Reincarnation Revisited. Question format and the distribution of belief in reincarnation in survey research

Survey Methods: Insights from the Field

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How to cite this article : Siegers, P. (2013). Reincarnation Revisited. Question format and the distribution of belief in reincarnation in survey research. Survey Methods: Insights from the Field. Retrieved from https://surveyinsights.org/?p=2016

DOI : 10.13094/SMIF-2013-00007

Abstract : Comparing frequency of belief in reincarnation from different international survey projects (RAMP, EVS, ISSP) reveals differences of about 15 to 20 percent depending on the specific question format. If single binary questions are used, then belief in reincarnation is more often reported than if a forced-choice question is used which offers respondents alternatives to belief in reincarnation (e.g. resurrection). One possible explanation for this result is that respondents confuse reincarnation and resurrection if a binary item is used. If this is true, then empirical studies on religious individualization would be flawed because they use belief in reincarnation as an indicator for holistic beliefs such as New Age spirituality, post-Christian spirituality and subjective life spirituality.
Using a two stage question on beliefs about the afterlife that combines a binary rating procedure (1. stage) with a reduced forced-choice design (2. stage) allows analysis of whether respondents systematically confuse reincarnation and resurrection. Moreover, analysing associations with other variables on religious beliefs allows testing if consistent patterns of belief emerge.
The data provide little evidence that respondents confuse resurrection and reincarnation. Rather, they reveal a high level of uncertainty about belief in the afterlife. To conclude, the paper suggests some recommendations on how belief in reincarnation should be used as an indicator for holistic beliefs.

Introduction

Findings from cross-national survey projects suggest that about 20 to 25 percent of Europeans believe in reincarnation. This is interpreted either as a sign of the Easternization of Western religious beliefs (Campbell, 1999; Hamilton, 2002), as an indicator of religious individualization (Hervieu-Léger, 2006; Lambert, 2001), or religious *bricolage* (Champion, 1990, 2004; Dobbelaere, 2004; Lambert, 1999).

Qualitative in-depth studies reveal that individuals combine belief in reincarnation with Christian religiosity and New Age spirituality, but it also appears decoupled from any tradition or teaching (Walter & Waterhouse, 1999). However, Walter and Waterhouse (1999) acknowledge that the high proportion of belief in reincarnation might also be due to respondents confusing reincarnation and the Christian belief in resurrection (see also Lambert, 1999, p. 320; Waterhouse, 1999, p. 97).

Moreover, Waterhouse (1999, p. 97) notes that some studies report only a 5 percent belief in reincarnation while in other studies it reaches up to 25 percent. This casts doubt on the reliability of findings on reincarnation from survey studies.

Nevertheless, belief in reincarnation has become an established indicator for “holistic imagery” (Beckford, 1984) that is used to operationalize New Age spirituality (Barker, 2005, 2008; Houtman & Mascini, 2002), post-Christian spirituality (Houtman & Aupers, 2007), alternative religiosity (Stolz, 2009), or non-church religiosity (Müller, 2009; Pollack & Pickel, 2008).

These studies did not systematically assess whether alternative holistic beliefs form a consistent construct. In contrast, two studies using multiple group latent class analysis (i.e. modeling religious beliefs as a categorical latent variable) could show that alternative holistic beliefs, called alternative spirituality in these studies, form a consistent pattern combining (1) holistic imagery (e.g. an impersonal concept of God and belief in reincarnation), (2) distance to traditional churches (e.g. no church attendance or other forms of religious practice), (3) openness to transcendental experiences, (4) and a strong emphasis on religious individualism (Siegers, 2010, 2012). Both studies showed that about 10 to 15 percent of respondents in Western European countries are classified as holistic or spiritual believers. The first study (Siegers, 2010) (analyzing data from the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) Project 1999) did not include belief in reincarnation as an indicator for holistic imagery. However, the second study (Siegers, 2012) (using data form the fourth wave of the European Values Study 2008) revealed that belief in reincarnation is part of alternative holistic beliefs but not exclusively. A substantial part of individuals combines belief in reincarnation with traditional religious beliefs (e.g. belief in a personal God) and practice (i.e. regular church attendance).

These studies confirm that alternative spirituality forms a consistent pattern present in many Western European countries across different data sets. At the same time, they underscore doubts about the validity of belief in reincarnation as an indicator for holistic imagery, at least if it is used in simple composite scores.

