Cults and Persuasion: Submission as Preference Shifting

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Introduction

The topic of mind manipulation is one of the most discussed because of its ethical implications and its practical consequences from a legal point of view. The term 'brainwashing', first used by Edward Hunter in 1950 to describe the actions of the Chinese who seemed to have infallible systems to induce changes in the way people think and act[1], has entered with force into popular culture, but is not a scientifically accredited concept. In fact, while since the 1970s mind control has often been linked to adherence to destructive "cults" that made the headlines[2][3][4], some sociologists of religion (Barker, 1984[5], Richardson, Introvigne, 2001[6]) consider the idea "implausible", because no methodologically sound research would support the thesis of brainwashing as an infallible technique of behaviour modification that occurs without the consent of the person who has agreed to modify the conduct of his or her life[7][8]. These authors, therefore, interpret

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[1] Hunter, E. (1951). Brain-washing in Red China: the calculated destruction of men's minds. New York: Vanguard Press

[2] Singer, M., Lalich, J.(1995). *Cults in our midst.* San Francisco: Jossey-Brass pubblications

[3] Zimbardo, P. (1997). What's the message behind today's cults? *Monitor on Psychology,* 14

[4] Zablocki, B. (2001). Towards a Demystified and Disinterested Scientific Theory of Brainwashing, In Zablocki, B. and Robbins, T. (Ed.) *Misunderstanding Cults: Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field* 159-214, Toronto: Toronto University Press https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442677302

[5] Barker, E. (1984). *The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing?* Oxford: Blackwell

[6] Richardson, J. T., & Introvigne, M. (2001). "Brainwashing" Theories in European Parliamentary and Administrative Reports on "Cults" and "Sects." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *40*(2), 143–168. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387941

[7] Barker, E. (1984). Op. cit.

[8] Introvigne, M.(2006), Brainwashing. In Clarke P. B. (Ed.) *Encyclopedia of New Religious Movements*. 66-70. London: Routledge

adherence to what they call "New Religious Movements" (NRM) as the result of the free choice of individuals, even if this should still be the result of persuasion. The risk is that of two opposing rhetorical positions, that of mind control and that of free choice. These two positions have historically taken the form of two opposing camps, each defined by its opponents with a unifying and vaguely disparaging appellation. They are known as 'anti-cult movement' and 'cult apologists' (Introvigne, 1998[9], Cowan, 2002[10]). This paper aims to overcome this opposing reductionist schematism through an analysis of research on factors that appear to intervene to modulate the *gradient of free choice* of individuals subjected to persuasion.

Methodology

The literature on persuasion and influence both in laboratory experiments (Milgram ,1975; Asch, 1951, etc.) and in real life instances in groups (Barker, 1984; Galanter, 1979; Lalich, 2004; Zablocki, 1997, etc) were identified and reviewed using google scholar and other databases (Unisalento Digital Library[11], SciHub[12]). An integrated research review approach (Russell, 2005[13]) was adopted to select and synthesize relevant articles using the following search terms: This review led to an argument that is posited that salience in psychology can be an elucidating concept for understanding the continuum of influence and free choice including in groups which are defined variously as cults or new religious movements.

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[9] Introvigne, M. (1998). Blacklisting or greenlisting? A European perspective on the new cult wars. *Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions,* Vol. 2, No. 1 , pp. 16-23

[10] Cowan, D. E. (2002) Cult Apology: A Modest (Typological) Proposal Paper presented to the 2002 Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Conference "Boundaries and Commitments in NRM Research" November 1-3, Salt Lake City, Utah

[11] https://unisalento.summon.serialssolutions.com/

[12] http://sci-hub.hk/

[13] Russell, Cynthia. (2005). An overview of the integrative research review. Progress in transplantation (Aliso Viejo, Calif.). 15. 8-13. 10.7182/prtr.15.1.0n13660r26g725kj.

