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Social Control in Alternative Religions: A Familial Perspective*

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This article highlights the pervasiveness of family models in both the theological self-conceptions of alternative religious organizations and the sociological scholarship on them. We argue that these models provide useful directions for studying alternative religions, since both institutions frequently enmesh their members in constraining social environments that facilitate the occurrence of sustained and systematic abuse. Noteworthy, therefore, is the failure of alternative religion scholars to incorporate insights from standard family violence literature in their analyses of various religious groups. We outline three approaches to family violence literature — social structural, social systems, and feminist — that provide explanations about why members remain in abusive social relationships. These explanations shed light on the reasons why members remain in abusive alternative religions, and they establish clear conceptual links between the sociology of religion and the sociology of the family.

Discussion of social control and coercion within alternative religious organizations¹ remains a controversial topic. To the general public, such religions often are pejoratively called “cults,” and they appear to threaten and challenge dominant North American values, especially since the popular media usually sensationalize their deviant teachings (Beckford, 1985:5). Devious and coercive practices are identified popularly as the means by which these groups maintain members’ allegiance to such deviant standards. Concerned parents, official religious leaders, and others in mainstream culture continue to be troubled by the perceived threat of these groups. Various “countercult” groups,

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¹We deliberately cast a broad net with this term, since we cite examples from a wide range of ideological groups. Kanter’s (1972) work on nineteenth century communes, for example, provides us with theoretical insights, and most examples come from groups that social scientists call “new religions.” Additional examples, however, are taken from contemporary psychotherapeutic groups that their contemporary critics frequently lump together with “new religions” and call “cults.” All of the groups that we cite, however, share basic characteristics: they are in tension with significant aspects of the societies in which they operate, and they are not accepted as legitimate by the dominant religions (or psychotherapies) of their era. Moreover, almost all of them have charismatic leaders. The examples that we cite merely reflect our own research interests and the material with which we are most familiar, yet the perspectives that we present have applicability to a wide range of religiously and psychotherapeutically ideological phenomena.

primarily formed by parents whose children experienced sudden and totalistic "cult" conversions, are at the forefront of such charges.

These "countercult" groups draw upon early thought reform and brainwashing psychiatric literature for explanations of these religions' ability to win converts (e.g., Lifton, 1961; Sargant, 1959; Schein, 1961). In response to the perceived thought-reform or "brainwashing" threat, parents advocate coercive forms of deconversion through kidnapping and intense confrontation. "Countercult" groups resort to such "deprogramming" practices since they regard "cultic" coercion of novice devotees to be the crucial social control issue.

Many academics, however, consider the organized expression of this public (and parental) concern to be the more relevant issue of social control. Scholars focus on social control as applied *against* "cults" rather than within them. "Cults versus the family," therefore, is a common theme around which authors organize the "cult versus countercult" controversy (Beckford, 1982; Kilbourne and Richardson, 1982; Shupe and Bromley, 1980).² These authors assert that "countercult" groups are an organized social control response to cultic rebellion against conventional culture. "Countercult" accusations of thought reform or mind control, say scholars, invoke (and reflect) the generally deviant image of "new religions" (see Kent, 1990). From this societal control of deviance perspective, therefore, parents understandably are the defenders of order, since they serve as primary socializers into conventional culture (Shupe and Bromley, 1980:38).

"CULTS" AS FAMILIES

Much of the virulence of the "countercult" opposition arises from alternative religions' apparent challenge to traditional family roles (Kilbourne and Richardson, 1982:93). By advocating an all-or-nothing commitment, many alternative religions separate devotees from their families and often serve as substitute families themselves.³ They even establish fictive kinship systems that are purported to be of greater spiritual validity than families of origin (Shupe and Bromley, 1980:41). As well, these groups structure themselves as substitute families through affective ties, rules of behavior, and roles for members that are similar to family interaction (Robbins, 1988:46). For families of origin, the shocking loss of their children's loyalties to these usurpers legitimates the "brainwashing" charge. Most academics, however, view this "familism" as a positive factor in alternative religions, and regard the brainwashing allegations skeptically.

Debates among academics concerning coercive aspects of alternative religions do exist, yet most scholars affirm that "the burden of proof is on those who proffer the brainwashing hypothesis" (Richardson, 1983:11). In these discussions, sociologists give

²For example, Shupe and Bromley titled their book *The New Vigilantes* in reference to the "unhappy families" who first formed an "anti-cult movement" (1980:13).

³For examples of authors describing alternative religions as (new) families, see Conason with McGarahan, 1986:24 (on the Sullivanians); Sipchen and Johnston, 1988a:10 (concerning the attraction that John-Roger's MSIA [Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness] organization had for many converts); Dupertuis, 1983:143 (on the Divine Light Mission's premie community being "family like"); Persinger, Carrey, and Suess, 1980:143 ("[i]n many respects, the Maharishi and the [Transcendental Meditation] organization become the family surrogate for individual structure").

priority to debating the existence of coercive proselytization (“brainwashing”) and the validity of coercive exiting (“deprogramming,” arguably another form of “mind control”). As Robbins indicates, therefore, “the brainwashing thesis has been enormously influential, even among sociologists who tend to reject it and for whom it has set the agenda of inquiry and discourse” (1988:79).

