THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE NEW AGE

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Introduction

Ten years after the publication of two major monographs on the New Age by Hanegraaff (1996) and Heelas (1996), which aptly described its practices and beliefs and framed them within a historical and sociological context, the time has come to add the contribution of empirical psychological research to the study of the New Age. In this chapter, we will focus on social-psychological, personality, and developmental research which we have independently carried out in Britain and Sweden using participants drawn from New Age settings and other groups of religious and non-religious people. We have used a variety of techniques including standardised interviews, statistically validated questionnaire scales and laboratory tasks.

Although working independently, we both started out with a similar hypothesis about the New Age – namely that the psychological characteristics of New Age individuals would differ in many ways from those of traditional religious people, whereas in other ways (e.g. attachment history with parents) they would be similar to those of sub-groups of religious individuals. Our studies have confirmed these ideas and, put together, our data challenge an underlying assumption in the scientific research of religion, which claims that different forms of religious/spiritual practices and beliefs fulfil the same motivational functions and draw upon the same cognitive and emotive resources (e.g. Boyer, 2001). Further, our research sheds a different light on many indigenous claims of individuals involved in the New Age, which emphasise, for instance, the primacy of spiritual experience over belief, and the sense of an autonomous, free

and powerful self. Thus, in the course of this chapter, we will describe studies which highlight a significant discrepancy between such claims and what can be asserted from an empirical psychological perspective. Although we have not carried out longitudinal studies, where individuals are accompanied across a span of years, our cross-sectional research strongly suggests that there are partly biological factors (i.e. personality and cognitive dispositions) and early environmental factors (relating to attachment to parents) which underlie endorsement of New Age ideas and practices. In this chapter we will summarise our empirical findings, first by focusing on partly constitutional factors such as cognitive styles and personality, and second by describing developmental precursors to the New Age. We will start out by briefly mentioning some motivational aspects associated with the New Age, such as individualistic/collectivist orientations and values, which have been a matter of considerable sociological debate (see Bruce, 2000; Hedges & Beckford, 2000; Rose, 1996).

What we will report and discuss may be mistakenly understood as blind reductionism both by readers personally involved in the New Age and by many researchers in this area. Such is not the case. We acknowledge that there are societal and historical factors, as well as demographic ones such as age and gender, which play a fundamental role in our understanding of what the New Age as a social movement is. Yet, just as sociological and historical factors cannot be dismissed, we argue that neither can the psychological factors considered here. Furthermore, on the basis of the findings to be reported, one cannot disconfirm (or confirm) supernatural claims, such as that people may become involved in the New Age as a result of having an encounter with spiritual beings. Nevertheless, even though it is not our aim or within our possibilities to challenge such claims, our evidence regarding the characteristics of individuals involved in the New Age strongly suggests that there are basic underlying processes of cognition and emotion, related to a particular pattern of personality traits and attachment organization, which may make some individuals more likely to report such unusual experiences and participate

in the New Age. At this stage, we would simply like to ask those readers that might find our empirical approach too reductionist to try keeping an open mind to the evidence we will present.

Personality and cognitive characteristics of individuals in the New Age

Motivational and Social-Cognitive Factors

Our research into the personality and cognitive characteristics of people involved in the New Age came about, somewhat unexpectedly, as a consequence of two previous studies conducted by one of us. These studies compared motivational and social-cognitive aspects of New Age participants practising Catholics and atheists (see Farias, 2004). For each study we included about 150 participants (50 per group), recruited at various places in Oxford and London. New Age participants were recruited at 'alternative centres' (e.g. 'Alternatives' at London), Catholics after Sunday mass, and atheists were contacted through a subject panel used for general psychological research at the Department of Experimental Psychology, University of Oxford .The first study aimed to explore what people valued most in life (motivational goals), how individualistic or collectivist their values were, and how they described themselves as individuals (Farias & Lalljee, submitted). The theory and instruments used were drawn from cross-cultural psychological studies of individualism/collectivism (see Cousins, 1989; Schwartz, 1992; 1994; Triandis, 1995; 1996). The results indicated that the New Age group's individualistic orientation was similar to that of the atheist group, differing from the more collectivist orientation of Catholics. Both New Age participants and atheists emphasised more than Catholics values of self-direction, stimulation and hedonism. These values are generally characterised by motivations towards independent thought and exploration, novelty and excitement seeking, and sensuous gratification. Moreover, New Age participants attributed more importance to values of universalism – which can be described as motivations towards

understanding, tolerance, and a concern for the welfare of humanity and nature – than did Catholics and non-religious people. These results are in line with previous characterisations of the New Age as being individualistic but also concerned with self-transcendence (Heelas, 1996).

However, the most intriguing result of this study came from the social-cognitive analysis of how people defined themselves. Participants were asked to give twenty self-definitions in reply to the question 'Who am I?'. Their responses were then scored across a concrete-abstract continuum which included physical and social descriptions (e.g. 'I am tall', 'I am fit', and 'I am a student', 'I am a psychologist') on the concrete side; on the abstract side there were psychological attributes (such as 'I am honest' or 'I am a hard worker') and global references to an abstract self (e.g. 'I'm a human being' or 'I am a link in a chain'). Our results showed that New Age participants gave far more global abstract self-descriptions than did the other two groups. Furthermore, many of these were highly abstract descriptions in which the individual tended to see him- or herself as a process, a metaphor or part of a universal force. Examples of such descriptions included 'I am a bridge', 'I am connected', 'I am a changing thing', 'I am an illusion' and 'I am an awakener'.