The salience-procrastination connection

The review of research and theory undertaken indicates that we all have a tendency to postpone actions that we perceive as unpleasant. This is because the 'here and now' costs are more concrete and vivid, as they are immediate and obviously unpleasant compared to vague future costs. This is so even though the final cost of this procrastination will be very high. Anyone who has 'decided' to go on a diet knows this (Sirois, 2017[14], Sirois and Pychil, 2016[15]). Similarly, we always adjust our preferences so as to desire more intensively those goods of which we have less availability at a given moment. Elster (1984) used as an example of what he calls "endogenous change of preferences" Hans Christian Andersen's novel in which a farmer goes to the market to sell or trade his horse but he goes home with a basket of rotten apples. In fact, along the way the farmer had traded the horse for a cow because he liked it better than the horse; then the cow for a sheep, for the same reason; and so this with a goose, the goose with a hen, and the hen, finally, for a basket of rotten apples[16]. In other words, people behave in inconsistent ways that they themselves cannot predict, indicating that the aforementioned mind control versus free choice dichotomy in groups ignores such fluidity in behaviour.

In psychology, the relevance that a subject or stimuli assumes in relation to a context is called 'salience'. The salience of an item is its state or quality of standing out relative to neighboring items. It is this salience, that changes according to the temporal perspective of the viewer, that can produces procrastination or a delay in more beneficial responses

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[14] Sirois, F. Procrastination, Health, and Health Risk Communication. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication.* Retrieved 18 Apr. 2022, from https://oxfordre.com/communication/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228613.001.0001/acrefore-9780190228613-e-345.

[15] Pychyl, T. A., & Sirois, F. M. (2016). Procrastination, emotion regulation, and well-being. In *Procrastination, health, and well-being* (pp. 163-188). Academic Press.

[16] Elster J. (1984). Ulysses and the Sirens: Studies in Rationality and Irrationality. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

(O'Donoghue and Rabin, 1999[17]).

The area in which procrastination is likely to produce the most damaging results is that of obedience to undue or abusive authority as is typically the case in cults (Singer, 2003). Nothing explains this better than Milgram's classic obedience experiment. In brief, social psychologist Stanley Milgram (1975) [18] recruited adult males to participate in an experiment that was supposed to focus on the effects of punishment on memory. The participants were routinely assigned the role of teachers, while an accomplice of the experimenter played the role of a pupil who had to be punished with electric shocks when he erred in recalling what was required of him. The subjects were initially given low-voltage (15 volts) shocks, with doses increasing by 15 volts at a time up to a maximum of 450. There are several versions of this experiment, but, in all versions, the 'pupil' showed a significant response to the 'shocks' and most of the time participants revealed afterwards that they did not believe it was right to administer the shock but obeyed the instructions from the experimenter anyway. In one version, according to Milgram's description,

> at 75 volts the learner began to grunt and groan. At 150 volts, he demanded
> to be let out of the experiment. At 180 volts, he cried out that he could no
> longer stand the pain. At 300 volts, "he . . . [insists] he must be freed" (1965,
> p. 246, quoted in E. Stotland and L. K. Canon, 1972, p. 6).

This result supports an emerging central argument from this analysis: In appropriate circumstances, people behave in ways that are inconsistent with their true beliefs ~~ways~~

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[17] O'Donoghue, T., Rabin, M. (1999). Do It Now or Later? The American Economic Review, Vol. 89, No. 1, pp. 103-124

[18] Milgram, S. (1975). Obedience to Authority :An Experimental View. New York: Harper and Row

and in ways that they themselves cannot predict, such as when they procrastinate or show irrational obedience to authority as in cults.