In a similar vein, another author notes that a crucial gap in the study of alternative religions results from the preoccupation with putative brainwashing. “Conversion into religious sects is voluntary in a restricted, legalistic sense, but the emphasis on voluntariness tends to divert attention from various mechanisms of control of a coercive nature that can be applied once individuals have volunteered themselves” (Taylor, 1983:90). In the debate over entry and exit, sociologists largely neglect analyses of group practices that sustain and restrain committed members.⁴ As Robbins states when discussing the dependence of religious devotees, “without appealing to notions such as mind control, it is nevertheless arguable there is an imbalance or inequality of power between the authoritarian leadership of some movements and the individual participants” (1985:11).

Scholars’ attempts at an academic balance to the “cult controversy,” therefore, still follow the agenda set by the “countercult” movement and media on “entry and exit.” Their rejection of “brainwashing” declares coercive belief adjustment for both “entry” and “exit” to be neither socially desirable nor actually possible (Bromley and Shupe, 1981:4). In debunking “brainwashing” myths, however, and invalidating the practice of “deprogramming,” scholars obscure the realities of coercive commitment processes in ongoing membership. The discounting of sensationalistic coercive practices has diverted attention away from analyses of actual, systematic abuse within alternative religious groups. Similarly, the identification of the aforementioned familism of alternative religions as an entirely benign and beneficent element neglects possible features of “mundane” family style coercion.

A FAMILIAL ABUSE PERSPECTIVE FOR RESEARCH

We suggest a *familial abuse perspective* that adds to, and contrasts with, the simplistic and functional view of the family currently used in identifying familial patterns in alternative religions. In mainstream sociology, research on intrafamily violence and spousal abuse challenges the 1950s’ functional view of the family. We argue, therefore, that the same revision of family conceptualization will benefit scholars of alternative religions. To this end, our perspective further develops existing family characterizations of alternative religions by drawing from perspectives taken from family violence literature. We are motivated by the prevalence of the family explanation for alternative religions’ *success*, a formula that begs the question of possible family *conflicts* in these same groups.

⁴Though “cult” writers recognize power and domination as issues in isolated communal groups, their avoidance of brainwashing sensationalism underplays the extent of these factors. Two authors examining the horrific mass suicide of the “People’s Temple” in Guyana, acknowledge that “[o]f course, there are cases where leaders do exert ongoing personal control, as Jim Jones did, but this is not usual” (Bromley and Shupe, 1981:145).

Researchers examining the structural causes of family violence, in fact, recognize success and conflict as paradoxically coexistent in the family. This paradox is rooted, on the one hand, in cultural values and modes of family organization that promote love, support, and happiness. On the other hand, "because of this very same mode of organization and because of the influence of these same cultural values, conflict and violence coexist with these more benign aspects of married life" (Hotaling and Straus, 1980:10).

In applying this paradox to alternative religions, use of a family violence perspective does not discard the benefit realized by familyhood. The paradox actually affirms the ironic juxtaposition of "success and conflict" or "cohesion and coercion" as a more *complete* understanding of family-like relations. Use of this approach also incorporates, without "brainwashing" sensationalism, the concerns articulated by the "countercult" lobby and various scholars who argue that long-term abuses do occur in alternative religions.⁵ Our new perspective, therefore, rescues the "countercult's" concern with social control and coercion ("brainwashing") and places it within the context of the structure of long-term group commitment.

We present our familial abuse view in a theoretical outline of social control procedures that appear in many alternative religions. Our perspective employs the social structural, systems, and feminist theories from family abuse literature. First, the social structural tradition reveals common features of social location and structure shared by the family and alternative religions that allow violence. Second, the systems approach shows the role of an entire family or religious group in contributing to its own dependency. We also relate systems concepts of "boundaries" and the "closed system" (as developed for familial abuse) to alternative religious organizations. In the case of the feminist position, we connect the specific concept of "learned helplessness" to authoritarian charismatic leadership in alternative religions. The theory of learned helplessness describes the apparent powerlessness of battered women as a "normal" response to intermittent reinforcement (unpredictable behavior) by the batterer (Walker, 1989:47). Authoritarianism and erratic control that continually keeps dependents at a disadvantage are key similarities between charismatic leaders and controllers in abusive relationships.

A BRIEF CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF "FAMILY" IN ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS

Purposive Familyhood: Benefitting the Group

The connection, by various authors, of "familyhood" to commitment processes is important for understanding the sustained involvement of group members. Kanter remarks that "[m]any groups . . . sought to define themselves as families, use[d] images of brother and sister in describing the relationships among members and sometimes

⁵One author even declares that family violence, particularly long-term spouse abuse, is a form of "coercive control" (i.e., thought reform), whereby a "controller" employs greater "power" over a "dependent" (Okun, 1986:113). A pioneering sociologist of family violence in fact has described the family as the "most violent civilian group in our society" (Straus, 1980:24).