If, however, belief in reincarnation is not exclusively related to holistic beliefs operationalizing alternative holistic beliefs using reincarnation as a component of a composite score are not valid because in some cases reincarnation might be confused with resurrection.

Whether or not respondents confuse reincarnation and resurrection might result from differences in question format. How different item wording affects the distribution of belief in reincarnation has yet not been studied. Answering this question might help to design a better measure of belief in reincarnation and beliefs about the afterlife in general.

The paper is composed of three sections. The first section shows how the share of belief in reincarnation varies across different surveys, depending on the question format. The second section presents results from a two stage operationalization that allows analysis of the overlap between different afterlife beliefs. The third section summarizes the results and suggests procedures for how reincarnation might be used as an indicator for holistic beliefs.

Question format and distributions of belief in

reincarnation across international survey projects

Most papers reporting high shares of belief in reincarnation use data from the European Values Study (EVS) 1999[1] or 2008[2]. The EVS question on reincarnation is: “Do you believe in re-incarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again?” Respondents answer with Yes or No. In the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP)[3] questionnaire, in contrast, reincarnation is included within a forced-choice question on beliefs about the afterlife: “What do you think happens to us after death? Respondents have to choose between (1) an atheistic position: “Nothing—death is the end”, (2) a doubtful position: “There is something, but I don’t know what, (3) a traditional Christian belief: “We go either to heaven or to hell”, (4) a modern Christian belief: “We all go to heaven”, (5) belief in reincarnation: “We are reincarnated—that is, after our physical death we are born in this world again and again”, (6) a New Age belief: “We merge into some kind of eternal bliss after this life”, (7) other beliefs, and (8) an agnostic position: “I don’t know whether there is anything or not”. It has not been documented why belief in resurrection has not been included as an answer category although the Italian RAMP questionnaire included this option. All exact item wordings are available in the appendix to this paper.

A third operationalization was used in the 2008 module on religion in the International Social Survey Project (ISSP).[4] The wording is: “Do you believe in reincarnation—being reborn in this world again and again?” Answers are given on a four point scale: 1=Yes, definitely, 2=Yes, probably, 3=No, probably not, and 4=No, definitely not. Thus, the scale expresses the certainty of belief.

Table 1 presents the proportions of belief in reincarnation for each survey project in ten European countries. Countries were only selected where data are available for at least one point in time for each of the three survey projects.[5] The table reveals important differences in the distributions of belief in reincarnation. The RAMP data produce consistently smaller percentages than the EVS. The difference is less than 10 percent in Denmark but reaches about 25 percent in Portugal. These differences are too important to be attributed to differences in sampling.

This means that asking about reincarnation as a forced-choice item systematically reduces the share of belief in reincarnation. One reason for this might be that having reincarnation accompanied in a survey by an answer category that stands for Christian beliefs prevents religious respondents from confusing reincarnation and resurrection.

Table 1: Percentage of belief in reincarnation in RAMP 1999, EVS 1999, EVS 2008 and ISSP 2008

Country	**RAMP 1999**	**EVS 1999**	**EVS 2008**	**ISSP 2008**			
	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, definitely	Yes, probably	No, probably not	No, definitely not
Belgium	4.6	18.6	17.5	2.8	10.8	30.2	56.1
Denmark	9.0	17.3	18.4	6.0	13.6	21.7	58.7
Finland	6.6	18.4	24.7	4.2	16.4	36.9	42.5
Great Britain	7.9	–	27.8	7.0	17.8	33.8	41.3
Hungary	6.3	19.6	23.2	7.2	18.8	30.8	43.2

Netherlands	9.1	22.2	18.8	8.4	17.8	27.2	46.6
Norway	5.0	–	18.4	4.8	13.2	26.7	55.4
Poland	2.9	24.2	17.4	5.2	17.5	38.9	38.4
Portugal	4.6	29.9	31.4	14.3	21.8	21.2	42.7
Sweden	5.7	22.3	22.6	5.3	15.4	31.5	47.8

Note. Question about reincarnation not asked in Great Britain in EVS 1999, Norway was not part of the EVS 1999 study.

The ISSP data yield an interesting pattern: the share of the category that expresses great certainty of belief is close to the results from the RAMP data (with the exception of Portugal). If the second, more doubtful, category is added to the first, the sum is close to the distribution of EVS (here again, the pattern differs in Portugal).

