'I Believe in Something; I Don't Know What It Is': An Exploration of Five British Hindus' Worldviews Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

SECULARISM & NONRELIGION

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

Previous research has suggested individuals can draw on resources from a diverse range of existential cultures when constructing their personal worldviews. However, the ways individuals' beliefs and worldviews are acquired and develop is still only partially understood. This study investigates these processes of worldview dynamics by exploring the beliefs and practices of five British Hindus. Semi-structured interviews with each participant were inductively analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This analysis developed six sub-themes which formed two superordinate themes: 'Everybody has their own way' and 'Focusing on this world'. The analysis shows the complexity of many individuals' worldviews and demonstrates how individuals can live in a hinterland between religiosity and non-religiosity. For these participants, existential beliefs were idiosyncratic and deeply personal. They rejected some aspects of their cultural heritage while retaining others. The participants were comfortable with uncertainty about such matters and were highly tolerant of divergent beliefs. Understanding how these participants made sense of their world increases our understanding of both worldview dynamics and the forms that secularity can take in modern Britain. This shows why more nuanced understandings of 'belief' are necessary to explore the complexity of people's lived experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

The relationship between what people believe and their experiences is complex and yet crucial for understanding many issues of interest to social scientists. It is especially pertinent for understandings of religiosity, spirituality, and secularity. However, drawing clear distinctions between religiosity, spirituality, and other existential beliefs or practices is problematic, especially at the psychological level (Murphy 2017; Taves et al. 2018). The more encompassing concept 'worldviews' provides a more useful framework for understanding how individuals and groups make sense of the world, integrating understandings of culture and religion (Johnson et al. 2011; Taves & Asprem, 2018). Although 'worldviews' has also been used to describe institutionalized systems of belief and practice (including, but not limited to, religious traditions), our focus as psychologists is on the personal worldviews that are distinct from these larger traditions (but often draw upon them). These personal worldviews are functionally the same as individuals' global meaning-making systems (Park 2013; Lewis Hall & Hill 2019), which Hood et al. (2018) argue convincingly are a fundamental aspect of religiosity (and, by implication, also non-religiosity).

Johnson et al. (2011) identify ontology, epistemology, semiotics, axiology, teleology, and praxeology as the six key aspects of worldviews, and the 'answers' to these different existential concerns are usually intertwined. These understandings of the world are created and communicated through language, stories, and other symbols. As Taves et al. (2018) note, while worldviews are often explicit and articulated, they can also be implicit and unarticulated. Deeply held yet unarticulated values can often be more important than explicitly professed doctrinal beliefs. Expanding understandings of belief to include "all information (not necessarily in propositional or explicit form) [that is treated] as true in the generation of further thought and behaviour" (Barrett & Lanman, 2008, p. 110) can potentially offer richer and more accurate insights into the complexity of lived experiences.

Previous research has suggested that when constructing their personal worldviews, individuals can draw on resources from a diverse range of existential cultures (L. Lee 2015), and individuals often hold beliefs that are incongruent with each other (Chaves 2010) or with the formal doctrines of groups they identify with (Slone, 2004). However, how individuals' beliefs and worldviews are acquired and develop is still only partially understood (Barrett & Lanman 2008; Park 2013; Taves & Asprem 2018). This study seeks to help clarify these processes of worldview dynamics. The particular focus here is on better understanding these processes in a sample of British Hindus.

Hinduism is the fourth largest religious group in Britain, with about 800,000 individuals (1.3% of the population) identifying as Hindu (Office for National Statistics 2013). It is also the fourth largest religious group globally, with approximately 1.1 billion people (15.1% of the population) identifying as Hindu (Pew Research Center 2017). Hinduism has roots that go back to at least 2,500 BCE, but only really began to be perceived as a single, cohesive religious tradition in the 19th Century (Jacobs 2010). This conceptualization of Hinduism is problematic (Fitzgerald 1990): Hinduism is a very diverse tradition, with many texts that are considered sacred and practitioners can be polytheistic, monotheistic, henotheistic, or even atheistic (Jacobs 2010). There are multiple paths to liberation or salvation in Hinduism, including through: devotion to a specific deity, specific behaviors, and attainment of certain understandings (Jacobs 2010; Knott 2016). In addition to regional and caste/class variations, Hinduism is also often practiced differently in the diaspora than in India, with many individuals incorporating elements of other religious traditions into their practices (Brekke 2019).

This diversity makes Hindu participants ideal to explore how worldviews form and change over time. There have been few psychological studies examining the experiences of Hindus in Britain, and the ways their worldviews develop and are sustained may be very different to both Hindus in other cultural contexts and those from other cultural traditions. As will be seen in the analysis, the participants in this study were in many ways secular and non-religious, although they continued to identify as Hindu. To develop a richer and fuller understanding of secularity and non-religiosity, it is crucial that non-white and non-Christian populations like these are studied. As Asad (2003) argues, secularity in the modern world can look very different when the starting point is not Christian.

