

Chapter 14

Who Holds the Cards? Women and New Age Astrology

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Introduction

Astrology is often thought of as a form of fortune telling. Many assume that predictive questions such as: Will I ever fall in love? Will I win the lottery this month? are of central concern to astrologers. Despite this conception, not all astrologers are interested in prediction. This study examines the difference between those practitioners of astrology who utilize their craft as an instrument for predicting future events and those who speak of it as one tool among many in a spiritual quest. I propose that the difference between the two types of practitioners of astrology corresponds to whether or not they identify themselves as members of the New Age movement.

Of central concern in this paper is the way in which gender manifests itself in the New Age movement. I will argue that women are more likely than men to identify themselves as members of the New Age movement. Further, I posit that women's identification with the New Age movement occurs because women's worldview is consistent with that of the New Age.

Prior to the publication of this anthology, very little has been written about astrologers or the New Age from a social scientific perspective. Obviously, then, women's involvement has not been carefully studied. We know, however, that women's experiences have led them on spiritual paths that differ from men's.² This is in great part due to women's understanding of the world, which tends to be more wholistic and integrative than men's.³

LEWIS, JAMES R.,
and GORDON MELTON.
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Methods

The data on which this paper is based were collected at The United Astrologer's Congress in New Orleans, Louisiana, 1989 (UAC 1989). The congress was chosen as the site for administering the questionnaire because it attracted a large number of people interested in astrology at every level of expertise.

The questionnaires were distributed to approximately 600 attendees, 383 of whom completed the survey. The respondents answered questions ranging from general involvement in astrology to demographic characteristics. They were also instructed to answer a series of questions designed to assess the nature of the astrological services they provide or, conversely, seek. The use of a questionnaire enabled the participation of a large number of people involved in astrology.

To supplement the survey data, I conducted personal interviews. In this paper interviewees are referred to by fictional names. These interviews helped to flesh out areas that were limited by the questionnaire and to develop a better understanding of astrology and the New Age movement.

It is important to keep in mind that the respondents in this study are a select group, namely those with sufficient interest in astrology to attend an astrology conference. One might therefore argue that this data is not generalizable to the population at large. Nevertheless, the study based on this sample of astrologers has provided interesting insights about gender in astrology and the New Age movement.

Results

One of the most interesting results of this study is finding that two distinct groups exist among astrologers: New Age astrologers and non-New Age astrologers.⁴ The difference between the two groups is based primarily on the role that astrology plays in their lives: whether astrology is part of a worldview or is perceived as a predictive tool.

The difference between those respondents who identify with the New Age and those who do not stems from an analysis of several characteristics. These characteristics are: the respondents' religious identity, what they believe the purpose of astrology to be, their involvement in other esoteric teachings, their social networks, and their demographic characteristics. In this section, I will explore these six areas in turn.

In terms of current religious identity, New Agers are more likely to consider themselves religious "others" than are non-New Agers. While

they consider themselves religious, they do not identify with mainline religion. Non-New Agers either identify with mainline religion or are not religious. This is particularly interesting in view of the finding that there is no significant difference between New Age and non-New Age astrologers when it comes to the religions in which they were raised: proportionally, both were raised in the same religions. The New Age movement seems to encompass a spiritual outlook, an "other" way of expressing spirituality. By identifying with "other" religions, New Agers maintain a spirituality while turning away from traditional Western religion. Those interested in astrology independent of the New Age are so without necessarily being "spiritual" and identify somewhat with mainline religion, or more frequently with none.

Another way in which the difference between astrologers who identify with the New Age and those who do not is evident is in their views of astrology's purpose (see appendix). Both New Agers and non-New Agers are likely to think of astrology as a healing art or as a psychological tool. However, more New Agers than non-New Agers put astrology in this category. Astrology, then, is experienced as a therapy—it deals with the mind (psychological tool) and the body or spirit (healing art). In a similar vein, New Agers are more likely to believe that astrologers should be primarily concerned with counseling people rather than with forecasting future events or trends. They are also more likely to be influenced by metaphysical religion and are overwhelmingly more involved in other esoteric teachings than non-New Agers. New Agers are more likely to label themselves professional astrologers, and more of them professionally practice other esoteric teachings. In looking at New Age astrologers, one sees that these respondents emphasize the counseling aspect of astrology rather than its predictive powers.

