

RELIGION AND THE SOCIAL ORDER

THE HANDBOOK ON CULTS AND SECTS IN AMERICA

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A SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITIQUE OF "BRAINWASHING" CLAIMS ABOUT RECRUITMENT TO NEW RELIGIONS

James T. Richardson

ABSTRACT

This paper offers a multifaceted critique of so-called "brainwashing theories" which purports to explain recruitment to and participation in new religions, sometimes referred to as "cults." Reasons for the development and widespread acceptance of theories involving claims about brainwashing and "mind control" in religious groups are presented, as is a logical, historical, and data-based critique of such theories. Then alternative explanations are presented using general theories in social psychology, especially some focusing on conformity and changes in behaviors and attitudes. This classical work in social psychology is criticized itself, however, for being somewhat passive and deterministic in its orientation. The paper closes with an application and extension of work on "minority influence" in groups that assumes a much more interactionist perspective. This perspective includes the view that individual recruits are active agents, involved in a negotiation process with potential groups of membership, and even influencing groups that they join.

Large numbers of young people have been involved with new religious groups—sometimes pejoratively called "cults"—over the past two or three decades in American society and other Western countries. These young people have often been from dominant class groups, and among the most affluent

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and better educated of all youth in their societies. Huge controversies have erupted about the meaning of this participation, as parents, friends, and political and opinion leaders have attempted to understand why this "collective desertion" by many of its youth has occurred and as methods are sought to control such involvement.

Joining the groups, some of which appear culturally strange in their beliefs and organizational patterns, has seemed to many to be an act of ultimate rejection of American or even Western culture. The act of participating in new religions has appeared to be an overt rejection of American and Western values and institutions—including religious, economic, and familial. This "culture-rejecting" explanation has been difficult for many to accept, prompting a search for alternative explanations for involvement.

One of the most appealing alternatives has been so-called "brainwashing," "mind control," or "thought reform" theories (Bromley and Richardson 1983). According to those espousing these ideas, youth have not joined the new religions volitionally, but have instead been manipulated or forced into participating by leaders and members of groups using powerful psychotechnology practiced first by communist, anti-Western societies. This psychotechnology allegedly traps or encapsulates young people in the new religions, allowing subsequent control of their behavior by leaders of the groups (see, for example, Shapiro 1977; Delgado 1977; Singer 1979). It was originally developed, according to these claims, in Russian purge trials of the 1930s, and later refined by the Chinese communists after their assumption of power in China in 1949. The techniques also were used against POWs during the Korean War of the 1950s. Now these techniques are allegedly being used by foreign-based and inspired religious leaders against young people in Western countries, who are supposedly virtually helpless before such sophisticated methods.

When questioned about the obvious logical problem of applying these theories to situations without physical coercion, proponents have ready, if problematic, answers. They claim that physical coercion has been replaced by "psychological coercion," which is actually more effective than simple physical coercion (Singer 1979). These ideas are referred to as "second generation" brainwashing theories, which take into account new insights about manipulation of individuals. It is not necessary to coerce recruits physically if they can be manipulated by affection, guilt, or other psychological influences. Simple group pressures and emotion-laden tactics are revealed as more effective than those used by officials in physically coercive Russian, Chinese, and Korean POW situations.

These theories might be thought of as quaint ideas developed for functional reasons by those who have an interest in their being accepted. They plainly are a special type of "account" which "explains" why people join the groups and why they stay in them for a time (see Beckford 1978a; Bromley and Shupe 1979 on conversion accounts; Richardson, Balch, and Melton, this volume, for problems with such accounts). Whatever the origin, and no matter that the veracity of such accounts is questionable, these ideas have become commonly accepted among the general public. For instance, DeWitt (1991)

reports that 78 percent of a randomly drawn sample of 383 individuals from an urban county in Nevada said they believed in brainwashing, and 30 percent agreed that "brainwashing is required to make someone join a religious cult." A similar question asked of a random sample of 1,000 residents in New York prior to the tax evasion trial of Reverend Moon (Richardson 1992) revealed that 43 percent agreed "brainwashing is required to make someone change from organized religion to a cult." Latkin (1986) reported on results from a random sample of Oregon residents who were asked about the controversial Rajneesh group centered in Eastern Oregon. Sixty-nine percent of respondents agreed that members of the group were brainwashed. Bromley and Breschel (1992) report that 73 percent of 1,700 randomly drawn respondents in a national survey support legislation prohibiting conversion of teenagers by religious cults. This strong finding may derive from concern about perceived brainwashing-based recruitment techniques allegedly used by new religions.¹

These notions about brainwashing and mind control have pervaded institutional structures in our society as well. Such views have influenced actions by governmental entities and the media (van Driel and Richardson 1988; Richardson, Kilbourne, and van Driel 1989; Bromley 1984). The legal system has seen a number of efforts to promote brainwashing theories as explanations of why people might participate in new religions (Richardson 1991a; Post 1988; Anthony 1990; Anthony and Robbins 1992). A number of these initiatives have resulted in multimillion dollar judgments against religious groups allegedly using brainwashing techniques on recruits (Bromley 1988b).

