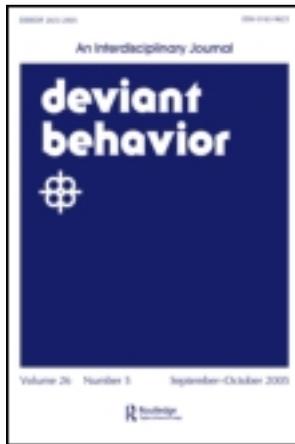


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“Cult Commitment” from the Perspective of Former Members: Direct Rewards of Membership versus Dependency Inducing Practices

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The experiences of involvement in a deviant “religious” group such as a cult or new religious movement is not well understood, with few qualitative studies having explored the experiences and perspectives of former members of such groups. To gain a better understanding of what compels individuals to become committed to a cult or new religious movement, the current study is a qualitative investigation into “cult commitment” from the perspective of former members. Seven participants from four different groups were recruited, and in-depth interviews were conducted to explore the participants’ accounts of their experience. This study found that participants’ “decision” to remain in the group was influenced by both “direct rewards” of membership and levels of control exercised by the group and its leaders.

Thousands of “cult-like” groups, or what scholars prefer to call New Religious Movements (NRMs), exist in Western society (Barker 1999; Dawson 2007). Some “cults”/NRMs are well known and have a large following, such as the Church of Scientology, the Unification Church, and the Children of God; however, many of them tend to be small, only last for a short time, and attract little to no attention (Dawson 2007). A cult or NRM is often described as a “deviant” group (Balch and Taylor 1977; Lofland and Stark 1965; Robbins and Anthony 1982; Wright and Piper 1986), with Bainbridge (1997) describing a cult as a “deviant religious organization with novel beliefs and subcultures” (p. 24). Even though a considerable number of people have been affected by such groups, Barker (1999) stresses that at least 80 percent of the population are not followers of an NRM.

Cult membership is an area of psychological and sociological interest, with an overview of the literature indicating little agreement among researchers who study cults or new religious movements. These researchers generally join the ranks of one of two opposing camps; those who support “brainwashing theories,” predominantly psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers (Hassan 1988, 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003; Singer and Ofshe 1990; Singer 1979; West 1993), and those who argue that cults simply represent alternative cultures

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that people join through an exercise of their own volition; a volition they also use to leave after some time (Barker 1984; Richardson 2004).

Studies that have investigated the experiences of membership have mostly done so by studying current members (Balch 1980; Barker 1984; Robbins 1988). In these studies, life in a group is predominantly studied through the use of qualitative methods, including participant observations. These studies find current members to be well adjusted, and as such conclude that membership is not harmful (Aldridge 2007). Those researchers who support the brainwashing thesis have predominantly focused on the experience of former members through the use of quantitative studies (Malinoski et al. 1999; Martin et al. 1992; Walsh and Bor 1996), and, to a lesser extent, clinical case studies of those who have sought their help (Goldberg 2003; Hassan 1988; Hassan 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 1979; Singer 2003; Singer and Ofshe 1990). The few qualitative studies that have explored the experiences of former members predominantly focus on how these individuals come to leave, and former members' experiences in terms of adjustment to life after involvement (Beckford 1978; Boeri 2002; Coates, 2009; Jacobs 1984, 1987, 1989; Rothbaum 1988; Wright 1984). These studies pay little attention to how former members describe their experiences of involvement in a cult, and what they view as the key factors in their commitment to the group. To gain a better understanding of what compels individuals to become committed to a cult or new religious movement, the current study is a qualitative investigation of the experiences of membership from the perspective of former members of such groups. The purpose of studying cult involvement from the perspective of former members is to contribute to our understanding of the competing disciplinary claims of "brainwashing" versus "normal" social processes.

Attempts have been made to explain how people become committed to, and remain in, cults. The brainwashing model of commitment is the most popular model outside of sociological circles (Snow and Machalek 1983). Those who support the brainwashing theories argue that involvement in cults stem from the experience of psychological practices that are designed to increase members' dependency on the group and that result in a loss of free will (Hassan 1988; Hassan 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003; Singer and Ofshe 1990; Singer 1979; West 1993; West and Martin 1994). The brainwashing model is built on the studies of indoctrination practiced by Chinese communists on American prisoners of war (POWs) (Wright 1991). In the past, brainwashing referred mainly to techniques for influencing POWs, political detainees, and hostages held by terrorists (West 1993). In the late 1980s former members of cults (e.g., Hassan) started to embrace this body of knowledge and claimed that during their group involvement they encountered many of the same indoctrination practices experienced by former POWs (Hassan 2000; McKibben, Lynn and Malinoski 2000). The term brainwashing is used as "a very strong metaphor for a very powerful kind of interpersonal influence" (Zablocki 1998:217). This interpersonal influence is viewed as a deliberate act that is more coercive than simple persuasion (Taylor 2004). Even though it is recognized that cult commitment and obedience cannot be explained entirely in terms of brainwashing, and that other factors such as conformity play an important role, it is argued that "deliberate cultic manipulations of personal convictions" plays an important role (Zablocki 2001:162). Extensive sociological literature evaluates the merits of brainwashing theories and most of it is critical (Richardson 2007; Snow and Machalek 1983). Sociologists who have studied cults, on a whole, have found no evidence of "brainwashing" (Hunt 2003; Richardson 2007; Snow and Machalek 1983). Some sociologists argue that the brainwashing model of commitment has gained currency among the public

