

24 A personality approach to involvement in new religious movements

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Why do people join New Religious Movements [NRMs]? Recent literature would not lead us to ask someone interested in personality trait research. A more sociological emphasis leads the way with the able work of Barker (1981) and Snow and colleagues (1980, 1983, 1983a, 1984). This slant and the legacy of the Brainwashing model of 'cult' conversion has de-emphasized personality predispositions in the affiliation process, emphasizing instead life context and group influence. Yet, understanding personality attributes of Eastern NRM affiliates powerfully contributes to the causal story regarding differential involvement, namely why does one person rather than another become involved in one kind of movement rather than another?

This paper presents evidence from an empirical study testing a resocialisation model of conversion (McIlwain, 1990), suggesting that life stress and social network disruption (or inadequacy) are necessary but not sufficient precursors of movement affiliation. Such a disrupted past might characterize those drawn to secular remedial groups such as psychotherapy. The model suggests that movement appeal is determined by a congruence between personality and movement attributes. Since Eastern NRMs are outside the dominant culture in Australia, they may attract those less traditional than the general community and Western NRM members. Since they emphasize life changes possible now rather than waiting for a remote afterlife, they may draw those less constrained, more willing to embark impulsively on a course of action and less open to delay in their pleasure-pain gratification style. Since Eastern NRMs promote a mystical relationship to nature and to spiritual leaders (a tendency not so readily accepted in Western NRMs where any suggestion that one is 'part of' God is seen as blasphemous

self-deification), those drawn to them may be more mystically oriented or 'absorptive', i.e. more prone to experience a sense of fusion with the object of perception, thus losing the sense of being a separate perceiver.

In addition to these predicted parameters of congruence between an individual's personality and attributes of the group contacted, involvement may be facilitated by an overlap in the orientation of individual and movement beliefs. Eastern NRM belief systems were discovered to posit superempirical forces, action at a distance, and other non-naturalistic modes of causation. The appeal of these beliefs is often overlooked by scientific observers (but see Snow & Machalek, 1983a). Such views of causation suggest that a person can act now to remedy his/her experience of stress, aloneness and suffering (via lifestyle, meditation, and chanting) while minimizing guilt and atonement. They are likely to appeal to those enduring recent disruption, especially if the group's views overlap with an individual's beliefs. So those drawn to Eastern and Western NRMs are likely to be more open to spiritual beliefs per se, while individuals drawn to Eastern NRMs are likely to be more open to Eastern spiritual beliefs than any other group.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants in four Eastern NRMs (E1: $N=14$; E2: $N=16$; E3: $N=30$; E4: $N=12$), and a Psychotherapy group ($N=11$) were approached at point of first contact with their group. There were two Control groups (neither NRM nor psychotherapy attenders): A Community sample ($N=17$) matched for age and socioeconomic status with the Eastern participants, and a Psychology First-year student sample ($N=39$). A Western NRM member group ($N=14$) was included, as access to first time affiliates was denied by the leader.

Measures

Disruptive Life Circumstances: Disruption in social support networks was measured using a self-report version of the Interview Schedule for Social Interaction, and disruption in recent life experiences was measured using the recent life events scale (Henderson, Scott, & Byrne, 1981).

Personality Traits: Traditionalism, Constraint, and Absorptive perceptual style were assessed using Tellegen's (1982) Multi-dimensional Personality Questionnaire [MPQ].

Congruence of Individual Beliefs with Movement Ideology: The intensity and orientation of spiritual beliefs were assessed using the Spiritual Orientation Scale [SOS] (McIlwain, 1990), developed using a multi-dimensional scaling technique (Michell, 1990), providing uni-dimensional metric interval scales assessing spiritual beliefs of a General, Eastern, and Western nature. The General items were analyzed separately to avoid an ill-conditioned factor matrix. The Eastern and Western factors are uncorrelated ($r = .09$) which, using varimax rotation, account for 53% of the variance. The scales have high internal consistency. Cronbach's alphas for the scales are: General = .98, Eastern = .92, Western = .88.

Procedure

The researcher approached the leaders of each of the NRMs and gave a general explanation of the aims of the study, while keeping private research hypotheses. Unconditional permission was granted by all Eastern group leaders for the researcher to ask individuals to participate in the study and conditional permission was granted by the leader of the Western NRM, (where only members could be approached). Subjects were approached personally by the researcher at their first visit to the respective Eastern communities, and the nature of the questionnaires was discussed with the suggestion that filling them out might bring to light some interesting personal issues. Subjects were asked to post back the questionnaires in a week's time. Subjects in Eastern NRMs and the Psychotherapy group were assessed at point of first contact with the movements, distinguishing the precursors from the sequelae of movement involvement. The Western member group is not of comparable status. Students received course credit, and the Community sample was selected randomly within specified suburbs from the phone book. Data were analyzed using a priori planned contrasts (in one-way ANOVAs).