Ross (1988) argued that this specific salience attributed to disobedience is due to the fact that there is an implicit psychological contract between the "teacher" participant and the experimenter and that this contract does not require the existence of a valid reason for terminating the shock[19]. Thus, the participant sees the cost of current disobedience as very high and can only plan to disobey in the future if the cost should increase. The participant, that is, procrastinates. What is perhaps most relevant is that the salience itself is probably determined not so much by the level of tension the subject administers, but by the difference between the current voltage and the voltage already administered. In fact, one can clearly see that with a sufficiently slow escalation of commands, participants can be led to deliver higher and higher levels of electric shock. They would not have agreed to administer 450 volts at the start. Participants are willing to disobey if the demands become particularly excessive and very quickly, but through procrastination not now, not yet. While assuming future disobedience, these participants continue to increase the level of electric shock needed to induce them to later disobey, a situation analogous to cults where members are induced, over time, to carry out acts on behalf of the leader.

The Milgram experiment shows that, when isolated in a laboratory, individuals may exhibit unexpected and disturbing behaviour out of sheer obedience, powered by a contract or identification with the experimenter (Laurens & Ballot, 2021), provided that the demands progress gradually. Outside the laboratory, in non-isolated conditions,

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[19]Ross, L. (1988). Review of Arthur G. Miller, The Obedience Experiments: A Case Study of Controversy in *Social Sciences*, New York: Praeger, 1956, *Contemporary Psychology*, February 1988, 33, 101-04

however, there is evidence that such behaviour occurs only when there is near unanimity of opinion. In this respect, the most relevant evidence comes from a variant of Asch's well-known experiment (1951)[20]. Solomon Asch showed that participants who were asked to compare the length of a line with a series of other lines of different lengths gave a wrong answer in about 40% of cases if they were preceded by accomplices of the experimenter who had given deliberately wrong answers. The experimental participants conformed to the answers of the others even though they were obviously wrong, an effect usually attributed to normative influence and the desire not to break with social norms (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955)

However, in a variant of the experiment, Asch found that the presence of even one accomplice who gave the right answer, among all the others who gave the wrong one, reduced the number of errors in the experimental participants by two-thirds (Asch, 1952)[21].

This suggests that the presence of like-minded people who confirm our perceptions significantly increases the probability of disobedience in situations such as Milgram's experiment. It could be inferred that obedience such as in Milgram's research can only occur in the laboratory, where people are shielded from outside information and influences. However, there are other situations in which this can occur, namely in cults or other similarly coercive environments. In groups defined in this way, closure to the outside world does not presuppose physical delimitation. In his classic study of thought reform in Maoist China, Robert Jay Lifton (1961)[22] indicated "milieu control" as a

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[20] Asch, S. (1951). Effects of group pressure upon the modification and distortion of judgments. In H. Guetzkow (Ed.), *Groups, leadership and men; research in human relations.* (pp. 177–190), Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press

[21] Asch S. (1952) Social Psychology, Englewood Cliff: Prentice-Hall

[22] Lifton, R. J. (2012). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of 'brainwashing' in China.* UNC Press Books.

prerequisite to allow social pressure and conformity to take place, including in wider society.

Cults and persuasion

A frequently published and cited author on the subject of cults and persuasion is the sociologist of new religions Eileen Barker, who is associated, because of some of her early research, with a strand of criticism of the concept of 'mind control'. Barker's (1984) classic study *The Making of a Moonie.*[23] was conducted on Reverend Moon's Unification Church, whose members are commonly referred to as *Moonies*. Barker found that of more than 1,000 people stopped on the street who attended their first Moonie event (usually a luncheon), about 33.3 percent went on to the next workshop. About 10 percent said they would join, and about 5 percent were still full members two years later. Barker found this figure rather disappointing as it would show that there is no such extraordinary mechanism of persuasion such as the phantom 'brainwashing'. It suggests that the followers are not manipulated as quickly or as much as some stereotypes of cults might suggest. Barker's assessments are certainly valid in refuting the hypothesis of a specific and infallible technique of the reconstruction of all individuals. Such a conception is similar to that narrated in the 1962 movie *The Manchurian Candidate.* In the movie, a 'brainwashed' Korean War hero had been programmed - 'reconstructed', in the language of the movie - to assassinate a candidate for the presidency of the United States. This is seen as an unrealistic conception of mind control, not only by the critics of the concept

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[23]Baker E. (1984). The Making of a Moonie: Choice or Brainwashing? Oxford: Blackwell Publishers

(for example, Richardson and Introvigne, 2001[24]), but even by proponents of a mind manipulation such as. Lifton's whose concept of *thought reform* (1961) [25] ~~was~~ is something much more subtle and was based on the combination of coercion from outside, and an inner exhortation that exploits the person's feelings of guilt and shame and the need to belong (Kruglanski & Orehek, 2011) .