The comparison of data from EVS, RAMP, and ISSP shows that the distribution of belief in reincarnation depends on the format of the question. It is systematically lower if a forced-choice question is used. One reason for this might be that offering alternative beliefs about the afterlife prevents any confusion of reincarnation with Christian belief in resurrection.

Tracking the choice of afterlife beliefs: results from a two stage operationalization

A two stage question allows analysis of whether there is confusion between resurrection and reincarnation. Instead of asking about belief in reincarnation as a single binary item (as in the EVS) or a forced-choice item (as in RAMP), both are combined into a two stage design (see the appendix to this paper for the item wordings).

At the first stage, respondents are asked whether or not they agree with a set of afterlife beliefs. Five beliefs about the afterlife are included: (1) the traditional Christian belief in resurrection: “Not only the soul but also the body will resurrect”, (2) a metaphorical belief: “Our soul continues to live”, (3) a doubtful position: “Something I do not know”, (4) belief in reincarnation: “I believe in re-incarnation, that is, that we are born into this world again”, and (5) the atheistic position: “Nothing, death is the end”. Respondents had to answer whether they “tend to agree” or “tend to disagree”. They can potentially agree or disagree with all five items. The sequence of the categories was randomized to avoid biased distributions due to the order of items in the questionnaire.

If respondents agreed with *more than one* belief, then at the second stage they were asked to select the *one* option that best described their belief from those choices they agreed with at the first stage. Thus, the second stage is a reduced forced-choice question where respondents choose from a limited set of beliefs. The rationale behind this procedure is that if respondents struggle to distinguish reincarnation from resurrection (either because the item is too complex or due to respondents’ lack of attention) as single items, the direct confrontation of beliefs in a reduced forced-choice question might focus respondents’ attention toward the differences in wording and thus improve understanding.

The survey was administered as a CATI in December 2006 in Germany using random digit dialing.[6] The

population for sampling is the resident population of legal age (i.e. 18 or older) in Germany. A total of 2,016 interviews were completed with an oversampling in East Germany. Because East Germany is largely secularized, the sample is slightly biased in favor of secular attitudes. A design weight correcting oversampling was not used for the following analyses because the focus is on changes between different question formats. Given the experimental logic of the design there is no necessity to weight the data. The response rate was 29 percent according to the AAPOR definition for response rates (response rate 1) (AAPOR 2011).[7] 57 percent of the sample are women, mean age is 48 years (SD = 17.5). 42 percent have no denominational membership, 29 percent are Protestants (i.e. members of the *Evangelische Kirche*), and 20 percent are Catholics. The remaining 10 percent include other Christian (i.e. Orthodox Churches, free churches, new apostolic churches) and non-Christian denominations (i.e. Muslims, Eastern Religions, and other).

Before commenting in more detail on how the distribution of the answers evolves across the two stages, several details are noteworthy: First, only 1.4 percent of the sample chose none of the five beliefs included in the survey and only 0.6 percent chose all five beliefs. Second, about a quarter of respondents chose only one of the five alternatives at the first stage. This proportion is highest for the atheistic position and for resurrection. Third, 44 percent agree with two and 23 percent agree with three different beliefs. Moreover, two thirds of the respondents agreeing with reincarnation agreed with three or four beliefs about the afterlife. This pattern might not result only from ambiguous item wording but it could also indicate that respondents believing in reincarnation have comparatively strong doubts about their beliefs. Furthermore, agreement with more than one belief might result from an acquiescence response style.

Table 2 compares the distribution of afterlife beliefs at the first (second and third column) and second (fourth and fifth column) stages. At the first stage, almost a fifth of the sample reports belief in reincarnation whereas at the second stage, this number drops to less than 5 percent. This decrease mirrors the differences we found between the forced-choice design in the RAMP questionnaire and the single item in the EVS. Almost three quarters of respondents reporting belief in reincarnation at the first stage did not select it at the second stage. This proportion is higher than for all other categories. However, in addition, almost two thirds of respondents agreeing with resurrection at the first stage finally selected another belief.

Table 2: Distribution of afterlife beliefs at first and second stage

	First stage (single item)		Second stage (forced choice)		Difference	
Belief in...	N_1	Valid %	N_2	Valid %	N_1-N_2	$N_1/(N_1$-$N_2)$
Resurrection	315	16.0	122	6.3	193	0.61
Soul only	1188	60.6	545	28.1	643	0.50
Don’t know	1310	67.0	571	29.4	739	0.56
Reincarnation	362	18.7	94	4.8	268	0.74
No life after death	943	47.9	607	31.3	336	0.36

Note. N=2016. At the first stage, more than one answer is possible. Therefore, the sum exceeds 100 percent.

