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Information Disease: Effects of Covert Induction and Deprogramming

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Introduction

In their 1978 book *Snapping: America's Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, Conway and Siegelman introduced the term 'information disease' for what may represent a new class of information-processing disorders caused not by germs, drugs, illness, or any recognized physical abuse, but by the manipulation of information. Their concept proposed that basic human capacities of thinking and feeling can be altered solely by information and communication.

In this initial explication, Conway and Siegelman supported their contentions with comments from interviews with former members of some extremist religious sects they refer to as 'cults' and a number of related 'mass-marketed self-help therapies,' many of which, according to their distinction, employ 'identifiable communication techniques' that may 'make captive' and, over time, alter or impair fundamental individual information-processing capacities (Conway and Siegelman, 1978, 1979, p. 220).

Ex-members they spoke with reported a variety of disturbances of thinking and feeling that persisted for months and, in some instances, for years after they left the group. Such conversations were sufficiently convincing that the authors felt it necessary to conduct a more systematic study to document the alleged effects of the communication techniques used by these so-called 'new age' cults and sects. A questionnaire was constructed that contained 98 specific and four open-ended questions covering every stage of experience in the new cults and sects: recruitment, conversion, daily membership life, separation, 'deprogramming,' rehabilitation, and long-term effects.

The questionnaires were distributed to ex-sect members who were contacted through intermediaries: psychiatrists, lawyers, social workers, clergy, etc. Nearly a quarter of the questionnaires sent out by these intermediaries were completed and returned, almost all

within six weeks. A summary of preliminary findings published by Conway and Siegelman (1982) received widespread attention and has become the subject of growing interest in the academic community.

In light of this growing interest, however, and because of the controversy that surrounds this subject, the authors were reluctant to release their full findings until the entire body of data could be analyzed, substantiated, and prepared for more formal presentation. In 1984, this effort was undertaken jointly by Conway and Siegelman and researchers at the University of Oregon Communication Research Center Project on Information and Social Change. This report represents the first in a series of studies on this subject and related issues of communication, persuasion, and social change to be presented by the project.

Overview of the Project on Information and Social Change

Analysis of the Conway and Siegelman Data

A total of 426 questionnaires were obtained, each providing slightly over 100 bits of information on each respondent (including multiple coding of open-ended questions). Seventy-three of these were completed by parents, which will be analyzed separately; therefore, the sample size for the data analysis reported here is 353.

Makeup of Groups Represented in the Sample

Subjects were ex-members of 48 different sects, including the five largest represented in the sample: Unification Church (N = 153, or 44 percent); Divine Light Mission (N = 40, or 11 percent); Church of Scientology (N = 36, or 10 percent); The Way International (N = 22, or 6 percent); and Hare Krishna (N = 19, or 5 percent). In addition, there were smaller numbers of other international groups and local or minor sects such as the Children of God, the Faith Assembly, the Love Family, the Tony and Susan Alamo Foundation, the Rajneesh Neosannyas International Commune, the Farm, and the Church Universal and Triumphant.

Background of the Sample (Appendix, Part I)

From the demographics obtained, the respondents appeared to differ little from the national population. Slightly more than half the subjects are women (50.1 percent/49.9 percent). They range in age from mid-

teens to mid-fifties, with a mean age of 21 at the time of first contact. Their prior religious background also seems to be fairly typical: Protestant, 45 percent; Catholic, 27 percent; and Jewish, 21 percent, with the exceptions of a disproportionate number of ex-members of some sects from both Catholic and Jewish backgrounds (primarily in Eastern and esoteric groups), which may or may not accurately represent their true proportions within any particular group.

Time in and First Contact

Respondents, on the average, spent just under three years (34 months) in their respective groups. Subjects experienced first contact with the organization in a variety of places, but the most frequently cited place was on the street--with school and home running a close second and third: on street (33 percent); at school or college (25 percent); in private home (19 percent); at work (8 percent); through books, ads, etc. (6 percent); and at airport/train terminal (2 percent).

It is no surprise, then, that the type of person initiating that first contact was described primarily as a "stranger" (63 percent), as opposed to a "friend" (30 percent) or a "relative" (7 percent).

