Processual Pagans:
Quasi-longitudinal approaches to survey research

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Abstract

There is a common pattern for researchers to study one particular new religion, write a monograph or article on that specific group, and then begin the cycle all over again with a different group. This approach causes one to remember such groups as relatively stable organizations, fixed in memory at a specific stage of development, rather than as dynamic, evolving groups. In the present article, we will examine new data on contemporary Pagans that takes a quasi-longitudinal approach to survey data. Though our focus will be limited, the result will nevertheless be a partial statistical picture of Paganism as a changing, evolving *movement*, rather than a static statistical snapshot.

Keywords

Contemporary Paganism; questionnaire research; Pagan Census Revisited; quasi-longitudinal approach; marital status; educational level

In studies of contemporary new religious movements (NRMs), researchers typically examine the personal background(s) of the founder(s) and a given group's prior "history," brief though it may be. Otherwise, however, the time constraints of a typical fieldwork cycle normally prevent researchers from examining any given new religious movement – including Neo-Pagan (subsequently: "Pagan") groups – across more than a few years. Though studying one NRM after another has certain advantages in terms of being able to contrast comparable patterns across different organizations, it also tends to cause one to remember such groups as being relatively stable organizations, fixed in memory at a specific stage of development, rather than having experienced how they change over time.

One also tends to miss the direct experience of watching people cycle into and out of NRMs – of seeing how a group that seems to be quite stable for an extended period

of time actually undergoes an upheaval of personnel across the course of a decade or two. Thus, while we have had the notion of 'conversion careers' – referring to sequential affiliations-disaffiliations across time – in our conceptual toolbox,[1] it is rare that researchers establish ongoing contact with a sample of seekers[2] and keep track of them across time as they take their "bumper car ride through a maze of spiritual trips."[3]

In the present article, we examine new data on contemporary Paganism that replicates the quasi-longitudinal approach Lewis utilized in his recent questionnaire research[4] on a number of different NRMs – including Paganism – plus examine recent findings from a selection of questionnaire items that were included in the Pagan Census Revisited (PCR I), a survey conducted in 2009-2010, and the Pagan Census Revisited II (PCR II), a questionnaire that Helen Berger and Lewis administered in 2014 as a follow up to the PCR I. The result will be a partial statistical picture of Paganism as an ongoing living, changing religious movement – rather than statistical snapshots of Pagans 'frozen' in time.

Methodology and Findings

Helen Berger initially surveyed contemporary Pagans in 1993-95. She and her colleagues' findings were later published as *Voices from the Pagan Census* (2003). Because she had designated the first survey as the Pagan Census, she named the second survey as the Pagan Census Revisited (PCR-I). Though she partnered with Lewis for this new phase of her research, Berger took the lead, both in designing and

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[1] James T. Richardson, *Conversion Careers. In and Out of the New Religions* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1978); James T. Richardson, 1980. Conversion Careers. *Society* 17 (3): 47-50.

[2] We have in mind is something along the lines of Saul Levine's approach as reported in his *Radical Departures*, though Levine restricted himself to tracking NRM members from the period of their deepest involvement in a single group to their post-involvement re-adjustment period. Saul V. Levine, *Radical Departures: Desperate Detours to Growing Up* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984).

[3] Balch, Robert W. Balch and David Taylor. "Seekers and Saucers: The Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult," *American Behavioral Scientist* 20:6 (1977), 848.

[4] James R. Lewis "Cracks in the Network Conversion Paradigm. *International Journal for the Study of New Religions* 3:2 (2012), 143–162; "The Youth-Crisis Model of Conversion: An Idea Whose Time Has Passed?" *Numen* 61 (2014), 594–618; *Sects & Stats: Overturning the Conventional Wisdom about Cult Members* (Sheffield: Equinox, 2014).

distributing the PCR-I. The questionnaire was quite lengthy, containing a total of 82 items that collected a wide variety of demographic and attitudinal data. It was posted online via Survey Monkey, an online questionnaire hosting service.

