Cults Essay, Research Paper

I. Brief Introduction

Recently during our in class discussion we where introduced to the definition of a

cult. So unbenounced to myself I was unaware of the fact this paper was due. Which is

entirely my fault. This in turn peaked my interest to learn more of the cult and where this

term originated. So The past week I attempted to read many articles on such things as

Waco and the like.

The controversy surrounding new religious movements seems to be foremost

concerned with whether or not the members of these religions come of their own freewill

or if they convert as a necessary and inevitable response to coercion, or brainwashing

techniques employed by the cult leaders. I previously stated this in one of my Journal

entries. It seems that there is always one man in charge with all the power . With this

power he can inevitably induce a form of brainwashing .

The concept of brainwashing came into popular existence in the 1950 s as the

result of attempts to try and explain the behavior of some American GI s who defected to

the Communists during the Korean War (19 Oct 1999). Many people, including some

professionals, found brainwashing to be an acceptable explanation for the otherwise

unexplainable behavior. However, the brainwashing theory did nothing to explain why

hundreds of other captured GI s chose to remain true to their country even at the risk of

being tortured. It could not accurately account for the behavior of a select few GI s when

it did not offer any explanation for the behavior of the majority. This also ties in with

something we discussed early on in the quarter called shell shock . Many times

throughout history we tend to seek an easy answer for that which we do not understand.

Or rather that which we DO NOT want to understand. It is much easier for us as humans

to dismiss such things to brainwashing or shellshock rather then to seek the truth.

Since the 1950 s, the concept of brainwashing has faded in and out of public

consciousness with a tendency to flare up again in the face of public controversy. In the

1960 s and 1970 s the brainwashing debate again took center stage, this time in an

attempt to explain the behavior of so-called radicals who left behind a normal life and

opted instead for a cult existence. I believe James would have questioned this. What is

a normal life . He stood on the grounds of, (in Lamens terms) to each their own. Who

are we to say who is right and who is wrong? If this cult life where to better a person

and do good for a community who are we to judge?

Although scholars of new religious movements would agree that religious groups

often have substantial influence over their followers, they would also argue that the

influence exerted in “cults” is not very different from influence that is present in

practically every arena of life, (19 Oct 1999). Mainstream religions also exercise

influence over their members concerning matters such as lifestyle choices, familial

relations and monetary donations. Furthermore, most social scientists concede that some

degree of influence is inevitable in each culture and facet of life even outside the arena of

religious choice.

Despite the fact that there do not appear to be any studies that conclusively

provide evidence of brainwashing as a legitimate explanation for joining, and in spite of

the many studies that have refuted that brainwashing defense successfully, the

brainwashing theory continues to be debated regularly. Although we tend to put this

concept to rest at times, it shall inevitably rear its ugly head. Then once again we must

question and dispute is it brainwashing or rather a free choice? The concept of

brainwashing is still often relied on to account for behavior that is otherwise culturally

unjustifiable.

If brainwashing is not an appropriate explanation for the conversion of people to

NRM s than what is? A common theme on the anticult side of the conversion debate is

the argument that members are, to varying degrees, predisposed to becoming cult

members. This supposed predisposition is commonly thought to be a product of

depression, grief, loneliness and a life filled with successive failures. Often these cults

are funded by its followers giving their worldly goods . Although I can not quote this In

one of the many articles I read in one such case where a successful business man was a

main contributor to the cult. However, as recent studies have shown, this is not entirely

true. Although many people who seek out NRM s are suffering with depression or have

realized some setbacks the same could be said of some that seek out mainstream

religions for the same reasons, namely to feel better about themselves and to find purpose

and meaning in life. Once again I must reiterate James s thoughts. His judge no others

concepts often put these views into question.

Shelley Leibert, an instructor with the Unification Church, has discussed two

main types of people that pass through the UC camps (Dawson, 1996:204). Leibert

describes one type as being well rounded, successful and secure while the other is

described as being drug users, dropouts and drifters. Leibert concludes that it is the latter

that are most unlikely to dedicate themselves to the lifestyle of the UC. Proponents of the

predetermination theory often argue that it is these depressed and lonely people who are

susceptible, predetermined and often targeted victims of cult brainwashing. They make

these assumptions often lacking any firsthand knowledge of cult recruiting practices.

While it is true that at times some cult members appear to be more vulnerable to cult

recruiting (Dawson, 1996:205), it remains that vulnerability and predisposed are two

different concepts. Furthermore, many of those who are deemed to be vulnerable

(recent divorcees, the grieving, etc.,) frequently regard their cult experience as a positive

and therapeutic experience, even after leaving the cult environment (Dawson, 1996:205).

Although, as Dr. John G. Clark suggests, these seemingly vulnerable people join NRM s in an attempt to feel better about themselves (Dawson, 1996:207), the same thing can

be said of many who join mainstream religious organizations. Regardless of whether the

vulnerable person chooses to join a mainstream religion or an NRM, it is, nevertheless,

still a choice. The exercising of freewill, or choice, by cult inductees is evident but their

frequent church, or cult, hopping done in order to find a group whose beliefs and

practices best answer their questions (Dawson, 1996:205).

The brainwashing theory conveniently provides an outlet for the anti-cult

movement to answer to the question of why some people chose NRM s over mainstream

religions. It allows those who leave NRM s and regret their former connections to avoid

taking responsibility for their actions and takes the blame for their deviant behavior

away from them. In doing so, the brainwashing theory negates the plausibility of freewill.

In closing, it could be argued that, if brainwashing were a legitimate theory, the

anti-cult movement exhibits more mind control behaviors than do NRM s, when

considering their participation in action such as deprogramming and their consistent

use of propaganda and half truths. It must be stated that it is a CHOICE.

II Brief conclusion

Often times in paper we must state the facts and argue each case with out opinion. This

is why I enjoy the journal topics. It is extremely hard to put ones own personal thoughts

and feelings into a paper. As I am right now, I am just winging it . With out any pre

planned writing but just stating what comes to my head. So Like I said The reason I

chose this topic was because of what we discussed in class also how the case of Waco

stuck so profoundly in our heads. Hopefully I will write on James in my next paper.

Many of the things regarding cults could be argued by James. I enjoy his non

judgmental way of thinking. Such as you can believe in what you want, like mystical

experiences .