A QUALITATIVE APPROACH

Qualitative research approaches are adept at exploring complex issues and developing a rich understanding of phenomena. They are particularly suitable for exploring process-focused questions, such as understanding the meaning of events, understanding the context of and influences on people's actions, understanding the processes by which events take place (Maxwell 2013; Patton 2015). Qualitative approaches enable phenomena that are difficult to conceptualize and/or measure to be investigated in an open yet rigorous manner.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith et al. 2009) is a qualitative approach that is well suited to exploring the formation and development of worldviews. IPA is designed to explore both individuals' experiences and how they make sense of them. It is adept at investigating 'complex, ambiguous and emotionally laden' topics (Smith & Osborn 2015, p. 41) such as religion (Murphy et al. 2022). IPA supports rich and detailed examination of convergence and divergence

between participants' experiences, enabling a deep understanding of how events (and the participants' interpretations of them) shape each other to be developed. IPA is a phenomenological approach that is consistent with a critical realist epistemology and it uses a double hermeneutic: the analysis is the researchers' interpretation of the participants' interpretations of their experiences.

IPA studies explore primary and secondary research questions (Smith et al. 2009). Primary research questions focus on how people experience phenomena and make sense of their experiences. Secondary research questions are broader, more explanatory and more theory-driven. The primary research question that this study explored was: '*How do the Hindu participants experience the relationship(s) between themselves and the things they consider sacred?*' Two secondary research questions were: '*How do these relationships form and develop?*' and '*What are the relationships between beliefs and experiences deemed spiritual and/or religious?*' The focus of the study was therefore on understanding both the lived experiences of the participants and the relationship between those experiences and the way they understood the world. In other words, it explored the lived experiences, worldviews, and worldview dynamics of the participants.

METHOD

DESIGN

This study conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al. 2009) of data collected from individual, semi-structured interviews with each participant.

PARTICIPANTS

The sample comprised five British Hindus from a community in a small geographical area of South East England. They were not affiliated with a specific place of worship, as the nearest Hindu temple was not local. Participants were purposively recruited, using a gatekeeper (Patton 2015), in accordance with predetermined eligibility criteria. The participants had to self-identify as Hindu, British, between 18 and 65 years old, and as not possessing any characteristics that made them vulnerable. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity (Madill 2012). Two participants (Madesh and Panev) were male and three (Nalika, Olena, and Rachana) were female. All five were relatively well educated and affluent, which reflects the nature of the community chosen for the study. Further demographics are not presented to preserve participant anonymity. All participants provided informed consent. The study was approved by the university's research ethics committee.

IPA intentionally uses smaller samples than some other qualitative approaches, and the sample size used here is typical for the methodology (e.g., Cassar & Shinebourne 2012; K. Lee & Gubi 2019; Lewis et al. 2018). IPA explicitly rejects the concept of data saturation and instead idiographically explores the experiences of a purposively chosen sample in detail. Using five participants enabled a good balance between detailed analysis of individual experiences and exploration of similarities and differences between participants (Smith 2011; Smith et al. 2009).

INTERVIEWS

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant individually. The interview schedule covered seven broad areas, each introduced with an open question and supplemented by additional prompts. The broad areas were: (i) the participant's sense of who they are and their background; (ii) their current perspective on life and the world, with prompts eliciting the sources of meaning, purpose and value; (iii) their experience of religious or spiritual activities; (iv) their views concerning god(s) and the supernatural; (v) a more detailed focus on specific experiences of god(s) and the supernatural; (vi) how their beliefs had changed (or remained constant) during their lifetime; and (vii) anything else not yet covered they felt was germane. The full interview schedule is available in Murphy (2021). All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

DATA ANALYSIS

The transcripts were imported into NVivo 11 before being analyzed by the first author, in consultation with the other authors. Following IPA's idiographic commitment to detailed analysis of each case (Smith et al. 2009), transcripts were first analyzed separately. Each transcript was annotated with initial comments and reflections prior to inductive, iterative coding. Themes were developed to capture the lived experience and sense-making of each participant. After the conclusion of these case studies, a cross-case analysis explored patterns of convergence and divergence in the participants' experiential themes to work out idiosyncratic and shared aspects of the phenomenon. This resulted in a set of interpretative cross-case themes, which served the double hermeneutic principle of IPA (researchers making sense of participants making sense of the phenomenon) and structured the presentation of results, as usual in IPA (Smith et al. 2009). 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. The analysis thus followed the hermeneutic circle, which is used in IPA to ensure a dynamic, interpretative and non-linear engagement with the data by understanding each part with reference to the whole and the whole with reference to its parts (Smith et al. 2009).

As is normal for IPA and many other forms of qualitative analysis, each theme continued to evolve during the write-up of the analysis, as the research team reflexively tested its interpretations of the data and developed deeper insights into it (Patton 2015; Smith et al. 2009). The entire analytic process was documented using memos. The resulting analysis provides an interpretative account of the participants' experiences and meaning-making processes, based upon the complete data. The quotes and interview extracts presented within it have been chosen to illustrate the themes and highlight aspects of convergence and divergence within the participants' experiences.

RESEARCHER BACKGROUNDS

This study formed part of the first author's doctoral dissertation (Murphy 2021) and the research team consisted of the first author, who conducted the interviews and was the principal analyst, and two supervisors. The first author and one supervisor are not religious, while the other supervisor is a practicing Lutheran. We were committed to engaging with the participants' experiences in their own terms, reflexively maintaining an awareness of our own positionality and deliberately setting aside assumptions from our own experiences and the extant literature as much as possible throughout the research process (Smith et al. 2009).