Non-New Agers, by contrast, are more likely to use astrology for predictive purposes, their adherents wanting concrete, tangible answers to specific questions. For instance, UAC 1989 classes fitting this description dealt with finance. An astrologer whose interest is in business or the stock market might be an example of the non-New Age astrologer. For these people, astrology is a divinatory craft.

For New Agers, astrology informs the way they view the world; it is an integral part of their spirituality, explaining the apostasy of their childhood religion and the current identification with an "other" religion. Concerned with the transformation process, New Agers are likely to have an interest that extends beyond the client-professional status. Therefore, they are also likely to engage in other esoteric teachings and to have friends who are involved in astrology, in this way approaching a life-style enclave.⁵ For non-New Agers, social networks may be inde-

pendent of astrology, since astrology does not inform their worldview or meaning system. And, because it is a divinatory technique, they may not feel the need to do astrology professionally but are comfortable leaving it to the "experts."

Those involved in the New Age not only are part of a larger spirituality, but also form a community of sorts. Geographically, they tend to live in similar areas. Consistent with Stark and Bainbridge's findings on cults, New Agers are most likely to live in the Pacific and Mountain regions as well as the South Atlantic area, specifically Florida.⁶ Non-New Age astrologers are more evenly distributed across the country. Not only do New Agers cluster in terms of regional area, but their friends are more likely to read astrological charts than non-New Agers' friends (see appendix). In this way New Agers have developed social networks which enable them to form a community of like-minded people. Given the emphasis on astrology as a counseling tool and the involvement in other esoteric teachings, one sees that, for many, astrology is subsumed under the umbrella of the New Age. Astrology, then, is one among many teachings. It is a tool which can be used in conjunction with other esoteric "tools" in the transformation process.

Astrology takes on a spiritual dimension and is fueled by the study of metaphysical religion and other esoteric teachings when combined with the New Age. In speaking of how astrology fits into the larger process of the New Age movement, Harvey explains that, having been interested in the transformation process for years, he finally found astrology to be "a very powerful tool in the process of searching for self knowledge." Another informant, Gary, takes this idea one step further and says that it is impossible to do astrology seriously without being "an advocate of the perennial philosophy." Without this idea, Gary says,

one is almost forced into a deterministic model because if you don't accept the idea that individuals are a consciousness that is continuous, that's evolving over time, that has no particular beginning and perhaps no particular end . . . you're more or less forced to consider that the individual in the context of one life is somehow determined by these astrological forces or configurations external to his or her consciousness.

Thus, Gary is differentiating between a New Age and non-New Age approach: those people who see astrology as part of a larger spirituality versus those who do not. For those who view astrology as independent of reincarnation or any other esoteric teaching, astrology becomes necessarily predictive. If, however, one believes in "perennial philoso-

phy," then astrology is not deterministic but rather helps in the expression of the individual's consciousness.

The most striking characteristic differentiating New Age from non-New Age respondents is sex. The table below, drawn from the UAC study, shows that more women than men identify with the New Age movement.

The Relationship Between Sex and New Age

	Sex	
	Male	Female
Percent New Age	62	83
	(n = 92)	(n = 266)
p = .000		

The question is: why are women more likely than men to identify with the New Age? Theories focusing on this issue center around two themes. One is that the New Age, unlike mainline religions, gives women a voice and in so doing allows them to move out of their traditional roles. The other theme is that there is something in the ideology of the New Age that particularly appeals to women. I will look at these two possibilities in turn and then speculate about the relationship of the New Age to feminist spirituality.

Discussion

The New Age Gives Women a Voice

Traditionally, women's voices have been silenced in mainstream religions. Because these religions have been male dominated,⁷ the experiences of women have not been heard.⁸ The New Age movement, however, has allowed women to break away from male-centered ideology and religious institutions.

In his study of astrology in France, Fischler theorizes that women turn to astrology as a result of modernization and its accompanying crises.⁹ Women have been kept apart from the "political community" and have only recently begun leaving their traditional position as housewives.

