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The Teenage Religion and Values Survey in England and Wales: an overview

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Abstract

The Teenage Religion and Values Survey was conducted throughout the 1990s among young people between the ages of 13 and 15 years. A total of 33,982 young people took part in the survey. As the next phase of this research begins for the twenty-first century this paper looks back at the survey conducted in the 1990s and considers two aspects of the research. First, this paper considers the methodology behind designing such a survey. Second, this paper considers some of the insights generated by the survey under five headings: personality, spiritual health, religious affiliation, belonging without believing, and church leaving.

Key words: young people; personality; spiritual health; religious affiliation; belonging; church-leaving

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Introduction

The Teenage Religion and Values Survey, established in the 1990s, generated a valuable and unique source of information about the place of religion in the lives of young people throughout England and Wales at the close of the twentieth century. Drawing on a large sample of 33,982 young people, the survey was able to profile the range of religious traditions visible within England and Wales, including representatives from the major world faiths (e.g. Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and Sikhs), the smaller Christian denominations (e.g. Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians), and other sects (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses). Some findings from this survey were published in two books, *The Values Debate* (Francis, 2001a) and *Urban Hope and Spiritual Health* (Francis and Robbins, 2005). Other key findings however, have been distributed across a range of edited volumes or specialist journals, including *British Journal of Religious Education*, *Implicit Religion*, *International Journal of Education and Religion*, *Marriage and Family Review*, *Mental Health*, *Religion and Culture*, *Religious Education*, and *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*. The aim of the present study is to discuss the methodological issues involved in creating a survey of this scale, to draw together some of the disparate output, and then to assess what has been achieved by such an undertaking. This discussion and evaluation is intended to prepare the ground for undertaking a new study of similar scope during the first decades of the twenty-first century.

Designing the survey

Empirical research concerning the place of religion in the lives of young people draws on both qualitative (often using interviews) and quantitative (often using questionnaires) traditions within the social sciences. Both traditions have their unique

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strengths. The Teenage Religion and Values Survey belongs to the quantitative tradition since our aim was to survey a large sample of young people and to make clear generalisations on the basis of our data.

Using a substantial questionnaire, the Teenage Religion and Values Survey employed three types of questions. General factual information was gathered by forced-choice questions. For example, sex could be indicated by ticking one of two categories: male *or* female. Some clear-cut issues could be assessed on a simple dichotomous scale: yes *or* no. Most issues, however, were assessed on a standard five-point scale following the method originally proposed by Likert (1932). Well phrased items could be evaluated on the continuum: agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly.

The Teenage Religion and Values questionnaire has its roots in two processes. Good questionnaires of this nature draw on what has been learned from previous research. In this case, the survey built on previous studies by the same research group, including *Youth in Transit* (Francis, 1982), *Teenagers and the Church* (Francis, 1984), and *Teenage Religion and Values* (Francis and Kay, 1995). Good questionnaires of this nature also draw on qualitative research. In this case the survey built on a series of focus groups that listened to the concerns of young people (and how they express these concerns) and then tested how young people themselves responded to the draft questions being shaped for the survey.

As a result of these focus groups, a map was developed of the key values that should be included in the survey. After listening carefully to what the young people were saying in the early 1990s about their lives and about their values, our map proposed 15 main areas which we defined as follows: personal well-being, worries, counselling, school, work, politics, social concerns, sexual morality, substance use, right

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and wrong, leisure, the local area, religious belief, church and society, and the supernatural. Each area was then represented by at least six items.

A values map of this nature means that a broad canvass can be covered, but also that inevitably each aspect of the canvass is only thinly covered. We recognised that each of our 15 areas could have deserved many more items, but that to have extended the scope in this way would have made the questionnaire too long.

The notion of measurement

The kind of quantitative questionnaire designed for the Teenage Religion and Values Survey builds on the notion of measurement within the social sciences. Measurement works in a variety of ways. At the simplest level, we were concerned to measure or to quantify discrete categories. This is evident, for example, in our basic question concerning the sex of the respondents: we could report the percentage of males and females responding to the survey.

