RESEARCH NOTE

RECONSTRUCTING THE "CULT" EXPERIENCE:
Post-Involvement Attitudes as a Function of Mode of Exit and Post-Involvement Socialization[1]

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The principal evidence for the cult stereotype has been derived from the testimony of deprogrammed former members. Although scholars of new religious movements have frequently observed that deprogrammees are not neutral witnesses, systematic empirical work in this area has been scant. The present paper is a report of a survey of 154 former members of controversial religious movements. The results of this research replicate the conclusions of Trudy Solomon's study, i.e., that the tendency of ex-members to hold negative, cult-stereotypical attitudes toward their former groups is highly correlated with the extent of their exposure to the socializing influences of the anti-cult movement.

In the controversy over "cults," the general public has overwhelmingly accepted the brainwashing/mind control ideology which has been propagated by "anti-cult" groups opposed to alternative religious movements. The reasons for this largely uncritical acceptance include our society's secular world view and our tendency to utilize such values as economic success as criteria for determining what is reasonable and logical. From this perspective, a more than nominal religiosity which seems to interfere with, or to supplant, more instrumental goals and values is automatically suspect as not quite "rational." This cultural bias, combined with the mass media's penchant for sensationalism, has enabled "anti-cultists" to enlist this powerful ally in their efforts to shape public opinion. The chief support for the notion of "cultic brainwashing" has been the negative testimony of (usually deprogrammed) former members of controversial religious groups. Accounts by former

members who have "actually been there" have a force of appeal which is difficult to contest. Particularly when the anti-cult movement is able to parade before the media ex-member after ex-member willing to recount the same story of manipulation and exploitation, the general public cannot help but to be impressed, both by the sheer volume of testimony and by how congruent this testimony is with anti-cult ideology. It would probably not be going too far to say that the negative testimony of deprogrammed ex-members is the epistemological foundation—the very bedrock—on which the edifice of anti-cultism rests. For this reason, any critical analysis of anti-cult ideology must necessarily come to grips with such testimony. Thus far, the principal argument which has been advanced to explain this phenomenon is that "successfully" deprogrammed apostates possess external and internal motivation to recount stereotyped atrocity tales in order to "absolve families (and themselves) of any responsibility for their actions" (Shupe and Bromley, 1981:201). While this argument has been accepted by a substantial number of social scientists, up to this point systematic empirical support for this counterposition has been minimal.

Although there have been a number of well-designed ex-member studies, only Trudy Solomon's (1981) research has systematically contrasted the attitudes of deprogrammees with non-deprogrammees. Solomon's survey of one hundred former Unificationists in 1978 (generated entirely through anti-cult contacts) demonstrated that the attitudes of ex-members tended to "vary as a function of method of exit and degree of contact with the anti-cult movement" (Solomon, 1981:287). What follows is a report of a research project which was designed to replicate as closely as possible the aspect of Solomon's study which dealt with post-involvement attitudes. The hypothesis, in other words, was that deprogrammed former members would be more likely to describe their involvement in terms of negative categories drawn from anti-cult ideology than would voluntary defectors.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

The findings presented here are based on a mail survey which was conducted during the year 1984. The subjects were 154 former members of controversial religious groups. The initial sample was obtained by soliciting names of former members from the Unification Church and individuals known by the author. Snowball sampling techniques were used to obtain additional resondents. The final sample included 42 (26%) former Unificationists, 36 (23%) former members of 3HO, 30 (20%) former members of ISKCON, 24 (16%) former followers of The Way, 12 (8%) former members of the Divine Light Mission, 2 (1%) ex-Scientologists, and 8 (5%) former members of miscellaneous groups. Anti-cult groups originally provided a list of 72 former members, 52 of whom (72%) eventually responded (plus 37 snowballs). I was personally acquainted, directly or indirectly, with 25 ex-members, 17 of whom (68%) eventually responded (plus 4 snowballs). Ten of the 16 former Unificationists (62%) with whom the Unification Church put me in contact eventually responded. The return rate for lists of former members provided by ISKCON and The Way International is more difficult to estimate precisely, because of partial and out of date addresses on those lists. There was no apparent bias on the lists

provided by either the anti-cult movement or groups themselves. Some inferential evidence on this point can be gleaned from comparisons among the subsample. For example 9 of the 44 (21%) of the ex-members which the new religions put me in touch with were coercively deprogrammed, while 23 out of the 89 (26%) of the former members which the anti-cult groups put me in touch with were coercively deprogrammed. More importantly, the patterns of their responses relative to their mode of exit were also similar.