as it provides a convenient account for those who are at a loss to explain why individuals are attracted to such groups (Snow and Machalek 1984; Richardson 2007). The model predominantly used by sociologists to understand commitment to NRMs is termed by Long and Hadden (1983) the “social drift” model. The “social drift” model suggests that people become committed to a group gradually, even inadvertently, through the influence of social relationships, especially during times of strain (Balch and Taylor 1977; Balch 1980; Lofland and Stark 1965; Richardson and Stewart 1977). By and large, sociologists view cult membership in terms of normal processes of socialization as the result of a shift in patterns of association (Lofland and Skonovd 1981a, 1981b; Long and Hadden 1983; Richardson 1989, 2007). The self-guiding aspects of conversion are stressed with commitment to cults viewed as motivated by the “direct rewards” of membership such as friendship and meaning (Dawson 2007; Howell 1997; Wright 1984). (For an in-depth discussion on the sociological approaches to conversion note Gooren 2007.)

THE RESEARCH METHODS

This study was part of a larger study into the experiences of former members of cults and NRMs. The method described below is that part of the study related to the experience of membership. A qualitative methodology was used to investigate what compels individuals to become committed to a cult or new religious movement from the perspective of former members. To this effect, seven self-identified adult former members of, what they perceived as, and termed, a cult, from four different groups, were recruited. Researchers who prefer the term cult appear to be discussing very different things to those who use the term NRM, and it is sometimes argued that they are, indeed, researching different groups (Langone 1993). However, a review of the literature indicates that those researchers who prefer to use the word cult, by and large, are studying the same groups as those who prefer the term NRM. In this light, even though the names of the cults discussed in this study cannot be disclosed, the groups are in line with, or in some instances the same as, those commonly mentioned in the study of both cults and NRMs.

Both purposive sampling and modified snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. In first instance, four participants were recruited through an Australian-based “cult aware” organization. Using the support of such an organization is recommended as it is difficult to identify former members who are not involved with such networks. Former members have shown to be reluctant to participate in studies and it is viewed that a fear of ridicule from those who lack understanding and a need for closure may motivate this reluctance (Gasde and Block 1998). With the aim of recruiting a diverse sample (i.e., former members who associate with “cult aware” organizations and those who do not), a modified snowball sampling strategy was also employed. Snowballing is used to expand a sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Crabtree and Miller 1992). It is modified in line with privacy legislation by ensuring that contacts are asked to express an interest in the research and consent to be contacted. The researcher asked those who consented to participate to pass on the invitation to anyone else they knew who fits the criteria, and a further three participants were recruited.

All research participants participated in individual in-depth face-to-face interviews conducted by the author. Open-ended questions were posed concentrating on the former member’s experiences, feelings and beliefs in relation to their involvement with a cult.

The questions were carefully phrased to evoke memories of the experiences the participants had lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon in question (Morrisey and Higgs 2006). Research questions in qualitative studies typically assume one or two broad opening questions, followed by a series of follow up prompts or sub-questions to frame and focus the interview (Creswell 1994; Miles and Huberman 1994; Morrisey and Higgs 2006). The interviews commenced with a broad opening question such as “What can you tell me about your experience of membership of the group [name of the group]?” A few (albeit minimal) sub-questions were posed to participants when required. Questions were not tailored around reward/benefit of membership and control but discussions on direct rewards of membership and control developed spontaneously.

The interviews continued until the topic was exhausted or saturated. Consequently, the duration of interviews varied from one participant to the other, but lasted for a minimum of one hour, but no longer than two hours. The number of questions posed also varied between interviews.