Table 2 also shows that there is a high level of uncertainty about belief in the afterlife: two-thirds of respondents agree with the doubtful position but at the same time agree with some belief. Moreover, the metaphorical belief that "only the soul continues to live" attracts far more agreement than resurrection or reincarnation.

Table 3: Description of changes between first and second stage answers

Changing to...	Changing from...									
	Resurrection		Soul only		Don't know		Reincarnation		No life after death	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Missing	11	6	37	6	36	5	19	7	18	5
Resurrection	–	–	46	7	50	7	40	15	11	3
Soul only	70	36	–	–	327	44	110	41	117	35
Don't know	61	32	392	61	–	–	89	33	184	55
Reincarnation	40	21	69	11	66	9	–	–	6	2
No life after death	11	6	99	15	260	35	10	4	–	–
N	193	100	643	100	739	100	268	100	336	100

In order to analyze possible misunderstandings between different afterlife beliefs, *Table 3* shows the destination of those respondents who change at the second stage (rows) by their initial choices (columns) at the first stage. It is evident that the overlap between reincarnation and resurrection is limited. Only 15 percent of respondents who agree with reincarnation at the first stage (but not at the second stage) select resurrection. Conversely, 21 percent of respondents who choose resurrection at the first stage (but not at the second stage) select reincarnation. This means that the high share of reincarnation at the first stage does not result from confusion between resurrection and reincarnation.

From those respondents who do not believe in reincarnation, 41 percent chose metaphorical belief and 33 percent opted for the doubtful position. If respondents perceive metaphorical belief as being part of a Christian religiosity, a substantive overlap between reincarnation and Christian belief exists. It is noteworthy that the doubtful position and metaphorical belief have the strongest overlap (in absolute numbers).

But do the overlaps reported here challenge the interpretation of reincarnation as an expression of holistic belief? Is metaphorical belief part of more traditional belief systems? To answer these questions, comparison was undertaken between the means of church attendance and the importance of God for the first and second stage classification as well as for each group of second stage changers. Moreover, the associations between afterlife beliefs and different concepts of God were analyzed.

If respondents confuse resurrection and reincarnation at the first stage, more religious individuals (regular church attendance, great importance of God, belief in a personal God) would be expected to switch from reincarnation to resurrection when confronted with both alternatives. If the metaphorical

option is part of Christian belief, it should show a positive relationship to church attendance, importance of God, and belief in a personal God.

The results do not yield evidence for the assumption that more religious individuals switch to reincarnation if confronted with both, reincarnation and resurrection (Tables not reported here).[8] The mean of church attendance for belief in reincarnation even slightly increases at the forced-choice stage. Furthermore, at the forced-choice stage belief in reincarnation is not exclusively related to an impersonal image of God which is another indicator for holistic orientation.

In contrast, a slight association is evident between the metaphorical belief in afterlife and church religiosity. It is associated with occasional church attendance, a slight emphasis on God being important to people's lives, and either belief in a personal God or the metaphorical concept of the God within.

Therefore, although there is no evidence that respondents confuse resurrection and reincarnation, the fact that metaphorical belief has a strong overlap with reincarnation at the first stage shows that a single item approach does not efficiently discriminate between metaphorical beliefs that are part of a moderate religiosity and holistic worldviews.

It is noteworthy that the associations between afterlife and indicators for church religiosity are stronger at the forced-choice stage. This indicates that a forced-choice question yields better measurements of afterlife beliefs particularly because highly religious and highly secular individuals produce consistent response patterns.

Recommendations & conclusion

The comparison of survey data from different sources shows that belief in reincarnation is more frequently reported if a single binary question is used instead of a forced-choice question. If a two stage question is used, then belief in reincarnation drops by 15 percent at the forced-choice step.

Does this indicate that (moderately) religious respondents tend to confuse reincarnation and resurrection as suggested by some authors? Analyzing the shifts in respondents' answers between the first and the second step yields limited evidence for this interpretation. Only a few individuals shift from reincarnation to resurrection or *vice versa*. Rather, the data point to high levels of general uncertainty about afterlife beliefs. First, many respondents chose more than one belief at the single binary stage. Individuals that affirm belief in reincarnation are particularly likely to choose three or more different beliefs and three quarters of them select another option at the second stage. Second, two-thirds of the respondents chose a doubtful position at the first stage and a third maintains this position at the second stage. Third, a 'fuzzy' metaphoric belief is much more popular than belief in resurrection or reincarnation.