RESULTS

The findings are summarized in Table 1. Two superordinate themes captured the core of the participants' spiritual experiences and beliefs; namely that 'everybody has their own way' of finding and expressing spiritual fulfilment, and that the participants were 'focusing on this world' rather than thinking much about what may happen after they die. Each theme was apparent in all five interviews.

SUPERORDINATE THEME: EVERYBODY HAS THEIR OWN WAY

All the participants described complex entanglements of personal beliefs, practices, and non-beliefs. They all believed in something greater than themselves and engaged in some religious or spiritual practices but rejected many traditional Hindu doctrines and customs. The participants had an inclusive and tolerant attitude to different religious beliefs and practices, accepting and embracing their own uncertainty as part of the mystery of life. They believed that everybody has their own way to find peace and happiness in the world and that conclusive answers to existential questions were not necessary to achieve that. This superordinate theme included the following four sub-themes.

Believing in 'something'

The participants all believed in something greater than themselves, but they were consciously ambiguous about what that entity was like. They did not believe in literal, anthropomorphic deities but believed there was some sort of higher power or divinity beyond the rational and materialistic realm in which they lived. The participants struggled to communicate their thoughts and beliefs about this topic and seemed to find the concepts available to them inadequate to reflect their experiences and beliefs. For example, Rachana initially stated that 'I don't believe in God,' but she continued to say, 'I don't know how to explain, but there's something there – but I don't know what it is.' Later in the interview, after discussing a difficult time in her life, she again affirmed with conviction that: 'There must be something. I don't know what it is… There's something pulling back.'

SUB-THEME	SAMPLE EXTRACT
Superordinate theme: Everybody Has Their Own Way	
Believing in 'something'	'I don't believe in God… [but] there must be something. I don't know what it is… There's something pulling back.' (Rachana)
Experiencing spirituality and peace	'[I] recite shlokas…religious verses. I think it has more like a meditative effect… I don't know if it does anything… [but] it clears your head.' (Olena)
Rejecting some doctrines and customs	'The customs should, and the myths should, actually replicate what is possible… most of them are impractical.' (Madesh)
Embracing inclusivity and uncertainty	'Everybody has their own beliefs… There are different ways to reach God…to reach their God everybody follows their path.' (Nalika)
Superordinate theme: Focusing on This World	
Finding meaning by helping others	'Life is not about 'me, me, me' … Do something that will be beneficial to others. That's it. That makes your life meaningful.' (Madesh)
Being Hindu	'We were all brought up in, like, intense Hindu faith – but none of us really practice as such.' (Olena)

Table 1 Summary of themes with example quotes.

Rachana's words here reveal how she struggled to form a coherent explanation for some of her experiences. Her experiences convinced her that some higher power existed and cared for her, but she found the traditional explanations offered by the major religions, including Hinduism, inadequate or unconvincing.

Madesh echoed these thoughts using similar language, saying he was certain that: 'Something is there. Some power is there.' Like Rachana and the other participants, he believed that there was more to the world than naturalistic explanations allowed but was unsure about what that 'something' was. The participants believed that the unseen or spiritual elements in the world were difficult, if not impossible, to comprehend or explain. However, their experiences of this 'something' suggested it was quite abstract and distant from human affairs. For Panev, 'The universal intelligence is a blade of grass. It's in the wind, it's in the dog, it's in the cattle, it's in you, it's in me, in everything.' Not all the participants took such an explicitly pantheistic or panentheistic approach, but they all rejected the notion of a personal God while affirming their belief in some other form of higher power. Olena, who said her best friend was a Christian, wasn't sure if she believed in God 'exactly'. She said she believes there is 'an energy in the world which you call God and when you die your energy… goes back to that energy… It's Hinduism mixed with science.' The participants were aware of the limitations of language when discussing such topics, but all had beliefs that, despite their ambiguity, were still important to them. The belief that something greater than themselves was watching over them and their loved ones, and that when they died they would return to something eternal, provided them with comfort and reassurance. Knowing that 'something' was there was far more important to them than understanding it.

Experiencing spirituality and peace

The participants described taking part in a range of religious and/or spiritual practices which they found beneficial. Many, but not all, of these were Hindu in origin. Performing these practices gave the participants feelings of peace and made them feel more spiritually attuned. Participants' experiences during rituals and other spiritual practices helped affirm their belief in something greater than themselves and their sense of being Hindus.

The participants kept small shrines in their homes, where they lit candles and said brief, daily prayers as part of the ritual of Puja. Rachana suggested that, although it was something she did every day, it was not something she considered especially important. She said, 'We have got a small place – God's place here, which I keep to light the lamp. That's all it is, morning and evening… it makes me feel calm.' This sense of calmness when performing spiritual practices was a recurring theme in the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Olena elaborated on this saying, '[I] recite what are called shlokas… religious verses. I think it has more like a meditative effect…. It sort of takes you into a trance and it's like meditation… I don't know if it does anything… [but] it clears your head.' Olena also practiced other forms of meditation and it was the practical benefits of reciting shlokas that motivated her to continue doing so. She, like the other participants, did not know whether there were any supernatural benefits to their practices but that did not seem important to her – what mattered was that they made her feel better.

