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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Date..............................

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

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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.
Introduction

We are manufacturing a postmodern society that is screaming out for some blacks and whites and some solid ground to stand on, and the need for other people, for community. I think that postmodernism has left us depleted of good solid rights and wrongs and community, with family and community being fragmented. I now view cults more as a product of society rather than big rip-off merchants who are trying to screw everyone around... Especially in unstable times like this you need some kind of a framework, some kind of a morality that you believe in to keep you steady otherwise you waft all over the place... Being in a cult offered me a sense of identity... It served a purpose(Thomas).

Debates around the nature and condition of the self and identity in contemporary environments have moved to the centre of intellectual debate in the social sciences and humanities in recent years. Up until at least the beginning of the twentieth century, identity was not so much an issue. When social change was less rapid, identity was to a great extent taken for granted and assigned by relatively stable cultural patterns that governed people’s lives. A sense of self was achieved and maintained through commitments embedded in a relatively consistent community of others that remained more or less stable across the individual’s lifespan (Bauman, 1996, 164; 2000, 2001b; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 2003). Since the latter part of the twentieth century, the issue of identity has become increasingly problematic in the view of many sociologists. Resulting from the destabilisation of social life, with traditional ways of doing things dissolving and traditional institutions that guide behaviour no longer available, people experience increased freedom and have to confront personal futures that are much more open than in the past. No longer anchored in traditional ways of doing things, ‘self’ and identity have become much more uncertain and personally negotiated and constructed (Bauman, 1991, 2001a, 2003; Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985; Giddens, 1991). This suggests that the achievement and maintenance of identity is no longer a given but can be best conceptualised as a ‘project’ (Giddens, 1991, p. 32-33). In contemporary unstable environments, individuals continuously strive to maintain their ‘identities’ but never completely attain them in any stable sense. Thus, because the world changes too rapidly to allow for stability, the project of the self has become a never-ending, lifelong process (Bauman, 1996, 2001a; Giddens, 2003).

While there is a general consensus that changing social conditions have had a wide impact on the achievement and management of self and identity, the nature of this impact is much debated. While some argue that the self is capable of negotiating these less stable cultural demands effectively
(Castells, 1997; Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1993), others argue that a postmodern social landscape has led to an increase in identity issues and mental health problems resulting from a lack of stability and inner confusion (Cote, 2000; Kreisman & Straus, 1989; Lasch, 1984; Schachter, 2005). Even though the impact of unstable or changing cultural contexts on the self and identity is an area of significant discussion and debate, it remains a confusing and contradictory area of study.

The current study addresses the ways in which individuals negotiate issues of self and identity under varying cultural conditions. With the aim of studying the different domains of the self and linking macro with micro analyses, the current study seeks to investigate the ways in which former members of World-Rejecting New Religious Movements (NRMs) have managed issues pertinent to self and identity across their lifespan. As will be described in the next section, former members of world-rejecting NRMs were selected as a suitable sample for the study of the experience and management of self and identity because of the centrality of issues pertinent to self and identity in NRM scholarship (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; S. Levine, 2007; Richardson, 2008) and also because these groups have been on the rise in late modernity (Barker, 1999; Dawson, 2007a, 2007b; D. Martin, 2005; Wilson, 1979). Through the use of a qualitative methodology the current study investigates the way in which membership in a world-rejecting NRM and reintegration into mainstream society following disaffiliation impacts upon or informs the management of the selves and identities of former members of NRMs.

To elucidate the ways in which former members have negotiated issues pertinent to self and identity across their lifespan the theoretical framework of symbolic interactionism (SI), informed by some postmodern contributions and writings by contemporary modernists, will be employed. The rationale for choosing to study former members of world-rejecting NRMs is outlined in the next section.

The study of former members of World-Rejecting New Religious Movements (NRMs) as a site for the study of self and identity

To study the management of self and identity under different cultural conditions, and in response to changing cultural expectations, an analysis of the life history narratives of 23 former members of world-rejecting NRMs was conducted. Because of their experiences of having joined, as well as having exited a world-rejecting NRM, former members are perceived as knowledgeable about the management of self and identity constructions and reconstructions in response to changing cultural contexts. Former members are understood as both familiar with the demands of different cultural environments, ‘mainstream’ culture as well as the culture of the NRM, as well as the management of
self and identity change as they adjust to new cultural demands. NRMs are commonly described as controlled cultural environments that expect and enforce conformity to norms and expectations that deviate significantly from mainstream culture (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Coates, 2012; Elshtain, 2008; Jacobs, 1989). Involvement in a NRM is recognised as causing changes to the self and identities of its members as they adjust to new cultural requirements and expectations (S. Levine, 1984, 2007; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Zablocki, 2001).

Considering the centrality of self and identity in NRM membership, an analysis of the narratives of former members can offer insights into issues pertinent to self and identity in Western contemporary society. More specifically, taking into account that the culture of a NRM varies significantly from that of its host culture, the study of former members can offer insights into the management and construction of self and identity under different cultural conditions and in response to changes to their prevailing social and cultural environment. Few sociological studies have investigated individual experiences specific to the management of self and identity across the lifespan of individuals who have negotiated significant and ‘accelerated’ cultural changes (for a notable exception see Zurcher, 1972, 1977, 1983). While a rich body of literature exists that discusses the different ways in which the self is constructed in different cultural contexts (Foucault, 1986; Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; Lasch, 1984; Riesman, Glazer, & Denny, 1950; R. H. Turner, 1976) this literature primarily consists of macro analysis of historical and cultural patterns and does not investigate the management of social and cultural change across the lifespan of the individual.

The majority of research specific to the study of NRMs has focussed on either adjustment to membership or adjustment to life after involvement, but by and large has not studied the ways in which the self or identity is managed in these different cultural environments across the life histories of individuals. By focussing on specific aspects or stages of the NRM experience, most of this literature has failed to make sense of members’ or former members’ experiences of affiliation or disaffiliation in light of their wider life histories. The study of the ways in which former members have managed issues of self and identity across their lifespan has been by and large neglected (for some exceptions see Boeri, 2002; Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Healy, 2011; Jacobs, 1989). In contrast to the majority of previous studies that focus on certain stages of membership or the adjustment to life after involvement, this research contributes to the literature by interpreting the former members’ self and identity challenges and negotiations and experiences of NRM membership in light of their wider life story.
The relationship of this study to the literature on New Religious Movements

The current study is also a contribution to the NRM literature and addresses some existing tensions in this body of work. Despite a general agreement that identity is primary to the experience of NRM involvement, this is generally considered a contentious area of study (Buxant, 2008; Healy, 2008, 2010; Walsh & Bor, 1996). The available literature indicates a diversity of views; at either end of the continuum are found those who support ‘brainwashing theories’ and view membership as almost inevitably negative and those who do not see membership as inevitably damaging (Buxant, 2008; Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, 2007; Coates, 2010a, 2011; Healy, 2008, 2010, 2011). This literature demonstrates a continuum of positions between these two extremes, but those scholars who are critical of NRM or ‘cults’ are often referred to as ‘anti cultists’ and those who view the groups in a more positive light, or at least present a more balanced perspective, are labelled ‘cult apologists’ by the former.

While it is recognised that some scholars have endeavoured to resolve some of these tensions by presenting a balanced and nuanced account of membership (for example see Boeri, 2002; Healy, 2010; Jacobs, 2007) significant disagreements remain. The primary tensions of interest here pertain to the nature of the self and identity changes experienced by members as the result of NRM affiliation, and the impact of membership on the wellbeing of current and former members. In regards to the experience of self and identity change following membership, the majority of the empirical literature argues that these changes are primarily motivated or directed by the member, who is perceived as an active agent in his or her self-change (Balch, 1980; Rambo, 1993; Richardson, 1989, 2007). This is in strong contrast to the view most commonly presented in popular literature and put forward by the media which portrays the changes in the selves and identities of members as influenced and directed by powerful external sources, and positions the member as a passive ‘victim’ (Hassan, 2000; Langone, 1993a; Singer, 2003).

The level of disagreement between the two viewpoints is not always constant, and not all researchers who study NRMs fit easily into one group or the other; however, many researchers appear to have aligned themselves with one or other of these positions. Possible reasons that researchers draw different conclusions from their work may be related to the worldview and focus of their respective disciplines and the use of different populations and contrasting methodologies used by sociological and psychological studies.
The view of NRM members as ‘victims’ and membership as emotionally damaging is primarily supported by quantitative studies and, to a lesser extent, clinical case studies, that have set out to investigate psychopathology in former members (Conway, Siegelman, Carmichael, & Coggins, 1986; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Langone, Martin, Pile, Burks, & Martin, 1998; Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999; P. R. Martin, Langone, Dole, & Wiltrout, 1992; Singer, 2003; Swartling & Swartling, 1992). In quantitative studies, categories of meaning tend to be predetermined by the researcher (Babbie, 2001, 2004). They therefore tend to channel the interpretation of experiences into clinical categories. Clinical case studies are also limited in their ability to present a balanced view of membership as the former members studied had all sought treatment from the reporting clinicians (Giambalvo, 1993; Goldberg, 1993, 2009; Singer, 1979, 2003; West, 1993).

Those researchers who present a more favourable view of NRM membership have predominantly studied life in a group through the use of qualitative methods with current members of such groups (Barker, 1984, 1997; Healy, 2010; S. Levine, 1989; Robbins, 1988c). In these studies, life in a group is predominantly studied through the use of qualitative methods, including participant observation, and this method lends itself to understanding the point of view of participants. These studies find current members to be well adjusted and this may be why the majority of the sociological literature appears to be dismissive of former members’ accounts and may underplay claims of harm (Aldridge, 2007). These different methodologies used to a large extent are consistent with the different methodological preferences of psychology and sociology. Following a breakdown in the collaboration between the discipline of psychiatry and sociology which occurred in the 1970s, the methodological preferences of the two approaches to mental health problems became discrepant (Pilgrim & Rogers, 2005). Resulting from a shift to the medical model and a focus on diagnoses, the former sociological contributions which looked at the patient’s personal accounts of his or her life, has become largely ignored in the study of mental health (Pilgrim & Rogers, 2005, p. 319).

In addition to the different methodologies and population used, differing perspectives or positions of the researchers may also contribute to conflicting findings. It is sometimes suggested that much sociological scholarship has been aimed to counter accusations made against NRMs by the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) and the media, thereby highlighting the positive aspects of membership rather than presenting a balanced perspective (Namini & Murken, 2009). The image of NRMs commonly put forward by the mass media, popular literature, and ACM literature is that membership is almost invariably emotionally damaging to its members (Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Introvigne, 2007). The suggestion that many sociologists primarily focus on the potential benefits of membership rather than on the possible costs is highlighted by Barker’s (1995) observation: “the somewhat paradoxical situation is that the more we feel the NRMs are having untrue bad things said about them, the less
inclined we are to publish true ‘bad’ things about the movements” (original emphasis) (Barker, 1995, p. 305).

Therefore the tensions in the literature may, to a large extent, reflect methodological and disciplinary preferences rather than present an ‘accurate’ account of membership and its impacts. A relatively small body of literature exists that has attempted to present a balanced account of membership by adopting a qualitative design favoured by sociologists with a former member population most commonly studied by psychologists and ‘anti cultists’. These qualitative studies have mostly found that former members report mixed experiences and perspectives, and conclude that they view their experiences in different, and sometimes opposing, ways (Boeri, 2002; Buxant, 2008; Coates, 2009, 2010a; Durocher, 1999; Healy, 2010; Namini & Murken, 2009; Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1984, 1987). This body of literature remains limited in the extent to which it explains why such divergent accounts are present. While considerable attention has been paid to exit narratives by scholars who contest the brainwashing thesis (Bromley, 1998a, 1998b, 2004; Richardson, 1978; Wright & Ebaugh, 1993), there has not been a theory proposed to account for the wide divergence of accounts of such experiences.

In order to identify and make sense of the nuances, complexities and contradictions in the individual’s experience of NRM membership and its impacts, the current study adopts a qualitative design with a sample of former members. It is hoped that a qualitative analysis of the life histories of former members will contribute to an improved understanding of the conflicts and ongoing debates present in the NRM literature, and contribute to an understanding of why former members report diverging experiences. To make sense of convergences and divergences in the meanings former members attribute to their experiences, the theoretical framework of SI is applied through which to interpret their life history accounts.

A summary of the aims of the current study and the ways in which it contributes to existing knowledge is presented in the next section.

**Research Aims**

The current study is an exploratory investigation of the life histories of former members of NRMs aimed at gaining an in depth understanding of the ways in which members interpret and negotiate issues pertinent to self and identity. In particular, the current study is interested in the management of self and identity in unstable environments or as the result of changes to the individuals’ cultural
contexts. The use of a sample of former members of NRMs was identified as appropriate because of its ability to shed light on issues pertinent to the management of self and identity in general, as well as its ability to contribute to ongoing debates present in the NRM literature in particular. There has been limited study of the life trajectories of former members of NRMs using qualitative methods, especially in Australia, and this study is intended to add to this literature. In particular it is hoped that an in depth understanding of the ways in which former members manage their selves and identities across their lifespan will help make sense of the variations reported in the literature in the ways in which membership and its impacts are experienced and perceived. By studying the ways in which former members have managed issues of self and identity across their lifespans, this study aims to contribute to both the ‘self and identity’ literature, in particular to the small body of literature that links micro and macro analysis of the self, as well as the NRM literature.

Guided by the aims and objectives of this study, a small number of research questions were formulated. As is common in qualitative exploratory research, a relatively loose conceptual understanding of the research questions is employed (Alston & Bowles, 2003, p. 63), with the following questions conceptualised as loosely guiding this work:

- What purpose did NRM membership serve for the former members in this study, and how, if at all, does this relate to the conditions of increased uncertainty for the self in contemporary Western societies?
- How do the former members in this study negotiate issues pertinent to self and identity following affiliation and disaffiliation from a NRM? What is the nature of self and/or identity changes experienced by these former members across their lifespan?
- How can NRMs membership be understood in light of former members’ wider life trajectories?

These research questions reflect the current study’s focus on the ways in which the self manages or resists change across the lifespan, and negotiates the complexities and uncertainties of contemporary environments and times of cultural change. In particular, the research questions were designed to help elucidate understandings of the ways in which the self is negotiated in social interaction in relation to the wider cultural context.

To analyse micro and macro impacts on the self and identity, a theoretical framework that offers both insight into the way in which the self is personally constructed through interaction as well as an understanding of the way in which the self is influenced by its social and cultural context was chosen. To this end, the theoretical approach of SI with its emphasis on subjective meaning and identity as central concepts for understanding human behaviour (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007; Mead, 1934) was
identified as an appropriate theoretical framework for this study. Positing the self as socially constructed, SI addresses the construction of self and identity at both a micro as well as macro level, linking these different domains of the self through the study of the impact of cultural changes on the self as well as the ways in which self and identity is constructed and reconstructed in social interaction.

SI is considered an appropriate framework because of its ability to make sense of the contradictions and confusion around the inconsistent use of the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Little analytic precision in the use of these terms appears to exist in the identity literature more generally, and the NRM literature in particular. The SI theoretical framework of self and identity is considered particularly helpful in that it puts forward a workable conceptualisation of self and identity as distinct but interconnected. Early analysis of the interview materials indicated a need for a conceptual framework that distinguished self from identity, while offering theoretical insights into their interconnectedness. As the issue of the definition of ‘self’ and ‘identity’ is both complex and fundamental to this study a detailed discussion of these terms in part of the theoretical framework of this study is outlined in Chapter 2.

For the wider community and more especially for other former members, it is hoped that this research will promote better understanding of the significance of NRM involvement to the life trajectories of former members. In particular it is hoped that an increased understanding of former members’ experiences in regard to the management of self and identity across their lifespans will help inform health professionals who work with former members as well as health professionals who work with self and identity related difficulties and challenges more generally.

**Organisation of the thesis**

Chapter 1 presents an overview of NRM scholarship, in particular pertaining to the significance of identity and self in NRM membership. Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework of this study, which is SI, informed by some postmodern contributions and writings by contemporary modernists such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Zygmunt Bauman. Chapter 3 describes the methodology and research methods employed in the current study. The findings of this study are outlined in Chapter 4 through to Chapter 13.

Chapter 4 describes the 11 different NRMs the participants in this study had joined; six of which can be described as religious groups founded in Christianity, four as personal development or
psychotherapy groups and one as Eastern meditation. Despite significant variations in terms of beliefs and practices, the findings outlined in this Chapter describe these groups as controlled environments in which conformity to behavioural, emotive, cognitive and social expectations as determined by leadership is expected and enforced. In this Chapter a conceptualisation of these groups as ‘world-rejecting NRMs’ or identity-based communities that exhibit strong processes of social influence and whose cohesiveness is based on a collective identity, in-group/out-group boundaries, and shared values and symbols is developed.

Chapter 5 presents a conceptualisation of the selves and identities of the participants in this study. In this Chapter it is suggested that the participants construct their selves in different ways and place varying importance on the ‘personal’ or individuality versus the ‘social’ or conformity in self-construction. While the majority of the NRM literature suggests that differences in the way in which former members describe and experience NRM membership can be attributed to gender and the nature of the group, it is argued in this Chapter that variations in the way in which the participants in this study describe NRM membership can also be attributed to variations in the way in which these participants construct their sense of self.

Chapter 6 to 9 outline the NRM trajectory. Chapter 6 addresses predispositions or vulnerabilities to NRM membership. In this Chapter it is suggested that the childhood experiences of the participants in this study did not adequately prepare them for the complexity of contemporary social life, and it is argued that this is significant to understanding NRM affiliation. Membership is conceptualised as related to childhood experiences that were excessive controlling or neglectful. In Chapter 7 it is argued that, unprepared for the challenges of contemporary life, some participants joined a NRM in need of guidance and direction, while others were motivated by a desire for ‘self-change’, in particular the development of an increased ability to relate or connect to others. In Chapter 8 it is argued that participants experienced and negotiated membership in different ways. It is argued that while some participants adjusted or conformed to the NRM demands easily, others struggled to conform and, to large degree, negotiated membership at a behavioural level through the use of impression management strategies. Chapter 9 addresses the causes of disaffiliation and distinguishes between narratives of disaffiliation prompted by a crisis caused by ‘others’ such as organisational changes and inconsistencies in the teachings and accounts of a more personal crisis caused by ongoing tensions between the groups’ expectation of conformity and the participants’ personal sense of autonomy.

Chapter 10 describes the significance and purpose of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) and in particular their predominant discourse of ‘brainwashing’ underpinning NRM membership. It is argued here that for many of the participants ACM participation and the brainwashing theories served an
‘identity function’ at a time of need. For some these resources offered a sense of identity or direction at a time of great loss and uncertainty, while for others they served an impression or stigma management function. While this thesis critiques the brainwashing explanation of membership, it is seen that it served a temporary and helpful purpose for many of the participants.

Chapter 11 to 13 addresses the debate over the impacts of affiliation and disaffiliation; it argues that for the majority of participants the experience of membership and exit facilitated the development of an increased ability to negotiate tensions between individuality and connectedness. While acknowledging the significant pain and loss experienced by many participants, these chapters suggest that NRM membership may also be a possible avenue for the development of an increased ability to negotiate the emotional complexities of contemporary society. It is argued that the majority of those participants who described membership as motivated by difficulties with personal autonomy, developed an increased sense of individuality as the result of their experience. Similarly, it is argued that approximately half of those participants who described membership as motivated by difficulties connecting to others, developed an increased ability to do so. In Chapter 11 it is argued that while NRM membership is a difficult and painful experience for many of these participants, in particular those individuals who were highly invested in the group and lost loved ones upon exit, for the majority of the participants the positives gained from membership outweigh the negatives suffered. Chapter 12 outlines a conceptualisation of the process through which the experience of membership and exit facilitated the development of an increased sense of individuality for those participants who were previously highly conformist or dependent on others for their construction of self. Chapter 13 outlines a conceptualisation of the process through which NRM membership is understood as having facilitated the development of a stronger sense of social and emotional connectedness for a number of those participants who had joined in search of an increased ability to connect to others.

The Conclusion returns directly to the research questions, and discusses the ways this study contributes to an understanding of NRM’s affiliation and disaffiliation as a possible avenue of personal growth and development.

Chapter 1 follows and presents an overview of the NRM scholarship pertinent to the current study.
Chapter 1

New Religious Movement membership, conversion and identity: Understandings and perceptions of NRMs

One of the things [the group] held very dear was this concept of what identity is. Basically God determined the identity of every person before the beginning of time; because of the fall, even though we have our basic identity, we are all sinful and no one maintains their true identity. A basic part of what they teach is that a person cannot determine their own identity; they must have someone else tell them who they are... They have this thing about naming and identity. You are named by someone else, you do not name yourself. Your naming and your identity is about other people telling you what you are and what you should be (Michelle).

What is a NRM?

The term NRM is used by sociologists in reference to often unrelated non-traditional groups or movements that became prominent in Western societies towards the end of the 1960s. Thousands of NRMs exist in Western society (Barker 1999; Dawson 2007). While there is some dispute over the significance of NRMs, the NRM or ‘cult’ information service INFORM has over 2600 different groups in its database, the majority of which can be called NRMs (Barker, 1999; INFORM). These groups are religious in as far as they all propose answers to at least some of the questions that have traditionally been addressed by mainstream religions (Barker, 1999). Many of these groups are not religious in the traditional sense and could also be described as quasi-religious, or even spiritual, political, scientific, alien-oriented, or psychotherapeutic (Barker, 1997, 2004). NRMs vary significantly from each other in terms of ideology, approach and size, and exhibit differences in terms of origin, practices, beliefs, lifestyles and leadership (Barker, 1997, 1999; Possamai, 2009). Furthermore, while some NRMs are well known and have a large following, others are small, only last for a short time, and attract little to no attention (Dawson, 2007a).

In addition to questions about the extent to which these groups are best described as ‘religious’, there is also argued to be nothing ‘new’ about NRMs. Most sociologists would agree that new religious groups have regularly appeared throughout history (J. R. Lewis, 2004; Melton, 2007; Miller, 1991); some have become established in the community while others have disappeared. In addition, a great
number of NRMs are cultural transplants, often of Asian origin. After the lifting of a ban on Asian immigration to America during the 1960s, America experienced an influx of alternative religious movements, mostly from India (Finke & Iannaccone, 1993). As a result, groups that were institutionalised religions in their culture of origin became ‘new’ religions in their culture of destination (Finke & Iannaccone, 1993, p. 37). While many of these groups are not ‘new’ as such, they have only become visible in their present form since the second world war, and therefore were ‘new’ to Western societies in the late 1960s (Barker, 1999; Possamai, 2009). Healy (2010) comments that while the term ‘new’ does not accurately reflect the origin of the group, it does accurately reflect the ‘study’ of NRMs, which is a comparatively new area of sociology with just over 40 years of exploration (Healy, 2010, p. 32).

NRMs have also been termed ‘cults’; however, considering the derogatory usage of the word cult, the majority of scholars, in particular sociologists, prefer the more neutral term NRM (Barker, 1984, 1999; P. J. Olson, 2006; Possamai, 2009). Both the terms NRMs and ‘cults’ comprise considerable definitional vagueness, and there is no standard definition or agreed-upon criteria that identifies or describes these groups (Barker, 1999; Robbins & Bromley, 1993). Nonetheless, the commonly used descriptions or definitions of a world-rejecting NRM or ‘cult’ are comparable, and some researchers use these terms interchangeably (for example Healy, 2010). Despite significant similarities between the terms world-rejecting NRM and ‘cult’, the different terms imply different underlying assumptions. The use of the term cult tends to imply an assumption that group membership results from having been ‘brainwashed’ and will likely prove damaging (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993a; Singer, 2003). The term NRM, on the other hand, allows for an examination of its members without the assumption that they are victims of coercive and unethical practices that will inevitably lead to harm (Barker, 1984; Richardson, 2004, 2007). While the term NRM is favoured in this work, as the term ‘cult’ was favoured by many of the participants, both of these terms are used.

Despite different assumptions regarding the inevitability of harm, most scholars agree that ‘cults’ or world rejecting NRMs are ‘high demand’ organisations that promote beliefs, values and behaviours that conflict with those of the dominant culture (Langone, 1993a; Richardson, 1999). These groups are commonly described as ‘deviant’ groups that have novel beliefs and practices from those of their ‘host’ culture, albeit to varying degrees (Bainbridge, 1997; Balch & Taylor, 1977; Hampshire & Beckford, 1983; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Robbins & Anthony, 1982; Wright & Piper, 1986). Variations in the degrees to which NRMs can be considered ‘deviant’ from their culture of destination has been an area of significant interest. Many social scientists have observed differences in what they call the degree of ‘continuity/discontinuity’ between NRMs and the dominant culture; to represent these variations, a great number of different typologies of NRMs have been created (Beckford, 1985; Bird, 1979; Dawson, 1997; Ellwood & Partin, 1988; Lofland & Richardson, 1984; Nelson, 1986;
Robbins, 1988b; Stark & Bainbridge, 1985; Tipton, 1982; Wallis, [1984] 2007). What most of these typologies have in common is that they all highlight that the relationship between a NRM and mainstream society is complex. Many of these typologies indicate that most NRMs combine both conformity as well as resistance to mainstream culture, and often reject some elements of the mainstream culture while adopting others (Dawson, 1997; Tipton, 1982).

Most of these typologies are problematic in their complexity, and have been criticized as not at all ‘user friendly’ (Dawson, 1997). One notable exception is the most widely cited typology developed by Wallis (1984) (Dawson, 1997). While it is recognised that Wallis’ typology is sometimes critiqued for its simplicity, for the purposes of this work it is adequate. Much more simple than most of the other available typologies, Wallis’ (1984) typology distinguishes between NRMs according to their orientation to mainstream culture, and he notes that while some NRMs maintain members’ positions in conventional society others isolate and encapsulate them. Wallis (1984) proposed a classification of NRMs where he distinguished three distinctive group cultures, each reflecting a different degree of ‘continuity/discontinuity’ between the group and mainstream culture. The different ‘ideal types’ identified by Wallis include: world-rejecting, world-affirming and world-accommodation groups (Aldridge, 2007; Wallis, [1984] 2007), out of which the discontinuity between world-rejecting NRMs and mainstream culture is the greatest. As described by Wallis (1984) ‘world-rejecting’ groups believe themselves to be the only ones holding the ‘truth’, standards of conduct are imposed on the followers in the name of a personal deity, human beings are seen as sinful, and obedience to the leadership and commitment to the cause is expected (Aldridge 2007; Wallis [1984] 2007). With its tendency to ‘encapsulate’ its members and reject mainstream society, what Wallis describes as world-rejecting NRMs resembles what some others have preferred to label ‘cults’ (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Langone, 1993a; for a much used definition of cults see Langone, 1993a, p. 5).

The groups referred to in this study appear to, by and large, to fit within Wallis’ (1984) criteria for ‘world-rejecting’ group; the study participants almost universally referred to the groups they had belonged to as ‘cults’. While an in depth description of the groups and their relationship to various conceptualisations of NRMs and ‘cults’ is provided in Chapter 4, most important to the current study is that the various groups described by participants all depict controlled environments or cultures that vary significantly from their host culture, mainstream Australian society.

**NRM in Australia**

Australia is one of the most culturally and religiously diverse nations in the world, and is recognised as having an increasingly diverse range of religious affiliation(Bouma, 1995, 1996, 1998, 1999, 2003,
Australia’s high religious diversity is most commonly attributed to its heavy inflow of immigrants who carry with them their religious and cultural values and practices (Bouma, 2003, 2006; Richardson, 2001). In accordance with its cultural and religious diversity, increasingly Australians are choosing their own faith rather than the faith of their birth, demonstrating a tendency to move away from established forms of religion towards personal or ‘new age’ spiritualities (Bouma, 2003, 2006; Ezzy & Berger, 2009; M. Mason, Singleton, & Webber, 2007; Possamai, 2001; Webber, 2002) and NRM affiliation (Possamai, 2003, 2011). Following this move away from traditional religion and the resultant growth in NRM participation (Possamai, 2011), it is estimated that NRMs in Australia now number in the several hundred (HREOC, 1998). As elsewhere, most of these originate overseas, and range in size from small and exclusive groups to organisations with thousands of members’ (HREOC, 1998, p.7).

While the growth in NRM participation in Australia is comparable to elsewhere in the Western world, NRMs have witnessed less hostility in Australia than in many other countries (Clarke, 2005a, 2005b; Richardson, 2001). With its more pluralistic approach to religious and cultural differences, Australia has been tolerant of the rich diversity of religious groups found in the community, extending to NRMs; at least significantly more tolerant than some European and former Communist countries (Richardson, 2001). Two government reports into religious practice and belief in Australia (HREOC, 1998; JSCFADT, 2000) concluded that it is difficult to define certain groups as ‘cults’ or to institute regulations of conduct (Hill, 2001; Possamai, 2003). It is sometimes even argued that rather than harm or disrupt, some NRMs contribute to and enrich Australian society (Ireland & Baker, 2003). Nonetheless, responses to NRMs in Australia, like elsewhere, remain mixed. Despite some tolerance towards smaller religious groups, many groups are treated with suspicion, especially those groups that make life-changing demands on participants (Richardson, 2001, p. 259). Even though there are no laws that prohibit practices of religious belief in Australia, a number of these groups have been the subject of discrimination and misunderstanding, and have suffered, and continue to suffer, considerably at the hand of authorities and the media (Bouma, 1999; Hill, 2001; HREOC, 1998; Possamai & Murray, 2004).

Despite this climate of relative tolerance, the occurrence of conflict between a NRM or an individual’s religious affiliation and the wider community or government, and the wide reporting of such conflicts by the media, is not at all unusual in Australian society (Kohn, 1996; Possamai, 2003). In some cases, the fear of the ‘cult’ could not be substantiated or proved to be false. For example, in what is often described as the largest action against a NRM in Australia, in the mid-1980s, 153 children were removed from the communal homes of the group The Family (formerly called the Children of God). The children, thought to be at risk of sexual abuse, were soon returned to their
parents because of the lack of evidence (Bouma, 2006; Hill, 2001; Kohn, 1996; Richardson, 2001). Another well-known example is the disappearance of baby Azaria Chamberlain in 1980 which brought negative attention to her family’s affiliation with the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The mother, Lindy Chamberlain subsequently served three years in prison for the alleged murder before being acquitted of the charges (Richardson, 2001, p. 259). Similarly, three members of the Eastern-based Ananda Marga group were accused of the Hilton Hotel bombing in 1978, and spent many years in prison before being acquitted of their charges (Richardson, 2001, p.260). In other cases, evidence of harm was substantiated. In 2002, the Order of Saint Charbel’s leader William Kamm (also known as the Little Pebble) came to the attention of the authorities and the media following sexual abuse charges towards minors, for which he is currently in prison. Those who describe Kamm as a ‘cult’ leader refer to his apocalyptic prophesies that predict end-time, war and natural disasters, and his claim that he will become the final Pope of the Catholic Church (Wickham & Hartney, 2006). Similarly, in 2007, Kenneth Dyers, the 85-year-old co-founder of Kenja Communications (a self-improvement group) was reported to have committed suicide before he could be tried for allegations of the sexual abuse of two 12-year-old girls. Dyers was hailed a prophet by his group, and as a result is most commonly portrayed as a ‘cult’ leader (Morris, 2007; Teutsch, 2007). While the list of examples goes on, outlining them all is not within the scope of this work.

These and many other examples of conflicts involving NRMs and, in particular, the ways in which the media reports these occurrences, impacts widely on the wider community’s perceptions and attitudes towards ‘cults’ or NRMs. The relationship between the media and public perception of NRMs or ‘cults’ is well established (Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Introvinge, 2007; Wright, 1997). Sociologists most commonly argue that the community has been largely educated about cults/NRMs by journalists who are not apprised of objective information about NRMs and are unfamiliar with sociological understanding of these groups (Beckford, 1999; Possamai, 2003; Richardson, 1996; Richardson & van Driel, 1997; Wright, 1997). They stress that in Australia, as elsewhere, there tends to be a reluctance to consult sociological evidence which has found minimal risk of harm and an over reliance by governments and the media on the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) which emphasises the risk(Barker, 2007; Clarke, 2005a; Richardson, 1996; Richardson & Introvinge, 2004; Soper, 2001). An overview of the ACM and its influence on community perceptions of ‘cults’ and NRMs is outlined in the next section.
The influence of the Anti-Cult Movement (ACM) on the public perceptions of NRMs

Despite a more peaceful situation for NRMs in Australia than in much of the rest of the Western world (Richardson, 2001), the views of Australian society as expressed through, and influenced by, the media and other public institutions indicate considerable suspicion and intolerance of NRMs (Clarke, 2005a). The ACM plays a large role in shaping media representations and public perception of these groups (Clarke, 2005a).

The ACM was initially formed by a group of parents and disgruntled former members. Due to the growing number of NRMs in the early 1970s, by the middle of this decade parents of members of such groups alleged that ‘brainwashing’ techniques were being used to enslave young persons (Anthony, 1993; Bromley, 1998b; Robbins, 1988b; Wright, 1998). These parents argued that the changes they observed in their children following NRM affiliation could be best explained as caused by powerful and deceptive strategies used by the group and its leaders (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Singer, 2003). With an aim of trying to reunite families, parents and some former members formed groups that opposed ‘cults’, which by the late 1970s developed into the ACM. By the mid-1980s, as the result of the professionalization of the ACM, a process in which research and the role of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers became more salient (Robbins, 1988, p. 6), support for the brainwashing explanation of membership became more widespread. Even though the application of the brainwashing thesis to NRM affiliation has consistently been rejected by many of those who study NRMs (Anthony, 1993; Barker, 1984; Richardson, 2001, 2007; Richardson & Introvinge, 2004; Robbins, 2001; Robbins & Anthony, 1982; Stark & Finke, 2000; Wright, 1991), it has found lasting favour with health professionals and cult information services (CIFS, 2012; Goldberg, 1997, 2003, 2009; Hassan, 1988, 2000; ICSA, 2011; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010). Even though some sociologists argue that the brainwashing discourses are no longer employed or given serious consideration, the brainwashing thesis continues to be utilised by health professionals who study and work with former members. Currently the primary, not to say only, strategy for health professionals who work with former members recommends attempting to ‘undo’ the alleged influences of ‘having been brainwashed’ (Goldberg, 1993; Halperin, 1993; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993a; Singer, 2003; Tobias, 1993; West & Martin, 1994).

