QUAKER STUDIES 13/2 (2009) [238-245]
ISSN 1363-013X

COMPARING TWO SURVEYS OF BRITAIN YEARLY MEETING: 1990 AND 2003

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ABSTRACT

Comparison of postal surveys of Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting in 1990 and 2003 showed modest differences for reported self-descriptions and beliefs. Quakers in 2003 appear to be less pacifist, somewhat less likely to describe God as 'Spirit', 'Inward Light', or 'Love' in absolute percentages, and less likely to describe Jesus as 'containing that of God within as we all do'. Meeting for Worship was described less as 'Seeking God's will', and more as 'Listening'. The largest changes were an increase in reported levels of education and a 13-year increase in median age across the 13-year period. The change in sampling methodology between the two surveys did not appear substantially to affect the results.

KEYWORDS

Quakers; religious belief; aging; educational attainment; Britain Yearly Meeting

INTRODUCTION

This report compares the results of two similar surveys of Friends in Britain Yearly Meeting (BYM) conducted in 1990 by Pink Dandelion (Dandelion 1996) and in 2003 by Rosie Rutherford (reported in Cary and Dandelion 2007). The 2003 study was intended to repeat much of the material of the 1990 study, but with a better sampling methodology.

The two surveys differ in numerous ways including (1) different sampling methods of Meetings, (2) different methods for distributing the surveys, (3) different response rates, and (4) while there were many identical questions, others had minor wording changes or changes in response alternatives. Thus, in comparing the results from the two surveys, any changes might be due to the factors above rather than a change in beliefs or behaviors across the 13-year period between them.

The samples for the two studies were drawn differently. For the 1990 data, the sample was a quota sample, with Meetings classified into three dimensions: (1) urban–rural, (2) north–south with the dividing line being at the latitude of Chester in Britain, and (3) large–small, with more than 50 members being large. This factorial design generated eight separate groups. Four Meetings from each group were chosen in an unspecified manner, for a total of 32 meetings. A letter was sent to the Clerk of each meeting to ask for permission to circulate the survey and subsequently to interview some of the participants and to estimate how many survey forms would be required if everyone took one. The Clerk was asked to set out the copies of the questionnaires, which came with a 'freepost' (free postal) envelope, at the Meeting for anyone present to pick up and complete. Five Meetings did not reply. The overall response rate relative to the number of questionnaires dispatched was about 58%. Some questionnaires were picked up and completed by visitors from other Meetings and mailed back. Thus, the final sample consisted of 483 responses from 27 Meetings primarily, with a scattering of others from various Meetings.

Britain Yearly Meeting has about 500 monthly meetings in total, thus the sampling fraction was about five percent of the Meetings. In addition, the sample was augmented with samples from the Meeting for Sufferings, a standing representative body entrusted with the care of the business of the Britain Yearly Meeting through the year, and from a gathering of 'Young Friends Central Committee', the standing organisation of 18–35 year old Quakers. For this analysis, we did not use these two augmented samples in order be as consistent as possible with the 2003 survey.

The 2003 data are from a mail survey of 48 meetings in BYM using a more formal sampling method. These Meetings were classified into six groups based on size, with eight randomly chosen from each group, except the smallest, which had ten selected. Of the 50 meetings, 48 participated. The surveys were sent to the Meetings and twenty-two persons from each Meeting were selected by giving everyone a number and using a table of random numbers. Where Meetings were smaller than 22, all participants were used. Respondents mailed back their survey using a freepost address. The final sample was 600 responses, with an overall response rate of 75%, substantially higher than in the first survey.

The two questionnaires were similar, with many identical or highly similar questions. However, the response lists often changed somewhat and the order of questions was different. Thus, the second survey was not an exact repeat of the first.

METHOD

Because of the multiple differences between the two studies, we judged that we could not conform the samples by any obvious procedure to make them more similar, other than by deleting the supplementary sample of Young Friends and the sample from Meeting for Sufferings. Instead, we take the view that these two

samples represent different methods of measuring some similar constructs and they will be compared directly using both statistical and qualitative methods.

The 2003 survey had a well-defined sampling plan that allows us to compare the variance of the estimates computed using a simple random sample compared to a stratified cluster sample. Using SAS 9.1 survey procedures (SAS Institute 2006), we estimated the standard errors of the percentages using both a simple random sample and the more elaborate method of a clustered sample within the strata (i.e. the six levels of Meeting size). At times, a stratified sample can increase the precision of the estimates. However, our results showed little difference between the two methods on key variables. For example, 64.3% of the 2003 respondents were female, margin of error of $\pm$3.8 percentage points (i.e. the 95% confidence interval). The unadjusted margin of error was $\pm$3.9, a very similar result. We could not generate a clustered estimate for the 1990 survey because the size of the clusters was not known and the Meetings were not chosen completely at random. Thus, we make our comparisons using the tests for simple random samples, an approximation to the correct tests.