Several participants attended Temple irregularly and Nalika described how, when she visited a local Temple, she sometimes experienced feelings of connection and peace. She spoke about how, 'the vibrations, the sound… the chanting of the mantras… really gives you a resonance… That has happened a few times, but not exactly every time you go to the Temple…' The participants did not expect their religious or spiritual practices to elicit these positive feelings every time. It was enough for them that they sometimes did, and the memory of such times was enough to encourage their continued participation. The participants appeared to have low expectations about the impact of their spiritual practices but found the benefits were worth the relatively low investment they made into them.

One participant, Madesh, described a more transformative and mystical experience. The experience occurred in India, while he was recovering from major surgery, and he described it as follows: 'In the second night, I have a feeling… I'm the stretcher. I'm the bird… Something, some force is lifting me and taking and banging my body into this and then I'm coming back… I don't know what happened… My feeling is like this: I've been thrown out and come back here… Then I realized something is there. That is the world change-over point for me, basically…' Madesh continued to talk about how the experience occurred while he was heavily medicated and dehydrated, and after multiple religious rituals were performed on him during the day by a female relative. Madesh said that this experience had convinced him there was 'something' beyond the physical world and that, before it occurred, he had doubted that. Like the more minor experiences discussed previously, this experience gave him a sense of peace. Experiences like this one, whose spiritual veracity were affirmed by trusted others, reinforced beliefs in the spiritual or supernatural and formed a key aspect of how the participants made sense of the world (even years later).

Rejecting some doctrines and customs

Despite clear Hindu influences on their beliefs and practices, all the participants also rejected many elements of the tradition with which they continued to identify. These rejected elements included both

rituals and beliefs, including some important elements of traditional Hindu theology. For example, the participants did not believe in literal reincarnation, and by implication in the cycle of Samsara or Moksha which are central to traditional Hindu cosmology and soteriology (Jacobs 2010; Knott 2016). Nalika was the most open to the possibility of reincarnation but even she said, 'I'm still exploring [the idea of reincarnation], but I don't have a feeling it'll be real. Even if it is, I don't bother!' This demonstrates the low priority the participants gave to understanding such issues and how they perceived theological and transcendental issues as often being irrelevant to their lives (a topic that will be discussed further in the second superordinate theme).

Olena described how she and her friends were 'all brought up in, like, intense Hindu faith, but none of us really practice as such.' She, and the other participants, knew and understood many Hindu myths, considering them an important part of their cultural heritage that they wanted to preserve, but did not believe they revealed the true nature of the world. Madesh expressed this point rather tactfully, saying 'the customs should, and the myths should, actually replicate what is possible… most of them are impractical.' Madesh's use of the term 'impractical' here deviates slightly from conventional usage, but his point was that he thought many of the practices and stories he associated with Hinduism made claims he did not feel were credible. He, like the other participants, was skeptical of supernatural and historical claims that contradicted scientific evidence and understandings. The participants clearly valued the scientific skills and principles they had been taught at school and university. However, they did not want to eliminate rituals and myths entirely from their lives. Instead, they wanted myths, rituals, and customs that fit with how they understood the world.

The participants also viewed some traditional Hindu practices and teachings as being actively harmful. Rachana spoke about how practices like extreme fasting, self-mutilation, and other forms of self-discipline, 'doesn't make sense and it's hurting your whole body.' Things which caused suffering in this life but which were claimed to relieve future suffering did not appeal to them.

The participants' beliefs about existential issues were often tentative and implicit; they believed in some things and disbelieved others. They knew this made them different to many other Hindus but did not find these differences problematic. Nalika summarized this by saying, 'I do have a belief… but not the way that lots of other people do… Everybody has their own way.' Exposure to diversity of belief and practice, both within Hinduism and in their British social context, appears to have helped the participants explain their own divergence from traditional beliefs.

Embracing inclusivity and uncertainty

The participants had an open and inclusive approach to other religious traditions. Madesh attributed this to Indian culture, saying, 'We Indians believe in all religions. We are Hindu majority, yes, but we do believe in all other customs.' The use of collective pronouns here shows how he retained a strong sense of a shared identity as 'Indian', and that his heritage was a source of personal pride that encouraged him to embrace diversity. The participants had grown up with friends and neighbors from other religious traditions and not only tolerated this diversity but embraced it as something positive that enriched their lives.

Olena explained why she found Hinduism to be more inclusive than many other religious traditions: '[In] Hinduism… [we] believe[s] that everything is God, so we don't see Christianity as a different religion. We see it as an extension of our religion.' Subsuming other religious traditions under the broad umbrella of Hinduism allowed the participants to engage with their religious practices without too many difficulties, though they rejected exclusivist explanations and doctrines. Hinduism, as the participants understood and practiced it, accommodated myriad different perspectives on the sacred. For Olena, and many other participants, worshiping Jesus or Allah was not different to worshiping Vishnu or Shiva. They were all aspects of the same mysterious and unknowable 'Divine Truth' that different people found their own ways to connect to. The participants emphasized the importance of individuals having agency in their own choices of beliefs and practices. As Nalika noted, 'Hinduism: it's like very vast. Everybody has their own beliefs… there are different ways to reach God… so everybody follows their path to reach their God.'