Fischler's historical analysis of why women are attracted to astrology fits in with Gary Ward's analysis of women in New Thought.¹⁰ New Thought, he states, has traditionally attracted disproportionately high numbers of women due to both the movement's content and organization. As one Christian Scientist wrote in the 19th century, "... in this

movement woman's real voice has been heard for the first time in the history of the race."¹¹

Both Fischler's account of astrology and Ward's of Christian Science explain women's turning away from traditional Western male-biased religion and towards an expression that fits with their lives—via the ancient craft of astrology or the relatively new response of sectarian Christianity. Because traditional religion is defined by men,¹² women have not had a voice.¹³ In stifling the female voice, new spiritual expressions have arisen. Women have sought out old nontraditional religious expressions or developed new sectarian places and positions to fully express their faith.¹⁴ The theologies of both these types of movements get away from God-as-a-man imagery and incorporate women. As a result, there has often been a high degree of female leadership in these churches.¹⁵ Whether in leadership positions or not, women have protested against the prevailing structures and have worked to create an alternate reality. Harvey believes that the astrologer is an example of someone who creates an alternate reality. The astrologer, Harvey states, uses a different approach than the fundamentalist Christian to answer the same existential questions:

The astrologer has more alternatives in terms of what he's willing to look at than the fundamentalists. If the fundamentalists say, 'I need a rope to hang on to, I need someone that I can put my trust in, God or the Church, or whatever it is, because I don't want to figure out what I'm supposed to do myself.'

According to Harvey, in the New Age movement the relationship to God is direct. It is a nonhierarchical system, unlike mainline religions. With men to mediate between women and their spiritual experiences, traditional Western religion has not made room for women in its structure. Therefore, some women have begun to reform their mainline traditions or, in the case of the New Age, to look elsewhere. *New Age astrology*, then, provides women with a new arena in which they have a voice.

The New Age Appeals Ideologically to Women

There are ideological aspects of the New Age which, I propose, are inherently appealing to women because they relate directly to women's experiences. Self-identified New Agers talk about women having intuition, a characteristic held in esteem by New Agers; astrologers "require lots of intuition, a lot of men don't open up to that space" (Brian). Another informant elaborates, "Women tend to have more of an emphasis on right brain kind of activity, this requires a big intuitive kind of component, you can't do astrology just with your head. So in that sense, they're nat-

urals at it" [Harvey]. Men, as Brian points out, generally "don't open up to that space" because, for them, knowledge depends on a clear and distinct determination of the boundaries between self and world.¹⁶ Men's consciousness is founded on the differentiation of pairs of opposites. And while men are dualistically categorizing the world, women are attempting to restore wholeness and balance to the institutions of society and to reintegrate spirit and matter, mind/soul and body. This "dualistic" nature of men¹⁷ is deemed both "unnatural" and antagonistic to women's nature¹⁸ and to women's psychological¹⁹ and moral development.²⁰

Some theorists argue that "the awareness of oneness and openness to new sources of power . . . is a Wholistic understanding of the world"²¹ and is a form of spirituality that is specific to, or inherent in, women. The New Age, in its emphasis on oneness with the universe and healing therapies, is therefore feminine in content. The New Age relies on being receiving, encompassing, global, wholistic, nourishing—all of which are terms traditionally used to describe women. Brian, speaking of a woman astrologer friend of his who introduced him to practicing astrology professionally, says, "she was a housewife but just an incredible counselor, totally untrained but just so nurturing and really had a fine grasp of astrology."

Unlike women, men are "conditioned more into some kind of self-reliance sort of space" (Brian), unable to go and ask for help outside of themselves (Harvey, Brian). Women, on the other hand, are not only "receivers" but "givers": an important characteristic of the New Age astrologer who carries out counseling activities. As Janet put it, "Women . . . want to help people with counseling and they can do that because they can give more empathy than men." In their travels, Rennie and Grimstad noticed that women all over the country, are becoming

sensitized and receptive to the psychic potential inherent in human nature—and they are realizing that women in particular are the repository of powers and capabilities that have been suppressed, that have been casualties of Western man's drive to technological control over nature. It is as if [women] have recognized an even deeper source of female alienation and fragmentation than the sex role polarization which has so effectively limited women's lives—the mind/body dualism progressively fostered by patriarchal culture.

The phenomenon Rennie and Grimstad discuss might be subsumed under, or overlap with, the New Age. In either case, it is clear that the New Age is an integrative view of the world, since it emphasizes transforming people spiritually to make them aware of their oneness with the universe.

This wholistic approach is traditionally female. And astrology is a

tool which fits into the transformation process and is integrative in its emphasis on unity with the heavens. "Astrology . . . [is] a key to understanding the self in harmony with the Universe and the cyclic nature of time."²² Astrology empowers, since a woman's "birth chart is a set of instructions about how she can work toward self-integration."²⁴ However, often astrology has become a predictive tool or, as Janet points out, a business which is "very male-oriented." Minerva agrees, stating, "we see patriarchy misuse [astrology] as a fortune-telling amusement." Brian notes that his misgivings over astrology stemmed from his discomfort with traditional astrology's dualism where things are either good or bad. In viewing astrology in a broader, philosophical, humanistically-informed perspective, he felt more comfortable:

This humanist, or transpersonal approach is an approach beyond yourself . . . it's to begin to live life as part of the whole . . . it's not: When's this man going to come into my life? . . . When is my career going to happen?

