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IMPATIENT FOR PARADISE

A RITES OF PASSAGE MODEL
OF
THE ROLE OF PSYCHOLOGICAL PREDISPOSITIONS
IN DETERMINING DIFFERENTIAL OPENNESS
TO INVOLVEMENT IN
NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Doris JF McIlwain

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■

Some find themselves in life
like Michelangelo's prisoners in stone -
eternally
almost free.



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ABSTRACT

This study considers the adequacy of explanatory accounts of recruitment to New Religious Movements [NRMs], defined by their doctrinal innovation or importation from another culture, and formed around a charismatic leader. It considers the coercive persuasion paradigm which assumes *no* predisposing features of those who become involved, a sociological account by Snow Zurcher and Ekland-Olsen (1980) which seeks to redress overly exclusive attention to psychological variables by emphasising the importance of structural variables such as the existence of 'discretionary time' and having a friend involved in the NRM. It is suggested that a psychological focus need not entail a deemphasis of current life circumstances, such as social bonds, and life stress, nor a failure to acknowledge the importance of the group's ideology in lending definition to felt difficulties.

The historical lineage of a model of personal change is traced, termed the *Rites de Passage* model, based on Van Gennep's (1908) anthropological work, the work of Schein (1957) and Lifton (1961) which leads to the viewing of conversion as an example of resocialisation. Specific focus is placed on the early phases of this process where disruption occurs in existing coping techniques and social supports as a result of disruptive life events. Lofland and Stark's (1965) model forms the conceptual framework from which literature regarding differences in life stress, social bonds and behavioural involvement in NRMs, and prior cognitive spiritual orientation can be addressed.

The work of Galanter (1980, 1989) and Barker (1981, 1984), Heirich (1977) and Snow and Phillips (1980) provides substantial evidence for the existence of pre-existing differences between affiliates (who make contact with such movements) and non-affiliates (who do not). In this thesis two facets of differential involvement are addressed: i) why does one individual rather than another become involved ii) with a given *genre* of movement rather than another? The *Rites de Passage* model, which is a modified version of Lofland and Stark's (1965) account of cult conversion, is tested placing NRMs in a comparative context with a secular self-help agency: a therapy group. Four groups of affiliates to three different eastern NRMs are compared to a therapy group, (Richardson and Kilbourne, 1984), two control groups (a student sample, and a sample from the general population) and a western NRM. There are 160 subjects overall, who completed a battery of questionnaires at point of first contact with the movement, to distinguish the precursors for movement involvement from the *sequelae*. Exceptions to this prospective data collection were the western NRM and the inclusion of a graduate rebirthing group. The latter was deliberately included to facilitate pre-involvement and post-involvement comparisons. The former's adept status was due to the leader's reluctance to burden new members with a three hour test battery.

Measures were taken regarding life events and their psychological impact using Henderson, Byrne and Ducan-Jones (1981) recent life events inventory and impact scales using a twelve month time frame. A modified version of the Interview Schedule for Social Interaction (by Henderson *et al*, 1981) was used to assess the availability and adequacy of acquaintance-level and intimate bonds in the recent past. Mental health was assessed using Galanter's (1980) General Wellbeing Scale and

Tellegen's Multidimensional Personality Questionnaire (1982).

Recollections of early family relations were assessed using Likert scales derived from the detailed comparative study by Ullman (1982) which supported the psychoanalytic hypothesis regarding troubled early parental relations, suggesting that current life difficulties re-evoked early life problems.

Since disruption is seen as a necessary but not sufficient condition for movement involvement (Greil, 1977) the therapy and eastern groups were not expected to differ on the measures so far. Though they were expected to differ, and did differ from the control groups and western NRM members in these respects. The value-added form of the model merely specifies that a substrate of stress and disruption suffered in relative isolation and loneliness will increase the probability that some form of *social* agency will be sought. This is the first component of differential recruitment, or differential openness as it is termed here.

Differences are predicted and found between the eastern groups on the one hand and therapy group, control groups and western group on the other, when personality variables indicative of a lack of traditionalism, a challenging attitude to conventional authority (assessed by Ray's (1971) balanced F scale) and a tendency to experience perceptual phenomena indicative of an absorptive or mystical tendency (Tellegen's MPQ was used to assess this personality feature). The eastern groups have a personality profile of being: unconventional, somewhat impulsive and highly absorptive in perceptual style. This profile distinguished them from all other groups.

When the additional feature of the model was considered, namely the consonance between individual worldview and movement ideology in intensity of spiritual belief

and the eastern or western orientation of that belief (as assessed by a spiritual orientation survey developed by the author across three pilot studies using Coombs Unfolding Technique (Coombs, 1964) to produce a metric ordinal scale), the major finding of the study was that a markedly distinctive feature of those drawn to NRMs is a spiritual orientation consonant with that of the movement approached. The SOS revealed a strongly demarcated pre-existing eastern spiritual orientation in those drawn to make contact with Eastern NRMs, which set them apart significantly from all other groups. The Western NRM, who were already members of their group, had a western spiritual orientation, to the exclusion of an eastern orientation, while the eastern groups were more eclectic. Both eastern and western NRMs were spiritually more intense on the general religious items, suggesting these items are central to any spiritual worldview.

All of the major predictions of the *Rites de Passage* model were supported. The model provides a welcome link between a sociological and psychological focus on movement involvement. The systematic differences between affiliates and non-affiliates of NRMs at point of first contact, suggest that recruitment is unlikely to be completely due to NRM design: the results suggest participants are likely to be interested and consenting.

In summary, it is shown that those drawn to New Religious Movements of an eastern kind are indeed non-traditional, have a high incidence of recent life events and suffer a sense of community isolation, and loneliness which are considered as factors which might lead a person to modify an unfulfilling lifestyle. A portrait of a seeker is lightly (sketched against a background of this dissatisfaction) which includes personality variables like an impulsive, present-oriented pleasure/pain regulatory style, a mystical perceptual style, and an intensity of spiritual orientation and a congruence of spiritual

orientation with that of the ideology of the movement approached. These are considered potential influences on the *genre* of movement contacted, and are suggested as explanatory of the second facet of differential openness to movement involvement.

The relative privilege of the Western NRM in terms of reduced stress, availability of community and intimate social support suggests that involvement does provide a relief effect, though caution must be exercised in interpreting this difference as these groups differ in membership status and spiritual orientation.

The distress and neediness of those contacting movements for the first time is apparent, which suggests that movement contact might be a response to felt dissatisfaction interpreted within a spiritual worldview. An eastern spiritual worldview is a highly significant distinguishing feature of affiliates, and is the final phase of the *Rites de Passage* Model. Speculative theoretical consideration of the data's implications for a psychoanalytic consideration of movement involvement, in the light of Cushman (1986), Deutsch (1983), Halperin (1983) Doi (1971) and Kohut's (1977) theory and research is adumbrated concerning differential openness to charismatic appeal.

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