However, analysis of the literature reveals that it is possible to contemplate a different conception of manipulation, which sees mind control as a process of persuasion that takes place precisely by selecting, in successive and orderly steps, the most willing subjects, and which is carried out in practice, above all, on the final recruits, operating as indoctrination in a psychological and relational context, which is by now profoundly changed (Singer, 2003).

Joining the Moonies, for example, can be seen to involves four separate decisions <cite Barker or Galanter?>. Potential recruits are first contacted individually and invited to go to a two-day weekend workshop. This workshop is followed by another 7-day workshop, then a 12-day workshop and finally, there is the real membership. The potential recruit must makes four separate decisions: first to attend the 2-day workshop, then to continue with the 7-day workshop, then to attend the 12-day workshop, and finally to join the Church. As in the Milgram experiment, the decision is made in slow stages and through slight deviations from the previous choice. This progression is can be seen to be related to the progressive variation in the salience of the options of obedience and disobedience, as will be shown in the analysis of research which follows.

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[24] Richardson, J. T., & Introvigne, M. (2001). "Brainwashing" Theories in European Parliamentary and Administrative Reports on "Cults" and "Sects." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, *40*(2), 143–168. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1387941

[25] Lifton, op. cit.

Galanter's classic study (1979)[26] demonstrates this gradual restructuring of thinking towards commitment. In this study, also of the Moonies, of the 104 guests in the first two days of the workshop, 74 did not continue. Of the 30 in the 7-day workshop, 12 did not continue. Of the 18 remaining in the 21-day workshop, 9 did not continue. Of the remaining 9, 6 were active church members 6 months later. The example of the Moonies illustrates a conversion process to different degrees over time. Converts undertake a sequence of small decisions concerning the acceptance of authority. Ultimately, as a result of this sequence of decisions of obedience rather than rebellion, converts develop beliefs and values that are very different from those they had at the beginning of the process.

We can assume that this willingness to acquiesce to authority is facilitated by self-selection. Since the majority of those who have doubts leave, the dissent necessary to resist the escalation of the commitment to the group does not develop. Thus this creates the condition of isolation from external influences that exists in Milgram's laboratory and, at the same time, the conformity to the ideas of others, as in Asch's experiment. This is also an example of preference shifting where changes in preferences depend on choices induced by previous preferences, as Elster pointed out. The theory of referent information influence (Turner, 1987 [27], Hogg and Turner, 1987 [28]) explains this process of conformation. People expect to agree with ingroup members, and ~~trought~~ through self-categorization, conform to the norms that define the ingroup, as part of their self-identity, in the salient social comparative frame of reference. Polarisation, i.e. the shift towards extreme positions, occurs because members distance themselves from the norms, beliefs,

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[26]Galanter M. et alii (1979). The 'Moonies': A Psychological Study of Conversion and Membership in a Contemporary Religious Sect". *American Journal of Psychiatry,* February 136(2), 165-70.
[27] Turner, J. C., & Reynolds, K. J. (2011). Self-categorization theory. *Handbook of theories in social psychology*, 2(1), 399-417.
[28] Hogg, M. A., & Turner, J. C. (1987). Intergroup behaviour, self-stereotyping and the salience of social categories. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 26(4), 325-340.

and behaviours of comparison outgroup members. This occurs as a result of the fact that the group is situated towards one extreme of the salient comparative context or social frame of reference (Turner, 1989)[29].