In this thesis the term ACM is not intended as a pejorative label in reference to a movement of disgruntled parents or former members but is used more broadly to refer to professionals or groups who are informed by the brainwashing thesis in their work with current or former members, such as
cult information services, helping professionals, and pastoral carers. In Australia the ‘ACM’ is informed by a cult information service called Cult Information and Family Support (CIFS, 2012). According to its website CIFS is a cult information network that was initially formed by parents and family members of current members of ‘cults’, and provides cult information and support to former members and the families of current members, and organises regular anti-cult seminars and conferences. The main aim of these conferences and seminars is described as to educate the Australian public in general and health professionals in particular on the negative impacts of brainwashing. To do so, overseas ‘cult experts’ are engaged as main speakers (CIFS, 2012). The researcher attended the CIFS 2010 National Conference called “Coercive Persuasion and Mind Control: Treating Victims of Coercive Groups and Destructive Cults”, and this conference was aimed at educating the 120 delegates, of which many were health professionals, about the danger of cults and the management of “post-cult trauma”. The presenters emphasised the dangers of what they continued to term ‘brainwashing’ throughout this conference (CIFS National Conference, 2010).

In Australia, as elsewhere, the reliance of the media on the ACM or ‘cult awareness groups’ for information has resulted in popular media portrayals and public conceptualization being largely shaped by the brainwashing thesis (Barker, 2007; Beckford, 1999; McCloud, 2007; P. J. Olson, 2006; Richardson & van Driel, 1997; Soper, 2001; Wright, 1997). To fuel allegations of brainwashing and increase the credibility of these proposed theories, the ACM and media support their claims with evidence that some of these groups have indeed resulted in significant harm to their members, including the risk of death. The ACM and media consistently point to the Jonestown mass-murder-suicide in 1978, the Branch Davidian siege in 1993, the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway by Aum Shinrikyo in 1995, the Heavens Gate suicide in 1997, and the deaths of the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God in 2000. These examples give credence to the brainwashing theories as they demonstrate a need to explain such irrational behaviour (Bromley & Melton, 2002; Robbins, 2001). Therefore, not surprisingly, outside of sociological circles, the conceptualisation of affiliation as resulting from brainwashing has become an influential theory of involvement in NRM.

Identity difficulties and challenges that motivate membership

While the brainwashing interpretation of membership implies that anyone can be ‘recruited’ and that one can become a members simply by being ‘at the wrong place at the wrong time’ (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Singer, 2003), a more influential explanation relates to issues of identity. NRM membership is most commonly understood in terms of a NRM’s ability to provide its members with a sense of certainty and identity security. The identity and sense of belonging achieved by embracing the group’s
beliefs, values and practices assist the new recruit in managing the sometimes overwhelming ambiguities of contemporary ‘life’ (R. L. Adams & Fox, 1972; Buxant, 2008; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Buxant, et al., 2007; Coates, 2011; Curtis & Curtis, 1993; Galanter, 1989; S. Levine, 2007; Robbins, 1988a; Saroglou, 2002; Zablocki, 2001). From this perspective, involvement in a NRM is not understood as the result of deceptive practices but as motivated by the individual in search of identity stability and ‘relief’ from the anxieties associated with living in complex contemporary social environments. Levine (1984) studied over 800 youthful converts and found that 90 percent left within two years of joining and used their experience to navigate through a turbulent post adolescence identity crisis. From his findings he concluded that group involvement can be best understood as motivated by a desire to avoid having to negotiate the frustrations and ambiguities of changing societies (Levine, 1984, 2007). Amore thorough investigation of this issue appears in Chapter 6 and Chapter 7.

The view of membership as motivated by a desire for identity is supported by studies that have looked at ‘who joins’ these groups. Challenging the view that anyone is susceptible to membership put forward by those who support the brainwashing thesis these studies have found that many of those who join NRMs share certain characteristics. While further discussion of these studies is included in Chapter 6, there is convincing evidence that suggests that people who join NRMs are predominantly young, come from unstable or fundamentalist homes, and, even though they are often well educated, could be described as not well prepared to negotiate the demands of complex contemporary social life (Buxant, 2008; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; S. Levine, 1984, 2007).

Self and identity changes upon joining a NRM

Identity and self are also central concepts in the study of the individual’s adjustment to group membership. Predominantly referred to as ‘conversion’, the changes in self and identity observed in current members upon joining a NRM is an area of significant sociological interest and has been fundamental to the study of individuals’ affiliation to religious perspectives (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981a; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1993). Conversion is commonly understood as a ‘radical reorganisation of identity, meaning, life’ (Travisano, 1970, p. 594).

As uniformity of behaviour is a common feature of NRM membership (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Coates, 2012; Jacobs, 1989, 2007), it is well established that new recruits undergo an identity change process so as to align their previous sense of self or identity with the group ‘identity’ (Balch, 1980; Boeri & Pressley, 2010). However the nature of the perceived changes in recruits following membership is disputed; conceptualisations of conversion are varied and have shifted and changed.
significantly over time (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999; Snow & Machalek, 1984). The study of conversion is further complicated by the inconsistent use of the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ in this body of literature, and there is some confusion over what exactly is meant by different authors when using these varying terms. While many authors appear to use these terms interchangeably, as is described in Chapter 2, in the current study the term identity and self are conceptualised as distinct but interconnected.

The earliest studies of conversion tended to de-emphasise social processes and rest on a shared faith which attributed agency to a powerful external ‘force’, such as an omnipotent ‘God’ (James, [1902] 1979; Starbuck, 1987). From this perspective the conversion experience is understood as involving a cognitive shift resulting from a single epiphany or the grace of God, which is conceptualised as the cause of behavioural change (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981b; Richardson, 1985). While this model may apply to some contemporary converts, scholars have argued that it does not give adequate consideration to social interaction and the individual’s personal agency as a seeker of change (Rambo, 1993; Richardson, 1985).

Another common explanation for the sudden and dramatic changes in behaviour that, like the early model of conversion, also de-emphasises personal agency and social interaction is ‘brainwashing’ (Balch, 1980, p. 137; Richardson, 1985). Those who support the brainwashing theories argue that involvement in cults or NRMs stem from the experience of psychological practices that are designed to increase members’ dependency on the group and that result in a loss of free will (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Singer, 1979, 2003; Singer & Ofshe, 1990; West, 1993; West & Martin, 1994). The brainwashing model is built upon studies by Lifton (1961) and Schein (1961) of indoctrination practised by Chinese communists on American prisoners of war during the Korean War in the early 1950s (POWs) (Anthony, 1999; Lifton, 1961; Schein, 1961; Wright, 1991). In the past, brainwashing referred mainly to techniques for influencing POWs, political detainees and hostages held by terrorists (West 1993). In the late 1980s former members of cults (e.g., Hassan, 2000) started to embrace this body of knowledge and claimed that during their group involvement they encountered many of the same indoctrination practices experienced by former POWs (Aronoff-McKibben, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000; Hassan, 2000). Currently, recognising that NRM members are not physically restrained against their will, the term brainwashing is understood to be on a continuum of influence and is described as “a very strong metaphor for a very powerful kind of interpersonal influence” (Langone, 2005; Zablocki, 1998, p. 217). This interpersonal influence is viewed as a deliberate act that is more coercive than simple persuasion (K. Taylor, 2004; Zablocki, 2001). Even though it is recognised that cult commitment and obedience cannot be explained entirely in terms of brainwashing, and that other factors such as conformity play a role, it is argued that “deliberate cultic manipulations of personal convictions” play an important role (Zablocki, 2001, p. 162). Those who
adhere to the brainwashing theories argue that the changes in identity observed in new recruits are the result of powerful and deceptive strategies used by the group and its leaders. Upon joining, the recruit is argued to develop a ‘pseudo-identity’ (West & Martin, 1994) to help him or her adapt to a stressful environment where brainwashing techniques are used (Conway & Siegelman, 1982, 1995; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010). From this perspective the changes in identity are considered a ‘dissociative coping strategy’ which overlay or replace what is perceived as a previous ‘authentic’ identity (Conway & Siegelman, 1982, 1995; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010). West & Martin (1994) compare pseudo-identity as observed in current and former members of ‘cults’ to the personality changes sometimes observed in POWs.

Extensive sociological literature evaluates the brainwashing theories and most of it finds little or no merit in them. Sociologists who have studied NRM, on the whole, have found no evidence of ‘brainwashing’ (Richardson, 2007; Snow & Machalek, 1983). Some sociologists argue that the brainwashing model of commitment has gained currency among the public as it provides a convenient account for those who are at a loss to explain why individuals are attracted to such groups (Snow and Machalek 1984; Richardson 1987). It is argued that the brainwashing thesis is limited in its ability to fully account for the variety of individuals’ experience of involvement (Barker, 1984; Boeri, 2002; Healy, 2010, 2011; Hill, 2001) and does not give adequate consideration to social interaction and the individual’s agency (Richardson, 1985, p. 166). Scholars have pointed out that while ‘brainwashing’ may be no different from techniques of persuasion seen in more conventional organisations, brainwashing allegations are rarely made against conventional organisations displaying similar traits such as monasteries or the military (Coates, 2012; Wright, 1991).

A move to a more activist understanding of conversion followed an interest in NRM by symbolic interactionists, including those interested in religious activity (James, [1902] 1979; Lofland & Stark, 1965) as well as those interested in the sociology of deviant groups such as quasi-religious UFO groups (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). The SI conceptualisation applied to the study of NRM influenced the development of active rather than passive theories of conversion, and this shifted the view of new members as passive recipients of change towards as view of members as active seeker who change through interaction with the NRM. This movement was primarily initiated by Lofland & Stark (1965) who emphasised interpersonal bonds in NRM membership, and it has been developed further by numerous scholars who have emphasised interaction and personal agency in conversion (Auf der Heide, 2006; Barker, 1984; Neitz, 1990; Richardson, 1985; R. A. Strauss, 1979).

Termed the ‘social drift’ model by Long and Hadden (1983) this interactionist model of conversion suggests that people become committed to a group gradually, even inadvertently, through the
influence of social relationships, especially during times of strain (Balch, 1980; Balch & Taylor, 1977; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Richardson & Stewart, 1977). From this perspective NRM membership is understood in terms of normal processes of socialisation resulting in a shift in patterns of association (Gooren, 2007; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981a, 1981b; Long & Hadden, 1983; Richardson, 1989, 2007). Individual agency or the self-guiding aspects of conversion are stressed, and commitment is viewed as motivated by the ‘direct rewards’ of membership such as friendship and meaning (Dawson, 2007a; Howell, 1997; Wright, 1987). Unlike the traditional conception of conversion and the brainwashing theories that view identity changes as sudden and dramatic, from this perspective conversion is considered a gradual process that result from the new members’ decision to play the role of convert or new member (Balch, 1980; Richardson, Van der Lans, & Derks, 1986). It is argued that the changes in behaviour or identity observed in new recruits are related to the enactment and rapid learning of new roles rather than dramatic identity changes resulting from brainwashing. These scholars highlight a discrepancy between behaviours and underlying beliefs, at least initially, and argue that genuine conviction develops later beneath a façade of total commitment (Balch, 1980). From this perspective members are viewed as actively involved in ‘learning’ and, in time, internalising the NRM identity and are not just passive victims of powerful external influences.

The impact of membership on its members and former members

The impact of NRM affiliation on the psychological health of its members is another area of NRM study that has drawn mixed findings. Permeating public perception is the view of membership as psychologically and emotionally damaging to its members. This view is predominantly put forward by the mass media, popular literature and anti-cult movement literature, but has also been published in a number of journals. As explained previously, the view of membership as harmful is supported primarily by studies that have set out to investigate psychopathology in former members through quantitative studies (Conway & Siegelman, 1982, 1995; Conway, et al., 1986; Langone, et al., 1998; Malinoski, et al., 1999; P. R. Martin, et al., 1992; Moyers, 1994; Swartling & Swartling, 1992) and, to a lesser extent, clinical case studies with former members who sought treatment from the reporting clinicians (Giambalvo, 1996, 2000; Goldberg, 2009; Hassan, 2000; Singer, 2003; West, 1993; West & Martin, 1994).

Despite relatively little empirical support, this view is most widespread, and the possible impacts of involvement are argued to be extensive, ranging from relationship difficulties to severe mental health problems such as anxiety disorders and dissociation. Furthermore, some claim the discovery of distinctive syndromes as the result of having been brainwashed, such as ‘atypical dissociative
disorder’ (dissociative states that are viewed as the result of being subjected to ‘brainwashing’) (Singer, 1979), ‘pseudo-identity or altered persona’ (a dissociative coping response) (West & Martin, 1994) and ‘information disease’ (disturbances in perception, memory and other information processing capacities) (Conway & Siegelman, 1982, 1995). This view of NRM membership as damaging to psychological health is highly influential in the treatment of former members of such groups; with the majority of this literature written by health professionals, many of whom are former members themselves (Giambalvo, 2000; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010).

This view of membership as psychologically damaging is in contrast with the view put forward by many sociologists which is that it can be beneficial, or at least not harmful, for its members (Di Fiorino, Fizotti, & Miniati, 2002; Kuner, 1981; Latkin, Hagan, Littman, & Sundberg, 1987). These scholars have predominantly studied life in a group through the use of qualitative methods with current members of such groups (Balch, 1980; Barker, 1984; Richardson, 1989; Robbins, 1988). The positive impacts of membership identified by this body of literature are varied and wide ranging. Most significantly, this body of literature has found that current members of NRMs report decreases in levels of stress or psychological distress than prior to involvement (McIlwain, 1994; Richardson, 1995; Ullman, 1982), dramatic decreases in drug and alcohol usage (Galanter, 1980, 1983; Galanter, Buckley, Deutsch, Rabkin, & Rabkin, 1980; Galanter, Rabkin, Rabkin, & Deutsch, 1979; Simmonds, 1977), an increased sense of ‘family’ and community (Galanter, 1980; Lofland & Stark, 1965; McIlwain, 1994; Saroglou, Christians, Buxant, & Casalfiore, 2006; Wright & Piper, 1986), and the resolution of identity related challenges and difficulties (R. L. Adams & Fox, 1972; D. F. Gordon, 1974; McIlwain, 1990, 1994).

Researchers who posit membership as inevitably harmful tend to dismiss these qualitative studies as ‘unreliable’. Relying on a study that has identified elevated lie scales in current members (Ungerleider & Wellsch, 1979) they argue that honest responses are hard to obtain from group members who are influenced or even ‘controlled’ by group leaders (Aronoff-Mckibben, et al., 2000; Langone, et al., 1998).

A more balanced picture of NRM membership comes from qualitative studies with former members. These studies have concluded that the impacts of membership vary, with some former members reporting predominantly negative impacts, others predominantly positive impacts but the vast majority both positive as well as negative impacts. On average, qualitative studies have found that former members generally indicate favourable, or at least mixed responses toward their former group (Barker, 1984; Beckford, 1985; Boeri, 2002; Coates, 2010a; Durocher, 1999; Goldman, 1995; Healy, 2010, 2011; S. Levine, 1984; Rothbaum, 1988; Solomon, 1981; Taslimi, Hood, & Watson, 1991; Wright, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1991).
These studies have found that in addition to the grief and distress related to the loss of a social bond, former members report positive impacts including improved critical thinking, coping skills, wisdom, insight and empathy (Buxant, 2008; Coates, 2009, 2010a; Goldman, 1995; Namini & Murken, 2009; Wright, 1987). Rather than being a lifelong pathology, the psychological symptoms reported by former members are viewed as primarily related to leaving a social group and subsequent problems re-adjusting to society. In contrast to the experiences presented in much of the popular literature on cults, qualitative studies with former members suggest that even though the experience of exit is negative and destabilizing for most, most former members find the strength to reconstruct their lives, and many feel they have become wiser because of the experience.

**Conclusion**

Despite a general agreement that identity is primary to understanding NRM affiliation, an overview of the literature indicates that significant tensions remain in this body of literature. The current study aims to contribute to an improved understanding of the conflicts and ongoing debates present in the NRM literature, and contribute to an understanding of why former members report diverging experiences. In addition, the current study is intended to contribute to the study of the life trajectories of former members of NRMs using qualitative methods, which has been limited, especially in Australia. By studying the ways in which former members describe their experiences of self and identity following affiliation and disaffiliation from a NRM, this study aims to contribute to both the ‘self and identity’ literature as well as the NRM literature.

In this study, life history accounts by former members are analysed using a theoretical framework based on symbolic interactionism (SI) informed by some postmodern theories and writings by contemporary modernists. This is to make sense of the convergences and divergences in the meanings former members attribute to their experiences and to gain an understanding of the ways in which issues of self and identity have been managed across their lifespan. This theoretical framework is outlined in the next Chapter and the methods employed are described in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2

Theorising self and identity in contemporary society: Social influence and personal autonomy

Despite all the negatives of being part of a group like that, the standards and principles weren’t all wrong…. In terms of mental health, in terms of drug abuse, in terms of broken families, I’d say in a cult per capita it would be less… A cult is like a hot house, everything flourishes... It offers a sense of community and belonging that mainstream society doesn’t. I miss that (Flora).

Identity has become a topic of increasing sociological interest in recent years. Sociologists commonly describe identity as having become problematic in comparison to previous eras (Bauman, 2000; Baumeister, 1996; Bendle, 2002; Cote, 2000; Heelas, Lash, & Morris, 1996). Identity scholars explain that as the result of rapid social and cultural change, and the dissolution or destabilisation of traditions that guide behaviour, the self has started to experience increased levels of uncertainty, and, in turn, increased freedom and personal autonomy. As cultural boundaries are no longer clearly delineated but become personally negotiated, individuals are deemed to be open to greater uncertainty and are forced to confront personal futures that are much more open than in the past (Bauman, 1996; Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994; Bellah, et al., 1985; Lash, 1994, 1999). Identity is no longer understood as determined by traditions but is now considered much more open and personally negotiated and constructed by the individual (Bauman, 1996, 1998, 2000; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1992, 2003; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Rose, 1996).

Debates around the changes in personal freedom and autonomy for the self have often surrounded what has been called ‘the new individualism’ (Bellah, et al., 1985; Elliott, 1996; Elliott & Charles, 2006). Today, following the ‘the new individualism’, most people spend their adolescence ‘finding themselves’, searching for ‘self-actualisation’ in the ever changing context of contemporary social life (Cote, 2000; Jordan, 1978). The transition from a sense of self primarily determined by traditional ways of doing things to an emphasis on individuality and personal development is a relatively recent phenomenon (Elliott & Charles, 2006; Hitlin, 2003). Individualism arose as society offered a new potential for distinction between public and private lives. This term only dates back to the 1830s when it was coined by Alexis de Tocqueville in reference to a growing value he observed in the middle and upper classes in European diaspora (Elliott & Charles, 2006). Resulting from the increased importance given to individuality, the construct of adolescence, the ‘official’ period in which the individual is to develop an identity as separate from his or her parents, only dates back to the early
1900 (Hitlin, 2003; Jordan, 1978; Krings, Bangerter, Gomez, & Grob, 2008). To this extent, the shift towards individuality or increased freedom for individuals to negotiate or ‘be in charge of’ their own biographies is a relatively recent occurrence.

While the contemporary self has greater freedom to invent and reinvent itself than ever before, individuals are now also faced with high levels of uncertainty. The construction of a coherent or clear sense of self has become increasingly difficult. In a world characterised by ongoing change where fixed points of reference and certainty are no longer available and meaning has become tentative, a sense of self or identity formed one moment may no longer be relevant the next (Bauman, 1996; Gergen, 1987, 1991; Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1992; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; C. Levine, 2005). Current identity scholars generally agree that contemporary conditions, in particular the multiplicity of contexts and relationships in which the contemporary self is embedded, demand a high level of adaptability and openness to change. This privileges the development of adaptability and fluidity over the development of self-stability and coherency (C. Levine, 2005; Phoenix & Rattansi, 2005; Schachter, 2005; Weigert & Gecas, 2005). Even though there is a general consensus that in contemporary Western society the stable self of the past is increasingly replaced by a self characterised by adaptability and flexibility, the extent to which this decreased cultural stability for the self is celebrated varies. While some scholars depict the contemporary self as highly adaptable and capable of negotiating unstable cultural conditions, others continue to emphasise the importance of self-stability. The various emphases identity scholars place on the self’s adaptability to change versus the importance of self-stability are developed in the next section.

**Self-construction under conditions of uncertainty: Tensions between the demands of adaptability and self-stability**

Conceptualisations of the contemporary self are multiple and often contrasting, and can perhaps be best understood as a continuum with the view of the self as highly fluid and changeable in response to changing social conditions on the one end, and the view of the self as possessing an ‘essence’ or a sense of ‘coherency’ or ‘stability’ on the other. Most scholars view the self as both personal and somewhat stable, whilst at the same time socially influenced and adaptable; however the extent to which scholars emphasise these varying forces varies. Extreme versions of social constructionism, associated with post-structuralism and postmodernism, reject the notion of a somewhat stable self altogether and conceptualise the self as a product of discourse and as inherently fragmented, multiple and transient. From this perspective the self is no longer considered guided by a stable inner sense of
coherency that was common in the past but has become amorphous, fluid and ever-changing in response to ever-changing social demands (Gergen, 1987, 1991). As the result of the frenzied and often conflicting demands of contemporary life the self of the past has become ‘hyper-fragmented’ and has become replaced by a self that has no shapes of its own but assumes varied shapes according to circumstances (Gergen, 1991; Lifton, 1993). Individuals’ subjective sense of self-continuity or stability is conceptualised as merely an impression that is narratively constructed and maintained. Rather than perceived as anchored in experience and social interaction as in previous era, the individual’s sense of self is understood as, at least to a large extent, constructed and maintained through discourse (Baudrillard, 1988; Butler, 1990; Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1979, 1980, 1986; Gergen, 1991; Hall, 2000; Lyotard, 1984).

While some scholars celebrate the perceived increased fluidity of the self as a sign of vitality, and argue that sameness and continuity is no longer important for well-being and rather inhibits freedom and ‘self-actualisation’ (Gergen, 1991), others are less optimistic. A number of scholars argue that cultural stability and sameness and continuity continue to be important for the self and that the lack of boundaries or the increased fluidity of many selves is not evidence of psychological health but may lead to pathology (Cote, 2000; Lasch, 1984). To support their claims, these scholars point to the alleged rises in mental health problems and the myriad of identity or self related difficulties common in contemporary Western society (Cote, 2000). From this perspective it is argued that the increases in selves that lack consistency is not a ‘healthy’ sign of adaptability but are indicators that personality disorders, such as borderline and narcissistic personality disorder, are becoming more widespread (Castells, 1997; Cote, 2000; Kreisman & Straus, 1989; Lasch, 1984; Riesman, et al., 1950; Schachter, 2005).

Many scholars are critical of portrayals of the self as amorphous and reduced to discursive constructions or as inevitably damaged by cultural instability; they argue that the postmodern self is not dissolving but continues to exist and remains central to an individuals’ experiential affairs (Giddens, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). While it is recognised that the construction of stable selves may be more problematic in contemporary life than was traditionally the case (Gecas, 1994; Gecas & Burke, 1995; Schachter, 2005), a rich body of literature, primarily developed within the SI tradition, argues that most individuals are capable of overcoming the possible identity challenges associated with increased uncertainty and can manage the complexities of contemporary society without having to ‘surrender’ or ‘forego’ the self, and without succumbing to identity disorders. From this perspective the self continues to be understood as a somewhat stable and guiding ‘force’ that is not merely discursively constructed but continues to be anchored in relatively stable patterns of social interaction (Athens, 1994; Charmaz, 1987, 1991, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Gubrium & Holstein, 1994, 2000). Even though these scholars recognise that a stable sense of self
cannot be fully attained in an ambiguous and uncertain world, they argue that most individuals are capable of negotiating contemporary tensions between a need for adaptability and the development and maintenance of a sense of coherency or self-stability.

This conceptualisation of the self as relatively stable as well as adaptable and changeable in response to social influence is well developed within the symbolic interactionist tradition (Athens, 1994; Blumer, 1969; Callero, 2003b; Coles, 2008; Gecas & Burke, 1995; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Mead, 1934). Following Mead’s (1934) conceptualisations of the self as constructed through a reflexive process of interaction between the ‘I’ and the ‘Me’, from an SI perspective the self is conceptualised as to varying degrees informed by both the ‘self’ or the personal, and ‘others’ or the social. These two ‘domains’ of the self are conceptualised as interrelated or connected through an ongoing process of reflexivity that links internal experiences and external feedback. This construct of reflexivity which is central to SI thought refers to the capacity of people to consider or experience themselves in relation to their social contexts and their social contexts in relation to themselves (Archer, 2007; Mead, 1934). While some scholars have highlighted reflexivity as a cognitive and deliberate or conscious process (Giddens, 1991), from an SI perspective reflexivity is understood as involving conscious as well as unconscious processes, and cognitions as well as emotions (Hitlin, 2003; Mead, 1934; Puddephatt, 2009). From an SI perspective, the self is understood as both personal as well as socially constructed through a process of reflexivity that connects internal feelings and cognitions, previous biography, others and context (Mead, 1934; Puddephatt, 2009). It is this understanding of the self that is taken in this study.

**Symbolic Interactionism: Its intellectual and historical roots**

Symbolic Interactionism is a distinctive American sociological approach to the study of the self and society derived largely from interpretations of the teachings of George Herbert Mead (Mead, 1925, 1934, 1938, 1970). While symbolic interactionism has deep and varied intellectual roots, virtually all sociologists aligned with the SI tradition would agree that the central figure of this tradition is Mead (1934). George Mead was a social psychologist from the Chicago sociological tradition who was influenced by American pragmatism, in particular the views of John Dewey. Pragmatists maintain that human beings go through a continual process of adaptation in the constantly changing social world, and that the existence of a mind through which contemplation of a situation occurs makes this process possible (Dewey, 1931; Mead, 1934). Mead (1934) provides wide ranging discussions about the relationship between society and the individual. Along with the concepts of ‘mind’ and ‘society’, the basic tenet that emerge from Mead’s work is the notion of ‘self’ (Mead, 1934). In his classic work
‘Mind, Self and Society’, Mead asserts that the ‘self’ needs to be appreciated as being situated in interaction with the social world. The self is conceptualised as fundamentally social and it is argued that the self and the social world cannot be understood in isolation. SI was advanced further by Herbert Blumer (1969, 1992) who endeavoured to elucidate Mead’s work and coined the term SI. Other scholars that are closely identified with the SI tradition include Charles Horton Cooley (1902, 1970), William James (1970, [1902] 1979), Howard Becker (1968, 1970b) Erving Goffman (1961, 1963) Airlie Hochschild (1979, 1983), Manford Kuhn (1964, 1970) and Sheldon Stryker (1968, 1980).

In accordance with traditional SI thought, the contemporary self continues to be conceptualised as socially influenced and informed as well as personally directed or negotiated. While symbolic interactionists recognise the influence of social forces (Forte, 2003; M. Hunt, 2003; Maines, 1996, 2003; Stryker, 1980, 2008; Ulmer, 2003), they continue to believe in a coherent sense of self that stands apart from the social world and guides and motivates personal action. From an SI perspective it is argued that while it is important to recognise that structures of power and inequality influence selves, it is equally important to recognise that people are not simply passive mediums who exhibit larger social forces, but are active agents who are capable of individual and deliberate action (Callero, 2003b; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Puddephatt, 2009).

From an SI perspective, the self is not considered as invariably ‘hyper-fragmented’ by conflicting ‘social forces’ or cultural conditions, but continues to be anchored in both personal uniqueness and individuality, as well as social influence or social connectedness. From this perspective, ‘healthy’ individuals are argued to be capable of reflexively developing and maintaining a sense of personal uniqueness or self-coherency and continuity as well as connectedness to multiple, changing, and at times contrasting, social contexts or ‘others’ (Coles, 2008; Fuchs, 2001; Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Linde, 1993; Orrange, 2003). Challenging conceptualisations of self-continuity as discursively constructed, from an SI perspective it is argued that while self-continuity may be discursively influenced, even in postmodern times individuals continue to be guided by a sense of self that is anchored in personal experience, memories of the past and anticipation of the future (Dunkel & Kerpelman, 2006; Ezzy, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 2003; Strahan & Wilson, 2006). It is posited that without a somewhat coherent sense of self that links past experiences and hopes for the future to current action, selves would not endure beyond their immediate, passing experiences and be faced with the ‘absurdity’ of a continual need for reinvention (Athens, 1994, p. 523; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). This portrayal of the contemporary self as anchored in a sense of coherency or continuity is said to be supported by significant empirical evidence by the more quantitative wing of the SI tradition. They argue that there is evidence to indicate that even under conditions of cultural change and uncertainty individuals actively strive to acquire and maintain self-stability and continuity. While
it is recognised that self-stability may have become increasingly difficult to acquire, studies within
this tradition show that individuals, to a large degree, continue to remain ‘stable’ over time by
employing strategies that facilitate the maintenance of existing self-perception and social relationship
(Baumgartner, 2007; Burke, 2007; Burke & Stets, 1999; Collier, 2000, 2001; Demo, 1992; Haworth-
Hoeppner & Maines, 2005; Heise & Weir, 1999; Hitlin, 2003; Keyes & Ryff, 2000; Robinson &

While symbolic interactionists continue to believe in the existence of a self that is anchored in
experience and social interaction, the degree to which the self’s coherency or stability is
conceptualised as socially informed or personally directed varies. Following Mead’s conceptualisation
of the self as comprised of both ‘self’ and ‘others’, some symbolic interactionists have developed
conceptualisations of the self that emphasise personal uniqueness and individuality (Becker, 1963;
Blumer, 1969) while others, primarily those within the structural tradition, have developed
conceptualisations of the self that emphasise the self as social (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Cast &
Cantwell, 2007; Cast, Stets, & Burke, 1999; Hicks, 2008; Kuhn, 1964; Marks & MacDermid, 1996;
Timothy J Owens, 2006; Timothy J Owens & Serpe, 2003; Stets & Cast, 2007; Stryker, 2008; Stryker
& Burke, 2000). Even though most scholars align themselves with one or other tradition, both
traditions contribute to an overall picture of the self as to varying degrees constructed in the realm of
the self and the realm of others (Athens, 1994; Stets & Burke, 2000).

The SI tradition that depicts the self as highly conformist and socially influenced is sometimes
critiqued for its failure to incorporate the personal into its theories (Athens, 1994; Stets & Burke,
2000, p. 228). Similarly, the SI tradition that emphasises the personal by highlighting the ways in which
the self can be distinguished from its social context can be critiqued for underplaying conformity and
commonality (Athens, 1994; Burke, 2003a). It is argued here that while one tradition accounts for
individuality, and the other for conformity, both traditions combined present a more complete
understanding of the self as both personal and social. Rather than adopting a dichotomous
conceptualisation of the self that highlights the self as either highly conformist and social or primarily
individualistic and autonomous, from the SI perspective taken in this study, the self is understood as
informed by both these forces, albeit to varying degrees. A conformist conceptualisation of the self is
not necessarily in conflict with a theoretical position that emphasises individuality, but represents a
different position on the same continuum.

A rich body of literature pertinent to the social and culturally contingent nature of the self describes
how the extent to which the self is socially informed and conformist or autonomous and unique may
vary significantly and is dependent on the availability of cultural, social or personal resources from
which individuals can construct selves. In this literature it is argued that different social and cultural
conditions or personal experiences give rise to individual differences in the way in which individuals go about constructing their selves (Athens, 1997; Callero, 2003b; Coles, 2008; Dunn, 1997; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Kroger, 2005; R. H. Turner, 1976; R. H. Turner & Gordon, 1981; Weigert, 2009; Weigert & Gecas, 2005; Zurcher, 1972, 1977). Even though it is sometimes argued that ‘healthy’ selves are able to negotiate a reflexive balance between the personal and the social, between individuality and social connectedness, and can perhaps be conceptualised as positioned towards the middle of this continuum (Campbell, 2009; Fuchs, 2001; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Orrange, 2003), scholars have recognised that not everyone is successful at negotiating this balance (Buchmann, 1989; Castells, 1997; Cote, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Kegan, 1994; Kreisman & Straus, 1989; Kroger, 1989; Lasch, 1984; Schachter, 2005). It is argued throughout this thesis that some selves may fail to establish and/or maintain a balance between connectedness and individuality and instead become highly socially dependent and lacking in personal uniqueness, while others may be high in uniqueness but lack in social connectedness.

As will be developed and demonstrated throughout this thesis, it is suggested that some individuals may construct selves that are highly socially influenced and dependent, while others may construct selves that are more personal and anchored in their internal experiences. To distinguish between the social influences on the self and the more personally negotiated or internal aspects of the self, the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’ are used in reference to different ‘aspects of the self’. While these terms are often conflated and used interchangeably, in accordance with SI conceptualisations of self and identity the term ‘identity’ is used in reference to the ‘other’ or external influences on the self and the term self or ‘personal self’ is used in reference to the more internal or personally managed or negotiation aspects of the self (Phoenix & Rattansi, 2005; Vryan, Adler, & Adler, 2003; Weigert & Gecas, 2003). The different conceptualisations of the contemporary self as to varying degrees dependent on or informed by social identities or ‘others’ versus personal experiences, thoughts and emotions for self-stability are outlined in the next section.