We named the combination of individualistic motivations and highly abstract self-descriptions found in the New Age group 'holistic individualism'. The term holistic was used in reference to the strong universalism values and the highly abstract cognitive style of self-definition employed by the New Age group. Holistic individualism describes a somewhat paradoxical social-psychological frame, as New Age individuals tend to see themselves connected to a larger universe of being and, yet, the nature of this connection is highly personal and abstract rather than socially embedded. Following from these results, a second study was devised where we investigated autobiographical descriptions of significant life episodes and the types of explanations people gave to events in their lives (see Farias & Lalljee, 2006).

For the autobiographical narratives participants were asked to write about a 'high point' in their lives, such as an episode where extremely positive emotions like joy or great happiness

were experienced. These narratives were analysed using a simple scoring system centred on two main modalities of human motivation, one stressing the autonomous organism as an *agent* while the other entailing the individual in co-operative *communion* (Bakan, 1966; McAdams, Hoffman, Mansfield & Day, 1996). While Catholics and atheists emphasised agency and communion themes equally, individuals in the New Age group reported twice as many agency as communion themes in their autobiographical life stories. We also found that the type of agency more frequently used by New Age participants centred on ideas and feelings of being magically or paranormally empowered by a non-material force or entity. The autobiographical focus on agency motivations, particularly associated with empowerment, suggested that the New Age ideas and experiences of being connected to a larger non-material reality lead the individual towards engagement with abstract forces and processes rather than to direct interactions with others and the world.

The second part of this study provided further evidence that the New Age idea of abstract connectedness is not just a static belief but rather a cognitive process which underlies the way in which New Age participants perceive and interact with the world. Participants were asked to comment on a set of vignettes depicting everyday life events by answering the question 'How would you interpret this event?'. All answers were coded for naturalistic, religious and magical types of interpretation. Thus, for the first vignette which read 'You meet someone for the first time but that person seems extremely familiar to you, as if you had met somewhere before', a typical naturalistic explanation would be 'Perhaps I had seen them before in a street, shop or television'. A religious explanation would focus on God's agency (e.g. 'God wanted me to meet this person and maybe she is in need'). Magical explanations, on the other hand, would describe paranormal or metaphysical processes, such as: 'Our souls have probably met before' or 'We have similar/compatible energies or frequency of vibration so resonate with each other giving a feeling of familiarity'.

Based on previous studies of naturalistic and religious explanations of everyday life events (Lupfer, Brock & DePaola, 1992; Weeks & Lupfer, 1996), we expected participants – including religious ones – to show a higher frequency of naturalistic explanations, as compared to religious explanations. We also expected New Age participants to show a higher frequency of magical explanations than the other groups. Both hypotheses were confirmed but it still was surprising to find that New Age participants made twice as many magical as naturalistic causal attributions. On the other hand, religious interpretations were seldom used in general, even by Catholics. Overall, these results led us to consider that New Age individuals had a highly associative cognitive style which made them perceive events in their life in a tightly connected way (via supernatural forces or entities).

These two studies led us to shift the direction of our research from the exploration of motivational and social-cognitive factors to the personality and cognitive-perceptual literatures, in particular to the study of magical thinking or ideation. This change of shift was greatly facilitated by two streams of literature: First, the impressive set of recent neuropsychological, neurological and cognitive studies on magical thinking conducted by Peter Brugger and colleagues (Brugger & Graves, 1998; 1997; Brugger et al., 1993), which consistently showed an association between this type of thinking and neurological factors (Pizzagalli et al., 2000); and second, the life-long work of Gordon Claridge and collaborators (Claridge, 1997) on schizotypal personality traits, a main feature of which is the disposition to unusual perceptual experiences and other cognitive experiences, such as hallucinations and magical interpretation of events. In the following sections we will briefly describe the conceptual framework and evidence on the cognitive and personality dispositions associated with magical thinking and proceed to report a study which tested the association between New Age endorsement and such dispositions.

Magical thinking and schizotypy

The array of magical and paranormal beliefs present in the everyday explanations of individuals involved in the New Age is illustrative of their concern with the existence of an intimate connectedness between all things (visible and invisible). Concepts such as karma or the idea of synchronicity (Jung, 1952/1972) are employed in such a way as to allow the individual to establish a virtually unending network of connections. Thus, it is possible to explain practically any trivial event as if filled with rare significance. The New Age motto, 'nothing happens by chance', is taken quite literally, as it leads the individual to cognitively seek a hidden magical significance behind daily events. Whilst these beliefs, like other paranormal ones such as telepathy, are not alien to traditional religiosity, they have tended to be de-emphasised as the focus is laid on submission to the divine: 'God knows best'. However, in the New Age, we are all gods and active creators of reality. Such differences could be understood as no more than a sort of metaphysical disagreement; however, the studies described so far seem to indicate otherwise. The high frequency of magical attributions suggests that people in the New Age, more than just sharing a set of beliefs, possess a personality and cognitive disposition which makes them particularly prone to search for meaningful connections between seemingly distant and unrelated objects and events.

It has been reported that magical thinking and unusual perceptual experiences are fundamental components of schizotypal personality traits (Mason, Claridge &Williams, 1997). There are two main models of schizotypy. The quasi-dimensional view of schizotypy originates in the medical tradition; it considers schizotypy and normality to be discontinuous, emphasises its genetic basis and treats it as part of a 'schizophrenia spectrum' of psychotic disease. The other model proposes a fully dimensional perspective on schizotypy and considers that schizotypal traits are not necessarily pathological but represent personality variation. This is the model which was adopted in our study of the New Age. Claridge and collaborators (Claridge, 1997) are the most important proponents of the latter model and have demonstrated that normal subjects show the same cognitive indicators as found in clinical psychotics in a range of studies. Claridge

(2001) has also considered the example of spiritual experiences which, like creativity, are an example of 'healthy psychoticism', i.e., a form of schizotypal personality which lies on the healthy side of the psychotic continuum.

