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A MODEL OF PSYCHOLOGICAL DISENGAGEMENT

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Abstract

This paper presents the preliminary findings of research into the disengagement from highly entitative and ideological social groups, such as one percent motorcycle clubs, military special forces and fundamental ideological groups. Using a grounded theory approach, the discourse of 25 former members identified the discrepancy between group membership and the self-concept as the core theme in the disengagement experience. This model presents the process of experiencing a threat, self-concept discrepancy and management, physical disengagement and the post-exit identity. The findings indicate a consistent experience of disengagement and allow further understanding to the factors influencing membership appraisal.

Keywords

Disengagement, Self-concept, Threat, Social Identity, Discrepancy

INTRODUCTION

Groups like one percent motorcycle clubs (1%), Special Forces (SF), and fundamental ideological (FI) groups encourage members to adopt salient group roles that overlap other aspects of the self. Social identity theory posits that individuals encompass various identities and roles; however, when one identity becomes salient to the self-concept, the qualities and attributes extend to other self-aspects (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The prominence of this social identity into other aspects of the self reduces self-complexity by lessening the number of diverse attributes and unique self-aspects; allowing the dominant identity to influence other roles, forging a holistic identity (McConnell & Brown, 2010).

Reference groups displaying strong ideological premises and high levels of entitativity are more likely to evoke a salient group identity that transcends across self-aspects by the level of affective commitment required and the imposed norms (Hogg, Adelman, & Blagg, 2010; Kinnvall, 2004; Schmitt, Branscombe, Silvia, Garcia, & Spears, 2006). These groups emphasise their distinctiveness and impose boundaries between themselves and the mainstream – enhancing strong connections between members and fostering the ‘us and them’ mentality that allows a propensity for violence against the ‘enemy’ to develop. The group entitativity, derived from Gestalt principles of proximity, similarity, organization and shared fate, instils group norms through psychological processes and endorses a salient social identity (Campbell, 1958; Hogg & Reid, 2006). The cohesive nature of these groups ensures they are highly resistant to disruptive influences, and external pressures can serve to consolidate the collective identity.

These members are exposed to mechanisms that promote group identity salience and reduce dissent. Taylor (1988, p. 168) describes this as the ‘spiralling of commitment’ where previous investments and organizational pressures entrap the individual into active participation, irrelevant of doubts. The barriers enforcing group commitment consist of three fundamental elements; (1) ensuring the member’s behaviour requires socio-psychological investments, (2) decisions reinforcing this investment are advocated as the only feasible option, and (3) any efforts to avoid the investment only serve to consolidate the entrapment of the member (Taylor, 1988). While these mechanisms work to promote a cohesive social unit they also serve to entrap members and pose significant barriers to disengaging. Nonetheless, involvement is often not a lifelong commitment and many members of ideological and entitative social groups are likely to experience psychological disengagement.

Drawing from interviews with former members of highly entitative social groups with strong ideologies central to their members’ social identity (to the extent of jeopardising members and non-member’s security in defence of their group), this paper will present the preliminary findings from current PhD research exploring the experiences of psychological disengagement.

METHODOLOGY

Following a grounded theory methodology, 25 people were interviewed regarding their experiences of disengaging from highly entitative and ideological social groups. Participants were drawn from the one percent motorcycle clubs, fundamental religious organizations, cults, political extremist groups and military Special Forces. Methods of recruitment included personal and professional networks, online forums, newsletters, requests to high profile former members, formal requests to support organizations and developing relationships within the target group's informal milieu.

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed to facilitate in-depth dialogue exploring the participant's perceptions of the causes, processes and experiences of disengaging with their particular reference group. Participants were asked to provide background information of their initial engagement with the club and duration of membership before describing in detail their experiences of disengaging from their corresponding social groups. The remaining interview was conducted in a conversational manner to allow participants to expand on their own experiences.

Findings

In this current research, participants followed a consistent pattern in moving towards membership reappraisal and disengaging as means to resolve their conflict. The focal concern in the grounded theory is the discrepancy between group membership and the participant's self-concept. With the growing discrepancy, participants engaged in self-concept management strategies to maintain psychological integrity, and reduce psychological dependency on their social group. Primarily, participants engaged in three management strategies; (1) atypical identification – redefining the self as atypical of the ideal member and attaching a positive emotional response to their non-prototypical identity; (2) adaptive preferences – developing a positive attachment to alternative goals based on the feasibility of attainment; and (3) justifications – the evaluation of events and information as support for their attitudes. These management strategies provided the impetus for reducing psychological dependency, physically disengaging from the group, and the reformation of the self-concept as an 'ex-member'.