Thus it appears that ideas about brainwashing of recruits to new religions have developed momentum of their own in our society and other Western countries (Bromley and Shupe, forthcoming; Beckford 1985; Barker 1984). These notions are impacting society in many ways, including as contributors to a possible severe limitation on religious freedom in American society (Post 1988; Richardson 1991a). Thus, we need to examine the brainwashing thesis more closely, in order to see if it might be a proper explanation of what takes place when people join and participate in a new religion. This paper begins with a critique of brainwashing theories from a social science perspective, followed by an attempt to explain the recruitment process from another point of view—generic social psychological theories developed to explain changes in behavior and attitudes. The paper closes with an application of a more activist perspective of the process of recruitment and participation, building on some creative work by Moreland and Levine (1985) and Levine and Russo (1988).

CRITIQUE OF "BRAINWASHING" THEORIES

Brainwashing theories serve the interests of those espousing them in a number of ways. Parents can blame the groups and their leaders for what were volitional decisions to participate by their sons and daughters (Shupe and Bromley 1979). Former members can blame the techniques for a decision to participate which the participant later regrets. Deprogrammers can use brainwashing theories as

a justification for their new "profession" and as a quasi-legal defense if they are apprehended by legal authorities during their deprogrammings, which often have involved physical force and kidnapping (Bromley 1988a). Societal leaders can blame the techniques for seducing society's "brightest and best" away from traditional cultural values and institutions. Competitive religious leaders as well as some psychological and psychiatric clinicians attack the groups with brainwashing theories, to underpin what are basically unfair competition arguments (Kilbourne and Richardson 1984). The claims that new religions engage in brainwashing thus become powerful, effective social weapons for many partisans in the cult controversy (Anthony and Robbins 1992). Such ideas are used to "label" the exotic religious groups as deviant or even evil (Richardson et al. 1986; Robbins and Anthony 1982). However, the new "second generation" brainwashing theories propounded by a few psychologists, sociologists, and others whose interest such theories serve have a number of problems.

Misrepresentation of Classical Tradition

Modern brainwashing theories in some crucial ways misrepresent earlier scholarly work on the processes developed in Russia, China, and the Korean POW situation (Anthony 1990; Anthony and Robbins 1992). These misrepresentations are as follows. First, early research by Schein (1959), Schein and associates (1961) and Lifton (1961) revealed that, contrary to some recent claims, the techniques were generally rather ineffective at doing more than modifying behavior (obtaining compliance) for the short term (see Schein et al. 1961, p. 332; Lund and Wilson 1977, p. 348; Scheiflin and Opton 1978). Such theories would seem even less useful when trying to explain long-term changes of behavior and belief, which are implied if not explicitly alleged by those propounding brainwashing theories to explain participation in new religions.

Second, the degree of determinism associated with contemporary brainwashing applications usually far exceeds that found in the earlier foundational work of Lifton and of Schein. Anthony (1990) and Robbins (Anthony and Robbins 1992) contrast the "soft determinism" of the work of Lifton and Schein with the "hard determinism" of contemporary proponents of brainwashing theories such as Singer and Ofshe (1990). The hard determinism approach assumes that humans can be turned into robots through application of sophisticated brainwashing techniques. Thus, humans become "Manchurian Candidates," even in spite of great efforts to overcome the techniques. Such a perspective is not acceptable to classical scholars Lifton and Schein, who seem more willing to recognize human beings as more complex entities than do some contemporary brainwashing theorists. Richardson and Kilbourne (1983) also note that extreme determinism of contemporary applications of brainwashing theories.

Third, another major problem for contemporary brainwashing theories is that both scholars (Lifton and Schein) who produced what has come to be called classic work in this field are not comfortable with their work being applied to modern noncoercive situations. Lifton (1985, p. 69) explicitly disclaims use of

the ideas concerning brainwashing to attack so-called cults as a legal problem, and earlier (Lifton 1961, p. 4) he had stated: "the term (brainwashing) has a far from precise and questionable usefulness; one may even be tempted to forget about the whole subject and return to more constructive pursuits." The work of Schein and of Lifton both suggest great difficulty in "drawing the line" between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors on the part of those involved in influencing potential subjects for change (Anthony and Robbins 1992). Group-influence processes operate in all areas of life, which makes singling out one area for special negative attention quite problematic. Such a negative focus cannot be adopted on strictly logical or scientific grounds.

Ideological Biases of Brainwashing Theorists

Richardson and Kilbourne (1983) point out that contemporary applications of brainwashing theories share an ideological bias in opposition to collectivistic solutions to problems of group organization (Richardson 1989). In the 1950s Americans opposed collectivistic communism; in the 1970s and 1980s many Americans shared a concern about communally oriented new religions. Another problematic element of contemporary applications concerns the ethocentrism and even racism which may be related to their use. The fact that a number of new religions are from outside Western culture and were founded and led by foreigners should not be ignored in understanding the propensity to apply simplistic brainwashing theories to explain participation and justify efforts at social control.

Limited Research Base of Classical Work

Richardson and Kilbourne (1983) as well as Anthony (1990) note that the research on which the classical models are based is quite limited. Small samples were used by both Lifton and Shein, and they were not necessarily representative of the general populations of those societies. Those in the samples were presented using an anecdotal reporting style, derived from clinical settings, especially with Lifton's work. As Biderman (1962) pointed out, Lifton only studied 40 subjects in all, and gave detailed information on only 11 of those. Shein's original work was based on a sample of only 15 American civilians who returned after imprisonment in China.

Predisposing Characteristics Ignored

Contemporary application of brainwashing theories to recruitment tactics of new religions also ignores important work on predisposing characteristics (Lofland 1978; Anthony and Robbins 1992). The techniques of brainwashing supposedly are so successful that they can transform a person's basic beliefs into sharply contrasting beliefs. This aspect of brainwashing theory is appealing to proponents who have difficulty recognizing that an individual might have been attracted to a new and exotic religion. This potential of brainwashing also allows proponents conveniently to ignore volitional aspects of recruitment to new religions.