General lack of access by researchers to such a new context in a cult ~~gives~~ means that changes in 'salience' and meaning still needs to be better understood. Evidence is potentially provided by Kahneman and Tversky (1979)[30] who found that human beings often do not rationally choose the strategy that maximizes the probability of winning in the long run (the 'expected utility' of economists), but are interested in current wins and losses. As Elster (1984) points out, this alters the rationality of the choices, because the principle of transitivity is lost. In fact, if one prefers A to B and B to C, he or she should also prefer A to C, but it does not always happen (so the farmer goes home with a basket of rotten apples). Not only that, they fear loss more than they are attracted by gain and react in opposite ways if the same problem is posed negatively or positively. This last phenomenon is known as *framing* or "context effect". This means that our decisions are influenced by the way information is presented (as Lifton and others have noted occurs in cults with concepts such as 'loaded language').

Equivalent information can be more or less attractive, and our choices different, depending on what features are highlighted (another way of defining salience in context). One of the shortcuts in decision making, known as 'heuristics', that contributes to the framing effect is the *affect heuristic*. This is a phenomenon whereby we rely heavily upon our emotional state during decision-making, rather than taking the time to consider the

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[29] Turner, J. C., Wetherell, M. S., & Hogg, M. A. (1989). Referent informational influence and group polarization. *British journal of social psychology*, 28(2), 135-147.
[30] Kahneman D., Tversky A.(1979). Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk, *Econometrica*, 47(2), 263-291

long-term consequences of a decision. This may be why we favor information and options that are framed to elicit an immediate emotional response. Marketing and political propaganda make extensive use of these biases. In marketing, framing is used with the intention of focusing the content of the message on the potential gains associated with the use of the product or, better, on the potential losses resulting from not buying it. Furthermore, the use of framing strategies is often at the basis of the creation of news stories containing biased information favouring certain perspectives, points of view or ideologies (Tankard, 2009)[31], a process well documented in cults (Singer, 2003).

The importance of framing and emotional reasoning in manipulation and propaganda is particularly emphasized by Lakoff (1980[32], 2001[33]), who focuses on language as a tool that can change people's worldviews and consequently their decisions. He pays particular attention to the use of metaphors as an element of narratives that convey messages that can change individuals' perceptions and decisions through "reframing".

As just indicated, these mechanisms play a role in a wide range of types of persuasion, including forms which are benign, but this does not mean that there are no forms of undue or coercive persuasion as argued by some (e.g. Introvigne, Folk, Frisk, Palmer, Richardson, 2018)[34]. In fact, what is arguably reprehensible in a the work of conversion in harmful cults is not the 'technique' used, but its end. Sometimes the end is fraudulent and exploitative as in damaging cults. To pursue a 'secret agenda' aimed at the exploitation of those who are persuaded to make choices contrary to their own interests can certainly

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[31] Tankard, J. W. (2009). The empirical approach to the study of media framing. In A. Hansen (Ed.), *Mass communication research methods* (Vol. 4, pp. III99-III99). SAGE Publications Ltd, https://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446262474.n43

[32] Lakoff, G., Johnson, M.(1980) *Metaphors we Live By*, University of Chicago Press

[33] Lakoff, G. (2001) *Moral Politics: How Liberals and Conservatives Think.* University of Chicago Press

[34] Introvigne, M., Folk H., Frisk, L., Palmer, S., Richardson, J. T. (2018) Does "Mental Slavery" Exist? An Expert Opinion. *The Journal of CESNUR*, Volume 2, Issue 6,, pages 74—97

be defined as 'manipulation.' The fact that human beings are seemingly prone to systematic errors that can lead to counterproductive choices and this can be seen to be helpful to those who intend to be maliciously persuasive (Singer, 2003[35]). Charismatic cult leaders can lead their followers into a frame in which their irrational decisions make perfect sense to them (Lalich, 2000)[36].