**The contemporary self: The self as to varying degrees informed by the ‘self’ versus ‘others’**

In their theorising about self-stability the majority of contemporary symbolic interactionists point to the ‘stable’ others that continue to be available for self-construction in today’s society. From this perspective it is argued that the disintegration of stable others in which the self can become embedded is exaggerated, and that even in contemporary conditions of increased uncertainty the acquisition and
maintenance of self-stability continues to be mediated by relatively stable others. Despite ‘detraditionalisation’ (Giddens, 1991) individuals continue to be embedded in relatively stable communities or social networks (Demo, 1992; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Smith-Lovin, 2007; Smith-Lovin & McPherson, 1993), and while contemporary social institutions may be different from those of the past, individuals continue to construct their selves through interaction with social institutions such as schools or counselling centres that provide relatively stable discourses of ‘who we ought to be’ (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

In particular, symbolic interactionists associated with the more structural tradition argue that the disintegration of stable social communities has been exaggerated, and that even in culturally and socially diverse societies, individuals’ social networks continue to remain relatively stable across the lifespan. From this perspective it is argued that individuals continue to seek out and socialise with others who are deemed similar to themselves, and, in accordance with traditional SI, by doing so continue to construct relatively stable selves through interaction with relatively stable others (Armato & Marsiglio, 2002; Burke & Stets, 1999; Collier, 2000; Demo, 1992; Pinel & Swann, 2000; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Smith-Lovin, 2007; Smith-Lovin & McPherson, 1993; Stets & Burke, 2003; Stryker, Owens, & White, 2000; Swann, 1999; V. Taylor, 2000). Similarly, the theoretical work of Holstein and Gubrium also points to the myriad of relatively stable others that continue to be available in contemporary society for self-construction. While they recognise that the self is no longer anchored in the stable institutions that were available in traditional society, symbolic interactionists argue that the self continues to be institutionally mediated through interaction with the numerous social institutions that offer discourses through which the self can be interpreted. Setting out to meld interactionist and postmodern insights into the self, these scholars highlight the discursive influences on the self and point to the profusion of discourses that inform the contemporary self promoted by schools, counselling centres, treatment programs, self-help groups, religious organisations and other social institutions in which the self has become embedded (Gubrium & Holstein, 1994, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). From this perspective it is argued that while self-construction can be discursively mediated, the self is not merely discursive as is suggested by some postmodern commentators, but continues to be anchored in experience and social interaction and continues to be reflexively constructed through a dialogue between the self and others, the personal and the social (Callero, 2003b; Dunn, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

While the majority of symbolic interactionists continue to highlight the significance of others for self-construction, a conceptualisation of the contemporary self as anchored in individuality and autonomy is central to the reflexivity theories put forward by a group of sociologists usually known as contemporary modernists. From this perspective, the development of selves anchored in personal uniqueness and autonomy is considered more psychologically healthy or adjusted to contemporary
conditions than the more conformist self that was prominent in traditional societies (Beck, 1992; Cancian, 1987; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1994). While their meta-theories differ in their emphasis, the accounts of the contemporary self put forward by contemporary modernists such as Beck and Giddens have many similarities and all highlight the centrality of reflexivity and personal autonomy for the contemporary self (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Beck, et al., 1994; Giddens, 1991, 2003). Reflexivity theorising posits that following the loss of traditional sources of identity stability, individuals are increasingly required to construct more personal or unique selves from which to negotiate unstable contemporary environments. It is argued that the ‘traditional biography’ of the past has become replaced with a ‘do-it-yourself biography’ (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), which Giddens (1991) refers to as ‘the reflexive project of the self’ (p. 32-33).

Reflexivity theorising posits that stable ‘others’ are no longer as essential, or even important, for the construction of stable selves, and depicts the contemporary self as capable of personally and reflexively constructing a personal self or self-identity anchored in autonomy and independent decision making from which to navigate contemporary demands (Beck, 1992; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1994). Through reflexively taking stock of the relationships or social context in which the self is embedded, individuals develop a personal self or self-identity that is both dependable and strong enough to guide the individual through the uncertainty of daily life as well as flexible and capable of continuously adapting to change (Giddens, 1991). These theories celebrate personal autonomy and the notion of a self that is dis-embedded or independent from its social context, and describe reflexivity as key to achieving a separation between the self or personal and the social. From this perspective the reflexive achievement and maintenance of a separation between the self and society is celebrated, and a reliance on others for self-construction is perceived as reflective of psychological difficulties or evidence of limited psychological development (Cancian, 1987; Cote, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Kegan, 1994).

Conceptualisations of reflexivity that celebrate a separation between the self and society and highlight cognition and independent thought have been critiqued for their failure to consider the significance of irrational processes, emotions and social connectedness (M. Adams, 2003; Archer, 2003, 2007; Bendle, 2002; Glover, 1999; Holmes, 2010, 2011). Even though Giddens imports some of Mead’s work in order to develop more of the social understanding of reflexivity, the significance of emotions and social connectedness for the self is given little importance in his work, and reflexivity is depicted as a fundamentally cognitive process (M. Adams, 2003). Unlike reflexivity theories put forward by Beck and Giddens that celebrate personal autonomy and independent thought, SI conceptualisations of reflexivity do not dis-embed the individual from its surroundings but emphasise the social origin of the self. From an SI perspective reflexivity is conceptualised as central to the social development of the self, and refers to the ongoing dialogue or feedback loop that connects the personal to the social.
From this perspective reflexivity connects both the personal and the social influences on the self, and refers to both the process through which individuals maintain or develop personal uniqueness as well as the process through which the individual becomes socially or culturally embedded or connected (Archer, 2003, 2007; Mead, 1934). While contemporary symbolic interactionists recognise the increasing importance of individuality and personal autonomy for the self, from an SI perspective the self’s ability to establish and maintain social and emotional connectedness to others continues to be considered paramount to psychological and emotional well-being (Archer, 2003, 2007; Holmes, 2010).

The perceived ongoing significance of social connectedness, even within a culture of individualisation, is supported by a rich body of SI literature that conceptualises emotions as signals about the extent to which a balance or connection exists between the self and its social context. A rich body of empirical evidence within this tradition shows that when there is a disequilibrium or inconsistency between the self and the environmental or cultural expectations, individuals experience negative emotions such as stress and discomfort. Conversely, a connection or equilibrium between the self and its environments has been shown to result in positive emotions (Festinger, 1957; Heise, 1999; Lawler, 2003; Lively & Heise, 2004; Riley & Burke, 1995; Stets & Cast, 2007; Stets & Tsushima, 2001; Stets & Turner, 2006). To this extent, taking into account the significance of both individuality as well as social connectedness for personal well-being, from an SI perspective the increased significance of reflexivity for the contemporary self pertains to the importance of being able to maintain an ongoing and flexible connection to both self and others, both individuality and connectedness.

Even though reflexivity theories have traditionally highlighted cognitions, in accordance with SI thought, increasingly scholars are pointing to the significance of emotions in social interaction and human behaviour, and the development of reflexive selves (Archer, 2007; Elster, 1999; Holmes, 2010, 2011; King, 2006; Yang, 2000). From this perspective it is argued that the contemporary discourses that emphasise individualisation and personal autonomy at the heart of traditional reflexivity theories do not necessarily signify an increased separation between the self and society but can be understood as a discourse that provides boundaries for the contemporary self and thereby enhance social connectedness (Adam, 2003, p. 227).

Even though the significance of social connectedness remains at the centre of contemporary SI theorising of the self, a number of symbolic interactionists have pointed out that not everyone develops socially connected selves. These scholars point out that as fewer stable others are available for the construction of socially connected selves, individuals are increasingly forced to rely on their internal experiences for guidance and direction. However, rather than depicting the more personally
anchored self as high in reflexivity and cognitive awareness as traditional reflexivity theories suggest, these scholars highlight the increasing significance of personal emotions and personal desires and impulses for the contemporary self (R. H. Turner, 1976; R. H. Turner & Gordon, 1981). Evidenced by the growing body of literature on the significance of ‘authenticity’ for the contemporary self, scholars are increasing pointing to the role of personal emotions as a guide or self-anchor to navigate the complexity and ambiguities of contemporary social life (Erickson, 1995; Erickson & Wharton, 1997; George, 1998; Holmes, 2010, 2011; Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Weigert, 2009).

Despite a rich and growing body of sociological literature pertinent to the significance of emotions for the self (Denzin, 1987b; Hochschild, 1979, 1998; Holmes, 2010, 2011; J. H. Turner, 2000, 2004), emotions and feelings continue to be marginalised in sociological discourse and this has only recently started to change (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Greco, 2011). While the study of the emotions was not a primary aim of this study, emotions were found to be important to understanding contemporary selves and NRM membership and, as a result, this study contributes to this body of literature.

**Symbolic Interactionism as the Primary Theoretical Framework of This Study**

SI was identified as the most suitable theoretical framework through which to understand the various ways in which the former members in this study have constructed, negotiated and managed their selves and identities across their lives. The theoretical significance of SI conceptualisations of the self only became apparent after having made significant effort to analyse the data in the contexts of debates about the new individualism. In accordance with the methodology of grounded theory outlined in Chapter 3, the theoretical framework chosen for this study was informed by the data rather than predetermined by the researcher prior to the commencement of the research (Charmaz, 1990, 2006a; Ezzy, 1998, 2002; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Theoretically positioning the study in SI was motivated by early data analysis and the themes that emerged from the data. Preliminary analysis of the data collected during the initial interviews identified a tension between a need for adaptability and a desire to maintain or acquire self-stability as important to understanding NRM membership. To this extent, a theoretical framework that accommodates the continued existence of the self as somewhat continuous, as does SI, was selected to understand these observations. In addition, preliminary analysis indicated significant diversity in the ways in which the former members constructed their selves. As is outlined in Chapter 5, some of the former members in this study describe themselves as highly dependent on ‘others’ for their self-construction, while others describe themselves as independent and highly autonomous. This observation also pointed to SI which views
the self as both influenced by ‘others’ as well as the ‘self’, albeit to varying degrees. In particular, SI was identified as an appropriate framework because of its ability to offer insights into the tension between the self’s desire for continuity and its need for adaptability as to connect and negotiate unstable cultural environments. Its conceptualisation of the self as to varying degrees informed by the social as well as the personal made SI particularly suitable for the current study.

In addition to its diverse understanding of the self as social as well as personal, SI theorising of the self also offers insights into the ways in which changes in cultural environments or social contexts impacts on the construction and management of the self. Only a small number of sociologists have studied the impact of macro level changes on the management of self and identity at a micro level, and most of these have adopted SI conceptualisations of self and identity (Callero, 2003a; Hochschild, 1983; R. H. Turner, 1976; Zurcher, 1972, 1973, 1977). Considering the current study’s interest in the extent to which the self is capable of adjusting to ever changing cultural demands, as well as the processes through which adjustment and readjustment to cultural changes is managed, an SI framework that offers both micro and macro level insights was chosen. Furthermore, as outlined in the Introduction, SI was also deemed as useful in its ability to make sense of the contradictions and confusion around the inconsistent use of the terms ‘self’ and ‘identity’. Early analysis of the interview materials indicated a need for a conceptual framework that distinguished self from identity, while offering theoretical insights into their interconnectedness.

In addition to its contribution to the sociological study of emotions, the current thesis also contributes to the study of the social and cultural contingency of the self. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, the different conceptualisations of the contemporary self put forward by symbolic interactionists and contemporary modernists are not necessarily in conflict but complement each other and represent individual differences in terms of self-construction. As outlined in Chapter 5, it is argued that significant diversity exists in the ways in which the participants in this study describe their sense of self, in particular in regards to the way in which they experience and negotiate contemporary tensions between social connectedness and individuality. To this extent, theorising that emphasises individuality and personal uniqueness is not understood as in conflict with theorising that highlights conformity and commonality, but is understood as complementary, and together offer a more complete understanding of the self as to varying degrees constructed in both the realm of the personal and the realm of the social.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This is a qualitative study into the experiences of former members of NRMs. The research questions for this study are focussed on the experiences of former members of NRMs, and the ways in which NRM membership can be understood in light of former members’ accounts of their own life trajectories. In order to address the research questions outlined in the Introduction, a qualitative design informed by symbolic interactionism and constructionist grounded theory was chosen.

This chapter discusses the methodology of the study, and examines relevant theories on how research should be undertaken. The rationale for using a qualitative frame in making sense of the experiences of former members of NRMs is outlined, as well as the particular methods used to gather and evaluate the data. In particular, the influence of symbolic interactionism and constructionist grounded theory on the research design and on aspects of the research process are discussed. This Chapter will discuss the measures which were undertaken to enhance the validity and credibility of the study and will address the importance of reflexive practice for qualitative research. The Chapter concludes by examining the ethical considerations relevant to, and the limitations of, the research.

The Research Design

The research design reflects both the aims and questions described in the Introduction, and the method of enquiry appropriate to the study (Grbich, 2007; Rice & Ezzy, 1999). With the aim of making sense of NRM membership in light of former members’ wider life trajectories, the research design is an open qualitative enquiry consisting of in-depth life history interviews with a purposive sample of adult self-identified former members of NRMs.

As little empirical work exists on the life trajectories of former members, the design for this study is exploratory, and, as is favoured in exploratory research, a qualitative design was chosen. Few researchers have adopted qualitative methods to investigate the experiences of former members, especially in Australia. To date, the majority of sociological studies have studied theories about, and trends of, NRM membership rather than the individual experience, and the majority of psychological studies have used quantitative methods that are limited in their ability to shed light on the individual experience. The relatively few qualitative former member studies identified do not appear to consider the former members wider life histories in making sense of NRM membership, but attribute the
difficulties reported by former members to group involvement without giving consideration to potential pre-involvement factors (Coates, 2011). To address this omission, the current study employs a qualitative exploration of the life histories of former members of NRM. As outlined in Chapter 2, in order to make sense of the life history narratives the dominant framework of self and identity, Symbolic Interactionism (SI), is applied.

In line with the assumptions of SI, the study’s epistemological underpinnings are that of constructionism. With its focus on gaining understanding of the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it, SI is considered one of the principal constructivist interpretivist approaches to human enquiry (Denzin, 1988; Herman-Kinney & Verschaeve, 2003; Schwandt, 1994). Constructivist researchers have difficulties with the notion of an objective reality that can be known, and consider that the task of the researcher is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge (Burr, 1995; Robson, 2002). Meaning is not considered inherent, but rather, derived from interactions and made sense of through a process of interpretation (Burr, 1995; Crotty, 1998; Padgett, 1998). As noted by Crotty (1998), from this perspective “meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (p. 8-9). Consistent with the interpretivist constructivist research tradition, this thesis aims to present former members’ perceptions of their selves and experiences, and does not propose to present a single reality. Designed to privilege the subjective realities of the participants, the project recognises that within any social context people construct meaning in a variety of ways.

As is recommended for constructivist research, to generate an in-depth understanding of the life histories of former members a qualitative design was chosen (Charmaz, 2000; Robson, 2002). Qualitative methods are suitable to constructivist research because of its interest in uncovering experiences from the standpoint of those living them (Charmaz, 2000; Robson, 2002). Consistent with the aims of this study, qualitative methodologies examine the way in which people’s social worlds are constructed, and are most useful in uncovering the deeper subjective meanings individuals attribute to their experiences, rather than attempting to map a single reality (Addison, 1999; Babbie, 2004; Bryman, 1999, 2001; Ezzy, 2001; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The strength of qualitative methods is attributed to ‘the depth of understanding it permits’ (Babbie, 2001, p. 298) and its strong ‘possibility for understanding latent, underling, or non-obvious issues’ (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 10).

Even though SI does not propose a single method (Maines, 2003), it is mostly associated with qualitative methodologies (Becker, 1963, 1970b; Blumer, 1969). Whilst it is recognised that there are numerous schools of symbolic interactionists and that they favour different qualitative methods or in the case of structural symbolic interactionists favour quantitative methods (Burke, 1980, 2003b;
Kuhn, 1964, 1970; Kuhn & McPartland, 1954; Stryker, 1980; R. H. Turner, 1976, 1978; Zurcher, 1972) SI was originally established as a qualitative research approach (Blumer, 1969; Charon, 2007). Furthermore, SI’s qualitative methodologies provided the historical and theoretical foundations from which the qualitative methodology of grounded theory was derived (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The methodological contributions of SI and grounded theory to the current research design are outlined in the next section.

### Symbolic Interactionism and Constructivist Grounded Theory

Following on from the work of Mead (1934), one of his students Herbert Blumer coined the term *Symbolic Interactionism* and further established SI as a research approach. Favouring qualitative methodologies, he describes the goal of SI as making society intelligible rather than testing relationships between variables (Blumer, 1969). With the aim of understanding human behaviour, traditional symbolic interactionist research describes the processes of symbolic interaction, from which themes are identified and theories developed (Becker, 1963, 1970a, 1970b; Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961; Blumer, 1969; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

Central to SI thoughts is the notion of ‘meaning’. From this perspective, the individual meanings people ascribe to their experiences are considered fundamental to human behaviour, and meanings are understood as derived from shared interactions and made sense of through a process of interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 1990; Mead, 1934). It is assumed that humans are thinking, acting, creative individuals who respond to the actions of others after interpreting these others’ intentions (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 1990; Mead, 1934; Schwandt, 1994). In this way, the ‘self’ and ‘meanings’ are not considered stable but are best described as processes (Charmaz, 1990, 1991). As proposed by Blumer (1969) the premise of SI is that: “[Firstly] human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them... [secondly] the meanings of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows ... [thirdly] these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). Consistent with the stated premise, Blumer (1969) proposes the methodological position for SI which maintains that to reach an understanding of a social process the enquirer needs to endeavour to grasp the meanings that are experienced by the participants within a particular context. To gain an understanding of participants’ individual meanings and interpretations of their personal experiences, when adopting the SI approach, it is recommended for the researcher to be actively engaged with the participants (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 1990). In particular, to achieve an in-depth understanding of the personal meanings of the participants, in depth interviewing is
recommended (Charmaz, 1983, 2000, 2006a; Meltzer, Petras, & Reynolds, 1975). To this extent, in the current study an understanding of the subjective realities of former members of NRMs was achieved through in depth life history interviews that centred around their experiences of self and identity change upon joining, and since leaving a NRM.

In line with the epistemological assumptions of this study, the life history accounts provided by former members are not understood as literal descriptions of what actually happened but as narratives, stories constructed to explain and present one’s experiences in a meaningful way (Ewick & Sibley, 1995; Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Yamane, 2000). From an SI perspective, retrospective life history accounts are not understood as presenting an objective reality but are considered helpful in their ability to elucidate understanding of individual meanings and self-constructions (Charmaz, 1987, 1995, 2000; Charon, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). The past is not considered an objective reality, but it is recognised that the past is reinterpreted based on current circumstances and influenced by the available cultural discourses through which the self can be narrated (Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Vryan, et al., 2003). In addition, it is recognised that narratives are constructed in accordance with the current ‘selves’ the participant would like to present (Vryan et al., 2003, p. 372). However, despite their retrospective and constructionist nature, life history narratives provide meaningful insights into the actual process of self and identity construction and reconstruction (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Diniz-Pereira, 2008; Ewick & Sibley, 1995). The analysis of retrospective accounts is a commonly recommended and chosen method for the study of self and identity change (Boeri, 2002; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Diniz-Pereira, 2008; Yamane, 2000).

The data collection and analysis was informed by the qualitative methodology devised by Glaser and Strauss (1967) called grounded theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007c; Charmaz, 1987, 1990, 1991, 1995, 2006a, 2006b; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theory has been developed over time and offers a sophisticated approach to qualitative studies (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007b; Ezzy, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1984, 1994; Silverman, 2005; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The grounded theory approach was selected as most appropriate because of its constructivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), its close relationship to SI and its emphasis on the development of theory (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007a; Charmaz, 1983; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In particular, the constructionist grounded theory perspective (Charmaz, 2006a; Denzin, 1988, 1992; Prus, 1995) informs the analysis of this work rather than a more structured approach such as that of Strauss and Corbin (1990). In particular, Charmaz’ constructivist application of grounded theory is especially well developed and the relevant features of this approach were selected as a guide to inform the research methods. Charmaz’ applications is closely associated with the symbolic interactionist perspective, and with its emphasis on respondents’ lived experience and stories and the individual
construction of meaning is considered most suitable to the aims and objectives of the current study (Charmaz, 1983, 1990, 2000, 2006a).

The emphasis placed on theory development in SI (Blumer, 1969; Bogdan & Taylor, 1975) in general and grounded theory in particular (Charmaz, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) is also in accordance with the aims and objective of the current study. In line with the emphasis placed on theory development in SI (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975), the goal of grounded theory is to develop theory that accounts for behaviour rather than to develop descriptions of behaviour with the goal of verifying theory (Glaser, 1978, p. 93; Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 30). The grounded theory approach is inductive in that it generates conclusion and theories from the observations gathered from the primary data (Charmaz, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The topic of this research is well suited to an exploratory inductive design, since the primary objective is to uncover the meanings of NRM membership from the perspective of former members and build new theory to make sense of membership in light of former members’ life trajectories. While the data have been analysed to highlight new knowledge from the point of view of the participants, theory has also been developed in continuous iterative dialogue with existing literature. This is to amplify and refine former accounts rather than to test a formal hypothesis.

In accordance with symbolic interactionist and grounded theory methodology, the current study aims to elucidate theory relevant to the selves and identities of former members of NRMs through the analysis of life history accounts. While this study has been informed by strategies from grounded theory it should be noted that this is not strictly a grounded theory study because some aspects of grounded theory, such as field work and repeated rounds of data collection are not part of this research. Glaser and Strauss (1979) and Charmaz (2006) have argued that researchers can be flexible with their use of strategies from grounded theory. They argue that the methods presented in grounded theory are not fixed rules for turning data into theory but a guide that could help researchers towards that goal. For the present study, grounded theory was important in informing the collection and analysis of the materials. The influence of grounded theory will be demonstrated in depth in the following sections on interviewing and the analysis of materials collected.
Research Methods

Sampling Strategy

A total of 23 participants from 11 different groups were recruited for participation in in-depth life history interviews. Both purposive sampling and modified snowball sampling were used to recruit participants.

Purposive sampling recommends that participants should be selected on the basis of their personal knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Babbie, 2001, 2004; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). In first instance, those former members who had participated in the researcher’s honours thesis ‘The lived experiences of former members of charismatic groups’ were approached (Coates, 2008). All seven former members who had participated in the honours project had indicated a willingness to be contacted for participation in future research and their participation was covered by the ethics approval for this study. The seven participants were emailed an invitation to participate in the current study. Six agreed to participate in a follow up interview and offered permission for secondary analysis on the data already obtained through the interview for the honours project to be conducted. The initial recruitment of these six participants had occurred through an Australian based ‘cult aware’ organisation, called Cult Information and Family Support (CIFS). This is an Australian support and information network which includes families, friends, former members and concerned individuals working to provide support and develop awareness for those affected by “high demand groups” or “cultic relationships” (CIFS, 2012). This organisation distributed the information letter to people who might like to participate. Using the support of such an organisation is recommended as it is difficult to identify former members who are not involved with such networks. Former members have shown to be reluctant to participate in studies and it is viewed that a fear of ridicule from those who lack understanding, and a need for closure may motivate this reluctance (Gasde & Block, 1998).

With the aim of recruiting a diverse sample and to not be limited to a sample derived from ‘cult aware’ organisations, an attempt was made to recruit some former members through advertisements placed in local newspapers. However, this was not achieved, and no participants were recruited through this strategy. This is consistent with previous observations that the recruitment of former members who have no affiliation with cult aware organisation can be challenging (Healy, 2008). Nonetheless, the recruitment of a diverse sample was achieved through modified snowball sampling strategy. Snowballing is used to expand a sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Bryman, 2001; Crabtree & Miller, 1992). In particular, snowball sampling is recommended when researching populations that are hard to access (Atkinson & Flint, 2001;
Holloway & Wheeler, 2002) as is the case with former members of NRMs. Snowball sampling was modified in line with privacy legislation by ensuring that contacts were asked to express an interest in the research and consent to be contacted prior to being contacted by the researcher. The researcher asked those who had consented to participate to pass on the invitation to anyone else they knew who fitted the criteria, and a further 17 participants were recruited. The extent to which these participants can be regarded as affiliated with the Australian ‘cult aware’ network varies significantly. While some of these participants reported current or former affiliation with the Australian ‘cult aware’ network, at least half appeared not to have any, or at least very minimal, affiliation with ‘cult aware’ organisations. Out of the total of 23 former members recruited, 11 are regarded as currently or previously affiliated with a ‘cult aware’ organisation, the remaining 12 are deemed as having no affiliation with ‘cult aware’ networks.

For the purposes of the current study a sample of 23 participants was identified as sufficient. As is recommended in grounded theory, saturation was used to determine the sample size (Charmaz, 2006a). Saturation was achieved when no new information was gathered, but new data confirmed the developing theories (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Houser, 2007). The data obtained in the last few interviews confirmed what the preceding interviews had already shown, and no further information was gathered. A relatively small sample size is often recommended in qualitative research, in which a large sample size is sacrificed for in-depth understanding (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Silverman, 2005).

### Groups and Participants

Participants were self-identified former members of 11 different ‘cults’ or NRMs. All participants had joined their respective groups as ‘adults’, either completely independently from their parents or primary caregivers during late adolescence or when they were over the age of 18. Only those who had exited at least 12 months previously were considered as participants. This was done in an attempt to recruit respondents who had gained some distance from the experience and had had time to reflect and possibly develop alternative life trajectories. Of the 23 participants 13 are women and 10 men. This reflects the intention to recruit approximately equivalent numbers of men and women. Participants’ ages ranged from 26 to 65, and although there was a reasonably wide range of ages at the time of the interviews, the average age of the participants when they joined a NRM was in their early to mid-twenties. Participants’ affiliation with a NRM ranged between one and 30 years. Disaffiliation had occurred between four and 25 years before the interview. At the time of initial engagement with the NRM 10 of the participants were or had been engaged in higher education. A further eleven went on to higher education after their involvement.
While the various groups have different beliefs and adopt different practices, they appear to have enough in common to make a study worthwhile. The groups in question are commonly described as ‘cults’ or NRM in the literature; they included groups with Christian affiliations, some self-development and ‘psycho-therapy’ groups and Eastern meditation groups. Not all of the groups’ names can be disclosed as some of the participants have asked for the name of their former group to be concealed. Groups include The Family/The Children of God, Kenja Communication, The Twelve Tribes, the Boston Movement or The Boston Church of Christ, and a group formed by Swami Balyogi Premvarni. A description of the different groups is outlined in detail in Chapter 4, and a table with the participants’ demographics is included at Appendix 1.

**Interviewing**

In depth qualitative interviewing was used to obtain rich life history data specific to the selves and identities of former members. Qualitative interviewing is the most common method in qualitative research and is an important medium for sourcing meaningful explanations of an individual’s life experience (Bryman, 2001; Ezzy, 2002; Patton, 1990, 2002). As is important in SI research an attempt was made to ‘get inside’ the participants perspectives and gain rich and detailed data that would help elucidate the personal meanings and interpretations of the participants (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006a; Charon, 2007; Meltzer, et al., 1975). To achieve this, an approach whereby the researcher is actively engaged with the participants, such as in depth interviewing, is recommended for SI and grounded theory research (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 1990, 2006a; Meltzer, et al., 1975). Data was obtained through participation in in-depth interviews which aimed to draw out the personal story and meaning of each participant. Importance was given to the concepts, perspectives and interpretations of the participants, rather than assumptions pre-determined by the researcher (Bryman, 2001; Charmaz, 2006a; Ezzy, 2002).

The interviews took place during 2009 and 2010. The interviews were conducted at a time and location nominated by the participants. Most of the interviews were conducted in the participants’ homes, but in the few instances where this was not possible the interview was conducted in a cafe or hotel conference room or lobby. Furthermore, while face to face interviewing was the preferred mode, in four cases this was not possible because of logistical reasons and the interview was carried out over the phone. The duration of interviews varied from one participant to the other, but lasted on average around two hours. All the interviews were audio recorded.
The interviews were semi-structured and took the form of guided conversations (Charmaz, 2006a; Lofland, 1971). The interview questions were designed to gain an understanding of the life histories of former members and their experiences of identity and self-change following affiliation and subsequent disaffiliation from a NRM. The research aims and objectives were described to the participants at the commencement of the interview. Participants were told that the study hopes to makes sense of membership in light of former members’ life histories. It was explained that while this research is interested in membership, it also seeks to gain understanding of the former members’ lives before, as well as after, NRM involvement.

After an informal introduction to the research, the interview commenced with a broad open-ended question. The use of a broad open-ended question, followed by a series of follow-up prompts or sub-questions to frame and focus the interview is commonly recommended in qualitative research (Creswell, 1994, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994), and is the recommended interview format in grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2006a). In light of the introduction which set out the aims of the study, the interviews commenced with a broad opening question along the lines “If you feel comfortable, perhaps you could tell me your story?” The most common response to this was “Should I just start at the beginning? From when I was born and keep going […] Please interrupt me if I what I’m telling you is not relevant to your study” (Richard). In response to the invitation to share their story, almost half of the participants talked for over an hour and a half without requiring any, or only very minimal, prompts. Even though the researcher had prepared an interview guide based on the research questions (see Appendix 2) to help guide the interview (Patton, 2002), the majority of the questions were answered naturally throughout the ‘interview conversation’. Sub questions were only posed if they were not answered naturally as part of the telling of the story.

The most commonly posed sub-questions included:

- What can you tell me about your family of origin?
- What can you tell me about the time you became involved with the group? (i.e. How did you become involved? What was it like?)
- What can you tell me about your experience as a member of the group?
- What can you tell me about your experiences when leaving the group/since leaving the group? What prompted you to leave?
- How do you think your experience of membership has impacted on your current life?
- How, in retrospect, do you view the experience?

As is recommended in grounded theory research the interview style was flexible and the questions posed varied between interviews (Charmaz, 1980, 2006a; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Clarification
were sought when appropriate and issues and ideas that emerged in the interview were immediately pursued (Charmaz, 2006a). For example, as is recommended for grounded theory research, when appropriate further details were elicited with questions such as “That’s interesting, tell me more about it”. Charmaz (2006a) recommends the use of such questions to assist participants to articulate their intentions and meanings. In addition, some cross-referencing questions were asked to ensure that the interviewer’s understanding of what was said was the intended meaning and to check that certain aspects of the story were clear (Charmaz, 2006a; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). While some probing was used, care was taken to remain open to what the interviewee had to say and maintain a balance between the research agenda and whichever meaning emerged during the interviews (Ezzy, 2010, p. 164).

To this extent, even though an interview guide was prepared to ensure some commonality across interviews (Patton, 2002) the interview guide remained open. Grounded theorists recommend using a flexible interview guide that is guided by what emerges during the research process (Charmaz, 2006a; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It is recommended that new insights gained from one interview are further explored in the subsequent interviews (Charmaz, 1990, 2006a). In accordance with this, themes identified in earlier interviews were tested in later interviews. While the categories and themes identified in the first interviews influenced the questions posed in the later interviews, all interviews involved the telling of the participant’s story and by and large answered the same or very similar questions.

During the interview care was taken to establish rapport and demonstrate empathy, while at the same time being mindful to limit influencing the participants as much as possible. As to limit the extent to which the participants were influenced by the researcher, personal statements and observations were kept to a minimum. Limiting personal inputs was regarded important as to limit influencing the participants to give the ‘right’ version of their story, the version they believe the researcher wants to hear (Goodson & Sikes, 2001). Therefore, the establishment of rapport was negotiated with the importance of limiting influencing the participant as much as possible in mind. To establish rapport at the beginning of the interview meeting, the researcher engaged in casual conversation about topics such as work, children and travel while carefully avoiding the research topic until the commencement of the ‘more formal’ interview. An attempt was made to make the participant feel at ease without divulging a personal stance on the research matter. Throughout the interview, rapport was maintained through the use of active listening skills (Durocher, 1999) and, when appropriate, the use of empathic responses that validate the significance of the experiences to the participant (Charmaz, 2006a; Patton, 2002). These comments were kept to a minimum and were in the nature of “That must have been hard for you” or “That must have taken courage”. Despite little input from the researcher, participants were very willing to share their stories, and seemed comfortable doing so. The researcher believes that understanding and appreciation of the stories shared was successfully conveyed through active
listening skills, body language, eye contact and the questions posed, and personal inputs from the researcher were not considered required to build trust as is sometimes suggested (Oakley, 1981).

Taking care to limit influencing the participants as much as possible to give the ‘right’ version of their story is argued to be particularly pertinent to the study of ‘cults’ or NRMs, specifically because of the contentious nature of this area of study (Walsh & Bor, 1996). As described previously, the NRM debate and available literature is unusually divided between those described as ‘anti cultists’ and those described as ‘cult advocates’ (Healy, 2010; Langone, 2005). Limiting personal inputs was considered important because the researcher feared that being perceived as either an ‘anti cultist’ or ‘cult advocate’ would dramatically influence the data collected. Considering that the researcher is not aligned with either camp, and has attempted to take a balanced view in previous research as well as the current study, minimising inputs to avoid being perceived as aligned with either ‘camp’ is not considered deceitful in any way.