Despite explaining their acceptance of other religious traditions as being part of Hinduism, and thus implicitly privileging a Hindu theology, the participants remained agnostic about the true nature of the universe and the divine. The participants all believed in 'something' but were not sure exactly what that 'something' was. This uncertainty did not appear to cause the participants any difficulties, and they were comfortable with their own limited understanding. Rachana summed this up succinctly by saying, 'I'm quite happy not knowing. I think it's difficult to find… the right ideas…' She was confident that there was something beyond the material world, but she did not feel the need to explain such things. Panev said, 'Nobody really understands. Nobody really understands. It's, it's out there somewhere… so in my household it's been open system.' Like the other participants, he was sure there were explanations, but he located them beyond the possibility of human understanding. What mattered, ultimately, to these participants was that they lived good lives and their spiritual practices helped them to do that. If a practice

made them feel better, and did not harm anyone else, they did not need to understand how it worked to use and benefit from it.

SUPERORDINATE THEME: FOCUSING ON THIS WORLD

It was clear throughout each of the interviews that all the participants were more concerned with living their lives within this world than with thinking about anything beyond it. They worked hard to provide for themselves and their families, finding meaning and purpose in their ability to help others. Their families, both close and extended, played an important role in developing and sustaining their identity as Hindus. Hinduism was an important aspect of their identity and lives, but they understood their heritage differently to many of their older relatives. This superordinate theme encompassed the following two sub-themes.

Finding meaning by helping others

All five participants believed it was important to help others as much as they could. For example, Olena described her values as striving to 'be kind, work hard, respect other people.' These three elements were echoed in the accounts of the other participants and are all focused on living well in this world, rather than looking towards more transcendent concerns. This emphasis on being kind and respecting other people reflects both the type of character the participants worked to develop and the relationships they wanted to have with others. They tried to be positive presences in the world who made others' lives better. Their continued links with India made them acutely aware of the consequences of poverty and they believed working hard enabled them to avoid it for themselves and alleviate it for others.

Money and time were finite resources in the participants' lives that limited their ability to improve the world. Rachana spoke about how she '[would] like to help people, more than what I can. I can't give more, but I'm thinking of how to help people once I've retired.' She, like the other participants, expressed compassion and worked hard so she could be kind and helpful towards others. She believed doing this was the purpose of her life.

This focus on helping relieve the suffering of others was far more important to the participants than resolving more esoteric questions. Panev, a highly educated and thoughtful man, described how he spent little time thinking about existential questions because 'being in the moment, now, is more important… all effort is in that. What I see, everybody, I see a five-year-old struggling, I see a hundred-and-five-year-old struggling, and they look pensive in their mood.' Panev saw others suffering and struggling around him, which compelled him to spend his physical and mental energy on trying to fix these immediate problems and teaching others how to improve their situations.

For these participants, as Nalika explained, life was 'about sharing, caring and being a closer society… it's not about just… yourself.' Madesh expressed similar sentiments: 'We start with "life is not about me, me, me" … Do something that will be beneficial to others. That's it. That makes your life meaningful.' The participants were explicit that they believed it was their relationships and actions in this world that gave meaning and purpose to their lives, rather than anything transcendent. They were all concerned about the people around them and spent time and money trying to make the world a better place. Helping others in this way gave their lives meaning and purpose.

Being Hindu

The five participants all described themselves as Hindu and being Hindu was an integral part of who they thought they were. For them, being Hindu was not primarily about doing or believing certain things. Being Hindu instead involved belonging to a community with a legacy of traditions that helped orientate them in the world.

Family was important to all the participants, and all had married other Hindus (although one had since divorced.) The participants maintained good relationships with their parents and extended families, viewing these networks as an important element of their cultural heritage. Nalika spoke warmly about how she and her husband had 'a close relationship with the immediate family, as well as the extended family… we really like that… [we] keep in touch and we tend to meet them as often as possible.' Their families were a priority for all the participants, and these familial networks gave them a sense of belonging to a wider Hindu community.

The participants' emphasis on family and community reflected their childhood experiences, which they described in positive and affectionate terms. Olena described her childhood as 'Perfect. Absolutely perfect… [a] very close, loving family.' Their childhoods were not devoid of hardships or suffering, but they felt loved and experienced a sense of belonging. Even when they rejected aspects of traditional Hindu culture, the participants still associated themselves with it through their bonds of kinship. These cherished relationships appear to have helped draw their focus to the people and events around them.

The participants had been brought up as Hindus, but they described how many of their older relatives were far more devout than they were themselves. Olena, when discussing her experiences and those of her Hindu friends, said, '[we] aren't really religious, it's just the parents…' This contrast between the beliefs and actions of the younger generation and those of their parents and grandparents was important and created a tension that

they needed to navigate. Being Hindu meant something different to Olena and her peers than it did to many older Hindus, but this did not mean it was unimportant to her. The participants did not cut themselves off from their extended families and heritage, but they interpreted and made use of it in their own ways.