Lewis utilized data from the PCR-I to determine the ages at which respondents began self-identifying as Pagans. The PCR-I was open from 5 September 2009 to 15 October 2010, and received more than 8000 responses. By midnight 31 December 2009, there had been 6000+ responses. Because of the different ways in which they had worded the age and affiliation questions, restricting the sample to respondents from one year or the other made calculations significantly easier.

Lewis's article on the "Youth-Crisis Model of Conversion" included these calculations, which indicated that the average age at which individuals began self-identifying as Pagans gradually increased across time, from 18.27 years of age in the five-year period 1975-79, to 30.51 in the period 2005-09. In that article, Lewis also used comparable data from a number of other NRMs to challenge the generalization that people who join alternative spiritual groups tend to be younger. The PCR-II, a follow-up to the PCR-I, was a much shorter questionnaire. It was posted on Survey Monkey on the 11th of April of 2014. As of the 25th of October of 2014, it had received 3210 responses.

One of the advantages of using Survey Monkey is that it can be set so-as to be completely anonymous, including not collecting IP addresses.[5] The data collection method for this survey was 'convenience sampling' – also referred to as 'accidental sampling,' 'grab sampling' or 'opportunity sampling'[6] (Grønmo 2004). Through this method, participants are selected principally because they are available and convenient. A consideration favoring convenience sampling is the high percentage of potential respondents. This sampling method choice, however, also means that the sample is statistically non-random, and thus probably biased in one way or another.[7]

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[5] Survey Monkey is a credible survey engine used by researchers and companies around the world. The high degree of anonymity has, we believe, been positive for the respondents, increasing the probability that they will report accurately. The online medium also gives respondents more time to reflect on their answers.

[6] Sigmund Grønmo, *Samfunnsvitenskapelige metoder* (Bergen: Fagbokforlaget 2004).

[7] See the relevant discussion in Sergey Dorofeev and Peter Grant, *Statistics for Real-Life Sample Surveys: Non-Simple Random Surveys and Weighted Data* (New York: Cambridge University Press 2006).

For the present article, our sampling method means that all or most participants were restricted to self-identified Pagans who had ready access to the internet, which means that, in practice, almost all Pagans were from industrialized Anglophone countries. On the other hand, the decentralized nature of contemporary Paganism effectively frustrates the construction of a truly random sample, meaning almost any sample of self-identified Pagans one might consider is necessarily non-random in the statistical sense.

To return to the data from the PCR-II: If we once again subdivide the sample into five-year periods (and exclude respondents who had been raised by Pagan parents), we see essentially the same pattern of increasing age across time discussed in the Lewis article, except the five-year periods begin ten years earlier, and the people who became involved in more recent years tend to be somewhat younger than for respondents to the PCR I (refer to Table #1).

Table 1 – Ages at which People become 'Practicing Pagans'

[From the 2014 Pagan Census Revisited-II]

5-yr periods	Mean Age	N*
2010-2014	26.39	690
2005-2009	26.28	467
2000-2004	24.56	529
1995-1999	22.43	482
1990-1994	22.39	378
1985-1989	22.32	244
1980-1984	21.27	115
1975-1979	19.74	70
1970-1974	17.10	103
Prior to 1970	16.07	55

[*N = Number of Respondents per Five-year Period]

More generally, as a relatively young movement, it seemed that a useful temporal marker for studying changes within Paganism would be the point in time at which participants began to consider themselves Pagans. To get a sense of how this might

work out, the PCR-II included two sets of questions – one pair on marital status 'then' (back when one started self-identifying as Pagan) and 'now,' and another pair on educational level, then and now – that used this temporal marker to gauge changes across time within the Pagan movement. Once again, respondents who were raised Pagan were not included.

