Seeing is Believing: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the Experiences of the 'Spiritual But Not Religious' in Britain

JAMES MURPHY (iD)

FERGAL W. JONES (iD)

DENNIS NIGBUR (iD)

*Author affiliations can be found in the back matter of this article

ABSTRACT

A majority of the British population now consider themselves not religious, but many of these individuals still have some beliefs they consider spiritual. This study explores the connections between the beliefs and practices of five British participants who identified as 'spiritual but not religious' (SBNR). Semi-structured interviews with each participant were analyzed inductively using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This analysis developed seven sub-themes that were organized into two superordinate themes: 'Experiencing Transcendence' and 'Constructing a Personal Spirituality'. The participants' spirituality was an important part of their identities and lives. They pragmatically and eclectically drew on a wide range of spiritual tools and resources to enrich their lives. In a complex world where they considered traditional sources of religious or spiritual authority untrustworthy, the participants developed their own answers to existential questions that resonated with their own experiences of the world. Both their personal experiences and sociocultural influences were important in shaping and sustaining the participants' worldviews and practices. These idiosyncratic ways that individuals made sense of their experiences show why it is important the research tools used to study worldview dynamics are sensitive to a wide range of factors and the iterative interactions between them.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:

James Murphy

Canterbury Christ Church University, GB

james.murphy@canterbury.ac.uk

In contemporary Britain, those who identify as 'not religious' form an important and growing segment of the population. 57% of the British population are 'not religious' but they do not form a homogeneous group (Curtice et al. 2019; Lee 2015). Many identify as 'spiritual' but 'not religious' (SBNR), with a diverse range of existential beliefs and practices they consider spiritual (Mercadante 2014). This distinction between religion and spirituality is problematic at an etic level but an important part of many individuals' emic identities (Murphy 2017). Bullivant et al. (2019) report 71% of atheists in the UK believe in some form of supernatural being or phenomena. They also report 68% of nonbelievers in the UK do not consider the universe to ultimately meaningless. Understanding the spiritual beliefs and practices of these people is therefore a crucial and integral part of understanding secularization and the increasing numbers of people who identify as 'not religious'.

Globally, the number of people who consider themselves spiritual but not religious is on the rise (Steensland et al. 2021). However, spirituality is not a highly generalizable category – it means different things in different contexts, and it is misguided to seek an overarching definition (Murphy 2017; Steensland 2021). Modern religiosity and spirituality are complex, fluid, multi-layered, and personal (Roof 1999), as are the beliefs of those who identify as not religious (Lee 2015). This entanglement of people's beliefs, practices, and experiences in both their cultural and social contexts (Bender 2010; Steensland et al. 2021) means it is crucial for researchers to study non-religious individuals in a broad range of cultural contexts and not to inappropriately generalize findings from specific countries, such as the USA, to other contexts.

Rather than relying on problematic emic categories like religion, non-religion, or spirituality, an encompassing 'worldviews' approach can explore critical questions across the porous boundaries of these distinctions. The term 'worldview' has been used by scholars to refer to various conceptualizations, but the approach suggested by Johnson et al. (2011) and Taves et al. (2018) appears to have the most potential. This approach focuses on personal worldviews, rather than corporate ones, and encompasses beliefs and associated practices connected to existential concerns such as ontology, epistemology, axiology, and praxeology (Taves & Asprem 2018). These deeply rooted understandings of the world include both explicitly articulated explanations and unarticulated implicit ones.

Focusing on people's everyday ways of life and understandings of the world, rather than on the discursive categories they use to describe them, can help us understand why people believe and do what they do. Hood et al. (2018) propose that 'meaning-making' can provide a framework for understanding the psychology of religion (and, by extension, non-religion). Following Park

(2013), they describe meaning-making as the processes that restore, and create, global meaning systems, which are functionally equivalent to the understanding of worldviews used here (Lewis Hall & Hill 2019; Murphy 2021; Taves et al. 2018). These worldview dynamics remain only partially understood (Barrett & Lanman 2008; Park 2013; Taves & Asprem 2018) and are a vital topic of research in a world where ideologies can rapidly spread and have profound consequences.

The diversity of worldviews among people who eschew formal religious or spiritual organizations makes them difficult to study (Lee 2015) and a broad range of methodological and disciplinary approaches are necessary to understand them (cf. Paloutzian & Park 2013). Qualitative methodologies can help this effort (Coyle 2008; Murphy 2017). They enable complex phenomena to be robustly explored and can generate understandings beyond mere description (Maxwell 2013; Patton 2015). This includes elucidating the meaning of events, the context of and influences on people's actions, and the processes by which events take place (Maxwell 2013). Strong qualitative studies are also a necessary precursor for qualitative research syntheses that use multiple studies to develop a stronger understanding of phenomena and develop more robust theories about them (Paterson et al. 2001; Suri & Clarke 2009).