Madesh, who was probably the most religious of the five participants, described how he was 'very religious... [but] we tend to adapt our religious beliefs between our work culture.' The participants navigated two very different cultures and saw value in each of them. They were part of modern British society but also wanted to keep their identities as Indians and Hindus. The diversity of Hinduism appeared to help them navigate this complexity, as did the tolerance towards other forms of religious practice and belief that they saw as an integral part of Hinduism. They did not believe that performing specific rituals, or believing particular teachings, was necessary to be a good person or a good Hindu. For these participants, what mattered most was belonging to their communities and working together to help others. They believed these values were both Hindu and British.

DISCUSSION

This study used IPA (Smith et al. 2009) to analyze semi-structured interviews with five British Hindus. The iterative and inductive analysis developed six sub-themes that were organized into two superordinate themes: *Everybody Has Their Own Way* and *Focusing on This World*. The participants described believing in 'something' greater than themselves and they all engaged in some form of spiritual or religious practice. However, they rejected many traditional Hindu beliefs and practices and were unsure about the nature of the 'something' in which they believed. This uncertainty did not seem to cause them distress, and their spirituality gave them a sense of peace and comfort. Being Hindu was an important element of the participants' identity, but they focused on living within the world rather than on existential or esoteric concerns. They devoted their energy to helping others and found meaning in the relationships they formed with those around them.

BELIEVING IN BELONGING

The increasing disengagement of individuals in Britain from organized religion (Curtice et al. 2019; L. Lee, 2015) remains the subject of ongoing research. Different, though often complementary, theories have been suggested to help explain this trend. This work has often focused on Christian and ex-Christian populations, in Europe and North America, with the experiences of those in other cultures potentially very different (Asad 2003; Jakobsen & Pellegrini 2008).

Day (2011) has suggested that what many individuals in Britain now believe in is really their relationships with other people. They identify with, and belong to, communities associated with beliefs even if they do not share all the traditions' beliefs themselves. In her fieldwork, Day (2011, p. 92) found that 'belief was not absent but relocated to the social realm where it is polyvocal, interdependent, emotionally charged, and illustrative of experiences of belonging.' She categorizes such individuals, who now probably constitute the majority of the British population, as 'anthropocentrics' who 'articulate their beliefs primarily in reference to their human relationships' (p. 157). She contrasts these individuals with those who are 'theocentric' and structure their lives around a relationship (or relationships) with God, gods, or other higher powers. This description of anthropocentrism is a good fit for the participants in this study, who focused their lives on the people around them rather than on things beyond this world.

Day's (2011) work primarily focuses on individuals from Christian backgrounds. She describes how many anthropocentric individuals are nominalists who have only minimal involvement with the Church, but for whom Christianity remains an important aspect of their identity, allowing them to distinguish themselves from others. The participants in this study can similarly be described as natal or ethnic nominalists, as their Hindu identity stems from being born and raised in Hindu families. As the participants themselves described, their form of Hinduism was different to that of many other Hindus. During the colonial period, elements of Hinduism and Enlightenment ideals were consciously combined to create identities that were perceived as both Indian and 'modern' (Frazier 2013). The participants' cultural heritage and family histories influenced both their sense of identity and their understanding of what it meant to be Hindu. The current study suggests that Day's theoretical analysis is useful beyond the predominantly white and Christian context in which it was developed. Believing that one belongs to a community can still provide meaning and psychological support to individuals who reject institutions or religious doctrines (Day 2011).

DEVELOPING IDIOSYNCRATIC WORLDVIEWS

Describing the participants as anthropocentric individuals who retained a nominalist form of Hinduism (Day 2011) only provides a partial and, in some ways misleading, picture of their beliefs and practices. These were important elements of how the participants made sense of their lives and experiences in the world, but not the only ones. L. Lee (2015) has identified five types of 'existential culture' that individuals can use to formulate their understanding of themselves and the world. These participants' outlooks were primarily unexistential: they were not particularly concerned with existential questions

in their daily lives. 'Everyday needs, responsibilities, and pleasures' (L. Lee 2015, p. 169) were the participants' primary concern. However, the participants also had humanistic, agnostic and subjectivist elements in their worldviews. This fusion of differing (and sometimes contradictory) elements in individuals' worldviews is not uncommon (Chaves 2010; L. Lee 2015; Slone 2004).

We can only offer tentative explanations for why the participants integrated the elements they did into their worldviews, but their social environments and own experiences both seem to have played important roles. Social and cultural influences have wide-ranging effects on what people do and how they think, including their religiosity and spirituality (Hood et al. 2018; Loewenthal 2013). For these participants, their family upbringing as Hindus had lasting impacts on how they understood the world. The participants blended elements of their families' cultures and wider British society, integrating and assimilating themselves into the world in which they lived (cf. Berry 1997; Kramer 2003; Sinha 2019). They described having many non-Hindu friends and not experiencing much racism or prejudice. This helped them feel a valued part of British society and gave them access to a wide range of cultural resources. Perceived threats to religious identities are often associated with developing fundamentalist beliefs, and these participants did not experience such threats (Hood et al. 2005).