Therapeutic Effects of Participation Ignored

Participation in new religious groups seems to have a generally positive impact on most participants, an often-replicated finding that undercuts brainwashing arguments, but is usually ignored by proponents of such theories. Robbins and Anthony (1982) summarized positive effects that have been found. They list ten different therapeutic effects, including such things as reduced neurotic distress, termination of illicit drug use, and increased social compassion. Richardson (1985b) reviewed a large literature concerning personality effects of participation. He concluded (1985b, p. 221): "Personality assessments of these group members reveal that life in the new religions is often therapeutic instead of harmful." Kilbourne (1989) drew similar conclusions in his assessment of why some therapists ignore positive outcomes from participation.

Psychiatrist Marc Galanter, who has done considerable assessment research on participants in some of the more prominent new religious groups, has even posited a general "relief effect" brought about by participation in such groups (Galanter and Diamond 1981). He is interested in finding out what about participation leads to such consistent positive effects, so that other therapists can use the techniques themselves. McGuire (1988) found that large numbers of ordinary people participate in exotic religious groups and experiences in search of alternatives to modern medicine, and that many apparently think themselves the better for the experience. Brainwashing theorists usually conclude that participation in the new religions is a negative experience, which seems counter to the line of research just cited.

Voluntaristic Character of Participation Overlooked

Brainwashing theorists such as Delgado (1982) turn predispositions and interest in exotic religions into susceptibilities and vulnerabilities, adopting an orientation toward recruitment that defines the potential convert in completely passive terms. This view ignores an important aspect of classical work in the brainwashing tradition. For instance, Lifton's (1961) work clearly shows the voluntaristic character of much of the thought reform which went on in China. Richardson and Kilbourne (1983) discuss the passive orientation of most brainwashing theories, and Richardson (1985a) discusses the growing use of "active" (versus passive) paradigms in conversion/recruitment research. More activist views of conversion stress the predispositional and volitional character of participation, deriving such a view from research findings that many participants actually seek out the new groups in order to learn about them and try out different lifestyles (Kilbourne 1986).

Large Research Tradition Ignored

There has been a huge amount of research done on recruitment to and participation in the new religious groups and movements, research which is almost totally ignored by brainwashing theorists. This work, which is

summarized in such reviews as Greil and Rudy (1984), Richardson (1985a), and Robbins (1985, 1988), nearly always applies standard theories from sociology, social psychology, and psychology to explain why youth join such groups. The explanations offered by these researchers seem quite adequate to explain participation, without any "black box" of mystical psychotechnology such as offered by brainwashing theorists. Examples of such work include Heirich's (1977) study of the Charismatic Renewal movement, Pilarzyk's (1978) comparison of conversion in the Divine Light Mission and the Hare Krishna, Straus' (1981) "naturalistic social psychological" explanation of seeking religious experiences, and Bromley and Shupe's (1986) role theory approach.

Lack of Success of New Religions Disregarded

There are a number of other problems in applying brainwashing theories to research data on participation in new religions. One obvious problem with assuming the efficacy of powerful recruitment techniques concerns the *size* of the new religious groups. Most are quite small: the Unification Church probably never had over 10,000 American members, and can now boast only 2,000 to 3,000 members in the United States; the Hare Krishna may not have achieved the size of the Unification Church; and most other groups have had similar problematic experiences in recruiting large numbers of participants. These histories of meager growth and/or rapid decline raise serious questions about the efficacy of brainwashing explanations of participation (Bromley 1991). Such powerful techniques should have resulted in much larger groups.

A related problem concerns attrition rates for the new religions. As a number of scholars have noted, most participants in the new groups remain for only a short time, and most of those who have been recruited simply ignore or rebuff recruiters and go on with their normal lives (Bird and Reimer 1982; Barker 1984; Galanter 1980). Many people leave the groups after being in them relatively short periods (Wright 1983, 1987; Skonovd 1983; Richardson et al. 1986). Recruitment techniques characterized as brainwashing should lead to retention of members if they are as powerful as claimed, but this is not the case.

Class Origins of Members Not Properly Recognized

A related issue concerns the education level and sophistication of participants. It would seem reasonable to assume that those most susceptible to so-called brainwashing would be less well-educated. However, sizable numbers of "America's finest" in terms of education level and relative affluence have participated in the groups, if only for a short time (Richardson et al. 1979; Kilbourne 1986; Barker 1984). This finding raises questions about application of brainwashing theories as adequate explanations of participation. Both Barker (1984) and Kilbourne (1986) have found that there are predisposing characteristics for participation in the Unification Church—such as youthful idealism that has provoked interest in the Unificationist message. Thus, the brainwashing theorist's argument would seem to be refuted, even if such data are often ignored.²

Brainwashing as Its Own Explanation

A last critique of brainwashing theories is that they are self-perpetuating, through "therapy" offered those who leave, especially those who are forcibly deprogrammed. As Solomon (1981) has concluded, those who are deprogrammed often accept the views that deprogrammers use to justify their actions, and which are promoted to the deprogrammees as reasons for cooperating with the deprogramming. These views usually include a belief in brainwashing theories. One could say that a successful deprogramming is one in which the deprogrammees come to accept the view that they were brainwashed, and are now being rescued. Solomon's finding has been corroborated by other research on those who leave, including Lewis (1986), Lewis and Bromley (1987), and Wright (1987). The social psychological truth that such ideas are *learned interpretations or accounts* would seem to undercut truth claims by brainwashing theorists.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY OF THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

