

## Empowerment in the New Age: A Motivational Study of Auto-biographical Life Stories

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**ABSTRACT** *This article contributes to the ongoing debate about the motivational goals of New Age practices and beliefs by looking at descriptions of auto-biographical life events. Narratives from New Age, Catholic, and non-religious participants (N=163) were analysed according to agency and communion types of motivations. New Age respondents were found to have a higher frequency for agency and a lower frequency for communion themes than the other groups, with particular stress on forms of self-referential magical empowerment. This study provides further evidence for the existence of a particular motivational-cognitive pattern in the New Age: holistic individualism. The pattern associates individualistic motivations with a highly abstract holistic style of thinking and sets the New Age individual apart from religious and non-religious people.*

### Introduction

The motivational aspect of New Age practices and beliefs has been a source of debate among scholars. Proponents of one stance consider New Age practices to be just a new consumer fad—“Feng Shui is a new angle on decorating and furniture arranging . . . [and] aromatherapy is just a new word for bubble bath” (Bruce 234), while proponents of another stance consider the New Age as a mystical movement whose adherents are positively transformed by its practices (Rose 338).<sup>1</sup> The Vatican has argued that the individualist ideology of New Age is at odds with a Catholic understanding of spirituality, which is envisaged not as an individual accomplishment, but “always and in every way a free gift . . . and the one who benefits from it knows to be unworthy” (Vatican 24). In the Vatican’s report, the New Age is also seen as promoting a form of ‘implicit pantheism’ because of its ‘holistic’ ideology.

### New Age Holistic Individualism

Many of the ideas in the New Age belief system, in particular those which are adaptations of the Hindu concepts of *karma* and reincarnation (Campbell 82–3), and its holistic framework are already found in an historical predecessor, the Theosophical Society (Melton, Clarke, and Kelly xxv). Catholic author G. K. Chesterton (242–3) illustrates how the Theosophical Society’s sense of the universal self, advocated by one of its leaders, was opposed to the traditional

Christian understanding:

A short time ago Mrs. Besant, in an interesting essay, announced that there was only one religion in the world, that all faiths were only versions or perversions of it, and that she was quite prepared to say what it was. According to Mrs. Besant this universal Church is simply the universal self. It is the doctrine that we are really all one person; that there are no real walls of individuality between man and man. If I may put it so, she does not tell us to love our neighbours; she tells us to be our neighbours. That is Mrs. Besant's thoughtful and suggestive description of the religion in which all men must find themselves in agreement. And I never heard of any suggestion in my life with which I more violently disagree. I want to love my neighbour not because he is I, but precisely because he is not I.

Chesterton alludes to a universal understanding of the self which seems to correspond to the way in which New Age individuals use abstract holistic self-concepts. Holism is used by New Age individuals as an antidote to reductionism, a way of thinking which unites intuition and intellect and connects each individual with nature, other beings, and the very source that creates life (Hanegraaff 119). However, it has been shown that this holism is not associated with collectivism, but with an emphasis on individualistic goals. Using a set of social-psychological scales, Farias and Lalljee compared New Age with Catholic and non-religious individuals. Catholics were reported to emphasise more collectivist values of tradition and conformity and self-transcendent values of benevolence, while New Age respondents stressed individualistic value types (hedonism, self-direction, stimulation), together with self-transcendent values of universalism. Furthermore, whereas Catholics emphasised more concrete socially based self-definitions (e.g. 'I am a neighbour', 'I am English', 'I am a mother'), New Agers used substantially more abstract universal-holistic and metaphoric self-concepts (e.g. 'I am connected', 'I am part of the universe', 'I am a bridge', 'I am many souls'). The study by Farias and Lalljee confirms previous findings about the higher levels of individualism found in both New Age and non-religious participants when compared to traditional religious participants (Houtman and Mascini 465–6). Moreover, it helps to differentiate the kind of individualism found in the New Age—a holistic individualism which combines individualistic motivations with universalism values and abstract holistic self-concepts—from that found in people with a purely secular outlook.

