

CHAPTER TEN

A Critique of “Brainwashing” Claims About New Religious Movements

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Introduction

Many young people have been involved with new religious movements (NRMs) – sometimes pejoratively called “cults” – over the past several decades in American and other Western societies. These young people have often been among the most affluent and better educated of youth in their societies, which has contributed to controversies erupting about the meaning of such participation. Parents, friends, and political and opinion leaders have attempted to understand the phenomenon, and develop methods to control activities of such groups (Beckford 1985; Barker 1984).

Joining NRMs, which may appear quite strange in their beliefs and organizational patterns, is interpreted by some as an act of ultimate rejection of Western cultural values and institutions – including religious, economic, and familial ones. This “culture-rejecting” explanation has been difficult for many to accept, prompting a search for other explanations for involvement, a search raising serious ethical issues.

An appealing alternative explanation has been so-called “brainwashing” theories (Bromley and Richardson 1983; Fort 1983). According to those espousing these ideas, youth have not joined NRMs volitionally, but have been manipulated or forced into participating by groups using powerful psychotechnology practiced first by communist,

anti-Western societies. This psychotechnology allegedly traps or encapsulates young people in NRMs, allowing subsequent control of their behavior by leaders of the groups, through “mind control.”

These techniques were originally developed, according to these claims, in Russian purge trials of the 1930s, and later refined by the Chinese communists after their assumption of power in China in 1949, and then used by them with POWs during the Korean War of the early 1950s (Solomon 1983). Now these techniques are allegedly being used by NRM leaders against young people in Western countries, who are supposedly virtually helpless before such sophisticated methods (Richardson and Kilbourne 1983).

When questioned about obvious logical and ethical problems of applying these theories to situations without physical coercion (such as participation in NRMs), proponents have a ready answer. They claim that physical coercion has been replaced by “psychological coercion,” which is supposedly more effective than simple physical coercion (Singer 1979). These ideas are referred to as “second generation” brainwashing theories, which take into account new insights about manipulation of individuals. Supposedly, physical coercion is unnecessary if recruits can be manipulated by affection, guilt, or other psychological influences.

These theories can be considered ideas developed for functional reasons by those who have a vested interest in their being accepted, such as parents of members, therapists, and leaders of competing religious groups. The ideas plainly are a special type of "account" which "explains" why people join the groups and why they stay in them (Beckford 1978). Whatever the origin, and no matter that the veracity of such accounts is questionable, these ideas about NRM participation have become commonly accepted.

For instance, De Witt (1991) reports that 78 percent of a random sample of 383 individuals from Nevada said they believed in brainwashing, and 30 percent agreed that "brainwashing is required to make someone join a religious cult." A similar question asked of a random sample of 1,000 residents in New York prior to the tax evasion trial of Reverend Moon (Richardson 1992) revealed that 43 percent agreed "brainwashing is required to make someone change from organized religion to a cult." Latkin (1991) reported that 69 percent of a random sample of Oregon residents who were asked about the controversial Rajneesh group centered in eastern Oregon agreed that members of the group were brainwashed.

These notions about "brainwashing" and "mind control" have pervaded institutional structures in our society as well, even if they are problematic. Such views have influenced actions by governmental entities and the media (Van Driel and Richardson 1988; Bromley and Robbins 1992). The legal system has seen a number of efforts to apply brainwashing theories as explanations of why people might participate in new religions. Several civil actions have resulted in multimillion dollar judgments against NRMs allegedly using brainwashing techniques on recruits (Anthony 1990; Richardson 1991, 1995).

Thus it appears that ideas about brainwashing of recruits to new religions have developed a momentum of their own in several Western societies. These notions are impacting society in many ways, including limitations on religious freedom (Richardson 1991). Thus, we need to examine the brainwashing thesis more

closely, in order to see if it is an adequate explanation of the process whereby people join and participate in NRMs, and to examine the underlying ethics of offering such explanations of religious participation.

Critique of "Brainwashing" Theories

Brainwashing theories serve the interests of those espousing them, which is a major reason they are so readily accepted. Parents can blame the groups and their leaders for what were probably volitional decisions to participate by their sons and daughters. Former members can blame the techniques for a decision to participate which the participant later regrets. Deprogrammers can use brainwashing theories as a justification for their new "profession" and as a quasi-legal defense if they are apprehended by legal authorities during attempted deprogrammings, which often have involved physical force and kidnapping. Societal leaders can blame the techniques for seducing society's "brightest and best" away from traditional cultural values and institutions. Competitive religious leaders as well as some psychological and psychiatric clinicians attack the groups with brainwashing theories, to bolster what are basically unfair competition arguments (Kilbourne and Richardson 1984).