This study uses Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2009), an inductive qualitative methodology, to explore the relationships between the beliefs, practices, and experiences of a group of individuals who identify as SBNR in South East England. IPA was developed to investigate how people in specific contexts experience phenomena and make sense of their experiences. It is adept at exploring complex, ambiguous, and emotionally charged issues and well-suited to investigate existential concerns, including religious and spiritual phenomena (Murphy 2017; Murphy et al. 2022a; Murphy et al. 2022b). IPA works with a small number of participants to understand their experiences and meaning-making processes in detail. This makes it a very efficient methodology for studying specific groups in specific cultural contexts, which makes it an ideal tool to help expand the study of the non-religious into a wider range of settings.

IPA studies explore both primary and secondary research questions, investigating people's experiences and wider theoretical issues related to those experiences (Smith et al. 2009). The primary research question this study explored was: *'How do these non-religious participants experience the relationship(s) between themselves and the things they consider sacred?'* Our two secondary research questions were: *'How do these relationships form and develop?'* and *'What are the relationships between their beliefs and the experiences they deemed spiritual and/or religious?'* We believe this study is the first to investigate this particular group and

that understanding their beliefs and experiences can help develop a more general understanding of the processes associated with secularization in the contemporary world.

METHOD

DESIGN
We analyzed data from individual, semi-structured interviews using IPA (Pietkiewicz & Smith 2014; Smith et al. 2009). IPA uses an inductive and idiographic approach to investigate individuals' experiences and sense-making, acknowledging that both participants' accounts and the academic analyses of them are inherently interpretative.

PARTICIPANTS
Five participants in South East England were recruited, which is an appropriate number for an IPA study (Smith 2011; Smith et al. 2009). IPA uses small samples from relatively homogenous groups, intentionally examining diverse perspectives on phenomena from similar vantage points (Smith et al. 2009). This enables a good balance between the detailed examination of each case and comparisons between the different cases (Murphy 2021). The key inclusion criteria for this study were that participants lived in the selected geographical area, were between 18 and 65 years old, and had identified as SBNR for at least two years. Participants were purposively recruited to ensure a diverse range of demographic features, particularly gender, educational level, and socioeconomic background.

The diversity of SBNR individuals, and their lack of formal organization, meant that a suitable gatekeeper was required to access an informal network (see Lee 2015; Mercadante 2014). A chance encounter enabled the recruitment of Samantha, who identified as SBNR, had many SBNR friends, and was eager to participate and help recruit others. Only limited demographic details about the participants are presented here to preserve anonymity. All were White and from working- or middle-class backgrounds, reflecting the demographics of the area. There were two women and three men. Each was assigned a pseudonym: Samantha, Thomas, Victor, William and Yvonne.

DATA COLLECTION
Semi-structured interviews with each participant were conducted by the first author. Participants were encouraged to speak extensively about their own experiences. Interviews began by asking the participant to describe themselves and their childhoods. They were then asked about how they understood the world and their place in it, with follow-up questions about what they valued and thought gave them a sense of purpose

or meaning. The focus then shifted to their religious and/or spiritual beliefs and activities. Examples of experiences the participants considered spiritual were discussed in detail. Participants were then asked to reflect on how their beliefs had changed over time. The interview ended by giving the participants the opportunity to share anything else they thought was important about their spirituality or other life experiences. The full interview schedule and details of its development can be found in Murphy (2021). Each interview lasted between 48 and 103 minutes, with a mean duration of 68 minutes.

DATA ANALYSIS
A recording of each interview was transcribed and imported into NVivo 11. Each transcript was annotated with initial comments and reflections before coding by the first author, following the standard IPA analytic process detailed by Smith et al. (2009). Coding was inductive and iterative, first examining each case individually and then re-examining them in light of each other to develop a stronger understanding of the data in a dynamic hermeneutic approach (Smith et al. 2009). Potential themes were consolidated, and those found in at least half the accounts were considered recurrent and grouped conceptually into superordinate themes (Smith 2011). This process was iterative and exhaustive, with the themes repeatedly refined as they were rigorously checked against the data and discussed by the research team. Writing up qualitative research is an integral part of the analysis (Patton 2015; Smith et al. 2009), and each theme continued evolving during this period as we reflexively tested our interpretations of the data.

The account presented here is an interpretative account of the participants' experiences and meaning-making processes, based upon the complete dataset. The extracts presented were chosen to illustrate the themes and show key aspects of convergence and divergence (Smith 2011; Smith et al. 2009).