Figure 1 illustrates this shared experience of disengagement, detailing the stages and processes each individual attended to; however, while the model represents a process it must be noted that each stage may not occur in isolation and varies in duration. The following discussion will be discussed in the five stages outlined in the model; threat, discrepancy, management, physical disengagement and ex-member.

Threat

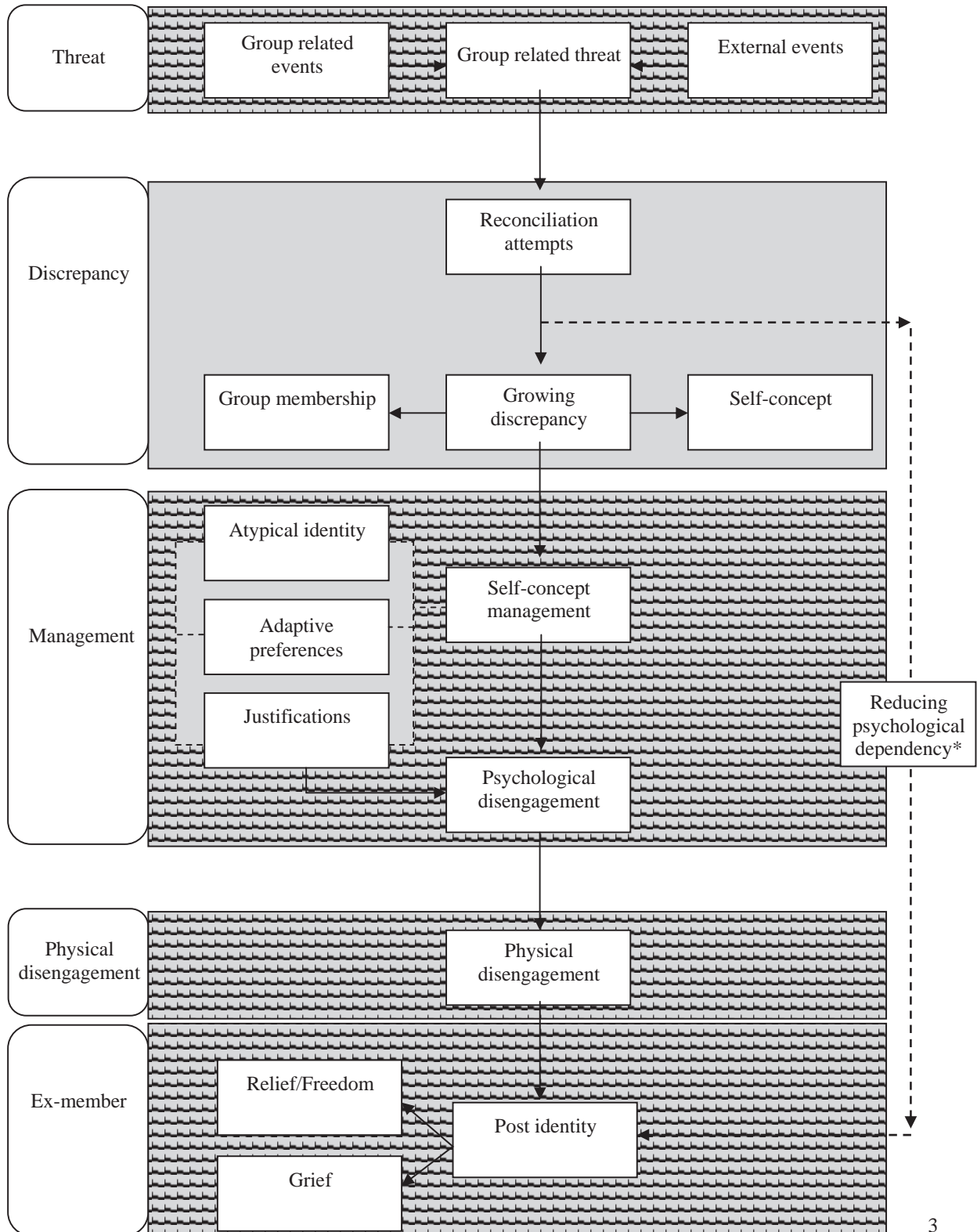
The disengagement process begins with a *group related threat*, caused by an intra-group event or accumulative annoyances, or external pressures presenting group membership unfavourably. Common themes for the group related threats included failed interpersonal dyadic relationships, changing group dynamics, role conflict, and leadership's failure to act in accordance with expectations and group norms. The findings demonstrated that both intra-group and external factors may exist, encouraging members to exit the group; however, disillusionment with the in-group is necessary for psychological disengagement. Those who only experienced outside forces, such as external family commitments or police pressure, physically disengaged but maintained a positive identification with the group and an unfulfilled desire to rekindle affiliation.