Hypotheses: If stress experienced in a life context of inadequate social support is a precursor of movement involvement, it is predicted that those drawn to Eastern NRMs and psychotherapy, will have experienced in the last 12 months: (1) more life events and (2) less adequate social support (concerning acquaintances and intimate bonds) than the Western NRM and the Control groups. However, this background life experience is suggested to be insufficient to account for which kind of group is contacted; secular or spiri-

tual, Eastern or Western in spiritual orientation. Personality traits and beliefs may determine which *genre* of movement is contacted, and a congruence is predicted between individual traits and movement attributes. It is predicted that those drawn to Eastern NRMs will be (3) less traditional, (4) less constrained, (5) more absorptive, (6) more generally intensely spiritual, (7) more Eastern in their spiritual orientation than any other group, and (8) less Western in orientation than those belonging to the Western group.

RESULTS

Differential involvement in Eastern *spiritual* groups can only be accounted for when disruptive life experiences coincide with the predicted personality profile.

Disruptive life experiences

Systematic differences suggest that disruption is a precursor of movement involvement. Hypothesis 1 is partly supported since those drawn to Eastern NRMs had significantly more elevated levels of recent life events than the Western NRM ($p < .01$) and the two Control groups ($p < .0005$). However, they also had significantly more life events than the Psychotherapy group ($p < .05$), which is an unexpected result. Hypothesis 2 is supported as Eastern NRM affiliates were more lonely. They had significantly less adequate acquaintances than the Western NRM ($p < .005$) and than the Control groups ($p < .0005$) but, as predicted, they did not differ from the Psychotherapy group in this regard. Further, they had significantly less adequate intimate bonds than the Western NRM ($p < .0005$), than the Control groups ($p < .0005$), and, once more, they did not differ from the Therapy group in this regard.

Personality profile of affiliates

Hypothesis 3 is partly supported since the three Eastern NRMs are significantly less traditional than the Western NRM and the Control groups ($p < .0001$), though they do not differ from the Psychotherapy group on this measure. Hypothesis 4 is supported in that Eastern NRMs are significantly less constrained than all other groups: Less than the Psychotherapy group ($p < .05$), the Control groups ($p < .01$), and the Western NRM ($p < .0001$). Hy-

pothesis 5 is supported as the Eastern NRMs are more absorptive in their perceptual style than any other group: More than the Psychotherapy group ($p < .005$), the community Control group ($p < .0001$), the student Control group ($p < .005$), and the Western NRM ($p < .0001$). These findings support Tellegen's comment that the Absorption subscale of the MPQ might select those prone to mystical experiences.

Beliefs

The SOS revealed significant preexisting differences in spiritual orientation between those drawn to a secular self-help agency (the Psychotherapy group) and to NRMs, and further, distinguished those drawn to Eastern NRMs from those belonging to a Western NRM. Hypothesis 6 is partly supported in that those drawn to spiritual movements, Eastern and Western, were more generally spiritually intense than the Control groups ($p < .0001$) and did not differ from each other in this regard. However, neither did they differ from the Psychotherapy group on this measure. They all endorsed items central to any spiritual worldview. Hypothesis 7 is supported since the Eastern NRMs show greater assent to items of an eastern spiritual orientation than any other group, being more in accord with Eastern items than the Psychotherapy group ($p < .0005$), the Control groups and Western NRM ($p < .0001$). Hypothesis 8 is supported in that the Eastern NRMs were less Western in orientation than the Western group ($p < .0001$), however they endorsed these items significantly more than did the Control groups ($p < .01$).

DISCUSSION

The systematic differences outlined above support the resocialisation model of conversion (McIlwain, 1990), challenge any simple brainwashing account of movement involvement, and show definitively the explanatory utility of a personality approach to movement proneness. In line with the model's predictions, while a large number life events experienced by a lonely person is found to be characteristic of those drawn to Eastern NRMs, it is shown that consideration of the congruence of personality traits and movement attributes accounts for differential involvement. Namely, unconstrained and absorptive people may be predisposed by attributes of their temperament and personality to favor belief systems and affiliations which provide immediate answers and solutions to day to day (and ultimate) questions and problems.

Life experiences and social support adequacy on their own are insufficient to account for why a person joins a particular kind of social movement, since they also characterize those recently attending Psychotherapy (though the latter have experienced fewer disruptive life events than Eastern affiliates). However, there is little personality profile overlap between the Psychotherapy group and the Eastern NRMs. They share only a low level of traditionalism, and a general spiritual orientation. The latter may reflect the fact that the Psychotherapy group was run by a Methodist church, though open to all. These findings justify viewing NRMs in such a comparative context.

At point of first contact with a movement, congruence is demonstrated between a person's personality traits and spiritual orientation and attributes of the movement. The measures of constraint and absorption are powerful distinguishing features of those drawn to Eastern NRMs, with the absorption subscale of Tellegen's MPQ distinguishing those who have mystical tendencies. The study supports the discriminant validity of the SOS in assessing spiritual intensity and orientation to innovative spiritual movements.

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