Reasons for Joining

Subjects were asked to rate a variety of factors that might explain their attraction to these groups on a scale of whether each was "very important," "important," "not important," and "most important." An interesting finding here is that those factors receiving the most "very important" ratings seem to relate to a "personal persuasion" dimension. For example, two-thirds of the sample rated perceived happiness of other members as very important, and 37 percent rated it as the single most important factor. Ratings of the other factors can be seen in the following.

	Very Important	Most Important
Apparent happiness of members	66 percent	37 percent
Group's beliefs	48 percent	19 percent
Pressure from members/leaders	41 percent	15 percent
Group's social/political goals	35 percent	6 percent

Attention of opposite sex member	25 percent	8 percent
Group leader's «charisma»	24 percent	2 percent
Group's rituals or techniques	21 percent	6 percent
To escape from family/society	20 percent	9 percent

That «desire to escape from family or society» received the least rating lends some credence to the researchers' hypothesis that involvement in these groups has come about primarily as a result of persuasive techniques from within rather than from other external factors. Similarly, the leader's «charisma» did not receive a very high rating. Only two percent rated it as the most important factor.

Similar observations can be made by looking at the other end of that scale--the «not important ratings» of the group-attracting factors: group rituals or techniques (48 percent); attention of opposite sex member (48 percent); means of escape from family/society (48 percent); group leader's «charisma» (47 percent); group's social/political goals (33 percent); pressure to join from members/leaders (26 percent); group's beliefs (11 percent); and apparent happiness of members (6 percent).

Selected Aspects of Daily Life in the Group (Appendix, Part II)

Sleep and Diet

Some aspects of daily life in these groups are strikingly similar and some show considerable variance from group to group. The amount of sleep reported averaged only six hours--with a narrow range of only 5.2 to 6.4 hours. Clearly, sleep was not an «escape» offered these subjects nor, at an average of six hours per night, could it be considered an extreme physical deprivation in most groups.

Similarly, nearly half of the respondents reported a vegetarian or low-protein, but not unhealthy, diet (50 percent), while the remaining half were equally split between those who reported a well-balanced diet (26 percent) or a poor, non-nutritious diet (24 percent).

Sex

Sexual activities were not a major aspect of life in these groups. In fact, 71 percent reported a celibate existence and most of the others indicated some heterosexual activity (24 percent). Only two percent reported any homosexual activity and, despite the celibate lives led by so many, only 22 percent reported instances of masturbation while in

the group. The major exception in all categories of sex was the Children of God, a number of whose former members reported engaging in sexual activities with group leaders or as part of recruiting activities.

Money

The amount of money donated to and earned for these kinds of groups is an issue of concern and is, of course, difficult to document. Conway and Siegelman's self-report data indicated an average of \$3,516 donated from savings and personal possessions and \$25,211 earned from fundraising and outside jobs during the time of membership. These overall averages, however, are rather misleading since this is one of the variables showing considerable discrepancy between groups.

For example, the range for donations was from \$961 for Hare Krishna subjects to \$9,331 for Scientologists. This could be explained in part by the differing structures of the sects. For example, in contrast to other sects surveyed, many Scientology donations represent charges made to members, both by the course and by the hour, for the sect's purported therapeutic practices. As a group, Scientologists also ranked among the oldest sect members (average age at time of first contact: 24.8 years), which could account for members' greater personal income and discretionary funds for such donations and payments.

The Hare Krishnas, in contrast, averaged the *highest* amount for earnings (\$71,630), while members of The Way averaged the smallest amount (\$1,258). The large sums could be explained by the Krishna sect's apparent concentration on fundraising. Undoubtedly, the kinds of members recruited by each sect and the types of fundraising activities engaged in would explain many of the differences. It is beyond the range of this study, however, to be able to account for other between-group differences.

Recruiting Activities

Recruitment of new members also showed extreme variance between groups. The number of recruits averaged per subject ranged from 1.5 for Unification Church members to 9.5 for the Bible sects. Fundraising and recruitment do not seem to relate within any one organization.