A second issue in making comparisons between the two samples is the problem of multiple tests. A significance level of $p=.01$ means that about 1% of the time the difference could be due to chance alone, not to a real underlying difference. Thus, when making multiple comparisons, about 1 in 100 of the statistically significant results will be due to chance alone. There are many methods to correct for multiple tests; the most conservative is to multiply the significance by the number of tests. Thus, a significance test of $p=.001$ would be treated as $p=.06$ when making about 60 tests, as we are doing. In this paper, we interpret only those results near the $p<.001$ level but present the uncorrected significance levels in the table.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the comparisons between the two surveys. The significance levels presented are chi-square tests for simple random samples with the significance level uncorrected. The wording of the questions is listed when it varied across the two studies. We are presenting differences between belief and attitude variables in the surveys but not all of the variables, such as whether the respondent had ever been appointed to a Yearly Meeting position.

In demographics, there was no change in the percentage of females, but educational levels and age increased from 1990 to 2003. The age in 1990 was reported as a category, while the age in 2003 was the current age in years. Thus, to compare the two, the age in 2003 was classified into the same categories as in 1990. The effect for age was pronounced. In 2003 almost 4 in 10 reported being over age 70, while just over 2 in 10 were that old in 1990. The median (middle value) age as estimated from the categories increased from 51 years to 64 years, a 13-year increase across the 13-year period between the two surveys. Educational attainment also increased somewhat, possibly consistent with increasing educational attainment as respondents aged.

Table 1. *Comparison of 1990 and 2003 Results*

Variable	**1990 Data %**	**2003 Data %**	**Chi-square(df), p value**
Respondent is a Female (1990 'Sex', 2003 'Gender')	64.8	64.3	.03(1), p=.86
Educational attainment[1]			
None	12.6	3.0	48.3(5), p<.0001
CSE/O/GCSE	13.2	8.2	
A/Higher	16.2	20.8	
Degree	41.4	44.9	
Masters	11.1	14.7	
Doctorate	5.5	8.4	
Age			
Over 70	22.9	38.8	122.0(6), p<.0001
60–69	13.7	22.5	
50–59	16.6	22.0	
40–49	25.0	9.8	
30–39	12.1	4.7	
20–29	6.2	2.0	
Under 20	3.5	0.2	
Estimated median age (years)	51.0	64.0	
Mean age (years)	not available	63.9	
Describe self	**Would you describe yourself as any of the following?**	**Do you think of yourself as**	
Quaker	82.4	86.1	2.8(1), p=.09
Christian	51.5	45.5	3.7(1), p=.05
Pacifist	57.6	37.7	41.7, p<.0001
Universalist	22.5	18.8	2.2(1), p=.14
Do you believe in God?			
Yes	74.8	73.5	6.7(2), p=.03
No	3.4	7.0	
Not sure	21.8	19.5	
Which of the following best describes God for you (allowed to tick multiple boxes)			**Chi-square(df), p value**
A father/mother/person figure	14.1	8.2	9.7(1),p=.002
A spirit	52.7	39.9	17.1(1), p<.0001

A process	19.1	14.3	4.4(1), p=.04
A being	13.3	10.9	1.5(1), p=.22
The Inward Light	58.0	42.9	23.9(1), p<.0001
Best not described	18.9	15.8	1.7(1), p=.19
Love	46.4	39.5	10.3(1), p=.001

Best describes your view of Jesus (multiple boxes allowed)			
Christ, the Son of God	15.3	15.6	.02(1), p=.89
Containing that of God within as we all do	63.3	49.1	21.5(1), p<.0001
an ethical teacher	46.9	42.1	2.4(1), p=.12
a spiritual teacher	69.9	66.1	1.7(1), p=.19
Christ, inward light	25.3	19.3	5.4(1), p=.02
God made human	19.2	17.1	.8(1), p=.38

Best describes what Prayer is for you (multiple boxes allowed)			
Talking to/listening to God	42.5	36.3	4.1(1), p=.04
Asking God to change things	12.6	8.0	5.9(1), p=.02
Seeking communion with the divine	32.2	25.5	5.7(1), p=.02
Seeking enlightenment/guidance	60.6	50.4	10.7(1), p=.001
Meditating	35.0	32.9	.4(1), p=.48
Daily life	22.0	22.7	.1(1), p=.78
Still and silent waiting	51.1	49.5	.3(1), p=.61
Praise	23.8	19.4	2.9(1), p=.09
Confession	22.9	14.8	11.4(1), p=.0007
Recollection	11.7	10.6	.3(1), p=.56
Seeking healing	31.7	23.8	8.3(1), p=.004
Thanksgiving	48.9	44.3	2.2(1), p=.14
Opening to the Spirit	53.5	50.5	.9(1), p=.33

Activities that best describes what do in Meeting for Worship (multiple boxes allowed)	**Are doing**	**Usually do**	**Chi-square(df), p value**
Praying	35.4	34.0	.2(1), p=.64
Praising	12.2	13.7	.5(1), p=.48
Meditating	42.8	46.9	1.8(1), p=.19
Listening	52.6	65.9	19.5(1), p<.0001
Communing	27.8	24.1	1.9(1), p=.17
Seeking God's will	32.6	25.0	7.7(1), p=.006
Seeking union with the	20.2	20.3	.01(1), p=.99