Considering the flexibility and variation with regard to the available routes of qualitative analysis (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Larkin et al. 2006), thematic data analysis was chosen for this study. The qualitative material in this study was managed and analyzed with the assistance of NVivo 7, a computer-based qualitative analysis package that was designed specifically for qualitative researchers (QSR International 2008). The ability to organize the transcripts made NVivo particularly useful for this project. In first instance, to ensure the data was approached with an openness to whatever meaning emerged, and to allow for the researcher to enter the world view of the participants as much as possible, “bracketing” was used (Hycner 1999). “Bracketing” is the practice of examining your presuppositions relevant to the research matter and making them explicit (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Hycner 1999). The interviews were recorded and transcribed, and each interview tape was listened to a number of times to ensure a good understanding of the context of the themes that were later identified (Hycner, 1999). Units of meaning relevant to the research question were delineated (i.e., the “nodes” relevant to the research question were identified). Units of relevant meaning were clustered together to form themes. Themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations were noted.

As a qualitative study, the study is limited in its ability to be generalized (Morrisey and Higgs 2006). Therefore, it is important to note that those interviewed are not necessarily representative of the whole population of former members of cults. Furthermore, limitations of working with samples derived from “cult-aware” networks need to be considered. For example, the sample may be tilted toward those who found the experience harmful (as those who did not find the experience harmful may not contact support networks) (Langone 1993; McKibben et al. 2000). However, some participants did not establish contact with the support network out of their own need for support, but as the result of connections established by their family while they were still in the group. It is also possible that those who have had no support from other former members (often through such networks) may over-emphasize the positives of their experience out of embarrassment of having become involved with a cult (Langone 1993). Modified snowball sampling was also used with the hope of attracting some participants who have no association with “cult-aware” networks, and two participants were recruited who appeared to have had little or no involvement with such networks.

In addition, the problems of relying on the retrospective accounts of former members should also be noted as such accounts are interpretive and influenced by the respondents’ present situation (Robbins 1988:15).

THE GROUPS AND PARTICIPANTS

Seven participants were recruited from four different groups; two of which are “personal development” type groups and two that are religious Christian types groups. The terms cult and NRM are used for group that range from religious “doomsday cults” to group that offer means of developing human potential (Hunt 2003). Despite some obvious differences, there are many commonalities between different groups. To this effect, Wallis ([1984] 2007) proposed a classification of NRMs where he distinguished three ideal types: world-rejecting, world-affirming, and world-accommodation groups (Aldridge 2007:50). The groups referred to in this study, appear to, by and large, fit best within Wallis’ ([1984] 2007) criteria for “world-rejecting” groups. “World-rejecting” groups believe to be the only ones holding the “truth”; standards of conduct are imposed on the followers in the name of a personal deity; human beings are seen as sinful; and obedience to the leadership and commitment to the cause is expected (Aldridge 2007; Wallis [1984] 2007). Even though two of the groups referred to in this study could be classified as “personal development” type groups; and two as religious groups founded in Christianity; they appear to share Wallis’ characteristics of “world-rejecting” groups.

Laura joined a religious group founded in Christianity group at the age of 18, shortly after completing high school. She was searching for alternative ideas and wanted “more” from life than seemed available “at home.” She moved into one of the group’s communes where she met her future husband, Thomas. During membership, Laura and Thomas moved from Europe, to Australia and then to India, where they worked as missionaries and set up a new group center. Twenty-two years ago, after 14 years of involvement Laura left the center in India to return to Australia, with Thomas, their five children and pregnant with their sixth child.

Thomas joined the same group as Laura (a religious group founded in Christianity) at the age of 23 while travelling in Europe on a search for “meaning.” Within hours of meeting the group, he moved into the commune and within a week handed over his savings and cashed in his return ticket to Australia. Within a year of involvement, he was encouraged to start a friendship with, and in turn, marry Laura, his wife. After working in middle leadership in Europe and then Australia, Thomas and Laura moved to India as missionaries. Three years later all leadership was demoted and, without being given a clear reason, they were eventually asked to leave. Twenty-two years ago, after 11 years of membership, Thomas, together with his wife and children, moved back to Australia.

Catheline joined a self development and spiritual healing group at the age of 21 after attending a weekend workshop on “how to spiritually evolve and learn about healing.” She dropped out of university to obtain full-time employment to pay for more courses. A weekend workshop was followed by a five-day course, a five-day course by a ten-day course, and eventually a one-year course. Two years ago, after eight years of involvement she was “kicked out” by the leader for “not being good enough.” Over night she lost the group, her partner who was a fellow member with whom she lived, and her home.

Alice joined the same group as Catheline (a self development and spiritual healing group) at the age of 38 and remained for two years. Following the leader’s request, she involved her three children and husband. When her husband did not continue his involvement after one year, Alice was faced with decisions around following her husband or the leader. She chose her husband, and her group involvement gradually came to an end.