Despite efforts to limit the extent to which the researcher influenced the participants’ responses, in line with the epistemological underpinnings of this study it is recognised that the researcher invariably impacts on the data collected. From a constructivist perspective interviews are considered meaning-making practices where both interviewer and interviewee are considered active participants in the construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Raz, 2005). Even though personal inputs were limited, the questions posed were still guided by the researcher’s identity (Charmaz, 1990). To this extent, the researcher’s personal experience as the daughter of a member of a NRM is recognised as having influenced the data collection. During childhood, the researcher joined her mother in her involvement in a NRM. Unlike the participants in this study, the researcher never voluntarily joined a group in adulthood, and never experienced membership in a NRM as an adult. In this respect the stories of the participants are distinctly different from her own. However, even though the researcher’s experience was limited to childhood, having left the group 15 years ago at the age of 18, it seems reasonable to suggest that because of her experiences during childhood she has a greater understanding of the culture of NRMs than would be commonly expected. The idea that personal experience or ‘being an insider’ offers understanding that may not be available to ‘outsiders’ is well supported (Olmedo, 1996). Specific to the study of NRMs, NRM scholars who were themselves members of the groups studied argue that their prior knowledge acquired through personal involvement gave them an understanding of the group culture and dynamics that enhanced their ability to connect to the research participants (Boeri, 2002, 2005; Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Healy, 2008; Puttick, 2007). While there is support for the suggestion that being an ‘insider’ enhances the quality of the data obtained (Olmedo, 1996), the validity of this data is sometimes questioned. It is sometimes argued that more reliable information can be gathered as an ‘outsider’ (Rasbridge, 1996).
In consideration of the ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ debate, Olmedo (1996) suggests that for optimal results a balance between engagement and distance needs to be maintained; a balance the researcher took care to achieve. The researcher’s personal understanding of NRMs helped establish engagement and rapport, and is argued to have contributed to the quality of the data collected. A level of distance, and in turn validity (Rasbridge, 1996), was maintained by not disclosing her personal story to the participants unless asked directly. Only those six participants who enquired about her personal experiences with NRMs were briefly told that she had some involvement during childhood. In addition to not wanting to influence the participant narratives, personal disclosures were limited and the focus of the interviews remained on the participants’ stories throughout the duration of the interview. It was also feared that if the researcher was perceived as having extensive knowledge on the subject matter, participants would assume a shared understanding and fail to recount their experiences and interpretations in detail. These fears were confirmed, and in turn strengthened, during one of the first interviews. At the end of this interview the researcher was asked regarding her personal interest in the topic under investigation, in response to which she disclosed her affiliation with a NRM during childhood. In response to this the participant said “I didn’t realise, I’m sorry I described everything in such depth ... You probably already knew everything I’ve told you” (Robert).

Lastly, care was taken to end the interviews on a positive note. As is recommended by Charmaz (2006a) ending questions were slanted towards positive responses to bring the interview to closure at a positive level. In addition, care was taking to bring the rhythm and pace of the interview back to a normal conversational level before ending (Charmaz, 2006a). The interviews were ended with a comment along these lines: “Thank you very much for your participation. I really appreciate your honesty and courage in sharing your story so openly with me. I hope it has not been overly exhausting or draining, and that you’ll give yourself some time to relax this afternoon. If there anything I can do for you I’d be very glad to”. All participants responded with comments along the lines of “You’re welcome, the pleasure was mine. I really enjoyed telling my story. It was cathartic. Thank you for listening” (Trudy).

Even though, in line with the epistemological assumptions of this study, the researcher’s identity is regarded as invariably influencing the research process; as discussed, efforts were made to enhance the credibility of the data collected and remain faithful to the experiences of the participants as much as possible. It is relevant to note here that one of the supervisors of this research also has experience of New Religious Movements as she joined a self-development group in her early 20s and was involved with it for nine years before coming to Australia with her husband and child. She did not leave family members in the group. These events occurred more than twenty five years before the research was undertaken. As she had no direct involvement with the interviewees, her experiences did not influence data collection directly but inevitably informed her views on the interpretation of the
data to some extent. Strategies were put in place to enhance the credibility of the data analysis and minimise the extent to which the interpretation of the participants’ accounts were influenced by the researcher’s preconceived ideas and perceptions. Before outlining these strategies, a description of the steps undertaking during data analysis is warranted. This is outlined in the next section.

**Data Analysis**

As an interpretative method, the analysis was not limited to descriptive or surface analysis of the data but went beyond the data to develop ideas and theories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Holloway & Wheeler, 2002). As is recommended in grounded theory, theoretical development was achieved through a detailed process of comparative analysis (Charmaz, 1990, 2006a; Ezzy, 1998, 2002; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In accordance with grounded theory guidelines, a step by step process to the development of theory was followed.

Data analysis commenced as soon as the first interview was conducted. In grounded theory data collection and analysis are considered closely related activities that are recommended to be conducted simultaneously (Charmaz, 2006a; Corbin & Strauss, 1993; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the first instance, immediately following each interview, notes on the interview content and context were taken, including initial impressions on what seemed to be important themes. Before conducting subsequent interviews or commencing the next analytic step, namely coding, the interviews were listened to in their entirety a number of times and then transcribed. Listening to the interviews in their entirety was considered important as to ensure the researcher had a good understanding of the context of the themes that were later identified (Charmaz, 2006a; Hycner, 1999). This was maintained throughout the interviewing process.

The next analytic step involved coding the transcripts. Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emergent theory to explain the data; it is the first step in moving beyond concrete statements in the data to making analytic interpretations (Charmaz, 2006a). Qualitative coding consists of applying conceptual representations called codes to segments of text, whether applied to single sentences, paragraphs or whole passages. This involves the naming of segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorises, summarises, and accounts for each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006a). Through a coding process similarities and differences were identified in the data, both within the same interview and across different interviews. This, eventually, allowed for comparisons across all the interview transcripts and facilitated the development of theory. To guide the analysis, the coding phases recommended by Charmaz (2006a) were followed, which included: 1)
an initial phase in which each word, line, or segment of data were labelled or coded; 2) a focused phase which involved the selection of the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesise, integrate the large amounts of data; and 3) a theoretical integration phase in which possible relationships between the different codes were identified to return a sense of coherence to the fractured story.

In first instance, the interview transcripts were coded according to key issues, themes, events and words. The codes arose from the data collected, and were not predetermined by the researcher. This initial coding process involved the very rigorous process of going over every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and noted significant nonverbal communication in the transcript in order to elicit the participant’s meaning (Charmaz, 1990, 2006a). To avoid making conceptual leaps prematurely, during initial coding care was taken to stick closely to the data and use simple words to code the data, or code with words that reflect action or processes rather than topics (Charmaz, 1990, 2006a). Charmaz (1990) proposes that coding for processes, actions, assumptions, and consequences rather than for topics leads to greater analytic precision. At this early stage, the aim was to identify categories or themes, irrespective of the research question. During this coding phase, care was taken to remain open to all possible theoretical directions indicated by the data (Charmaz, 2006a).

Initial detailed and careful coding led to what Charmaz (2006) describes as “Aha! Now I understand” moments (p. 58). Such ‘Aha’ moments prompted the return to previously coded data to explore topics that might have been glossed over, that may have been too implicit to discern initially or had remained unstated (Charmaz, 2006a, p. 58). In light of ‘Aha’ moments or insights gained from subsequent interviews, initial coding was recoded several times. Reworking the data in light of new insights helped to systematically refine and reformulate categories, subcategories, and the relationship between each code, and, in turn, enabled developing theories to be tested and confirmed. In addition to verifying new ideas or insights through the reanalysis of previous transcripts, subsequent interviews were also used to check or test developing theories or ideas (Charmaz, 1990). In accordance with grounded theory methods, throughout the life of the study, theories emerging from new data were considered in relation to previous data as well as tested in subsequent interviews (Glaser & Strauss, 1979; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

‘Aha’ moments and the subsequent return to the data led to what Charmaz (2006a) calls ‘focussed coding’. Focussed coding is used to pinpoint and develop the most salient categories from which theory can be developed (Charmaz, 2006a). While initial coding generated over 200 categories, focussed coding eliminated those categories that appeared unimportant to the research questions. While making sure to give importance to minority voices (Ezzy, 2001, 2002) and not to cluster common themes if there appeared to be significant differences, through focussed coding duplications
were identified which were then merged to refine the coding process. This process helped to make sense of what was going on and to look at patterns and relationships across all of the participants. These categories developed in focused coding then informed theoretical coding or theoretical integration (Charmaz, 2006a). While initial coding fractured the data, theoretical coding identified possible relationships between the identified categories and subcategories and returned a sense of coherence to the fractured story (Charmaz, 2006a). In grounded theory, the quality and complexity of the theoretical development is argued to be dependent on keeping codes ‘active’ during the coding process, and verifying or further developing new insights in light of previously collected or subsequent data (Charmaz, 2000, 2006a; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the current study, keeping codes ‘active’ and consistently returning to the data in light of new theoretical developments and as such making extensive comparisons within and between interviews allowed for the development of an analytic or theoretical framework that captured the complexity of the data.

The ability to keep codes ‘active’ during the entire coding process was made possible through the use of NVivo7. The qualitative material in this study was managed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo7, a computer-based qualitative analysis package which was designed by, and for, qualitative researchers (Richards, 1999, 2005; Siccama & Penna, 2008). The use of software packages is recommended for qualitative research as it makes data analysis more manageable and increase the validity of the research findings by permitting very thorough analysis (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Ezzy, 2002; Richards, 1999, 2005; Silverman, 2005). The use of NVivo7 was invaluable in managing the large amount of data generated from transcribing interviews. Analytical coding commenced with importing the transcriptions into NVivo7, and coding or fragmenting the data into segments (called ‘nodes’). Through the use of NVivo7 categories and subcategories could be easily represented as coding trees with a core category or theme and branches of sub-categories. The ability to organise the transcripts and to build hierarchical trees and model some of the main concepts helped to build ideas and theories from the data collected, and made NVivo7 particularly useful for this project.

Furthermore, through the use of NVivo7 developing theories could be easily interrogated. For example, the NVivo7 query tool made it possible to easily identify or verify the relationship between developing theory and participant demographics (Siccama & Penna, 2008).

Some criticisms of the use of grounded theory methods in the analysis of qualitative data were taken into account, particularly the way that the above coding methods can fracture the data, potentially undermining the richness of the individual participants’ narratives (Mattingly & Garro, 2000; Riessman, 1993). An awareness of this critique permitted continuous assessment and reassessment of coding practices, with a focus on maintaining the value in each of the rich individual voices and descriptions. As noted, listening to the interviews in their entirety before the coding commenced was aimed at maintaining a sense of the ‘whole story’. Furthermore, in consideration of this critique, and
to ensure the data had not become overly fragmented, during the final stages of analysis all the
interview recordings were listened to again in their entirety. The risk of over fragmentation was also
managed through the use of NVivo7. NVivo7 makes it easy to re-locate fragments within the original
transcript, keeping the original transcript always intact and easily accessible in its entirety. The use of
analytic memos which were maintained from the beginning of the interviewing process and
throughout the coding process also helped to keep track of developing ideas and ensure that the final
write up faithfully represented the participants’ narratives.

The ways in which these and other strategies enhanced the validity and credibility of the study is
described in the next section. In particular, strategies used to manage the unavoidable impact or
influence of the researcher’s identity on the ways in which the data is interpreted and analysed is
discussed.

Validity, Credibility and Reflexive Research

The positivist versus social constructionist arguments regarding the reliability and validity of various
qualitative methods has been well documented (Bryman, 1999, 2001). The positivist evaluation
criteria that convey rigour and validity such as of reliability, generalisability, and objectivity as
applied to quantitative research are not applied to qualitative studies (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Ezzy,
2002; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). In qualitative studies, rigour or validity relate to the
extent findings are credible interpretations of what has been studied (Ezzy, 2001, 2002; Lincoln &
Guba, 1985; Padgett, 1998). The concept of validity is defined by Maxwell (1996) as “the correctness
or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account”
(Maxwell, 1996, p. 87).

For the present study a number of strategies were employed to enhance the validity or credibility of
the study. Most significantly, credibility was ensured through the construction of an appropriate
methodology, in particular the use of a grounded approach to data collection and analysis. The
credibility and quality of this study was primarily ensured by methodological thoroughness, both in
terms of data collection as well as analysis (Charmaz, 1990, p. 1163 ; Ezzy, 2002). As described
previously, a number of strategies were used to enhance the credibility and ‘accuracy’ of the data
collected. These included the audio recording and verbatim transcription of the interviews by the
researcher, the careful following of interview protocol regarding the use of open ended questions, the
seeking of clarifications during the interview to ensure intended meanings were successfully
conveyed and the limiting of researcher inputs and disclosures as to minimise influencing the
participants. The strategies used to enhance the credibility or validity of the data analysis included the use of ‘open coding’ facilitated through the use of computer software assisted analysis. As noted, to ensure validity the research questions and problems were continuously reassessed as processes of data collection and analysis were undertaken. This included paying attention to minority voices and searching for evidence to disconfirm theories that emerged from the data. Care was also taken not to overly fragment the data and faithfully represent the participant narratives. To ensure a sense of coherence was maintained the interviews were listened to, and the transcripts read, in their entirety a number of times. In addition, notes and memos written immediately after the interviews were compared to the developing theories during the final stages of analysis. The final theoretical integrations remained consistent with the initial observations made about the life histories of each individual participant. In addition to these strategies, to enhance the credibility of the data analysis care was taken to minimise the extent to which the participants’ accounts were imputed with researcher’s personal interpretations and meanings through the use of reflexive practice, some member checking and the student-supervisor relationship.

Minimising the influence of the researcher’s identity on the data analysis is considered both important as well as challenging. As previously noted, from the perspective taken in this study the epistemological, ontological and theoretical assumptions, as well as personal experiences and emotions of the researcher are understood as invariably impacting on the research process (Charmaz, 1990, 2000, 2006a; Ezzy, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). To avoid, or at least minimise researcher’s impact on the interpretation of the data, early grounded theory rules prescribed commencing the research project without having preconceived concepts in mind (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In practice, a ‘pure’ grounded theory approach may not be possible. In reality, by the time data is collected, Human Research Ethics clearance must have already been obtained from the governing body in question, which inevitably involves attention to existing literature. A researcher is thus inevitably exposed to various theoretical perspectives related to the research topic prior to data collection and analysis. Recognising that the researcher’s previous experience with NRM and understanding of the literature gained from her Honours research invariably impacted on the data collected and the analysis, the researcher’s identity is not considered ‘independent’ from the research findings.

However, in line with constructivist grounded theory methodologies, it was important that the project maintained an inductive design, with conclusions and theories generated from the data gathered rather than based on preconceived views or hypotheses (Charmaz, 1990; Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Therefore, despite the acknowledgement that the researcher’s perspectives and experiences invariably impact on the research findings, a number of techniques were employed to minimise the extent to which the interpretation of the data was guided by the researcher’s identity. As already
mentioned, one such technique regarded the use of careful coding; careful coding is recommended as a strategy to help the researcher refrain from imputing personal perspectives or motives to the data (Charmaz, 2006a). Other strategies employed to enhance the validity of the data analysis included the use of some member checking, supervisor examination of the data, and the use of reflexive research.

To ensure the data was approached with an openness to whatever meaning emerged, and to allow for the researcher to enter the world view of the participants as much as possible the practice of reflexivity (Ezzy, 2001, 2002, 2010; Robson, 2002), or what is sometimes called ‘bracketing’ (Hycner, 1999; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006) or ‘critical self-scrutiny’ (J. Mason, 1996) was used. The importance of reflexive practice for research validity is a focal theme in SI discussions of research (Denzin, 1988; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Raz, 2005) and is described as examining and identifying personal presuppositions and assumptions with the purpose of limiting the extent to which data is interpreted in accordance with existing preconceptions (Robson, 2002). Similarly, Mason (1996) describes the importance of ‘critical self-scrutiny’ for research validity, stressing the need for the researcher to evaluate the impact of his or her theoretical and methodological perspectives on the research process throughout the duration of the study. In accordance with the importance of reflexivity to the study’s chosen methodology, the researcher examined and endeavoured to identify her personal presuppositions relevant to the research matter, endeavouring to make her assumptions explicit (Holloway & Wheeler, 2002; Hycner, 1999). In relation to the researcher’s ability to identify personal presuppositions, it should be noted that the researcher is a qualified and experienced counsellor. A significant component of counselling training focuses on the trainee counsellor’s ability to recognise their presuppositions or assumptions in order to understand the worldview of the client as much as possible. Thus, the practice of identifying or becoming aware of preconceptions and, in turn, putting them aside, is a practice in which the researcher has significant experience and training.

Nonetheless, the researcher attempted to make any underlying suppositions explicit by a) discussing her views on the phenomenon in question in detail with her supervisor and friends prior to commencement of this study and b) keeping a diary with her thoughts and emotions pertinent to the subject matter, and thereby keeping track of how her understandings evolved throughout the study as they were shaped by the interactions with the research participants and the data collected. The possible influence of the supervisor’s experience was addressed by recording an interview using the same questions as the study. This data was not analysed but served to highlight to both the researcher and the supervisor where there were overlaps between the supervisor’s experience and the data collected for the study. Despite numerous attempts at self-awareness with the aim of reducing personal bias in the interpretation of the data collected, it is recognised that the researcher is not in any way neutral or dispassionate (Ezzy, 2010), and the experience of data collection as well as analysis was a deeply emotional experience. Despite efforts to increase the validity of the research, ultimately the research was a subjective and emotional endeavour (Ezzy, 2010).
Member checking is also sometimes recommended to enhance the credibility of the research findings (Charmaz, 2006a; Ezzy, 2001, 2002; Hycner, 1999). Member checking was conducted during the interview with all participants, as well as through a follow up conversation during the final stages of analysis with four participants. During the interview the researcher used active listening skills and asked questions to verify that intended meaning as accurately understood. In addition, if the researcher suspected a possible relationship between different aspects of the participants’ life histories and experiences, she invited the participants to comment on the possibility of such a relationship. For example, to check the accuracy of developing theories questions such as “You mentioned feeling controlled by your father during childhood, do you think there may be a relationship between this and your decision to join a [the group], or do you believe they are quite independent?” In addition, at the end of each interview a brief overview of the developing theories were offered to each participant. Soliciting the respondent’s feedback resulted in valuable data and provided a venue for testing emergent insights, and in turn, enhancing validity (Douglas, 1985). Out of the 23 participants, member checking during the later stages of data analysis was conducted with four participants. The major findings were discussed with these participants in a casual manner and their feedback was sought. While discussing the major findings with all participants may have further enhanced the study in regard to rigour, it was recognised that this is limited in as far that no single participant can have a true insight into the attitudes or experiences of all other participants (J. Mason, 1996). It is recognised that some of the observations made are likely to be in line with the perceptions of some of the participants while in conflict with those of others. Considering the contentious nature of this area of study, in an attempt to present a balanced perspective, it is likely that some of the observations reported may seem inaccurate by some participants while supported by others. Therefore, contacting each participant to discuss the research findings was not considered necessary, and ‘member checking’ was primarily used to seek clarifications specific to the experiences and perceptions of the interviewee in question.

Lastly, some of the subjectivity of isolated analysis was kept in check by employing ‘peer-checking’ of the initial codes and ongoing data analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Padgett, 1998). To this extent, the student’s supervisors read the transcripts and monitored the coding and ongoing analysis of the data; this ongoing and supportive relationship is considered integral to the quality and rigour of this study (Shelby, 2000).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical conduct was ensured by, in first instance, receiving approval to conduct this study from the Human Research Ethics Committee. The protection of all human subjects is required of all research conducted through the University of Newcastle. Each participant was over 18 years of age. Individuals who demonstrated excessive levels of distress were going to be thanked for their interest but excluded from the study; however as no such individuals showed interest this was not required. Gaining consent from the participants was obtained after discussing the focus of the research and what would be involved in their participation (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 291). Participants were provided with an information statement which clearly outlined the risks and benefits of participating in the research, and were given every opportunity to have sufficient time to digest and discuss their participation with partners and other family members before the interviews were conducted. (Note Appendix 3 for the Information Statement and Appendix 4 for the Consent Form).

The participants were told as much about the purposes of this project as possible and encouraged to seek clarification on any aspect of the research if required, and all questions posed by the participants were answered as openly and honestly as possible (Oakley, 1981). However, while an effort was made to be transparent about the research agenda and the personal position of the researcher (Oakley, 1981), the researcher did not share her personal experiences relevant to NRM membership unless directly asked. Even though she never explicitly lied when responding to a question, she was somewhat uncomfortable with the ethics of adopting the role of ‘objective researcher with no personal understanding’, as was assumed by the majority of participants. While the researcher was prepared to give something of herself during the interviews, she believed that the participants would have been influenced by her personal disclosures, with this, in turn, impacting on the quality of the data collected. To answer the project’s research questions, it was considered important to keep the focus on the participants, not on the researcher. Therefore, the importance of learning about the participants’ views and understanding their lives from their perspective took precedence over ‘coming clean’ (Oakley, 1981). Rather than developing trust through ‘coming clean’ and sharing personal experiences (Oakley, 1981), in line with constructivist approach to grounded theory, respect and trust were developed and demonstrated by making concerted efforts to understand the subjective realities of the participant (Charmaz, 2006a).

Despite choosing not to share her personal story, in accordance with the epistemologies and methodologies favoured, the researcher wanted to give something back to the participants. While the interview process involved the telling of the participant’s story, and was directed to some extent by interview topics and questions, care was taken not to exclude issues that were important to the
participants. Many participants noted that they hardly ever had the opportunity to discuss their experiences of membership, and seemed to relish the opportunity. As for many of the participants the interview represented a rare occasion to tell their story, it seemed important to give them the opportunity to talk about issues important to them, regardless of how relevant they seemed to the research question. Higher priority was given to the participants’ comfort levels and to ensuring that the interview was a positive experience for the participants than to obtaining ‘juicy’ data (Charmaz, 2006a). Participants were very willing to cooperate with the research, and many reported that they felt grateful to be able to share this part of their histories with someone. Fourteen out of 23 participants contacted the researcher in the days following the interview to thank her for listening “so openly and non-judgementally” to their story, describing the experience as “cathartic”. As is suggested in the literature, for many of the participants the experience of sharing their story seemed to have been an empowering and positive experience (Goodson & Sikes, 2001; Munro, 1998).

Lastly, all information provided by participants in this study was treated with strict confidence. As a counsellor, respecting confidentiality is second nature (Royse, 2004; Yegidis & Weinbach, 2005), and the researcher feels confident that the privacy of the participants has been safeguarded. Nonetheless, as the former member community in Australia is relatively small, and therefore the possibility of recognition is heightened, maintaining confidentiality was not always straightforward. To guarantee confidentiality, interview recordings and transcripts were de-identified immediately and pseudonyms used. In addition, the description of the participants in this thesis is purposefully limited and general. To further protect the respondents’ privacy, all materials collected in the field are stored securely in a locked filing cabinet, and computer files are password protected and, consistent with the University’s ethics requirements, will eventually be destroyed after 5 years.

**Limitations of the Research Design and Methods**

A number of limitations of the design of this study need to be acknowledged. In accordance with constructivist epistemology, the study is limited in its ability to be generalised (Charmaz, 1990). Grounded theory research does not aim to be statistically representative, but aims to obtain rich data from which insights can be derived and theories developed (Charmaz, 1990; A. Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In line with this, the ‘accuracy’ of a specific piece of data is considered less important than its theoretical relevance (Charmaz, 1990). This study does not claim to be representative of the attitudes and experiences of all former members; rather, it seeks to add to the growing knowledge and understanding of NRM s, as well as contribute to the literature on ‘the self’ and ‘identity’. Despite
limitations in regards to generalisability, the data collected and presented is considered rich in depth and scope, offering a sound foundation for the theories proposed.

Limitations of working with samples derived from ‘cult- aware’ networks also need to be considered. It is recognised that the sample may be tilted towards those who found the experience harmful, as those who did not find the experience harmful may not contact support networks (Aronoff-McKibben, et al., 2000; Langone, 1993a). On the other hand, it is also possible that those who have had no support from other former members through involvement with ‘cult-aware’ networks may over-emphasise the positives of their experience out of embarrassment of having become involved with a NRM(Langone, 1993b). Even though only half of the participants are regarded as recruited through a ‘cult aware’ organisation, it is possible that the sample of former members in this study is biased towards those particularly troubled and may not accurately represent the former member population. However, this possible over representation of those who found the experience harmful could be considered a strength rather than a possible limitation of the study. Research with samples of former members derived from ‘cult aware’ networks is often critiqued with the argument that research with a sample of ‘disgruntled’ former members will invariably come to the conclusion that membership is harmful (Bromley, 1998a, 1998b; Robbins, 1988b; Wright, 1987, 1998). Despite having derived its findings from a sample of potentially ‘disgruntled’ former members, the findings of the current study are considerably more nuanced than this. To this extent, having a sample of former members recruited through ‘cult aware’ networks strengthens any argument that membership may be enhancing rather than inevitably harmful.

The problems of relying on retrospective accounts of former members should also be noted as such accounts are interpretive and influenced by the respondents’ present situation (Robbins, 1988, p. 15). While acknowledging this limitation, it should be stressed that, in line with the epistemological underpinnings of this study, the accounts are not understood as literal descriptions of what actually happened but are narratives that help elucidate understanding of individual meanings and self-constructions (Charmaz, 1987, 1995, 2000; Charon, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). As noted, despite their retrospective and constructionist nature, life history narratives provide meaningful insights into the actual process of self and identity construction and reconstruction, with this a primary aim of this study (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Diniz-Pereira, 2008; Ewick & Sibley, 1995). The narratives are analysed as presentations, as the narrators’ preferred interpretations of their present and past situations rather than objective realities (Jarvinen, 2004; M. B. Scott & Lyman, 1968; Vryan, et al., 2003). In line with the SI perspective, the point is not whether the respondent’s account is an illusion or reality; rather, the focus is on the individual meanings or subjective realities of the participants and on how individuals give coherence, as well as diversity, to their life experiences.
(Denzin, 1989; Raz, 2005). To this extent, the narratives are not treated as necessarily true accounts but nor are they considered false in any sense.

**Conclusion**

This Chapter has presented the research process involved in undertaking this study. This Chapter has outlined the conceptual framework for the study and discussed the relevant epistemological and theoretical approaches to constructivist grounded theory research. A detailed description of the methods of data collection and analysis was included, following the previously established research aims and questions. Ethical considerations were considered, as were the limitations of the research. The strategies through which the validity and credibility of this study was enhanced were outlined, paying much attention to the value of reflexivity, and the importance of being aware of the position of the researcher.

The following Chapters, Chapter 4 through to Chapter 13, present and discuss the findings from this study. A description of the groups is offered in the following chapter, and of the participants in Chapter 5.
Chapter 4

Conformity as the cost of belonging: Life inside ‘world-rejecting groups’ in Australia

Even though I don’t agree with a lot of the things we did, it didn’t come from a bad place ... We were converting a lot of drug addicts and street people and stuff ... we had quite a few in the group who had actually been smoking dope or using acid and the group was strictly no drugs at all. So companies would just give us stuff and support us financially and I’ve always wondered why people did that.... But we were so convinced, we weren’t like conmen, we were different from conmen because we were so convinced of the sincerity of our goal. We came across to people as a group of idealistic young people who had really given up our worldly possessions to give our lives for those for whom the world was not a good place. So we were picking up the riff raff of this world and looking after them and making a better world for them. In that sense our goal was sincere (Lauren).

The current Chapter describes the 11 different NRMs the participants in this study had joined. While the various groups have different beliefs and adopt different practices, they appear to have enough in common to make a study worthwhile. All 11 groups can be described as ‘world-rejecting NRMs’ or identity-based communities in that they exhibit strong processes of social influence and demand conformity to a shared identity that rejects mainstream society or non-members. An understanding of the way in which these groups promote or enforce conformity to a shared identity is crucial to the arguments developed throughout this thesis as this thesis investigates the way in which NRM membership impact on the construction of self and identity.

The terms cult and NRM are used in reference to groups that can vary significantly, ranging from religious ‘doomsday cults’ to groups that offer means of developing human potential (Barker, 1997, 2004; S. Hunt, 2003). While there is not one commonly accepted definition of the word ‘cult’ most definitions encompass the following characteristics: a group that is critical of or rejects mainstream culture; perceives itself, its leaders and members as elitist and superior; expects conformity to the group’s unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices as dictated by leadership, and conformity or commitment is increased or maintained through various psychological techniques and practices (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993a, 2005; Singer, 2003). The term NRM is used more broadly, and also encompasses groups that are not rejecting of the host culture. In contrast to what is understood as ‘cultic’ some NRMs are argued to be ‘affirming of”
mainstream culture, and aim to enhance their followers’ potential to perform successfully in mainstream society (Wallis [1984] 2007).

While the groups used in this study are referred to as ‘cults’ by the participants, they appear in line with what is described by Wallis as ‘world rejecting’ NRMs (Aldridge, 2007; Wallis, [1984] 2007). In line with common descriptions of ‘cults’, Wallis describes ‘world rejecting’ groups as groups that are highly critical of outside society; believe to be the only ones holding the ‘truth’; impose standards of conduct on the followers in the name of a personal deity; expect obedience to the leadership and commitment to the cause, and can be described as total institutions that require a high level of commitment and demand significant lifestyle changes (Wallis [1984] 2007).

Despite obvious similarities between various definitions and descriptions of ‘cults’ and NRMs, in particular ‘world rejecting’ groups, the literature written by those who favour the word cult can be easily distinguished from the literature written by those who favour the term NRM. While there is a consensus that cults or NRMs expect conformity to norms and expectations determined by leadership, the main difference between these two bodies of literature regards how conformity or commitment is perceived as enforced or ensured. On the one hand, those who favour the term NRM, mostly sociologists and religious studies scholars, conceptualise the maintenance and enhancement of commitment in NRMs as within what can be considered normal processes of socialisation. On the other hand, those who favour the term ‘cult’, mostly psychologists or other helping professionals, argue that conformity is deliberately ensured and enhanced through the use of psychological techniques and practices that only occur in unusual environments such as cults, called brainwashing.

Those in favour of the term cult predominantly support the brainwashing theories which argue that involvement stems from having fallen victim to deceptive psychological techniques and practices designed to induce commitment and conformity (Almendros et al., 2011; K. Taylor, 2004). According to this view dependency is deliberately created by gaining control over members’ behaviours, thoughts and feelings through the use of unusual dependency increasing techniques and practices. Such techniques include powerful emotional bombardment techniques, limiting of personal relationships, devaluing of reasoning and critical thinking, forced confessions, food deprivation, self-denigration, group pressures and information control (Chambers, Langone, & Malinoski, 1996; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003; West & Langone, 1986).

Sociologists have found little or no evidence of ‘brainwashing’. Rather than interpreting the group interactions in terms of brainwashing sociologists argue that the intense interactions of members that contribute to conformity is not unusual but can be considered within the realm of ‘normal’ group dynamic or socialisation processes (Barker, 1984; Dawson, 2007a; Long & Hadden, 1983; Melton,
From this perspective, the changes observed in members is not understood as resulting from coercive influences but as the expected result of a shift in patterns of association and motivated by the ‘direct rewards’ of membership (Howell, 1997; Lofland & Skonovd, 1981a, 1981b; Long & Hadden, 1983; Richardson, 1989; Snow & Machalek, 1984). This literature describes membership as directed by the individual, motivated by numerous commonly reported benefits or ‘direct rewards’ of NRM participation such as friendship and community, self-development, a sense of identity and certainty, improvement in health and happiness and a decrease in alcohol and drug use (Galanter, 1980, 1983, 1989; Galanter, et al., 1980; S. Levine, 1984, 1989; Ross, 1983). Stressing that many members choose to leave after some time, it is argued that membership does not result from having fallen victim to powerful coercive techniques but is motivated by personal choice (Barker, 1981, 1984; Richardson, 2007). Despite variations in whether the group dynamics are interpreted along the lines of brainwashing or normal processes of socialisation, there appears to be agreement that cults or NRMs can be understood as controlled environments in which conformity to behavioural, cognitive, emotional and social expectations is expected.

The descriptions of group life outlined in the sociological literature do not vary dramatically from the accounts of group life provided by potentially disgruntled former members as outlined by those who favour the term cult. Davidman & Greil (2007) observe that the descriptions of group life provided by those who seem favourable towards their former group and those who seem disgruntled are very similar. They argue that while individuals may place different valences on the experience and use different metaphors to characterise it, there is a general consensus of what happens in groups.

The groups in the current study are called ‘cults’ by the participants and refer to groups that have been previously labelled ‘cults’ or NRMs in news reports or scholarly literature. To provide a description of the type of groups included in this study, this chapter presents three case studies that highlight the common themes that were found in all the accounts of group life narrated by the former members in this study.

**Accounts of NRM life**

The 23 participants in this study are former members of 11 different groups, of which six can be described as religious groups founded in Christianity, four as personal development or psychotherapy groups and one as Eastern meditation. While no case study is provided to depict the Eastern
meditation group, the descriptions of this group are in line with the themes outlined in the other case studies.

The case studies indicate that the ‘cults’ or NRMs described in this study correspond with the previous literature that describes NRMs as controlled environments or total or semi-total institutions in which conformity to behavioural, emotive, cognitive and social expectations as determined by leadership is expected and enforced (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Coates, 2012; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; S. Levine, 1989; Lofland, 1977). In particular, despite significant variations in terms of beliefs and practices, the NRMs described are in line with the characteristics of ‘world rejecting’ groups as described by Wallis ([1984] 2007).

“A Pentecostal church turned cultic”

Flora, Gabrielle, Michelle, Hillary, Richard and Max are former members of a Christian NRM that was founded in the 1940s and has two main churches across Australia. They describe the group as “a Pentecostal church turned cultic” (Hillary), and compare the group to the Exclusive Brethren and The Churches of Christ (Michelle). Hillary explains that when she first joined, the group was perceived as a “respectable independent movement run by Presbyterian ministers, ordained ministers”. She explains how the group has grown from “a gathering of 100 people to at times filling an auditorium that seats 3000 people”.