Table 2 – Marital status at the time one began to identify as Pagan vs currently

	Then		Now	
Answer Options	%	N	%	N
Single; Never Married	58.1	1847	18.8	598
Live with life partner	3.0	94	6.4	202
Committed Relationship	6.9	220	12.8	406
Married Legally	19.1	607	35.8	1138
Married Ritually	0.4	13	2.6	83
Group Marriage	0.0	1	0.5	15
Divorced	6.6	211	11.5	365
Separated	1.8	58	2.7	86
Widowed	0.6	19	1.8	58
Divorced and Remarried	1.0	32	6.7	214
Widowed and Remarried	0.1	3	0.5	15

As one can see from Table 2, the increase in the percentages of Pagans involved in legal marriages or other types of partnerships sharply increase from the time they become involved. Of course, given that the average respondent has been involved for 15.55 years, one might respond that this growth in numbers of partnerships is unremarkable. However, these figures are nevertheless useful for demonstrating that Paganism is not somehow anti-marriage or anti-family, as some critics might assert.

Additionally, as we can see from Table 3, participants' average educational level sharply increases from the time they became involved. Once again, given the length of a representative Pagan's average involvement, one might respond that this increase is unremarkable. However, as with the partnership questions, these figures are useful for demonstrating that Paganism does not only attract educated

participants – as one might infer from, for example, census data[8] – but, rather, participation in the movement does not discourage higher education, as do some religious bodies.[9]

Table 3 – Highest level of formal education completed at the time one began self-identifying as Pagan vs currently

	Then		Now	
Answer Options	%	N	%	N
Doctoral/law degree	1.3	40	4.2	132
Master's degree	4.2	133	13.2	419
Bachelor's degree	11.5	365	23.8	755
Technical/Associates	6.1	193	11.8	374
One Year of University	9.0	285	10.7	338
Two Years of University	7.6	241	10.8	342
Three Years of University	4.3	136	9.1	287
High School Diploma	20.5	647	13.4	425
< High School Diploma	31.4	991	3.0	96

New Religious Movements and Conversion Careers

One of the few ways in which the dynamism of NRMs has been studied is with regards to what has been referred to as 'conversion careers.' This expression has come to mean a general approach to conversion research that takes a multi-factor approach to what is often pictured as a multi-step process of involvement, including disaffiliation.[10] One of the earlier and, for present purposes, more important

[8] James R. Lewis and Sverre Andreas Fekjan, "Beyond Hogwarts: Higher Education and Contemporary Pagans," *The Pomegranate: The International Journal of Pagan Studies* 15:1-2 (2013), 273-284.

[9] As discussed in the opening sections of, e.g., Robert Wuthnow, "Science and the Sacred," in Phillip E. Hammond (ed), *The Sacred in a Secular Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1985), 187-203.

[10] Gooren, Henri. 2010. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practices*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan 2010; "Anthropology of Religious Conversion," *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, pp. 84-116, (New York: Oxford University Press 2014).

meanings of this expression refers to "sequential joiners who have 'conversion careers' resulting from spiritual journeys that involve an experimental mode of seeking or searching."[11] In other words, "The notion of *conversion career* is tied to the idea of *serial alternatives*, by which is meant the sequential trying out of new beliefs and identities…."[12]

A number of different studies have presented data indicating that many people who disaffiliate from one new religion later join another intensive religious group. Thus, for example, Stuart Wright found that a full 78% of the disaffiliators he researched later joined another NRM or a conservative Christian church, while Janet Jacobs found the same pattern among half of the defectors she studied.[13] Other researchers have studied new organizations that formed in the wake of a group defection from a parent group.[14]

The PCR-I questionnaire contained an open-ended item that requested respondents to identify "Other religions/spiritual paths involved in, either now or in the past." Though these kinds of open-ended questions obviously do not produce crisp data, it was nevertheless anticipated that responses would provide a suggestive impression of respondents' conversion careers. Because over eight thousand people responded to the first PCR questionnaire – and because we had to do this part of the tabulations by hand – we decided to examine data from only first thousand respondents.