Communication-Related Aspects of Daily Life

The communication-related aspects of daily life in these groups are more relevant to our field. For example, identifiable communication techniques such as the ritual practice of chanting, meditation, or

•auditing• were reported variously by nearly all subjects. Although it is apparent that chanting was the most widely practiced technique overall, generalizations about such communication activities over groups are unwarranted.

Each group seemed to have its own profile of recruitment, conversion, and daily ritual methods that employed a unique combination of communication tools. Some groups were reported to have used primarily one technique (for example, chanting for the Krishnas or meditation for the Divine Light Mission), while others were more equally distributed among several activities. As can be seen in the Appendix, Part II, the Unification Church and the Bible sects were almost identical in their breakdown of subjects' responses on the types of activities, yet the amount of time spent engaged in such activities varied greatly--4.5 hours per day for the •Moonies• and 6.4 for the Bible sects, with an overall average of 4.3 for all groups.

A major focus in this study is on the relationships between these specific communication techniques and various physical, emotional, and mental conditions reported by individuals in the period after they had left their groups. Such effects, Conway and Siegelman contend, may be directly related to the intense or extended practice of these communication techniques.

Reported Effects

The types of lasting effects reported by subjects ranged from physical changes (weight gain/loss, sexual dysfunction) to emotional changes (depression, sleeplessness, guilt, anger, hostility, etc.) to various cognitive problems (•floating,• hallucinations, memory loss, etc.). The breakdown of reported data on these in the Appendix, Part IV, shows several interesting patterns. First, the individual groups vary considerably; generalizations across groups are impossible. A close examination of this table is recommended. Second, comparing categories of effects: emotional and cognitive changes were far more frequently reported than physical changes. Third, several unique findings stand out as unusual. Among them:

1. Ex-Krishna women reported a higher incidence of menstrual dysfunction than other groups (42 percent).
2. Ex-Scientists reported a high frequency of loneliness (89 percent).
3. Former members of all major groups except The Way International reported weight gain, not weight loss, after leaving their groups. The Way appears to stand alone in producing more weight loss after individuals left their groups.

4. Ex-Scientists reported the most total months of combined effects--average 139 months; ex-Way members averaged the least 43 months.

5. Similarly, ex-Scientists had the highest reports of suicidal or self-destructive tendencies (52 percent), while ex-Way members had the lowest (15 percent).

6. In contrast, ex-Scientists had the *lowest* reporting of inability to break mental rhythms of chanting, meditation, speaking in •tongues,• etc. (18 percent), while ex-Krishnas, Divine Light Mission, and Way members reported the *highest* numbers unable to break the rhythms of such ritual practices.

The variance, in this instance, may be explained in part by Scientology's relative lack of emphasis on rhythmic mental rituals. Yet its own distinctive rituals, •auditing,• •training regiments,• and other communication techniques appear to cause more intense effects than those of other sects.

These identifiable sect rituals and regimens that have been widely referred to as forms of •mind control• or •self-hypnosis• are termed by Conway and Siegelman methods of •covert induction.• They hypothesize that, practiced intensely and over time, these covert methods may have lasting impact on both basic (physical) and higher-order (emotional and cognitive) information-processing capacities of the brain and nervous system.

Testing for Correlation: Ritual Time Versus Effects

One of the major findings of this initial analysis conducted on the data focused on the time spent in ritual activities and respondents' reported effects or changes. Acknowledging the sampling's weakness of not being able to make experimental/control group comparisons, Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients were run, testing ritual time and alleged effects for each major group.

The correlation table in the Appendix, Part V, shows 63 statistically significant correlations between ritual time and reported effects. While there were some significant correlations between ritual time and reported physical effects--primarily in the Church of Scientology, whose former members reported incidents of weight loss (nine percent, $p = .026$), sexual dysfunction (24 percent, $p = .007$), and menstrual dysfunction (17 percent, $p = .039$)--the majority of correlations were strongest for emotional cognitive effects.