[took] a single family name" (1976:149). Kanter's research indicated that the development of such fictive kinship systems strengthen intragroup ties through affective bonding. Solomon states that for new converts to the Unification Church (the "Moonies") — a group with an explicit surrogate family base — "an intensification of affective bonds" replaces "familial and friendship ties lost or damaged" upon joining (1983:171).

When analyzing deconversion, Jacobs found an explicit connection between affective bonds and staying in groups. She discovered that the dyadic love relation, in the form of followers' love for their leaders, was an essential basis for members' loyalty to their groups. Separation from the group was complete only when departing members broke emotional ties with leaders (1987:306). Similarly, another researcher of deconversion indicates that he "found the literature on marital separation and divorce helpful in analyzing the gradual disengagement of followers from the group" (Wright, 1987:5).

Affective bonds and familial systems also support the hierarchical structure of new religions. Jacobs, for example, saw that leaders' basis for their power and authority over followers existed in their role as "paternal guardian[s], . . . potentially powerful source[s] of love, knowledge, and protection" (1987:306-7). In his seminal study of the early Unification Church, Lofland described the United States mission's leader as members' "'mother in faith,' with the responsibility of raising her 'spiritual children' " (1977:216). Later studies of the Unification Church noted the central importance of the fictive family to its structure and ideology. Members believe that the Reverend Moon and his wife are their "True Parents" and eventually create their own new families within the church (Fichter, 1983).⁶

The familial theme in new religions highlights emotional bonds among followers and between leaders and their followers. It also serves to buttress the authority of leaders, not only through the power of emotional dependence but also in providing a legitimation of the leaders' authority. Assigning a parental authority to leaders ensures the right of leaders to direct intimate details of devotees' lives. Thus, followers as "children" come to attribute their entire "spiritual" development to the guidance and power of their faith parents (Kent and Mytrash, 1990:35).⁷ As one leader of an emerging alternative religion allegedly stated many centuries ago, "unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:2-4).

Functional Familyhood: Benefitting Society

In attempting to place alternative religions within the context of larger society, sociologists resort to a functional theory for explanation. From this view, alternative

⁶See also Barker, 1984:81, 84 (on the Reverend Moon of the Unification Church as "True Father"). Other examples of alternative religious organizational leaders serving as parental figures include John-Roger of MSIA (Sipchen and Johnston, 1988b:2); Swami Muktananda (Gilchrist, 1984:127); and Wangerin, 1981:3 (on "Father" Moses David of the Children of God).

⁷For members' development of childlike dependencies on leaders, see Haaken and Adams, 1983:271 (on Lifespring and similar psychotherapies); Marin, 1979:44; Gordon, 1987:77, 135; and Strelley with San Souci, 1987:102 (on the Rajneeshes). For the development of childlike relationships among members see Henican, 1983:23 (concerning the Sullivians); Sipchen and Johnston, 1988a:10, 1988b:2; Strelley with San Souci, 1987:169; Haaken and Adams, 1983:275.

religions are a form of mediating structure between the nuclear family and general society. This theory contrasts the intimate warmth of social relations in the family and community with the incongruent reality of society as the "lonely crowd." Alternative religions supposedly mediate between the intimacy of the home and the impersonal nature of outside social existence, thereby offering an affective solution to modern loneliness (Dunphy, 1972:34; Robbins, 1985:9; Robbins and Anthony, 1982:66). In this vein, Robbins explains that " 'mediating structures' provide the opportunity for close, face-to-face contact with other persons with whom one shares common sentiments and solidarity," and that the familial motif emerged as an aspect of this societal role. "Social movements are often effective mediating structures because they emphasize universal values and often integrate these meanings into 'familial' or diffusely affective and expressive patterns of interpersonal relationships" (1988:46).

Analogies between family and new communal religions, therefore, generally take this functional and orderly form. For example: "the most visible of the new religious movements are organized communally, and the communal group serves many of the functions of families" (Bromley, Shupe, and Oliver, 1982:119). Scholars of new religions reflect family sociology's opinion that, as one of the "functional equivalents" of the extended family, communal living can "fulfil many of the functions traditionally fulfilled by the extended kin" (Scanzoni and Scanzoni, 1981:286, 288). Discussing urban communes, Cornfield even proposed "a review of the literature on family (or marital) 'success,' a compilation of alleged causal factors, and a comparison of that list with the predictors cited in the literature on communal success." In such a study, "by noting the degree of overlap between the two bodies of literature, one could explore the extent of the parallels between family and communal dynamics" (1983:125).

Conflict and Coercion in Familyhood: A Hidden Presence

As this discussion reveals, the current family metaphor suggests routes for understanding the "success" functions of communally organized alternative religions. Nevertheless, the family analogy in its current form is a one-sided perspective. In implementing a functional familial comparison, sociologists, like proponents of traditional family unity, generally disregard components of abuse,⁸ coercion,⁹ power differentials,¹⁰ and conflict.¹¹ The wealth of literature developed over the last twenty years on spouse

⁸We are sympathetic with the insight provided by Gelles and Straus (1988:57) that "abuse is not a scientific or clinical term. Rather it is a political concept. Abuse is essentially any act that is considered deviant or harmful by a group large enough or with sufficient political power to enforce the definition." Nonetheless, the term is used widely in family violence literature, and we offer a broad definition of it that builds upon insights provided by David Gil (and is paraphrased in Gelles and Straus, 1988:57): "Abuse is any acts of commission or omission by an individual or individuals, organization, institution, or society that deprives people of equal rights or liberty, and/or interferes with or constrains people's ability to achieve optimal developmental potential."