Former members of this group explain that while this group was initially connected to the wider community, it gradually became more and more insulated and critical of society, portraying themselves as superior and non-members as sinful. Max describes the changes in the group as follows:

Initially it was simply a gathering of Christians who didn’t have a hierarchy but gradually I could see a change occurring in the group. A simple gathering around a communal table changed to a situation where nobody was able to make a decision without asking the elder. The impression I had is that this eldership was rapidly trying to elevate itself so it was no longer in the midst of the congregation as it was originally formulated. They now wanted to be at the top of the congregation. While initially they were one of the congregation, now they viewed themselves as superior, in direct communication with God.
In regards to the changes that occurred in the group, Michelle describes how the group became less and less involved with the wider community, and started to preach against mainstream society. She notes:

There was no community involvement anymore, and no fellowship with other churches anymore... They started to preach that they are the only ones going to heaven. They certainly believe that they have the latest and greatest word from God that is more advanced than anyone else and you are absolutely privileged to be sitting here listening to the word of God.

Participants explain that this group expects a high level of commitment and conformity to the norms and expectations determined by the elders. Behavioural expectations, personal and social relationships, emotions and thoughts were prescribed by the leaders. Participants comment that as time went on the extent to which obedience and conformity was expected increased to the point where all personal or organisational decisions were deferred to leadership. In regards to the control of behaviour, the former members of this group note that they spent all their free time associating with the leaders and fellow members. They explain that while initially participation was voluntary, gradually they became more and more pressured to make significant life style changes and commit all their free time to the group. Max comments:

It’s a gradual increase in commitment ... It goes from going to a casual BBQ to labouring away and supplying your skills for nothing”. Similarly, Michelle describes: “I was being pressured to participate in everything… You were expected to be at home groups which was once a fortnight, you were expected to be in anything that they deemed appropriate for your age group; if you had any musical inclination you were expected to be in the choir or the orchestra.

In regards to social relationships, a number of participants explain that who they associated with and how they negotiated their social and intimate relationships was dictated by leadership. They explain that while working outside the group was permitted, socialising with non-group members was strongly discouraged, and sometimes punished. In addition, they comment that even within the group social contact was controlled. Michelle explains: “Even within the group I was told who to associate with.... Quite literally they preach this thing that you have to cut ties with your family if they are anything other than what they determine as living in a Godly manner, even if they are within the church”. In regards to romantic relationships Hillary explains that they were only permitted with fellow members and only if and when both parties were considered marriageable. She explains:
Courtships are all tightly controlled. The young are assessed by the elders whether they are marriageable or not marriageable. The qualifications for being marriageable are that you have completed your studies, and that you have saved money so you have some financial security. That you’re fully committed to the elders’ program and you are fully submitted to your father at home. [The leaders] look at the young people and assess them as to whether they are measuring up. And if they are deemed marriageable they are allowed to court one another, within the church.

The former members of this group describe being pressured to conform. They comment that if they failed to comply with expectations they were asked to attend private counselling session with the elders in which they were berated for their lack of obedience. Hillary explains that she was punished for contacting her daughter who was no longer a member of the group. As the result of her disobedience privileges were taken away, for example, she was no longer allowed to take communion and was told to repent and ask for forgiveness. She describes this process as follows:

I underwent counselling with various elders. I had to write confessions and do assignments during that time … They told me was so wicked and that I hadn’t seen anything of my nature and that if I ever wanted to be saved I had to come back to the elders with notebook in hand, and if I took notes and if I tried and if I confessed, and sat under their teaching, maybe in six or seven years they would start to see some change in me; but they actually doubted if I would ever be saved. So they had a way of crucifying you and your character and making you this mess that would submit under their power to then try and learn how wicked you are.

Similarly, Max explains that non conformity was managed by “putting someone in a state of brokenness”, which refers to the idea “that people needed to be broken before they could become ‘fixed’ … Like being born again… By this they mean being killed and then brought back to some form of life. What they look for is total brokenness”. He explains that arguing that for a marriage to improve or become ‘fixed’ it first needed to be broken, the leaders broke up his marriage and forbid contact between him and his wife. However, once the marriage was ‘broken’, it remained broken; this Max argues profoundly shook his sense of self and caused self-doubt, and in turn, compliance.

The group is described by Richard as follows:

When we were part of the group, in the beginning there was real camaraderie, there was family involvement. We used to do group activities together. If a person wanted a house painted, the whole group would come and have the whole day of painting and having fun. We’d have working bees for anyone needing any help; it was a real communal thing. But as
time went by we began to see that things started to change and the groups became more insular from other groups ... we were no longer having visiting preachers, visitors from other churches. The preaching was becoming more direct, and it was changing from being Bible based to more emphasis on the word of the elders rather than the Bible. Now it was about what they were saying and what they were expecting. The obedience factor became more prevalent ... There was this new emphasis on obedience to the elders’ word as they were the channel through which you were hearing from God.... In the beginning there was this wonderful sense of family and community but as time went on it became this rigid, law based regime where the word of the elders became law...We accepted that. These men we saw as our spiritual fathers who were there for our guidance.... When you are in that situation you don’t even think about it, you believe what you’re told... I remember being told that is we left the group we would go mad. I accepted that... As time went on, we started getting huge amounts of notes every week from the elders, all meetings were being taped so you could buy copies of the meeting to listen to at home. They were sent overseas and all around the world. We were encouraged to go to meetings every week, and working bees every Saturday. They were filling every waking moment of your life with activities so you would have no time to think about going to the beach or the movies or visit friends outside the church, your whole life consumed by the activities in the church. And when you missed a meeting questions were asked... It changed from those initial days when it was a caring, loving, group of people to just a big business now that needs all this money to keep it going.

“A group founded in Extremely Alternative Christianity”

Thomas and Lauren are former members of a NRM that was also founded in Christianity. Thomas describes the group as critical of mainstream society, with an “us against them” type mentality; its beliefs and behaviours were very different from the socially conservative and hierarchical culture of the Pentecostalist church just described. Thomas describes how the leader perceived himself as in direct communication with God and members as chosen or handpicked by God to carry out his work; to judge from Thomas’ description, the leader took his group in a very alternative direction. He describes the group as a controlled environment in which a high level of commitment and conformity to norms and expectations determined by leadership was expected and enforced; these norms and expectations violated many of the values usually associated with Christianity, including sexual fidelity and financial probity.

Thomas’ narrative describes how during membership his behaviours, social relationships, thoughts and emotions were managed or dictated by the group and its leaders. Thomas explains that
membership signified significant life style changes and “a total commitment to the commune”. He explains:

I met people on the street who invited me to their coffee club afterwards and then invited me to stay with them. Within a week they’d fleeced me of all my savings. We’d gone down to the bank and done a bank transaction and cashed in my ticket home. I started living with them... and immediately there was pressure to fully dedicate myself to the cause ... As a member your days were planned from morning till night... All your time’s taken up with scripture memorisation, with meetings, with intense Bible studies, and studies of the leader, with work, passing out literature on the street.

He explains that the control was not limited to his behaviours, but also impacted on his social relationships, thoughts and emotions. In regards to how his thinking was influenced he explains that an adherence to the group’s teachings was expected and doubts were depicted as influenced by the devil. He describes:

They would say ‘So now that you’ve chosen to serve God the devil is going to come with his doubts. Be ready for that... And they would use Bible verses to justify everything they said. So anytime you would stop to think about whether you were doing the right thing, there was someone there ready to counter your doubts. There was a buddy system, someone was always with you. You would never go out alone. You willingly subject to this because they told you the devil would come and take you away from the truth.

Similarly, he explains that his social and romantic relationships were carefully managed. He explains that the leaders encouraged a relationship between him and Lauren, his now wife. He notes:

So we were kind of put together with our consent to see how things worked. I’d been in the group just on a year by then. We build a pretty reasonable friendship and I was of the opinion of “why not?” this is what God’s ordained and she’s nice girl so we might as well get married... If it’s leadership and God speaks through his leadership then that’s fine.

In regards to the management of emotions he explains that the group and its leaders would influence which emotions were expressed by members by condoning the experience of certain emotions and disapproving others. He describes the management of emotions by the group as follows:

Straight after the birth of our first child [a] new belief […] was introduced, which involved females sleeping with guys to convert them... During that time it was really rough because
she would go out meeting guys; which had to be done with my consent because I was supposed to be providing a balance to her so she wouldn’t get swept away in emotion. So she would come back and say “I met this guy, a business man and I think I should go the whole way with him”. That put me in another bind as even though I didn’t want her to, for me to say “I don’t think you should”, would be labelled as jealousy and jealousy was the ultimate sin. So I was in a double bind again. I couldn’t say what I thought so I’d reluctantly go “seems like the way to go”. It was all presented as laying down your life to save someone’s soul, and this is going to be painful but we’re doing the right thing and Jesus went to the cross for us, it’s no great thing for us to share our wives for him. So the first few times were really painful. She’d go out, come back from this great exciting experience and I’d be at home, drunk, in tears, with our little baby.

Thomas suggests that practices such as the buddy system described above were aimed to enforce conformity through the distilling or negating of doubts. In addition, he describes the practice of ‘bottle breaking’ as also designed to encourage conformity. He describes:

When I first joined, they sent me and the other people that had been recruited in that period to a secluded farm for pretty intense training. Some of the things that stood out, apart from being indoctrinated with the group’s beliefs, were the thing they called bottle breaking. The idea was taken from the Bible, illustrating that you can’t pour new wine into old bottles because the bottle would break. It’s only by breaking you down and reforming you that you accept these new truths. Bottle breaking involved a lot of crazy games, a little bit like you do in drama school with just loosening up and getting out of yourself, releasing your inhibitions, doing silly dances in front of the group just to break down any barriers between each other and the leaders. It was quite a fun time in some ways... There was also a lot of invading people’s personal space initially. There was a lot of hugging, group hugs, and people looking into your eyes and telling you how they loved you, really getting emotionally bombarded with all these feel goods. And that continued on. This intense feeling, daily, a number of times you’d be hugged by everybody and you would hug everybody.

**A personal development group**

Julie, William, Kerry, Michael, Joe, Alice and Catheline are former members of the same ‘personal development group’. They all describe this group in similar ways. They explain that group membership followed the attendance of a personal development weekend workshop, which, in
retrospect they argue is designed to motivate enrolment into the longer, more committed and expensive courses. Even though participation in this weekend workshop was described as “very intense” and “full on” (Catheline) for most participants this was a positive experience that motivated increased commitment to the teachings. Participants comment: “The course in itself was kind of fun. It kind of makes you feel good about who you are, that you’re part of this whole world process… They do things like re-birthing and you get a crystal … So you get sucked into signing up for the other courses” (Catheline) and “During the first course [the leader] is really peace and love, and doesn’t at all prepare you for the second course which was like a trip to the military” (Michael). Following participation in the weekend workshop, participants purchased audio recording and literature with the group’s teaching, and signed up for the seven day course. This was then followed by a one year course, which signified full ‘group membership’. For most of the participants, at the end of the one year course membership was not terminated but continued. Kerry notes “What was initially twelve months and it ended up going longer and longer. We did more and more courses, repeat courses” (Kerry).

Even though participants describe the group in terms of “personal development” and “spiritual healing” they explain that this group differs from those personal development groups that aim to improve their followers performance in mainstream society. They highlight that the leader is highly critical of society, positioning herself as “highly evolved” and others, in particular non group members, as “unevolved”. In line with the description of ‘world rejecting’ NRMs the former members accounts portray the group as a controlled environment that demands a high level of commitment and life style changes from its members and is disconnected from wider society in terms of its values, beliefs and practices.

In their descriptions of the seven day course participants highlight the importance of obedience and conformity to the demands of leadership. Catheline explains:

> On the first day of the course they put us on a bus and blanked out all of the windows so we didn’t know where we were going. And they just drove all night. I was really frightened by that stage. Everyone was frightened I think, but no one thought of questioning it... There was no toilet, and people needed to go to the bathroom. But they wouldn’t talk to us. The leaders just ignored us completely. And they wore sunglasses and uniforms... Finally the bus stopped on this property in the middle of nowhere ... It could have been anywhere. And we had to get out of the bus and line up. The leaders were really military, getting us to hurry up, do push ups, sit ups, and run. And still people needed the bathroom. I needed food and water... It was really crazy. That week was full on... Maybe I had about ten hours sleep for the whole week. The leaders were putting you down the whole time; screaming at you, swearing, humiliating.
Like, they would say ‘take off all your clothes, stand in front of the group, everyone now tell them what’s wrong with them’... with that one person... Everyone did as told. One guy tried to run away but before you went they took your phone and money, so you didn’t have anything and you didn’t know where you were. So he didn’t get far. And also, they would just stop feeding you for a day. One day they said ‘you’re all so selfish and lazy, we’re not going to feed you today’, things like that.... By the end of the week I thought I was seeing faces in the trees and stuff. It’s probably sleep deprivation and also they are telling you stuff the whole time. Like ‘your spiritual guides are near you’ ... so you think all these spirits are around and stuff.

In reference to the same course Joe adds:

I remember one occasion in which we had to stand in this circle for like hours and we weren’t allowed to go to the toilet and I was busting and I thought ‘fuck this’ and left the circle and just went ... I pissed in [the leader’s] garden and for that I was punished and made to scrub that area over and over again.

This course was followed by participation in the one year course. The participants describe the one year course as consisting of meetings, group work, counselling sessions, assignments, a diet and exercise regime, fundraising and voluntary work for the group. Kerry describes the group as follows:

[The leader] controlled everything: we had to attend private and couple counselling. She even controlled relationships and parenting as well, we couldn’t make a decision about our child or our relationships unless it was via her... You were expected to tell her everything... We were kept very busy ...We’d be sleeping 2 or 3 hours a night. We’d be doing up to 80 assignments in a period of three months. We’d be running at least 10km a day. We had a completely vegan diet. Our bodies and our minds were being broken down... We were enticed to move down to where the community was and we became work slaves ... The act of cleaning something was that you were cleaning your soul. That you were cleaning your past lives. And the closer you came to cleaning anything that was [the leader’s] personally, the more evolved you felt.

The former members of this group explain that a lot of the group practices and teachings centred around the creation and experiencing of emotions. Comments such as “There were lots of activities where they start to turn the knife and twist” (William), “It was all about sorting out your so called
issues and getting in touch with your emotions” (Catheline), “[The leader] was interested in psychological warfare... But she would do it under the guise of ‘this is your stuff’; you need to sort this out about your personality because your personality is out of line” (Michael) and “It was all about logic being a bad thing and that we should listen to our emotions and our feelings” were common. This emphasis on emotions and dealing with issues is further highlighted by Alice’s description of the meetings:

The courses involved attending meetings where you had to deal with your so called issues... The group meetings were all about bringing up each other’s so called issues. It just crossed so many lines, it was so personal... So they would pick out stuff and really have a go at you... I saw people insulted ... One of the girls experienced ... they hung a noose from the ceiling and said to her ‘Go on, you’re making such a big fuss about things, hang yourself right here and now in front of us all, you just do it’.

Similarly, Michael comments:

These people had their way with me. They systematically group laughed at me and made fun of me and made me out to be a strange and a weird person... During these meetings [the leader] would take her personal issues out with you and then she would let you fall down and hold you down until she was sufficiently satisfied that you had learned your lessons ... I have seen her beat people up. I have seen her hold people under black mats with other people leaning on them ... and it’s done under the guise of ‘John, you are not dealing with your stuff’.

Participants argue that a lot of the group’s activities and interactions were designed to enforce commitment and conformity. They note that obedience and conformity was encouraged or ensured through “bullying”, referring to the leader as “a physically violent bully” (Alice). They explain that “[The leader] sort of uses good old fashioned bullying techniques to get people to do what she wants, masquerading it as giving you insight” (Michael). Comments such as “I did as told because she told me I would die if I didn’t” (Julie) and “I didn’t want to get beaten up” (Alice) were common. In regards to the expectation and enforcement of obedience, Joe comments:

I was critical and asked questions and stuff initially and I was quickly disciplined as a result. Quickly brought into line by a torrent a physical abuse and threats. I was pushed around and held down, being restrained while people yelled at me for extended periods and being slapped in the face for an extended period by her. At a particular meeting I had to be pulled into line
because I was asking questions, she singled me out and grabbed me and started slapping me in the face and she kept going and going and going.

In addition, participants comment that a technique called ‘accessing’ was used to encourage compliance. This practice encouraged intense emotional expression through crying, screaming and hitting a mat. They explain that the expression or “purging” (Joe) of resistance or perceived negativity encouraged or motivated compliance. Julie explains:

When I didn’t listen and told her I didn’t want to move she’d say ‘go and access’. So I’d be like on this mat, hitting the mat, screaming ‘I don’t want to move, you can’t fucking tell me what to do’. And over one weekend I had gone from that to at the end of the weekend I said ‘I have decided I am going to move up’. I even shocked myself when I said it. It just came out and I thought ‘this accessing stuff clearly works, doesn’t it?’ They got what they wanted, they told me to access out the bad stuff to get to the good stuff, which is what they wanted. It definitely was my decision but I was definitely pushed into it. It’s not like I got asked once and it was left at that, it was all weekend I was hammered on until I changed my mind.

Also in regards to the enforcement of conformity, William describes an incident in which the leader used “bullying tactics” to “try and break” him:

It was common for [the leader] to try and upset us and humiliate us. For example, we had to do this play which I’d put lots of effort into and she said I was hopeless and terrible and the worst she’d ever seen and I was absolutely blown away by it. She said ‘can’t you see this? Can’t you see what’s going on? Where are your glasses? I said ‘In the car’. ‘Where is the car’ she said. The car was way down this hill and this is two o’clock in the morning. ‘Go down and get your glasses’. So she made me walk down this hill in the dark to get my glasses… So I got the glasses and came back and sat down and about two hours later I got out of there.

Similarly, Julie describes:

In terms of fundraising, our final goal of the group was to make ten thousand dollars and I think we came in just under nine, pretty bloody good effort I reckon ... We could make this money however we wanted, we did sausage sizzles, we sold cookbooks, we were always doing some shit, and we ended up getting cleaning jobs so that was the big money maker at the end, plus selling tickets for our play... I was keeping the money in my account and because I had worked in financial planning the other people in my group had asked me to do all the
banking. Then [the leader] starts going off ‘You’d give a drug addict the money?’ She told the whole group off for that. I thought ‘right, I have done this whole course for a year to prove to myself and everyone else that I am not a drug addict and right at the end she tore me down and put me down in front of the whole group saying that I am the drug addict. I never stole a cent of that money, I handed it all over to them … On another occasion we’re all sitting in a group together and she starts going on about how I’m a liar and how I twist things and about me being a drug addict … So now everyone starts turning on me, they are all going nuts, screaming ballistic.

NRMs as controlled cultural environments

While it seems clear that in these various groups leadership dictates how members should think, act, and feel and that conformity is enforced through a variety of commitment-enhancing and commitment-maintaining mechanisms, it remains unclear whether the enforcement of conformity should best be understood in terms of brainwashing or normal processes of socialisation. The notion that power differentials exist in groups with those more powerful determining the cultural expectations to which those less powerful conform is well established in SI thoughts (Altheide, 2000; Cahill, 1998; Coles, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Musolf, 1992; G. Stone & Faberman, 1970). From this perspective it is argued that culture or group life is dependent on mechanisms or strategies that achieve and maintain conformity to group or cultural expectations (Broad, 2002; Francis, 1997; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Mead, 1934; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, 1980).

Whether the practices and mechanisms described by the participants can best be understood in terms of well recognised mechanism that maintain culture or as deceptive techniques deliberately designed to cause harm and exploit continues to be debated in the literature (Coates, 2012). Many of the participants in this study commented that the incidences of ‘bullying’, group pressures, punishment of disobedience etc. that they recounted are not particularly unusual or unique to ‘cults’ but reflect human nature and group dynamics in general. As argued by Max:

What you are studying is not a religious cult, it is human nature … If someone allows themselves to be led, the leader can start to assert more and more power…. It’s not the case of leaders imposing their will, it is by mutual consent. Like a symbiotic relationship. It’s a mutual dependence. Without those willing compliant followers, the group could not exist. These are two things fuelling each other.
Similarly, Nicholas notes:

A lot of people don’t understand brainwashing, brainwashing to me is just the ability to change your perception and your ethics and your morality. It’s just peer pressure; that is all it is... It’s not unique to cults. Advertising is just brainwashing. It’s just getting you to choose what they want you to choose. Within that framework you still have your free will. You beat the hell out of your kid because you believe it is the right thing to do, or you cannot beat the hell out of your kids despite the fact that you believe it is the right thing to do. You still have that free will. I choose to discipline my children and I felt guilty about it but not to the point where I didn’t discipline him.

Many participants commented that while they believe their freedom was restricted in the group, this is not distinctly different from the restriction of freedom that commonly occurs in society in general. Gabrielle notes:

Your choices are limited in a cult; if you’re in a cult where you’re special and his word is dependent on your eternal salvation you can’t just leave easily. But I guess that’s also true to some extent if you’re a bloke and you have 4 kids and a mortgage.

In regards to the methods or techniques used to enforce conformity, a number of participants comment that they do not perceive the techniques used as deliberately manipulative as is suggested by the brainwashing thesis. Michelle comments “I don’t think the group is evil, I think they are very isolated from the real world, and they don’t realise that that is a problem ... Most of the elders are well intentioned but they do not have the training to realise that what they do is manipulative and damaging”. Similarly, Julie argues that coercion or pressure may not necessarily be negative, and can be helpful. She comments:

I look back now and I think I choose to be there and I choose to be there the whole time. I know there was coercion and pressure and that but I just saw that as tough love... They would all hammer me on my shit until I’d crack ... but then they were there for me. I see it like tough love, and I needed that sometimes... I knew it was a bit uncommon the things that we were doing but I liked that all the more ... It has helped me a lot.

The commitment maintaining and enhancing mechanism described can be best understood as on a continuum of social influence and it is obvious that the degree of social influence in a controlled environment such as NRM or other total or semi total institutions is more intense or extensive than more open or democratic environments. It is not denied that the degree to which conformity and
obedience is expected and enforced in the groups described can be seen as unusually severe, but it can be seen as on one end of a continuum which may include more severe forms of military and religious training as well as other forms of socialisation, rather than being a qualitatively different phenomenon, such as ‘brainwashing’. A number of scholars have started to discuss brainwashing in reference to the wider literature on social influence (Cialdini, 1993, 2001; Cialdini, Wosinska, Barrett, Butner, & Gornik-Durose, 1999; Wosinska, Cialdini, Barrett, & Reykowski, 2000). These scholars point out that there is considerable confusion over and misuse of the term brainwashing, and argue that the term brainwashing does not suggest an elimination of free choice as is sometime argued (Hassan, 1988, 2000) but should be understood as on a continuum of social influence (Almendros et al., 2011; Almendros, Nishida, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Carrobles, & Ordoñez, 2007; Langone, 2005; Zablocki, 1997, 2001; Zimbardo, 2002). From this perspective it is argued that the practices of social influence in NRM are not distinctly different from the practices of social influence in other organisations or cultures, even though social influence in NRMs and other semi total or total institutions may occur to a greater extreme. Even though ‘brainwashing’ accusations are seldom used against more conventional organisations that use techniques of persuasion such as monasteries or the army (Wright, 1991) excessive use of social influence is not specific to NRMs. The way in which conformity is ensured in the army seems comparable to the practices described by the participants (Dornbusch, 1955). Similarly, a number of researchers have argued that certain so called ‘therapeutic practices’ are akin to what is described as ‘brainwashing’ (Dubrow-Marshall & Dubrow-Marshall, 2007, 2008; Galanter, 1990; Samways, 2006). Some of the techniques that are referred to as ‘brainwashing’ in the anti-cult literature are well recognised and accepted practices that in different setting are described as therapeutic. For example, the practice of ‘bottle breaking’ described by Thomas appears similar to therapeutic practices for working with recovering alcoholics. Denzin (1987b) argues that before rebuilding of what is perceived as a ‘healthy self’, dismantling or the destruction of the unhealthy or alcoholic self must occur.

Conclusion

In line with previous descriptions and definitions of ‘cults’ or ‘world rejecting’ NRMs the groups in the current study are understood as controlled cultural environments that exhibit strong processes of social influence through which conformity and commitment is ensured and maintained. In line with a definition provided by Jacobs (1989) a ‘cult’ is a world of “total meaning” where its subjective reality is defined by the group and its leaders. As described by Elshtain (2008) “the cult offers a total meaning system with no grounds for disputation or interpretation” (p. 18). Similarly, Boeri & Pressley (2010) suggest that “in a cult environment, members form a sense of self based on how they decode
the meanings encoded by their leaders … cult members relinquish to cult leaders most choices that people living in democratic societies consider fundamental human rights, choices such as what to eat, what to wear, where to live, employment options, whether to marry, whom to marry, whether to have children and how many… original personal thoughts contrary to the cult’s meaning system are forbidden, and the expression of such private thoughts cannot become public” (p. 182-83). While the findings indicate that these groups can be understood as controlled cultural environments that expect and enforce conformity, it is not evident that these groups deliberately exploit and manipulate their members, and inevitably cause harm as is suggested by many of the definitions of ‘cults’ (for example Langone, 1993a, p. 5). Whether these ‘dependency inducing practices’ have been created ‘deliberately’ to enhance control over members or are the result of predictable group dynamics and processes of social influence is not within the scope of this work. It seems reasonable to suggest that the extent to which the commitment maintaining practices are deliberately manipulative and potentially harmful may vary from group to group (Bohm & Alison, 2001; B. Elliot, 2008).

The groups in this study are understood as identity-based communities whose cohesiveness is based on a collective identity, in-group/out-group boundaries, shared values and symbols. While symbolic interactionists commonly argue that a group identity is both personally as well as socially constructed, and can best be understood as an interplay between the identity resources provided by the group and the personal contributions of the self (Broad, 2002; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Kladermans & Oegema, 1987; Passy & Giugni, 2000; Snow & McAdam, 2000), it is argued here that the extent to which the NRM identity can be personally constructed is limited.

The current Chapter offered a description of the groups; the next Chapter describes the study’s participants. In particular, the next Chapter outlines the significantly different ways in which the participants describe their selves and identities.
Chapter 5

The diversity of selves: Variations in the significance of individuality and personal autonomy versus conformity and social connectedness for self-construction

The current Chapter develops a conceptualisation of the different ways in which the participants in this study construct their sense of self and identity. Central to this thesis is the idea that the experience and impact of NRM membership varies significantly between participants, and that this can be explained, at least in part, by the different ways in which individuals construct their sense of self. It is argued throughout this thesis that variations in the extent to which individuals place importance on the ‘personal’ or individuality versus the ‘social’ or conformity in self-construction impacts on the reasons for joining, the way in which affiliation and disaffiliation is negotiated, and the participants’ experiences post exit.

Over the last half century, significant scholarship has been devoted to the historical, cultural and social contingency of selves, and there is a general agreement in the literature that different social and cultural conditions give rise to variations in the selves that inhabit the social scene (Bauman, 1996, 2000; Callero, 2003b; Coles, 2008; Dunn, 1997; Gergen, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Lasch, 1984; Lifton, 1993; Riesman, et al., 1950; Weigert & Gecas, 2005). Even though there is a general consensus within the sociological literature that selves adjust to the demands of social life, and that variations in social conditions give rise to individual differences in self-construction, this is not to say that all individuals within a social context are influenced uniformly by their social and cultural milieus (Kroger, 1989, 2005; Schachter, 2005). While traditionally, when societal norms and expectations were more stable, there may have been one prominent ‘character type’, identity scholars argue that contemporary Western conditions have given rise to an increased diversity of selves. As the result of the social changes associated with ‘detraditionalisation’ (Giddens, 1991) and the ‘new individualism’ (Elliott & Charles, 2006) individuals now experience greater freedom in the way in which to construct selves than ever before, and the stable selves of the past have given way to an increased diversity of selves (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991; Kroger, 1989; Shanahan, 2000).

In ‘The Lonely Crowd’ Riesman and colleagues (1950) describe the shift that occurred in the 1950s from what they call ‘traditional selves’ towards an increased diversity in the way in which individuals construct their sense of self. In the 1950s these scholars argued that as the result of rapid social change the ‘traditional’ character type had given way to an increase in selves that are highly dependent on
their peer group and easily influenced, called the ‘other-directed’ character type, as well as an increase in selves that became anchored in an internal ‘rigid’ guide of values and beliefs, called the inner-directed character type. Neither type is considered ‘well-adjusted’ and capable of negotiating a reflexive balance between individuality and social connectedness; rather these selves are described as merely ‘surviving’ by either rigidly following an internal guide or blindly conforming to ever-changing cultural demands (McClay, 2009; Riesman, et al., 1950). While these observations are based on patterns in the 1950s, they are argued to continue to hold, at least throughout the second part of the 20th century (McClay, 2009; Zinkhan & Shermohamad, 1986).

This idea that selves are struggling to negotiate the demands of rapid social change is also developed in Lasch’s (1984) ‘The Minimal Self: Psychic Survival in Troubled Times’. In the tradition of Riesman but following the social changes of the 1960s, Lasch argued that cultural instability has led to the development of selves that have become reduced to what he called ‘minimal’ or ‘narcissistic’ selves. Minimal selves are conceptualised as two extremes on the same continuum, and this term is used in reference to both selves that have become reduced to a ‘defensive core’ and are emotionally and socially disconnected from others as well as selves that have foregone personal uniqueness and blindly conform to the expectations of others. Like the other- and inner-directed selves, minimal selves are considered incapable of managing contemporary tensions between personal uniqueness and social connectedness; rather, they are conceptualised as selves that, in order to cope with rapid social change, have become limited or ‘minimised’ to either the personal or the social. Lasch locates evidence for his minimal self in the radical political movements of the 1960s, as well as in the cults and spiritual movements of the 1970s.

Along similar lines, Lifton (1993) also observes that many individuals are struggling to adjust to the complex demands of contemporary society, and while some people may demonstrate greater flexibility and adjustability than before, he argues that many individuals have become increasingly ‘rigid’. Like Riesman and Lasch, he describes the contemporary self on a continuum with on the one hand what he labels ‘protean selves’ and on the other hand ‘fundamentalist selves’. Lifton (1993) links the continued existence, and even growth, of fundamentalism and fundamentalist groups in contemporary society to cultural instability and individual’s difficulties in developing the types of selves necessary to successfully negotiate the complex demands of contemporary life. Similarly, contemporary modernists such as Giddens (2003) and Bauman (1998, 2000) also describe the rise in fundamentalism as a response to postmodernity.

This observation that individuals construct their selves in different ways, and draw to varying degrees on the realm of the social and the personal for self-construction, is in line with SI conceptualisations of the self. From an SI perspective the idea that individuals construct their selves in different ways is
well established, and from this perspective individuals are understood as to varying degrees informed by the personal and the social, the self and others (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; R. H. Turner, 1976; Zurcher, 1972). Zurcher (1977) observed that college students construct their selves in different ways; based on his observations in ‘The Mutable Self’ he argues that some individuals are more highly dependent in their sense of self on social or institutional expectations while others are more individualistic and autonomous (Zurcher, 1972, 1973, 1977). Similarly, in ‘The Real Self: From Institution to Impulse’ Turner (1976) describes variations in the conditions under which different individuals experience a sense of ‘realness’. He found that while some people feel more ‘real’ under conditions that allow for the expression of personal emotions, impulsivity and individual uniqueness, others feel more ‘real’ under conditions that demand conformity to institutional guidelines or a sense of duty. Turner’s description of the diversity of selves positions some individuals as more socialised than others; he argues that some individuals derive their sense of self from their internal experiences and emotions, while others are more dependent on social direction and guidance. While this is conceptualised as on a continuum, and individuals are understood as informed by both internal as well as external forces, Turner and those building on his work have observed a historical shift away from selves highly influenced by others to a greater emphasis on impulses, emotions and self-feelings in self-construction (Snow & Phillips, 1982; R. H. Turner, 1976; R. H. Turner & Gordon, 1981).

There is now a significant body of SI literature that highlights the diversity of selves and describes variations in the conditions under which individuals experience a sense of ‘realness’ or perceived ‘authenticity’ (Erickson, 1995, 2005; Erickson & Wharton, 1997; Franzese, 2007; Gecas, 1994; R. H. Turner & Gordon, 1981; Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Weigert, 2009). While this is conceptualised as on a continuum, this literature shows that while some individuals are more likely to experience a sense of ‘authenticity’ under conditions that demand conformity and social connectedness, others are more likely to experience ‘authenticity’ under conditions that encourage autonomy and personal uniqueness (Carver & Michael, 1985; Schlenker & Weigold, 1990; R. H. Turner & Gordon, 1981; Vryan, et al., 2003). Even though from an SI perspective, ‘healthy’ selves are conceptualised as informed by both the personal and the social, and capable of maintaining a reflexive balance between the two, it is recognised that some individuals minimise this dialogue by identifying closely or entirely with some specific other or social group, or conversely by paying a lot of attention to their internal thoughts and feelings (R. H. Turner, 1976; Zurcher, 1972).

The idea that the individual is informed to a greater or lesser degree by the personal or the social is pertinent to the current study. As will be developed throughout this thesis, the findings of the current study suggest that the ‘selves’ of the former members in this study vary in the extent to which they could be described as social versus personal. Whilst in accordance with SI understandings of the self all participants are conceptualised as to some extent influenced by both the social and the personal,
the participants in this study describe selves that appear to be best positioned towards either end of the continuum. It is argued in this chapter that the participants in the current study managed and experienced their selves in considerably different ways. Analysis of the life histories of the 23 participants in this study identified two distinctly different main narratives that made sense of NRM membership in significantly different ways. During the interviews 12 participants described selves that appear highly dependent on others for their sense of self, and these participants are conceptualised as positioned towards the social end of the ‘self-construction’ continuum and have been labelled ‘social selves’. Conversely, 11 participants described themselves as highly autonomous and independent from others, to the extent that they struggled to form social relationships. These participants are conceptualised as towards the personal end of the ‘self-construction’ continuum and have been labelled ‘protected selves’.