ETHICS
Ethical approval for the study was received from the university's ethics committee and all participants gave informed consent to participate. The participants all said they were happy to take part and showed no signs of discomfort, sharing highly personal details about their lives even in the early stages of the interviews.

RESEARCHER BACKGROUNDS
This study formed part of the first author's doctoral dissertation (Murphy 2021), which the other authors supervised. The first author interviewed the participants and conducted the initial analysis, which was then further developed by the research team collectively. The first author and one supervisor are not religious, while the

other supervisor is Christian. We consciously maintained an awareness of our own positioning throughout the research process, setting aside assumptions from our own experiences and the literature as much as possible (Smith et al. 2009).

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the two superordinate and seven subordinate themes produced by the analysis. All subordinate themes were present in each participant's experiences.

EXPERIENCING TRANSCENDENCE

The participants' experiences of transcendence included both profound, mystical experiences and more subtle (but no less significant) meaningful 'coincidences' which they participants believed showed the universe was not random. Participants described an eclectic range of spiritual beliefs and practices, all grounded in personal experiences. This sense that there was something more to life than the mundane and physical was an important aspect of why they considered themselves spiritual. They sought to experience these mysteries while acknowledging that they may never fully understand them. This superordinate theme comprised the following sub-themes.

Profound Personal Experiences Are Transformative

Each participant emphasized the importance of potent, personal experiences they considered spiritual.

They reported diverse experiences with a common theme of heightened awareness and a sense that, in the moment, they were seeing and understanding something that was always there but usually hidden from them. For most, these experiences were not common, but they were sufficiently profound to have significant and lasting effects. As Samantha noted, "I believe that there is something because there have been… there are instance or occurrences in my life and other people'… lives, that I cannot and other people can't explain… the scientific method does not work… for those situations." Samantha's belief in something beyond 'science' emerged from a need to explain something she found otherwise inexplicable. These occurrences altered how the participants saw both the world and themselves, convincing them that materialistic or scientific explanations were sometimes inadequate.

These experiences were often empowering or liberating, sometimes allaying concerns or providing guidance. Thomas described one such incident, following his diagnosis with terminal cancer. "There was like a heightened awareness… I was in the moment… it was like a heightened level of perception of reality… my eyes would settle on maybe a headstone which just say 'peace'… It felt like the dead… were talking to me… saying, 'There's nothing to worry about, it's all good… be at peace.'" Thomas' experience helped him cope with a traumatic situation, altering how he viewed the situation and providing comfort in a crisis. This association between heightened spiritual awareness and stressful situations was common.

SUB-THEME	EXAMPLE QUOTE
THEME: EXPERIENCING TRANSCENDENCE	
Profound personal experiences are transformative	"I've also experienced my soul leaving my body… I've experienced that. I know that it's a thing." (Yvonne)
Meaningful 'coincidences' suggest cosmic purpose	"I've also had…, quite incredible coincidences… I can't really explain other than we are all connected and the thing that connects us is love or consciousness." (Thomas)
Psychoactive drugs are experienced as opening the mind	"Doing them [drugs] with my brother, I definitely felt that there was more of a connection between nature, science, human. It kind of opened up my brain a little bit more than what I really perceived was originally there." (Victor)
Actively developing spirituality through diverse practices	"I use [glossolalia] kind of like as a mantra, to kind of keep my monkey mind from wandering if I'm trying to focus on something or if I'm, you know, involved in some kind of meditation or some kind of healing practice…" (Thomas)
THEME: CONSTRUCTING A PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY	
Rejecting dogmatic religious authorities	"There's a really good message in Christianity but it got taken over by a horrible power-hungry patriarchal bollocks… they used it as this massive control system." (Yvonne)
Trusting themselves and their experiences	"Seeing is believing. Unless I can see it, I don't really, don't really believe it. But I do have faith: faith in myself and faith in humanity." (Victor)
Finding value in humanity	"We appreciate the value of life and where and what goes on around us and… are very aware that it can change in a heartbeat for a multitude of reasons…" (Samantha)

Table 1 Seeing is Believing: Summary of Themes with Example Quotes.

The participants said these experiences felt different to 'normal' life, which imbued them with a sense of significance. Some were dramatic. Yvonne described how she had "also experienced my soul leaving my body…. I've experienced the separateness… my consciousness coming out… I've experienced that. I know that it's a thing. I can't measure that… but I can say that it's true for me… Once you know that you can do that, you kind of know that you're infinite and you kinda know that everything is far more kinda cosmic than you… could possibly believe in the first place." Yvonne was certain there is something beyond the physical world because she had experienced it, and she believed the experiences or explanations of others cannot negate that.