The preceding critique indicates that brainwashing theories of participation in new religions fail to take into account considerable data about participation in such groups. The theories ignore the small size of the groups, as well as their high attrition rates and motivations for joining of many participants. Also, they are not based on accurate renditions of what classical research revealed about the process of change in coercive situations. And the classical research may itself be built on shaky foundations. However, many people and institutional leaders still accept such theories, which requires that serious attention be paid to developing alternative explanations that demystify the process of recruitment to and participation in the new religions.³

The following section presents some rather straightforward applications of theories and research from social psychology to aid in understanding recruitment and participation, relying in major part on a few explicit efforts to apply social psychology to new religions. Following that discussion, the area of "minority influence" from social psychological studies of nonconformity will be reviewed. This latter effort relies on creative work based on an assumption of a more independent and active individual functioning within the group context and influencing group culture through a process of negotiation with the group and its leaders. Such theorizing and research belies many of the claims made by so-called brainwashing theorists.

Coverage of New Religions in Text Books

Two well-known text books in social psychology, in an apparent effort to be current, discuss participation in new religions. Zimbardo, Ebbesen, and Maslach (1977) open their text with discussion of two situations bound to attract readers' attention. They describe in detail the circumstances of the kidnapping of Patty Hearst, and make the point that simplistic claims about

“brainwashing” cannot be used to explain her odd behavior. The authors point out that efforts were made to present a brainwashing defense in the Hearst trial (also see Fort 1983), but they did not succeed. Their brief discussion of the classical theorists discussed above is sound.

However, the authors then discuss the Unification Church (sometimes referred to in the text using the negative descriptor, “Moonies”), under the subtitle, “A (Reverend) Moon for the Misbegotten.” The authors’ description of the Unification Church follows many of the stereotypes about this group, and their treatment suggests that something as sinister as the kidnapping of Patty Hearst occurs in this group. They also include a copy of a very derogatory editorial cartoon about the Unification Church that appeared in a recent *ABA Monitor*. The text indicates that a student of theirs who visited a Unification Church training camp came away “shaken...by the brief, two day experience” (Zimbardo et al. 1977, p. 19).

Later in the text Zimbardo et al. (1977, pp. 182-189) offer more detail about the experiences of this student who feigned an interest in the Unification Church. They are making a similar point to the overall thrust of this section—that the influence techniques are actually quite mundane and ordinary. However, the reader cannot help but deduce that Zimbardo and company do not care for the Unification Church or the content of the influence processes being used. Several social psychological concepts are mentioned as being apropos, including deindividuation, social reinforcement, informational control, “foot in the door” techniques, dissonance, personal attraction, and semantic distortion. The following quote about the recruitment process shows the approach being taken in this text (Zimbardo et al. 1977, p. 185):

(T)here are informational inputs to be listened to uncritically. An “open mind” means a nonevaluative vulnerable mind set of acceptance. A childlike atmosphere filled with simple demands that are easy to satisfy recreates the passivity, dependence, and obedience of childhood (and evokes our elementary school conditioning). Minimal obedience is all that is required at first. Dissonance follows once the foot is in the door, and then attitudes fall into line to justify compliant actions.

Thus Zimbardo et al. have built an excellent and socially acceptable “straw man” to show how useful and powerful social psychological techniques are for changing people.

Another prominent social psychology text that includes discussion of participation in new religions is Cialdini’s (1985) widely cited and very readable *Influence: Science and Practice*. Cialdini discusses the Peoples Temple tragedy, using concepts such as social isolation and pluralistic ignorance to explain the 900 plus suicides and murders that occurred in the South American jungle. He refutes the idea that personal attributes of Jim Jones led directly to the tragedy, but gives Jones credit for knowing how to manipulate the situation so that his wishes would be followed.

This text contains as well a fairly lengthy treatment of the famous “new religion” examined by Festinger et al. (1956). The infiltration of this small group

by Festinger's colleagues yielded some fascinating detail about how a group prophesying the end of the world can overcome the obstacle of a failed prophecy. Cialdini posits "social proof" as the mechanism of explanation about what happened with this group which managed to talk itself into an acceptable interpretation of why the end did not come. There was no physical proof of the events they have predicted, but an acceptable social account was developed which most members were able to adopt and even propagate rather forcefully to those who wanted to know why the end had not occurred. Cialdini ignores (as do Festinger et al. 1956) the significant impact of the infiltration and subsequent actions of the covert researchers (see Richardson 1991b). However, his discussion is relatively objective and informative, even if it overlooks the importance of the researcher intervention.

Cialdini also uses the Hare Krishna as an excellent example of the power of reciprocity in social affairs. He notes that the Krishna, a stigmatized group, were able to raise large amounts of money from strangers who did not care for them or want to talk with them, simply by offering them a token (usually a flower or book) in exchange for a donation. This example relates to participation and thus is germane to an examination of brainwashing theories explaining such activities.

