

Innovation Funding Project Report and Student Stipend Report

Peter Beyer

Project Title: *A Web-based Survey Instrument on Religious Identity (II): Testing, Refining, Validating*

1. Project Goals

The main aim of the project was to develop further a web-based survey instrument on religious identity which had initially been developed in the context of a 2011-2012 project funded through the RDP. The first stage developed the core questionnaires and pretested them through a small group of volunteers from outside the initial research group. The main goal of this project was to refine, test, and validate the questionnaire through its actual use in a concrete research setting with a select panel of participants who represented a broad cross-section of possible religious identities, and who would offer feedback on their experience with the instrument. Thus, although the instrument was designed to be useable by different researchers, working with different groups and adding their own specific questions to the questionnaire in that context, it had to be tested and refined in a broader context with such a broad sample of participants. The goal was to make the instrument more reliable and thus potentially more useful for other research during the remainder of the RDP project period (and beyond).

2. Researchers and Students Involved

The project was carried out primarily by Peter Beyer & Solange Lefebvre, with the collaboration of two research assistants, Caitlin Downie (MA, University of Ottawa) and Alyshea Cummins (Ph.D University of Ottawa)

3. Rationale

The primary question of reference for Strand 1 research asks how different groups, agencies, and institutions in Canada construct and understand religious identity and religious diversity. Given the relational nature of such identities in a context of presumed religious plurality, carriers of religious identity can be expected always to understand their own identity both in terms of its own unique characteristics, and in contrast to other formally homologous religious

identities. Such identity constructions can therefore be expected to vary from religious group to religious group and from individual to individual, but also show certain similarities as ‘differences within identity’. Researching religious identity constructions therefore requires methods that take this into account, that allow the measurement of how different religious identities are constructed ‘identically’ – or not. The survey instrument was designed to contribute to the possibility of such measurement.

4. Methods

The previous project (2011-12) determined what sorts of survey instruments have been used in past research to measure religious identity and found that most were overly biased toward Christian/Abrahamic religious identities. It therefore constructed a survey of religious identity more likely to fulfill the purpose, namely one divided into three questionnaires, one for people who by their own declaration said they were religious and/or who identified with one or more distinct religions, one for people who didn’t but declared themselves nonetheless to be spiritual, and one for whom neither applied (see report on 2011-2012 project for further details). The three part survey was mounted on the RDP’s Survey Monkey site. The purpose was to create a questionnaire that addressed the widest variety of ‘religious’ identities possible, including the absence of such an identity. In light of the pretesting completed in the context of the 2011-2012 project, the three questionnaires were refined. A group of potential participants representing a wide variety of potential religious identities was then asked to take the survey; the results for those who then did take the survey were analyzed and the survey was further refined.

5. Ethics, permissions

The list of 92 potential participants was compiled on the basis of a previous research ethics certificate obtained outside the context of the two RDP projects. A further ethics certificate was obtained from the University of Ottawa Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Board. This allowed the recruitment of the 92 participants to take the web-based religious identity survey. The certificate was obtained during the early months of 2013, resulting in recruitment during the March-June 2013 period.

6. Summary of Activities

In light of the pretesting completed in the context of the 2011-2012 project, the three questionnaires were refined during the fall of 2012. The list of potential participants was also completed during this time. The final list of 92 included people who came from a variety of religious backgrounds (whether or not they actually identified with the religions concerned) including Muslim, Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant), Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, and no religion. Between March and June of 2013 the 92 were solicited to take the web-based survey on the RDP Survey Monkey site; 50 did so, 43 the English version and 7 the French version. The results were analyzed in July 2013.

7. Provisional Findings

The questions for the most part appeared to be valid in that they were understood by the participants more or less in the way that they were intended to be understood. Participants had the opportunity to question any of the questions and to indicate where they found difficulty understanding what was asked or applying the question to their situation. We received few indications of problems, and where we did, we have changed the question concerned slightly to respond to the potential difficulty. Perhaps significantly – the question must be tested further – exceedingly few participants ended up taking either the “spiritual only” questionnaire or the “no religion” questionnaire. The reasons for this are speculative, but point at least to the need to recruit participants intentionally drawn from such segments of the population, and to the need to present the questionnaire in a ‘non-religious’ format so as not to ‘bias’ the questionnaire in favour of those who recognize themselves in a survey labelled as ‘religious identity’. Moreover, a disproportionate number of Muslims and Christians took the survey, but this corresponds roughly to the fact that the longitudinal list was compiled from a group of research participants who were disproportionately Muslim and Christian. There were, however, enough Buddhist, Sikh, Hindu, and no/very weakly religious respondents to lead us to conclude that the questionnaire is likely valid for them as well.

8. Outputs

The main output is the refined questionnaire itself. We are now fairly sure that at least the ‘religious’ questionnaire is valid across a very broad range of religious identities, including those who do little more than identify with a particular religion, if not those who eschew anything presented to them as religious identity. The questionnaire can now be enhanced for particular

target populations, as foreseen at the beginning of both the projects and yield concrete results that will inform published reports of various kinds.

9. Finances

Student Information:

Research Assistantships

The project engaged one student assistant (C. Downie), who was responsible for a) completing the longitudinal list of participants, b) mounting the questionnaires and correcting them in light of previous and ongoing feedback, c) and recruiting from the list to take the questionnaire. A further assistant was hired with other monies (from Beyer’s internal funds) toward the end of the project year to analyse the results (A. Cummins).

Breakdown of Expenses			
Student Funding*			
	Amount	Name	Dates
Student Assistantships	\$4,000	Caitlin Downie	September 2012 – June 2013