By using the five-point Likert scaling technique we are able to assume a more sophisticated level of measurement. For example, when a group of young people respond to an item like, 'I feel that my life has a sense of purpose' on a five-point scale (agree strongly, agree, not certain, disagree, and disagree strongly), it is possible to handle the data in a variety of ways. On the one hand, we can report the percentage endorsing each of the five options, or we can combine options (agree strongly and agree can be combined to produce the total who say 'yes' to the item). On the other hand, we can treat 'disagree strongly' as 1 and 'agree strongly' as 5 and so calculate the mean score for the group as a point on the scale between 1 and 5. Scaling of this nature also allows us to add a number of items together to produce a cumulative scale score. Scaling items in this way permits more sophisticated statistical analyses.

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The personality and individual differences approach

The Teenage Religion and Values Survey was designed to enable sophisticated statistical modelling (including linear multiple regression and path analysis) to explore the associations between the different kinds of information that we were able to collect. Such analyses were nested within the individual differences approach to social psychology. Overall, we are concerned with the cumulative influence of a range of individual differences, including factors like age, sex and socio-economic background. Such factors have to be taken seriously before we can ask questions about the potential influence of religion, since individual differences in religion may themselves be associated with these very factors (age, sex and socio-economic background).

While factors like age, sex and socio-economic background are highly visible and routinely taken into account by branches of sociology and social psychology, the Teenage Religion and Values Survey went one stage further to pose questions regarding the influence of less visible individual differences focused by personality psychology.

In the sense adopted by the Teenage Religion and Values Survey, personality is concerned with those deep-seated individual differences that have their roots in our biological nature. The particular model of personality incorporated in our study was the one proposed by Hans Eysenck and outlined by Eysenck and Eysenck (1991) in its most up-to-date form. Eysenck's dimensional model of personality maintains that individual personality differences can be most economically and most adequately summarised in terms of three orthogonal higher order dimensions that he characterises as extraversion, neuroticism and psychoticism.

There are two features of Eysenck's model that are of particular interest. First, these three dimensions are completely independent one of another. Second, these

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dimensions link normal personality with psychological abnormality. As well as assessing these three major dimensions of personality among adults, Eysenck's family of personality tests also include versions appropriate for children and adolescents. The Teenage Religion and Values Survey included short forms of the 'junior' tests specially developed by the research group (see Francis and Pearson, 1988; Francis, 1996).

Assessing religion

The social scientific study of religion has long recognised that religion is a multi-dimensional construct. The Teenage Religion and Values Survey was designed to capture a number of these dimensions in order both to test each independently and to explore the interaction between different dimensions.

The first dimension is self-assigned religious affiliation. This is the dimension of religiosity routinely gathered in many countries within the context of the national census and included for the first time in 2001 in the census for England and Wales and for Scotland. In England and Wales the census distinguished between the six main faith traditions (Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism). In Scotland the census also distinguished between denominational strands within Christianity. Recognising the importance of the denominational differences within Christianity, the Teenage Religion and Values Survey made fine distinctions between different groups.

The second dimension is self-reported attendance at public centres of worship (including churches, synagogues, and temples). Public religious practice taps the extrinsic aspects of religiosity.

The third dimension is self-reported personal prayer and self-reported reading of scripture. Personal religious practice taps the intrinsic aspects of religiosity.

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The fourth dimension is religious belief. Belief in God may operate independently of self-assigned religious affiliation and of self-reported public and personal religious practice.

The fifth dimension is God images. Alongside a well-established research tradition concerned with assessing the social significance of belief in God, a second research tradition has examined the importance of the *kind* of God in whom people believe (that is to say their image of God). The Teenage Religion and Values Survey included items concerned both with belief in God and with the *kind* of God in whom individuals believe.

Alongside these indicators of conventional religiosity, the Teenage Religion and Values Survey also included a range of markers tapping aspects of alternative spiritualities. One key aspect of this area focused on the paranormal and on paranormal beliefs.