Meaningful 'Coincidences' Suggest Cosmic Purpose

Participants' accounts of their spirituality emphasized meaningful 'coincidences'. These varied both in their significance and probability but affirmed the participants' beliefs that things were connected and not simply random. Thomas described how he "had kind of quite, quite incredible coincidences… that [he] can't really explain other than we are all connected, and the thing that connects us is love or consciousness…" Thomas, like the other participants, acknowledged that events in his life could have been merely due to chance, but he found that explanation unlikely and unsatisfying. The events were too important for him to attribute to randomness, so he preferred an alternative explanation that matched his spiritual beliefs and values.

Not all experiences were construed in this way and there was a somewhat ineffable and intuitive element to the attributions. As Samantha explained, "Sometimes, I'm like, 'Oh, that was just a lovely coincidence.' Other times I'll be like, 'This is definitely simpatico'… or 'This was definitely supposed to happen.'" Ultimately, it was the participants' own perception of events that determined whether they were considered spiritually significant, which involved both intuitive feelings and conscious reflections. For many participants, these experiences were relatively rare. However, for Yvonne they were a common occurrence. She described how she, "get[s] it all the time… it's so ingrained in my life… I take that as a massive affirmation that I'm on the right path…" This sense of affirmation and encouragement from the experiences appeared to be what made them spiritual and significant for the participants.

Psychoactive Drugs are Experienced as Opening the Mind

Drugs, of various kinds, played an important role in the spiritual development and lives of all participants. Their experiences while under the influence of psychoactive drugs enhanced their sense of connectivity and altered how they understood reality. Victor described how,

"Doing them [drugs] with my brother, I definitely felt that there was more of a connection between nature, science, human. It kind of opened up my brain a little bit more than what I really perceived was originally there." The language of 'opening up' was common in the participants' accounts, and they believed their experiences with psychoactive drugs had been transformative and revelatory. Their vivid experiences while using drugs broke down barriers and gave new insights.

The participants rooted their spirituality and beliefs in their own experiences and perceptions of the world, and the use of psychoactive drugs altered those perceptions, opening them up to possibilities they otherwise might not have considered. Yvonne summed this up with passionate intensity, "There's just so much more than we know. And our minds…they're the portals…and the use of psychedelics and… mind-altering substances, and meditation, and rationale, all of those things combined will help us somehow discover… this multidimensional fucking shit we live in." She, like the other participants, had a strong desire to understand a world that contains things she struggles to explain, and mind-altering substances caused her to see the world differently.

Actively Developing Spirituality Through Diverse Practices

The participants valued their spirituality and actively developed it through a wide range of spiritual practices. They described eclectic and pragmatic approaches to enhancing their spirituality, using various tools they found useful. These included both specific and formal techniques, such as Tarot or Reiki, and more expansive and informal elements such as music or nature. Both formal and informal activities enhanced the participants' sense of their spirituality, giving them considerable freedom to explore and develop their spiritual identities.

Yvonne spoke extensively about her spiritual practices. She learned to read Tarot as a child. She said, "The tarot are basically depictions of the entire human experience. … Any time you lay those cards down they're vibrating with the energy where you are at the moment… It is completely magical, and it completely works, and it is to do with synchronicity and it's to do with spirit guides and it is to do with you know, I dunno…" Using Tarot fostered her sense of connection to the universe because she believed it enabled her spirit guides to guide her. Yvonne did not understand exactly how Tarot 'works' but was convinced it did because of her many positive experiences.

Participants' spiritual tools were drawn from many different traditions. Perhaps the most surprising was glossolalia (speaking in tongues.) Thomas described learning to speak in tongues in the church he attended as a child and said he continued to find it useful. He said, "I use [it] kind of like as a mantra to kind of keep my monkey mind from wandering if I'm trying to focus on

something or if I'm you know, involved in some kind of meditation or some kind of healing practice... I think I made it up." Reframing it as a learned skill, rather than a gift from God, allowed him to continue using it without theological difficulties. This demonstrates the two key reasons for participants to use specific spiritual practices: they worked for them and could be integrated into their broader conceptions of how the world works.

Each participant used a wide range of spiritual tools and had also experimented with others. They judged practices primarily on their effects, valuing those that they found useful. If they did not enjoy or benefit from a spiritual practice, they sometimes disregarded it entirely, but more often concluded it 'wasn't for them' while acknowledging others might find it helpful. They encouraged others to try practices they found beneficial but believed everyone was responsible for developing their own spirituality and had the freedom to do so in their own ways.

CONSTRUCTING A PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

The participants all described themselves as 'spiritual' but also actively identified as 'not religious'. They trusted themselves, including their own experiences and reasoning, and rejected external authorities that clashed with their values or lived experiences. The participants looked to others for guidance and ideas but rejected interpretations of the world that did not match their own experiences and ideals. Their lives, spiritual and otherwise, were grounded in the people around them whom they cared about. The desire to be happy (and for others to be happy) was important to all the participants; they found value and purpose in their shared humanity. This superordinate theme comprised the following sub-themes.