Kemp (99) recently claimed that the "New Age is a different form of religion or spirituality compared to Christianity, just as Christianity is a different form of religion compared to Buddhism or other religions". If this is the case, it is perhaps legitimate to consider the New Age a form of religion that adopts the individualistic motivational goals of the historical-cultural context from which it emerged, in the same way as the major Western religions merged with the collectivistic background of their own time. However, even if this were the case, it is still important to understand how—and why—the New Age form of holistic individualism differs from traditional religion and from a secular non-religious worldview. After all, the holistic individualist profile of the New Age does not agree with current cross-cultural research on individualism/collectivism (Triandis) or share the value patterns associated with traditional religiosity

(Schwartz and Huismans) and differs from both a collectivist religious and an individualist non-religious orientation (Farias and Lalljee). In order to explore New Age holistic individualism further, the present article compares personal narratives of life events in New Age, Catholic, and non-religious individuals through an analysis of agency and communion types of motivation.

### Agency and Communion in Auto-biographical Life Stories

Bakan categorises agency and communion as two fundamental modes of human existence. Agency concerns the person as an individual organism, whereas communion involves taking part in a larger organism. These two modes find different forms of expression in everyday life:

Agency manifests itself in self-protection, self-assertion, and self-expansion; communion manifests itself in the sense of being at one with other organisms. Agency manifests itself in the formation of separations; communion in the lack of separations. Agency manifests itself in isolation, alienation, and aloneness; communion in contact, openness, and union. Agency manifests itself in the urge to master; communion in noncontractual cooperation. (Bakan 15)

Following Weber's work on the influence of Protestantism in the making of capitalism, Bakan argues that the Protestant Reformation led to an exaltation of the 'agentic mode' in modern life and the repression of the communion component. He understands the accumulation of material wealth, the emphasis on productivity, and the methodical effort to control nature's resources as forms of 'agentic mastery'. Bakan also finds the agency mode prevalent in the Protestant idea of *privacy*—which is opposed to the Catholic idea of confession and mediation of the divine—which has, in secularised form, become a central tenet of modern individualism (Lukes 94–8).

McAdams et al. developed Bakan's theory further and devised categories for analysing auto-biographical narratives. For them, agency involves themes of self-mastery, status, achievement, and empowerment, whereas communion includes themes of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community. In accounts of significant auto-biographical scenes, such as 'high points' in life, positive associations were found between agency and communion themes, together with motives of achievement, power, and intimacy, as assessed by the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT). Agency was found to be positively correlated with self-report scales of dominance and achievement and personal strivings for feeling strong and successful. Communion was found to be related to the need for affiliation, nurture, and personal strivings for warm and close relationships. The orthogonal character of the themes of agency and communion stood out in these studies and further research with young children confirmed it (Ely, Melzi, Hadge, and McCabe).

For the present article, auto-biographical narratives were analysed for agency and communion motivations by dividing each mode into four different themes, which are described below. Some of the most relevant themes are illustrated with excerpts taken from the life stories collected in our study (for a more detailed description, see McAdams et al. 346–51).

*Agency*

*Self-Mastery.* Bakan (53–6) stresses self-mastery as the prototypical separation theme, as the individual isolates him/herself from others in search for personal mastery of the self and the world. This category thus comprises the individual's attempts to master, control, enlarge or perfect the self through forceful or effective action, thought or experience. A relatively common expression of the theme involves the protagonist attaining a dramatic insight into the meaning of his/her life. The insight may be seen as a transformation in self-awareness or a leap forward in self-understanding that entails the realisation of new goals, plans or missions in life. Another relatively common expression in this category involves the protagonist experiencing a greatly enhanced sense of control over his/her destiny in the wake of an important event.

In this study, self-mastery emerged in very different types of accounts. One illustration of the way in which the change in one's appearance leads to self-mastery is the account of a person who has a haircut:

I was 16 and had long hair for two years. I was shy, had acne, and hid behind my hair. Finally, I got it cut and the moment I walked out of the hairdresser I felt so much more confident and happy. I finally realised that I wasn't ugly and it just improved my life so much.

Another example is the experience by a participant whose perspective on life changed after reading a book on philosophy:

Whilst reading the book my perspective on life and my place in it shifted . . . I became more philosophical! I read the book in my room, on a bus, and on a train journey, digesting each of the chapters and their wisdom over those days. I was the only person involved, I don't think that I spoke to anyone about the book for a few weeks afterwards. I arrived at a mindset, albeit a shaky one, where I realised that I dictated what I felt and how I reacted to certain situations and fundamentally I was able to, in small and large ways, control my feelings.

