

Brought into the Fold: Influence and Persuasion in a Conversional Religious Setting
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This study explored the use of influence techniques upon introduction of individuals to a conversional religion (The Church of Scientology). The researcher used the Participatory Research paradigm to investigate four aspects of influence (liking, social proof, authority and reciprocation, Cialdini, 1994) in an overriding Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, R., Cacioppo, J., 1986) framework. Findings supported hypothesis of use of influence techniques for the financial benefit of the organization. The implications of these findings for the future studies of influence were discussed.

Webster's New World Dictionary (1992) defines religion as "Belief in a superhuman power or powers to be obeyed or worshipped as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe." The dictionary goes on to define influence as the "power of persons or things to affect others." Where do these two concepts come together? How is influence used to bring in new disciples to a religion? This study examined the intersection of influence and religion, through the framework of the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, R., Cacioppo, J., 1986) a Social Psychological theory of persuasion.

Influence in the religious setting is as old as religion itself. The ability to gain adherents to one's preferred perspective serves many purposes. First, it satisfies the need for social proof, that "We view a behavior as correct in a given situation to the degree that we see others performing it." (Cialdini, 1993) which can facilitate a wide variety of behaviors and activities, such as group cohesiveness, profiteering, social support and expansionist sensibilities.

Second, new recruits continue the tradition of young religions, tap their passion and further the goals of their mentors. The methods used have varied, but the goal is usually the same, either recruiting or eliminating non-believers. History is full of the use of influence techniques in religion, from the brutal inquisition of Torquemada, the use of group dynamics by the Reverend Sun Myung Moon, and countless missions of the Christian Protestant Sects, to the Jihad of Islam. As time passes, most of the rough techniques of influence (pouring molten lead down the throats of "infidels", drowning innocents to prove they weren't witches, stretching on the racks to promote conversion) have succumbed to more subtle techniques that can be as effective.

This study explored the use of influence techniques upon introduction of individuals to a conversional religion (The Church of Scientology) using the Elaboration Likelihood Model (Petty, R., Cacioppo, J., 1986) framework.

The Elaboration Likelihood Model

The Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion suggests that persuasion occurs in two different ways, depending on the amount of cognitive effort (elaboration) that they require. The two paths are the central route of persuasion and the peripheral route of persuasion.

The central route to persuasion occurs when the subject finds the message or communication important, personally relevant, and interesting without any distractions to prevent them from examining the communication in detail. If the above are present in a communication, the subject has the capacity to consider the message carefully, thoughtfully weighing the argument presented. If the message is interpreted favorably, the target's attitudes and cognitive structures can be changed, persuasion having occurred.

The peripheral route occurs when the message doesn't interest the subject, but aspects of the message either elicit positive feelings, respect, or feelings of responsibility. For example, the use of beautiful men or women to advertise cars has nothing to do with the car, but as reported by Smith and Engel, (1968) men who saw a new car advertisement that had a seductive woman in it saw the car in the ad as more appealing, faster and better designed than those who saw the same ad without the model. The same effect has been shown using breathtaking natural scenery, authorities (effective even if the authority isn't in the same field, i.e. Angela Lansbury for Bufferin Aspirin), thus the message itself isn't the important factor in the peripheral route, it's the framing of the message and its presentation.

We will be referring to the ELM to describe the influence techniques used during the research.

The selected setting was a Washington, D.C. Church of Scientology, in the northwestern quarter of the city. The researcher had called to make an appointment on Wednesday, the 16th of April. The receptionist explained that the church was open from 8:00am to 11:00pm weekly, and that anytime during those hours, one could view the orientation movie, and talk to a "counselor".

The influence tactics to be observed consisted of four types of observable influence techniques; the use of Social Validation, Liking, Authority and Reciprocation. These were further defined as follows:

- Social Validation is the premise that we are generally more willing to comply with a request if this action is consistent with the performance of others with whom we identify. (Cialdini, 1994)
- Friendship/Liking is the principle of influence that uses people's attractiveness, friendliness, and similarity to gain compliance in any type of interaction. Thus we are more likely to comply with requests from friends and family than strangers are (Cialdini, 1994).
- Authority is valued by people for many reasons: experience, trust, and expertise. Therefore, people are more willing to comply with requests that come from an authority or perceived authority (Cialdini, 1994).
- Reciprocity states that we are more willing to comply with the requests of people who have previously provided us with a favor than to people who haven't provided a favor (Cialdini, 1994).

The moment I stepped into the historic beige and white Victorian building, I was impressed by my surroundings (peripheral route) and took note of the formality of the warm entry room. It had a large entry room with beautiful wooden staircases on either side of the entry. The parquet floor was immaculate, the walls painted white with ornate wooden trim. There were plenty of live plants all around, giving the feeling of a peaceful, growing place. As I walked up the landing, into the room, the ruckus of about 40 well dressed, smiling, and multi-racial people crowded around the entryway of a small auditorium, surprised me.