Thus it is in the interest of many different entities to *negotiate an account* of "what happened" that makes use of brainwashing notions. Only the NRM membership, which is usually politically weak, is left culpable after these negotiated explanations about how and why a person joined an NRM. All other parties are, to varying degrees, absolved of responsibility (Richardson, van der Lans, and Derks 1986).

The claim that NRMs engage in brainwashing thus becomes a powerful "social weapon" for many partisans in the "cult controversy." Such ideas are used to "label" the exotic religious groups as deviant or even evil (Robbins and Anthony 1982). However, the new "second generation" brainwashing theories have a number of logical and evidentiary problems, and their continued use raises profound ethical issues.

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Misrepresentation of classical tradition

Modern brainwashing theories sometimes misrepresent earlier scholarly work on the processes developed in Russia, China, and the Korean POW situation (Anthony 1990). These misrepresentations are as follows. First, the early classical research by Schein et al. (1961) and Lifton (1963) revealed that, contrary to some recent claims, the techniques were generally ineffective at doing more than modifying behavior (obtaining compliance) even for the short term. Such theories would seem less useful to explain long-term changes of behavior and belief allegedly occurring with NRM participation.

Second, the degree of determinism associated with contemporary brainwashing applications usually far exceeds that found in the foundational work of Lifton and of Schein. Anthony and Robbins (1992) contrast the “soft determinism” of the work of Lifton and of Schein with the “hard determinism” of contemporary proponents of brainwashing theories such as Singer and Ofshe (1990). The “hard determinism” approach assumes that humans can be turned into robots through application of sophisticated brainwashing techniques, easily becoming deployable “Manchurian Candidates.” Classical scholars Lifton and Schein seemed more willing to recognize human beings as more complex entities than do some contemporary brainwashing theorists.

Third, another problem is that classical scholars Lifton and Schein may not be comfortable with their work being applied to non-coercive situations. Lifton (1985: 69) explicitly disclaims use of ideas concerning brainwashing in legal attacks against so-called cults, and earlier (1963: 4) had stated: “. . . the term (brainwashing) has a far from precise and questionable usefulness; one may even be tempted to forget about the whole subject and return to more constructive pursuits.” The work of Schein and of Lifton both evidence difficulty in “drawing the line” between acceptable and unacceptable behaviors on the part of those involved in influencing potential subjects for change (Anthony and Robbins 1992). Group influence processes operate in all areas of life,

which makes singling out one area like NRMs for special negative attention quite problematic. Such a focus cannot be adopted on strictly logical, scientific, or ethical grounds.

Ideological biases of brainwashing theorists

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

Limited research base of classical work

Research on which the classical models are based is quite limited (Richardson and Kilbourne 1983; Anthony 1990). Small non-representative samples were used by both Lifton and Schein, and those in the samples were presented using an anecdotal reporting style, derived from clinical settings, especially with Lifton’s work. As Biderman (1962) pointed out, Lifton only studied 40 subjects in all, and gave detailed information on only 11 of those. Schein’s original work was based on a sample of only 15 American civilians who returned after imprisonment in China. This work may be insightful, but it does not meet normal scientific standards in terms of sample size and representativeness.

Predisposing characteristics and volition ignored

Contemporary applications of brainwashing theories to NRM recruitment tactics typically ignores important work on predisposing characteristics of NRM participants (Anthony and

Robbins 1992). The techniques of brainwashing supposedly are so successful that they can transform a person's basic beliefs into sharply contrasting beliefs, even against their will. This aspect of brainwashing theory is appealing to proponents who have difficulty recognizing that an individual might have been attracted to a new and exotic religion perceived by the recruit as offering something positive for themselves.

Sizable numbers of participants are from higher social class origins in terms of education level and relative affluence, a finding raising questions about application of brainwashing theories as adequate explanations of participation. Both Barker (1984) and Kilbourne (1986) have found that there are predisposing characteristics for participation in the Unification Church – such as youthful idealism. Thus, the brainwashing argument would seem to be refuted, even if such data are often ignored.

Brainwashing proponents also conveniently ignore volitional aspects of recruitment to new religions. Brainwashing theorists such as Delgado (1982) turn predispositions and interest in exotic religions into susceptibilities and vulnerabilities, adopting an orientation toward recruitment which defines the potential convert in completely passive terms, a philosophical posture that itself raises serious ethical problems. Most participants are "seekers", taking an active interest in changing themselves, and they are often using the NRMs to accomplish planned personal change (Straus 1976, 1979). There is growing use of an "active" paradigm in conversion/recruitment research which stresses the predispositional and volitional character of participation. This view is derived from research findings that *many participants actually seek out NRMs to accomplish personal goals* (Richardson 1985a). This nonvolitional view ignores an important aspect of classical work in the brainwashing tradition. For instance, Lifton's (1963) work clearly shows the voluntaristic character of much of the thought reform which went on in China (his last chapter discusses voluntaristic personal change).