Other Applications of Social Psychology to New Religions

Solomon (1983) has done the most thorough job of analyzing recruitment to new religions from a social psychological perspective. Her analysis begins by offering a provocative comparison of Russian and Chinese brainwashing techniques, which she claims differ in important ways. Her analysis reveals that the Chinese approach allegedly is more similar to the practices of new religions in the United States. Unlike the earlier Russian model, the objective of the Chinese approach was a person who was usable after the process. Chinese methods thus seek "conversion," which implies a change of attitude, instead of just compliance, and uses persuasion instead of physical coercion as a major tool. The approach is "evangelistic" instead of "scientific" in orientation, uses a social group as the change agent instead of an individual interrogator, and practices "overstimulation" as contrasted to the "understimulation" (through isolation) of the Russian model. With its emphasis on group processes and on making the convert a functioning member of the group through focused interaction, the Chinese model is obviously social psychological in orientation.

Solomon (1983, p. 169) then launches into a discussion two major issues in social psychology:

- (1) how and under what circumstances can social influence processes impact upon individual participants, and (2) what is the nature of the relationship and direction of causality between attitudinal and behavioral changes.

These issues demonstrate the problematic nature of simplistic views of social influence. Individual behavior can be modified through group pressure, as the

classic studies of Asch (1960) and Sherif (1936) demonstrated long ago. However, it is not clear why this occurs or what conditions cause some people to appear to conform to group pressures while others do not. The relationship of attitudes and behavior also remains unspecified. Were peoples' minds actually changed in the classic experiments on social influence, or were those who gave incorrect answers simply conforming to avoid conflict or to get along with their fellow subjects? If their minds were changed, did this occur before or after the incorrect behavioral response? These questions are, of course, important to understanding what happens when an individual is in a recruitment situation with a new religious group.

Solomon focuses her analysis of the process of recruitment on three general factors: (1) isolation from contact with other environments; (2) group pressures that seem to influence attitudinal and behavioral changes; and (3) coercion of a physical nature, including food and sleep deprivation. Her discussion gives extended treatment to some topics covered briefly in the two texts just mentioned, and thus her delineation will be used to offer detail needed to flesh out our assertion that social influence processes in new religions are easily understood.

Isolation

Isolation of recruits can be found in a number of new religions, as efforts are made to reduce potential recruits' ties with family and friends, and "encapsulate" them in the new milieu (Greil and Rudy 1984). In some groups, such as the Unification Church, this effort is often quite systematic, whereas in others, particularly noncommunal groups, facilities do not exist for much isolation from normal life. Whatever efforts the groups make are often complemented by actions and predispositions of the recruits. Considerable research has shown that many potential recruits already had weak ties with their family and former friends. Indeed, many were "on the road," looking for alternative lifestyles and belief structures (Straus 1976, 1979; Lofland and Skonovd 1981; Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson 1985a). The combination of group efforts at isolation and individual willingness to become isolated sometimes has produced a situation in which few or weak ties remain to anyone outside the recruiting group. Such a circumstance allows a greater impact from various group pressures which might develop within the group.

New religions are not the only groups seeking to influence behavior which have encouraged isolation and the weakening of ties with former friends and with family. Parental restriction of dating partners or otherwise monitoring contact with other youth exemplify the technique of isolation. College sororities and fraternities which discourage contact with home or with certain groups of students on campus are also implementing isolation techniques. Marine boot camp or juvenile detention halls are less benign examples of organizations which isolate "recruits" to improve chances of modifying behavior and belief.

Group Pressures

Group pressures can take many forms, including repetition, monopolization of time, and positive reinforcement of desired behaviors and beliefs (Solomon 1983, p. 170). The combination of such techniques can influence behavior and perhaps beliefs. The classic experiments of Asch clearly show that a significant minority of people will, under certain conditions, change their behavioral response to one which is obviously incorrect but nonetheless conforming. It is not clear, however, whether attitudes and beliefs were actually impacted in these experiments. Social psychology assumes that beliefs and attitudes can be modified through group processes, but there are competing theories to explain this phenomenon.

Treatments such as Solomon, Zimbardo et al., and Cialdini generally assume a cognitive perspective with the person actively seeking an understanding of what they encounter. Solomon discusses cognitive theories that have been developed to explain attitude changes in individuals, including Festinger's (1957) dissonance theory and Bem's (1972) self-perception theory. Both theories place emphasis on the primacy of behavior. Festinger suggests that when cognitions and behavior differ, there is a tendency to alleviate the dissonance that occurs (the actual occurrence of dissonance is a key but untestable assumption of dissonance theory). It is usually easier to modify beliefs than behaviors, or, more accurately, to align beliefs with the behaviors in which a person has engaged.

In contrast to Festinger's ideas, Bem argues that a person's self-perception develops from observing his or her own behavior, which is the same way that individuals make sense of other peoples' behaviors. Individuals attribute beliefs and attitudes to others by observing them, and Ben claims they do the same with themselves.

Both these theories assume that getting a person to act can lead to changes of belief. Thus, the theories suggest that getting potential recruits to participate in the round of group activities is the best way to begin the process of changing their belief structures to ones more closely aligned with those of the group. A number of new religions and some traditional ones as well seem to understand this concept at least intuitively, and seek to involve the potential recruit in many activities from fundraising to proselytizing. The groups welcome the recruit, and reinforce behaviors fitting the group lifestyle and values.

One example of such actions would be Mormon Church encouragement of participation by young people in the two-year volunteer mission program of the church. Whether this and similar practices are cynical manipulation or the actions of a group concerned about demonstrating a caring atmosphere to recruits and others depends in significant measure on the intentionality of the actors. In the case of highly controversial groups, manipulation may be "in the eye of the beholder," and nowhere else.