Defining the sample

The Teenage Religion and Values Survey was an ambitious project not only in terms of the scope of the issues covered but also in terms of the sample frame. The aim was to collect data from a sample of young people large enough to make the religious minorities visible. In order to ensure that we had full access to sufficient young Jews and young Jehovah's Witnesses (to name just two of the groups specified) we settled on a target of 34,000 young people representative of England and Wales as a whole, stretching from Cornwall in the South to Northumberland in the North, from Pembrokeshire on the west coast to Norfolk on the east coast.

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In defining the sample we recognised that we needed a proper mix of rural and of urban schools, of state maintained and of independent schools, of schools with a religious foundation and of a secular foundation.

Our main aim was to be able to talk about adolescents coming toward the end of the period of compulsory schooling, but at the same time we recognised the problems of approaching year eleven pupils in view of the pressures from the GCSE examinations. We settled, therefore, on year-nine pupils (13- to 14-year-olds) and year ten pupils (14- to 15-year-olds). The survey was given scrutiny from the appropriate ethics committee and deemed suitable for the age group.

Each participating school was asked to administer the questionnaire throughout the year-nine and year-ten classes to avoid any self-selection of pupils by the schools. Pupils were assured of confidentiality and anonymity, and that their replies would not be inspected by teachers within their school. Pupils were given the chance not to participate in the survey, although surprisingly few opted out.

Schools were recruited by the technique of snowball sampling. We found that once schools had participated in the survey and perceived the benefit of the enquiry for the participating pupils, then schools were generally keen to commend the project to other schools. All told 163 schools took part in the survey, giving rise to 33,982 thoroughly completed questionnaires.

Listening to the findings

A survey of this magnitude takes considerable time and resource to carry out and to prepare for analysis. The resulting publications have been shaped partly by the focused and developing interests of the research group, partly by external invitations, opportunities and challenges (like contributing to conferences, special issues of

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established journal, and edited collections of essays), and partly by specific sponsorship (like the Templeton Foundation that provoked our work on prayer, the Bible Society that provoked our work on bible reading, and the Commission on Urban Life and Faith that provoked our work on spiritual health). One aim is to draw attention to the output by focusing on eight areas of our work: the foundation book, *The Values Debate*; the book on spiritual health; the series of papers on religious and denominational affiliation; the contribution to the debate on believing without belonging or belonging without believing, the contribution to research on church-leaving; research on schools of a religious character; studies concerning the correlates of personal prayer; and the other diverse issues explored through the data.

The values debate

The first publication was in *The Values Debate* (Francis, 2001a). The aim of this book was to introduce the database and to provide a general overview of the values of year-nine and year-ten pupils across the 15 areas covered by the survey. Then individual chapters examined the associations between values and the following six factors: age, sex, social class, parental separation and divorce, television viewing, and church attendance. The significance of these factors can be illustrated against the straightforward belief question, 'I believe in God.' All the percentage differences reported in this section and in subsequent sections were tested in the original publication by means of the chi-square test and attained statistical significance.

While 43% of year-nine pupils believed in God, the proportion dropped significant to 40% among year-ten pupils. A significantly higher proportion of females (45%) than males (38%) believed in God. A significantly higher proportion of young people from professional and semi-professional backgrounds (47%) than from semi-

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skilled and unskilled manual backgrounds (38%) believed in God. A significantly higher proportion of young people from intact homes (43%) than from broken homes (36%) believed in God. Young people who watched more than four hours television a day were less likely to believe in God than those who watched less television than that (38% compared with 42%). The chapter on church attendance demonstrates that not all churchgoers believed in God and that not all non-churchgoers did not believe in God: 82% of weekly attenders believed in God, but so did 21% of those who never attended.