Two of the most commonly used instruments in the measurement of schizotypy are the Schizotypal Personality Scale (STA) and the Magical Ideation Scale. The first instrument was developed by Claridge and Rawlings (reported in Claridge & Broks, 1984) to measure schizotypy as a personality continuum. Its items describe a series of experiences and beliefs which include magical ideation, unusual perceptual experiences and paranoid ideation and suspiciousness (Hewitt & Claridge, 1989). The other instrument is Eckblad & Chapman's (1983) magical ideation scale, which taps magical and paranormal ideas and experiences. Both scales have been extensively used with cognitive and neuropsychological tasks. The magical ideation scale has recently been correlated with a series of tasks and indices including olfactory perception, EEG wave patterns and semantic priming. These studies reported positive correlations between magical ideation and left temporal lobe dysfunction (Mohr, Rökrenbach, Laska & Brugger, 2001), a loosening of semantic network functioning, which is characterised by making frequent connections between not-closely related words (Pizzagalli, Lehmann & Brugger, 2001), and an overactivation of the right hemisphere (Pizzagalli et al., 2000). Studies with the STA have shown that highly schizotypal subjects have difficulty in suppressing irrelevant material from conscious awareness (Williams & Bleech, 1997) and show a 'leaking' of preconscious activation, which normally needs to be suppressed, into current awareness (Evans, 1997). This means that these people are more susceptible to perceiving stimuli (visual or semantic) at a lower threshold of awareness, which is usually inhibited in the process of selective perception of our environment.

Related concepts: Cognitive looseness and Thin Boundaries

The cognitive mechanism associated with pre-conscious 'leaking' or 'decreased inhibition' of perceptions into conscious awareness has been referred to as a process of cognitive looseness. Brugger and colleagues have reported that people endorsing magical thinking and paranormal beliefs were able to make stronger semantic associations between remotely connected words (Brugger & Graves, 1998; Gianotti et al., 2001; Mohr et al., 2001) and to see more meaningful patterns in a visual display of random dots (Brugger et al., 1993). In this last study, the authors argue that such a cognitive disposition, which leads the individual to make close associations between random stimuli or events, can also account for the emergence of magical and paranormal beliefs. Such a cognitive mechanism is associated with the presence of schizotypal personality traits and might also be correlated with the New Age sense of abstract connectedness and magical explanations.

A number of related concepts have been put forward in an attempt to explain this mechanism which leads to uncommon perceptions and beliefs. Thalbourne & Delin (1999) have proposed the notion of transliminality, referring to individual differences in the extent to which ideas and emotions are able to cross the threshold of conscious awareness. They report that people with a higher perception or sense of transliminality tend to have better dream recall, to have a greater number of spiritual experiences, and to believe in the paranormal. More recently, Claridge (2001) quotes Anthony's (1987) concept of 'skinlessness', referring to a supersensitivity of perception, thinking and feeling.

Another related concept is that of boundaries, proposed by Hartmann (1991). This concept refers to mental and emotional boundaries, which on one side of the continuum – thin boundaries – seems to tap into a particular hypersensitivity and fluidity between thoughts, feelings and states of consciousness. A person with thin boundaries would be characterised as tending to blend thoughts and feelings, to make fluid associations between events, to be

hypersensitive in terms of emotion, to be particularly susceptible to daydreaming and fantasy, and to report experiencing unusual experiences such as clairvoyance. Hartmann's (1991) Boundaries questionnaire comprises perceptual, cognitive, emotive and interpersonal factors, accounting for a variety of personal characteristics such as vivid imagery, feelings of synaesthesia (e.g. 'seeing' words or 'feeling' sounds), fluctuating identity, fragility and isolation. Hartmann, Harrison & Zborowski (2001) review a set of studies conducted using the Boundaries Questionnaire, where thin boundaries were shown to correlate with 'transliminality', hypnotisability and suggestibility, insecure attachment (see section below) and openness to experience. Hartmann (1991) summarises the distinction between thick and thin boundaries as the difference between insulation and connectedness. This sense of connectedness is of a cognitive and emotive kind but does not extend into the interpersonal domain, as people with thin boundaries typically have difficulties with feeling part of a group. This characterisation seems quite adequate as a description of individuals involved in the New Age, whose sense of magical interconnection is a heuristic for everyday life, while their practices do not oblige them to engage in the type of group membership characteristic of traditional religiosity.

Oxford study: Personality and cognitive-perceptual predictors of the New Age

In contrast with the previous studies we didn't use specific New Age, religious and atheist groups but a sample of 99 non-selected participants who came into the Department of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University to take part in personality research. As measures of the New Age we included the New Age Orientation scale (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001), and a scale of New Age practices, adapted from Höllinger (2000; see also Höllinger and Smith, 2002), which asked about the frequency of practices such as yoga, reiki, tarot reading and consultation with a psychic. A brief scale of traditional religiosity was also included. Personality questionnaires comprised the schizotypal personality, magical ideation and boundaries scales. A laboratory task that measured cognitive looseness with a visual association test was also utilised. In this task, a

random display of 100 dots changing every 4500 milliseconds was shown to participants on a screen for a period of 10 minutes in a dimly lit room. Participants were told that they would be looking at changing patterns of dots, some of which were random and some of which were programmed to show something, and they were then instructed to report whether they saw something recognisable (e.g. a figure or a scene). This procedure was used for the first time by Jakes & Hemsley (1986) in a study of psychosis and hallucinatory predisposition, and was later adapted to study delusional perceptions and beliefs in extrasensory perception (Brugger et al. 1993).