*Status.* In the category 'status', there is always an interpersonal and implicitly competitive context, as the protagonist attains heightened status or prestige among his/her peers, through receiving special recognition or honour or winning a contest or competition.

*Achievement.* The individual reports substantial success in the achievement of tasks, jobs, instrumental goals or in assuming important responsibilities. The story's protagonist feels accomplished or successful in (1) meeting significant challenges or overcoming important obstacles concerning instrumental achievement in life or (2) taking on major responsibilities for other people and assuming roles that require him/her to be in charge of things or people. The main difference between achievement and status is the latter's emphasis on competition and prestige, while achievement focuses on the successful completion of the task, although a sense of personal enhancement may also be present.

*Empowerment.* The subject is enlarged, enhanced, empowered or made better through his/her association with someone or something larger and more

powerful than his/her self. The self is made even more 'agentic' by virtue of its involvement with an even more powerful agent. The empowering force is usually either God, nature, the cosmos or some other manifestation of a larger power in the universe; it can also be a highly influential teacher, parent or authority figure who provide critical assistance or guidance.

Experiences of empowerment can take many forms. In the following example, empowerment is preceded by a feeling of moral emptiness:

...I was a young woman. I was part of the acting/modelling world, partying along the surface, spoiled and self-centred. Standing alone on the balcony of a friend's flat overlooking the harbour, feeling quite unusually hollow, I was suddenly filled with the profoundest, warmest love, peace, and connection to the world!

I don't know how long it lasted, but the memory of it has lasted a half-century and it was, and is, as if that was the time of my real birth and my real life's journey.

Empowerment also happens in association with nature:

I left show business behind from a world of glamour and travel into the woods and solitude. It was spooky at first and yet after a while the feeling of unity and connection with nature was a healing after the world of cabaret. I then was able to write music and concentrate for the first time in my life... Soon I felt bliss like never before and truly connected in another world of reality on a higher vibration one might say. I became a channel for poetry and music that could not be learned in college. It felt like a force of nature was helping me and sometimes I can hardly recall being fully present.

Finally, religious experiences within a more traditional setting (e.g. a church) also illustrate this theme:

At the age of about 38 after staying away from the sacraments for some years, I went to confession and Holy Communion. After I had received the Holy Communion, the choir sang 'Lead Kindly Light' amid the encircling 'Lead through me on'. I was in tears and experienced a feeling of peace and elation unsurpassed in my life.

### ***Communion***

*Love/Friendship.* The individual experiences an enhancement of friendship or erotic love towards another person. This category refers primarily to love and friendship between peers, as in heterosexual or homosexual relationships and same-sex as well as opposite-sex platonic friendships; it does not include tender feelings of nurture or caring, as experienced in parent-child relationships.

*Dialogue.* A person experiences a reciprocal and non-instrumental form of communication or dialogue with another person or a group.

*Care/Help.* The individual provides care, nurture, aid, support or therapy for another person, serving the physical, material, social or emotional welfare or

well-being of the other. The subject usually expresses strong emotional reactions of love, tenderness, care, nurture, joy, warmth or similar in response to the event. Many accounts of childbirth 'fall under' this theme as well as stories of adoption. Assistance or care for spouses, siblings, parents, friends, co-workers, and colleagues may also be included.

*Community.* Whereas the other communal themes tend to specify particular relationships between the protagonist and one or several other people, this theme captures the idea of being part of a larger community. The protagonist experiences a sense of oneness, unity, harmony, synchronicity, togetherness, allegiance, belonging or solidarity with a group of people, a community or even all of humankind.

The narrative approach with a focus on agency/communion themes has two advantages for the study of New Age individuals. Firstly, it provides a system of categorisation that partly overlaps with the construct of individualism/collectivism, thus allowing for an understanding of how the New Age pattern of holistic individualism presents itself in life events. Secondly, by eliciting personal narratives without reference to any belief system, it allows for an assessment which is free from bias which inevitably arises when individuals are directly asked about the influence of their beliefs in their lives. The latter has been a privileged methodology in questionnaire and ethnographic studies of New Age practices and beliefs (see e.g. Rose).

