

## Introduction

Within Cults, or New Religious Movements (NRMs), both regular practices and recruitment processes implement the use of social control through methods of teaching ideologies, persuading members, and forcing participation in group norms; allowing NRMs to maintain conformity as well as an ability to hold ideologies considered deviant from the main culture.

## Theories of NRM Use of Social Control

### The “Brainwashing” Model

- This model indicates that methods of social control are implemented knowingly as a means to actively manipulate individuals by removing free-will (Coates, 2012).

### The Socialization Model

- Theories such as the “social drift” model suggest that the methods of social control implemented are part of the naturally occurring progression of groups (Coates, 2012).

### Both are supported

- Research done on former cult members suggests that the practices used to maintain membership experienced by the participants could be interpreted to align with both the “brainwashing” and socialization theories of social control (Coates, 2012).
- Research on voluntary defects from NRM found that participants voluntarily joined and remained within groups despite being aware of the issues within the organization; indicating they operated with free will while still experiencing various implementations of social control during their membership (Wright, 1984).

## Early Recruitment

- Defected members of NRMs were more likely to report that the reason behind joining their respective groups was due to family and pre-established friends and colleagues offering a means of entry rather than pursuing advertisements for NRMs (Coates, 2011).
- In the same research, some individuals expressed a sense of willingness to join the group rather than a sense of recruitment due to the fact the group provided them with a sense of belonging, identity, and alternative lifestyle their normal life failed to provide.

## Family Ties Inside NRMs

- Research found that members who maintained outside connections with non-movement affiliated family members were more likely to withdraw than individuals who did not have contact (Wright, Piper, 1986).
- Additionally, former members expressed that they found an immediate sense of community with long standing members; newer members were instantly included in group activities and found comfort in the potential long-standing members expressed in them (Coates, 2012).
- As new members are brought into the group, they also encouraged to have romantic relationships with long standing members in order to establish generations that are born and raised within the NRM (Wexler, 2016).
- These newer generations grow up in an environment divorced from the main culture and are only taught the norms of the NRM.
- These in-group families also make it harder for members to leave the NRM because their strongest familial and social ties exist only within the group itself.

## Group-based Identity

- The leader of the group will exemplify certain beliefs, behavior, and ways of life that the group at large will conform to. New members will leave their old habits behind to conform to these qualities, establishing a group identity (Wexler, 2016).
- In turn, this new group identity acts to detach members from their previous lives, causing them to become dependent on the social ties within the group.

## Punishment as Incentive to Conform

- New members were faced with a gradually increasing demand for commitment
  - In a study examining ex-cult members, all participants described some degree of confession, sometimes under the guise of counseling (Coates, 2012).
- Later, this personal information is in turn used as a token of control. These confession sessions work to re-contextualize personal experiences to fit with the group’s ideologies and create a false sense of deviance to instill fear.
- Furthermore, participants experienced a degree of control exercised over their person, such as regulation of eating habits and personal finances.
- These regulations were further restricted as a form of punishment for behaviors that did not adhere to the norm.
- Additionally, participants experienced removal of direct reward in which statuses within the group, career positions obtained through the group, and social relationships were at jeopardy if members did not conform (Coates, 2012).

## Ideologies and Isolation

- Individuals reported developing sense of certainty and comfort accompanying the ideologies provided by NRMs, which teach simple and clear answers to larger complicated life questions that arise in emerging adulthood (Coates, 2011).
- The meaningful connections and self-assurance the group provides for new members puts new members in a place to accept illogical group ideologies to gain acceptance (Coates, 2012).
- Furthermore, the isolation created in NRMs allows the group to encourage emotional thinking over critical reflection; setting up an environment where the groups ideologies remain uncontested by outside influences.

## Conclusions

- The presentation of persuasive rewards and assurance have been found to establish a strong tie to the group. This initial establishment sets the basis for members to be gradually integrated onto the group’s norms and beliefs, as demonstrated in the socialization models.
- This research creates an awareness of cults as a forcefully maintained counter group rather than a gathering of blind followers. It also presents the strength of social control as a means to keep members despite pushback or challenges of the leader’s beliefs.

## References

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