⁹By coercion we mean "the use of any forms of power in attempts to gain compliance."

¹⁰By "power differentials" we mean "the unequal ability to obtain rewards while avoiding punishments and costs" (see Gelles, 1983:157).

¹¹The earlier reference, however, to Jacobs's work on the role of affective bonding to charismatic leaders is an exception. She notes, for instance, that in Christian-based groups "abuse is often justified

abuse, family violence, and failings of the family ideal apparently is conceptually compartmentalized as irrelevant to the familial nature of alternative religions.

The discussion of alternative religions as "mediating structures" also is incomplete, since it idealizes both the nuclear family and small face-to-face communities. A more useful perspective appears in Jacobs's argument that the "new religions" offer family substitutes. By tracing the upsurge of "cults" to the *failure* of the patriarchal family ideal, Jacobs contended that "new religions" offer members the possibility of first experiencing the "mythological" family life-style.

Cornfield's proposal (above) is similar to our own in one respect. We, too, wish "to explore the extent of the parallels between family and communal dynamics" in our perspective, but with attention to power and coercion, not "success." That attention stresses "negatives" in order properly to redress the omission of coercive control in alternative religions. As Cornfield advocated, our approach looks for an "overlap" between two bodies of literature. In contrast to Cornfield, however, we review the family violence literature and alternative religions research.

APPLICABILITY OF OUR PROPOSED PERSPECTIVE

We suggest that the "family violence" perspective is particularly relevant to alternative religions that are: somewhat detached from a society with which they are at tension, communally based, and charismatically led. Intense relations, intimate face-to-face interaction, social isolation, and a dynamic of powerful leaders and dependent followers all provide the context for familial styles of coercion. Studies of family violence show there are "many incidents" of on-going abuse, primarily by men against women, performed in an "incredible variety of ways" (Stacey and Shupe, 1983:29). Family-style coercive control practices in alternative religions also are diverse. Physical abuse (including assault,¹² deprivation of regular sustenance and shelter, and onerous physical

by a norm of discipline within the 'religious family' which sanctions domestic violence and allows the spiritual father to punish his children in order to secure their relationship to god." Jacobs's research actually reveals the abuse of both "positive" aspects of the emotional bonding process (i.e., legitimization of authority and intragroup ties). First, members experienced physical cruelties and psychological abuse at the hands of their leaders, thus betraying their followers' submission to leaders' paternal authority. Second, they experienced the failure of their special relationship of "love" with the leader, an experience Jacobs terms "the most painful realization of all" (1987:300-302).

¹²For examples of physical assault in alternative religious organizations see Gordon, 1987:83-84 and Strelley, 1987:82 (for "therapeutic violence" in Rajneeshee groups during the 1970s); Conason with McGarrahan, 1986:24 (for mention of Sullivanian therapists slapping clients); Hubner and Gruson, 1988:115 (in which the now-excommunicated ISKCON leader, Kirtanananda, allegedly told an abused wife to submit to her husband); Saint John's Calgary Report, 1979:49-50 (in which Alpha and Omega Order of Melchizedek's leader, David Livingstone, ordered a pregnant woman's common-law partner to beat her with a belt, after which he and other followers also did so); Gazette, 1989 (describing the arm-amputation and castration that Roch Theriault, leader of an Ontario commune called the Ant Hill Kids, perpetrated on followers). For specific examples of physical assault of a sexual nature occurring in alternative religions, see Marin, 1979:52 (concerning Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche's orders for followers to attack and strip a man and a woman who had refused to stay at a party); Kornfield, 1985; Gordon, 1987:84 (among the Rajneeshees); Conason with McGarrahan, 1986:22 (concerning the sexual exploitation of Sullivanian women); Hinduism Today, 1989:3 (concerning the transmission of AIDS to members of the Vajradhatu International Buddhist Church by Osel Tendzin [Thomas Rich], who was the successor to the late Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche); Leydecker, 1985; Colin, Seidman, and Lewis, 1985 (concerning

or religious "tasks"¹³) is the first and most obvious practice. Emotional and psychological abuse, primarily involving the debasement of the follower's identity, is a second practice common to many alternative religions and families.¹⁴ Economic coercion through group or leader control of individual finances is an important third method for maintaining devotees' (or spouses') dependency.¹⁵ Total disbursement of one's monetary resources ensures commitment and the reduction of viable alternatives to group affiliation. Social isolation, both from society and within the group (shunning) is a fourth form of coercion.¹⁶ Isolation from society affirms group boundaries and interaction. Isolation from fellow members once one is entrenched in such a system is a radically stronger control mechanism. The personal sense of rejection and loneliness is intense when one's solitary source of affective support is severed. In fact, analysts of family violence regard isolation to be so severe a form of coercion that they term it "social battering" (Okun, 1986:69).