It is argued here that variations in these narratives can be understood as pertaining to differences in the extent to which participants have anchored or constructed their sense of self in the personal versus the social. For the purpose of analysis the two broad groups or narratives identified will be referred to as “social selves” and “protected selves”. This is a heuristic device to represent those who are grouped at either end of the continuum. Those participants labelled the social selves in this study describe selves that appear highly conformist or socially dependent. Albeit to varying degrees, their narratives describe selves that are highly informed by others, and NRM membership is described in the context of needing or wanting stable others for the construction of a stable sense of self. Towards the other end of this continuum, protected selves are understood as unusually independent or disconnected from others. Their narratives position NRM as related to their difficulties connecting or relating to others, and a desire to become more sociable. The differences in the selves of the participants are conceptualised as related to variations in the extent to which the participants’ selves are constructed in the realm of the ‘self’ versus ‘others’, and this will be demonstrated by two case studies.

In accordance with SI understandings of the self, while the different narratives may be partly informed by different discourses, they are also understood as anchored in different experiences (Gubrium & Holstein, 1994, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). To this extent, the differences in the narratives told by interviewees are not purely discursive but also reflect differences in their personal and social experiences and contexts. The difference between these two narratives will be demonstrated by the case of Margaret and Michael, which will be further developed throughout this thesis.
Social Selves: The Case of Margaret

At the time of the interview Margaret was in her late 50s, and over the course of nearly 30 years she had joined and left numerous NRMs or what she calls ‘cults’. The first three groups Margaret became a member of in her 20s she describes as Eastern meditation, and these were followed by involvement with a variety of “extremist churches” and “psychotherapy groups gone wrong”.

Consistent with the self-descriptions of other social selves, Margaret describes herself as easily influenced by others, and “addicted to being accepted as part of a group”. She describes her involvement in various NRMs as motivated by her high need for social approval, guidance and direction. When asked about the circumstances that led to her joining a NRM, Margaret makes extensive comparison between the high levels of guidance and control in a ‘cult’ and the high levels of control in her family of origin. She explains:

*The major reason I got trapped in a cult was my father... The main guru I was with was so like [my father]... They were both dominant, authoritarian and controlling ... Joining a group like that is all about wanting attention and love, like little kids waiting for daddy... We were sitting in a row every day with all these devotees waiting for God to look at us and give us some attention. Like little kids needing direction.*

Margaret explains that after leaving the “certainty and structure” of her family environment, she felt directionless and struggled with depression. She explains that she did not know who she was or what she wanted from life, and how joining a group resolved her sense of aimlessness. She notes:

*So I went to this yoga ashram and I was absolutely transported that night. I had never felt like that in my whole life; it was better than any drug experience I have ever had. I went away and thought ‘this is what I’ve been looking for’... My whole life changed that night... I now had direction.*

Like other social selves Margaret explains that she conformed easily to the group’s expectations, and she quickly changed her lifestyle to be accepted by “this new family of likeminded others”. When she became disillusioned after some time, she joined a different group and again ‘changed’ her sense of self and conformed to the new expectations. Margaret explains how at various stages she believed “three different gurus were God”; each time she met a different God’ she “changed [herself] entirely to become part of the group”. Margaret describes herself as motivated by the sense of purpose and
direction she derived from being a member of a group, irrespective of the groups’ teaching. She explains:

First I was into Eastern meditation, then I became a born again Christian and now I just went to this group that has this guy who claims to be Jesus... it’s about the teachings, it’s about being part of a group and being given a Truth, regardless of what that ‘Truth’ is.

While Margaret argues that gradually, over the years, she has become less dependent on others in her sense of self, she explains that she continues to desire acceptance and struggles with an ongoing yearning to be part of a group. She explains that even though her experience with various groups has given her a greater understanding of the dangers of blind conformity, and she now appreciates the significance of developing and maintaining a sense of individuality and personal autonomy, she continues to struggle with the tensions between her tendency to conform and become part a group and her desire to maintain a sense of individuality. She notes:

Even last month I got caught up in this group. I went up to see some friends and they are talking about this Jesus ... and they told me about how this guy does emotional healing and I though yeah that’s interesting, I will go and check it out... First time he spoke, I though this is really cool, I agree with what he says. I decided it was definitely not a cult, it was not dangerous ... I went up again, and my former doctor was there so it had to be legitimate, if there’s a Doctor there... I was getting all excited, I was going to move closer and become part of this thing ... But then I caught myself and realised I was making the same mistake I had already made many times. You would think that after all these years I would know better, but I’m an addict and I just wanted to be part of something.

Protected Selves: The Case of Michael

Unlike Margaret who appears highly socially connected and dependent, the protected selves in this study describe selves that are autonomous and socially isolated, albeit to varying degrees. Like other protected selves, during the interview Michael described himself as socially disconnected and autonomous. At the time of the interview Michael was 31 years old, and he had left a personal development group ten years ago after two years of membership.

When asked about the circumstances that led to his involvement in a NRM, Michael, like other protected selves, described a childhood of loneliness and isolation, and difficulties establishing and, in
particular, maintaining social relationships. Michael describes membership as motivated by a desire to change a history of social isolation and become “part of a group”. Michael explains that he had hoped this group would help him ‘fix himself’ and overcome his ‘troubled past’. He explains that he had hoped to change his life’s pattern of weak relationships that had commenced in childhood when his mother left him and his siblings in the care of his father. He explains:

*Mum left when I was five... [My father] didn’t really know how to raise kids so we kind of fended for ourselves if you throw a pack of kids together ... My family was a funny family, it’s not a family per se, my family is like herding cats; we’re all individuals. We grew up that way because we never had a central family. There was never any discipline and there was never any order... Dad was not a father, and he always used to put me down. And mum is still 16... She’s crazy, and I’ve had to accept that.*

He explains that he thought a group like that would help him become ‘more normal’, and help him develop relationships. He thought NRM membership would help overcome his social isolation and drug use. He explains:

*I wasn’t really getting into life; I didn’t get a good start of life... I was living on the edge of life. I was living in this house, cut off from the world. I had given up music because I was doing drugs at the time and I was sick of the whole thing. I was working on and off... wondering around the country side working in cattle stations. I was living from week to week and the power was always cut off, it was a very day to day way to live. I was just surviving... I used to run out of food and would have to steal food out of the back of fruit shops because I didn’t have any money; I was really on the edge. I was young and aimless... I thought joining this group would help.*

Unlike the social selves who describe membership as primarily motivated by a desire or need for belonging or direction, Michael, like other protected selves, describes membership as motivated by a hope of dispelling a history of loneliness and alienation. Michael explains:

*I thought [group involvement] was going to solve my problems... I thought that I was going to be able to evolve out of my troubled childhood, my troubled experiences and finding a way of being a better me. So I had this idea that I was going to be able to finally amalgamate all these terrible things that I was carrying inside of me or sense of unhappiness or disappointment or all these things. So I ended up in this cult, looking for the answers.*
Despite his best attempts, Michael struggled to conform, and he observes that he never felt part of the group. He explains that while many of the fellow members appeared to conform easily and reinvented themselves in light of the group’s norms and expectations, he found membership and his ongoing efforts to participate exhausting and stressful, until, after two years, he “gave up and left” and returned to his previous sense of isolation. Michael reports that since leaving the group ten years prior to the interview his life has not changed significantly. He describes feeling “disconnected from life” and “struggling with relationships”. He explains:

Now ... to be honest I am in not such a good place... What do you do when all the food on offer is bland? [...] I am still pessimistic. ... I go through the motions but ... I’ve lost a lot of confidence in my capabilities as a person and my views have isolated me from the rest of the world or maybe I just haven’t met my kind... I had never had many friends and I will go on to say that most people make pretty crappy friends.... I am so honest because I want to connect, I don’t want any bullshit between me and someone, if they are open, let’s talk. But it’s rare to find that, if you talk to someone honestly you scare them off... I still haven’t managed to work out how to connect I guess... I feel like life is trying to squeeze me sometimes... I spend a lot of time alone, meditating on my feelings and thoughts.

Conclusion

As introduced by the case of Margaret, the social narrative depicts selves that appear high in conformity or social connectedness and are conceptualised as primarily constructed in the realm of the social. Conversely, as introduced by Michael, the protected narrative depicts selves that appear high in individuality and personal autonomy and are conceptualised as primarily constructed in the realm of the personal. While from an SI perspective selves are understood as constructed in both the realm of the personal and the social, it is recognised that the extent to which individuals are capable of negotiating a reflexive balance between social connectedness and personal uniqueness varies. While an ability to reflexively balance these forces is considered optimal, not everyone is capable of this and some individuals construct selves that are ‘overly’ dependent on the social while others construct selves that are ‘overly’ dependent on the personal.

Consistent with this literature, as introduced by the case of Margaret and Michael, it is argued throughout this thesis that the issue of the balance between the personal and the social, between individuality and conformity, is particularly relevant for understanding the experiences of the former members in this study. While this is conceptualised as on a continuum, and all the participants are
understood as informed by both self and others, the social selves in this study are positioned towards one end of this continuum and the protected selves towards the other, albeit to varying degrees. Neither the social nor the protected selves are considered skilled at reflexively negotiating contemporary tensions between individuality and social connectedness, and it is suggested that difficulties negotiating these tensions is significant to understanding NRM membership.

While the participants have been conceptualised as either more ‘social’ or more ‘protected’ in the way in which they construct their selves, later in this thesis a cohort within the broad group of the protected selves called the ‘managed selves’ will be introduced. This cohort of protected selves describe an intriguing shift away from the ‘protected’ or overly autonomous end of the self-construction continuum towards the centre of this continuum, and throughout membership become more social and better balanced between autonomy and social connectedness. These participants distinguish themselves from the protected selves in the way they actively managed their selves within the group and on exit. For this reason they will be introduced in more detail in Chapters 9 and discussed in Chapters 12 and 13.

This suggestion that variations in the way in which membership is experienced and narrated can be attributed to individual differences in regards to the construction of self contributes to the literature that explains individual differences in NRM membership in terms of gender variations (Atsuko, 2003; Boeri, 2002, 2005; Howell, 1998; Jacobs, 1984, 1987; Raine, 2006, 2007) and differences in the types of groups people join (Ellwood & Partin, 1988; Hassan, 2000; Singer, 2003; Wallis, [1984] 2007). While it is recognised that gender is important to understanding individual differences, gender is significant in as far as it influences the way in which the participants experience and describe their sense of self. Consistent with the literature that suggests that women are generally more social or relational and men more autonomous (Coles, 2008; Denzin, 1987b; Hulbert, 1993; Josselson, 1996) more women were identified as social selves (eight out of a total of 12) and slightly more men were identified as protected selves (six out of a total of 11) (see Appendix 1). While it is recognised that the type of NRM people join may influence their narratives, the analysis identified variations in the participants’ narratives as more strongly connected to the way in which they described their sense of self than to the groups in question. While the social selves and the protected selves are former members of the same groups, they report different experiences. To this extent, it is suggested that the extent to which participants experience their sense of self as informed by the social versus the personal contributes to understanding individual variations in NRM membership; it elucidates the working of gender differences and appears to be more significant than the ‘type of group’. A number of scholars have observed that the struggle between the self and others that is at the heart of SI understandings of the self is often missing from sociological discussion on the ‘making of the self’
(Coles, 2008, p. 21; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) and the current thesis is intended as a contribution to this literature.

While the current Chapter introduced a conceptualisation of the different ways in which the participants in this study are understood as constructing their selves, the following chapter outlines the different ways in which these participants describe their experiences of childhood.
Chapter 6

“My childhood did not prepare me for adult life”: Difficulties in negotiating tensions between individuality and community as a predisposition to New Religious Movement membership

While the previous chapter developed a conceptualisation of the different ways in which the participants construct their sense of self, in the current Chapter it is posited that the different ways in which individuals construct their sense of self may be informed by childhood environments and experiences. In this Chapter it is suggested that the childhood experiences of the participants in this study did not adequately prepare them for the complexity of contemporary social life, and it is argued that this is significant to understanding NRM affiliation. Membership is conceptualised as related to childhood experiences that were excessive controlling or neglectful.

A major area of disagreement in the NRM literature concerns the importance of pre-involvement factors to understanding group involvement. Some scholars argue that certain factors predispose an individual to joining a NRM; others portray the notion of vulnerability factors as a myth, and argue that anyone could become ‘entrapped’ in such groups (Hassan, 1988, 2000; West & Martin, 1994). The notion that pre-involvement experiences are important to understanding group involvement is supported by a rich body of research that has identified a wide range of vulnerability factors or predispositions in current members. While these are wide ranging, they primarily pertain to the experience of loss or stress, in particular as caused by an identity crisis in the period immediately preceding membership (D. F. Gordon, 1974; McIlwain, 1990, 1994; Ullman, 1982), and a tendency towards conformity, dependencies or a simplistic ‘black and white’ worldview (R. L. Adams & Fox, 1972; Balch & Taylor, 1977; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Galanter, 1980; S. Levine, 2007; Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Simmonds, 1977). In addition, scholars have identified weak or insecure social and family relations and traumatic childhood experiences as a predisposition to NRM membership (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Murken & Namini, 2007; Ullman, 1982, 1989; Wright & Piper, 1986). In opposition to this is the view predominantly presented in popular literature on cults that pre-involvement factors are unimportant to understanding membership and that anyone could be ‘recruited’ and fall victim to brainwashing. This view is predominantly put forward by health professionals who work with former members (Goldberg, 2009; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010; Singer, 2003; West, 1993; West & Martin, 1994) and is highly influential in the treatment of former members of such groups.
The vast majority of the literature pertaining to adjustment to life after involvement dismisses pre-involvement factors as irrelevant, and questions the reliability of studies with current members by highlighting the retrospective nature of the study of pre-involvement experiences. Perceived as ‘brainwashed’, current members are portrayed as unreliable research participants encouraged to lie by the group and its leader and recount their childhood in negative terms (Langone, et al., 1998; Ungerleider & Wellisch, 1979). A number of scholars have challenged this argument by highlighting that studies have found individual differences in terms of childhood attachments between those current members who ‘check out the group and leave again’ and those who remain committed for an extended period of time, even at first point of contact (Barker, 1981, 1984; Wright & Piper, 1986). Nonetheless, the body of literature developed by health professionals by and large discounts individual differences in terms of life circumstances prior to membership, and presents former members as a homogenous group with similar experiences and needs in terms of involvement and recovery (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003). Rather than making sense of membership in light of pre-involvement histories as is sometimes recommended (Coates, 2011; Healy, 2011) the majority of this literature outlines treatment models that are focussed on ‘undoing’ the impacts of membership, in particular the impact of having been brainwashed, and assisting the former member in making sense of their current difficulties in light of their experience of membership (Dowhower, 1993; Halperin, 1993; Langone, 1993a; Rohmann, 2006; Walsh & Bor, 1996; Ward, 2000, 2002). This notion that pre-involvement experiences are unimportant, and that former members are a somewhat homogenous group with similar needs and experiences is challenged by the current findings.

As outlined previously, analysis of the life histories of the 23 former members in this study identified two main narratives that made sense of NRM membership in significantly different ways. The life history narratives of a group of participants labelled the ‘social selves’ were easily distinguished from the narratives of those labelled ‘the protected selves’. While the different narratives in regards to the construction of self initially became evident in the ways in which NRM membership was described, further analysis found that these differences extend to pre-involvement experiences. A comparison of the narratives suggests that the different ways that membership was negotiated by these different ‘selves’ may have its origin in pre-involvement experiences, in particular childhood experiences.

Even though it is sometimes suggested that pre-involvement factors are unimportant to understanding the life trajectories of former and current members of NRMs, the findings of this study suggest otherwise. In addition to making comments that directly link membership to pre-involvement experiences, participants describe themselves as previously troubled and struggling to negotiate the complexities of mainstream society.
Comments that link NRM membership to adverse childhood experiences include: “I do believe that the first 5 years are the foundation of my life ... that’s the foundation, the building blocks or an imprint... My imprint wasn’t great” (Margaret), “Experiences in childhood are linked to involvement... What happened in my childhood has contributing factors to me joining the cult” (Michael), “From my experiences all cult members have had a traumatic event happen within their lives [prior to joining]” (Lindsay) and “I know the cult experts don’t think this, but I think there has to be some existing emotional damage there ... Why else would you join?” (Margaret).

In addition to these comments that imply a direct relationship between childhood experiences and NRM membership, the vast majority of participants comment that they perceive their childhoods as not having adequately prepared them for adult life. When reflecting on their selves prior to group involvement, the majority of participants describe themselves as either previously lacking in a sense of connectedness and belonging or lacking in a sense of individuality. Some of the participants in this study describe themselves as previously highly conformist and dependent on others, while others describe themselves as previously overly independent and disconnected from others. Those participants labelled the social selves in this study describe histories of high dependency on others and depict childhood environments that were very controlling or authoritarian. Those participants labelled the protected selves in this study describe histories of struggling with social anxiety and difficulties in forming social connections and portray childhood environments that were neglectful or even abusive.

It is argued here that variations in the way in which the participants in this study construct their sense of self may relate to differences in the resources for self-construction available during the participants’ childhoods, at least as they recall them. The participants’ narratives suggest significant differences in the family cultures of the social selves versus protected selves. By and large, the narratives of the social selves depict childhood environments that are high in control and demand a high level of ‘other-directedness’, and the narratives of the protected selves describe environments that appear neglectful or even abusive and demand independence. While there is considerable variation in the extent to which those participants constructed as social selves describe their childhoods as controlling and those participants constructed as protected selves describe their childhoods as abusive or neglectful, none of these participants describe supportive childhood conditions that offered both a sense of individuality as well as a sense of community or ‘family’.

The current Chapter explores the varying ways in which pre-involvement selves and family environments are described by the participants in this study.
“I had no sense of self”: The narrative of the Social Selves

The 12 social selves as constructed for the purposes of analysis in this study describe authoritarian or controlled childhood environments and a tendency towards conformity or dependency on others, sometimes called ‘other-directedness’ (Hochschild, 1983; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Riesman, et al., 1950). While some describe their childhood environments as ‘authoritarian’, others use terms such as ‘restrictive’ and ‘controlling’ and describe close-knit social communities (Gabrielle, Lauren, Alice, Max, Richard), or the limitations of growing up in a Christian home (Hillary, Emily, Max, Nicholas, Richard). Terms most commonly used by these selves to describe their childhood environments include “highly involved parents” (Emily), “authoritarian” (Trudy, Thomas, Margaret, Gabrielle) “controlling” (Emily, Nicholas, Lauren, Max, Margaret, Gabrielle) “restrictive” (Lauren, Alice, Hillary), and “cold” (Margaret, Richard, Catheline, Max).

Some examples of pre-involvement circumstances described by these participants include:

*I think I just didn’t have any sense of self at all; I’d been controlled fairly continuously all my life. My mum was a very submitted wife and my father was very strong and dominant and took charge and took control of things... I was always cared for ... and I didn’t have to think about things because [my father] knew better...Anything I did was dismissed. So you are trained that you’re not very important, that you don’t have the ability to sort through information in life. When I used to present a different opinion to my father he would get quite angry and silence me like ‘listen, I know how things are, don’t tell me how things are, let me tell you how things are’. I think that I really believed that I was that person, and I believed that I didn’t really have much value, or confidence, or anything to offer anyone* (Trudy).

*My father had a very strong born again experience when I was about eight years old. He went to an evangelist and he changed over a period of three days, he became a completely different human being, he stopped drinking, smoking, partying and he turned into a Christian zealot, within three days. He was very extreme. That had a large impact on my life. Around that time I had also made the decision to be a Christian, largely because of the change that I saw in my father, which at that age I viewed as positive. And it was positive in a number of ways; he used to get very drunk and aggressive and would want to punch people and stuff. He just totally changed. We used to sit, when I was little, and have long talks about God and angels and all of these things, it gave me a closeness to my father as well ... I had quite a strong Christian faith... My father became such a righteous man; I never caught him out on any, what could be construed as sinful behaviour ever again. He never slipped up. He never got*
drunk again. He never chased other women again. He was an exemplary man from everything I could see. He was very dogmatic in his approach... I was never like that, even though I tried. I felt if I wasn’t like him, I probably wasn’t measuring up. That could have been part of why I joined a cult; the forces that mould us(Thomas).

I grew up in a family that was quite close as a family. My younger brother had leukemia when he was younger so there was a real pulling together of the family and a real bond that happened because of that... It was a very stable environment to grow up in... We went to church growing up and I suppose we leaned on our faith quite a lot, especially when my brother was sick. It was something that was always very important to me and something that I knew would always be with me throughout my life, I never questioned it too much ... But we were controlled in the sense that we didn’t just take off and do what we wanted to; we always had to get permission and it had to be known where we were ... And I didn’t really develop a sense of who I was separate from my family. I needed their approval, and when it was time for me to move out and grow up, I found that approval in joining a cult(Emily).

As demonstrated by these quotes, in their description of their pre-involvement circumstances the social selves in this study consistently link their controlled childhood environments with their previous tendency towards other-directedness or other-dependency and conformity. In addition to a dependency on others, the social selves describe previously struggling with a lack of individuality or personal identity. Comments such as “Pre-cult I was told that I was a different person to what I am... Being forced to focus on others, I never developed me. I was told what to think or belief, so I never had to work it out for myself” (Trudy), “I never valued me... That’s why I was willing to give all of myself so readily... I never developed a sense of what I taught or believed about things” (Catheline) and “I was not valued as an individual and being an individual was unimportant” (Gabrielle) were common.

In addition to a limited sense of their personal thoughts and beliefs, a number of social selves also report previously having little understanding or awareness of personal emotions. A number of these participants note that to cope with the restrictive conditions of their childhood they learned to repress their feelings, and became disconnected from their emotions (Thomas, Catheline, Trudy, Margaret, Gabrielle). For example, being socialised in an environment where emotions were not considered appropriate, Margaret explains that she grew up repressing her emotions, failing to understand emotions as a warning sign. She describes a history of feeling out of touch with her emotions, interpreting feelings in accordance with her father’s perception of emotions as “evil spirits or the devil”. She perceives her previously limited emotional awareness as having predisposed her to NRM membership. She notes: “Someone who is really in touch with their feelings will not go to [a guru].
because feelings are warning signs, they are your friends, they would guide you and say, this isn’t right, get out; they wouldn’t say ‘what’s wrong with you, this is your karma’; they would say ‘this is not right’. I didn’t have a warning system to guide me”. These participants describe their lack of individuality in the context of personal beliefs, thoughts as well as emotions.

Overall, the narratives of the social selves suggest that having grown up in social environments that demand obedience and restrict the development of individuality they were inadequately prepared for the demands of contemporary social life. Further demonstrated by comments such as “I was easily swayed by others” (Catheline), “I was overly innocent” (Thomas, Trudy, Alice), “I was quick to believe anything” (Thomas, Nicholas, Alice) and “I was not at all self-aware” (Nicholas, Margaret, Richard) they all observe that upon leaving the safety of their childhood environments they left lost and uncertain, and were vulnerable to NRM membership. Albeit to varying degrees, they all observe that their dependency on others and limited sense of individuality or personal identity predisposed them to membership. They note:

I didn’t know how to predict people’s behaviour, I didn’t know how to detect what was genuine and what wasn’t. I grew up being vulnerable; I was easily tricked when I was younger. Even meeting the group I didn’t have discernment there, when you grow up controlled you’re not allowed to exercise discernment and I think that was dangerous in me being too gullible, too trusting; believing what people said. I was an accident waiting to happen(Trudy).

When I was young I didn’t have the ability to question things as well as I do now. I wasn’t very assertive, even when I had a question, I didn’t feel like I had the power or right to ask the question. Other kids that age just do. I didn’t have a great level of confidence… Maybe other people are taught or have had experiences already where they have learned not to be taken on a ride. I hadn’t had that. I needed to be taken on a ride to learn (Catheline).

This observation that a tendency to be guided by others in the experience and expression of emotions and beliefs may have its roots in childhood experiences is consistent with SI notions of the self. From an SI perspective, it is suggested that in authoritarian childhood contexts individuals learn to internalise expected behaviours rather than developing a more complex understanding of themselves as both individual as well as social (Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). It is argued that a ‘reflexive self’ that is capable of negotiating complex social demands including tensions between both a need for individuality as well as social connectedness develops through a reflexive process of interaction between the ‘self’ and multiple others (Coles, 2008; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Mead, 1934; Thoits, 1983). The development of a sense of individuality is considered dependent on
experience and social interaction with multiple and at times contrasting others (Athens, 1994; Fontana & McGinnis, 2005; Giddens, 1991; Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Mead, 1934). A process of reflexivity, which refers to the self’s ability to reflect on- and consider both the perspective of others as well as the ‘self’, is considered fundamental to the development of selves that are informed, but not determined or dictated, by the social (Giddens, 1991; Hochschild, 1983; Holmes, 2010). Even though stability and consistency in terms of social feedback is considered important for the development of stable selves, with young children only considered capable of considering or internalising the perspective of a few ‘significant others’, as children mature they become capable of considering multiple perspectives and expectations, and need to be exposed to greater diversity (Athens, 1997; Coles, 2008; Hitlin, 2003; Mead, 1934). Exposure to diversity and manageable dissonances between ‘the self’ and multiple others is recognised as important for the development of a reflexive self that can tolerate the levels of ambiguity and uncertainty common in today’s society (Coles, 2008; Thoits, 1983). It is argued that exposure to multiple and at times contradictory others instigates a process of reflexivity and the development of a personal self (Hitlin, 2003; Zurcher, 1972, 1977), self-identity (Giddens, 1991) or a sense of individuality (Fontana & McGinnis, 2005) from which relationships with multiple and diverse others can be negotiated. To this extent, the current findings suggest that, having been raised in environments that were rich in absolutes the social selves were not exposed to sufficient diversity for the reflexive development of a personal self from which complex social environments can be negotiated.

The social selves in this study are conceptualised as having selves that are highly socially dependent. Their narratives suggest that this dependency exceeds a tendency towards behavioural and cognitive conformity, and extends to the ways in which they experienced and expressed emotions. While the sociological study of the individual’s social determinacy has predominantly focussed on cognitions and behaviours (Coles, 2008; Mead, 1934) symbolic interactionists have extended the study of the individual’s social connectedness to the study of emotions. This body of literature outlines the emotional benefits associated with conformity and describes the processes through which more primal emotions become socialised into socially constructed sentiments that facilitate conformity. From this perspective, the notion that emotions can be culturally determined and shaped is supported, and, in line with the current findings, social or cultural connectedness is described as exceeding cognitive and behavioural conformity to include emotional conformity (Collins, 1990, 2004; S. L. Gordon, 1981; Heise, 1999; Hochschild, 1998; Holmes, 2010; Kemper, 1978, 1987, 1990; Scheff, 1988; Shott, 1979; J. H. Turner, 2009). In accordance with SI notions of the self, the current findings suggests that, having grown up in controlled environments in which adherence to behavioural, cognitive as well as emotion norms was expected, the social selves in this study were in a sense ‘over-socialised’ and developed highly conformist selves that struggled to negotiate the diversity of contemporary society.
Their highly structured childhood environments may not have adequately prepared them for contemporary social life, and predisposed them to NRM membership.

The argument that ‘over-socialisation’ in childhood and a tendency towards conformity may predispose some individuals to NRM membership is consistent with previous sociological studies. A number of studies have found that people who join NRMs are often highly dependent on others and concerned with seeking external approval and guidance (R. L. Adams & Fox, 1972; Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Buxant, et al., 2007; S. Levine, 2007; Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Robbins, 1988a; Saroglou, 2002; Simmonds, 1977). Consistent with the current findings, this body of literature also links the high need for guidance or dependency on others observed in current members of NRMs to childhood environments with significant levels of control, where individuals are raised to follow a set of beliefs that lead to dependency (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Buxant, et al., 2007). A number of studies have described the childhood environments of people who join NRMs as “black and white” (R. L. Adams & Fox, 1972; Toch, 1965) or “fundamentalist” (Richardson & Stewart, 1977); or environments that “over-socialise” by instilling too many absolutes which leave the young adult unprepared for the realities of more complex social contexts (Richardson & Stewart, 1977; Toch, 1965).

While consistent with the majority of previous research pertaining to predispositions to NRM membership, the current study suggests that high levels of childhood control and ‘other-directedness’ is only half the story. Though this was the narrative of 12 participants, the remaining 11, those constructed as protected selves, describe ‘selves’ and childhood contexts that are in many ways opposite to those outlined by the social selves. Their experiences are discussed in the next section.

“I didn’t know how to form relationships”: The narrative of the Protected Selves

In opposition to the high levels of connectedness and dependency described by the social selves in this study, the 11 protected selves describe their pre-NRM selves as highly autonomous and disconnected from others. Their narratives portray childhood environments that were isolated and, on the more extreme end of this continuum, neglectful and abusive. Terms used by these participants to describe their childhood environments include “neglectful” (Vicki, Michael, Kerry) “isolated” (Michael, Kerry, Joe) “disconnected” (Michael, Joe, Julie, Chris), “disinterested parents” (Adam, Michael, Vicki, Julie), “unavailable parents” due to alcoholism (Vicki, Adam, Lindsay) or major depression (Chris), “physical and sexual abuse” (Lindsay), “survival of the fittest” (Michael, Kerry),
“unstable” (Michelle). Comments such as “we have terrible relationships in our family” (Michael) and “my sense of family was being isolated” (Adam) were common.

While some of these protected selves describe their childhood as isolated and limited in guidance and support (Julie, Joe, Adam, Chris, William, Michelle), others depict childhoods filled with abuse and neglect (Vicki, Michael, Kerry, Flora, Lindsay). Some examples include:

I came from a really dysfunctional family, my dad was murdered and he was schizophrenic and he was really violent and my mum had a breakdown and became an alcoholic and human services stepped in and I was put into an institution… they didn’t have adolescent unit is those days [at the age of 13]… I ended up living on the streets and dabbled in prostitution (Flora).

I had a pretty crappy childhood. I was an only child and my parents were very young. 19 and 21. [Before migrating to Australia] mum was in a women’s refugee camp, where I was born. They started from nothing and whatever they did, I went with them. My dad was a chronic alcoholic, my mum as well… I had such a rough childhood, there was bugger all love and nurturing and I was isolated in the bush by myself, there was a sense of survival … I was really isolated and we were often in the country… always moving, never staying (Kerry).

My mother was narcissistic. She was an incredibly narcissistic personality who didn’t take a great interest… There wasn’t a real sense of understanding who I was or of love and warmth for me… When I was really little there was lots of problems and lots of fights between siblings and between parents and siblings so I learned to become very independent emotionally, I became very contained… I didn’t demand a lot of emotional space or concern because there wasn’t any available (Adam).

Mum and dad would sit around at home and do their own thing… There was no real interaction with us, no real conversations; we’d even sit and eat our meals in front of the TV… I had all these feelings and desire and didn’t know what to do with them and my parents weren’t interested. I started to leave home and they didn’t care… So started using drugs and drinking alcohol when I was 15, and when I was 16 I started using heroin regularly, and did casual work and telephone sex to support the habit (Julie).

I was raised in the rough and tough field, like when you got a broken nose you continued playing football, a broken finger you worried about after the game … and … I was raped when I was 6 or 7. Few things are clear in my childhood but unfortunately I have vivid
memories of those few months. It was over a 6 month period. I remember each of the incidents vividly (Lindsay).

Attributed to their experiences of isolation and disconnection in childhood the protected selves in this study describe their selves as highly individualised and autonomous, and anchored in intense internal turmoil. Terms that were commonly used to describe themselves include “anxious”, “emotionally volatile”, “suicidal”, “hyper-sensitive”, “always worrying”, “self-obsessed” and “highly independent”. Some examples that depict the emotional turmoil and disconnectedness of these protected selves include:

My mother is an alcoholic. I argued and fought it very hard, and became a bit of a trouble maker in the family. When I was 13 I changed. I became anxious and very paranoid, I worried about what everyone thought of me, I felt hated all the time, I became nervous about going to school … I started to change and I was very scared of what I was thinking. The person I would have normally turned to at that age is my mum but of course she wasn’t available emotionally or she was having so many problems herself I don’t think she knew how to help me through that [my anxiety]… By the time I was 14 I had started drinking alcohol heavily and turning up to school drunk because I was just so frightened… Whenever I went to parties with friends I drank very heavily, I immediately became anti-social, thrown out of parties, not invited anymore. And of course alcohol being what it is it became worse. So I got into a vicious circle. Anxiety, depression, fear and looking for alcohol to relieve that it was actually making it worse. I left school with not many qualifications at all, my grades suffered. Then I became anorexic for several years and when I was 18 I couldn’t stand starving myself anymore so I became a binge eater and I became very fat, which made me drink more because I hated being fat. It was a real awful time… I started to get suicidal … I ended up taking anti-depressants. I was so unable to cope with life (Vicki).

I guess one of the reasons I ended up on heroin is because I just felt so fucked up and I didn’t know how to cope. The more I took drugs the more damage I did to my mind and my body; there was no way I was coming back from that without something… So heroin was the only thing that made me feel good in the end… I became totally paranoid, psychotic, hearing voices in my head and everything. I had gone to see a psychiatrist. I had the little blue pills from the psychiatrist and they just felt so artificial and fake and I had Prozac and it was all so fake and heroin was the only thing that made me feel good or ok. I had to learn to cope with myself, that was hard for me (Julie).
Dad died of a heart attack [at age 12]. From the point of my dad’s departure, my mum was out of the picture because she was busy grieving... I guess I was in a vulnerable position because I had just lost my father... the uncertainty that a death of a parent creates when you’re quite young, it made me uncertain about other things that I had previously been sure about... I plunged into such uncertainty and an inability to stop worrying (Joe).