They were watching a sharply dressed African American man enthusiastically talk about the misunderstandings between the Baptist Church and the Church of Scientology. Having been given a bright and inviting smile by the receptionist, I made my way through the crowd to the attractive (she was more attractive as social norms go) young lady, wearing what could best be described as a Burgundy Marie Calendars waitress outfit from the late 70s (sans ruffles). I asked if I could see the video presentation that the phone operator had told me about. She wasn't sure of the showing times, but invited me to stay and watch the rest of the man's presentation.

I said thanks, and sat down to watch the members of the church. Shouts of "Alleluia!" and "Amen!" filled the air. When one member would shout, the next would join in a sort of self-perpetuating chorus of chanting and yelling. Smiles abounded (normative social influence,

peripheral route). I seemed to be the only visitor at the time, the only person not clapping or yelling (I wasn't wearing clothing that seemed to fit either). I was reminded of the phenomenon that keeps laugh tracks in TV programming, or the Claque effect of planting confederates in audiences to bring them to their feet (peripheral route).

Soon the presentation ended, I was invited into a wood paneled study, with several trophy cases full of the works of L. Ron Hubbard's (L. Ron Hubbard was the founder of Dianetics, as well as a very successful science fiction writer) including, *Dianetics*, *Dianetics Explained by the Worlds Greatest Religious Scholars* (influence based on the symbols of authority, peripheral route), and *Self-Analysis*.

The group spoke of spreading the message of "Ron" through teaching the illiterate to read, fostering love for all people, and creating more Scientology churches. The gentleman speaking also stated that about 50% of recruits are on psychotropic drugs, thus the need to become clear is very pressing. While attempting to mingle and find out what he (Mr. Hubbard) meant over coffee and sweets (reciprocation, peripheral route), the receptionist sweetly (liking, peripheral route) let it be known that the movie was being set up for a group viewing. The group consisted of the researcher and one other person. The group was led downstairs to a plush waiting room with modern wicker furniture and more plants, a few desks, computers and telephone banks.

Asked to sit for a while, the researcher read a little newsletter called "When life becomes a battleground, your MIND is your best weapon." (CSI, 1995) The newsletter went on to describe the goal of Psychology as labeling peoples disorders, and the "fact" that Psychiatrists "believe the mind is a physical organ-a theory with no scientific basis." It went on to detail the difference between the two parts of the mind, the analytical mind ("like a perfect computer") and the reactive mind (like a computer with a virus). The paper then lets us know that we can gain control of the negative reactive mind and take control of our lives for whatever we define success.

While reading, the film was set up, and the group was introduced to Haliva, who would answer questions after the movie. We were then both led into the screening room, which had huge speakers in the front, and about twenty velvet chairs in it. The lights went out, and a trembling "THX" theater introduction rocked the room. The screen brightened to reveal the word "ORIENTATION". A middle aged, average looking white man, wearing a suit, came on the screen, and pictures of all of the church's headquarters started flashing around the screen. "The Dianetics University in England, The Celebrity Center in Hollywood, The fabulous Freewind, the Dianetics Resort Cruiseship." were shown to the audience.

The man introduced the Dianetics religious background by reporting that, indeed, according to court cases throughout the world (which were read in English, but with the accent of the country in which the decision was rendered) Dianetics was declared a religion, while the main point of the decision was printed on the screen with flags flying, gavels flashing down, behind the writing, hammered out finality, and justified Dianetics as a religion (influence through authority, peripheral route).

The movie went on to explain the organizational aspects of the religion, the fact that there was an internal dispute counselor, so any grievances could be resolved through the process of the church, as opposed to outside courts. Eventually, the researcher found out that every church has a workroom for "Ron", who was technically proficient in over thirty career fields (influence based on authority, peripheral route). Towards the end of the movie, famous people gave their endorsements. John Travolta (of "Welcome Back Kotter" fame), Kirstee Allie, Chick Corea, and a host of other professionals and average people of every race and background (More Authority influence, peripheral route).

Finally, after ten minutes of endorsements, the middle-aged man was back, talking to an attractive young lady in a Dianetics bookstore. "What do you suggest these good people in the audience should start with in their exploration of Dianetics?" he asks. She replies with a confused face, "The start up book pack, for starters, is perfect, you can buy it in the lobby." She goes on with a concerned voice that all of Ron's books are excellent, and they can be ordered through either of the Church's presses. She then admonishes the viewer to buy the books, and wishes her best in their voyage through Dianetics.