Divine			
Sleeping	5.8	7.3	0.9(1), p=.33
Worshipping God	17.0	17.3	.01(1), p=.90
Thinking	64.1	57.2	5.3(1), p=.02
Opening up to the Spirit	59.5	66.8	6.0(1), p=.01

Agreement with statements (on a 5-point scale recoded as 5=firmly agree, 1=firmly disagree)	**Mean (SD)**	**Mean (SD)**	**t-test, t(df), p value**
'Moral standards can survive without religion'	2.50(1.20)	2.29(1.20)	2.83(1036), p=.005
'In certain circumstances, breaking the law can be justified'	1.91(1.08)	2.03(1.11)	-1.76(1050), p=.08
'In certain circumstances, violence can be morally justified'	3.70(1.32)	3.84(1.22)	-1.89(1035), p=.06

Reason for being attracted (multiple boxes allowed)	**What were the main attractions of Friends?**	**What initially attracted you to Quakerism?**	**Chi-square(df), p value**
Peace and social testimonies/political viewpoint	51.4	43.7	6.0(1), p=.01
Form of worship	73.7	62.0	15.5(1), p=.0001
Quaker way of life	41.2	43.1	.4(1), p=.54
Lack of religious dogma	73.0	62.8	11.3(1), p=.0008
Position of women within the group	17.8	18.4	.1(1), p=.77
Position of gays and lesbians within the group	7.9	5.2	2.9(1), p=.09
Quaker structure/lack of hierarchy	33.7	30.9	.9(1), p=.34
Company and friendship	24.6	23.5	.2(1), p=.67
Your own curiosity	14.8	17.6	1.2(1), p=.25
A feeling of coming home	40.2	35.6	2.2(1), p=.14
Quaker writings	13.9	13.7	.01(1), p=.94
The idea of the inward light	36.1	30.9	3.0(1), p=.08

[1] 'CSE/O/GCSE' refers to examinations taken in high school at age 15/16. 'A/Higher' refers to the examinations taken two years later.

Respondents described themselves in about the same percentages as Quaker, Christian, and Universalist, but Pacifists decreased from 58% to 38%.

The percentage saying 'yes' to 'Do you believe in God?' remained the same, at 75% in 1990 and 74% in 2003. When describing God, the percentages for 'A person/father/mother figure', 'A process', 'A being', and 'Best not described' decreased slightly. However, descriptions of God as 'Spirit' (53% in 1990 vs. 40%

in 2003), 'The Inward Light' (58% vs. 43%), and 'Love' (46% vs. 40%) were statistically less. These decreases may be partly due to differences in the number of questionnaire response categories between the two surveys. In both 1990 and 2003, these three terms were the most common ways to describe God even though the absolute percentages decreased over time. Thus, despite decreases in percentages, the rank order remained about the same.

When describing Jesus, the two surveys differed on only one out of the six items. Jesus was 'containing that of God within as we all do' for 63% in 1990 and for 49% in 2003. Similarly, descriptions for prayer were strongly different for only 3 out of 13 items. In 2003, prayer was less likely to be described as 'Enlightenment', 'Confession', or 'Seeking Healing'.

Activities performed in Meeting for Worship differed strongly for only 2 in 11 items. 'Seeking God's Will' declined from 33% to 25%, while 'Listening' increased from 53% to 66%.

Friends in 2003 were less likely to agree with the statement that 'Moral standards can survive without religion'.

The reasons for being initially attracted to Friends are difficult to interpret because the wording of the question changed from 1990 to 2003. However, only 2 out of 12 items showed much change. Both 'Worship' and 'Lack of Dogma' were cited less as a reason for being attracted to Friends, but remained the most cited reasons; that is, their rank did not change relative to the other items.

DISCUSSION

The differences between the 1990 and 2003 surveys were rather modest for reported self-descriptions and beliefs. Because the changes that did occur are often for only a few items within a longer list, it is likely that these changes represent true change. Thus, Quakers in 2003 appear to be less pacifist, somewhat less likely to describe God as 'Spirit', 'Inward Light', or 'Love' in absolute percentages, and less likely to describe Jesus as 'containing that of God within as we all do'. Meeting for Worship was described less as 'Seeking God's will', and more as 'Listening'.

The largest changes have been in age and education. Friends appear to be 'aging in place'. The increase in the median age of 13 years over the 13 years between surveys suggests that BYM Friends are either recruiting older new members or simply not recruiting younger members. The educational increases could be due either to replacement of members with better-educated ones of the same age, to persons receiving more degrees as they age, or even to differences in the sample and design. However, if this age trend continues, BYM Friends will lose roughly half of their current membership in the next 20 years.

The relatively small change in beliefs between the two samples over the 13 years is consistent with a relatively static membership. It is also consistent with a view that the methodology in 1990, although differing in many respects from 2003, produced similar results. Thus, the results for 2003 provide evidence that the 1990 results were not biased by the sampling method in any dramatic way that would qualitatively affect the analyses that were performed on those data.

NOTES

The 1990 survey data from Dandelion's work are available from the ESRC Data Archive. The 2003 data are available for the use of other scholars by application to Pink Dandelion. We thank Anita L. Weber for comments on the draft.

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