As noted previously, our perspective compares ideas gleaned from two distinct bodies of literature (family violence and alternative religions). The family violence literature, however, is so theoretically diverse and extensive that we focus upon three

alleged activities within the community that followed Da Free John); and Rodarmor, 1983 (concerning Swami Muktananda). Still more examples exist of sexual activities initiated by spiritual leaders toward their followers that probably were exploitative but may not have involved assault. For examples see Gordon, 1987:79-80 (concerning Rajneesh and female devotees); Sipchen and Johnston, 1988b:12 (concerning John-Roger and men within his inner circle); and Butler, 1983 (concerning Zentatsu Baker-roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center).

¹³See Miller, 1987:286 (for mention of exhausting work regimes and meagre food on a Scientology ship whose crew Hubbard was punishing); Hubner and Gruson, 1988:259 (for mention of fourteen- and fifteen-hour work days over five weeks for a Krishna fundraiser); Hall, 1981:179 (discussing the charges of long work hours in Jonestown); and Fitzgerald, 1986:322 (for Rajneeshes who "continued to work twelve hours a day with more or less serious ailments" because "[t]he rule was that those who could not work had to leave").

¹⁴For examples of psychological abuse by alternative religious organizations against their members see Butler, 1985 (for mention that Da Free John's "teachings were similar to the 'crazy wisdom' traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, where teachers may humorously trick and humiliate their followers for their spiritual growth"); Mitchell, Mitchell, and Ofshe, 1980:268-69 (where Synanon's leader, Charles Dederich, "perform[ed] some kind of emotional surgery on [members] who were getting along pretty well" by forcing them to swap lovers); and Mitchell, Mitchell, and Ofshe, 1980:136-39 (describing Synanon's "game" of indictments and emotional assaults levelled against members in group settings); Thomas, 1977 (describing "The Arena" or accusations, charges, and verbal assaults that leaders of PSI Mind Development Institute [also known as People Searching Inside (or Inward)] subjected participants to in the group's Inward Bound VII course); and Alberta, 1979:225 (describing a "clearing" process involving nearly seven hours of accusations and pleadings for forgiveness imposed upon a follower of Alpha and Omega Order of Melchizedek by its leader and his wife).

¹⁵For economic coercion by alternative religions against their members see Conason with McGarahan 1986:19; Sipchen and Johnston, 1988b:2; Bainbridge, 1978:168-69 (perpetrated by the upper class of the Power or Process Church against the lower- and middle-rank membership); Saint John's Calgary Report, 1979:51 (against members of Alpha and Omega Order of Melchizedek by their leader); Wallis, 1976:179 (on the financial costs involved in admitting disagreement or doubts about Scientology training).

¹⁶For examples of isolation of group members from one another see Alberta, 1979:225 (describing how Alpha and Omega Order of Melchizedek placed troublesome members in a house that was "used apparently for isolating members who were creating difficulties with respect to [the leader's] directions"); and Wallis, 1976:145 (discussing the Scientology punishment of "exclusion of the individual from effective interaction with the believers").

of its most recognized perspectives.

Social Structural Explanation

The "failure" of apparently autonomous adult female victims to leave violent relationships is an important issue in the family violence literature. Psychologists' early research suggested that pathological masochism sustained a woman's persistent participation in an unhealthy relationship (Stacey and Shupe, 1983:9; Walker, 1988:14). The structural approach of sociologists followed, countering with such theories as the family's freedom from social control, "culture of violence," women's economic dependence, and women's commitment to the relationship (Gelles, 1974:188, 1987:119; Strube and Barbour, 1983:786). Sociologists, like the psychologists, largely continued the implicit focus on women's failure to depart from abusive familial situations (perennially titled "Why do they stay?").

Social-psychological answers similarly emerged regarding "exit" in alternative religions. Sociologists labeled former (exited) "cult" members' accounts of abusive control practices "atrocious tales." They suggested that such tales legitimized former cult membership as an experience of oppression of will, which removed the stigma of voluntary deviant membership (Bromley, Shupe, and Ventimiglia, 1983:141; Shupe and Bromley, 1980:154).

The effect of "psychologizing" in both family and alternative religious analysis is to "blame the victim." The posited need of violence by battered women diminished their status as actual victims. Similarly, religious devotees' "need" for social acceptance supposedly prompts their "atrocious tales." In discounting these stories of "brainwashing" control, academics also devalue reports of coercion and abuses as self-serving in (at least subconscious) intent. Consequently, they largely ignore social processes and structure that plausibly account for actual victimization.

Gelles's pioneering study of violence between adult "marrieds" affirmed the importance of social processes and structure (1974:188). Gelles's early perspective of a "structural theory of violence" for the family attempts to explain the apparently higher rate of such conflict among lower-class families by suggesting that lower social power leads to the greater likelihood of violent acts. Subsequent family violence research upheld the importance of social structure but, in contrast to Gelles's early theory, established that "domestic violence, particularly woman-battering, is . . . found throughout all levels" of society (Stacey and Shupe, 1983:38). Similarly, researchers deny that family violence is directly learned and generationally repeated (Okun, 1986:63; Stacey and Shupe, 1983:43-45).