The results showed significant correlations between adherence to New Age ideas and practices and the schizotypy personality scale, thin boundaries, magical ideation and a loose cognitive-perceptual style measured by the visual task. This loose style indicates that people more inclined to endorse New Age ideas perceived more complex patterns (e.g. figures of animals, people speaking, or angels dancing) than other people when looking at random dots. Amongst the several factors, (female) gender, magical ideation and thin boundaries were the most reliable statistical predictors of involvement in the New Age. In contrast, traditional religiosity was found to be unrelated to the personality measures and experimental task. (For a full description of the results, see Farias, Claridge & Lalljee, 2005.)

All in all, this study suggests that individuals involved in the New Age possess a disposition that is characteristic of schizotypal personality, particularly relating to magical ideation. Adding to the correlations between the schizotypy and the New Age measures, the results from the visual task and the Boundaries Questionnaire are strong indicators of the presence of underlying structures which may dispose the individual to experience unusual perceptions and magical/paranormal beliefs and experiences. The association between New Age practices and thin boundaries is particularly interesting, as this latter scale taps into a sense of social alienation, of not belonging to any particular group, a particularly associative thinking style, but also an emotional vulnerability or hypersensitivity. All this is characteristic of what is taught

in the New Age, be it in the form of workshops where one develops one's emotional sensitivity (in contrast with strict rationality, which is criticised); visualisation and free association techniques are also often used to 'unleash' unconscious capacities; paranormal and channelling faculties are trained and rituals are devised to ward off negative influences. It is also important to remember the loose and non-collectivist social context associated with such practices, as the individual tends to roam from group to group and workshop to workshop, rather than establish a tight social network, like in traditional forms of religion.

Another piece of evidence which substantiates this last study describes a strong association between the New Age and absorption (Granqvist, Fredrikson, Unge et al., 2005; Granqvist & Larsson, in press). Absorption is a personality disposition to be totally focused in experiencing a certain object (either outside oneself, or a memory or aspect of oneself), and has been found to correlate with suggestibility and hypnotisability (Tellegen & Atkinson, 1974). Absorption has also been linked to dissociative (see further below) and paranormal experiences (Roche & McConkey, 1990), and there is evidence for its moderate genetic heritability (Finkel & McGue, 1997).

Personality traits and cognitive dispositions are substantially constitutional and partly genetic in origin (see Plomin & Caspi, 1999). Although there is a degree of flexibility throughout one's life, abrupt changes occur very seldom. This is not deterministic in a strong sense, however, but simply probabilistically so. The data we currently possess do not allow for a definitive portrait of the 'New Age personality', because it cannot be totally ruled out that involvement with the New Age is a cause of the psychological pattern observed. Likewise, an individual with a disposition to magical thinking and schizotypal personality traits need not hold New Age beliefs or engage in New Age practices – although a person with such characteristics would have a higher probability of being involved in the New Age. Environmental factors necessarily play a strong role in adhesion to the New Age. Life experience is crucial to make personality dispositions more or less salient, and to lead people

into or away from the New Age. Whilst most people involved in the New Age usually talk of their 'journey of spiritual exploration' occurring in adulthood, there are now empirical indications suggesting that the life experiences which make an individual more likely to be attracted by the New Age start much earlier. In the next section of this chapter we will report on a number of such environmentally originating, developmental precursors to the beliefs, experiences and mental states involved in the New Age.

Attachment and the New Age

Contextual Background

The study of attachment and the New Age was initiated as a side-track to ongoing projects examining the applicability of attachment theory for understanding more traditional forms of religiosity and spirituality, particularly believers' perceived personal relationships with the divine (e.g. Granqvist, in press; Kirkpatrick, 2005). Studies on attachment and religion had documented differential pathways for the development of religiosity in relation to individual differences in attachment. First, security of attachment had been linked to a religiosity that is socially based on parental religiosity and reflects extrapolation of attachment experiences with reliably sensitive and emotionally available parents to the perceived relationship with a loving God (the correspondence hypothesis). The social basis of religion was most clearly seen in findings showing that individuals with secure attachments tended to embrace religion to the extent their parents had done during the offspring's upbringing. If the offspring did come to embrace religion, their religiosity tended to be temporally stable and the perceived God-relation tended to have attributes similar to secure attachment. Second, insecurity of attachment had been related to religiosity via emotional compensation for states of insecurity, wherein God was utilized as a surrogate attachment-like figure (the compensation hypothesis). This was evidenced, for instance,

by a higher proportion of marked religious changes and conversions precipitated by life-periods of distress.

Our studies on attachment and religion were conducted in Sweden, which is a highly secular country by the standards of substantive religion definitions. In fact, less than 10 % of the Swedish population meets established criteria for confessing Christians (Stark, Hamberg & Miller, 2005). However, while traditional, organized forms of Christian religiosity were well in the process of substantial decrease in the population, there had been a recent upsurge in more private, individualized forms of spirituality, most notably in the New Age movement (Hammer, 1997). This change in the spiritual landscape has been documented in large parts of the Western world, and especially in the Northern and central parts of Europe (e.g. the Netherlands, UK, Denmark; e.g. Houtman & Mascini, 2002). Therefore, we felt that a set of investigations parallel to the attachment and religion studies should be conducted, to examine whether individual differences in attachment security were related to embracement of the New Age. Given that most individuals in Northern Europe who embraced the New Age at the time had not been socialized in a New Age context by their parents and that perceptions of a relationship with a loving God are not at the forefront of New Agers' spirituality, we initially expected insecure attachment to predict embracement of the New Age. To understand the bases of these predictions, a brief introduction to attachment theory is necessary.