Of the 154 respondents, 69 (45%) were females and 85 (55%) were males. The median age at which subjects had joined their respective movements was 21, with a broad range of 14 to 55. The average length of involvement was 4¼ years, with another fairly broad range of several weeks to 13 years. It had been an average of slightly less than 5 years since leaving at the time they filled out the questionnaire, with a range of 6 months to 15 years. Consistent with previous studies of ex-members (e.g., Solomon, 1981; Wright, 1984), most respondents were caucasian (all but 3 Blacks). There were also, again consistent with previous research in this area, a disproportionate number of subjects from Jewish and Catholic backgrounds: 17 (18%) Jewish, 53 (34%) Catholic, 60 (39%) Protestant, and 11 (7%) with no previous religious affiliation (plus 3 non-respondents). At the time they joined, 6 (4%) of the respondents had some kind of advanced degree, 40 (26%) had completed college, 63 (41%) individuals had at least some college, 35 (23%) had completed high school, and 10 (6%) had not completed high school. The majority of respondents (89 or 58%) left voluntarily and were exposed to no exit counseling. Thirty-six (23%) were coercively deprogrammed and 29 (19%) experienced some form of voluntary (in the sense of not being physically kidnapped) exit counseling.

FINDINGS

Solomon's research posited a spectrum of eight subgroups across which post-involvement attitudes would vary (1981:281). However, the practice of deprogramming has changed considerably over the seven-year period between the time Solomon conducted her research and the time the present research was conducted. During the years 1977 and 1978, it was possible to distinguish three distinct "treatments" to which ex-members could be subjected: deprogramming (of the original "snatch" type), rehabilitation (in "half-way house" settings), and therapy. From the various combinations of these three types of possible interventions, Solomon was able to construct eight distinct "treatment groups."

By the mid 1980's, however, the ground rules had changed considerably. Alongside the various styles of coercive deprogramming, which can vary considerably in their degree of physical force, current deprogramming practice includes at least two varieties—overt and covert (Crawford, 1984:7)—of non-coercive "exit counseling" (efforts aimed at encouraging defection which do not involve kidnapping). Also, in addition to rehabilitation at various live-in facilities, there now exist such options as re-entry counseling (counseling which is sought out only after defection) and group counseling with other ex-members. Finally, the term "therapy" can refer either to "therapy" by anti-cult counselors or therapy under the guidance of professionals not

associated with the anti-cult movement. Thus by 1984 (when the present study was conducted), there was a confusing complexity of possible interventions which effectively frustrated any precise replication of Solomon's research.

As a result, this study utilizes a much simpler typology of deprogramming than Solomon used:

1. No exit counseling (NE): Voluntary defection, and no counseling connected with the anti-cult movement (N=89).

2. Voluntary exit counseling (VEC): Some form of voluntary counseling at the hands of anti-cultists—e.g., exit counseling, re-entry counseling, et cetera (N = 29).

3. Involuntary exit counseling (IEC): Coercive deprogramming with or without other forms of "treatment" following the deprogramming (N = 36).

These three groups incorporate three different levels of influence: (1) No formal contact and therefore near minimal influence; (2)Consensual counseling concurrent with or following voluntary exit from the group where the deprogrammer retains control over content and continuation of the counseling; and (3) coercive recruitment from the group for the purpose of involuntary counseling where the deprogrammer(s) retain(s) control over the content and continuation of the counseling by anti-cult groups. The survey instrument also included items which measured the extent of respondents' exposure to anti-cult literature and the extent of their contact with the anti-cult movement:

Have you read or studied "anti-cult" literature?
1. No   2. Minimally   3. Moderately   4. Extensively.

Have you ever been in touch with "anti-cult" groups (such as Citizens Freedom Foundation, American Family Foundation, et cetera)?
1. No   2. Briefly   3. Moderately   4. Extensively

These items were highly correlated with each other and with mode of exit. With the exception of a few individuals in the VEC group discussed below, it should be fairly evident that exit mode is the primary operant factor here in the sense that it is one's mode of exit which, more often than not, influences one to study anti-cult materials and to establish contacts with anti-cult groups, rather than the reverse.