The participants' spiritual practices and experiences also helped shape their worldviews. They rejected many doctrinal claims, both from Hinduism and other religious traditions, but believed in 'something' because their own experiences convinced them that there was something more than the materialistic and rational. They found comfort and peace in the belief that there was something benevolent and greater than themselves, even though their relationship with it was usually distant. The rituals they regularly performed probably helped stimulate their spiritual experiences and spiritual interpretations of phenomena. A key function of rituals is to communicate information to the individual about who they are (Rappaport 1999), and the sense of peace the participants experienced when performing rituals affirmed their beliefs that there was some value to them. Regularly performing an activity can alter how we view and value it (Norton et al. 2012), so it is plausible that praying at the small shrines in their homes every day had some impact on how they viewed the world. There is also evidence that such regular practice can make individuals more open or attuned to spiritual experiences (Farias & Wikholm 2015; Luhrmann 2012).

Secularization theory suggests aspects of modern society, including education and cultural diversity, erode religious belief systems and institutions (Bruce 2013; Smith & Cragun, 2021). The experiences of these participants are consistent with this. They described accumulating skepticism about specific religious doctrines and practices, but this had not caused them to stop considering themselves Hindu (cf. Day 2011; Smith & Cragun 2021). Instead, the flexibility they perceived as an inherent part of Hinduism enabled them to secularize without having to fully reject their religious and cultural identities. Fully leaving a religious worldview that is entangled with valued social relationships can be highly traumatic (Cottee, 2015; Winell 2017), and the participants' approach let them preserve important aspects of their identity and relationships with their extended families. This approach is not available to members of all religious communities (cf. Cottee 2015; Hood et al. 2005). The outcomes of secularization are shaped by the values and attitudes of communities as well as individuals' choices. However, disaffiliating and identifying as 'not religious' is not the only possible outcome (Asad 2003; Bruce 2013; L. Lee 2015).

These participants show the limitations of many of the categories used to study religion and non-religion. They described themselves as both religious and not religious, and this duality reflects how different understandings of what 'religion' is can affect the labels people use. The same emic labels can mean different things not only to different people but also to the same people in different contexts or at different times (Ammerman 2013; Murphy 2017). This has important implications for quantitative studies that rely on self-descriptions and reports. It is crucial that such studies establish exactly what participants mean by the answers they select (Oman 2013). Qualitative research must also make sure it explores how the participants understand the terms they use and make clear distinctions between emic and etic categories, understandings, and explanations. Approaches that study meaning systems (Paloutzian & Park 2013) or worldviews (Johnson et al. 2011; Taves & Asprem 2018) more holistically are able to untangle crucial processes that nomothetic approaches may obscure (Murphy 2017).

OPENNESS AND TOLERANCE

The participants attributed their inclusive and accepting stance towards other religions to their Indian and Hindu heritage, viewing it as an intrinsic part of their cultural traditions. Tolerance of religious diversity is an important part of contemporary Hindu identity (R. Davis 2008; Jacobs 2010) and has been shaped by various events in the history of modern India (Adcock, 2014). However, while there is a substantial strand within Hinduism that encourages tolerance and peaceful behavior, like in other religious traditions this strand of teaching does not always inhibit behaviors that violate it (Farias & Wikholm 2015; Juergensmeyer 2011). For example, some Hindu nationalists are violent and prejudiced towards those from other faiths (Anderson & Longkumer 2018; Battaglia 2017), and historical cultures that have subsequently been described as Hindu have waged wars and oppressed

the marginalized (Brekke 2019; Jacobs 2010). Therefore, it is helpful to consider why these participants were so open and inclusive of others.

Rather than simply accepting other religious traditions and practices as equal to their own, the participants integrated and subsumed them within their own worldview. This approach to religious tolerance and diversity is relatively common in Hinduism (R. Davis 2008) and is facilitated by the diversity of Hinduism itself, with its many paths to salvation (Jacobs 2010; Knott 2016). Identifying with, and combining, the practices of multiple religious traditions is not unusual, both on the Indian sub-continent (Gellner & Hausner 2013) and in its diaspora (Sinha 2019). This fusion of ideas often includes science and Western philosophy, alongside religious sources of truth or knowledge (Ecklund et al. 2019). This process of syncretism seems to have eroded some of the boundaries the participants might otherwise have perceived between themselves and other groups.

The links between religiosity and prejudice, the lack of which can be viewed as acceptance or tolerance, have been extensively investigated by psychologists. Religiosity, measured in various ways, has been associated with increased prejudice against a wide range of groups (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992; Batson 2013; Wulff 1991). However, high scores on the 'Quest' dimension of religiosity (which measures openness to change, the readiness to face existential questions without reducing their complexity, and viewing self-criticism and religious uncertainty as positives) have been associated with lower prejudice and increased tolerance (Altemeyer & Hunsberger 1992; Batson 2013).