An Overview of Attachment Theory

Attachment theory, as formulated by Bowlby (1969-1980) and extended by others (e.g. Ainsworth, Waters, Blehar & Wall, 1978; Main, Kaplan & Cassidy, 1985), is a well-established framework for the study of child-parent relations and their implications development. Drawing from evolutionary and control systems theory, mammalian offspring are assumed to possess an attachment behavioural system, which is sensitive to activation based on natural clues to danger

(e.g. separation from the caregiver) and manifest in offspring behaviours (such as crying and following) that increase proximity to a caregiver. Based on caregiver responses to such behaviours, the offspring develops internal working models (IWMs), or mental representations of self and others, which guide her/his interactions with others. The theory also describes four different qualities of attachment, which are thought to represent behavioural manifestations of IWMs already in infancy (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Main & Morgan, 1996). These qualities of attachment are not genetically heritable (Bokhorst et al., 2003) but result from environmental factors (e.g. caregiver sensitivity to offspring signals) (Ainsworth et al. 1978; De Wolf & van IJzendoorn, 1997). Later in development, IWMs can be inferred from speech and other representational products (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985).

Attachment Qualities

Secure attachment. In early childhood, *secure* attachment is characterized by a flexible balance between attachment and exploration. When distressed, secure children turn to their caregivers, who help them to handle the distress, thereby giving them increased confidence for exploration while demonstrating that other humans are available in times of need and that distress can be managed (Cassidy, 1994). In adulthood, when interviewed with the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI; Main, Goldwyn & Hesse, 2003), individuals judged secure with regard to attachment provide discourse surrounding their own attachment biographies that is internally consistent and maintains coherence regardless of whether their attachment-related experiences were primarily positive or negative. Thus, if a caregiver is globally described in positive terms such as "loving" and "caring", the individual is able to recall specific memories which convincingly support that global portrayal. Such interviews are labelled "continuous secure", as the current state regarding attachment corresponds to the coder's inferences of the interviewee's experiences. When attachment experiences are inferred to have been substantially negative and the interviewee nevertheless maintains coherent discourse, the transcript is labelled

"earned secure". Such transcripts often express an avowal of the need to depend on others and an attempt at understanding the parents. Hence, they imply a positive valuing of attachment.

Besides adult attachment research using the AAI, long-term romantic relationships have been conceptualized in terms of attachment (Simpson & Rholes, 1998) and individual differences in romantic attachment have been described (Brennan, Clark & Shaver, 1998). Secure *romantic* attachment is characterized by ease in getting close to others and comfort with dependency.

'Organized' insecure attachment. In contrast to secure attachment, insecurity in early childhood is characterized either by defensive exploration at the expense of attachment in response to rejecting caregiving (*avoidant* attachment) or passive clinginess intermingled with angry behaviours in relation to an inconsistent caregiver (i.e., at the expense of exploration; *ambivalent* attachment). In this chapter, the characteristics of ambivalent attachment are particularly noteworthy, as will be evident later. Adult interviewees assigned an ambivalent (or "preoccupied") classification in the AAI show responses that indicate an on-going, mentally preoccupying anger against the parent (e.g. directly addressing the parent in an angry context as if s-/he were present) and/or vagueness of mental processes concerning attachment (e.g. self-parent misidentifications, child-like speech). In addition, preoccupied speakers often present an image of authoritativeness surrounding psychological issues, conveyed in overused phrases and clinical jargon ('psychobabble'; e.g. 'My mother has a lot of material around her psychological issues'), which often serve to denigrate parents in the interview. In the context of romantic relationships, ambivalent/preoccupied attachment is characterized by anxiety surrounding the prospect of abandonment and insufficient love from one's partner.

Disorganised attachment. Finally, a fourth, insecure/*disorganised* quality of attachment has been described (see Main & Morgan, 1996). The disorganised child's behavioural strategy is thought to break down during stress. This is believed to be due to a paradoxical injunction: the child has made repeated experiences of fright without solution in relation to a caregiver who is acting frightening or frightened, but to whom the child is "programmed" to turn

during attachment activation (e.g. Hesse & Main, 2000). Such a breakdown is manifest in behaviours such as prolonged "freezing" with a trancelike facial expression or moves towards the caregiver inexplicably interrupted by the child moving in circles, falling prone, fleeing, etc.

Similarly to disorganised infants who lapse in behavioural organization, adult interviewees assigned a disorganised classification lapse in linguistic organization regarding attachment, either specifically in discussions surrounding abuse and loss through death (*unresolved*), or at a more global level in the interview (*cannot classify*). The most common example of unresolved speech consists of striking lapses in the monitoring of reasoning, as in the belief that a dead person remains alive in the physical sense (e.g. 'my mother speaks to me on a daily basis', said by an interviewee whose mother had been dead for many years) or in considerable spatial-temporal confusion surrounding a traumatic event (e.g. a given parent is said to have died when the interviewee was 8, 10, and 12 years old). A 'cannot classify' assignment is made for interviewees who fail to rally an organized stance in the interview or alternate between incompatible stances, for instance highly angry *and* highly idealizing speech surrounding parents.

In romantic relationships, the conceptual counterpart of disorganised attachment (*fearful-avoidant*), is characterized by both high anxiety and high avoidance (of closeness and dependency). Avoidance and anxiety are typically thought of as antithetical strategies that, when combined, lead to romantic attachment disorganisation (e.g. wanting closeness but at the same time avoiding it).