The questionnaire further contained eight items which indicated how respondents evaluated their former movement (the hypothesized dependent variable). Four of these measured cult-stereotypical attitudes, utilizing four possible responses:

(DECEPTION): Do you feel that you were recruited deceptively (i.e., that your recruiter(s) intentionally deceived you)?
1. No   2. Somewhat   3. Quite a bit   4. Yes

(BRAINWASHING): Do you feel that you were "brainwashed" by your former group?
1. No   2. Somewhat   3. Quite a bit   4. Yes

(LEADER): Do you feel that the leader/founder of your group is/was sincere?
1. Yes   2. Mostly sincere   3. Maybe a little sincere   4. Completely insincere

(WORLDVIEW): Evaluate the doctrine/ideas/world view of your former group.
1. Completely true   2. More true than false
3. More false than true   4. Completely false

The other four items measured positive-negative attitudes in a less stereotypical manner:

(DISCOURAGE JOINING): Would you discourage someone else from joining your former group?
1. No   2. Probably not   3. Probably so   4. Yes

(REPEAT MEMBERSHIP): If you could be transported back to the period of time immediately prior to your involvement, you would—
1. Do it all over again without many changes
2. Do it all over again, but with quite a few changes.
3. Not get so deeply involved; remain marginal to the group
4. Not get involved at all

(LEARNING EXPERIENCE): The time you spent in the group was—
1. An invaluable learning experience that would have been difficult to have acquired differently
2. A mixed (positive and negative) learning experience that might have been acquired differently
3. In some ways wasted time, but there were a few good learning experiences
4. A complete waste

(GROWTH EXPERIENCE): During the time you spent in the group you—
1. Grew (and/or grew up)
2. Grew, but no more than in the time had been spent doing something else
3. Remained static
4. Regressed

All eight items were highly correlated with the exit mode and with the other two measures of anti-cult socialization.

As controls, three variables which might conceivably have been factors in shaping post-involvement attitudes were also computed: (1) duration of membership, (2) age at time of affiliation, and (3) length of time between exit and the completion of the questionnaire. None of these variables yielded significant correlations.

The causal connections between anti-cult socialization and post-involvement attitudes are, of course, far more complex for the intermediate group than my earlier designations of "independent variable" would seem to imply. For the VEC group I found that it was sometimes the case that these individuals had had some kind of negative experience in their respective groups which prompted them to defect and which later prompted them to seek out the anti-cult movement. This contact in turn provided apostates with an ideology which legitimated and reinforced their negative attitudes. The causal connections for this relative minority of individuals were thus not unidirectional. However, from the information which the subjects offered in response to more open-ended items, it was clear that the exit of the majority of subjects in the VEC group was facilitated by their "counseling" (rather than being sought out after their exit) and that this counseling was more often undertaken at the insistence of concerned relatives than solicited by the counselee (e.g., refer to Wood, 1983; and Hassan, 1983).:E

RELATIONSHIP OF POST-INVOLVEMENT

ATTITUDES TO ANTI-CULT SOCIALIZATION

	Mode of Exit	Exposure to Anti-Cult Literature	Extent of Contact with Anti-Cult Movement
Deception	.392	.405	.504
Brainwashing	.587	.419	.535
Leader	.407	.212*	.385
World View	.551	.584	.601
Discourage Joining	.522	.464	.511
Repeat Membership	.465	.464	.487
Learning Experience	.320	.342	.362
Growth Experience	.503	.452	.535

*Significant at the .01 level. All other values significant at the .001 level (two-tailed tests).

Pearson Correlations

Total N = 154

DISCUSSION

The findings of this survey replicate Solomon's finding that post-involvement attitudes of ex-members tend "to vary as a function of method of exit and degree of contact with the anti-cult movement" (Solomon, 1981:287). The theoretical approach Wright utilized in his study of voluntary defectors is illuminating in interpreting the findings presented here. Making use of socialization theory, Wright described defection as a process of "desocialization" (Wright, 1983:15), and found that the first step in the deconversion process was a disruption of the group's "plausibility structure" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966:155), which could be brought about by one of four situations:

(1) a breakdown in members' insulation from the outside world, (2) unregulated development of dyadic relationships within the communal context, (3) perceived lack of success

in achieving world transformation, and (4) inconsistencies between the actions of leaders and the ideals they symbolically represent (Wright, 1983:i)

Wright also found that once this plausibility structure had been disrupted, certain secondary factors could come into play which would further increase the likelihood of defection; e.g, the pull of family ties, conventional careers, and alternative religious belief systems. In a different theoretical language, one could observe that the defection process was initiated by the discovery or by the induction of some kind of "dissonance" which was powerful enough to lead to the adoption of an alternative "reference group" to resolve one's dissonance (rather than seeking some kind of resolution within the ideological horizon of one's religious group). This general framework can be adapted for the purpose of understanding what occurs during deprogramming.[2]