Rejecting Dogmatic Religious Authorities

The depth of animosity that many participants felt towards organized religion (particularly Christianity) was strong. Yvonne expressed this the most provocatively: "I fucking hate Christianity. I hate it... it got taken over by a horrible power-hungry patriarchal bollocks... they used it as this massive control system... lots and lots of people died because of it." She acknowledged that many of the teachings of Christianity could be beneficial but perceived the institutions as corrupt and harmful. This perception of organized religion as a way of controlling people was expressed by most of the participants. There were two other recurrent elements in the participants' rejection of organized religion: they questioned the veracity of the dogmatic claims made by religious authorities and found the conduct of those authorities, and individual practitioners, hypocritical.

Thomas, raised in a Christian family, described how he came to question his former faith at length. He "started to question the historical man... the belief

system really and... test it myself and, and, found it... wanting.... since then, have, [I've] been kind of searching for my own interpretation and my own understanding... without actually getting too caught up in any dogmatic nonsense." Truth and authenticity were important concerns for these participants. In their quest for answers, they had considered those offered by organized religions but found them lacking. Their search for their own answers and their rejection of the dogmatic claims of religious authorities were interwoven.

The hypocrisy the participants perceived in the behavior of religious organizations and individuals were also important reasons for their rejection of religions' moral authority. For example, Victor objected to a perceived lack of charity by religious institutions. He focused on those most in need, saying, "The Church of England, the money they have, and the homelessness, there shouldn't be [any]... If it's love thy neighbor, and all that, then they should at least welcome them in..." The participants felt that, if people really believed in the religions they espoused, they should live by them fully, even sacrificing their own comfort and convenience to do so. When individuals or organizations did not meet their own standards and ideals, the participants perceived their beliefs as not authentic.

The participants' rejection of religious authorities went beyond Christianity and traditional organized religions. The participants valued the freedom to choose their own beliefs and practices and strongly disliked being told how to do that. Samantha was adamant that "I'm definitely, definitely not an atheist and certainly not a new atheist." The dogmatic approach of atheists like Richard Dawkins or Sam Harris was as unwelcome as other dogmatic claims. Similarly, despite using some practices associated with paganism, the participants did not identify with paganism and rejected what they perceived as the dogmatism of pagan traditions.

Trusting Themselves and their Experiences

Participants' distrust of authority was mirrored by a strong sense of trust in themselves and their own experiences. Victor expressed this clearly: "Seeing is believing. Unless I can see it, I don't really, don't really believe it, but I do have faith: faith in myself and faith in humanity." He rejected organized religion and embraced a more personal spirituality because of this emphasis on authenticity and the authority of his own experiences. The participants viewed their personal experiences as sufficient 'proof' for them to believe in various esoteric things, but acknowledged their experiences alone were not enough to 'prove' their beliefs to others. They viewed the universe as inherently subjective, hence their scepticism about absolute truth claims.

The participants all spent considerable time and energy seeking to understand themselves and the world but were sceptical about the very possibility of finding

any form of ultimate truth. Yvonne said, with some frustration: "The more you try and find the truth, the more you realize there is no truth and that, you know, even if you do find the truth, it fucking hurts… It's not very nice and then you have to face the truth, so most people don't do it anyway." The palpable anguish reflects the many challenges she had faced in her life. The participants were open to finding answers to their existential concerns but needed answers that were congruent with their own experiences. They felt compelled to pursue their own spiritual exploration to find meaning because they found that offered by organized religions inadequate or unacceptable.

Their pragmatic and individualistic approach to spirituality allowed the participants to be relatively open and warm towards religious individuals while maintaining their antipathy towards the institutions they found problematic. As William said, "Call it whatever you like, call it God, call it Mohammed… if that's what leads you to a more fulfilling and richer experience, then that's great… as long as that doesn't detract from anybody else's right to experience that in their own personal fashion too, and that's fine." Authenticity and meeting individuals' needs were their primary concerns. If people did not harm others, they could pursue that within or outside religious traditions.

Finding Value in Humanity

Despite their emphasis on independence and autonomy, the participants were neither unsociable nor uninfluenced by those around them. Each participant described close and valued relationships that were important sources of meaning in their lives. They trusted these friends and family members, respecting and accepting their experiences and beliefs even when they differed to their own. Samantha described this as being part of a "Massive support network… we're all kind of best mates and everyone's got their own relationships and stuff." These friendships had been developed over many years and William described how they had developed a "bond of brotherhood, mostly forged by strife." They had learned whom they could trust when life was difficult and reciprocated that support.