Therefore, instead of the Manchurian Candidate, another Hollywood product may potentially better help to illustrate the emerging psychological model from this analysis of the literature: *The Truman Show* (1998). In this movie, the protagonist is not an other-directed automaton who has been magically brainwashed, but a deceived man who lives in a world created especially for him, where he is constantly monitored, filmed, and broadcast 24 hours a day. In this pleasant, warm town, Seahaven, Truman acts based on the limited information he receives and makes choices he considers to be 'free', such as never leaving the town because of his fear of the outside world that was induced in him.

The apparent paradox is that some sociologists and religious scholars who ~~use to~~ have routinely defended every type of cult, even totalitarian cults, from the charge of coercive persuasion (Barker, 1984; Bromley, 2001; Introvigne, 2022; Melton, 2000; Richardson, 1993; Shupe, 2004), appear to show great faith in human rationality instead. In fact, the main theory they refer to is the *Theory of Religious Economy* (TER), an application of the classic *Rational Choice Theory* to the religious field. This reading (Stark, 2007[37]) supposes that the religious field is a market like that of goods. In practice, the various

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[35] Singer, M. T. (2003). *Cults in our midst: The continuing fight against their hidden menace, Rev*. Jossey-Bass/Wiley.
[36] Lalich J. (2000). Bouded choice: the fusion of personal freedom and self-renunciation in two transcendent groups, Phd Dissertation, Fielding Institute
[37] Stark R.(2007). *Discovering God. The Origins of the Great Religions and the Evolution of Belief*, New York: Harper Collins

faiths would be products offered by religious firms in competition with each other, and the faithful would be consumers who make choices based on their rational calculation. This has great practical relevance to an analysis of influence processes. In fact, affirming rational choice implies denying manipulation. It is the rhetoric of 'free choice.' It follows that the mass suicide of Jonestown, carried out by the faithful of the political-spiritual cult of the Reverend Jim Jones, which led to the deaths of almost a thousand people in 1978, would have been accomplished by the simultaneous cost-benefit calculation of more than 900 people who came to the conclusion that death maximized their utility. They choose freely, so therefore everything is okay. It is strange that a conception that sees faith as a marketable product does not take into account the basic marketing concepts mentioned above (such as the affective heuristic and framing), apparently does not contemplate misleading or manipulative advertising, and takes the absolute honesty of each seller for granted.

The idea of an individual being able to make fully rational choices has long ago been struck down for example by Simon (1957[38]), in studies on 'bounded rationality.' This reduced capacity is due to the computational limits of the brain, which means that our choices are always suboptimal. Tversky and Kahneman (1979[39]) in 'Prospect Theory' showed beyond any doubt how human choices systematically violate the principles of economic rationality, not only for computational deficits, but also for real computational errors. Working while using these computational deficits and errors within organized and sealed frames allows for the manipulation of the orientation of individuals' choices,

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[38] Simon H. (1957). Models of man; social and rational, Hoboken: Wiley
[39] Kahneman D., Tversky A. (1979), Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk, *Econometrica*, 47(2), , 263-291

especially if this process is led by a charismatic figure. A charismatic leader can take your horse and give you a basket of rotten apples, and you'd be lucky, too, because malicious, sociopathic leaders poison apples and take more than your horse. This ruinous endpoint can be seen to akin to Lifton's 'dispensing of existence' in thought reform (1961[40]).

The model proposed here, and emanating from the aforementioned review of research in this area, is also supported by the classic observations of Cialdini (2009) on commitment and consistency who shows how humans have a fundamental need to feel consistent with their ideas and decisions. Once we have made a choice or taken a position, we will encounter personal and interpersonal pressures to behave in a manner consistent with that commitment. He writes:

> Psychologists have long understood the power of the principle of consistency
>
> in directing human action (....) The urge to be (and appear to be) consistent
>
> constitutes a very powerful weapon of social influence, often leading us to act
>
> in ways that are clearly contrary to our own self-interest.[41]

The key element that reinforces consistency behaviour is commitment (Cialdini, 2009[42], Beatty et al., 1988[43]). Once a position has been taken, there is a natural tendency to behave