Current structural theory, therefore, regards family violence as "built in" to the family, and not learned or passed on to a particular subset of society. Social structural theorists conclude that family violence paradoxically is rooted in family intimacy (Hotaling and Straus, 1980:10). Their argument cites cultural values and modes of organization that ostensibly support "marital bliss" as key contributors to this dilemma. The uniqueness of these factors requires, they argue, a "special theory of violence" (Hotaling and Straus, 1980:15).

A 1979 listing of "distinctive" social structural factors developed by Straus and

Gelles was a step toward such a special "violence theory." They listed eleven factors that affected family violence: (1) time at risk, (2) range of activities, (3) intensity of involvement, (4) infringing activities, (5) right to influence, (6) age and sex discrepancies, (7) ascribed roles, (8) family privacy, (9) involuntary membership, (10) high levels of stress, and (11) extensive knowledge of social biographies (in Hotaling and Straus, 1980:15-18). Alternative religions, however, and especially those that are communally based, exhibit the same factors that facilitate violence. Factors of privacy, intense involvement, and right to influence especially are descriptive of life-style conditions in many "cults" or alternative religions. One journalist, for example, who studied the Rajneesh community expressed these factors in colorful imagery when she reported that "in Oregon the commune had clenched up like a muscle, to become rigid, controlling, and compulsive" (Fitzgerald, 1986:356).

These common elements, therefore, support application of the structural "special theory" of violence to alternative religions. The key to that "special theory" is the mutual intensity of family and communal alternative religious affiliations. Both groups exhibit the paradoxical conflict that Coser identified for intimate groups: a conflict originating in frequent interaction and total personality involvement (noted in Foss, 1980:116).

Social Systems Explanation

A second sociological theory of family violence treats families as "systems." The systems approach espouses the view that family violence is a product of a complex interplay of factors. A dependence, therefore, on a "single-cause" theoretical approach is conceptually inadequate, for in reality, social phenomena do not result from linear-causal relationships. The authors of a recent sociological treatment of family violence declared in this spirit that: "[w]e must abandon single-cause explanations such as sexism, psychological insecurity, media influence, and economic strains and yet simultaneously embrace them all" (Shupe, Stacey, and Hazlewood, 1987:19).

These three authors support a systems perspective because of their own growing realization that wife-battering is not the only form of family violence between adults. Women do not cause as much physical "damage" but can, and often do, act violently, and thus contribute to familial violence (Steinmetz, 1977:69). Furthermore, many women return (often several times) to abusive relationships despite apparent opportunities to remain out (Okun, 1986:56). Systems analysis reveals that members of abusive relationships form "symbiotic" relationships, each reciprocally contributing to the conflict. In such a mutually dependent system, these members "form a bond or symbiosis so it's 'us against the world' " (Shupe, Stacey, and Hazlewood, 1987:60).

A family system of this type is "closed," as evidenced by strong resistance to influence by the larger system (i.e., society). Such a closed system discourages both outside influence and "novel inputs" from within that would upset the symbiosis (Giles-Sims, 1983:10). This notion of closed systems is particularly relevant to understanding alternative religions. Common in such groups is the design of doctrines and structures in order to exclude harmful or "sinful" societal influence.¹⁷ Likewise, alternative religions

¹⁷For various alternative religions' attempts to exclude the allegedly harmful or sinful societal influences

advocate the development of “new” ways of life that challenge the conventions of their immediate societies. Strict “system boundaries” develop through the use of a unique religious vocabulary,¹⁸ codes of behavior, ritual activities, and exclusive residences. These boundaries prevent the influence of societal counterparts and help to stabilize the patterns of interaction within the group. The negative feedback of group and leader sanctions deter any “novel” responses that may upset established patterns. Describing, therefore, a system as “closed” is an alternative way of saying that it is socially isolated and private. As Kanter notes, communal members “have a clear sense of their own boundaries” and develop a “strong distinction between the inside and the outside” (1972:52).

The role of leaders in establishing standards and rules is important to maintaining a closed system. In the family, “[i]f one member of the system is more powerful, [then] his/her own personal goals prevail over the goals of the total system” (Giles-Sims, 1983:15). In alternative religions, leaders’ professed goals maintain a socially unique direction for the group, and so invalidate life outside the group’s influence. Again, Kanter discovered that successful utopias often were directed by one individual with “ultimate guiding power.” These leaders’ patriarchal authority contributed to group solidarity by rallying followers to their common status as “brothers and sisters” (1972:118, 132).