I think it’s family, it’s childhood... I learned to become very independent emotionally, I became very contained ... I wasn’t happy as a child... As a child and growing up I didn’t have this sense that you could just be happy, just by being with someone and doing things together. I had this sense that we had to do really good things, really great things to get noticed. So I had to be really good at school or good at sport ... happiness was in achieving something fantastic... Growing up I became driven by career, not relationships... I think my strong drives and independence has stood in the way of learning to form relationships (Adam).

The narratives of the protected selves suggest that their childhood environments did not adequately prepare them to successfully negotiate the challenges of contemporary social life as per the narratives of the social selves, albeit in quite different ways. In particular they argue that because of the intensity of their internal experiences they struggled to form social relationships, and found themselves increasingly socially isolated. Comments such as “I didn’t know how to make friends, I was far too anxious. People made me feel uncomfortable” (Michelle), “I was so driven to be independent that I couldn’t relate to people” (Adam), “I came out of the teenage years emotionally immature and unable to deal with people” (Vicki), “My childhood did not teach me how to form relationships” (Kerry) and “I had a need to be social, but it was too hard and too overwhelming, it still is. I find building relationships almost intolerably stressful to the point where I wonder if it’s worth it” (Joe) were common. The findings suggest that while the protected selves had the autonomy and individuality that social selves lacked, they were lacking in the social selves’ ability to conform and connect. The findings suggest that the protected selves, like the social selves, were deficient in a well-developed reflexive ability to negotiate tension between individuality as well as connectedness necessary for the management of contemporary social life. While within the sociological literature the self’s ability to resist the social and act independently is most commonly celebrated (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1991; Lash, 1994) the heightened independence described by the protected selves in this study is not perceived as something positive, but rather as an impediment to happiness. As noted by Michelle:

I was never a social conformist in any way. This made my life difficult, particularly as a teenager. I didn’t want to change my behaviour to please other people. I wanted to be myself
and have friends, at the same time... but I didn’t know how to do that so I was left feeling alone and anxious.

In accordance with SI theorising on the self, the protected narrative highlight the negative emotional impact of a disconnection between the self and its social environment (Burke, 1991, 2004; Collins, 1990; Heise, 1979, 1999; Heise & Weir, 1999; Smith-Lovin, 1990, 2003). While from an SI perspective the self is considered fundamentally social and yearning for connection with others (Athens, 1994; Coles, 2008; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), not everyone is viewed as capable of developing social connectedness. The self’s ability to conform and connect to others is understood as dependent on the availability of stable others during early developmental stages. Until children have the developmental maturity to make sense of multiple and at times contradictory others relative stability is important for the development of ‘fully functioning’ selves that are capable of social connectedness (Athens, 1994, 1997; Coles, 2008; Denzin, 1987a, 1987b; Mead, 1934). The self’s ability to conform and connect to or understand other people’s perspectives has been linked to the availability of emotionally available, supportive and stable caregivers in childhood (Cast, 2004; Hoffman, 1982).

Without connectedness to others, this body of literature suggests that highly autonomous selves that are anchored in negative emotions develop. Increasingly discussions on social connectedness exceed behavioural and cognitive connectedness and focus on the importance of cultural stability for the socialisation of emotions and the development of emotional connections to others (Collins, 1990, 2004; Smith-Lovin, 1990, 1995, 2003, 2007; J. H. Turner, 2000, 2009; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). Without stable others, particularly in childhood, selves that are emotionally connected to others do not form, but the individual remains anchored in intense negative emotions such as arousal or emotions anchored in fight/flight (Braithwaite, 1989; Cooley, 1902; Harter, 1983; Lazarus, 1991; Shitbutani, 1961). It is posited that the socialisation of emotions occurs through a process of sustained interpersonal interaction through which usually the child learns both the emotion culture of its social context as well as developing an ability to regulate intense emotions (Braithwaite, 1989; Hochschild, 1983).

Prior to NRM membership, the protected selves in this study are conceptualised as anchored in less- or un-socialised emotions such as “intense anxiety” and “suicidal feelings” that inhibit social connectedness. It appears that these participants were deficient in less intense or more socialised emotions that facilitated social interaction, and any attempts at social interaction became overshadowed by intense emotions. For these participants, as is outlined in the following Chapter, NRM membership signified a desire for self-change; in particular, a desire to learn to regulate intense negative emotions and develop a sense of connectedness to others.
While the observation that unstable and traumatic childhood contexts may predispose individuals to NRM membership is not new (Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001; Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Murken & Namini, 2007; Ullman, 1982, 1989), it is less developed in the literature than the finding of highly controlled childhoods as antecedents to NRM membership. Even though a significant body of literature has identified ‘insecure attachments’ or weak social and family relationships as pre-involvement factors to NRM membership, it is not always clear whether these experiences of social isolation refer to childhood conditions or the period immediately preceding membership (Galanter, 1980; Lofland & Stark, 1965; McIlwain, 1994; Wright & Piper, 1986). While in line with this research the vast majority of participants were found to have weak social relationship prior to membership, the current study adds to this literature by highlighting that, for the social selves, social isolation prior to joining can be attributed to the loss of a ‘controlling family’ during late adolescence or young adulthood, while, for the protected selves, weak relations prior to joining is understood as a continuation of childhood experiences of disconnection and neglect. In addition, those studies that have identified histories of alcohol and drug use as a predisposition to NRM membership could also be understood as in line with the experiences of the protected selves in this study (Galanter, 1983; Galanter, et al., 1980; Galanter, et al., 1979; Simmonds, 1977; Weiss & Mendoza, 1990). However, these studies attribute alcohol and drug use to ‘other-directedness’ or a tendency towards dependency on ‘others’ rather than to difficulties managing disconnection and anxiety as is suggested by the current findings (Vicki, Michael, Julie, Kerry).

It is possible that the narrative of the protected self may be less developed or identified in the previous NRM literature because this may be a relatively new phenomenon. The protected narrative may be increasingly common under contemporary conditions, in which inconsistent parenting and conditions of childhood neglect appear to be on the rise (Coates, 2010b, 2011). In previous times, when behaviour was more traditionally informed, controlled or authoritarian childhood environments were significantly more common; therefore it seems unsurprising that the social narratives may be more developed in the NRM literature. A number of scholars have observed that contemporary unstable environments appear to be facilitating the development of conditions that reflect difficulties connecting or conforming to others, such as social phobias and social anxiety disorders (S. Scott, 2005, 2006). The increasing sociological interest in the study of ‘authenticity’ (Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Gecas, 1994; Vannini & Franzese, 2008; Weigert, 2009) also appears to reflect a perceived rise in ‘selves’ that are emotionally disconnected or ‘separate’ from others, and a decreased tendency or ability for individuals to conform or connect the demands of others.
Conclusion

In accordance with a significant body of literature that suggests that the individual’s life trajectories and the various ways in which they construct their selves reflect variations in experiences in childhood (Elder, 1973, 1974, 1998; Gecas, 2003; Shanahan, 2000), the current findings suggest that childhood relationships are important to understanding NRM involvement. Both the social and the protected narratives describe pre-involvement selves that struggled to negotiate the demands of ‘adult life’, and depict unfavourable childhood environments that are perceived as having inadequately prepared them for the challenges of contemporary social life. While the social selves are perceived as lacking in individuality or autonomy and the protected selves as lacking in connectedness, both are conceptualised as limited in or lacking in a reflexive ability to negotiate tensions between individuality and connectedness necessary for contemporary social life. To this extent, both childhood environments lacking in stability as well as those limited in diversity are understood as inhibiting the development of fully functioning reflexive selves. For the development of reflexive selves that are capable of connection as well as a sense of separateness both stability and diversity are conceptualised as important. The current study identified difficulties in reflexively negotiating the demands of contemporary Western society, especially pertaining to the demand for individuality and personal stability and autonomy as well as connectedness to multiple and continuously changing others as a predisposition to NRM membership.

This observation that NRM membership may have its roots in unfavourable childhood experiences and relate to difficulties managing the demands of complex social environments challenges the view put forward by many health professionals who work with former members that predispositions are unimportant to understanding the life trajectories of former members. In line with previous observations, the current findings suggest that predispositions are important, and that membership for the participants in this study can be understood as an adaptive response or coping strategy for individuals who have not developed the skills required to navigate the complexities and ambiguities of Western society (S. Levine, 1984, 2007; Rothbaum, 1988; Simmonds, 1977).

It is not in any way argued that the participants in this study are unique in their current or former difficulties balancing the demands of contemporary life; rather, as the result of rapid social change many people face such difficulties and while some ‘suffer in silence’ and live socially isolated lives, join other total to semi total institutions or endeavour to resolve their difficulties through counselling, the participants in this study endeavoured to resolve their difficulties through NRM membership. The notion that people are increasingly seeking solutions to the complexities of everyday life by turning to psychological services is well established (Craib, 1994; Furedi, 2004; Giddens, 1991; Holzman &
Mendez, 2003; Lupton, 1998; Morrall, 2008), and it is argued in the current thesis that rather than seeking therapy or some other possible solution to challenges of contemporary living, the participants in this study joined a NRM.

The reasons for membership and how membership can be understood as a possible solution to difficulties negotiating the demands of contemporary life are outlined in the next Chapter.
Chapter 7

Reasons for Joining a NRM: The importance of stable others for the making of selves

Contemporary discourses and public perceptions of NRMs put forward by the mass media and popular literature posit that anyone could fall victim to brainwashing techniques and join a ‘cult’ (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Langone, 1993a; Singer, 2003). On the contrary, as outlined in the previous Chapter, the majority of empirical evidence suggests that individuals who join NRMs often share certain ‘predispositions’ and most commonly join such groups at a young age following a turbulent adolescence. This suggests that people join NRMs in an attempt to resolve previous vulnerabilities or ‘self’ or ‘identity’ related difficulties, and depicts NRM membership as a possible avenue through which these difficulties can become resolved. The ways in which NRM membership signified a possible ‘self’ or ‘identity’ solution for the participants in this study is the focus of the current Chapter.

The majority of the sociological literature describes NRMs as ‘identity designating’ environments and posits membership as a possible avenue through which ‘identity uncertainty’ can be alleviated. The most common reason for membership is referred to as the ‘uncertainty reduction’ thesis. This suggests that conformity to an ‘all-encompassing’ NRM identity can help to resolve or alleviate struggles pertaining to identity uncertainty or confusion preceding membership. Membership is described as motivated by difficulties in tolerating the uncertainty and ambiguity of mainstream society, and a desire for a clear-cut identity to which to conform, and NRMs are understood as providing a solution to these identity related difficulties by offering ‘identity certainty’ (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Curtis & Curtis, 1993; Galanter, 1989; D. F. Gordon, 1974; S. Levine, 2007; Richardson & Stewart, 1977).

Further support for this notion of NRMs as ‘safe havens’ or stable cultural environments that can offer confused individuals identity certainty can be found in the sociological scholarship on social movement participation. Like NRM membership, social movement participation is commonly described as motivated by a desire to establish and maintain identity certainty and continuity, and the tendency of individuals to opt for identity certainty as a member of a group is made sense of in terms of the ambiguity and uncertainty of contemporary society and the lack of traditional sources of identity. The overall assumption is that participants in social movements embrace the identity of the group and internalise it as their own, which then becomes a salient or primary identity. The group an individual joins is viewed as providing the individual with a sense of identity based on the defining
characteristics of the group, and this is conceptualised as providing the individual with identity clarity and certainty. Overall the nature of the identity is considered unimportant, as long as it is unambiguous. This suggests that there is not necessarily a relationship between previous identities and the group identity; any movement will do as long as it provides a level of identity clarity and certainty (Broad, 2002; Hogg, 2000; Hogg, et al., 1995; Hunt, 2000; Kaplan & Liu, 2000; Klapp, 1969; Pinel & Swann, 2000; Snow & McAdam, 2000; Stryker, et al., 2000; Swann, 1999; R. H. Turner & Killian, 1972; Zurcher & Snow, 1981). In accordance with this literature, the majority of sociological studies portray NRMs as stable cultural environments that provide members with a sense of identity that offers certainty in a turbulent and uncertain world.

This highly conformist notion of the self as directed or influenced by others is in line with the narratives of approximately half of the participants in this study, those labelled the social selves. This is not the narrative of those participants labelled the protected selves in this study who describe a strong sense of individuality and difficulties conforming or connecting to others. It is argued here that for the protected selves in this study membership was not motivated by a desire for a sense of identity certainty as determined by a stable ‘other’ but reflected a desire for self-change, in particular a desire to become more connected to others and less anchored in intense internal experiences. While the suggestion that for some members NRM participation may be motivated by a desire for self-change is not new, the majority of the sociological literature portrays NRM as avenues through which identity certainty and stability can be achieved rather than change. With a few notable exceptions (Barker, 1984; Healy, 2010; Kilbourne, 1989; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1984; Paloutzian, et al., 1999; Richardson, et al., 1986) the role of a NRM in self change is less developed in the literature and the findings outlined in this Chapter contribute to this. The data suggest that for social selves membership signified a need for direction and guidance, or ‘identity certainty’, and for the protected selves a desire for self-change or ‘to get fixed’. The varying circumstances or perceived reasons that prompted NRM membership for the social selves versus the protected selves is the focus of this Chapter.
“I needed direction and guidance”: The ‘uncertainty reduction’ thesis

The cult identity was really a continuation of the theme that I had always had as a child, it was just a different location; it was the same theme being played out. While before I was dependent on my father, now I was dependent on the leader (Trudy).

In line with the majority of the social movement literature in general and the NRM scholarship in particular, a desire for identity certainty and continuity was identified as primary to group involvement by those participants labelled the social selves in this study. For these participants NRM membership is understood as maintaining a sense of identity certainty and continuity in that membership supported the ongoing construction of a sense of self as dependent on an ‘all defining’ and clear-cut ‘other’. During the interviews, the social selves consistently pointed out the similarities between their childhood sense of self or identity as dependent on an ‘authoritarian’ caregiver, primarily their fathers, and a ‘cult’ identity as dependent on the group and its leader(s). Comments such as “I replaced the loss of an all-powerful force in my life by another... All-powerful daddy was replaced by an all-powerful cult leader” (Trudy), “I felt ‘here I am, I am home; I’ve done this before, I can do this again” (Gabrielle), “I think that dad could almost fit into the cult leader identity... Maybe it felt familiar” (Catheline) and “The major reason I got trapped in a cult was my father. All of us sitting in a row every day waiting for God to look at us and give us some love like little kids waiting for daddy” (Margaret) were common.

While not all the social selves attribute membership to “dysfunctional childhood experiences [with an] authoritarian father” (Gabrielle), to varying degrees all those participants constructed as social selves describe membership as to some extent related to their former other-dependency and strong need for guidance and direction. In addition to “authoritarian” or “controlling” parents, a strong reliance on a guiding belief system or faith, primarily Christian, was described as preceding membership by many of these participants.

Comments that depict a guiding religious framework as preceding and motivating membership include:

We decided that although we didn’t believe in the Catholic Church [anymore], we believed in God and we thought it important to raise our children with a belief in God and faith. We did
lots of research... When I eventually decided to join it was because I felt that I could live out my faith in the Bible in this environment (Nicholas).

I still felt that I was on this mission to find an alternative lifestyle. I had a Christian background and in a sense I felt led by God. I felt that he was leading me into something else. I felt called, I felt special; even before I met the group... And I felt that I’d left my Christian faith and I prayed and re-dedicated my life to God. From that time it seemed that miraculous things started to happen so I really started feeling led... Coincidental stuff was blowing my mind. So when I finally ran into [the group] I really felt that it was destiny. So I quite dropped into their lap in a sense (Thomas).

To varying degrees the social narratives attribute membership to difficulties managing identity uncertainty and a desire for guidance and direction. In particular, these narratives highlight the identity loss and uncertainty associated with the loss of the safety and security of their childhood environments as having motivated group affiliation. These participants explain that leaving home caused “an overwhelming void” (Thomas), “a loss of direction” (Trudy), and “aimlessness” (Catheline), and they describe membership as a resolution to difficulties pertaining to identity loss and uncertainty. The social selves explain:

In the time leading up to meeting the group I was really lonely and down and confused... I was quite vulnerable ... I needed direction ... I was a bit of a target waiting to happen in a sense (Thomas).

Since leaving home things hadn’t worked for me, I didn’t feel like there was enough in my life, I actually felt that my life was out of control. I thought joining would bring stability to me... [I thought] ‘Oh my God, I can’t deal with life outside of the family’s home, outside of my father’s domination; I’m not coping with things (Trudy).

Prior to meeting the group I found myself in a situation where there wasn’t a lot of meaning in my life and I was struggling with friends and I was cut off from my family ... [through contact with the group] I started to make new friends and meet new people and it was filling a void in my life... [I was] searching to fill that void. Some go into Eastern religion, some Christianity, we all pursue different things to fill that void... I think we are all social creatures, we need to be with other people, and [the group] filled that role. It gave me purpose, meaning and direction. If it’s used for the right purpose it is wonderful, it gives people that involvement, community, love, family (Richard).
The findings suggest that for the social selves in this study membership constituted a solution to an overwhelming sense of identity uncertainty and a desire or need for direction and guidance. Participants explain that membership resolved their sense of uncertainty and provided a much needed sense of “belonging”, “clarity”, “direction” and “certainty”. Comments such as “It’s the identity thing. Joining a group becomes part of who you are. It’s your identity. I belong to. I wanted that” (Gabrielle), “[It was about] this constant need to belong, wanting to belong, needing to be accepted … needing advice on everything” (Max), “It was kind of comforting to keep that containment, to understand how the world really is” (Catheline), and “I think what appealed to me about being in our group was belonging to a group of people, and the energy and clarity that gave me” (Alice) were common.

Challenging the notion that NRM membership results from ‘having been brainwashed’, the social narrative depicts membership as related to their former tendency towards other-dependency and conformity. While for some of these participants the group identity was in line with previously salient identities, mostly Christian identities, the nature of the group identity seemed unimportant, or at least less important, as long as it offered certainty, security and guidance. The data suggest that for many of the social selves ‘being guided’ was more important than ‘the source of guidance’. This is described by participants as follows: “If it wasn’t the group, it would have something else or another group… It wasn’t about the beliefs of the group, they were too zealous for me, it was about fitting in with a group of people and sharing their lifestyle” (Lauren), “I wanted Truth, regardless of the nature of that Truth, I needed certainties” (Margaret) and “It’s not about [the group] in question, it’s about being part of a group. I like to have a group and be committed there and be more secure” (Hillary). This is consistent with observations made by social movement scholars which suggest that the nature of the group is often secondary to its ability to reduce uncertainty and offer a clear-cut identity for guidance (Kaplan & Liu, 2000; Snow & McAdam, 2000).

As already argued, the social selves in this study are conceptualised as previously lacking in a sense of individuality necessary to negotiate the demands of contemporary unstable social life. Without a sense of individuality or self-identity, the loss of the safety and certainty of childhood resulted in overwhelming uncertainty that precipitated NRM membership. Rather than using this identity uncertainty as an opportunity for the development of a sense of individuality or self-identity from which conditions of uncertainty can be negotiated (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Zurcher, 1977), they embraced another clear-cut and ‘all defining’ other for guidance. As explained by Gabrielle:

*Upon leaving home I was feeling pretty lost, I had no direction and needed ... something ... and rather than working out what I believed I joined the first group that came my way ...*
There were a couple of people at school who were Christians so I asked them questions ... so I got the Christian answers. The claims of Jesus seemed pretty good... They seemed reasonable people, and they talked about having this wonderful present Truth. That seemed good enough to me... and it went from there ... before I knew it I’d joined a cult... It delayed having to develop or work out my own identity.

Similarly, Thomas explains that upon the loss of the safety of his father’s control and guidance, he left lost and uncertainty of how to manage ‘life’ and himself. He notes:

I started going off the rails, drinking and chasing girls and stuff like that. I always had an undercurrent of guilt in the back of my mind that I was failing God but that I couldn’t help it. I was driven by all these urges. So when the cult came along it was like. Oh great, a controlled environment where I don’t have to sin. It was an escape so I didn’t have to work out what to do with myself, partly due to the frustration of not being able to live up to my ideals, and finding a good framework to be a good person within. People are going to be overseeing me and I won’t be able to run amok like I had been.

It is suggested that for these participants membership postponed the development of a sense of individuality or personal identity.

Even though anchoring the self in one primary ‘other’, commonly referred to as ‘master identity’ or ‘master status’ (Hughes, 1945) is often portrayed as potentially problematic for the self (Adler & Adler, 1983; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Thoits, 1983, 1991, 1999) it offered the social selves in this study a much needed sense of self-stability and direction. A number of scholars have observed that for some individuals anchoring a sense of self in a stable group is a straightforward identity solution (Buchmann, 1989; Cote, 2000; Kegan, 1994) that can offer increases in self-esteem and reduction in uncertainty and anxiety (Abrams & Hogg, 1998; Armato & Marsiglio, 2002; Hogg, 2000; Hogg & Abrams, 1993). For those individuals who are deficient in a sense of individuality or self-stability from which unstable social conditions can be negotiated, anchoring the self in others is much easier than the complicated reflexive development of a self ‘foundation’ that is more personally constructed such as self-identity (Giddens, 1991) or personal identity(Hewitt, 1992; Hitlin, 2003). Without an ability to ‘internally’ or personally manage uncertainty, reducing uncertainty by anchoring the self in a stable other can be considered an adaptive response (Cote, 2000; Gergen, 1991; Hogg, 2000).

While reflexivity theories seem to suggest that there is no longer a need for traditional sources of identity in contemporary society, and that individuals are capable of personally negotiating ‘identity stability’ even under conditions of uncertainty (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Lash,
this is not the narrative of the social selves in this study. For the social selves in this study it appears that NRM membership signified a need for environmental or cultural stability for the achievement of self-stability (Demo, 1992; Weigert & Gecas, 2005).

In addition to providing a sense of identity certainty and continuity, the findings suggest that NRM membership also provided the social selves with a sense of ‘personal uniqueness’. A number of social selves note that a primary reason they were attracted to and joined their respective groups related to the sense of ‘specialness’ and ‘uniqueness’ membership offered. For example:

>You are here for a special purpose, you’ve been called here, the reasons you’re talking to me is because you are led here... suddenly you feel like you’re fitting in, and that you’re somehow part of this select group; which really implies ‘aren’t I lucky, I am better than everyone else’. That is the mechanism; all of us want to feel special, all of us want to feel we belong. It’s a basic human need... [Membership] appealed to my sensibilities. It made me feel that I was somehow better than other Christians. That what I had was right and that everyone else was missing out (Max).

>Once I was in the group and I started getting the praise and the identity I liked it and I wanted to keep it... I think I really wanted to succeed in something... I just wanted to prove to people that I can be successful... Suddenly I was excelling at something and I was being lifted up and regarded as the new best thing and I liked that... That was probably why I left my job and said you know what, this is a higher purpose; this is a greater purpose (Emily).

It is argued here that having grown up in environments that inhibited the development of individuality, NRM membership provided these participants with an ‘illusion’ of personal ‘uniqueness’. It appears that membership provided a sense of uniqueness without having to face the challenges of anxiety and uncertainty associated with the reflexive development of a unique personal identity (Fontana & McGinnis, 2005; Hitlin, 2003) or self-identity (Giddens, 1991). While a desire for certainty may be a ‘normal’ feature of childhood and early adolescence (Erikson, 1968; Festinger, 1957), it is posited here that the successful transition to adulthood requires a tolerance for uncertainty, because it is more in keeping with the ways contemporary society operates. A discussion of the process through which these participants are conceptualised as having developed an increased sense of individuality or self-identity following exit from a NRM is outlined in Chapter 12.

The social narrative is consistent with a body of literature that describes membership in terms of the ‘uncertainty reduction’ thesis. In line with the current findings, a number of scholars have made sense of fundamentalist identities in general (Castells, 1997; Snow & McAdam, 2000) and NRM identities
in particular (Barker, 1981; Beckford, 2004) in terms of their potential in offering a psychological
retreat from the complexities of postmodern society in which grounding for stable identities is limited.
Thus far the findings appear to support the argument that NRM members are highly dependent on
others for guidance and security, and that NRMs offer their members a much desired sense of
‘identity certainty’ that alleviates previous identity related difficulties and offers belonging and
direction (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; Namini & Murken, 2009; Saroglou, Buxant, & Tilquin, 2008;
Ullman, 1982). Also consistent with the current findings, this body of literature suggests that while
joining a NRM may represent an ‘identity solution’ membership can inhibit the development of ‘more
complex’ selves that are better suited to contemporary life. A number of studies have concluded that
even though joining a NRM resolves an identity crisis, this is merely a ‘pseudo-solution’ to the crisis,
and represents an escape from having to learn to negotiate the diversity and complexity of social life
and face the turmoil which commonly accompanies adolescence (Barker, 1984; D. F. Gordon, 1974;
S. Levine, 2007; Simmonds, 1977).

This notion that individuals may join groups in search of identity stability and certainty is well
established within the SI tradition, and a significant body of literature developed by primarily
structural symbolic interactionists depicts the self as motivated to maintain self or identity stability.
From this perspective it is argued that people strive to reduce self- and other- uncertainty, and employ
identity management strategies such as ‘selective interaction’ to confirm existing meanings about self
and others (Burke, 2006; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Erickson, 1995; Gecas, 1991; Robinson & Smith-
Lovin, 1992; Serpe & Stryker, 1987; Swann, 1999; Vannini & Franzese, 2008). This body of
literature presents significant evidence that indicates that individuals are motivated to reduce
uncertainty, and describes the acquisition and maintenance of a coherent, or ‘certain’, sense of self or
identity as important to understanding human behaviour. From this perspective it is commonly argued
that the maintenance of identity certainty and stability takes precedence over the acquisition of a
favourable sense of self or self-enhancement (George, 1998; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann,
1990, 1999). To this extent, the suggestion that people would never willingly join and remain in
groups in which they are not treated as an equal or valued member, as is put forward by many of those
who support the brainwashing theories (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006) is challenged by
this body of literature in general, and the findings of this study in particular. For the social selves it
appears that consistency, ‘being treated’ similarly to the way in which they were treated previously,
appears more important than the development of a greater sense of individuality necessary for the
‘successful’ management of contemporary social life.

The social narrative depicts NRM membership as related to a desire for identity certainty and
stability, with identity stability described as dependent on environmental or cultural stability. In line
with SI notions of the self, for these participants their sense of self appears highly interrelated with
their ‘identities’ or the ‘others’ with whom they interact (Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992). This body of literature presents a highly socially determined understanding of the self, and does not appear to differentiate between those aspects of the self that are somewhat ‘separate’ from its social context and those that are not. While this socially determined understanding of the self seems applicable to the social narrative, it seems less relevant to the narratives of the protected selves in this study. The findings suggest that for these more socially disconnected and isolated selves who appear anchored in internal turmoil, NRM membership did not reflect a need for stable others for the construction of stable selves but a desire for self-change. This is outlined in the next section.

“I thought it would fix me”: The self-enhancement or self-change thesis

_I thought it would fix me ... and also ... I am attracted to things that aren’t like, normal. I’m not good at fitting in with the mainstream ... Since being a drug user you just can’t just fit in. The average sort of life that most people lead doesn’t satisfy me, I need something more, especially to keep clean_ (Julie).

While social selves describe membership as a ‘continuation of the same theme’, the protected selves describe membership as an attempt at ‘changing the theme’ or changing patterns of loneliness and disconnection established in childhood. While the most common theme presented by the social selves was ‘I joined because the group provided me with an identity’ (Trudy), the theme presented by the protected selves was “I joined because I wanted to become someone other than me” (Vicki). To varying degrees, for these participants, NRM membership was motivated by a desire to develop a sense of social connectedness and an ability to establish and maintain social relationships.

The data suggest that for the protected selves involvement in a NRM reflected a desire for an increased sense of connectedness to others and a greater ability to control or manage internal turmoil. Prior to membership many of these participants describe ‘managing’ their internal turmoil through alcohol and drugs or other self-harming strategies such as promiscuity, obsessive compulsive behaviours and social isolation. These participants explain group membership as motivated by a desire to change previous ‘unhelpful’ or ‘destructive’ tendencies, and compare NRM membership to seeking therapeutic assistance. Comments such as “In my past ... I was a heroin addict ... The information in the book looked so different from anything I had ever seen. I was genuinely interested in it; I thought it would help me” (Julie), “I didn’t know how to manage stress and I’d tried
counselling and psycho-therapy but it didn’t help, I thought maybe this would, and I guess maybe it did” (William), “I thought it would help me manage my inability to stop worrying” (Joe), “I was looking for something to help me with my insecurity and anxiety” (Kerry) and “I needed therapy but instead I joined a cult, which at the time I perceived as a therapeutic group” (Chris) were common. In particular, the narratives depict membership was motivated by a desire to overcome negative childhood experiences. Protected selves explain:

I thought [the group] was going to solve my problems. I thought that I was going to be able to evolve out of my troubled childhood, my troubled experiences and finding a way of being a better me. So I had this idea that I was going to be able to finally amalgamate all these terrible things that I was carrying inside of me or sense of unhappiness or disappointment ... I was struggling with the world and I think I needed to get grounding...So I ended up in this cult, looking for the answers(Michael).

I thought [the group] would rid myself from my past and become the whole new person, free of my tormenting thinking ... I wanted to be free of the thinking that started when I was 13; constant negative self-hate talk. I would walk into a room and I was convinced everyone hated me, that I was a pain in the arse that no-one wanted me around; just constant. No confidence and inability to have what I wanted. I wanted freedom from that... I looked to people all the time to tell me what to do because I was so unsure and scared of making mistakes [if I followed my feelings]. I guess this is what led me to get involved in such a group... I wanted freedom from this horrible thinking that I had. I was putting all my hopes onto [the group] (Vicki).

In addition to providing relief from internal ‘overwhelming’ forces, these participants described membership as motivated by a desire to develop an increased sense of social connectedness (Adam, Michael, Julie, Kerry, Fiona, Flora, Chris). They explain:

I joined the group partly because I would have liked stronger connections... It’s been quite a struggle... I was looking for various things at that point. I was probably looking for therapy for myself; I was probably looking for more relationships and community ... The group did help me create an ongoing friendship group and I still have some of those friends...The whole idea of making friends is a difficult one. Before that time and subsequently it wasn’t that easy and it hasn’t been easy since (Chris).
As a younger person I was very shy and the yearning for warmth and connection... I think I was really yearning for a notion of family... I had this longing for this sense of being connected to others... I thought [the group] would give me that (Adam).

I am disgusted with modern day society. There is a group of people out there who do not fit into social norms or they need some sort of support group. I was, and still am, one of these people, and cults serve a purpose in that they help some of these very isolated people(Lindsay).

Even though this is not the dominant position presented in the literature, a number of NRM scholars have suggested that NRM membership may signify a desire for self-change or personal growth for some members (Barker, 1984; Healy, 2010; Kilbourne, 1989; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1984; Kriegman & Solomon, 1985; Paloutzian, et al., 1999; Richardson, et al., 1986; Travisano, 1970), and the findings of this study support this idea. The argument that membership may reflect a desire for self-change, in particular pertaining to the development of an increased ability to manage internal turmoil, is further supported by studies that depict membership as an alternative to alcohol or drug use (Galanter, 1980; Galanter, et al., 1980; Galanter, et al., 1979; Simmonds, 1977), or as an alternative form of psychotherapeutic treatment (Galanter, 1990; Kilbourne, 1989; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1984; Robbins & Anthony, 1982).

With its emphasis on self-maintenance and the importance of coherence for the self, the study of self-change or self-enhancement is less developed within the SI literature, and this thesis contributes to this. The findings support previous observations that while individuals are commonly motivated to maintain identity certainty, they can also motivated by a self’s desire for growth and personal enhancement and more attention needs to be paid to this (George, 1998). While a range of scholars have examined the emotional dimensions of self-change (Denzin, 1987a; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 2003a), the majority of this work has addressed behavioural and cognitive change. There is scope for further understanding of self-change at an emotional level. The ways in which NRM membership is conceptualised as facilitating emotional self-change, in particular an increased sense of connectedness and control over internal turmoil, is outlined in Chapter 13.

**Conclusion**

The current findings posit membership as actively negotiated by the individual, and challenges the view that people join groups because they have fallen victim to powerful brainwashing techniques. In
accordance with the contemporary view of the self as ‘a project’ the findings suggests that for many of the participants in this study membership signified an attempt to organise and make sense of their lives in a coherent and meaningful way (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock, 1996). While it appears that for some participants membership reflected an attempt at acquiring and maintaining identity certainty and continuity, for others it reflected an attempt at self-change or self-enhancement.

Despite variations in regards to the role of self-maintenance versus self-change, both social and the protected selves describes membership as motivated by a desire or need for the connectedness to others membership was perceived as offering. For both social selves and protected selves joining a NRM signified a desire for stronger connections to others than was perceived as available in mainstream environments. This notion that membership may reflect a desire for connectedness lacking in fast-paced and fragmented contemporary Western society is well established. A number of scholars have made sense of NRM membership in light of the perceived limitations of Western cultural values and institutions in providing the individual with stable and enduring connections to others, arguing that contemporary society fails to meet the individual’s need for belonging (Barker, 1981, 2006; S. Levine, 2007; Melton, 1992; Richardson, 2007). While for the social selves in this study strong social connectedness is understood as supporting their existing selves, it is argued that for the protected selves social connectedness reflected a desire for a sense belonging they did not experience in childhood. In line with the current findings, variations in the ways in which NRMs can offer connectedness to its members is described by Jacobs (1989) as follows:

Conversion often results in childlike dependency, the loss of autonomy experienced by the devotee is similar to childhood, in which the convert looks to a significant other to structure and place constraints on his or her life. For the younger devotees, the assumption of dependent status is often an extension of family relationships, while for others ... conversion might be considered as a continual search for a childhood security that has never been realised (p. 125).