The scene fades, and the middle aged man stands before two large wooden doors, explaining the fundamental choice the viewer now has to make. We can either "Shiver through one trillion years through the cold abyss" (fear tactic, peripheral route) or "Use our lives to live forever." He lets us know that it's our decision, and while they would be very happy to see us become Scientologists, they know we'd be very happy to become Scientologists. If not, we take it all in our own hands.

The most important factor in the movie was its insistence on circular argumentation. For example "Evolution doesn't prove that the mind doesn't have a spiritual basis." or "Psychology hasn't disproven the soul." The case was made that to be successful one needn't know the visitudes of Psychology, Psychiatry or Self-Hypnosis to be successful, one must merely understand the Dianetic approach to life and join its classes. The end of the movie showed the doors opening, with golden light flooding the screen until the doors fade, and the word "WELCOME" appears.

The lights went off, and Haliva came into the room to escort us to our respective counseling booths. We were split, the older woman being lead to a booth to the back of the room, the researcher following Haliva to the front of the room. She asked me to sit down, and why I had come to see the film. I responded that a friend had told me about the presentation (true), and I decided to follow up on it. She asked what I did (Social Psychology graduate student/Research Fellow) and what was troubling me. I replied, "I'm financially tapped" and I let her know the dismal reality of funding at my institution, and the vicious cycle of working while in school (needing to work for living costs, but work time interfering with school, cutting into my academic time).

As we spoke, her verbal and non-verbal behavior began to mirror mine (liking/similarity, peripheral route). For example, I would say, "that sounds excellent", she would say, "Don (she got my name wrong twice) it's Totally Excellent!" The researcher was thrilled to see his "counselor" pick up his San Fernando Valley dialect so quickly, and to have the genius to emulate it. As I thoughtfully rubbed my chin, she did the same. She leaned close, posture open, great eye contact. The researcher felt as if he was back in a peer counseling session during his undergraduate career.

Constantly touching my leg, she began asking questions that required deep thought on the part of the researcher, like "how could you make things better through Dianetics?", then interrupted the researchers answer with interjections such as "I know exactly how you feel" or "Uh-huh" or "it's the same for everyone before they're clear." (a state of well, clarity brought about by attending the classes offered by the church). Haliva seemed insistent on setting up a time for me to come in for a free personality test. We agreed on Wednesday the 23rd at 8:30pm. She wrote the time down on a piece of paper and pointed it out to me that she would call me (influence through commitment, peripheral route). I let her know I would be there.

Once she knew I was committed to come back, she seemed to rush to a closing point where she shockingly noticed the time. "What do the courses entail?", "They help you clear yourself through auditing" (the best explanation of auditing was "counseling") She then asked whether or not I would like to explore one of the training courses. I replied yes, and she asked if I brought my checkbook. I replied the reason I had troubled to come to explore Scientology was my financial situation, and she replied by asking if I had a credit card, or could borrow money from my parents or friends. "It's only \$136, Don!" At length she said "OK, better go, but before we meet on

Wednesday, make sure to call some friends, or your parents to see about getting some money together for the classes.”

Discussion

The experience supported the hypothesis that influence techniques are used to recruit new members for the Church of Scientology. Scientology is very aggressive in its use of the following tactics:

- Friendship/Liking: The principle of influence which uses people's attractiveness, friendliness, and similarity to gain compliance in any type of interaction. For example, the incredible warmth and sincerity of the Baptist minister, receptionist, and Haliva, promoted a feeling of honesty and trust.
- Reciprocity: We are more willing to comply to the requests of people who have previously provided us with a favor than to people who haven't provided a favor. For example, the sharing of food, the gracious attitude of welcome, offering written materials, and the viewing of a wholly entertaining movie made the researcher feel as if he should at least return the favor of giving his address and telephone number (he didn't).
- Social Validation: The premise that we are generally more willing to comply with a request if this action is consistent with others that we identify with who are performing it. For example, all the people chanting and hollering in the lobby, the use of celebrity endorsements, showing large groups of Scientologists achieving success in the movie, and all the kind, concerned counselors who boasted of their clarity.
- Authority: The use of legitimate or non-legitimate (phony) authority to bring about compliance. For example, the speech about L. Ron Hubbards proficiency in thirty professions, the uniforms used by the Scientologists, the trappings of authority (Huge ornate house, bookcases filled with medals and certificates, plaques) the titles of counselor, chief, etc.

Further research is needed, and if observation of the church was possible for long enough, more information on influence tactics could be explored. Also, comparisons between Scientology and older religions would be helpful, as the researcher believes that this growing phase of legitimization, emphasis on conversion and validation is an early developmental phase of all religions. It would be interesting to see how the techniques used change over time.

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