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[40] Lifton, R. J. (2012). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of'brainwashing'in China*. UNC Press Books.
[41]Cialdini R. B. (2009). Influence: psychology of persuasion, New York: Harper Collins, 2009, 52
[42] ibidem
[43] Beatty, S. E., Homer, P., & Kahle, L. R. (1988). The involvement—commitment model: Theory and implications. *Journal of Business research*, *16*(2), 149-167.

in ways that are stubbornly consistent with the position taken. The obedient choice under Milgram-like conditions can therefore be explained by the commitment made to the first 'cooperating' choice. If you have administered the first shock, consistency and commitment will lead you to give a higher shock. The smaller the increase in demand, the better the commitment and consistency heuristic will work.

The model presented here is also consistent with the observations of Zabloki on exit costs (1998)[44] and Lalich's *bounded choice* model (2000)[45]. Zabloki proposed a model in which persuasion and control do not operate in the recruitment phase, but only in the later phase in which members are kept in a movement by the maximization over time of their 'exit costs'. Truman doesn't leave his small town because the cost is too expensive: fear.

Furthermore Lalich, referring to the concept of bounded rationality (as per Simon), shows how the members of a destructive cult, given the conditions of a 'self-sealing' system, are led into a state of 'bounded choice', in which they make apparently irrational decisions in a context. It is one however, that gives them meaning and that, in fact, is consistent with their highest aspirations. This invokes the personal significance given by the feeling of being part of a shared reality in the radical ideology that is described by Kruglanski (2008)[46]. Embracing the belief system of the movement to which one belongs is crucial insofar as it tells individuals how to act (Hardin & Higgins, 1996[47]; Zartman & Anstey,

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[44]Zabloki B. (1998). Exit cost analysis. A new approach at the study of brainwashing, *Nova Religio*, Vol.I, 2, 216-249
[45]Lalich J. (2000). Bouded choice: the fusion of personal freedom and self-renunciation in two transcendent groups, Phd Dissertation, Fielding Institute
[46] Kruglanksi, A. W., & Fishman, S. (2008). Le basi psicologiche del terrorismo. L'individuo, il gruppo e l'organizzazione. *Psicologia sociale*, *2*, 197-224. doi: 10.1482/27418.
[47] Hardin, C. D., & Higgins, E. T. (1996). Shared reality: How social verification makes the subjective objective. In E. T. Higgins & R. M. Sorrentino (Eds.), *Handbook of motivation and cognition: The interpersonal context. Vol. 3. The interpersonal context*. New York: Guilford.

2012[48]), according to self-referential norms (Turner, 1987) and even legitimizes terrorist violence by placing it outside the sphere of immorality (Kruglanski et al., 2013)[49].

Seahaven and the Rat Park

Persuasion, therefore, takes place in a rewarding relational contexts, such as Truman's Seahaven, and it is this that allows it to have such a profound effect. In other words, according to this socio-biological model, the recruitment of members occurs through inclusion in a cohesive and enjoyable relationship structure and not through simple ideological persuasion. This is congruent with the observation that often dogma or theories are clarified and deepened only after potential followers have been integrated into the group. In an effective comparison, Lofland and Stark (1965) expressed the idea that accepting the new belief system is therefore tantamount to 'accepting the opinion of a friend'[50] and this is consistent with the identification of 'love bombing' in recruitment (Singer, 2003). Work on cultic group identity also emphasizes the importance of group cohesion and influence between like minded group members (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010[51]) whose self-identity becomes dominated over time by shared groups beliefs and norms.

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[48] Zartman, I. W., & Anstey, M. (2012). The problem: Preventing identity conflicts and genocide. In I. W. Zartman, M. Anstey, & P. Meerts (Eds.), *The slippery slope to genocide: Reducing identity conflicts and preventing mass murder* (pp. 3–34). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199791743.003.0001.

