

HPCA7002

ESSAY 1.

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Compare and contrast the methodologies used by T. L. Brink, 'Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (1978): pp. 82-85, with a paper by G. Bennett, "'If I Knew You were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group', in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, edited by Barbara Walker, pp. 122-142, (Logan, Utah: Utah University Press, 1995).

A comparison of T.L. Brink's 1978 research into reincarnation with Bennet's 1995 research into foresight highlights how qualitative research can yield immense detail and reveal new contexts, whereas a quantitative approach to research is limited in its ability to describe the nuances of human nature or allow new contexts to be discovered.¹

Brink

Brink investigated what 277 fourteen-year-old female students think about religion, reincarnation and astrology. He hypothesised that belief in one of the categories is mutually exclusive of the other two. It is striking that in his paper Brink does not define the term "belief". A discussion of his insider/outsider status is also omitted.

In his bibliography, Brink only cites one paper on astrology. In a research project investigating belief in astrology one would expect more sources about astrology. In 1978 works by prominent astrologers were in wide circulation.² Brinks' bias against astrology is thus demonstrated, compounded by his erroneous assumption that astrology is a belief system in the first place and that all astrologers are fatalistic and deterministic by nature and therefore exclude the possibility of simultaneously believing in reincarnation.³ Furthermore, he does not cite papers on other religions that have reincarnation as a major tenet, which reveals gaps in his inquiry into reincarnation and religion as well.

Additionally, he does not sufficiently discuss his sample group nor its relevance to the line of inquiry. For example, why did he select fourteen year olds or religious studies students in a Catholic school (versus a public high school)? Were there chaperones in the room when they filled out questionnaires, whose very presence might influence their responses?

Brink's quantitative approach limits the type of data he can collect. His questionnaires contained 14 statements to be answered in a binary yes/no fashion with no Lickert

¹ T. L. Brink, 'Inconsistency of Belief among Roman Catholic Girls: Concerning Religion, Astrology, Reincarnation', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 20, no. 1 (1978): pp. 82-85 [Hereafter, Brink, 'Inconsistency']; G. Bennett, "'If I Knew You were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake": The Folklore of Foreknowledge in a Neighborhood Group', in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore and the Supernatural*, edited by Barbara Walker, pp. 122-142, (Logan, Utah: Utah University Press, 1995), [Hereafter Bennett, 'Cake'].

² Such as, Bessie Leo and Alan Leo, *The Life and Work of Alan Leo: Theosophist, Astrologer, Mason* (London: Fowler, 1919), and many, many works by Rudhyar.

³ Brink, 'Inconsistency', p. 82.

Scale, which would moderate or clarify the responses.⁴ Only one of the statements referred to astrology (no. 13) and only one to reincarnation (no. 14), and they were both a simple “Do you believe in X?”-type of statement. The closed nature of the questions confines the girls to certain predetermined assumptions about belief. When addressing topics such as belief, opinions, views and emotions, research theorists Hennink et al. make specific reference to the necessity of using *qualitative* research.⁵

Brink’s conclusion makes no reference to his originally cited sources. Instead, he introduces a previously undiscussed paper on Thai studies concerning religion, and it becomes clear he depended on this single study of astrology to prove his theory: ‘Wuthnow then speculated that belief in astrology “may function in ways similar to, and indeed as a substitute for more conventional religions commitments.” The present study fails to confirm the substitution hypothesis’.⁶ In the end, Brink’s methodological design failed to allow him to genuinely confirm or deny that hypothesis.

Bennet

Bennet interviewed people at her father’s podiatrist’s office to explore people’s experiences of foreknowledge. She did not have an overt hypothesis, but her veiled hypothesis was that there is a common understanding of foreknowledge. She used rich narrative to describe and articulate every angle of her research.

Her historical review dwells on the type of vocabulary that people use to describe events that are not easily articulated in everyday language. She sets the scene for a complex exploration by describing the potential difficulties of her subject to hand, that of ‘foreknowledge’.

In her section on research context, Bennet describes in detail how and where she approached her data base, and from this we know exactly who was in the room when she was interviewing them, that the interviewees were in a relaxed environment, with people they trusted, and that they had time to tell their stories, they were clearly not rushed, and were prompted to clarify and explain. She is explicit in her bias or insider status, but her methodology relies on this as part of the relationship she develops with her participants.⁷ Bennet tells the stories that the respondents told her, verbatim (including gestures, silences, and other elements present in the interview such as the presence of other people, etc.). These non-articulated but very powerful communications needed to have a voice in Bennet’s view.

Bennet’s only table describes the age, gender and domestic status of her respondents. It is not to show any quantitative result, rather she uses qualitative narrative in order to share and analyse content. She compares the different words that people use, quoting them extensively. She sums up by circling back - another technique advised by Hennink,

⁴ See Judith Bell, and Stephen Waters, *Doing Your Research Project: A guide for first-time researchers* (London: McGraw-Hill, 2018), pp. 186.

⁵ M. Hennink, Hutter, I. & Bailey, A. *Qualitative Research Methods* (Los Angeles and London: SAGE, 2011), p. 10. [Hereafter Hennink et al., *QRM*.]

⁶ Brink, ‘Inconsistency’, p. 84.

⁷ Hennink et al., *QRM*, p. 19.

et al.⁸ - to specific quotes and words, seeking new connections to describe the commonality of the participants, where they intersect in age and gender and more importantly culture.

Bennet's comments (rather than conclusions) are retrospective. She makes sense of the narratives, seeking common ground that she had no previous idea might exist. This subtle shift to Grounded Theory is appealing as it allows the data to speak and not the author of the paper. This is an Interpretative Phenomenological Approach, as she compares meaning and content in such a way as to hint or ask a question, not to prove her own theory.⁹ ("A phenomenological approach allows researchers to focus on how we perceive the world in all its fullness and richness; our lived experience (Langdrige 2007). This includes not only reflective meaning-making (using discursive resources) (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) but also prereflective, prelinguistic understanding."¹⁰

In conclusion, open-ended interviews (Bennet) elucidate much more data than binary statements or questions (Brink), and allows for new theories to emerge. The qualitative methodology encourages more nuance, engagement, and sensitivity than a merely quantitative one, especially when it comes to studying questions of belief.

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⁸ Hennink et al., *QRM*, p. 23.

⁹ J. A. Smith, P. Flowers, & M. Larkin, *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method, Research* (London: SAGE, 2009).

¹⁰ Zoë Boden and Virginia Eatough, 'Understanding More Fully: A Multimodal Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Approach', *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, Vol 11, no. 2 (2014), pp. 160-177, DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2013.8538540, p. 161.