Daniel joined what initially seemed to be a “normal” Pentecostal church, and left 7 years ago after 13 years of involvement. He joined this group to be closer to his wife and children as they

had joined the group 13 years prior. When he left following a period of doubt, his wife and two out of his three children remained, and are currently still committed members of the group. After leaving the group his marriage gradually fell apart, and ended two years ago. His daughter has broken off all contact with her father.

Hillary joined the same group as Daniel, which she also perceived as a “normal” Pentecostal church. She joined with her husband and their three young children. Within a couple of years of joining, Hillary and her husband were promoted to middle leadership roles, and her eldest daughter married into the leadership. Seven years ago, after 15 years of membership, Hillary was also ex-communicated for not being, what they termed “submissive enough.” When leaving the group, she lost her husband, her son, one of her daughters, and her grandchildren. Hillary dedicates her time to increasing awareness of the “dangers” of such groups.

Adam is the only representative of a self-development/drama group. At the age of 19 Adam dropped out of university and commenced acting classes with the hope of starting a career in theater. Years later a group was formed by his teacher and her partner that Adam, inadvertently, joined. At the request of the group Adam stopped pursuing a career in theater and started to work for the group in the role of “recruiter.” Twenty-two years ago, after seven years of involvement Adam left the group, and as a result, had to terminate his relationship with a fellow member. Since leaving Adam’s career in theater has flourished.

All participants had some level of formal tertiary training before joining, ranging from trade certificates (Thomas, Daniel) to teaching (Hillary) and nursing (Alice) qualifications to first year university studies (Adam, Catheline). None of the participants had accessed mental health services or had been diagnosed with a mental health problem prior to joining; and their reasons for joining did not appear to be related to a lack of family support (for more information, see Coates 2010).

In regards to exit, participants had left the various groups between two and 22 years prior, with some leaving voluntarily, while others were expelled. Daniel, Laura, Adam, and Alice left voluntarily. Catheline, Thomas, and Hillary were “kicked out.” Even though Thomas and Laura, as a married couple, left at the same time under the same circumstances, their perception varied. When they announced their desire to take a break from the group, they were “kicked out.” Laura, who wanted to leave and considered “taking a break” as a first step toward leaving, feels that she left voluntarily. On the other hand, Thomas feels he was “kicked out.”

In line with the literature, the main reason of voluntary exit identified was disillusionment (Galanter 1989; Langone 1993; Melton 1992; Robbins 1988; Singer 1979; Wright 1984). For example, Adam became disillusioned with group life and left after he realized that “what was most important to . . . [the leader] was not people’s happiness but just the number of people you have coming and the amount of money.” Those who were “kicked out” (Catheline, Hillary and Thomas) appeared not to understand why they had been “kicked out”; and initially hoped that they would be allowed to return. The literature suggests that expulsion results when members are perceived as not totally loyal or opposed to new directions (Robbins 1988).

DIRECT REWARDS OF MEMBERSHIP VERSUS DEPENDENCY-INDUCING PRACTICES

Explanations of how people become committed to, and remain in, cults usually fall within one of two theories: the brainwashing theories or “social drift” theories. When exploring their

involvement and commitment to the group, the participants' explanations were compatible with both "social drift" and "brainwashing theories." The majority of participants talked about both the "direct rewards of membership" and described "dependency inducing practices" that they experienced during membership.

Staying Because of Direct Rewards

I kept thinking about [the group] all the time. Thinking I want that feeling again. I felt like, almost like a purity thing; like I'm getting dirty again being back in the normal world. (Catheline)

Cults provide many kinds of "direct rewards" to their members. Positive incentives include success in careers, a community of friends, self-development, religious experience, personal identity, heightened self esteem, knowledge that provides a sense of control over one's life, improvement in health and happiness and a decrease in alcohol and drug use upon joining (Aldridge 2007; Dawson 2007; Galanter et al. 1980; Galanter et al. 1979; Galanter 1980, 1983, 1989; Levine 1989; Ross 1983; Rothbaum 1988; Weiss and Mendoza 1990).

The main "direct rewards" mentioned by participants include friendships and affection, a sense of control over one's life, and the "exciting times" that they experienced as a member. In addition, Catheline reported an increase in self confidence and Alice described improved health and an increase in determination and energy.

Friendships made during membership are considered a fundamental aspect of remaining in the group (Boeri 2002; Dawson 2007; Lofland and Skonovd 1981b; Long and Hadden 1983; Wright 1984). A shift in social relationships was critical in Adam, Catheline, Thomas, and Laura their decision to remain. Both the companionship they experienced, and the romantic relationships they became involved in with fellow members, contributed to their involvement. As described by Catheline: "I've got this amazing group of friends, they would do anything for me and I would do anything for them. And that was kind of exciting." Similarly, Laura explained: "They were just such nice young people full of idealism . . . they were like an instant family and saw all of this potential in me that my family didn't see. I was made to feel so special . . . they were all so nice and gave me a fuzzy feeling."