[49] Kruglanski, A. W., Bélanger, J. J., Gelfand, M., Gunaratna, R., Hettiarachchi, M., & Sharvit, K. (2013). Terrorism—A (self) love story: Redirecting the significance quest can end violence. *American Psychologist, 68* (7),559-575. doi: 10.1037/a0032615.

[50]Lofland J., Stark R. (1965). Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective, *American Sociological Review*, 6

[51] Dubrow-Marshall, R. (2010). The Influence Continuum--the Good, the Dubious, and the Harmful--Evidence and Implications for Policy and Practice in the 21st Century. *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, 1.

An analogy can also be made with addiction–including in Alexander's (1981)[52] classic research on opioid addiction where two environments were created: the first was the classic 'rat in a cage' which was given morphine and left with a daily supply of the drug in a vial. The second was a 'rat paradise', the Rat Park, complete with toys, cans, running wheels, food, and other forms of entertainment where rats could engage in social and sexual relations.

The Rat Park also included a bottle of morphine, which was also initially administered to the rats. The result was eloquent: the rat in the cage stuck to the bottle and quickly developed a drug addiction, losing interest in any other activity. The Rat Park rats, after initial enthusiasm, abandoned the bottle. Some returned every so often to consume small amounts, but others did not even do that. "In a larger and more interesting 'social environment', the rat does not feel the need to 'take drugs'," the study concludes.

We can assume that if a rat is locked in a cage alone, drugs are an effective escape route from the prison situation. It is, in fact, an adaptation to circumstances.

This is probably also the case in 'cult addiction', as identified by Perlado (2003) as a potential 'Group Dependence Disorder'. In fact, the effectiveness of undue persuasion increases under specific relational conditions. The process is very similar to what has just been described as some people may give in to persuasion because they live like the rat in the cage when offered a 'Rat Park'.

What they are offered is good, artificial integration into a warm and safe environment. But the Rat Park is just another cage, one that feels more comfortable and good for the

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[52] Alexander K. B., Beyerstein L. B., Hadaway F. P., Coambs B. R. (1981). Effect of early and later colony housing on oral ingestion of morphine in rats, *Pharmacology Biochemistry and Behavior*, Vol. 15(4), 571-576

rats, but which excludes the possibility of the full deployment of human possibilities and reduces the range of opportunities to a minimum. It is the Seahaven of The Truman Show, a cage with no apparent bars and a blue sky drawn in the background. It is in this self-selected and self-sealing context that the slow process of indoctrination takes place. The path exemplified here thus leads us to consider the process of persuasion in cults from a perspective that, from the above analysis, has probably remained in the shadows. In practice, one does not believe because one is persuaded to do so, and therefore is merely introduced into the group (as per the attrition in recruitment as identified by Barker and Galanter). On the contrary, one is persuaded *because* one has been inserted into the group psychologically. This brings ~~us~~ this analysis back to the issue of social influence and the concept of psychological salience in self-categorisation according to Turner (1987) whereby the social context and groups are intrinsically rewarding and reinforcing of an increasingly dominant group identification (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010).

Although persuasion and inclusion can take place at the same time, the weight of the latter is temporally more important at the beginning. Ideological indoctrination acquires more weight over time. The more one is willing to believe and act in accordance with the new beliefs, the more gradually influential the persuasive process will be. At each step, the difference from what has already been acquired or done will be minimal (and the urge to defect will be delayed). Each of these steps will always be chosen 'freely', in the same sense that the consumer freely purchases products whose salience is modified by marketing and framing (Lakoff, 2001). However, the same people who go through the whole process by continuous and gradual approximation would never have freely chosen the final destination, i.e. dogmas and related behaviours that are bounded (Lalich, 2000) as per a rat cage, if they had been presented with this as a single solution at the beginning.

The 'manipulation' is everything in this gradient of 'free choice'. The polarized opposites

in the literature arguably co-exist in reality, as this analysis indicates, and a more nuanced

and thorough approach to analyzing the evidence from research on cults and coercive

influence is thus called for.

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