The purpose of the present study was to understand how the New Age pattern of holistic individualism, which associates individualistic with self-transcendent universalism values and abstract self-concepts, was implicated in the life events of New Age individuals by analysing agency and communion themes in auto-biographical narratives. Further, an elucidation was sought of the way New Age participants differ from traditional religious (Catholic) and non-religious individuals on agency/communion motivations.

New Age respondents were expected to report more episodes emphasising the agency theme of empowerment and the communion theme of community. Community is conceptually associated with the New Age emphasis on values of universalism, while empowerment accounts for their stress on values of self-direction in conjunction with their magical belief system. There is also continuity between these themes and the abstract holistic self-concepts given by New Age individuals (Farias and Lalljee). The general importance attributed to individualistic goals should also lead to an emphasis on the agency theme of self-mastery. Likewise, the individualist type of motivations found in the non-religious led us to expect that overall, this group would narrate events which emphasise agency themes more than any of the other groups. Finally, due to their collectivist orientation, traditional religious people were expected to report more communion themes in their life stories than the other groups.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Three groups of people were recruited in Oxford and London, comprising a sample of 163 participants. For the practising Catholic (N = 57) and New Age

**Table 1.** Age description.

Group	Mean	SD	N
New Age	45.7	14.8	52
Catholic	48.2	19.7	57
Non-religious	37.8	18.7	54
Total	44	18.4	163

(N=52) group, questionnaires were distributed after mass or talks at New Age centres ('Alternatives' at St. James's Piccadilly and the College of Psychic Studies), respectively. Subjects for the non-religious group (N=54) were recruited through advertisements and a pool of volunteers. Advertisements and letters invited individuals who were neither religious nor spiritual to participate in a questionnaire study.

The sample divided into 100 women and 61 men (with gender data missing for two respondents). The gender ratio was very similar for the Catholic (70.2% female, 29.8% male) and New Age groups (80% female, 20.0% male). The non-religious group included more men (63%) than women (37%). The difference in gender distribution between groups was significant ( $\chi^2(2) = 22.8, p < .001$ ). Women are often found to be more religious than men, both in frequency of practice and conviction in beliefs (Hood et al. 86); therefore, the reverse would be expected for the non-religious group.

The description of age for the total sample and for each group is shown in Table 1. Catholics were found to be older than non-religious subjects ( $F[2, 162] = 5.07, p < .008$ ). Differences in sex and age were statistically corrected for in all analyses reported below.<sup>2</sup> Most subjects (83%) were British nationals. Regarding occupation, 20% of the sample were retired (17% for the New Age group, 11% for the non-religious, 32% for Catholics) and 25% were students. The non-religious group had a greater proportion of students (48%) than the Catholic (29%) and New Age (6%) group. The remaining individuals were employed across a range of middle-class professions, such as management, administration, high-school teaching, university lecturing, medicine, journalism, and the arts.

### Measures

Instruments consisted of a questionnaire with two sections. The first asked participants to write about a significant 'high point' in their lives, when they experienced extremely positive emotions, like joy, excitement, great happiness or deep peace. It specifically requested respondents to report the episode regarding its action, the context in which it occurred, who was involved, what feelings and thoughts arose, and the general impact on respondents' identity. In section two, scales for New Age practices (adapted from Höllinger; see Höllinger and Smith 229–49) and traditional religiosity were used, together with religious affiliation, as control measures to assess the homogeneity of the groups. The traditional religiosity scale included items that asked about frequency of attendance of religious services and prayer and a rating of self-perceived religiosity ('how religious do you consider yourself to be?'). The New Age scale asked

about frequency of practices or techniques, such as yoga, meditation, Reiki, Shiatsu, divination with Tarot cards, and consulting a psychic (see Appendix).

### *Scoring Code*

Auto-biographical life stories were coded for agency and communion themes, following McAdams et al.'s (346–51) scoring code based on Bakan's work. Agency included themes of self-mastery, status, achievement, and empowerment, while communion was divided into themes of love/friendship, dialogue, care/help, and community. A score of 1 was attributed, if the theme was present, and 0, if not. Each theme could be attributed only once per narrative, although more than one theme could be present. Reliability for all categories was calculated by having two social psychologists independently scoring about 20% of the narratives (N = 30; 10 narratives from each group). They were instructed about the scoring categories and were not aware of the group participants belonged to. The proportion of agreement between the two researchers for each theme category and the totals for agency (.86) and communion (.96) were considered adequate: self-mastery (.86), status (.92), achievement (.75), empowerment (.91), love/friendship (.93), dialogue (1.00), care/help (.92), and community (1.00).