The sense of control and certainty that the group provided was highlighted by Catheline, Thomas, Alice, and Adam as a reason they became committed group members. A number of researchers have found that cults offer their followers answers to many of life's questions and outline a clear "meaning of life" (Barker 2006; Singer 1979). According to Levine (1989) these "Answers" enable imagined and real distress to dissipate (103).

The excitement and intensity of cult involvement was identified by Adam, Catheline, Laura, and Thomas as a main reason they became committed members. As explained by Laura: "It was an exciting time, there were a lot of young people travelling through that were on a quest, on a search for something meaningful. It was exciting to be part of this movement that was happening." Some researchers have found that some members join a group to replace their relatively mundane world with a dynamic exciting environment (Lofland and Skonovd 1981b).

As shown previously, research into the experiences of current members of cults, by and large, has concluded that current members are well-adjusted. Alice, Adam, Catheline, and Thomas made no reference to psychological difficulties experienced during membership. Daniel, Hillary, and Laura, however, described experiencing psychological distress during membership.

Staying Because of an Induced Dependency

When exploring their experiences of membership all participants discussed aspects of their environment that they, in retrospect, perceive as controlling. All participants perceive this control as having significantly increased their levels of dependency on the group and, in turn, this contributed to the length of their involvement. The brainwashing theories assert that dependency is deliberately created by obtaining substantial control over an individual's time and thought content. This is done by gaining control over major elements of the person's social and physical environment and systematically creating a sense of powerlessness in the person (Hassan 2000; Singer and Ofshe 1990). According to this model, dependency increasing techniques include limiting personal relationships, devaluing reasoning, guilt manipulation, forced confessions, food deprivation, self-denigration, powerful group pressures, and information control (Hassan 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 1979; Singer and Ofshe 1990). A few participants refer to the controlled environment they described as "brainwashing"; however, the majority simply described their experiences, both positive and negative without labeling them.

An analysis of the "controlled environment" experienced by participants highlights four main areas of control: emotional/psychological control, behavior control, thought control, and relationship control. This model of control is somewhat in line with a model of control developed by Hassan (2000), which focuses on behavior, information, thought, and emotional control.

Emotional and Psychological Control

[The leaders] are masters at harassment and mental cruelty, and I cannot tell you how extreme these men are and so besotted with power that they will do anything to beat people into utter submission . . . what [the leader] does in his insanity, he is a psychopath insane at destroying people, he tramples right over any boundary. (Hillary)

Participants described that emotional and psychological control was achieved through a number of practices of which the most significant ones included instilling guilt and fear, the use of "counseling" and "confessions," inconsistent behavior, the exacerbation of a "fear of failure" and "bottle breaking."

"Bottle breaking" was a term used by one of the participants to describe the need of cult members to be "destroyed" before the "authentic" self can be uncovered. "Bottle breaking" was explained as the practice of "breaking you down and reforming you so that you can accept new truths" (Thomas). Most participants described how "bottle breaking" was an "accepted" practice in their group. Adam explained: "[The leader] would decide that this person needs to be stripped down, or destroyed. And he would do that." Similarly, Hillary explained that the leaders had increased the level of "discipline" and continued to "punish" her because they wanted her to "come to an end of herself." This "destroying" of members was achieved through a number of practices used to "destabilize" participants that, in turn, increased their dependency on the group. "Destabilization practices" included public criticism and humiliation, scapegoating, the use of reward and punishment and violence. In sum all participants explained that destabilization was achieved through "bullying."

Being publicly criticized and humiliated was a main "destabilization practice" described by all participants. All participants felt, like Adam, that "[This group] makes you think there is

something wrong with you.” Catheline described her experience as follows: “the leaders were putting you down the whole time; screaming at you; the swearing and the humiliation. Like, take off all your clothes, stand in front of the group, ‘everyone tell her what’s wrong with her’; with that one person.” Some researchers argue that the use of criticism and humiliation serve to undermine a member’s self-esteem and, in turn, increase dependency on the group (Langone 2005; Whitsett and Kent 2003). Participants, like Thomas and Laura, described how this continuous criticism led to becoming “a basket case” (Thomas) and having “a nervous breakdown” (Laura). Closely related to being humiliated is being scapegoated. This was the experience of both Catheline and Hillary. Catheline described her experiences as follows: “things started to get really bad for me; there was always someone who it was going bad for [The leader] always had someone on the out so it would keep the other people in. If life is going really bad for someone, they can be used as an example. This is why you should stay and do more courses otherwise you’ll end up like her, and I became that her.” Researchers have identified that scapegoating is often reported by former members (Rothbaum 1988), however, Catheline’s theory about scapegoating has not been reported by other researchers but it is consonant with the other manipulations described.