The participants' strong sense of compassion and belief that people should do whatever made them happy, so long as it did not hurt others, appeared to be rooted in their own experiences of suffering. As Samantha explained, "I like being able to help people…. we appreciate the value of life and where and what goes on around us and… are very aware that it can change in a heartbeat for a multitude of reasons…" The participants had experienced trauma and found meaning and purpose in helping others to deal with adversity.

The participants believed their own experiences of hardship compelled them to try to make the world better

for others and doing so helped them cope with their own pain. Implicit in this was the belief that all people mattered and deserved not to suffer. Victor summarized the importance of helping others as he reflected on what was most important in life. "Life is what it is. It's about the memories you make with people…. When I don't feel like I'm doing much to help people, then I feel very lost in myself." For these participants, the world was a wonderful but often harsh place, and it was other people that gave meaning to the suffering inherent in life.

DISCUSSION

We used IPA (Smith et al. 2009) to explore the experiences and beliefs of five SBNR individuals. By identifying as SBNR, they embraced the mystery of something beyond themselves while rejecting traditional religious institutions they saw as oppressive and hypocritical. Both their rejection of what they perceived as negative religiosity and their embrace of a more positive and open spirituality were important aspects of their self-identity.

SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS

Distinguishing between spirituality and religion is problematic (Ammerman 2013; Murphy 2017; Zinnbauer et al. 1997) but for these participants the distinction was an important element of their personal identities and beliefs. This does not weaken the arguments for rejecting the distinction at the etic level, but the participants' experiences show how problematic terms can still do important work for individuals and groups. Being 'spiritual' and being 'not religious' were both important aspects of their social identities (see Brown 2000), and this shaped their beliefs and behaviors in various ways. This desire to identify themselves and distinguish themselves from others shows the inherently political and discursive nature of religious identifications (Ammerman 2013; Cotter 2020; Fitzgerald 2000).

The participants' lived experiences convinced them that there was 'something more' than the physical world and gave them a deep sense of connection to the rest of humanity and the world itself. For them, this 'something more' was spiritual and their connection to it was their spirituality. The participants were comfortable acknowledging that what they experienced as true may not also be true for others. Their rejection of absolute truth claims is typical of a subjectivist existential culture (Lee 2015) and other studies suggest this is common among those who identify as SBNR (e.g., Besecke 2014; Mercadante 2014). Describing themselves as SBNR allowed them to define their own spirituality and avoid being pigeonholed (Ceriello 2018).

The participants valued their independence highly, not only in their spirituality. Bostic (2018) suggests the

rejection of religious authorities by SBNR individuals is linked to a rejection of oppression and injustices, which appeared to be the case here. Freedom, autonomy, and authenticity were perhaps the most sacred values for these participants. They followed their own convictions and believed others had the right to do the same, even when they conflicted with their own beliefs. Like others who identify as SBNR (e.g., Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014; Wuthnow 1998), the value they placed on authenticity helps explain their rejection of authorities perceived as incongruent with their experiences and values.

The participants explicitly defined and positioned themselves in opposition to religion, primarily but not exclusively Christianity. Is this sense, they were not merely 'not religious' but were also actively 'non-religious' (Lee 2015). As Bullivant et al. (2019) shows, having one or more supernatural/spiritual belief is common for such individuals and understanding how people combine non-religious and spiritual sentiments in their personal worldviews is vital if we want to understand the non-religious and secularization more broadly. It is not enough to simply focus our studies on the minority of individuals who participate in organized non-religious groups and reject all supernatural beliefs (cf. Blankholm, 2022). This study provides important insights into how one group of people, in one cultural setting, do that.

CONNECTION, COMPASSION AND TRANSCENDENCE

A sense of compassionate connectivity was at the core of the participants' spirituality. The participants could not explain how the universe worked but were convinced that it was not merely random: things happened for a reason, even if that reason was unknowable. They attributed positive events, both profound experiences and subtle 'coincidences', to something greater than themselves and believed these events showed that 'something' was watching over them and cared about them (cf. Mercadante 2014; Spilka et al. 1985). They were emphatic that this was not the God of Christianity, but its presence gave them a sense of security and peace. By providing meaning, purpose, and enduring relationships the participants' spirituality helped them to cope with challenges in their lives (Pargament 1997; Pargament et al. 2013).

The participants had all experienced considerable suffering and described how this drove them to diminish the suffering of others. They were focused on living the best lives they could and helping others to do the same. This mirrors Albanese's (2008) finding that experiences of pain and incongruity often motivated American metaphysicians to strive for new solutions to existential struggles. However, our participants had a distinctly anthropocentric focus in their lives (Day 2011): they looked to the people around them for meaning, and

helping others was an integral part of their spiritual identities. While the participants' spirituality included elements of both vertical and horizontal transcendence (Coleman et al. 2013), that distinction was often not clear-cut. Their spirituality blended the physical and the spiritual, but they all experienced a sense of being connected to something loving and beyond themselves that helped orientate their lives and give them meaning.