## **Results**

### *Religious Affiliation and Religiosity Scales*

Table 2 shows that the Catholic and non-religious groups were strongly uniform, while the New Age group was quite varied, although it revealed that more than half of its adherents had no religious affiliation. Scales of New Age practices and traditional religiosity both had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. As expected, New Age individuals scored significantly higher than the other groups on New Age activities ( $F[2,144] = 87.71, p < 0.001$ ) and the Catholic group was higher on the traditional religious scale ( $F[2,153] = 297.77, p < 0.001$ ). No significant differences were found between Catholics and the non-religious for the New Age practices scale. Overall, these results confirm that we are looking at groups with different types and frequencies of religious practices and affiliations.

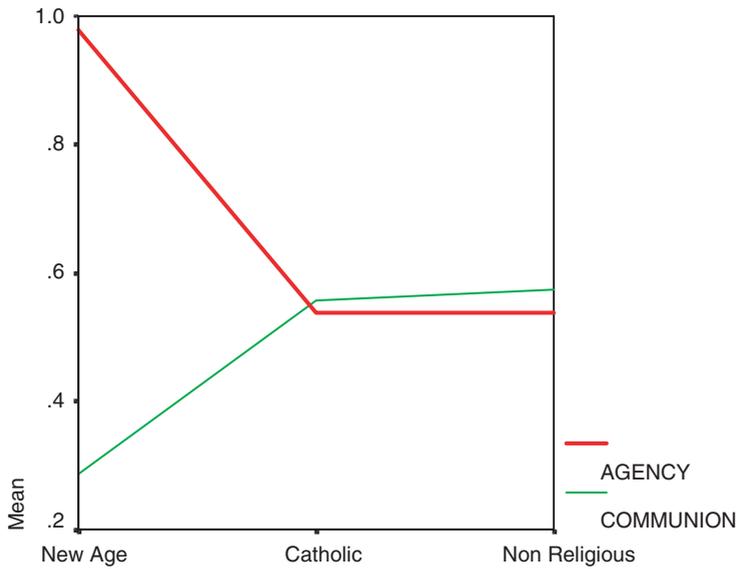
**Table 2.** Types of religious affiliation.

Affiliation	New Age	Catholic	Non-Religious
Catholic	3	56	–
None	30	–	51
Anglican	6	–	1
Other Protestant	6	–	1
Jewish	–	–	1
Buddhist	3	–	–
Hindu	1	–	–
Others*	3	–	–

\*These include 'New Age', 'All', and 'Danish Folkchurch'.

**Table 3.** Frequencies for agency and communion.

	Agency	Communion	Total	N
New Age	48	16	64	49
Catholic	28	29	57	52
Non-religious	29	31	60	54



**Figure 1.** Mean Scores for Agency and Communion.

*Auto-biographical Life Stories*

Frequencies for the total agency and communion themes in auto-biographical life stories are represented in Table 3. Catholics and non-religious respondents showed similar scores for agency and communion, while the New Age group reported a frequency which was three times greater for agency than communion themes. Figure 1 illustrates the interaction of these results as means of frequencies. A three-way multivariate analysis of variance, with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as co-variates was conducted to test for differences between groups in the total frequencies of agency and communion scores ( $F[2, 150] = 5.40, p < .001$ ). New Age individuals were higher on agency ( $M = .98, SD = .59$ ) than Catholics ( $M = .54, SD = .50$ ) and non-religious participants ( $M = .54, SD = .57$ ), ( $F[2, 150] = 10.94, p < .001$ ). Inversely, New Age respondents showed a lower communion score ( $M = .29, SD = .46$ ) than Catholics ( $M = .56, SD = .61$ ) and non-religious participants ( $M = .57, SD = .60$ ), ( $F[2, 150] = 4.68, p = .01$ ).