Discrepancy

While the initial threat varied in source, participants began *reconciliation attempts* via self-verification methods of gathering social feedback and self-evaluation. These threats were deemed significant to the individual who actively sought feedback from other members about their concerns and engaged in self-evaluation. When feedback towards the participants' concerns conflicted with the expected response, the participants became aware of discrepancies between their own self-concept and how they perceived other members viewed them. This discrepancy with relevant others can threaten self-esteem (Tajfel, 1978), social acceptance and project uncertainty (Abraham, 1998; Haslam et al., 1996). For example; a former member who was cheated on by his wife and was forced to continue living with her and her new boyfriend sought assistance from the leadership group;

[Group name] are always saying how they look after their members but here I was in this situation and the only thing they did was just offer bible study. . . . So here were God's people doing nothing to help me. (FI, 3)

Figure 1. Grounded Theory Model of Disengagement



**The reducing psychological dependency is involved in all aspects of the model following failed reconciliation attempts*

Or one participant who was sexually abused as a teenager by a relative in the leadership group who went to higher ranking leaders for help;

Just the way it was handled, telling me that it was a family matter. Not telling me to go to the cops. And telling me to back off from him. Nothing. They still expected me to sit next to him at meetings like church, yeah it was handled wrong and that's why I left. (FI, 5)

The events were significant in their own right, but the interviews identified the feedback from others challenged both the expectations of intra-group behaviour and values, furthering disillusionment.

Self-evaluation was more prominent for those who experienced role conflict than social feedback. Negative affect as a product of self-evaluation occurred when a member was required to perform tasks for the group that conflicted with personal values;

When I started focusing my energy on training and stepped away from the drugs that's when I started getting phone calls saying "oh this person needs to be sorted out at this address, and then this is going to happen". . . . I was more so, like a debt-collector without collecting any debts. And I didn't like it. (1%, 4)

Or if the member was unable to achieve self or group imposed standards for their desired role. Particularly for members of the Special Forces who were unable to maintain the physical intensity required;

It was a definitely a shock to the system thinking that I was the fittest, fastest, strongest I've ever been and suddenly put on my knees. . . . Depressing, very depressing. Going from nothing can stop you, physically able to do anything to suddenly being told, or knowing that you can't do even the most basic thing. (SF, 1)

The self-evaluation identified discrepancies between the self and the role competency required to effectively maintain membership. The unwillingness to perform tasks, or the inability to achieve standards, led to the re-evaluation of the social identity.

Both self-evaluation and social feedback regarding concerns lead to a re-evaluation of their commitment to the group and the significance of normative aspects;

I really felt quite disillusioned. And it was those issues that really led me to evaluating my life, how I'd got into that position and that in turn meant evaluating my religion . . . and once I really started investigating the chronology then my faith in the organization completely fell apart. (FI, 2)

When relevant others provided inconsistent feedback, or self-evaluation furthered the growing discrepancies between the self and standards, the single event or accumulative annoyances increased in personal significance and fostered negative affect towards group interactions and norms. Through self-verification methods of self-evaluation and social feedback, the group was identified as discrepant with the participants' ontological security, creating a conflict between group membership and the self.

Management

The existing discrepancy between group membership and the self produced a complex environment for the participant who experienced dissonance over pre-existing beliefs about the group and their current perspective, challenging both the social identity and self-concept. People are motivated in two ways; to develop or maintain positive affect towards the self, known as self-enhancement, or to maintain a sense of coherence and continuity with one's previous view of themselves (self-consistency; Markus & Wurf, 1987). These motivators act as the drive to alter beliefs and/or behaviour to produce a positive self-concept.