Spiritual health

A second book explores the database from the perspective of assessing the spiritual health of young people (see Francis and Robbins, 2005). This book draws on the model of spiritual health proposed by John Fisher (2001, 2004) who maintains that good spiritual health is reflect in positive relationships within four domains: the personal domain (concerned with relationship with self); the communal domain (concerned with relationship with others); the environmental domain (concerned with relationship with the wider world); and the transcendental domain (concerned with relationship with matters of ultimate concern however these are conceived).

This second book extended the range of factors against which belief in God could be assessed. It found, for example, a significantly higher level of belief in God in the north of England than in the south of England (43% compared with 41%), but no association between belief in God and levels of social engagement.

Religious and denominational affiliation

One major strength of the Teenage Religion and Values Survey was that the sample size permitted clear comparisons to be made between members of different faith groups. In one paper, Francis (2001b) examined the association between religious

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affiliation and personal, family and social values. For example, in terms of personal values 50% of young people who belonged to no faith group reported that their life had a sense of purpose, compared with 51% of Sikhs, 61% of Christians, 62% of Hindus, 64% of Jews, and 68% of Muslims. In terms of family values, 47% of young people who belonged to no faith group found it helpful to talk about their problems with their mother, compared with 45% of Sikhs, 40% of Hindus, 52% of Muslims, 53% of Christians, and 71% of Jews.

In a second paper, Francis (2001c) examined the association between religious affiliation and attitudes toward school, sex, alcohol, environment, and leisure. For example, in terms of school, 25% of young people who belonged to no faith group were worried about being bullied at school, and the proportions rose to 30% among Christians, 31% among Muslims, 32% among Jews, 34% among Sikhs, and 39% among Hindus. In terms of alcohol, 17% of young people who belonged to no faith group took the view that it is wrong to become drunk, and the proportions rose to 21% among Christians, 21% among Jews, 33% among Sikhs, 33% among Hindus, and 68% among Muslims.

In a second set of papers, Francis (2008a, 2008b) examined the variations between the different Christian denominations. For example, in terms of attitudes toward sex, the view that homosexuality is wrong was taken by 20% of non-affiliates, 18% of Presbyterians, 19% of Anglicans, 20% of Roman Catholics, and 21% of Methodists, but the proportions rose to 27% among Baptists, 59% among Pentecostals, and 81% among Jehovah's Witnesses. In terms of attitudes toward substances, while 35% of non-affiliates and 35% of Roman Catholics maintained that it is wrong to smoke cigarettes, the proportions rose to 40% among Anglicans, 43% among Baptists, 47%

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among Methodists, 52% among Presbyterians, 54% among Pentecostals, and 78% among Jehovah's Witnesses.

Belonging without believing

The previous two sections have examined the straightforward association between religious affiliation and values. In their study of 'belonging without believing', Francis and Robbins (2004) suggest that this association could be contaminated by religious belief. They proposed, therefore, to make a comparison between two groups: those who do not believe in God and claim no religious affiliation, and those who do not believe in God but describe themselves as Anglicans. The data clearly demonstrate the significant differences in the values held by the two groups.

For example, in terms of social concern, non-believing Anglicans were more inclined than non-believing non-affiliates to express concern about the risk of pollution to the environment (66% compared with 58%) and more inclined to express concern about the poverty of the Third World (52% compared with 44%). In terms of attitudes toward substance use, non-believing Anglicans were more inclined than non-believing non-affiliates to believe that it is wrong to use marijuana (49% compared with 44%) or to believe that it is wrong to use heroine (70% compared with 65%).

Church-leaving

As well as collecting information about current levels of church attendance, the Teenage Religion and Values Survey also collected data about regular attendance at church or Sunday school during earlier phases in life. Robbins (2000) employed these data to compare the profile of four groups of young people: those who attended church regularly at the time of completing the survey (attenders); those who used to attend church regularly, but now do so only occasionally (partial leavers); those who used to

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attend church regularly, but now no longer attend church (total leavers); and those who have never attended church regularly (non-attenders). Across a number of values domains, the findings demonstrated that the young church-leavers differed from those who have had no contact with the churches.