One criticism that can be made about the phenomenon group pressure and about the classic experiments which undergird this approach is that the experiment occurs in an artificial and relatively nonsalient situation in which

subjects are usually only passive recipients of actions by a majority. In Asch's classic experiment the subjects were not allowed to interact with the confederate majority, to question them, or seek information about why they were giving incorrect responses. In a situation with a task of low saliency to most individuals, many who responded with incorrect answers probably just conformed to avoid conflict. In later refinements of this and similar experiments, when even one confederate was instructed to give a correct response, the conforming responses of the subjects plummeted from over 30 percent to around five percent (van Avermaet 1988).

The recruitment situation for most new religions more closely resembles a situation in which interaction is possible between recruits and between recruits and recruiters, with questions being raised by recruits. Recruitment is often an active interaction situation, with the possibility of dissenters from group views being present. Social support would typically be available from other potential recruits who are present. Most importantly, potential recruits were usually present because they chose to be there, and they could leave if they desired.

This is not to say that every recruitment situation allows maximum conditions for dissent. Indeed, new religious groups and other types of recruiting organizations are usually attempting to discourage contacts with dissenters and to "make the sale" without being impeded by other influences. Few used car salespersons deliberately introduce a client to someone who just refused to buy a car from them. Instead, for obvious reasons, they want to have the client interact with other satisfied customers. The salesperson wants to monopolize the time of the client and to have them hear positive repetitions about the value of the car they are considering. And positive behaviors, such as wanting to take a test drive, are reinforced. A less mundane example might be actions taken by members of a convent when interacting with potential recruits. Interactions with defectors would usually be kept to a minimum, while repetitions of positive experiences would be demonstrated, and actions which signaled interest in becoming a nun would be reinforced by the group of already committed nuns and their leaders.

Coercion

This concept has already been discussed in the context of examining assumptions about how brainwashing occurs in new religions. There is little evidence that actual physical coercion occurs in recruitment situations, although there have been a limited number of reports of food and sleep deprivation in a few groups. Food deprivation may be a function of limited group resources, however, and sleep deprivation may be the result of a very full round of group activities designed to accomplish group tasks rather than to tire potential recruits deliberately (see, e.g., Richardson, Stewart, and Simmonds 1979).

It should be noted, however, that if physical coercion did occur, social psychological research would predict that it would not have long-term effects on attitudes and beliefs. Indeed, forced behavioral change may lead to a backlash against the beliefs of those forcing the behavior. As dissonance theory

suggests, only when behaviors are freely chosen will they lead to a commensurate change in attitudes about the object of the behavior. Only when the person chooses to behave in a certain fashion will there be an aligning of cognitions with behaviors, according to this line of thought. Cialdini (1985, pp. 60-63) makes a similar point in his examination of the ways in which Chinese captors manipulated the behavior of Korean POWs. He focuses on a kind of "foot in the door" approach, coupled with subsequent labelling of the prisoner as a collaborator to explain behavior changes which occurred.

It bears repetition that most scholars dealing with recruitment into new religions or other groups would not agree that psychological coercion can be equated with physical coercion in terms of impact on recruits (see Anthony 1990). Psychological coercion of various types is simply a fact of life with which contemporary people have to deal. Most handle psychological coercion by ignoring it and going about their business. Only a rare and unique set of circumstances would call for serious concern about the impact of psychological coercion in our society. Solomon includes physical coercion in her analysis because she is also analyzing the social psychology of "deprogramming," and those situations often do involve direct physical coercion (Solomon 1983, pp. 181-182).

Recruitment as an Interaction/Negotiation Situation ⁴

As indicated above in the discussion of group pressure phenomena, there are some difficulties with the paradigm adopted in most majority influence research, starting with the classical studies of Sherif and of Asch. A key metatheoretical assumption of most such work is that the subject is relatively passive in the face of majority pressures, with the majority acting upon the individual subject with relative impunity. Such a perspective cannot be sustained in the face of considerable evidence that people in real recruitment situations not involving physical coercion are quite active, seeking out opportunities to engage in personal change (Straus 1976, 1979; Richardson 1985a).

In order to understand this different, more activist perspective, one must recast the recruitment situation. Instead of conceiving of a group or organization acting upon an individual who is relatively helpless in the face of unwelcome group pressures, the situation should be thought of as one in which recruits are seeking alternatives, find one in which they are tentatively interested, and then engage in open interaction with the group to "feel them out." If the results of the initial contact are positive for the recruits and the group as well, then negotiations are opened to determine what the recruits *as well as the group* must do in order for a longer-term relationship to be agreed upon.

Such a perspective implies relative autonomy on the part of individual potential recruits, and it assumes that the group is not all-powerful. The individual can decide to withdraw from the interaction situation, and the group must allow this autonomous act, unless force is used. In short, the relative power of the group and the recruit(s) is not as highly asymmetrical as assumed by proponents of brainwashing theories. There is rough symmetry, simply because

the individual recruits can withdraw. In fact, either side in the negotiations can withdraw. The group can decide that the potential member is not worth the effort of recruitment, and individual recruits may decide that the group is simply too strange or too demanding to be worth the effort to meet entrance requirements; see Galanter (1980) for examples of the Unification Church deciding that some potential recruits were not acceptable, and Richardson et al. (1986) for a general discussion of "expulsion" by new religions.