Predictions Concerning Attachment and Embracement of the New Age

In the background context to the study of attachment and the New Age, we have already noted that, in line with the compensation hypothesis, insecure attachment was expected to be linked to embracement of the New Age. However, there were additional reasons for this expectation. These boiled down to a more specific expectation that disorganised and ambivalent/preoccupied qualities of attachment would be important precursors to involvement in the New Age

(Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001; Granqvist, Ivarsson, Broberg & Hagekull, 2006). Below, we present the reasons for these expectations.

Disorganised Attachment

Childhood abuse, a robust precursor of disorganised attachment (Main & Morgan, 1996), is associated with adult paranormal and related experiences (Eisen & Carlson, 1998; Lynn & Rhue, 1988; Reinert & Smith, 1997), which are also frequently found in the New Age. Moreover, George & Solomon reported (1999) that mothers classified disorganised tended to attribute supernatural powers to their offspring (e.g. psychic power and special connection with the deceased). Similarly, 6-year olds who had been classified disorganised as infants occasionally referred to invisible agents of action in interviews about child-parent separation (Kaplan, 1987).

In addition, Hesse, Main, and van IJzendoorn (see Hesse, 1999) devised a self-report scale that listed various anomalous experiences and beliefs (e.g. surrounding astrology, precognition, contact with the dead, spiritual possession, psychic powers, telepathy and reincarnation), many of which are core New Age concepts, and found scale scores to be related to disorganised speech in the AAI (see also Main & Morgan, 1996). Moreover, disorganised attachment in infancy (Carlson, 1998), disorganised speech in adulthood (Hesse & van IJzendoorn, 1999) and high scores on our New Age orientation scale (Granqvist et al., 2005; Granqvist & Larsson, in press) had each been found, as expected, to be linked to a propensity to enter absorbing and dissociative mental states. Dissociation can be characterized as a break-down in the individual's normal attentional processing, which results in anomalous shifts in consciousness. Examples of dissociative states are depersonalization (the feeling that part of one's self or one's body are detached from other parts, e.g. out-of-body experiences), derealization (the feeling that aspects of reality are not real or that aspects of unreality are real), and selective amnesia (e.g. that a pronounced part of one's life is lost from memory). The fact that disorganised attachment and New Age embracement shared this correlate with dissociative

states suggested that the two might be related as well. Finally, given the resemblances between New Age phenomena and unresolved/disorganised attachment within the AAI (e.g. personal contact with the dead and spiritual possession), persons assigned this classification should be overrepresented in the New Age movement.

Ambivalent/Preoccupied Attachment

Inconsistent responsiveness on behalf of the caregiver to the child's needs leads the offspring to develop an ambivalent pattern of attachment, characterized by the child maximizing its attention on the caregiver through displays of passive helplessness and exaggerated expressions of negative affect, especially anger. As noted, this combination of passivity and anger is characteristic also of ambivalent/preoccupied adults within the AAI system. Individuals with such a disposition to maximize their (negative) attention on attachment were hypothesized to be particularly receptive to parts of the popular psychology discourse associated with the New Age movement, for instance that on 'toxic parenting' and encounter groups, because such discourse permits and even encourages the expression of preoccupation. Another reason for expecting ambivalent attachment to be related to New Age endorsement came from a study of 6-year-olds, in which Main (1991) reported indices of difficulties understanding the privacy of thought (cf. telepathy) as well as belief in paranormal phenomena in ambivalent children. Finally, given the resemblances between New Age phenomena and preoccupied attachment within the AAI classification system (e.g. 'pop psychology' and psychological jargon), persons assigned this classification should be overrepresented in the New Age movement. Below, we present results from three sets of studies that have addressed these predictions.

Empirical Findings on Attachment and the New Age

Estimated Attachment History

No studies have hitherto been conducted examining longitudinal relations between attachment in childhood and embracement of the New Age later in development. However, two Swedish studies have taken the "short track" and retrospectively estimated participating adolescents' and adults' attachment histories. In those studies, focus was not on how the adult as a child had organised him-/herself around the parent, but rather on estimates of the parent's sensitivity to the offspring's needs. In the first study (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001), we found, as expected on the basis of the compensation hypothesis, that adults (n = ca 50) drawn from New Age settings (e.g. 'alternative' bookstores and health centres) retrospectively reported a more insecure attachment history than did adolescents (n = ca 200) drawn from the general population, who in turn reported a more secure attachment history. Also, higher scores on our continuous New Age Orientation Scale (NAOS) were related to retrospective reports of a more insecure attachment history with parents, both in the adolescent group and the adult New Age group.

The validity of retrospective self-reports of attachment history is of course questionable. Therefore, in a follow-up study (Granqvist et al., 2006), we utilized an independent AAI-coder's coherence-based inferences regarding interviewees' probable experiences with parents in childhood (the coder was, of course, blind to new age orientation). Such inferences had previously been found longitudinally predictable from independent, behaviourally based infant attachment classifications (Main, Hesse, & Kaplan, 2005). Participants were 84 adults drawn from religious and spiritual groups. The results of this study also supported the compensation hypothesis. Both parents (and especially the mothers) of high New Age scorers were judged substantially less loving and more rejecting and role-reversing -- in sum less sensitive -- than parents of participants who scored low on the New Age scale.