Another three-way MANCOVA with Post-hoc Bonferroni tests and with age and sex as co-variates was conducted for all eight of the agency and communion themes ( $F[2, 150] = 2.54, p < .001$ ). Table 4 shows that overall, the New Age group

**Table 4.** Mean scores for all agency and communion themes.

	New Age		Catholic		Non-religious		Manova
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	F
Self-Mastery	0.31 <sup>a</sup>	0.47	0.02	0.14	0.20	0.41	7.58**
Status	0.04	0.20	0.19	0.40	0.17	0.38	2.42
Achievement	0.16	0.37	0.08	0.27	0.11	0.32	0.81
Empowerment	0.47+	0.50	0.25	0.44	0.06	0.23	9.98**
<i>Total Agency</i>	0.98+	0.59	0.54	0.50	0.54	0.57	10.94**
Love/Friendship	0.10	0.31	0.25	0.44	0.31	0.47	2.11
Dialogue	0.02	0.14	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	1.63
Care/Help	0.08	0.28	0.19	0.40	0.09	0.29	2.24
Community	0.10	0.31	0.12	0.32	0.17	0.38	0.53
<i>Total Communion</i>	0.29-	0.46	0.56	0.61	0.57	0.60	4.68*

N = 150.

\*The mean difference between groups is significant,  $p = .01$ .

\*\*The mean difference between groups is significant,  $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup>The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic group.

+The mean score is significantly higher for the New Age than for the Catholic and non-religious group.

-The mean score is significantly lower for the New Age than for the non-religious group (Bonferroni comparison between New Age and Catholic groups,  $p = .06$ ).

scored higher on all agency themes, except status (this category involves the idea of competition or triumph over others), than the other groups and the achievement score did not reach significance. For the categories of self-mastery and empowerment, New Age respondents scored significantly higher than Catholics. While emphasis on self-mastery was also characteristic of the non-religious group, the empowerment category was stressed by Catholics, but practically non-existent for non-religious subjects. No significant differences were reported for the communion categories, but overall, the New Age group scored significantly lower than the other two groups on the total communion score.

### *Illustrations of Empowerment in Life Stories*

The results show that the New Age group emphasised agency themes of empowerment and self-mastery in their auto-biographical life stories. Empowerment stories typically reported experiences of an altered state of consciousness, sometimes interpreted as the contact with a supernatural force or 'energy'. To explore further the nature of this category and its centrality for New Age participants, some illustrations follow:

The high point in my life was as follows:

...I was on a course called something like 'Develop Your Psychic Powers' knowing full well that nothing would happen, as I am as thick as two planks. And sure enough, no matter what we did, nothing worked for me. However, at the end of the day before we closed,

the guy who held the workshop said: 'Let's send love or energy to East Timor' (this was obviously at the time when there was all that trouble). Since I do not know what the word 'love' means or maybe I am incapable of such a thing, I sent energy . . . And after a while when I was concentrating real hard to send energy to East Timor, I suddenly felt a beam coming from both my hands (as you sometimes see in pictures of Jesus Christ—at least these were common when I was a kid). This beam occurred as if someone had switched on an electricity switch (needless to say, it was not visible—I could only feel it) . . . Ever since that time I believe in an hereafter and that there are things we do not know about. (Respondent 133)

The empowerment theme was also reported by New Age participants in conjunction with self-mastery, a combination which did not happen for any of the other groups. These narratives usually related an experience of supernatural empowerment in association with a sense of physical mastery, such as in the following example about riding a horse and helping control the other horses:

I was riding my horse out with friends last year. We had to pass through a field with cattle in it. My horse is completely terrified of cattle. He bolts. This time we went into the field and the young bullocks came charging towards us, full of bumptious curiosity. Suddenly I was aware that my horse and I were encased within a bubble of white light. He and I were one. The 'bubble' was about two feet over my head, and was in the earth beneath us, and about 8 ft. to each side.

We walked across the field as if we were competing at the highest level of dressage. Slowly, calmly, beautifully. The other horses all bolted. My horse and I helped to calm everyone else and opened and shut the field gate for everyone else. A transcendent experience. At the beginning of the field I was terrified. At the end I felt transformed. And felt that I can trust in life—the life force—and ask for help. (Respondent 155)

Although these events were sometimes classified by their narrators as 'transcendent' or 'spiritual', they seldom qualified for any of the communion themes. Very few life stories reported an empowering of the individual which was accompanied by an explicit reference to a group of other people or a sense of abstract togetherness with humanity and/or the world. In the following narrative, the sense of empowerment is associated with a meditation state in which the individual's identity was expanded and confounded with animal and natural elements; it also showed an abstract sense of community (unity with 'all'):