At least two of Wright's primary and two of Wright's secondary "defection factors" are clearly present in deprogramming: (1) a breakdown in insulation from the outside world (by physically removing the member from her or his group), (2) a highlighting of the inconsistencies between group ideals and the actions of leaders, (3) the pull of family ties, and (4) the presentation of an alternative belief system. [3] In addition to these four factors, deprogramming seeks to induce defection by (5) pointing out internal inconsistencies *within* the group's belief system (as differentiated from inconsistencies between ideals and practices), and by (6) offering an alternative explanation for the individual's recruitment and membership—the exploitation/mind control ideology. These six factors effectively disrupt the deprogrammee's plausibility structure, induce dissonance, and provide an alternative reference group (though not so effective as to guarantee "success," as the high failure rate of deprogramming—more than a third (Langone, 1983) return to their respective movements—demonstrates.

The additional two factors go a long way toward explaining certain systematic differences which exist between the post-involvement attitudes of deprogrammees and the attitudes of voluntary defectors; i.e., voluntary defectors tend to retain more aspects of the world view and the ideals of their former movement than do deprogrammees, and voluntary defectors rarely rely on the categories of anti-cult ideology to interpret their former group or their membership in that group (as the data presented in the preceding section indicated). These two special tactics of deprogramming are not difficult to document. One of the respondents in the present study, for example, said that his deprogrammers demonstrated to him that, "The *Divine Principle* was flawed, had contradictions and thus could not be the absolute truth."

The presentation of the brainwashing ideology appears to be one of the most essential components of the deprogramming process; e.g., one of the deprogrammed respondents related that, "After three days of dialogue I had a basic understanding of thought reform and how it had been applied to me." The attractiveness of this

2. The following discussion focuses on coercive deprogramming, but much of the analysis could be applied equally well to voluntary exit counseling of the Hassan-Wood type.

3. In Wright's analysis of voluntary defection, this last factor was the *discovery* of alternate *religious* belief systems. In deprogramming, however, the alternative belief-system presented to the deprogrammee might be religious, or it might be some highly secular version of the American Way of Life.

ideology was reflected in yet another deprogrammee's response: "It still makes me cringe to think of the 'witnessing' I did to co-workers during free times. But my deprogrammer made sure I knew it wasn't my fault." This last statement clearly indicates how anti-cult ideology's provision for a face-saving "absolution from blame" induces ex-members to adopt it.

Deprogramming seems to be much more effective at desocialization (disrupting the old plausibility structure) than it is at resocialization (providing a new system of meaning.) The deprogrammees among my respondents who did not become either fundamentalist Christians or crusading anti-cultists after their deconversion reported experiencing a very bleak psychological landscape during the time period immediately following their exit, e.g.:

> I felt as if my whole world had caved in.

> I didn't know who I was, where I was going, why I should try. I just wanted to crawl into a dark corner and be put out of my misery.

> I was kidnapped and deprogrammed, so my whole world was suddenly ripped out from under me . . . before, every single action had cosmic importance, but after, I felt so small and unimportant. Life had no meaning.

Not unsurprisingly, deprogrammees frequently reported experiencing suicidial tendencies after their exit, and one of my deprogrammed contacts had killed herself before my survey reached her.

The one other characteristic of deprogramming which sets it apart from voluntary defection is its comparative rapidity. Voluntary apostates characteristically take a long time to reach a decision to leave, and then after leaving they continue to reflect on their membership period in a "sifting process in which favorable events or experiences are separated out from what is later perceived as wrong, immoral or theologically adrift" (Wright, 1984:180). As a result of this lengthy process of deliberation, their post-involvement attitudes toward their former movement are usually complex and ambivalent. Deprogrammees, on the other hand, frequently experience a "sudden" shift of perspective which resembles a classic conversion experience in its rapidity, totality and one-sidedness. The motivation for making this sudden shift in perspective can be explained in terms of the intense "cognitive dissonance" which the deprogramming process induces. The deconversion experience is thus a kind of "paradigm shift" (Kuhn, 1962) in which the deprogrammee resolves her or his dissonance by adopting the point of view of the deprogrammer.

This "induction of dissonance/paradigm shift/resolution of dissonance" model, when combined with the notion of "defection factors" derived from Wright, appears to give an adequate account of how the deprogramming process "works." In addition to avoiding pseudo-scientific notions of "brainwashing," this account is able to explain why deprogrammees' understanding of their "cult" experience should be significantly different from that of voluntary defectors. And equally important, this model fits what actually occurs during deprogramming far better than the explanation offered by anti-cult ideology.

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