For example, the section on sexual morality demonstrated that young church-leavers maintained a significantly more traditional view, although the difference remained quite small. While 17% of non-attenders considered that it is wrong to have sexual intercourse under the legal age, the proportion rose significantly to 20% among total leavers. While 32% of non-attenders considered that abortion is wrong, the proportion rose significantly to 37% among total leavers.

Schools of a religious character

While the analyses reported up to this point were based on the univariate comparisons of the percentage endorsement of individual items, questions concerned with the relationship between pupil attitude and school type required a more complex approach. In a study concerned with the influence of Anglican secondary schools on personal, moral and religious values, Lankshear (2005) developed three nine-item scales generating the following alpha coefficients of internal homogeneity reliability: scale of personal dissatisfaction (alpha = .72); scale of moral values (alpha = .68); and scale of religious values (alpha = .81). Analysis of variance was employed to compare the mean scores recorded by three groups of pupils (defined as non-affiliates, Anglicans, and other Christians) attending two types of schools (community schools and Church of England voluntary schools). The data demonstrated that Anglicans attending Anglican schools recorded higher levels of personal dissatisfaction ($F = 14.0, p < .001$), higher levels of religious values ($F = 8.6, p < .01$), and comparable levels of moral values ($F =$

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1.1 $p < NS$), in comparison with Anglicans attending non-denominational schools. Non-affiliates attending Anglican schools recorded higher levels of personal dissatisfaction ($F = 8.9, p < .01$), lower levels of moral values ($F = 28.2, p < .001$), and comparable levels of religious values ($F = 0.3, p < NS$), in comparison with non-affiliates attending non-denominational schools.

In a study concerned with the influence of Catholic schools on moral and religious values, Francis (2002a) employed two of the same scales as used by Lankshear (2005): scale of moral values ($\alpha = .71$); and scale of religious values ($\alpha = .84$). Analysis of these data drew attention to four distinct communities of faith within the Catholic school as defined by pupils who were active Catholics (who attend church every Sunday), sliding Catholics (who attend church some Sundays but less often than weekly), lapsed Catholics (who never attend church on Sunday), and non-Catholics (who have not been baptised in the Catholic Church). In respect of the scale of moral values, two-way analysis of variance demonstrated significant differences attributed to sex ($F = 19.2, p < .001$) and to religious status ($F = 29.4, p < .001$). More conservative moral values were espoused by girls and by practising Catholics. In respect of the scale of religious values, two-way analysis of variance demonstrated significant differences attributed to sex ($F = 21.8, p < .001$) and religious status ($F = 283.5, p < .001$). More positive religious values were espoused by girls and by practising Catholics.

In another study, Francis (2005a) examined the influence of Independent Christian schools on pupil attitudes.

Psychological correlates of personal prayer

Francis (2005b) set out to explore the association between personal prayer and the perceived sense of purpose in life. Given the potentially complex association

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between these two variables, two strategies were taken to minimise the effects of contaminating factors. First, given the size of the data set, the contaminating effect of church attendance was taken into account by conducting separate analysis on two subsets of the data: the 7,083 males and 5,634 females who never attend church, and the 1,738 males and 2,006 females who attend church nearly every week. Second, within both of these subsets of data, the contaminating effects of sex, age, and personality (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and the lie scale) were taken into account by means of multiple regression analysis. The data demonstrated a significant positive association between frequency of personal prayer and purpose in life among both the churchgoers (Beta = .25, $p < .001$) and non-churchgoers (Beta = .11, $p < .001$) after taking the other factors into account.

In a separate second analysis of the data provided by the 12,717 young people who never attended church, Francis and Robbins (2006) examined the influence of both purpose in life and frequency of personal prayer on three six-item scales of social attitudes: attitude toward school (alpha = .67); attitude toward law and order (alpha = .75); attitude toward substances (alpha = .71). In each case, after controlling for sex, age, and personality (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, and the lie scale), purpose in life was positively associated with higher pro-social attitudes. In each case, after controlling for purpose in life (as well as sex, age, and personality), greater frequency of prayer was associated with higher pro-social attitudes. In each case the beta weight was small (.04) but statistically significant ($F < .001$). Thus, multivariate modelling suggested that the influence of personal prayer on pro-social attitudes is partly, but not wholly, mediated via purpose in life.