The associations between beliefs about the afterlife with church attendance and the importance of God are stronger at the forced-choice stage; i.e. it discriminates better between different beliefs. Moreover, the data reveal that traditional religiosity is quite consistent (belief in resurrection, belief in a Personal God, frequent church attendance, and high importance of God).

In particular, metaphorical belief overlaps with reincarnation. This belief seems to be typical for moderate religiosity. But some association of traditional beliefs (e.g. belief in a Personal God) with reincarnation persists—even in the forced-choice design. This means that even if there is no confusion between

resurrection and reincarnation, it cannot be used as a single indicator for holistic beliefs.

Some recommendations can be drawn from the analysis. First, if belief in reincarnation is used to operationalize respondents' holistic orientation even a forced-choice question will yield unsatisfactorily results because the fuzziness between the metaphorical belief and reincarnation will persist.

This means that, second, if belief in reincarnation is used as an indicator for holistic beliefs, it should be combined with other indicators. For instance, reincarnation might be combined with other holistic beliefs, i.e. an impersonal image of God. More questions allowing to measure holistic orientation might be adopted from scales developed in psychology of religion, for instance, the New Age Orientation Scale (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001). A sample item would be: "Spirituality to me is above all about realizing my true nature or becoming one with cosmos." Only those respondents who agree with multiple holistic beliefs should score on indices for spiritualty or similar concepts. Alternatively, belief in reincarnation could be counted only if respondents score low on indicators for traditional religiosity, e.g., church attendance or the importance of God. Other constellations would express a form of religious *bricolage*.

Third, if more indicators for holistic orientation are available (e.g. drawn from the New Age Orientations Scale) belief in reincarnation might be used as an indicator in latent variable models like confirmatory factor analysis or latent class analysis (Siegers, 2010, 2012). These models allow controlling for measurement errors by assessing the strength between the theoretical construct of interest (e.g. New Age spirituality) and the indicator variable. Accordingly, potential measurement errors (i.e. religious individuals that believe in reincarnation) can be corrected. If the latent variable models do not fit the data, this would indicate that either the indicators are not reliable or the theoretical construct intended to measure has to be revised. Patterns that deviate from the expected measurement model might point to the existence of religious orientations not covered by the concept.

One important limitation of the study is that the data analysis presented here is limited to overwhelmingly Christian samples. Conclusions about effects of the question format in other religious cultures (e.g. Islam, Eastern Religion, and Judaism) cannot be drawn from this analysis. Studying denominational differences in more detail was not possible due to small shares of non-Christian respondents in the datasets.

Given the high level of uncertainty in beliefs about the afterlife, they should not be attributed too much weight as indicators of particular forms of religious beliefs. Further studies might ask whether beliefs about the afterlife are still part and parcel of religious worldviews.

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[1] EVS (2011): EVS – European Values Study 1999 (release 3.0.0, 2011) – Integrated Dataset. GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA3811 Data file Version 3.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.10789.

[2] EVS (2011): European Values Study 2008: Integrated Dataset (EVS 2008). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA4800 Data file Version 3.0.0, doi:10.4232/1.11004.

[3] The RAMP-Project was coordinated by Wolfgang Jagodzinski (University of Cologne) and Karel

Dobbelaere (Catholic University of Leuven). I am grateful to Wolfgang Jagodzinski for providing me the data.

[4] ISSP Research Group (2012): International Social Survey Programme 2008: Religion III (ISSP 2008). GESIS Data Archive, Cologne. ZA4950 Data file Version 2.2.0, doi:10.4232/1.11334.

[5] The RAMP-Project includes 11 countries but in Italy the question on beliefs about the afterlife used different answer categories and the results cannot be compared.

[6] More precisely a ADM-Telephone Master Sample was used. This method adapts random digit dialing to the regional attribution logic of telephone numbers in Germany. At the first stage of sampling households are selected. At the second step the last birthday method was applied to select the member of the household for the interview. The response rate is within the range that is reported for similar studies (Aust & Schröder, 2010, p. 200).

[7] The data collection was funded by GESIS – Leibniz Institute for Social Sciences and coordinated by Wolfgang Jagodzinski and the author. The data are available from the author upon request.

[8] The tables are available from the author upon request.

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