It seems likely that the participants' openness and uncertainty about their own beliefs contributed to their acceptance of others and compassion towards them. This openness and acceptance of others resembles that found in many individuals who identify as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), whose search for truth and subjectivist stance often also leads to a universalism that views all religious or spiritual paths as reflections of some greater truth (L. Lee 2015; Mercadante 2014). SBNR individuals also frequently construct pluralistic and hybrid spiritual identities (Bostic 2018). These parallels are important to note, even though our participants continued to identify with Hinduism. Individuals, such as the participants, who exhibit the traits of high 'Quest' can be found both within and beyond religious traditions, as there are many more reasons for individuals to belong to faith communities than just shared beliefs (Day 2011; Sherkat 2003).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

Good IPA studies are focused and use an idiographic approach to develop a rich understanding of phenomena by examining specific examples in detail (Smith 2011; Smith et al. 2009). This study does not attempt to describe the experiences of all Hindus in the United Kingdom; it explores how some individuals developed their own worldviews by drawing on the cultural resources available to them. This adds an important perspective to research on secularization and non-religion, which has previously engaged insufficiently with the experiences of individuals with non-Christian heritages (Asad 2003; L. Lee 2015). Future research should continue to explore the experiences and meaning-making processes of individuals from other understudied groups, including Hindus who have more 'traditional' beliefs and practices.

Studying a religious group as an obvious outsider can have various disadvantages, including potential distrust and unfamiliarity with key terms or customs (Chryssides 2019), but these did not appear problematic in this study. The participants appeared open and honest, with few reasons to be defensive or evasive. Careful follow-up questions helped ensure clarity around key concepts, and the lack of assumed understanding may have encouraged such elaborations and explanations. All interviews are co-creations between the researcher and participant (Madill 2012; Wooffitt & Widdicombe 2006), and both the data and its analysis were influenced by the researcher in various ways, but these are neither entirely avoidable nor intrinsically bad (Patton 2015; Smith et al. 2009). For example, the participants may have been more open about their deviations from the cultural expectations of other Hindus precisely because the interviewer was not Hindu.

The account developed here is interpretative and does not claim to be the only possible explanation for the data (Maxwell 2013; Patton 2015; Smith et al. 2009). However, we believe that it provides the best explanation for the experiences of the participants. IPA is explicitly aware of the hermeneutics involved in data analysis and their limitations. Like many other IPA studies, we have investigated phenomena that are difficult to describe linguistically and relied on data that is retrospective and self-reported (Coyle 2008). Memories are not always reliable, and narratives can be far more cohesive than the events they describe (Loftus 1979; Newman & Lindsay 2009). Stories have purposes (Crossley 2000), and IPA explores how participants make sense of their experiences as well as the experiences themselves (Smith 2019). Vigilant and extensive reflexivity throughout the research process helped explore the potential impact of these issues and enhanced the rigor of the analysis (Smith 2009; Yardley 2000).

Individual qualitative studies, such as this one, can make important contributions to our understanding of phenomena even though they cannot (and should not) yield complete and definitive explanations of them (Murphy 2017; Coyle 2008; E. Davis & Tisdale 2016). The methodology used in this study does not allow direct comparisons to be made with other cultural contexts, and the extent to which aspects of these findings

reflect particularities of the British context can only be established by further research in other contexts. The purpose of IPA studies is to provide rich insights into the experiences of particular groups and to develop ideas with theoretical transferability (Smith et al 2009). It seems plausible, although far from certain, that the worldview dynamics described in this study will also occur in other contexts. Additional studies, by diverse research teams using a wide range of methodologies, can triangulate findings and increase confidence in them (Emmons & Paloutzian 2003; Paloutzian & Park 2013). Qualitative research syntheses, and other forms of metastudies, have particular promise for developing strong theoretical understandings of phenomena, but multiple high-quality, qualitative studies are a prerequisite for such syntheses (Major & Savin-Baden 2010; Suri & Clarke 2009).

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides important insights into the lives of five British Hindus and shows the complexity of their lived experiences. These individuals were anthropocentric (Day 2011), but continued to identify as Hindu, despite rejecting many traditional beliefs and practices associated with Hinduism. They had each developed their own, idiosyncratic worldviews that combined elements from both Hinduism and secular culture. These idiosyncratic worldviews were developed by drawing on their life experiences and the cultural resources available to them. Their experiences demonstrate the problems with a binary approach to religiosity and secularity, showing how it is possible to combine elements of different existential cultures (L. Lee 2015) and live comfortably in a world that is ambiguous and uncertain. The participants had many beliefs that helped them make sense of the world, some of which were implicit and not directly articulated. Quantitative methodologies used to study secularization often place too much emphasis on explicit propositional or doctrinal beliefs. This study shows the importance of research approaches that can fully explore the complexity and ambiguity that characterises many people's worldviews in a globalized world.

The experiences of Madesh, Nalika, Olena, Panev, and Rachana show that many individuals develop their own ways of making meaning in the world which defy easy categorization. To paraphrase Nalika, these participants had beliefs, but they were different to the beliefs of those around them and they thought everybody had their own way of finding fulfilment in the world. Relationships, identities, and personal experiences all affect the things people believe about themselves and the world around them. Understanding these different ways of believing, and not believing, is vital and future research must be sensitive to these complexities.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author conducted this research as part of his PhD thesis, under the supervision of the second and third authors. All three authors contributed to the writing up of the study into this article.

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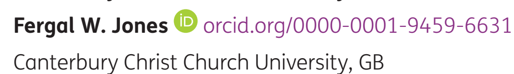
Fergal W. Jones  orcid.org/0000-0001-9459-6631
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