The Moreland/Levine Model of Socialization to Small Groups

The more subject-centered perspective on recruitment just described has been best delineated in the work of Moreland and Levine (1985) and Levine and Russo (1988). The Moreland/Levine theory of socialization into small voluntary groups is replete with ideas germane to recruitment to new religions. Indeed, they cite some of the research that has been conducted by scholars on new religious conversion as a part of their supporting data.

The Moreland/Levine model assumes three psychological and social psychological processes as crucial to any recruitment situation: evaluation, commitment, and role transition. The authors assume that decisions are made by the individual and the recruiting group on the basis of evaluations of the "rewardingness" of the relationship. If evaluations result in a positive assessment, then both the individual and the group make commitments to each other. These levels of commitment rise and fall over time and with different circumstances, leading to transitions from one role to another for the individual recruits.

Individual recruits pass through five different phases or roles vis-à-vis the group: investigation, socialization, maintenance, resocialization, and remembrance. The *investigation phase* involves the group looking for individual members who can contribute to group goals, while individual potential recruits look for groups which can help meet personal needs and goals. If both the group and an individual finds that the interaction meets minimum levels of satisfaction, then commitment levels for both to each other may rise to that level allowing the individual recruit to enter the *socialization phase*. In this crucial testing phase, the group attempts to change recruits so that they will make a maximum contribution toward group goals, while the individual recruits attempt to modify the group so that it will better meet their goals. If this negotiation process is successful, then mutual commitment levels may rise again, this time moving the recruit into a *maintenance phase*.

In maintenance a specialized role is sought by the individual which will maintain a high level of personal satisfaction, while the group wants to find a role for the individual which will maximize the ongoing contribution of the individual to group goals. If rewards remain high for both the group and the individual, then the maintenance phase can be prolonged indefinitely. However, if something happens to lower the rewardingness for either the individual or the group, the person may shift into a *resocialization phase*. During this phase an effort is made to renegotiate a mutually satisfactory agreement between the

individual and the group. If this outcome occurs, then the person re-enters the maintenance phase. If the rewardingness remains below a criterion level for either the group, the individual, or both, then the individual exits the group and enters the *remembrance phase*. In this phase the group and the individual engage in retrospective evaluations of each other in an effort to "explain" to each other and to outsiders why the individual left or was forced out involuntarily.

Moreland and Levine (1985, p. 153) offer a diagram which relates level of commitment in each of the five phases to passage of time. They posit a bell-shaped curve, with commitment lowest at either end of the curve during the investigation and remembrance phases, while commitment is highest during the maintenance phase. This diagram offers an informative visual for those seeking to understand recruitment to any group, including new religions.

However, the diagram perhaps misleads a bit on two counts—first, by assuming that the remembrance phase leaves the person in a neutral position vis-à-vis evaluation of and commitment to the group. As is well known, sometimes a person leaving a group does so with animosity on the part of the person, the group, or both. Such situations can involve much recrimination and self-justification. Richardson, van der Lans, and Derks (1986) discuss the use of labeling in such situations, as self-justificatory accounts are developed by internal and external parties alike.

Another misleading aspect of the diagram is that the curve depicting level of commitment seems to assume a mutual level of commitment occurring simultaneously for the individual and the group. Plainly, levels of commitment of the individual to the group do not always match levels of commitment of the group to the individual. When such mismatches occur in level of commitment, there obviously may be difficulties with the relationship. Indeed, one could speculate that certain methods of leaving might be preceded by systematic differences in levels of mutual commitment.

For instance, if the group valued the individual more than the individual valued the group and the group could not satisfy the personal needs of the individual, then we might predict more voluntary exiting by such individuals. By contrast, if the group did not value a member highly despite a high level of commitment of the member toward the group, then the group might eventually expel the member from the group. One might also predict that there would be greater "success" in forced disaffiliation through deprogramming ("extraction" in Richardson et al. 1986) in phases other than "maintenance," when commitment is usually highest for both the individual and group.

Speculation could be developed, as well, about ways to characterize specific groups in terms of the relationship of mutual commitment between the group and individual recruits. For instance, some groups seeking large numbers of recruits might have a high level of apparent commitment initially, which would yield a group commitment curve higher than the individual commitment curve in initial phases of recruitment. But once the person became a member, the group commitment curve could rapidly drop to a minimum required to maintain some loyalty from recruits. Beckford's (1978b) discussion of people

leaving the Unification Church suggests that this group's approach to recruitment might illustrate this interesting pattern. The strategy of high apparent initial commitment by the group but lower commitment once the person expresses commitment illustrates that the process of recruitment is variable and involves interaction and negotiation.

Another variation indicating differences in level of group and individual recruit commitment would be a group which was hard to enter as a new member, but which was in high demand. Individual commitment might be quite high initially, but the group level would remain cautiously low until the individual had clearly proved him/herself. Once this was accomplished, then, the group commitment level might rapidly approach the individual commitment level. *

These illustrations suggest that examining the interaction of mutual commitment curves could lead to some interesting insights into who might stay or leave (or be encouraged to remain or to leave). The mutual commitment curves might also be useful in characterizing different groups and different individual potential recruits. Moreland and Levine's social psychology of mutual commitment therefore seems a very fruitful area to develop as their ideas relate to recruitment to new religions.