EXPERIENCES AND SOCIAL INFLUENCES

Experiences the participants deemed spiritual or sacred (Taves 2009) were important in how they made sense of their lives and the world. These experiences were diverse, not only between participants but also within the lives of individual participants. They included spontaneous experiences, cultivated spiritual practices, and events in their daily lives that had special significance. The participants valued and trusted their own experiences; they provided the foundation on which their understanding of themselves and the wider universe (i.e., their worldview) was built. The participants' spiritual experiences were sometimes transformative and healing, having effects on their lives that went far beyond the intellectual. These other effects were more important to the participants than the intellectual insights they provided: it was how their spiritual experiences made them feel that encouraged them to continue their practices and helped them cope with life's stresses (cf. Mercadante 2014; Pargament et al. 2013).

Many of these experiences coincided with times of significant stress in participants' lives. Links between stressful stimuli and anomalous experiences have been found in studies of paranormal experiences (French & Stone 2013) and mystical experiences within religious traditions (McNamara 2014; Paloutzian et al. 2013). Sudden and transformative religious/spiritual experiences have also been associated with insecure childhood attachments (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick 2004), and many of the participants described traumatic and challenging situations in their early lives. The participants' spiritual experiences helped them construct more positive and meaningful understandings of themselves and their place in the world, often giving hope, comfort, or purpose in times of need.

The participants did not develop their spirituality in isolation, it was entangled and embedded in their social contexts (cf. Bender 2010, Roof 1999, Steensland 2021). The participants emphasized the importance of autonomy and authenticity, but also appreciated the importance of their connections to other people (cf. Pevateaux 2018). The participants learned many of their spiritual practices from others, and some of these had explicitly communal elements. All the participants spoke about how important their friends were to them, and many of their friends shared some of their practices

and beliefs. Other social influences on the participants included books, the internet and popular culture. The participants were part of a community of practice that was informal, dynamic and rhizomatic but that supported their spiritual development (Wanless 2017). That these communities did not share fixed traditions does not make them less important than more traditional religious communities (cf. Roof 1999).

The informal nature of the participants' spiritual networks does not preclude them having shared core values or common approaches to their spirituality. Openness to different spiritual practices and interpretations is a defining feature of the SBNR movement (Fuller & Parsons 2018; Mercadante 2014) and at the various workshops and informal gatherings they attended these attitudes were encouraged. Together with others, they collectively created and recreated meaningful stories and symbols that helped make sense of their lives and spirituality (Roof 1999). The participants pursued their own spiritual development, experimenting and learning to interpret their experiences and feelings with the guidance of respected others (cf. Luhrmann 2020). They adopted practices and beliefs that resonated with their own experiences, but their exploration and experimentation was supported by others.

PSYCHOACTIVE DRUGS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES

All five participants reported using various psychoactive drugs, which seem to have played an important role in their spiritual development. The use of psychoactive drugs, or entheogens, for religious or spiritual ends has a long history; it is only relatively recently that attitudes in many parts of the world have hardened against them (Partridge 2018). Individuals who identify as SBNR report using alcohol and psychoactive drugs more than the general population, which may be linked to their increased openness to mysticism and other forms of altered consciousness (Fuller 2001).

There have been more than a thousand studies on the psychology of entheogens (Wulff 2000), showing that they can induce states of altered consciousness and have a lasting impact on those who use them (see Hood et al. 2018; McNamara 2014). These studies suggest that a potential long-term effect of entheogens is changing how individuals understand and experience the world, so the experiences of our participants may not be uncommon. Hood et al. (2018) suggest that with a suitable 'religious' framing it is possible for experiences associated with entheogens to be considered spiritually significant and have life-transforming power. It appears that the lack of a suitable, pre-existing framework to make sense of their experiences led these participants to explore the possibilities and develop their own. However, it is also possible that the subjectivist existential culture

(Lee 2015) is now sufficiently developed and established in British popular culture that it does in fact provide an adequate framework for such spiritual seeking.

DEVELOPING PRAGMATIC AND ECLECTIC SPIRITUALITIES

The participants' spirituality was eclectic and pragmatic, drawing on manifold cultural resources to develop idiosyncratic systems of belief and practice that worked for them. This is not uncommon, and many people hold some contradictory or inconsistent beliefs (Chaves 2010). These participants were explicitly pragmatic in their approach, embracing things they found useful and that enhanced their sense of authenticity. The participants actively developed their spiritualities, intentionally and effortfully cultivating this aspect of their lives (cf. Bender, 2010). This eclectic pragmatism appears common among individuals who identify as SBNR (e.g., Albanese 2008; Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014).

