, I don't know what may have been accident or a product of science, but I just believe, and it's a comforting thing.

Duncan relies more on his feelings now, whereas when he was 15 he was almost wholly committed to rational positivism or what I might describe as ‘propositional beliefs’. In the extract above, I note how he deliberately distances himself from religions that advance only propositional belief systems. While he is inclined towards analysis, he now allows the felt, embodied experience of his beliefs to interact with key events and social relationships to performatively produce changes in identity not entirely dependent on intellectualist assumptions.

 Part of this change occurred with his engagement, but there was another change in his identity that occurred through the social context of his schooling and dramatically affected his life. His English Literature teacher was able to demonstrate the vibrancy of characters and plots in a way that captured Duncan’s imagination. Reading fiction gave him new insights into people and the nature of life, profoundly affecting his beliefs about human nature and, subsequently, his identity as he turned from a concentration on the sciences to a commitment to become an English teacher. He explained:

It was an epiphany really, um, I discovered I really enjoyed English Literature, and, that's when I decided that I wanted to study it at university, and that's, really, shaped a lot of things in my life since then, because, um, I enjoy reading it, so I spend my pleasure time on it, I reflect on it in my real life, um, all kinds of things really.

The two events of meeting his fiancée and finding inspiration from his teachers were the sources of his change in beliefs and identity. What he came to believe had the performative effect of producing changes in identity. He explained:

It's been specific events in my life that have really shaped me. I mean, obviously, it occurred, while I was ageing, [] but if similar, events of similar magnitude had happened earlier in my life I believe they would have had the same kind of effect.

**Conclusion**

This paper has reflected on the latest part of a longer study conducted in northern England when I revisited former informants to find out how my theories of religious and non-religious belief drawn from the first phase of my research were useful in explaining what I found when I returned. I had also wanted to explore whether young people’s beliefs had changed as they aged and experienced significant life changes and, third, whether those beliefs and the relationships they were based on were sufficient to have sustained thus far the young people I would re-visit.

I found that my earlier theories about belief and belonging helped explain what I found, which was primarily that when change occurred it was always mediated by changes in social relationships. As in my original study, the most important variable that helped explain why people believed different things was the source in which they did or did not trust. I did not find that young people were drifting through an amoral universe or unable to cope with life’s challenges in the absence of grand meta-narratives, contrary to predictions in studies cited earlier in this paper. They were informed and sustained by the social relationships and contexts in which they felt they belonged. What was introduced as a typology of belief: propositional, felt (emotional-embodied), and performative, emerged through analysis to be an interrelationship of varieties of belief, inter-linked and inter-dependent. (see Figure 2).

(Insert Figure 2 here)

The purpose of the model is not to restrict forms and expressions of belief into only three types, but to propose an analytical tool to help researchers understand the complexity of belief experienced by different people at different times. This may serve, particularly within anthropology, to reprise belief from its near-forbidden status as an object of study.  *Contra*, for example, Needham and Ruel, I have argued that a rich interpretation of belief, combined with a multi-dimensional approach, allows its utility for cross-comparative purposes. For a term so frequently used in everyday discourse, scholars need a means of interpreting it, not ignoring or subsuming it into something else.

Methodological issues are discussed in more detail in (Day in Woodhead forthcoming). A major methodological finding was the benefit of multi-sited ethnography (Amit; Hage; Falzon; Marcus) and a holistic, organic analytical approach using a multi-dimensional model. The original five-part analytical model (content, source, practice, salience, function), developed in the first phase of the research was in the latter phase extended to consider how belief can be researched over time and place. The multi-dimensional approach combined with an appreciation of belief’s tripartite nature allowed a more nuanced understanding of how and why young people’s religious and non-religious beliefs are created, sustained, and changed.

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1. See Mitchell for an interesting anthropology of religion perspective and Stringer for contemporary ethnographic examples of the complexity of belief. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)