The use of rewards and punishment was also used to destabilize participants. Hillary, Adam, Laura, and Thomas reported being “punished” by having privileges being taken away, in particular leadership roles and responsibilities. Violence, including to a lesser extent physical violence, was also used to destabilize members in the group Alice and Catheline left. For example, in this group “they hung a noose from the ceiling and said to [one of the girls] ‘go on, you’re making such a big fuss about things, hang yourself right here and now in front of us all, you just do it’ ” (Alice). In addition, both women explained how the leader would encourage couples to “beat each other up.”

Guilt and fear were described by participants as important features of membership, which is argued to be used to emotionally control members (Hassan 2000:45). In particular, Hassan (2000) explains that indoctrinating members with irrational fears about ever leaving the group or questioning the leader’s authority is a common feature of cults. Similarly, Dawson (2007) explains that fears that result from theological teachings could function as coercively on some individuals as actual physical restraints and threats. In relation to guilt, Thomas described how the group leaders made him feel guilty for feeling human. When he was told to share his wife sexually with other men, his feelings of anger, jealousy, and distress were portrayed as “selfish.” Fears of a decrease in health and “an apocalyptic disaster” were described by Alice. She explained that the leader would use the illness Alice had been struggling with to ensure her continuous commitment. As explained by Alice: “[The leader] used to say to me, ‘unless you go through with all this stuff and keep going you’re going to stay sick; you’re going to be unwell.’ ” In addition, Alice explained how the leader had predicted an apocalyptic disaster and how she had assured members that “as the chosen ones” they would be saved.

“Counseling” and “confession” was described by all participants as another feature of their group involvement. The use of “counseling” and “confessions” have been identified by a number of researchers as a common practice in cults (Hassan 2000; Langone 2005; Lofland 1977). Daniel and Alice described individual “therapy.” Hillary and Laura had to do homework and write confessions. Catheline described the main focus of therapy as talking about “issues” with other members, and “getting your true emotions out” through role plays and “screaming.” Laura and Thomas participated in something akin to “group therapy”; and Adam explained that

hypnosis was the “counseling” method used in his group. All participants viewed the use of “counseling” and “confession” as a method of control used by the group and its leader to increase members’ dependency on the group. As explained by Daniel: “They were counseling me about being raped by these four guys . . . but they address it as sin, my sin that I need to repent on. And lay it down . . . just like that . . . [knowing that I had been raped] became a string they could pull. Anyone they talked to, counselled, they’d keep all the records. And that was a string they could pull. They had no qualifications at all.”

Inconsistent behavior by the leaders was also highlighted by participants. Laura, Adam, and Catheline explained how inconsistencies caused confusion and contributed to feelings of self-doubt. Both Catheline and Laura described this inconsistency in terms of “they played games” and “they played with your mind.” Adam stressed the inconsistent use of praise and criticism. He explained “There are moments that you are praised and there are other moments that you are totally destroyed . . . there’s such illogic in the way you are being treated in these groups that you don’t know where you are anymore.” Closely related to inconsistent behavior are the deliberate attempts of disorientating group members described as common practice in Catheline’s group. For example, Catheline described how she and fellow group members were put on a bus with blanked out windows; the bus drove all night with no one knowing where they were going. No permission was given for toilet breaks, nor was any food or water provided. The leaders wore dark sunglasses and would not respond, or even acknowledge, any requests. This, similar to inconsistent behavior led to a sense of disorientation.

The exacerbation of fears of failure was also described by participants as a method of control. Those who leave cults are often stigmatized by the group and leaving is viewed as the “ultimate failure” (Aldridge 2007). The threat of risking this failure and losing all the positive rewards of membership appear to be very strong, making the decision to stay attractive. Participants described that this fear of failure was intensified by continuously being told that they were “the chosen ones,” and the responsibility this brought.

Behavior Control

[The leader] has written 10 volumes of books on rules; rules on how you wash the dishes, on how many pieces of toilet paper you’re allowed to use, how you raise your kids, how you spank your kids, what you say to your partner in bed, how to make love, how to do everything. So because there are all these rules, they can also pick you up on any of that. (Laura)

All participants described how, in various degrees, their behaviors were controlled during membership. The regulation of finances, diet, clothing, consumption of alcohol and drugs and social demeanour have been observed by a number of researchers as common feature of cults (Levine 1989; Lofland 1977). Laura, Alice, and Catheline described how their days were organized from morning to night. As explained by Catheline “It entails like a whole daily routine, regime she called it, the regime. A 10 km run, you had to drink 2 litres of juice, you had to meditate to certain tapes that she gave you and then you had assignments to do, reading certain books and fundraising money.” In addition, the regulation of sleep and diet, in particular the use of “sleep and food deprivation” was a feature of the group Alice and Catheline left. Catheline explained: “Sometimes they would just stop feeding you for a day. One day they said ‘you’re all so selfish and lazy, we’re not going to feed you today.’” Similarly, Catheline explained

“During the week, maybe I had about 10 hours sleep for the whole week. . . . By the end of the week I thought I was seeing faces in the trees and stuff. It’s probably sleep deprivation.”