Therapeutic effects of participation ignored

Brainwashing theorists usually claim that participation in NRMs is a negative experience, claims countered by many lines of research. Participation seems to have a generally positive impact on most participants, an often-replicated finding which undercuts brainwashing arguments, but is usually ignored by proponents of such theories. Robbins and Anthony (1982) summarized positive effects which have been found, listing ten different therapeutic effects, including reduced neurotic distress, termination of illicit drug use, and increased social compassion. One review of a large literature concerning personality assessment of participants concluded (Richardson 1985b: 221): "Personality assessments of these group members reveal that life in the new religions is often therapeutic instead of harmful." Kilbourne (1986) drew similar conclusions in his assessment of outcomes from participation, after finding, for instance, that members of the Unification Church felt they were getting more from their participation than did matched samples of young Presbyterians and Catholics.

Psychiatrist Marc Galanter, who has done considerable assessment research on participants in some of the more prominent NRMs, has even posited a general "relief effect" brought about by participation (Galanter 1978). He wanted to find out what about participation leads to such consistent positive effects, in order that therapists can use the techniques themselves. McGuire (1988) found that many ordinary people participate in exotic religious groups in a search of alternatives to modern medicine, and many think themselves the better for the experience. To ignore such scholarly conclusions seems ethically quite questionable.

Large research tradition and "normal" explanations ignored

There has been a huge amount of research done on recruitment to and participation in the new religious groups and movements, research almost totally ignored by brainwashing theo-

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rists. This work, which is summarized in such reviews as Greil and Rudy (1984), Richardson (1985a), and Robbins (1985), applies standard theories from sociology, social psychology, and psychology to explain why youths join such groups. These explanations seem quite adequate to explain participation, without any "black box" of mystical psychotechnology such as offered by brainwashing theorists.

Examples of such "normalizing" research include Heirich's (1977) study of the Charismatic Renewal Movement, Pilarzyk's (1978) comparison of conversion in the Divine Light Mission and the Hare Krishna, Straus's (1981) "naturalistic social psychological" explanation of seeking religious experiences, Solomon's (1983) work on the social psychology of participation in the Unification Church, and the examination of process models of conversion to the Jesus Movement (Richardson, et al. 1979). The ethics of ignoring such work, while propounding empirically weak notions such as brainwashing and mind control, seem questionable.

Lack of "success" of new religions disregarded

Another obvious problem with brainwashing explanations concerns assuming (and misinforming the public about) the efficacy of the powerful recruitment techniques allegedly used by the new religious groups. Most NRMs are actually quite small: the Unification Church probably never had over 10,000 American members, and can now boast only 2,000 to 3,000 members in the US; the American Hare Krishna may not have achieved even the size of the Unification Church . . . Most other NRMs have had similar problems recruiting large numbers of participants.

A related problem concerns attrition rates for the new religions. As a number of scholars have noted, most participants in the new groups remain for only a short time, and most of those proselytized simply ignore or rebuff recruiters and go on with their normal lives (Bird and Reimer 1982; Barker 1984; Galanter 1980). Many people leave the groups after being in them relatively short periods

(Wright 1987; Skonovd 1983; Richardson et al. 1986).

An example of one well publicized group . . . is The Family (formerly the Children of God) which has had over 57,000 young people worldwide join it over the group's 25 year history. However, the group has only about 3,000 adult members worldwide at this time, which could be construed to mean they have a serious attrition problem!

These histories of meager growth and/or rapid decline raise serious questions about the efficacy of brainwashing explanations of participation. Such powerful techniques should have resulted in much larger groups, a fact conveniently ignored by brainwashing proponents, who seem intent on raising the level of hysteria about NRMs, through misleading the public about their size and efficiency in keeping members.

"Brainwashing" as its own explanation

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

Conclusions

The preceding critique indicates that brainwashing theories of participation in new reli-

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gions fail to take into account considerable data about participation in such groups. However, many people still accept such theories, and high levels of concern about the "cult menace" exist, in part because of the promotion of ideologically based brainwashing theories of participation. Serious attention should be paid to alternative explanations which demystify the process of recruitment to and participation in the new religions.

Motivations for accepting such empirically weak theories as "brainwashing" should be examined. Also, those who propound brainwashing theories of participation need to examine the ethics of promoting such powerful "social weapons" against minority religions. When such theories are used to limit people's religious freedom and personal growth, then the society itself may suffer.

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