



Life inside a deviant “religious” group: Conformity and commitment as ensured through ‘brainwashing’ or as the result of normal processes of socialisation

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Abstract

The ‘dependency inducing practices’, sometimes called ‘brainwashing’, that are commonly alleged to occur in deviant “religious” groups such as a cult movements or new religious movements are not well understood and have promoted considerable debate. There is a general agreement that many of these groups are controlled environments in which conformity to behavioural, emotive, cognitive and social expectations as determined by leadership is expected and enforced; however, whether conformity is the result of normal processes of socialisation or deviant practices such as brainwashing that cause harm continues to be disputed. To gain an increased understanding of the conformity and commitment inducing practices that occur in ‘cult movements’, the accounts of group life of 23 former members of 11 different groups were analysed. A conceptualisation of ‘brainwashing’ as on a continuum of social influence is proposed, and some legal implications are discussed.

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Thousands of New Religious Movements (NRM) or ‘cult movements’ exist in Western society (Barker, 1999; Dawson, 2007b; Possamai, 2009; Smith, 1959). While there is some dispute over the significance of NRMs, the “cult” information service INFORM has over 2600 different groups on its records, the majority of which can be called NRMs (Barker, 1999; INFORM). NRMs are commonly described as ‘deviant’ groups that have novel beliefs and

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practices from those of their ‘host’ culture (Bainbridge, 1997; Balch and Taylor, 1977; Hampshire and Beckford, 1983; Lofland and Stark, 1965; Robbins and Anthony, 1982; Wright and Piper, 1986). Many scholars describe NRMs or “cult movements” as controlled environments or ‘high demand’ organisations that demand conformity to beliefs, values and behaviours that conflict with those of the dominant culture (Langone, 1993; Richardson, 1999). While NRMs or ‘cult movements’ all propose answers to at least some of the questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions (Barker, 1999), many of these groups are not religious in the traditional sense and could also be described as quasi-religious, spiritual, political, scientific, alien-oriented, or psychotherapeutic (Barker, 1997, 2004; Hunt, 2003).

While the more neutral term NRM is preferred by most scholars (Barker, 1984, 1999; Olson, 2006; Possamai, 2009), including the author, the more pejorative term “cult” is sometimes used in reference to the same groups. Both these terms have attracted considerable definitional vagueness, and there is no standard definition or agreed-upon criteria that identifies or describes these groups (Barker, 1999; Robbins and Bromley, 1993). While these groups are all considered ‘deviant’ groups that have novel beliefs and practices from those of their ‘host’ culture, the degree to which these groups are ‘deviant’ from mainstream society varies. Many social scientists have observed differences in what they call the degree of ‘continuity/discontinuity’ between NRMs and the dominant culture; and to represent these variations, a great number of different typologies of NRMs have been created (Beckford, 1985; Bird, 1979; Dawson, 1997; Ellwood and Partin, 1988; Lofland and Richardson, 1984; Nelson, 1986; Robbins, 1988; Stark and Bainbridge, 1985; Tipton, 1982; Wallis, 1984–2007). What most of these typologies have in common is that they all highlight that the relationship between a NRMs and mainstream society is complex. These typologies indicate that most NRMs combine both conformity as well as resistance to mainstream culture, and often reject some elements of the mainstream culture while adopting others (Dawson, 1997; Tipton, 1982).

The most widely cited typology, developed by Wallis (1984–2007), distinguishes between NRMs according to their orientation to mainstream culture, and differentiates groups based on whether they maintain adherents’ positions in conventional society or isolate and encapsulate their members. Wallis labelled those NRMs that isolate their members and are most deviant from mainstream society as ‘world-rejecting’ NRMs. He describes ‘world-rejecting’ NRMs as groups that believe to be the only ones holding the ‘truth’, where standards of conduct are imposed on the followers in the name of a personal deity, where human beings are seen as sinful, and where obedience to the leadership and commitment to the cause is expected (Aldridge, 2007; Wallis, 1984–2007).

With its tendency to ‘encapsulate’ its members and reject mainstream society, what Wallis describes as world-rejecting NRMs resembles what some others have preferred to label “cults” (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Langone, 1993). While there is not one commonly accepted definition of the word “cult” most definitions encompass the following characteristics: a group that is critical of or rejects mainstream culture; perceives itself, its leaders and members as elitist and superior; expects conformity to the group’s unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices as dictated by leadership; and conformity or commitment is increased or maintained through various psychological techniques and practices (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993, 2005; Singer, 2003) (for a much used definition of cults see Langone, 1993, p. 5).

Despite significant similarities between the term NRM, in particular world-rejecting NRM, and “cult”, the different terms imply different underlying assumptions. The use of the term “cult” implies an assumption that group membership results from having been brainwashed and

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