. . . I was sitting in my living room early one Sunday morning around 6.30 am, a beautiful, warm . . . summer morning looking into the window. I was deep in trance looking out at a small tree in the garden, when a bird landed on one of the branches; it settled itself and then turned around and looked in at the window. I held the gaze of this bird, it seemed as if the bird was motionless, just holding my gaze back. So immersed in this state, I became the tree, then as the bird remained motionless and continued to hold my gaze—I became the bird, the bird became me, transcending this, all became one; I truly became one with

all and lost time and all motion. My husband appeared and entered the room, I lost the gaze, the bird flew away and that experience was passed—but I felt rich from this that words cannot express. (Respondent 134)

The empowerment theme was also present in Catholics, although it featured Christian elements. In the life story given by a Catholic, empowerment, expressed in feelings of intense happiness attributed to God and the idea of how God cares about him, was associated with an abstract sense of community (unity with the surroundings):

It was in the middle of the week, in the evening, coming back to College from a normal day . . . As I walked out of the building I started thinking how wonderful God has been with me throughout my life, especially for allowing me to go back to Christ's path, since I was an agnostic for more than six years . . . All of a sudden, I felt such happiness in a way I don't remember ever having felt before, especially for so long—it lasted more than half an hour. Walking on the street, I felt like being one with everything surrounding me: people, animals, things, etc. Most of the time I was praising God and Jesus Christ and this kind of seemed like a feedback mechanism that made me feel even better . . . This experience indicated for me how precious I am to God, how he cares about me and everybody else in this world. It showed me also the value of communicating with him (i.e. praying). (Respondent 38)

A final illustration depicts the life story from a non-religious respondent; it shows the category of community expressing a sense of togetherness with family, friends, and the world, without an agency theme:

. . . At about 1:18 pm our daughter was born . . . I thought she was the most beautiful girl I had ever seen. The woman I loved, my daughter—I cried my eyes out and wanted to tell the world. In fact I phoned my mother—then went to a friend's pub and had a couple of drinks . . . A wonderful day—my heart felt full of love for my wife, child, in fact, the world. (Respondent 82)

## **Discussion**

The results showed that New Age participants emphasised more agency and less communion themes than the other groups in 'high point' life stories, with particular stress on themes of empowerment and self-mastery. Against the predictions, they showed a low frequency in all communion themes. Also against expectations, the non-religious group had results which were very similar to those from Catholic respondents. Although there were differences among the distribution of themes between groups, particularly in the higher frequency of empowerment for Catholics and self-mastery for non-religious participants, these did not reach significance. Nonetheless, results for the New Age narratives provide us with a clearer conceptualisation of holistic individualism and its presence in important life events. New Age adherents prominently gave accounts of themselves both as individual agents who feel to be in control of themselves

(self-mastery) and as experiencing a sense of personal enlargement through the attainment of expanded states of consciousness and/or association with magical forces or energies (empowerment). The holistic character of the New Age is evident in the category of empowerment, where the individual shows a sense of self-expansion and connectedness with abstract forces. However, the focus of these narratives, which New Agers would classify as 'spiritual' or 'transcendent', is on the individual as a particular self-contained person who enlarges his/herself—and not on any particular relation with a larger community of people or even the world.<sup>3</sup>

In many empowerment narratives, New Age respondents use expressions, such as 'personal transformation', 'growing up spiritually', 'feeling connected', and 'finding out who they really are', as the outcome of their experiences. These expressions have been interpreted as reflecting the New Age emphasis on personal self-development which is associated with goals of self-transcendence (Heelas 182–6). It has been argued that in complex modern societies, alternative spiritual practices and belief systems such as the New Age may fulfil the same communal role as religion in traditional societies (Bloch 298–300). However, our study has shown that notwithstanding the New Age sense of holism, with its stress on connectedness with the cosmos and its values of universalism, most New Age individuals tend to give accounts of 'high point' life stories in which they portray themselves in an 'agentive' self-referential way. This portrait is not unlike Chesterton's (242–3) account of the Theosophical Society's advocacy of an expanded universal self and accords with Campbell's (84) analysis of the New Age sense of self-transcendence as an inflation of the self, "since in general the cosmic scenario is employed purely as a backcloth or setting for the personal drama of the self"<sup>4</sup>