The participants displayed the key traits of 'reflexive spirituality' (Besecke 2014; Roof 1999). They rejected religious literalism and scientism, disliked rigid rules, and embraced an open-ended search for meaning. However, they retained fewer elements of Christianity than participants in American studies (e.g., Bender 2010; Besecke 2014; Roof 1999), likely due to the very different cultural contexts in which they lived. The importance of cultural contexts to both secularization and spirituality is widely acknowledged (e.g., Lee 2015; Steensland et al. 2021) and the participants' experiences in a society where the majority of people are no longer religious were very different to those in a society where the majority believe in God. Individuals in the modern world have a vast range of existential resources at their disposal to help them make sense of their lives, and they can combine them in very different ways (Lee 2015). This variation of belief and practice between different individuals who identify as SBNR means researchers must be sensitive to these divergences when conducting nomothetic research studying the non-religious, especially in different national contexts.

Each participant used their ongoing experiences, relationships and wider sociocultural resources to develop their own idiosyncratic worldview (Johnson 2011; Taves & Asprem 2018). This was an iterative and reciprocating process, where their worldviews also helped shape their experiences, relationships, and the sociocultural resources they engaged with. Although some particularly important events could have a large impact on how they understood the world, usually their understandings evolved gradually as new experiences and interpretations were assimilated and either affirmed or slightly altered their previous beliefs. They understood this as an ongoing process of discovery and enlightenment, with their beliefs evolving as they experienced new things and

learned more about the world. For these participants, seeing really was believing - but how they understood what they saw was influenced by their other experiences and the cultural explanations available to them (cf. Bender 2010; Roof 1999). Capturing this complexity is a necessary prerequisite for developing understandings of it. This study shows the utility of idiographic and qualitative methods for investigating these phenomena and developing richer understandings of how worldviews develop and affect people's lived experiences.

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

As with any study, the sampling process limits the claims that can be appropriately made from the data. This is particularly true with idiographic studies that examine the experiences of small numbers of participants in detail. As such, our findings are focused on understanding the experiences of how participants. However, idiographic approaches can generate more general understandings of phenomena and IPA aims not merely to describe but to analyze and help explain (Smith et al. 2009). The analysis developed in this study is interpretative but rigorous, and we believe the resulting insights into the lives of this group of participants also help explain how others develop their own understandings of the world.

Further studies are necessary to investigate the extent to which these participants' experiences are shared by other SBNR individuals. Findings from the United States (e.g., Fuller 2001; Mercadante 2014) suggest at least some commonalities. The importance of cultural and social factors in shaping the participants' worldviews suggests that, even if the underlying processes are similar, how non-religious individuals in other cultures develop or describe their spirituality may be different. Further research in countries beyond Europe and North America is particularly needed to develop a fuller understanding of secularization and non-religiosity. This study shows IPA can efficiently and effectively explore the experiences and worldviews of participants in specific contexts. As such, it has the potential to play an important role in expanding the study of the non-religious to a broader range of geographical and cultural contexts. Once such studies have been conducted, qualitative research syntheses can then develop a stronger and more generalisable understanding than any single study (Paterson et al. 2001; Suri & Clarke 2009).

The importance of the participants' social networks and wider cultural influences in shaping their experiences may reflect, at least in part, the recruitment process as completely isolated individuals could not be recruited by a gatekeeper. However, other research (e.g., Bender 2010; Lee 2015) has also suggested social and cultural factors play a crucial role in the development of worldviews and so it is unlikely that these findings are purely a consequence of our recruitment strategy.

CONCLUSIONS

Those who identify as SBNR are a growing and significant section of the population who grapple with the search for meaning and significance in the modern world. Our participants rejected many of the traditional dogmas and institutions that have provided existential meaning to previous generations and sought to find, and live, their own truth in a complex world. Understanding how Samantha, Thomas, Victor, William and Yvonne created meaning from their experiences, using the cultural resources available to them, provides insights into how others, including those who identify as religious and those who identify as non-religious, do the same. Their example also demonstrates the complexity of people's worldviews and lived experiences and cautions against making simplistic assumptions about who people are, what they believe, and what they do based on how they identify.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATIONS

James Murphy orcid.org/0000-0002-3571-2193
Canterbury Christ Church University, GB

Fergal W. Jones orcid.org/0000-0001-9459-6631
Canterbury Christ Church University, GB

Dennis Nigbur orcid.org/0000-0002-2332-9242
Canterbury Christ Church University, GB

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