Commitment was still maintained publically as participants employed methods to reduce the discrepancy between the self and membership, and reduce negative evaluations of the self. The affective-cognitive state produces conflict for members as they attempt to balance diverging beliefs;

I would sit at the meeting and just wonder how I did this for so long. . . . It's like a paradigm shift in how you look at the world. . . . At some point you feel a little duped, and you feel stupid but at the same time, you know what you are born into and what you're told from childhood is what you believe (FI, 6)

Discrepancies produced a negative effect on overall satisfaction with the group; influencing cognitive processing, affect regulation, motivational and interpersonal processes, and subsequently, impacting on the social perceptions, social comparison, and approach to interacting with others (Markus & Wurf, 1987). As a consequence, past and future self-relevant information is processed in relation to the current cognitive-affective state.

With conflicting cognitions, the participant is motivated to restore consistency between attitudes towards the self and the respective social group. This can be achieved through the self-enhancement method of comparing one's self with a negative view of other members.

I've got my head on my shoulders. . . . I didn't realise there would be so many dickheads so, you know a lot of idiots mate. I don't like them. I don't like some of the people in the club, so like how am I supposed to have this passion for this club when I don't even like half the people in it mate. (1%, 4)

By differentiating one's self from the members of the group, the participant develops an *atypical identity*, – viewing himself more favourably and defining himself as an atypical member of the group; subsequently, reducing identification with the group.

Another approach to reduce the discrepancy included the concept of *adaptive preferences* (Elster, 1985); the self-evaluation dissatisfaction motivates a conscious character transformation to liberate from the negative affective response (Zimmerman, 2003). For example, changing preferences from maintaining membership in an unfavourable state, to adopting perceived achievable goals in a new role external to the group, such as developing a family;

It is such a high intensity life style and such a high demand on you as a person to stay in that unit, it's very restrictive if you had a family and things like that, so whilst it is was a great life and an awesome job to me it wasn't really conducive to having a family so me that was the next biggest step so in order to do that I felt I had to leave. (SF, 1)

As the position in the Special Forces was threatened by illness and the inability to maintain the intensity required, the option for alternative roles became more relevant to a positive self-concept.

As the reconstructed self-concept becomes salient there is less psychological dependence on the group and the individual no longer considers himself or herself as a prototypical member. Furthering the disidentification with the group imposed identity was the *justifications* used by participants to validate their attitudes. This included secondary conflicts that emphasised the organizational failings of the group, for example the Army's political processes.

It's just the planning, a guy at his desk in Canberra hasn't done his job. . . . It's like saying that is a retarded kid that's annoying, yeah but he's retarded. The army is the way it is, it's not going to change. (SF, 2)

Also, the failings of the group to address concerns provided justification for moving towards disengagement. For example, emphasising the responsibility for disillusionment lies with the group's inability to resolve the conflict;

I was able to give them an opportunity to respond to the many biblical problems I had found with the teachings and ultimately that went nowhere. They could not provide any meaningful answers or comments. (FI, 2)

This participant validates his desire to leave by pointing out the group had the opportunity to responded effectively, and it is therefore “*their fault*” that the group and the self-identity could not be a realigned.

As the participants engaged in self-concept management strategies they increased the psychological distance between the self and the group identity. For those who psychologically disengaged, the social identity reduced

in salience as discrepancy reduction methods reconstruct the self-concept to exclude group membership as a core aspect of their identity.

Physical Disengagement

Despite psychologically disengaging with the group, participants maintained involvement at various levels until a catalytic event or cognitive shift hastened the physical disengagement. Variations in the physical disengagement included the approach of announcing the exit; covert, overt or declarative, and the preparedness in terms of the practical aspects (living arrangements, employment, relocation) and the shift in reference groups and relationships. Those who were able to plan and establish themselves pre-exit reported greater ease in the physical disengagement, particularly when there was an opportunity to socially distance themselves before committing to the exit;

I had planned to leave for a while prior to that so I had saved up my money and my overseas cash and I'd done a few things invested in a few things to ensure that when I left that I didn't have to go back for financial reasons always could self sustain and achieve what I wanted to do when I left so it was a relatively easy process for me to leave because I also took a year off before I left. I took a year's leave without pay to get myself sorted out. (SF, 1)

Those who did not plan the physical exiting from the group found they were compounded with extra stressors and uncertainty;

I packed a small bag that morning with a few essentials in it and went out of the house knowing I could not come back and not knowing where I would sleep that night. I didn't have anyone who would take me in. I didn't have any friends outside the [group name]. (FI, 7)

Participants from the Special Forces were provided with time and resources to assist their exit; however, the majority of participants involved in the one percent motorcycle clubs and fundamental ideological groups were unable to prepare for the exit due to the control exerted by the group and/or the hastiness of the exit.