Further, there is quantitative data which show that the New Age can be distinguished from traditional religion and a secular outlook using a set of motivational and cognitive aspects. Firstly, regarding motivation, New Age and traditional religious individuals are different in that the latter emphasise a set of collectivist goals, while New Agers—similarly to secular non-religious individuals—aim towards the fulfilment of individualistic goals (Houtman and Mascini 465–6). Secondly, New Age individuals show a particular cognitive style, which stresses abstract holistic self-concepts (Farias and Lalljee) and a form of empowering agency which is associated with magical ideation and unusual perceptions—what New Agers would call 'spiritual' experiences or altered states of consciousness. The seeming contradiction of these motivational-cognitive features has generated most of the controversy surrounding the characterisation and aims of the New Age. It is argued, however, that there is no contradiction. The holistic individualism construct found in New Agers, although presenting an unusual combination of elements, is nonetheless a variation of individualistic 'agentive' motivations which are associated with a highly abstract cognitive style. In fact, it seems as if the New Age ideas of holism, empowerment, and connectedness lead the individual towards engagement with abstract forces and processes rather than in direct interaction with others and the world. Future studies should look more closely at this cognitive characteristic, which resembles the loose type of associative style found for magical thinking in recent experimental studies (Brugger and Graves 6-7; Farias, Claridge, and Lalljee 979–89).

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## Appendix

The *New Age Practices Scale* consisted of twelve items which asked about the frequency of different types of New Age practices. The frequency range was: 'never practised', 'practised once', 'practised a few times', 'practised several times', and 'practising regularly'. Results were computed by attributing a score of 1 to the lowest frequency ('never practised') and a score of 5 to the highest frequency. Final results were obtained by dividing the total frequency score by the number of items.

The New Age practices included were: (1) oriental spiritual techniques like Yoga, Tai Chi or Chi-Gong; (2) meditation; (3) Reiki; (4) alternative medicine (e.g. homeopathy, acupuncture); (5) massage techniques like Shiatsu; (6) psychic or spiritual healing (e.g. laying on of hands); (7) rebirthing or past-life regression therapy; (8) divination with the Tarot, I Ching or Runes; (9) dream-interpretation or dream-work; (10) consulting a medium, psychic or fortune-teller; (11) consulting an astrologer or interpreting your astrological chart; (12) attending talks or workshops on topics of spiritual development.

## NOTES

1. The controversy surrounding the conceptualisation of the New Age *either* as a homogeneous set of beliefs *or* as a label for a broad set of non-traditional magical-religious ideas and practices has been dealt with, both theoretically (Hanegraaff) and empirically (Granqvist and Hagekull), in the past ten years of research on the subject. Although the New Age does not usually entail formal membership, it is nevertheless characterised by a particular set of practices and beliefs. This article extends the understanding that there is a common core to the New Age by focusing on its motivational aspects as reported by life narratives.
2. Statistically controlling for differences in age and gender between groups is, of course, not the ideal procedure, although standard in social psychological research, when the groups are not matched. However, we also controlled for frequency of participation in New Age and traditional religious activities or the absence of both practices, when composing the three groups. The most difficult group to control for was the non-religious/non-spiritual group, for which there was no specific instrument to assess beliefs and we could only rely on the lack of interest in New Age or traditional religious practices as an objective criterion of 'group membership'. Thus, it is more difficult to generalise the results from this group. For the other groups, however, it is assumed that the reported results can be generalised, with a margin of error.
3. An anonymous reviewer pointed out that the reported differences in motivation could be due to individual differences rather than holding New Age beliefs. It has recently been argued that

people with a particular type of schizotypal personality disposition may be more drawn to New Age practices and beliefs, but it could not be ascertained whether this personality disposition might be made more salient through involvement with the New Age (see Farias, Claridge, and Lalljee) 979–89. It is likely that both individual differences and beliefs/practices play a role in structuring the motivational goals of New Agers.

4. Campbell also argues that the New Age distorted the Eastern negative understanding of reincarnation and *karma* into positive notions of continuous experience and evolution. It could be added that such distortion is also a legacy from the Theosophical Society's idiosyncratic dissemination of Hindu doctrines, particularly the non-dualistic school of *Advaita Vedanta*, in the Western world over a century ago.

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