The system notions of established interaction and of closed boundaries repeat the structuralist attention to factors of isolation, privacy, and freedom from outside social control. These “separate world” factors hold particular relevance as religions’ unique patterns of interaction often facilitate abusive practices. Members’ adherence to such “deviant standards,” then, is attributable to the strength of *internal* social control mechanisms. These group-constructed patterns are a strong interactional currency for fellow devotees who employ them in a conjoint affirmation of limiting standards. Familial systems theory suggests, therefore, that religious devotees compose a “follower system.” In other words, followers maintain charismatic leaders’ authority, along with their own dependence, by mutually encouraging the belief in their own inadequacy or “sinfulness.”¹⁹

see Gordon, 1987:131-34 (concerning the Rajneeshees’ anti-AIDS efforts and their fear of attack from outsiders); Conason with McGarrahan, 1986:22-23 (on the Sullivaniens’ establishment of an emergency communications and transportation-evacuation systems out of New York City after Three Mile Island); Pritchett, 1985:xiii (on the Children of God’s representation of churches, schools, regular employment, and members’ parental families as the “Great Whore of Babylon”); and Lamont, 1986:38, 44-45 (for a brief discussion of Scientology’s program to purge drugs from the body).

¹⁸For examples of unique religious language that isolates members from outside social influences, see Gordon, 1987:135 (who described Rajneeshee terminology as making “oppression seem like spiritual discipline”); Hubbard, 1975 (for nearly five hundred pages of Scientology definitions); Wangerin, 1981:xii-xvi (for terms used by the Children of God); and Clarke, 1990:472 (for examples of the Christ Family’s terms).

¹⁹These “follower-follower” interactions are crucial aspects that Weber’s charismatic relationship does not delineate, as he argues only that charisma rests on a “follower-leader” relationship. Simply put, he indicated that a prophet whose message is not accepted and believed by a committed fellowship is nothing more than another eccentric. The prophet’s special “charismatic” status is dependent, he claimed, on a following of believers who recognize that charisma (1968:52). Systems theory, however, suggests that the “follower-follower” system also supports a charismatic leader as established interactions among

Feminist Explanation

The feminist perspective on family violence is concerned with the social control that men exert over women. As one author summarized, “[f]eminists advocate asking why conjugal violence tends to victimize women so much more than it does men, rather than inquiring why the family is such a violent institution” (Okun, 1986:108). Answering this question, feminist theory identifies women’s victimization in the home as ultimately the result of the sexist and violent organization of society. “[I]mplications and statements of male superiority breed inequality in male/female relationships. They encourage men’s control over women and the abuse of power. In the end, they lead to violence” (Walker, 1989:3).

Walker’s model of “learned helplessness” accounts for why a woman does not leave a battering relationship. She argues that such a woman is engaging in “coping responses” to extreme stress, and by remaining is dealing with the “demons” that she knows well. The degree of control held by the man and the degree of dependency of the woman conspire to render “leaving” even more problematic than “staying.” Existence outside of the relationship includes the factor of the unknown in addition to the man’s continued interventions. The helplessness that Walker describes results from a woman’s inability to “predict the effect her behaviour will have” on her situation (1989:50). That inability emerges from experiencing long-term and chaotically patterned abuse practices by the batterer.

In a battering relationship, “the batterer’s chief power is his seemingly random and variable unpredictability” (Walker, 1989:47). Batterers exhibit a characteristic “good/bad” or “Jekyll/Hyde” dynamic of constant personality change that follows the popular image of “schizophrenia.”²⁰ Women are confronted by capricious individuals who at one moment behave in loving and caring fashions but in the next are violent and abusive. Thus women are “helpless” before partners’ apparently “irrational” behavior, unable to respond effectively and exact personal control over their lives.

The unpredictability of a “controller” has a direct counterpart in studies of charismatic leadership. Groups that are charismatically led exhibit “histories [that] are curiously volatile and erratic in terms of the diversity of their innovations and the abruptness and unpredictability with which these innovations are introduced” (Wallis, 1983:4). This “constant ambiguity and contradiction” relates to the charismatic leader’s need to maintain exclusive control (Wallis, 1982:106). The charismatic leader also acts unpredictably to oppose any routinization of his or her authority. Thus a charismatic leader is “irrational” in seemingly acting without “common sense.” More important, the leader opposes the “rationalization” (routinization) of his or her leadership role that would permit its bureaucratization (Weber, 1968:61). The maintenance of

members affirm their common subservience to the leader. These interactions act as a mutual support system that upholds followers’ allegiance during moments of doubt or when the leader is absent.

²⁰For examples of alternative religious leaders undergoing dramatic personality changes, see Sipchen and Johnston, 1988b:12 (on “the ‘Jekyll and Hyde’ differences between John-Roger’s increasingly high-profile public personality and the ‘mean, cruel, dictatorial’ personality revealed to those closest to him”); Mitchell, Mitchell, and Ofshe, 1980:152 (concerning evaluations of Synanon’s Charles Dederich as being both “coarse and vicious” and other times “charming”); Corydon and Hubbard, 1987:98; and Miller, 1987:269 (for screaming and shouting incidents of Scientology’s founder, L. Ron Hubbard).

a constantly changing capricious leadership affirms the constant primacy of the leader's final word. Nothing becomes "certain" except for the leader's latest edict. Thus followers "are rendered exclusively dependent upon the leader who remains the sole source of certainty" (Wallis, 1983:10). The dependence of a charismatic's followers is the mirror image of the battered woman's helplessness in the face of unpredictability.²¹

Battering men generate an aura of omniscience by their constant but chaotically administered abuse. The long-term subjection to men's coercion eventually causes women to believe that there is no limit to batterers' control. As well, those in the community whose interests are threatened by the fall of socially powerful batterers sometimes aid them by "hushing up" women's atrocity tales (Walker, 1989:107). Even the "objective" legal system leaves many battered women vulnerable to continued assault, despite attempts to sanction batterers negatively through the courts (Davidson, 1978:88; Walker, 1989:236). With the "world against them," women in extremely abusive relationships often attest to a fear of the husband's influence "beyond the grave" (Walker, 1989:64).