Out of the first one thousand respondents to the "other religions/spiritual paths" questionnaire item, seven hundred and eighty-one (78.1%) were or had been involved in groups other than Paganism. Three hundred and fourteen (31.4%) had been involved in one other group or 'path,' one hundred and ninety-three (19.3%) hand been involved in two other groups, one hundred and twenty-three (12.3%) and

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[11] Stuart A. Wright, "Disengagement and Apostasy in New Religious Movements." In *Oxford Handbook of Religious Conversion*, ed. Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, 706-735. (New York: Oxford University Press 2014).
[12] James T. Richardson, "Conversion Careers," *Society* 17:3 (1980), 49. Italics in original.
[13] Stuart A. Wright, *Leaving Cults: The Dynamics of Defection* (Washington, DC: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Monograph Series 1987); Janet Jacobs, "Deconversion from Religious Movements: An analysis of Charismatic Bonding and Spiritual Commitment," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 26 (1987). 294-308.
[14] E. Burke Rochford, "Factionalism, Group Defection, and Schism in the Hare Krishna Movement." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 28:2 (1989), 162-179; James R. Lewis and Nicholas M. Levine, *Children of Jesus and Mary: A Study of the Order of Christ Sophia*. New York: Oxford University Press 2010).

one hundred and fifty-one (15.1%) in four or more other groups.

In some cases, however, it was clear that many people who took the survey included the religion of their childhood in their responses to this item. This was unintended, as there was a separate questionnaire item about the religious tradition in which one was raised. So, we went back and, in a painstaking process, estimated that 246 responses we probably identifying the religion of their upbringing.

Of the remainder, 216 respondents identified Buddhism or Buddhist meditation of some variety as a non-Pagan tradition in which they had been involved. The best we could determine, some form of involvement with Christianity (not counting the tradition one was raised in) ran second, with 118 respondents. Third, 66 respondents identified Hinduism or some form of Hindu-based meditation or Hindu guru as an alternate tradition in which they had been involved. Shamanism or some form of Native American spirituality was next is order of popularity, attracting 44 respondents. Yet another 40 respondents had been involved in ceremonial magic or some form of left-hand path tradition. Thirty-eight people identified with Taoism. And, perhaps, surprisingly, another 38 respondents said that one of the paths they had followed was atheism.

Discussion

What we have attempted here is to provide some preliminary examples of the kinds of processual[15] approaches that could be integrated into almost any study of a contemporary alternative spiritual group. We are aware that a properly longitudinal approach can be awkward and overly time consuming. However, the examples of three quasi-longitudinal items plus the past-involvements item that we presented here provide simple models for questions that would be easy enough to include in most kinds of survey research on such groups.

One might, however, ask if the data generated by such questions are significant enough to be included in future studies. This depends on what one wishes to

[15] By 'processual' we simply mean, in this context, "a sequence of individual and collective events, actions, and activities unfolding over time in context." Andrew M. Pettigrew, "What is Processual Analysis?" *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 13:4 (1997), 338. To avoid confusion, the reader might note that we are NOT referring what has been termed 'processual archeology.'

demonstrate.

The data presented in Table #1 indicates that contemporary Paganism is no longer a youth religion attracting primarily young people and adolescents – an interesting finding. Data presented in the second table is, as we have already indicated, useful for demonstrating that Paganism is not somehow anti-marriage or anti-family. The data found in Table #3 demonstrates that Paganism does not only attract educated participants (as a number of different observers have pointed out), but also involvement in the movement does not appear to discourage higher education, as do some religious bodies. Finally, the past-involvement data indicates that the majority of contemporary Pagans are not individuals who simply jumped on the Paganism bandwagon and stuck with the first spiritual movement they happened to stumble across. Rather, they tend to be seekers who have explored other spiritual paths before settling into Paganism.

These four items are, of course, simply examples of the kinds of diachronic information one can collect with this kind of quasi-longitudinal method. Using the same basic approach, a researcher could also ask about political orientation then-and-now, how many times one has changed residence over the years, variations in income, number of children then-and-now et cetera. Additionally, one could also specify different temporal periods rather than a single contrast between when one began to self-identify as Pagan and the point at which one responded to a survey.

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