Identity transitions and the project of the self: A Symbolic Interactionist exploration of life histories of former members of New Religious Movements

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B.Soc.Sc (Hons)

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
The University of Newcastle
July 2012
School of Humanities and Social Science
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Date..............................

Some of the findings of this PhD can be found in papers titled:
Acknowledgements

Acknowledgement must first go to the twenty three participants in the study who shared their stories with such honesty and trust. I hope I have accurately recounted their stories and faithfully reflected the texture of their experiences. This thesis would not have been possible without the cooperation of the participants who graciously allowed me into their lives to tell me their stories. The descriptions of their experience revealed much pain that continues to this day. Yet they each voiced a keen willingness to be involved and each demonstrated tremendous courage. I deeply appreciate their desire to help others by being involved in the study.

I would also like to thank my supervisors Dr Ann Taylor and Dr Margot Ford who were invaluable sources of encouragement and inspiration during the course of this thesis. In particular, I would like to thank my primary supervisor Dr Ann Taylor whose support and warmth often went beyond the call of academia. I am deeply grateful for the way she generously shared her insights and wisdom, for many illuminating discussions and her exceptional attention to detail.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their patience, support and encouragements. In particular, I thank Brendan Coates for his unyielding support and belief in my capabilities. I would not have come this far without him. I also thank Max and Gayle Coates for their ongoing faith in me.

A special thank you also goes to my closest friends Deena Campbell, Scott Hilton, Francisco Xavier Lahoz Cossio, Jason Warne and, again, Brendan Coates to whom I owe my sanity. Thank you for your friendship, encouragements and interest in my work, and most importantly, thank you for providing much needed distractions.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my two little children Aidan and Akira Coates who ensured I remained in touch with the demands of ‘real’ life and remained somewhat balanced and sane.
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Abstract

This thesis is an investigation of the life history narratives of 23 former members of 11 different World-Rejecting New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Australia. The study is a qualitative enquiry consisting of in-depth biographical interviews informed by constructionist grounded theory and the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (SI). Questions were aimed at elucidating insights into the way in which participants experienced and negotiated issues of identity and self before, during and since membership. The life history narratives were analysed for an understanding of membership in the context of the participants’ wider life histories and descriptions of self and identity. Both macro and micro understandings of membership were elucidated. At a macro level the narratives were analysed for an understanding of the significance and impact of NRM affiliation and disaffiliation on the participants’ sense of self. While it is recognised that NRM participation has been on the rise since the 1960s, why this is, and what identity purpose or significance NRM affiliation and disaffiliation may serve remains unclear. At a micro level, the narratives were analysed for an understanding of the way in which participants negotiated issues of self and identity prior to membership, following affiliation and since disaffiliation.

The principal findings were that participation in a world-rejecting NRM served a significant identity function for the former members in this study. The findings suggest that for the participants in the study membership was motivated by difficulties negotiating tensions between personal autonomy and social connectedness. In accordance with SI theorising of the self as constructed in the realm of both self and others, it is argued that an ability to reflexively negotiate tensions between personal autonomy and social connectedness is paramount for the contemporary self, and NRM membership is conceptualised as motivated by, and a potential solution to, difficulties balancing these tensions.

Some of the participants describe selves that were highly conformist and dependent on others, and these participants describe membership as motivated by a lack of personal autonomy and a need for guidance and direction. Other participants describe selves that were highly autonomous and socially isolated and these participants describe membership as motivated by a desire for self-change, in particular, the development of an increased sense of belonging or social connectedness. The majority of participants describe that as the result of their experiences of affiliation and disaffiliation they have become better able to manage tension between autonomy and connectedness. Participants varied in the extent to which their narratives of NRM affiliation were informed by the concept of ‘brainwashing’. Most participants describe membership and exit as a difficult but enriching experience that has helped to resolve or ameliorate previous vulnerabilities.
At a micro level, participants’ narratives were analysed using SI understandings of the self as, to varying degrees, informed by social influence and personal uniqueness. Variations in the way in which participants describe their ‘selves’, and the way in which they experienced and negotiated membership and exit, are interpreted in the light of SI theorising. The extent to which the participants describe themselves as actively ‘in charge’ of their experiences or as passively influenced by ‘brainwashing’ is argued to be related to the varying ways in which they construct their sense of self. In addition, a detailed conceptualisation of the way in which the experience of NRM affiliation and disaffiliation may contribute to the development of stronger sense of personal autonomy or an increased ability to connect to others is developed. By linking micro and macro analysis of the self, the current study contributes to theorising on the way in which the participants in this study personally negotiated NRM membership as well as the significance of NRMs and the understanding of self and identity more broadly.