Among the most significant emotional effects for all subjects were

depression (75 percent, $p < .0001$), loneliness (68 percent, $p = .014$), sleeplessness (31 percent, $p < .0001$), violent outbursts (17 percent, $p = .09$), and feelings of anger toward group leaders (68 percent, $p = .002$). Former Scientologists stood out appreciably with regard to depression (76 percent, $p = .001$), loneliness (89 percent, $p = .004$), violent outbursts (27 percent, $p = .005$), and guilt feelings about leaving the group (58 percent, $p = .001$). Ex-members of The Way, the only major group to show stronger correlations for combined ritual and additional study time than for ritual alone, were significant on this measure for loneliness (57 percent, $p = .021$), sleeplessness (33 percent, $p = .013$), violent outbursts (14 percent, $p < .0001$), feelings of guilt (57 percent, $p = .029$), and embarrassment (52 percent, $p = .030$).

Among the most significant cognitive effects (disorders of perception, memory, awareness, and other information-processing capacities) for all subjects were disorientation (66 percent, $p = .004$), reports of 'floating' in and out of altered states (61 percent, $p = .015$), nightmares (48 percent, $p = .024$), and reports of bewildering 'psychic' phenomena (17 percent, $p = .048$). Former members of the Divine Light Mission stood out appreciably in this category with regard to disorientation (56 percent, $p = .001$), floating (67 percent, $p = .008$), hallucinations and delusions (10 percent, $p < .0001$), and psychic phenomena (13 percent, $p < .000$). Ex-members of The Way, compared on ritual time alone, reported high instances of floating (71 percent, $p = .008$), and compared on both ritual and added study time, showed significant effects for disorientation (57 percent, $p = .026$), nightmares (38 percent, $p = .001$), and psychic phenomena (24 percent, $p = .008$).

The strength of Conway and Siegelman's assumptions about the relationships between ritualized communication activities and such effects is confirmed in the extent of these correlations. We were especially surprised to find significant r 's between ritual time and total combined effects for all major groups, and between ritual time and average rehabilitation time for all major groups except the Unification Church.

Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficients (significant at $p = .05$ or less)

	Total Effects (combined months)	Rehabilitation Time (months)
Unification Church	75.7 $p = .0016$	16.6 $p = .109$
Church of Scientology	139.1 $p = .001$	20.1 $p = .020$
Divine Light Mission	52.9 $p = .00001$	12.3 $p = .0067$
The Way International	43.5 $p = .007$	9.5 $p = .014$
All Subjects	81.5 $p = .001$	16.0 $p = .005$

Deprogrammed Versus Not-Deprogrammed (Appendix, Part VI)

Perhaps of as much interest to our field as the ritual communication techniques practiced by these sects and their apparent effects is the unorthodox procedure termed 'deprogramming' by which many respondents came to separate from their groups and re-enter the larger society.

Seventy-three percent of the respondents in the survey reported having been 'deprogrammed.' Again, differences between groups are important to note. Ex-members of the Church of Scientology were less than half as likely to have been deprogrammed than the proportion for all sects. In contrast, all of the respondents in the survey who had been members of The Way International reported having been deprogrammed. (Chi-square significant at .0001.) Among those who had been deprogrammed, the amount of time spent in this process differed significantly by sect (ANOVA, $p = .004$). The difference derives from the average amount of time spent in deprogramming, which ranged from ex-Scientologists (14.7 hours) to ex-Moonies (78.5 hours, $p = .05$) to ex-Divine Light Mission members (82.29 hours, $p = .05$).

Men were no more likely than women to have been deprogrammed, nor were those from some religious backgrounds rather than from others. But subjects who left their sects by being abducted, and those placed in their parents' legal guardianship or conservatorship, were significantly more likely to have been deprogrammed ($p = .00001$).

Subjects who were deprogrammed were more likely to have entered the sect at a younger age (t -test, $p = .001$). Notably, the younger a respondent was upon entering the sect, the longer the time they spent in deprogramming (Pearson r , $p = .008$). Deprogrammees spent less time in the sect than those not deprogrammed (t -test, $p < .05$). The shorter the time since leaving, the longer the time spent being deprogrammed (r , $p = .03$).

On examination of possibly relevant physical factors, the amount