Current Romantic Attachment

Links between self-reported romantic attachment and indices of New Age embracement have also been investigated in two studies. In the first study, as expected on the basis of the considerations above, high New Age scale scorers also scored higher in romantic attachment disorganization (i.e., fearful avoidance) than did low New Age scale scorers (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001). In the second study, conducted in Belgium, Saroglou, Kempeneers & Seynhaeve (2003) found a greater interest in reading spiritual/esoteric books, which are common in New Age circles, among adults who scored high in ambivalent/preoccupied attachment as compared with others.

Current State of Mind within the AAI

Although the above findings are converging in support of the compensation hypothesis, self-reports of attachment history and romantic attachment are vulnerable to a host of defensive biases (e.g. social desirability, impression management). Also, even if independent judges made coherence-based estimates of probable experiences with parents in the AAI study described, the inferences were still retrospective, they did not address the interviewee's current state with regard to attachment, and they are not as well-validated as the AAI (state of mind) classification. In fact, AAI classifications are both longitudinally predictable from the same individual's attachment classification as an infant and longitudinally predictive of how an adult interviewee's child will organize his/her behaviour around the adult/parent (see Hesse, 1999). Fore example, a prospective mother with a secure classification has approximately a 75 % chance of raising a child with secure attachment, whereas a corresponding percentage of prospective mothers with an insecure classification will raise a child with an insecure attachment. Hence, the question of whether New Age endorsement is linked to solid assessments of the hypothesized attachment qualities remains to be answered.

In the one study that has addressed that question, the answer was affirmative (Granqvist et al., 2006). Higher New Age orientation scores were linked, first, to unresolved (i.e.,

disorganised surrounding trauma) states within the AAI. Second, individuals assigned a preoccupied (M = 3.25 on the New Age scale) or globally disorganised (i.e., cannot classify; M = 4.16) category scored substantially and significantly higher on the New Age scale than did remaining participants (M = 2.16). The results for the globally disorganised group (n = 5) were particularly striking. Every participant with such a classification scored above the mean on the New Age scale (for details, see Hesse & Granqvist, 2005).

Discussion of Attachment and the New Age

We have thus seen that the few studies conducted on attachment and the New Age have uniformly and strongly supported the compensation hypothesis. Individuals who, according to self-reports or independent judges, have experienced parental insensitivity while growing up are particularly inclined to endorse the New Age. Moreover, those who currently embrace the New Age are more likely than those who do not to be disorganised or preoccupied/ambivalent with respect to attachment, in the AAI as well as with respect to their romantic partnerships.

It is worth noting that both of these attachment states represent serious forms of insecure attachment. They are both associated with elevated suffering (e.g. anxiety and dissociative states), particular clinical psychiatric diagnoses (e.g. anxiety disorders, borderline personality disorder) and with transmission of correspondingly serious insecure attachment to the next generation, who are likely to develop elevated behavioural and emotional problems as a consequence (Hesse, 1999). While most of these issues could not be addressed in the AAI study described above, the New Age scale was positively related to loneliness, though not to states of anxiety or depression (Granqvist et al., 2006, data not presented). In future research in this area, it will be important to investigate whether parental New Age endorsement, like preoccupation and disorganisation (van IJzendoorn, 1995), predicts ambivalence and disorganisation in their children.

The findings and conclusions on attachment and the New Age are important and raise a number of additional questions for future research and intervention. For example, individuals taking part in the New Age may have spent years, and considerable financial resources (e.g. Heelas, 1999), trying to make sense of their 'toxic parents', 'dysfunctional families' and the like, before now (finally) having the sense that they have developed some of their 'inner potential' and achieved a certain degree of authoritativeness concerning psychological issues in general, and perhaps their own personal experiences in particular. Has that 'work' been entirely in vain or even detrimental? To address such questions, it is necessary for future studies to employ longitudinal (pre- to post New Age involvement) designs. We would caution, however, that as considerable investments are typically made in the New Age, psychological assessments should not be based on self-reports (e.g. of mental health), which risk primarily tapping a subjective legitimization of the spiritual investment (i.e., cognitive dissonance), but rather on independent modes of assessment. While awaiting the results of such studies, we hypothesize that involvement in the New Age does not serve a *functional* compensation, especially not in promoting increased security of attachment. The reason for this speculation, besides the insecure states of mind described among New Age individuals, is that the inclinations of preoccupied (e.g. preoccupying anger, self-absorption) and disorganised (e.g. dissociative states, irrational states regarding death) individuals is not counteracted, but even encouraged and allowed a more or less full expression within the New Age and in the company of other individuals with similar inclinations. To encourage people involved in the New Age instead to seek out professionals in mainstream, traditionally evidence-based therapy may be naïve, as traditional standards for "evidence based" (e.g. randomized trials, comparisons with placebo effects) may be dismissed in the New Age as a dogmatic relic from 'the age of reason'. Still, it may be worth a try (cf. Lilienfield, Lynn & Lohr, 2003; McLaren, 2004).

The empirical one-dimensionality of the New Age orientation scale in conjunction with the theoretical heterogeneity of the scale items suggests that the average person attracted by the

New Age endorses beliefs and engages in activities that, for example, on the one hand imply determinism/fatalism (such as the belief in fortune-telling and astrology) and on the other an almost unlimited degree of individual freedom (such as the 'personal development' discourse or the belief that every individual 'chooses' his/her parents). Such contradictions constitute a direct parallel to the notion of incompatible strategies regarding attachment in globally disorganised (i.e., cannot classify) AAI transcripts. Hence, global attachment disorganisation seems to have a parallel in the New Age in an incoherent set of beliefs regarding the conditions and prospects of the individual's life as such.