Other diverse issues

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The Teenage Religion and Values Survey has enabled a number of other issues concerning the place of religion in the lives of young people to be examined in depth. Detailed studies have been offered on the influence of religion on attitudes toward smoking (Robbins, 2005), on attitudes toward religious education and school assemblies (Kay and Francis, 2001), on attitudes toward science (Astley, 2005), on attitudes toward abortion (Francis, 2004), and on suicidal ideation (Kay and Francis, 2006).

More complex multi-variate analyses have been employed to identify and isolate the influence of bible reading on purpose in life and attitude toward substances (Francis, 2000a; 2000b; 2002b); and to model the influence of God images on personal well-being and moral values (Francis, 2001d).

Conclusion

The Teenage, Religion and Values Survey represented a considerable investment through the 1990s from a small research group collecting, collating and checking a substantial database of almost 34,000 young people. In many ways that potential investment proved worthwhile as the database demonstrated its capacity to address and to inform a range of research questions throughout the subsequent decades. In the process of the project, the research group has learned three main lessons.

The first lesson concerns the crucial interaction between the design of surveys and the analysis of the data they generate. Some questions that may have been only of marginal interest when the survey was designed emerged of central interest as the data analysis progressed. For example, in the early 1990s we were only becoming aware of the emerging importance of 'positive psychology' in generating interpretative frameworks for exploring individual differences in values and life styles (Snyder & Lopez, 2009) Some of our single item measures, like the question on purpose in life,

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could have been strengthened by additional items in the field. In the early 1990s we were only becoming aware of the emerging interests in alternative spiritualities and anticipating academic study on the so-called 'spiritual revolution' (see Heelas and Woodhead, 2005). Some of our multi-item scales, like the scale concerned with paranormal belief, could have been strengthened by additional scales in this field exploring discrete but parallel aspects of the spiritual revolution.

The second lesson concerns the crucial tension between quantitative research that maintains connection with earlier studies (by employing the same items or the same scales) and quantitative research that introduces new measures and new conceptual fields to reflect (in this case) the changing worldviews and the changing vocabulary of young people. For example, in the early 1990s we were content to employ the abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire proposed by Francis and Pearson (1988). Growing discontent with some of the items in this instrument led to the development of the abbreviated form of the Junior Eysenck Personality Questionnaire Revised by Francis (1996), although the need to maintain continuity across the period of data collection encouraged us to keep the earlier instrument throughout the survey. In the early 1990s our values map of 15 main areas seemed to make good sense of the concerns and of the voices of young people. Qualitative research subsequently undertaken by members of the research group demonstrated how the contents of the values map needed to change for subsequent future projects (see Halsall, 2005).

The third lesson concerns the extreme vulnerability of a research-based vision of this scope within the context of the academic environment and the religious culture of England and Wales in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Some continuity

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of funding is essential to maintain the stability and sustainability of a skilled research group. Short-term non-recurrent project funding is highly detrimental for building such a research environment. Good doctoral students who have helped to build the project have moved on because continuing employment could not be guaranteed. The project leaders have never been able to exploit the full potential of the data because their time has been committed to those other short-term projects that have followed available sponsorship.

Collaboration

The Teenage Religion and Values Survey has throughout been a collaborative venture between the research groups that we lead, the sponsors who have made the research possible, the schools that have participated, and students and colleagues. We have wanted to encourage others to build on our own research by addressing new questions to our data and by adding to that data. We believe that it is in this way that the boundaries of knowledge can be most quickly pushed forward. We are now in the process of conducting a new study of comparable dimensions and welcome collaboration from teachers, postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers, and undergraduate students who may wish to work with us in gathering new data, in testing new theories, and in challenging old conclusions.

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