For participants who were able to establish external relationships prior to exiting acknowledged the significance these new references points provided. Forming new reference groups allows the acquisition of values and norms found in a group that one is likely to enter; thus, re-socialising the member to reduce the insulation from the previous group and ease integration into the new social environment (Ebaugh, 1988). For some participants the role of the external groups can be subconscious; for example, a former one percent motorcycle club member found forging new friendships at a martial arts training facility influenced his willingness to perform the tasks required in his current group role.

The more I got involved in the training the more I started to, the more personal development started taking place and I changed, myself. For the better, not for the worst. And like, the more and more I got into training the more it started making sense and the more I didn't want to be doing what I was doing. (1%, 4)

The new social environment provided a discipline that conflicted with the street violence and drug taking behaviour advocated by the motorcycle club.

In addition to providing feedback to the individual, these new groups also accelerated the process by providing social support and independence.

I started to get a bit involved, get a good career, started making money so I was financially independent, started making some friends at work that weren't [group], then once I had that support group then I think I knew I could cope and that is when I decided to, have the strength to pursue things and research things (FI, 3)

Not all participants were able to prepare for the practical aspects or loss of relationships prior to exiting; however, the majority emphasised this would be their advice to others considering leaving their respective groups.

Ex-member

Following the exit from the group, the participants experienced a post-identity transition. Initially, the experience produced feelings of relief and freedom, “*I could explain it like a kid being let free in a candy store*”, before developing into episodes of grief. Grief was experienced in various ways between participants, such as preoccupation “*I became I guess, what [name] calls a militant atheist and I was reading all I could about cults*” (FI, 6); resentment, “*I always wonder what my life would have been like if I wasn’t born into the faith. There is still some anger and resentment*” (FI, 6); withdrawals, “*It’s a bit like giving up smoking you know, you feel like a smoke every now and then. And there are certain aspects of it that were good*” (1%, 2); shame, “*well for many years I didn’t tell them at all. I didn’t tell anybody. I didn’t want to be seen as someone with a very strange background and with a whole lot of emotional baggage*”, (FI, 7); avoidance, “*I sort of dread the guys in the regiment that come up, I don’t really want those guys up here, reminds you of where you were at before*”; (SF, 2) and depression, “*I think I became probably a bit unbearable as I started to leave as I got absolutely obsessed by it all and I was massively depressed as well, I went through post traumatic shock*” (FI, 2). The post-exit response emphasises the significance of identification with these groups in the participants’ lives and the importance of the decision-making processes.

Self-concept management strategies continued to be employed from the discrepancy phase throughout the disengagement process. When the individual is able to develop a self-concept consistent with his or her ideals, he or she is able to move forward and establish the ex-identity.

I’m a lot more mentally free, I’m at lot more at peace with myself as far as being consistent with what I appear to be on the outside, I’m not claiming to be a [group name] when I am not. (FI, 6)

The model of disengagement ends at the post identity experience; however, this does not suggest the past identity is no longer relevant to the participant, but is rather integrated into the existing perception of the current self.

SUMMARY

The preliminary findings from the discourse of former members of ideological social groups with high levels of entitativity indicate a consistent pattern of disengagement. Beginning with an event acting as a catalyst for self-verification, the individual determines an inconsistency between the expectations of membership and the perceived reality. Self-evaluation and social feedback determine the group as threat to the self, in which membership becomes discrepant with the self-concept. This current study relies on the discourse of disengaged members, who as a response to the discrepancy utilised self-concept management strategies to disidentify with the group and adapted their behaviour and values to be in consonance with their self-concept. These strategies reduced dependency on the group and provided validation for their desire to leave for the remainder of the disengagement process. The physical disengagement from the group varied in method and preparedness, depending on the context, but the post-exit experience of initial relief and freedom was felt before entering a period of grief.

The self-concept is pivotal to an individual’s identification with a group, and the roles and relationships with in it. This research posits a perceived threat to the self-concept from within the group creates a discrepancy requiring the individual to adjust the self or membership to re-establish consonance. Understanding this process of disengagement from groups such as one percent motorcycle clubs, Special Forces and fundamental ideological groups provides awareness of the conditions for which disengagement is likely and avenues to accelerate or prevent the exit.

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