Thought Control

Anytime you would stop to think about whether you were doing the right thing, there was someone there. There was a buddy system, someone who was always with you. You would never go out alone, and you willingly subject to this because they told you the devil would come and take you away from the truth. (Thomas)

Participants explained how their thoughts were “controlled” by discouraging critical reflection and encouraging members to adopt the group’s doctrine. Participants described being kept occupied with information and activities during membership. Keeping group members busy is argued to have the purpose of denying them the opportunity to counter-argue or to discourage personal thought and reflections (Lalich and Tobias 2006). To limit critical reflection some participants described how their group used “a buddy system” (Thomas and Laura), others described how talking among members was discouraged (Alice). Similarly, critical thinking skills were disapproved of. Alice’s words described the experience of most participants “We were told that logic was a bad thing and that we should listen to our emotions and our feelings. This whole sense of following your intuition and letting your emotions guide you rather than intellect; that keeps you in the system. You then stop questioning what happens” (Alice). Disapproval of critical thinking skills has also been noted by previous researchers (Dawson 2007; Singer 2003; Singer and Ofshe 1990).

All participants explained how they were encouraged to internalize the group’s doctrine as “Truth.” Putting new members through a program of education in group beliefs and training in group practices is a practice commonly observed in cults (Melton 1992). In the same way, participants were either put through training programs to be “indoctrinated with the group’s beliefs” (Thomas) or told to meditate to certain tapes, read certain books and complete assignments.

Relationship Control

He would hit me and stuff like that but I felt like I deserved it. . . . He was told to do that and I didn’t know he was told to do that. So he’d come home and be really short with me suddenly for no reason. In the morning he’d be really nice. He’d had a phone call during the day, which I didn’t know about, from someone in the group saying “Catheline’s energy . . . I had a dream about her and her energy is doing this so therefore you must do that” . . . [The leader] was really the third person in the relationship; because whatever happened you had to tell her. (Catheline)

Participants described a number of ways their relationships were controlled during membership, including the regulation of married and sexual life, the loss of those friends who are not members, and the breakup of relationships when leaving. A number of other researchers have also identified the control of relationships as a feature of cult environments (Goldberg 2003; Lofland 1977; Singer 1979; Whitsett and Kent 2003).

Maintaining contact with non-members was strongly disapproved. Participants explained how they had been discouraged from maintaining contact with family or friends, and how the outside world, including their family, had been “demonized” by the group leaders. As explained by

Catheline: "I couldn't talk to my family, because my family was blamed a lot. 'It's actually your family, they are all rubbish'. And I wasn't allowed to go to my sister's wedding and stuff like that. So I stopped calling my family."

Regulation of married and sexual life was reported by all participants. For example, in the case of Thomas and Laura, in first instance their marriage had been encouraged by the leaders. In time, sexual promiscuity was introduced as an innovative way of "recruiting" new members. This escalated into the introduction of open marriages, which in time led to the destruction of previous marriages. As explained by Thomas: "We saw that it started to destroy marriages because a sexual bond creates a feeling of love, it works both ways, love leads to sex and sex creates feelings of love, of oneness and it was really playing with fire. So now you have mixed children marriages, no-one knew whose parents were whose. It got really confusing." Similarly, Hillary described the "control" her marriage underwent as follows: "[The leader] makes [those men who go into leadership] at some stage chose allegiance to him and love for him above their commitment and their love for their wife. If those men love and cherish and adore their wife they have that unique and secure relationship then [the leader] doesn't have the ultimate control over the men."

All participants, like Catheline, described the leader as "the third person in the relationship."