Minority "Conversion" and Innovation

One significant area of research which most clearly demonstrates the value of an interactive approach to social influence in new religious group recruitment derives directly from the earlier classical studies of majority influence done by Sherif and Asch. We refer to what is called "minority influence" research, first given impetus by Moscovici and his colleagues (see Moscovici and Faucheux 1972; Moscovici 1985). Moscovici decided that the majority influence paradigm was too sterile because it assumed a completely asymmetrical power distribution and usually involved little interaction between participants. He posited a more realistic situation in which there could be mutual influence of the majority over the minority *and* the minority over the majority. He also assumed that the processes of influence differed significantly in the two situations. Moscovici set about attempting to discern situations in which a minority could "convert" members of the majority to their views.

This line of research has revealed that indeed there are situations in which the minority can influence the majority. Such circumstances usually involve consistency on the part of the minority, with its views being displayed in a nonrigid and reasonable way. Moscovici asserts that a consistent, nonrigid, reasonable minority will focus attention on the substance of the minority arguments, and over time this strategy can lead to modifications of belief by the majority, *even if behaviors are not modified*. This situation is, of course, quite different from the majority influence situation which may lead to compliance but not necessarily with any concomitant shift in beliefs.

Levine and Russo (1988) and Moreland and Levine (1985) have been among the leaders in developing this line of research. They have sought the source of

innovation in small groups through an incorporation of ideas imported by new recruits who subsequently were successful in spreading their ideas within the group.

This fascinating line of research has not been focused directly on new religions as yet, but it plainly is applicable. It is discussed here, if only briefly, to drive home the point that when individuals choose to participate in any group, including religious ones, there is an interaction and an exchange that takes place. Group culture changes with each new member, even if the change is small, and even if the process of change is not overt or perceived by group leaders or the members doing the influencing. Sometimes the change is open and dramatic, as when a large group of new recruits are welcomed into membership even though they differ significantly from the regular members already present. Such a situation occurred with a number of new religions when their "target populations" of itinerant youth contracted, and the groups were forced to start recruiting from the ranks of married couples or college students. The incorporation of different types of new members led directly to change in the groups, sometimes quickly as the new members expressed their disagreements with group policies (see Richardson et al. 1979). There also are instances of new members rapidly becoming leaders in their new group, which allowed them considerable opportunity to change a group's beliefs and practices over time.

CONCLUSIONS

This analysis of the brainwashing metaphor has demonstrated its ideological foundation, as well as its lack of scientific support. The simplistic perspective inherent in the brainwashing metaphor appeals to those attempting to locate an effective social weapon (Robbins, Anthony, and McCarthy 1983) to use against disfavored groups. The fact that such efforts at social control have been relatively successful should not detract from the lack of scientific basis for such opinions.

A much more fruitful way to view recruitment processes into new religions is to treat them as small groups making use of well-known social psychological techniques to gain recruits. The classical studies of Sherif and Asch give some hints about how this view might be developed, and the work of several social psychologists, particularly Solomon (1983), offers systematic application of the classical tradition of social influence research to new religions' recruitment practices.

The classical work on conformity, however, suffers from metatheoretical assumptions which may mislead scholars somewhat. The traditional paradigm in social influence assumes a relatively passive subject and seems quite anti-interactionist. The work of Moreland and Levine (1985) attempted to develop a more interactionist general theory of socialization into small groups which seems quite valuable when applied to recruitment into new religions. Their perspective emphasizes the reciprocal influences of the group and individual recruit have on one another, as well as assuming that the relationship between the individual recruit and the group is constantly changing.

The follow-up research done by Moreland and Levine (1985) and Levine and Russo (1988) on minority influence over majorities within a small group setting adds another element to the understanding of what happens when recruits participate in new religions. Recruits can and do influence the group, sometimes in dramatic ways. Such situations of minority "conversion" of the majority offer evidence that the process of recruitment into religious groups should not be characterized as situations of majoritarian influence in which the majority always wins totally and dominates all recruits. Such a view misleads, and it detracts from fruitful lines of research which might be pursued by more knowledgeable researchers willing to admit that recruits can and do seek participation, and that they can also influence the groups which they join.

NOTES

1. Why the general public might hold such views is an interesting question. As Fort (1985) has noted, the Patty Hearst trial made the world aware of the "brainwashing defense" attempted in that case. Also, other media have promoted the use of terms like brainwashing, mind control, and associated ideas. Popular movies such as *Manchurian Candidate* have perhaps convinced viewers of the efficacy of psychotechnological techniques in changing and controlling people's behavior. Media have also used such ideas in reporting stories about new religions and their recruitment practices. Thus, the stories can be framed in simple "good versus evil" or "stealing of children" motifs which belie the usual complexities of such situations. Van Driel and Richardson (1988) noted that psychological manipulation (including brainwashing) was a common theme found in their large content analysis study of print media coverage on new religions in the United States.

2. This argument has been "turned on its head" somewhat by brainwashing theorists, who argue that because the subjects are relatively well-educated they should not be so susceptible. Therefore, the fact that large numbers of youth have shown such susceptibility is interpreted to mean that the psychotechnological techniques must be powerful indeed!

3. Before proceeding with demystification of recruitment to new religions one caveat is in order. It is not true, of course, that no problems exist with any new religions, or that no laws are ever broken by leaders and members of new religions. It would be astonishing if some such actions did not occur, even if rarely. As Balch (1991) has noted, sometimes a "corruption of power" develops and groups go awry. Law-breaking associated with the Rajneesh group in Oregon is a case in point, as is the mass murder and suicide of Peoples Temple in the jungle of Guyana (but see Richardson 1980). When such actions do occur, "brainwashing" is seldom useful as an explanatory device. No magical psychological "black boxes" are needed to explain most of what happens in human societies and groups, including recruitment to religious groups.

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