We opened the section on attachment and the New Age by noting that previous studies on attachment and religion had uncovered two developmental pathways to religion. As should be clear now, the pathway to the New Age is part of the emotional compensation pathway (i.e., via experiences from insensitive parenting and insecure attachment). Further attesting to the similarity between the New Age and emotionally compensating aspects of religion, New Age scale scores have been positively related to an emotionally based religiosity, wherein God is sought out as a source of distress regulation, and negatively related to religiosity as socially based in the parental relationship (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001). However, New Age endorsement and the emotionally compensating aspects of religiosity are differentially related to *current* attachment organization. While we have seen that New Age endorsement is associated with the most serious forms of insecurity within the AAI-system, more traditional aspects of religiosity, whether compensatory or not, are typically not related to state of mind classifications within the AAI (Granqvist et al., 2006). This suggests that some individuals who have suffered attachment-related adversities and sought God to compensate may in fact have achieved a certain degree of earned security from doing so (cf. effects from meeting a secure love partner or a therapist; Main et al., 2003). This, in contrast, cannot be said for those who have come to embrace the New Age.

While speculative at this point, one important reason for the discrepancy between these spiritual domains in relation to attachment may be that (theistic) religion contains a surrogate attachment-like figure (i.e., God), with whom the individual may establish perceptions of a personal, nurturing relationship that helps him/her derive a sense of security, comfort and direction in life, and partly frees the individual from a self-absorbed focus on his/her own sufferings. Hence, that relationship would serve important self-integrating functions that would not be served equally well if the individual was on his/her own, in a void of subjectivist values, trying to understand him-/her-self without sorting out incompatible beliefs and forming functional surrogate attachments. Thus, the development of earned security presumably requires more than the 'celebration of the self' (Heelas, 1996) that is primarily involved in the New Age.

General discussion and conclusions

In this chapter, we have considered a number of psychological characteristics tied to individual New Age endorsement. These characteristics have concerned developmental precursors, concurrent experiential states and constitutional correlates such as motivational goals, personality aspects and cognitive styles. A summary of these characteristics is provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Documented and Hypothesized Psychological Characteristics of Individuals Adhering to the New Age

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Constitutional factors and correlates

Biological[a]: Left temporal lobe dysfunction; overactivation of the right hemisphere (especially the temporo-limbic regions)

Motivation: Individualistic goals (rather than collectivist); agency (rather than communion)

Personality: Schizotypy; thin boundaries; absorption/suggestibility

Cognitive style: Magical thinking; loose connections; abstract self-understanding

Environmental/Developmental precursors[b]

Parental insensitivity to child's needs (rejection, role-reversal and/or frightening/frightened behaviours)

Traumatic loss and/or abuse

Insecure attachment organization (disorganised and/or ambivalent/preoccupied)

Experiential correlates

Dissociative mental states [a]

Elevated subjective suffering (e.g. loneliness)

"Bursts" of feelings and creativity [a]

Note: [a] Hypothesized based on inferential, rather than direct, evidence; [b] As of yet, only directly investigated in relation to New Age adherence in cross-sectional studies.

Besides the psychological characteristics studied to date in relation to New Age endorsement, we have added to the table a few characteristics that we hypothesize to be involved and that will be important for future studies to address. Most importantly, time is now ripe to address the biological correlates of New Age endorsement. As we noted earlier, genetic heritability explains a moderate to substantial part of the variance in personality characteristics (Plomin & Caspi, 1999), some of which were considered here in relation to New Age endorsement (e.g. schizotypy, absorption). More specifically, results from molecular genetic and neurological studies suggest that related patterns of thinking and experiencing, such as magical ideation and a propensity to enter dissociative states, can be understood against the background of left temporal lobe dysfunction and overactivation of the right (temporo-limbic) hemisphere. Future studies should address whether such a pattern of molecular genetic and neurophysiological alterations can be observed in relation to New Age endorsement as well.

An important question for future studies is whether the environmental attachment factor and the genetic basis of the personality aspects underlying New Age endorsement are independent or interdependent causes of New Age belief and practice. It could be that a combination of genetic predispositions and disorganised attachment is required to set the individual up for strong involvement in the New Age, but it could also be that one of the two suffices. Of course, to test such models requires a relatively large data base as well as considerable research funding. In the mean-time, twin- and adoption studies could easily incorporate the New Age orientation scale to test the relative contribution of genetic heritability and environment in explaining New Age variance.

Although the studies we have conducted describe how personality, cognitive and early developmental factors play a substantial role in adherence to the New Age, in order to avoid genetic fallacies (i.e., attribute ontological falsity to an experience because of its psychological or physical causation), we wish to distance ourselves from attempts to explain away metaphysical beliefs and spiritual experience as nothing but epiphenomena of the brain. In a recent

experiment, one of us has in fact found results that cast serious doubt on one of the major proposals of neurotheology (i.e., that paranormal experiences result from electric discharge in the temporo-limbic brain regions; e.g. Persinger, 2003) and has emphasised the multifactorial nature of mystical and related experiences (see Granqvist et al., 2005). One finding of this study that is relevant for the current chapter is that New Age orientation predicted mystical and other unusual experiences, unlike the experimental application of weak, complex magnetic fields to selected brain areas. Such predictive results were not found for traditional religiosity, which converges with the conclusions from the studies presented here, namely that the psychological correlates of New Age endorsement are distinct from those of traditional religiosity.

Finally, we hope that the studies and ideas described in this chapter may serve as a warning for psychologists and social scientists not to treat all systems of supernatural beliefs as reflecting the same kind of emotive, cognitive and motivational processes. Our research shows that this is not the case. The differences found are not just quantitatively significant but seem to be associated with profoundly diverse – and to a great extent contrasting – ways of perceiving and interpreting the world, and oneself.

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