She would always play with relationships. That became really destructive. Particularly with people who were married before they went there. She would pull apart marriages and people with children suddenly be without one of the parents. It was like a real game for her. . . . [The leader] had this thing with relationships where one was always elevated and the other one always put down. I became the one put down and [my partner] was elevated. (Catheline)

Goldberg (2003) argues that leaders often control the member's married and sexual life to guarantee that the member does not form a genuine relationship with other members. In some groups promiscuity is encouraged; in others, celibacy is required. In addition, she argues that in some groups, leaders match members for marriage; or, at least, they are consulted before marriage between members is permitted. Singer (1979) argues that this restriction of sexual behavior is geared toward increasing followers' commitment to the goals of the group and its powerful leader.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It appears that the majority of participants became committed members of their group because of both the "direct rewards" of membership (i.e., the friendships and meaning membership provided) and as the result of "levels of control" or "dependency inducing practices" used in the group. Therefore these findings appear in line with both aspects of the brainwashing theories and sociological theories. Whether these "dependency inducing practices" have been created "deliberately" to enhance control over members or are the result of predictable group dynamics remains unclear. Brainwashing theories depict the leader as consciously "manipulative" and "exploitative" rather than sharing in the delusion from a point of power. Despite apparent support for practices that are somewhat in line with "brainwashing," it is unclear whether or not these practices have been intentionally designed to control members. For example, in relation to the intense interaction of members and the subsequent conforming to group rules and

behaviors, sociologists view this as within the realm of “normal” group dynamic or socialization processes (Dawson 2007; Melton 1992). On the other hand, those who support brainwashing theories argue that organized group activities are *deceptively* used to enhance the effect of group dynamics in order to induce commitment (Hassan 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003). Participants shed little light on whether they viewed their experiences of conforming to group rules and behaviors as within the light of “normal” group dynamics, or the result of “brainwashing.” During the interview they used terminology consistent with both “normal group dynamics” and “brainwashing techniques.” For instance, Laura explained her involvement in controversial sexual practices to recruit new members along the lines of “normal” group dynamics and highlighted the role of peer pressure: “to be on the edge of what was happening you’d be following all this stuff . . . your spirituality, your loyalty, your commitment was proven by following these sorts of things.” She made it clear that she was never “coerced” into participating in these activities but was influenced by her desire to be “on the edge of what was happening.” References to “doing what the group does” to “feel part of a group” were common. This highlights the role of “normal” group dynamics. At the same time, as outlined previously, “techniques to control members” were described by all participants.

Another main dichotomy identified in the literature is the view that anyone can be “brainwashed” versus the view of human beings as active and meaning seeking entities that are participants by their own volition. In other words, some view members of a group as “brainwashed” (i.e., “robots”), others as “free.” Participants neither viewed themselves as “robots,” nor did they feel they had “free choice.” As explained by Alice: “Our leader always made out that it was your choice to be there so whenever anyone was kind of questioning anything she’d say ‘it’s your choice, just go if you don’t like it’. You just couldn’t go. You’re just trapped there. . . . You feel like you’re stuck there.” To allow for the view that “brainwashing” does not make “robots” or eliminates the capacity to make decisions “brainwashing” can be described on a continuum of influence (Langone 2005).

Participants described practices that could be easily interpreted by the researcher as in line with either sociological or brainwashing theories, depending on the researcher’s personal stance or discipline. This is contrary to the view that the differences observed by researchers is the result of a difference in the experiences of the research participants (Lofland and Skonovd 1981b). For example, participants described a gradual increase in the intensity of their involvement, and how small commitments progressively turned into bigger commitments. Both sociologists and those who support the brainwashing theories view commitment to a cult as a gradual process. Those who support the brainwashing theories view this gradual process as a “deliberate,” “deceptive” technique (Lalich and Tobias 2006; Langone 2005). On the other hand, sociologists, who have shown that members are aware of this gradual increase in commitment, view this as within “normal” socialization processes (Balch 1980; Lofland and Skonovd 1981a). In addition, organized activities were sometimes described as having the purpose of “breaking down any barriers between each other” (Thomas). Whether participants’ experiences were in line with (or were viewed by the participants as in line with) “brainwashing” or “group dynamics” was not always clear. Furthermore the majority of participants explained how their perception had shifted from in line with brainwashing theories to being in line with sociological theories. Some even displayed shifts in perception during the interview, described as “two sides of the same coin” (Catheline).

The findings of this study are in line with both aspects of the brainwashing theories and sociological theories (i.e., “normal” group dynamics). It is important to consider that the concept of

“brainwashing” may be inadequate as “brainwashing techniques” may not be different from the common methods used in social influence. A number of studies have consistently demonstrated the power of social influence and its ability to induce conformity and obedience (Zablocki 2001; Zimbardo 2002). Perhaps “brainwashing” could be viewed within a broader psychological perspective and the question of how “brainwashing” techniques are different from techniques of persuasion seen in more conventional organizations should be posed. As noted by Wright (1991) brainwashing allegations are rarely made against conventional organizations displaying similar traits such as monasteries or the military. In addition, some researchers draw a comparison between cults and “zealous self help” programs (such as Alcoholics Anonymous) (Galanter 1990) and certain personal development programs (Samways 2006).

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