Women's belief in their batterers' omniscience finds obvious comparison in the alleged spiritual authority and power of religious leaders. In particular, the charismatic "mandate" or "gift," supported by requisite "miracles," demonstrates the unusual abilities of a leader for followers (Weber, 1978:1114). Furthermore, charismatic figures establish a repertoire of "heroic" abilities that sets them above admiring followers (Stone, 1982:154). Finally, as with the socially influential batterer, interested parties (i.e., committed members and friendly supporters) protect charismatic leaders when "atrocity tales" potentially threaten their public status.

Crucial to feminist explanations is the amount of control exercised by men over women. This extensive control is based in physical, psychological, emotional, and economic forms of abuse, manipulation, and choice-limitation. Such factors find direct parallels in alternative religions as forms of "coercive control." Like Walker, Lewis Okun termed the "brainwashing" manipulation in female abuse a type of coercive control. He noted that comparison to the earlier studies of thought reform is justified by the replication of verbal abuse, physical beatings, and confinement in the family (Okun, 1986:115-16). Feminism's "controller-dependent" power dynamic for coercive control is retained if we replace "men" with religious leaders and "women" with religious followers.

CONCLUSION: FAMILY COERCION AND ALTERNATIVE RELIGIONS

Each of the theoretical positions on family abuse that we have reviewed contributes toward understanding coercive dynamics in alternative religions. The logic behind this comparison rested in the acknowledged familial aspects of these faiths, and it

²¹For examples of the unpredictability of alternative religious leaders see Jaynes, 1987:7 (concerning Trunpa Rinpoche); Dupertuis, 1983:208-11 (concerning Guru Maharaj Ji); Corydon and Hubbard, 1987:59-60 (on the fits of "furious screaming" and "amazing outrage" demonstrated by Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard). Strelley with San Souci (1987:250-51) discuss the unpredictability of work assignments for Rajneeshee workers in the Poona ashram. A classic description of learned helplessness among Rajneeshees appears in Strelley with San Souci, 1987:83.

assumed that critical weaknesses existed in an idyllic model of family life. In family studies, the development of more negative attributes breaks the idyllic stereotype, but these attributes have not been applied yet to “familial” analyses of alternative religions. We propose this application not only to enhance the familial analogy but also to develop a more theoretically grounded understanding of coercion and abuse in alternative religious groups. Thus allegations of abuse in alternative religious organizations need not emerge from an unnecessarily pejorative outlook on these groups, since the literature on family violence suggests that such behavior is widespread in “normal” social life.

The familial abuse perspective for alternative religions incorporates an accepted body of empirical and theoretical literature to explain the existence of intragroup violence and control. In so doing, these control practices are not deemed a result of “deviant” social norms or values, but are recognized as products of already identified social processes. The emphasis rests on the “irony” of intense familial relations, and on the degree of control held by and accorded to charismatic religious leaders.

Each of the three family violence theories reviewed here offers unique insights into coercive control and abuses within a variety of alternative religions. The social structural approach to family violence serves two purposes in our perspective. First, it affirms a social process approach to familial coercion against a purely psychological treatment of the issue. Next, it permits clear comparison of the structural basis for “familial” violence in both families and alternative (especially communal) religions. Our second comparative review, the systems approach, suggests analysis of multiple factors for control and conflict in its “multitheoretical” emphasis. It also highlights followers’ participation in producing conflict. Our third comparative review of feminist theory clearly emphasizes the patriarchal authority of alternative religions’ leaders. Like the first two theories, the feminist approach underlines the role of participants’ perception in maintaining abusive situations. It does so in the context of identifying the negative consequences that arise from the power of controlling husbands or leaders.

The assembled components of our threefold “familial abuse perspective” provide ready comparison to charismatically led alternative religions. Alternative religious organizations provide a unique environment for examination of the same linkages between affective bonding and coercive control that develop in the family. Few other social settings exist that involve the immersion of the “total” person within an environment of minimal external social control and intense internal group control. Like the family, elements of “voluntary” personal commitment (“internalized” control) frequently enmesh individuals even further within abusive “cult” affiliations.

Researchers who employ insights suggested here will benefit from observing the coexistence of cohesion and coercion in intimate social relations, as well as the frequent participation of victims in their own abusive situations. In short, the merging of cohesion and coercion frequently results in victims believing that apparently abusive events are either justified or not actually abusive. Strongly held religious views and personal relationships explain differences between participants’ views and many outsiders’ perceptions. Consequently, discussions of abuse and manipulative control are least likely to come from persons who are operating under their burdens.

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