Brian and Janet both see that astrology is often deterministic and tends toward fortune telling. They, however, are not interested in astrology at this level. They are interested in astrology inasmuch as it is a way to better understand themselves and their surroundings. Using astrology as a tool, they are able to give the world meaning in a new and different way.

The literature indicates that men and women view the world in different ways. Men are generally dualistic and deterministic, whereas women have traditionally been described as integrative and empathetic. The New Age emphasizes the latter traits and is therefore likely to appeal initially and primarily to women.

Feminist Spirituality

Many feminist theorists believe that women must look toward alternative religions. As Daly writes, "accepting the wholeness that includes psychic awareness and exploration takes feminist consciousness into an entirely new dimension—it amounts to a new definition of reality."²⁵ Daly believes women must get beyond the Judeo-Christian understanding and make "qualitative leaps" in their transcendence. The women's movement is essentially about relating to others and the environment in a new way. However, women will be unable to change their relationships within the confines of traditional religion.²⁶ The dualistic nature of traditional religion has separated the individual from God, and has therefore alienated women from their aspirations. By putting the "Source" outside of themselves, traditional religion encourages its adherents to look away from themselves to some external authority.

The New Age encourages people to look away from external authority and within themselves.

The New Age may be considered by some to be a feminist spirituality: women are empowered by a spiritual relationship which is not determined by men. In this way, women's spirituality is empowering. It allows women to take control of their lives. An historical example is Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, who provided women with new ways to be active and even independent in the economic sphere. Wherever there are feminist communities, women are reexploring psychic phenomena that advocate personal control: astrology, Tarot, prepatriarchal forms of religion, goddess-centered philosophies, ESP, etc.²⁷ Astrology, for example, allows women to look within themselves by helping to:

develop a new understanding of our universe and how we operate in it. . . . This knowledge is power, power enabling a woman to sense her own uniqueness, to become aware of her strengths and weaknesses, and to take control of her own identity. . . . To claim her own definition—that these qualities, whatever they may, are her own and can be changed or controlled by no one but herself—is real empowerment.²⁸

This is a new reality for women who have been controlled by others in our society. Gary talks about how astrology enables people to take responsibility for their own lives and that therefore,

. . . just giving people information based on their chart is not necessarily helpful and in fact it can be counterproductive because there's an implication that the responsibility for their problems is somehow outside themselves, in the position of the planets, etc.

Although it can be argued that the basic underlying theme of the New Age is feminist, I would like to point out that, from a sociological perspective, it has an antifeminist current. While empowering, the New Age is an individualistic movement which does not account for social structure. In other words, it places responsibility on the individual without acknowledging that there are larger, structural issues which may leave women frustrated and yet more alienated, despite their newfound empowerment.

Conclusion

In this study, it has become clear that those astrologers who identify with the New Age are a different type of adherent to astrology than

those who do not. New Agers are likely to practice a variety of esoteric teachings, astrology being one more tool in their spiritual quest. For non-New Agers, astrology is more likely a predictive craft, independent of spirituality.

Among those involved in the New Age, women are overrepresented. In this paper I have tried to posit some plausible explanations for this. I have argued that, unlike traditional religion, the New Age has given women a voice. I have also argued that the New Age appeals to women because it values traits that have been traditionally attributed to women (e.g., intuition, nurturance, etc). And that, perhaps, New Age astrology is a feminist spirituality.

However, when movements draw only on women, it is a sign of their failure to penetrate into the social mainstream.²⁹ Success lies in male involvement, not only because it helps perpetuate the movement but, more importantly, because it legitimates it. Thus, as long as women enjoy less status than men, astrology and the New Age movement will not be highly regarded by society at large.

Appendix

The Percent of Respondents Within Each Group
(New Age and Non-New Age) who:

	New Age	Non-New Age
See Astrology as A Healing Art	92	81
See Astrology as A Psychological Tool	99	94
Are Influenced by Metaphysical Religion	61	20
Professionally Practice Other Esoteric Teachings	25	7
Self Identify as Professional Astrologers	61	47
Have Friends Who Read Charts	55	39
	N = 283 ³⁰	N = 81

p = .01³¹