The way in which these different motivations impact on the way in which membership was experienced and negotiated by the participants in this study is outlined in the next Chapter.
Chapter 8

Staying in aNRM: Conversion as actively negotiated or passively received

Numerous attempts have been made to explain how people become committed to, and remain in cults or NRMs. Conversion, or the “radical reorganisation of identity, meaning, life” observed in current members of religious groups (Travisano, 1970, p. 594) is an area of significant sociological interest, and has been principal to the study of individuals’ affiliation to NRMs (Lofland & Skonovd, 1981a, 1981b; Lofland & Stark, 1965; Rambo, 1993). The idea that new converts undergo significant changes in ‘identity’ upon joining a NRM and change their behaviour to meet the group’s expectations is well established. However, the nature of the perceived changes in recruits following membership is disputed; conceptualisations of conversion are varied, and have shifted and changed significantly over time (Paloutzian, et al., 1999; Snow & Machalek, 1984). As outlined previously, while those who support the brainwashing thesis present a conceptualisation of conversion as caused by external pressures and influences, the majority of NRM scholars challenge this passive understanding of conversion and describe converts as actively engaged with their conversion experience. This scholarship portrays NRM members as active agents and emphasises the role of social interaction and personal agency in conversion. From this perspective the identity changes observed in new members are understood as a gradual process related to the enactment and rapid learning of new cultural expectations or ‘identities’. In opposition to the brainwashing thesis, it is argued that members are not passive victims of powerful external influences but are deliberately and actively involved in ‘learning’ and, in time internalising, the NRM identity.

This activist view of conversion is consistent with SI understandings of the self which argue that individuals are motivated to conform to cultural expectations, and actively employ strategies to acquire and maintain a sense of continuity or consistency between their ‘selves’ and the environment. Individuals are understood as motivated to maintain equilibrium between the ‘self’ and its environment; when ‘confronted’ with new cultural expectations people experience a sense of dissonance or discomfort which they endeavour to resolve. This notion is supported by a rich body of empirical work that has found that, when there is a disequilibrium or inconsistency between the self and the environmental or cultural expectations, individuals experience negative emotions such as stress and discomfort. Conversely, a connection or equilibrium between the self and its environments has been shown to result in positive emotions. Emotions are described as signals about the extent to which events or environments are confirming or disconfirming existing identities or self-conceptions and so to assist people in resolving dissonances between the self and the environment (Burke, 1991;
Burke & Stets, 1999; Festinger, 1953, 1954, 1957; Heise, 1979, 1999; Higgins, 1987; Higgins, Klein, & Strauman, 1987; Hochschild, 1983, 1990; Smith-Lovin, 1995; Stryker, 2004; Swann, 1999; Thoits, 1990. In this literature, it is argued that conformity or connection to others at a behavioural or cognitive level is fundamentally emotional in nature; group involvement and the enactment of a group identity is considered to be both a behavioural and cognitive as well as an emotional experience (Blumer, 1969; Collins, 1990; Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Shitbutani, 1961). As people are believed to be motivated to minimise disequilibrium between the self and its environment, it is argued that upon joining a ‘group’ new members employ ‘dissonance management strategies’ to resolve the discrepancy between how they feel, want to act or what they believe and what they are expected to feel, do or believe (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Pollak & Thoits, 1989; Thoits, 1990). In order to maintain this self-consistency, individuals personally negotiate or manage their ‘conversion’ or ‘identity change’ experience and actively employ strategies to align their selves with the expectations of the new cultural context.

A review of the ‘conversion’ literature shows that the extent to which individuals are perceived as actively engaged in their ‘identity change’ or ‘conversion’ experience varies. Some scholars describe the active way in which members negotiate NRM membership, while others portray a more passive picture of the new recruit. As a contribution to an understanding of the different conversion narratives described in the literature, the current Chapter analyses and compares the ‘conversion’ experiences described by the social and the protected selves in this study, and evaluates the ways in which, and the ease at which, these participants conformed to or aligned their sense of with the groups’ behavioural, cognitive and emotional norms and expectations or group ‘identity’. With some exceptions (Barker, 1997; Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Healy, 2010), individual differences in regard to the ways in which the demand of ‘conformity’ in NRM is experienced and negotiated are mostly neglected in the literature, and the findings outlined in the current Chapter contribute to an understanding of conversion as experienced or negotiated differently depending on individual differences in terms of self-construction.

The current findings suggest that to varying degrees, the participants in this study personally negotiated their conversion experience and were actively engaged in aligning their sense of self with the groups’ norms and expectations. While all participants described membership or adjusting to the groups’ demands as an active process, the data suggest significant variations in regard to the ways in which, or ease with which, conversion or ‘conformity’ to the group ‘identity’ was accomplished. The social selves and the protected selves describe NRM involvement in different ways; in particular they describe the way in which the conflicts or dissonances between the group identity and their previous ‘identity’ or ‘sense of self’ were experienced and managed differently.
As might be expected, the social selves in this study describe group conformity and the management of dissonances between their previous biography and the group identity as relatively straightforward and requiring limited effort. These participants consistently describe membership along the following lines: “I was used to having to fit in so I adjusted easily and the group quickly became me” (Laura). The protected selves, on the other hand, describe conformity as a difficult and effortful process that was to a large degree ‘unsuccessful’. For example, as described by Flora: “I never fully managed to be part of the group and I never felt comfortable, but I thought I could learn a lot from these people”. It is suggested that, for the social selves in this study, conformity to the NRM identity was consistent with their former tendency towards ‘other-directedness’, and was therefore relatively uncomplicated. For the protected selves in this study, who describe histories of heightened independence and difficulties conforming or connecting to others, it appears that conformity to the group identity was a more cumbersome and complicated process. The different ways in which the participants in this study experienced and managed the dissonance between the group identity and their previous sense of self is the examined in this Chapter.

The Social Selves: “The group quickly became me and gave me my identity”

The social narrative suggests that these participants experienced little to no conflict or dissonance between their groups’ expectations and their wider biography, and swiftly adjusted to the behavioural, cognitive and emotional expectations of the group. The limited discomfort or dissonance that was experienced by some of these participants is described as easily resolved through a number of strategies such as denial and ‘cognitive reappraisal’ (Hochschild, 1979). These participants describe conformity to the NRM identity as follows: “My character immediately changed a lot” (Emily), “I saw the guru and thought ‘this is God’; straightaway I thought ‘this is my guru’” (Margaret), “The group quickly became me ... My whole world changed dramatically within days of meeting the group” (Lauren), “They didn’t have any trouble convincing me ... My personality type is all or nothing so I didn’t go in there just a bit at a time; I went in feet first head and all. I gave them all of me... and that didn’t really worry me” (Alice), and “I conformed, most people don’t believe that you can change your morality or that you can change your ethics just like that, but in the right situation you change and you conform” (Nicholas).

These participants describe their conversion experience as a sudden and dramatic change in their lives. For example:
I just felt so euphoric by the end of the weekend. Within a few days of having met these people I felt like I had found part of myself ... I felt on a high and had made all these amazing friends, and had learned all this secret information about how to become really evolved spiritually and about how to be healthy...I never questioned the information; I thought it was all true and was quick to take it all on... I thought the leader was amazing.I became quite fanatical, and I kept reading her books and listening to her tapes ... It made me feel positive. I felt I was doing the right thing and anyone else just didn’t understand... I now had this amazing group of friends, they would do anything for me and I would do anything for them. And that was kind of exciting (Catheline).

I went to this yoga ashram and I was absolutely transported that night. I had never felt like that in my whole life... It was better than any drug experience I have ever had. I went away and thought ‘this is what I’ve been looking for’. I was looking for the Truth and it wasn’t there at university, and it wasn’t in the Christian church, and my whole life changed that night. I thought ‘that’s it’. I dropped out of uni, moved into this house... We were growing vegetables and having communal meals. I had incense and was meditating, just total heaven. I was part of a family (Margaret).

The data suggest that for the social selves in this study conversion was a ‘natural’ process that required little to no effort. Even though some of these participants describe experiencing initial doubts, their descriptions of group membership suggest that these doubts or dissonances between the group identity and their previous identities were minimal and easily resolved. The primary dissonance or conflict management strategy described by these participants appears to be denial, or “pushing away” (Emily) or “ignoring” (Catheline) the doubts and inconsistencies. For example:

You put aside any doubts, and stopped seeing people from the past who would make you doubt... You just kept going ... By being part of the group I became ultra confident in a way I was not before and I am not now, so when I felt doubts I would ignore them... I reminded myself that [group involvement] was the most evolved thing you could ever do, that it solves all the problems in your life and that I was helping humanity ... I wanted to be part of that. I wanted that feeling. I felt like, almost like a purity thing, and I didn’t get that feeling in the normal world(Catheline).

It’s not so much what they had to say that interested me but the whole trip, the non-materialistic viewpoint, the living together, the changing the world with love, I fell for some of these really simplistic statements. They were just such nice young people full of idealism ... I was made to feel so special and I just really bought into the whole thing. Even though there
were thing I didn’t really like… they were all so nice and gave me a fuzzy feeling… I ignored my doubts because I liked that feeling, the sense of belonging I got from being part of something bigger (Lauren).

For these participants, doubts and uncertainty became overridden by a strong need for belonging and emotional connectedness, and that the positive emotions associated with conformity and belonging were more powerful or more important than critical engagement with doubts and inconsistencies. This account of NRM members employing strategies that facilitate group connectedness such as denial and disconnection from conflicting former identities is consistent with previous observations (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Lalich & Tobias, 2006).

In addition to denial, a number of social selves describe how they resolved doubts and inconsistencies through the use of ‘cognitive reappraisal strategies’ (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1990). These participants explain that to help align their previous biography with the NRM identity they engaged in ‘biographical reconstruction’ (Richardson, 2008) by employing the groups’ scripts or discourses that ‘reject’ their former identities in favour of the group identity. They explain that they managed dissonances between their previous biography and the group’s expectations by reinterpreting their life histories in accordance with the ‘script’ provided by the group and its leaders. The dominant dissonance management ‘script’ described by participants regards the positioning of the family of origin as responsible for all the members’ difficulties and the portrayal of the NRM as a solution to these difficulties. As explained by Emily:

*I basically said that from the point that I joined that my life before that point had been terrible. My whole history changed, all of a sudden I viewed that my friends weren’t there for me, my boyfriend only wanted to have a relationship with me because he was feeling lonely and that was the only reason why. It all became distorted which I didn’t see at the time but afterwards I could see that… There was a real trying to disconnect myself from [my family]…. and I was being talked to in the ear ‘every time you speak to your parents you get all upset Emily, can you see what your parents are doing to you, they are making you all upset, you are getting all of this in your ear… So I rang up my parents and told them all the things I had been told about them. I told them how bad an influence they are… I said ‘you know what, you are not my family’… ‘You are not my family, this is now my family. You are dead to me.*

The data suggest that to a large degree these participants accepted or internalised these ‘scripts’ without critical reflection. For example:
You’re not encouraged to think for yourself but fed all these explanations and rationalisations that everything that happens to you is meant to happen… Rather than working it out for myself, when I had doubts they would say ‘it’s all your Karma’ or God’s will or whatever and I willingly accepted that (Margaret).

I just said to myself ‘this is a greater purpose’…Looking back now I was told a lot of that and I just accepted it. They would say ‘this is a greater purpose, this is more important, don’t you think Emily?’ And if you said no you would get challenged and I didn’t want to get challenged because I hated conflict so I accepted it and lived accordingly (Emily).

If you had doubts they would say ‘stop thinking, start feeling’. So I did… Every time I had a thought I’d remind myself not to dwell on it (Catheline).

In addition to denial and cognitive reappraisal, a number of social selves describe their efforts in converting others or proselytising and isolating themselves from non-members as ways in which they endeavoured to resolve doubts and uncertainty. For example:

I became like [the leader] in the way I would approach other people. I think sometimes if you doubt what you are believing you become dogmatic about it. When you have questions but you can’t express them you become more legalistic and more dogmatic because you are trying to make it ok. I became quite legalistic. I remember one of the women at school had a miscarriage and to my absolute shame I rang her up and said that it was because she was sinful and she’d let in a demon and God was punishing her (Trudy).

[Since joining the group] I had become a lot more aggressive, instead of having conversations with my parents I was arguing with them a lot more, instead of perhaps just disagreeing on something and leaving it at that it was more like you have to come around to my opinion, this is the Truth, this is what is right … I am living a right life and you need to as well… My moral standards had gone through the roof, so anything that could have been possibly deemed as immoral in any sort of way I took way out of proportion and accused a lot of people… To prove that I was 100 percent committed to the group I broke off all contact with my parents in the end, because they didn’t believe in the Truth … I think that’s how I managed my underlying doubts. I needed closure (Emily).

Consistent with previous observations (Gal & Rucker, 2010; Hogg, 2000; Mahaffy, 1996; Saroglou, 2002) the findings suggest that for the social selves in this study conversion was motivated by a desire for emotional connectedness or group belonging, and personally negotiated through the use of
dissonance management strategies such as denial, adherence to the group discourses, proselytising and selective interaction. The social narrative is consistent with a conceptualisation of individuals as highly socially embedded and motivated to align their sense of self with social and cultural expectations. A rich body of SI literature presents a highly ‘other-directed’ and socially conformist conceptualisation of the self, and demonstrates the ways in which individuals ‘actively’ conform to the behavioural expectations and discourses of the groups in which they socialise. From this perspective, group conformity is not perceived as purely caused by powerful external pressures, but individuals are understood as actively engaged in their change experience, motivated to conform and experience the positive emotions associated with group belonging (Adler & Adler, 1991; Armato & Marsiglio, 2002; Burke, 2006; Burke & Stets, 1999; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Stets & Burke, 2000; Stryker, et al., 2000). In accordance with this literature, it is suggested that although the social selves in this study were somewhat vulnerable to the desire to conform, they were not just passive victims of powerful external pressures such as ‘brainwashing’, but were actively involved in their conversion experience. It is therefore suggested that for these participants group conformity can be attributed to both social pressures and the active role of the individual.

Even though the social selves are conceptualised as actively engaged in their conversion experience, motivated to align their sense of self with the group demands, the findings suggest that for these participants this was not an ‘effortful’ process as is sometimes suggested in the literature. Identity change in response to new cultural demands is sometimes described as emotionally and cognitively taxing, and terms such as ‘emotional labour’ and ‘cognitive effort’ are commonly used to depict this process (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Thoits, 1990). Challenging a conceptualisation of ‘conformity’ or conversion as effortful, the social narrative depicts the alignment of the self with NRM demands and the resolution of doubts and dissonances as easily achieved through ‘denial’ and the ‘unquestioning’ acceptance of the groups’ norms and expectations. The social narrative portrays membership as an emotionally satisfying experience that required minimal ‘cognitive effort’. Further supporting this observation, a number of social selves suggest that the positive emotions associated with membership inhibited critical engagement in that these positive emotions were interpreted as evidence of the group’s supremacy. As observed by Margaret “I figured they were right because it felt so good... It’s this feeling of being part of a group ... Being part of a group is like a drug... I accepted my feelings as evidence that we were doing the right thing so I didn’t really think about it much”. The suggestion that individuals who are highly dependent on others for their construction of selves are sensitive to social influence and easily conform to group pressures is consistent with previous observations (Hochschild, 1983; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Riesman, et al., 1950).

In line with the activist understanding of conversion, the social narrative suggests that conformity was personally motivated and negotiated; however, even though considered personally ‘managed’ for the
social selves in this study conversion was emotionally ‘driven’ and required minimal effort. With its emphasis on ‘emotions’ over ‘cognitive effort’, the social narrative is consistent with a growing body of literature that recognises the salience of emotions to social activism or social movement participation (Aminzade & McAdam, 2002; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; King, 2006; Melucci, 1996; V. Taylor, 2000; Yang, 2000).

The Protected Selves: “It was all a game, I was just pretending”

Unlike the social selves, the protected selves in this study do not describe conversion as an ‘effortless’ process but portray the demand of conformity in NRM membership as a source of considerable stress and discomfort. The data suggest that, for these participants, attempting to align their sense of self with the group identity was a difficult and troublesome experience, and these difficulties are conceptualised as related to their strong sense of autonomy and individuality. These participants describe experiencing significant discomfort and dissonance between their ‘selves’ and the group identity; a discomfort that for most of these participants lasted the duration of group affiliation. Struggling to internalise the group identity as their own, for many of these protected selves, the groups’ expectation of ‘conformity’ was met through the use of impression management strategies or ‘pretending’, rather than the more ‘genuine’ emotional and cognitive participation described by the social selves. It is argued that while these participants conformed to the groups’ expectations at a behavioural level, many of these protected selves remained cognitively and emotionally separate or ‘disconnected’, albeit to varying degrees.

The data suggest that, for the protected selves in this study, conversion or ‘conformity’ was not the seemingly ‘natural’ response to new social expectations described by the social selves; instead, these participants describe ‘conformity’ as a complicated, stressful and mostly ‘unsuccessful’ experience. While the most common narrative of membership described by the social selves was “the group quickly became me”, the protected selves argue that they remained ‘separate’ from the group and maintained their sense of individuality and autonomy throughout involvement. For these participants comments such as “In reality I still had my sense of self” (Joe), “I was still very much in touch with where I came from and what I was like” (Flora), “I was committed into it... but I had my own mind left” (Julie), “I never fitted in” (Michelle), “I maintained a sense of survival... that stopped me losing myself” (Kerry), and “[Others] swallowed the whole thing hook, line and sinker, but I didn’t” (Michael) were common. To varying degrees these protected selves explain that despite their desire and efforts to do so, they struggled to align their thoughts and feelings to the group’s expectations, and never “fitted in”. As noted by Flora: “I didn’t fit in ... I felt like an adopted black child in a white
family, you feel different. There was no question that I was different and didn’t fit in, and when I tried I was a failure … I never really fitted in, and it wasn’t because of a lack of trying” (Flora).

These protected selves describe membership as an uncomfortable experience. Unlike the social selves who describe membership as emotionally satisfying, the protected selves comment that they found the experience stressful and emotionally and intellectually exhausting. Comments such as “I wasn’t very happy for any of it. I felt like I was split into two... between what I believed and felt and what was expected of me” (Michelle), “I was incredibly stressed. There is nothing more exhausting than trying to be something you’re not” (Joe), “I was wound up tight” (Michael) and “I didn’t feel good, never” (Adam) were common. While it appears that for the social selves initial discomforts and conflicts were resolved easily, the protected selves describe the experience and management of discomfort and doubts as an ongoing challenge. These participants explain that they struggled to resolve dissonances between their personal thoughts and feelings and the groups’ expectations, and never experienced a sense of belonging. As noted by Adam: “I must say I was very doubtful, very critical of [the leader]. I just thought there were other things in life than just being in this group that claimed to know everything ... Those doubts were always present for me. Other people didn’t seem to struggle with this as much, but for me the doubts never went. I was a difficult member and always remained a bit separate”. The most common way in which these protected selves describe membership is as an “ongoing battle” (Joe) between “wanting to learn and do the right thing” (William) and “not fitting in” (Flora). As explained by Michael: “I thought maybe I needed to learn some things so that kept me in a bit... I thought I had shit to deal with... I did the lifestyle and I did the running and I did the screaming and the shouting and the belting and the catharsis and the spiritual healing and I did all of it... But I didn’t really believe it ... and I just got more and more stressed out” (Michael).

The observation that individuals who report histories of self autonomy and ‘heightened’ individuality may experience unresolvable dissonance and intense discomfort under conditions in which they are expected to conform is consistent with previous research (Franzese, 2007; S. L. Gordon, 1989; Hochschild, 1983; R. H. Turner, 1976). While in this body of literature it is argued that such discomfort is most effectively resolved through disaffiliation, as outlined previously, these participants were motivated to sustain NRM involvement in a hope to ‘get fixed’ and resolve their difficulties relating and connecting to others. A central theme in the protected selves’ descriptions of NRM affiliation pertains to the ways in which they attempted to manage the dissonances between their selves and the group identity and alleviate the discomfort caused by their desire to sustain membership and a sense of emotional connectedness when this was in contradiction to their usual sense of self and previous way of relating.
A number of protected selves note that they struggled to ‘accept’ the group discourses and in the first instance attempted to resolve their doubts and discomfort by critically engaging with the groups’ teachings and expectations, primarily by asking questions and seeking clarifications. For example, Michael explains: “I couldn’t just conform and do what everyone else was doing. I wanted to but I’m far too critical a person, I needed it to make sense to me so I started to ask questions”. However, the protected narrative indicates that critical engagement was not an effective conflict resolution strategy, but consistently resulted in “punishment [and] increased discipline” (Joe). As explained by Chris: “I was very careful not to end on the bad side of things because if you did you could be seen as somebody who’s very negative and should be excluded from the group or punished in some way, so I stopped asking questions or being critical”. The protected selves explain that because they were unable to resolve conflict through critical engagement and align their sense of self with the groups’ teaching and practices, they stopped attempting to ‘genuinely’ partake in membership and started to ‘pretend’. Protected selves can be conceptualised as on a continuum, with some pretending more than others, but the protected selves in this study largely describe membership, or at least certain aspects of membership, as an ‘act’.

The protected selves in this study consistently explain that to avoid being “punished” for a lack of conformity and obedience, they started to conform at a purely behavioural level without ‘genuine conviction’ or an emotional investment in the group. They explain: “I didn’t feel good but I made out that I did, I sort of went along with this thing without really being part of it” (Michael), “I never quite went along with the cult stuff, even when I was doing it” (Adam), “I was always bad because I never fully fit in ... I just stayed in the background doing what I had to do” (Kerry), “It was just needing to survive. I never got convinced by the rubbish that was going on, for me it was just I did what I had to do” (William), “I felt like an imposter doing everything” (Michelle), “I was never a member of a cult ... I just pretended to be one” (Lindsay), and “In the group I developed a kind of pseudo-self, a character; I hid myself behind it” (Chris). Unable to ‘genuinely’ resolve dissonances, these participants managed their discomfort by distancing themselves and protecting themselves from the group identity by hiding their perceived ‘true’ sense of self behind a façade of pretence. These participants employed impression management strategies to present selves that on the surface adhered to the group norms and expectations, without really ‘believing’ or ‘feeling’ it. As explained by Joe:

We had to write a diary as part of [the group involvement], and my diary was filled with phrases like ‘fuck this, I’m leaving at the end of the year’, critical thoughts like ‘how can anyone succeed if they have so much pressure and so little time, so little sleep; how are you meant to succeed in that context’. My diaries have a lot of those kinds of comments; but I learned to keep those things to myself... So much of survival in a cult is being really cautious and careful about the way that you present yourself. In that group there was so much
This notion that individuals can manage dissonances between their ‘selves’ and external demands by distancing themselves or protecting themselves from these influences through the use of impression management strategies, sometimes called ‘surface acting’, is well established (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983). Scholars have observed that under certain conditions individuals may use a façade or protective strategies that maintain a separation between ‘the self’ and its social context and ‘protect’ the perceived ‘authentic’ self from social or cultural pressures (Coles, 2008; Denzin, 1987a; Franzese, 2007; Hochschild, 1983; R. H. Turner, 1976). Challenging conceptualisation of the self as highly socialised and culturally embedded, from this perspective it is argued that individuals are capable of maintaining a separation between their selves and the networks or groups in which they are embedded through the use of impression management strategies (George, 1998; Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963). While the social narratives support the dominant conception of the selves as highly influenced by the groups in which they are embedded, the protected narrative suggests that some individuals may maintain a distinct sense of separateness from their social context, even in a NRM setting where conformity is demanded. This observation is often unrecognised in the literature.

In line with previous observations it is argued that the façade of ‘devoted NRM member’ should not be mistaken for genuine conviction, and that attention needs to be paid to the ways in which NRM members remain separate from the group identity (Balch, 1980; Kilbourne & Richardson, 1989). This is consistent with observations made by a number of social movement scholars that, with the dominant view of the self as highly socially influenced, the study of the ways in which the self remains separate from its social networks remains neglected and in need of urgent attention (Broad, 2002; Passy & Giugni, 2000; Snow & McAdam, 2000). These scholars challenge highly conformist conceptions of the self and argue that even under conditions where the personal construction of meaning is discouraged or inhibited and conformity or uniformity of behaviours is expected, individuals continue to personally negotiate their construction of self and maintain a sense of individuality.

The extent to which protected selves remained ‘separate’ from group involvement varied. While the majority protected their ‘selves’ from the group identity through behavioural strategies, five out of the 11 protected selves, from hereon called the managed selves, also employed strategies that facilitated a cognitive and emotional connection to the group. The reason for this distinction within the cohort loosely constructed as protected selves is that those participants identified as managed selves describe a shift away from heightened personal autonomy towards increased social connectedness. While initially ‘conformity’ was purely behavioural, these ‘managed’ selves, in time and through effort,
were able to connect to the group at a cognitive and emotional level and gradually started to develop an increased sense of belonging or social connectedness. The ways in which they managed to extend behavioural participation to a more ‘deeper’ level involvement is outlined in Chapter 13.

**Conclusion**

Challenging theories that depict NRM members as passive victims or recipients of powerful external influences, the current findings support the activist understanding of conversion and suggest that the participants in this study were personally and actively involved in their NRM experience, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees. While all participants are understood as actively involved in membership, the findings suggest significant variations in regards to the ‘conversion’ experience, in particular pertaining to the ways in which the dissonances between the group identity and a previous sense of self were experienced and managed.

The findings suggest that the social selves in this study, with a tendency towards ‘other-directedness’ and motivated to establish a sense of belonging or emotional connectedness to the group, employed a number of dissonance management strategies and easily and swiftly internalised or embraced the group identity as their own. It appears that for these participants ‘conversion’ or conforming to the group demands was an emotionally ‘driven’ and satisfying experience that required little cognitive effort. On the other hand, the narrative of the protected selves suggests that, for these participants, conversion or conformity to the group demands was an effortful and emotionally and cognitively taxing experience. Unlike the social selves who easily adjusted their selves in accordance with the NRM identity, the findings suggest that for the protected selves the expectation of conformity was negotiated through the use of impression management strategies, while to varying degrees their ‘true’ thoughts and feelings remained hidden behind a façade of pretence.

In addition to highlighting variations in regard to the way in which ‘conversion’ can be experienced and negotiated, the social and the protected narrative also contributes to the existing NRM literature in their emphasis on emotions over cognitions or behaviours. The data suggest that membership was primarily an emotional experience, centred around the achievement of emotional connectedness for the social selves and the maintenance of emotional and cognitive autonomy for the protected selves. This observation challenges the common conception of NRM affiliation as ‘caused’ by dramatic ‘changes’ in the new recruit’s behaviours and thoughts, or even ‘personalities’ (Hassan, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003). Challenging common discourses of membership, the findings suggest that for the majority of the participants in this study membership did not instigate dramatic self or ‘personality’ changes; albeit to varying degrees, the participants in this study ‘maintained’ their
existing or pre-involvement ‘selves’. The social narrative suggests that throughout membership these participants maintained their pre-membership selves as highly dependent on others. While this narrative suggests that they adjusted their thoughts and behaviours to the group demands, the ease at which they conformed appears consistent with their former emotional, cognitive and behavioural dependency on others. Similarly, while the protected selves adjusted their behaviours to the group demands, the data suggest that, albeit to varying degrees, they maintained or ‘protected’ their personal beliefs and feelings from the group influences. These findings challenge the notion of ‘conversion’ as a ‘genuine’ and dramatic change in self resulting from NRM membership, and suggest that conformity to the behavioural expectations of a NRM can also be understood as consistent with their existing patterns of relating.

While consistent with the activist understanding of ‘conversion’ membership is understood as personally negotiated by the participants in this study, for the majority of the participants ‘active’ engagement centred around the maintenance of existing selves rather than self-change as is commonly suggested in the literature. Even though much of the NRM literature has focussed on the ways in which membership ‘changes’ the new recruit’s behaviours and thoughts, consistent with previous observations (Kemper, 1990) the data suggest that for the participants in this study membership was a fundamentally emotional experience centred around the maintenance of existing patterns of connectedness or isolation. The following Chapter evaluates the participants’ disaffiliation experiences.
**Chapter 9**

**Disaffiliation from a NRM: The importance of self and others in exit**

Challenging the popular belief that people who join NRMs or ‘cults’ become ‘entrapped’ and need to be rescued by ‘trained professionals’ (Hassan, 2000; Singer, 2003), the vast majority of empirical evidence suggests that most people who join NRMs simply walk away after some time (Barker, 1981, 1984; Richardson, et al., 1986). Even though most sociological studies have focussed on the conversion process, some attempts have been made to understand disaffiliation from NRMs (Beckford, 1978, 1985; Boeri, 2002; Brinkerhoff & Burke, 1980; Bromley, 1998a; Solomon, 1981; Wright, 1998). Most of this literature has found that disaffiliation is most commonly initiated voluntarily by the member after a period of doubt and uncertainty, but may also occur as the result of ‘an intervention’ by a trained professional, called ‘exit counselling’ (formerly referred to as ‘deprogramming’) or expulsion (Beckford, 1985; Robbins, 1988a).

The majority of this literature describes disaffiliation as an extended and gradual process that is personally negotiated by the member when doubts and dissonances become unresolvable. This literature suggests that prior to disaffiliation members will go through some effort to resolve doubts and uncertainties by employing coping strategies such as denial and avoidance, and that, when possible, disaffiliation is avoided until such strategies fail and doubts can no longer be resolved privately. In addition to unresolvable doubts, scholars have found that disaffiliation commonly occurs in the context of a ‘crisis’ or an ‘event’ and the availability of alternate ‘identities’ or social networks that can facilitate or ease the exit process (Balch, 1985; Bromley, 1991, 1997, 2004; Bromley & Shupe, 1986; Coates, 2009; Goldman, 1995; Healy, 2011; Jacobs, 1987, 1989; Mauss, 1998; Melton, 1992; Richardson, 2008; Rothbaum, 1988; Skonovd, 1983; Wright, 1987, 1988, 1991). With the aim of contributing to the relatively limited study of disaffiliation from NRMs, the current Chapter analyses the disaffiliation narratives recounted by the social and protected selves in this study.

Consistent with previous observations, the current findings identify doubts and disillusionment as integral to disaffiliation, but insufficient on its own to warrant exit. Analysis suggests that for the majority of participants in this study ‘having doubts’ alone was not strong enough a reason to leave behind “a community of friends” (Richard) or “the promise a better life” (Michael), and disaffiliation was avoided until an alternate ‘identity solution’ or social network became available, emotional exhaustion or a ‘crisis’ occurred. These various conditions under which exit occurred are
conceptualised as related to the different ways in which the participants in this study experienced and managed the doubts and dissonances associated with NRM membership. Even though all participants in this study describe experiencing doubt and discomfort, analysis of the disaffiliation narratives suggests that the social and the protected selves in this study experienced and negotiated or resolved these doubts and dissonances in different ways, and this is argued to be important to understanding disaffiliation.

The findings suggest that the social selves in this study were good at resolving doubts and avoiding exit, and this is understood as related to their desire or need to avoid an ‘identity crisis’ and maintain their sense of self as a member of a group. Analysis of the social narrative indicates that for these participants exit only occurred when an alternate ‘other’ or ‘identity solution’ became available in which they could anchor their sense of self, or when group level changes caused a ‘crisis’ that could not be resolved through sustained commitment. The protected narrative, on the other hand, portrays membership as an ‘identity disconfirming’ experience that was motivated by a desire for self-change. These participants describe NRM membership as an emotionally draining and difficult experience characterised by ongoing discomfort and a sense of displacement. The findings suggest that for the majority of these participants disaffiliation was caused by ‘burnout’ or the emotional exhaustion associated with attempted self-change. Only a small minority of these participants describe exit as a planned and strategic decision upon the achievement of the membership goals, namely an increased sense of connectedness to others, and the availability of a new and deemed more appropriate social network.

It is proposed in this Chapter that the reluctance of the social selves to disaffiliate can be understood as related to the centrality of the NRM to their sense of self, while the ‘eagerness’ of the protected selves to disaffiliate may reflect a desire for ‘authenticity’ as autonomous and independent individuals. On average, and in support of this argument, the social selves remained committed to the NRMs for a longer period than the protected selves. While many of the social selves in this study were members of their respective groups in excess of 10 years, the majority of the protected selves disaffiliated after 3-7 years of membership. This supports and provides further evidence for previous observations that the extent to which cultural environments support or confirm or disconfirm group members’ self-conceptions may impact on the likelihood and causes of disaffiliation (Passy & Giugni, 2000; Walsh, Russell, & Wells, 1995). The different disaffiliation narratives recounted by the participants are outlined in this Chapter.
“I realised I’d made a mistake, the ‘Truth’ was elsewhere”: The narrative of the Social Selves

The social narrative suggests that exit was generally avoided until an alternate ‘identity solution’ became available. Despite doubts and uncertainty, these participants were motivated to maintain their sense of self as a member of the NRM, and when possible, they resolved doubts privately through the use of strategies such as denial and cognitive reappraisal. The data indicates that for these participants exit was avoided until an alternate ‘identity solution’ or other in which to anchor the self became available, or when, due to internal changes in the group, new doubts or dissonances developed that could not be resolved through ongoing membership, which resulted in either expulsion or reluctant voluntary exit.

Consistent with previous findings, the primary theme in the disaffiliation narratives recounted by these participants pertains to the experience and management of doubt. The majority of these participants describe doubt as ‘cyclical’ throughout membership; they note that previously ‘resolved’ doubts consistently became replaced by ‘new’ doubts. In line with examples outlined in the literature (Wright, 1987) participants describe the circumstances that instigated ‘new’ doubts to include leadership or group level changes, becoming familiar with group practices that had previously remained hidden, the recognition of conflicts in the teachings, and inconsistencies between the ideal of the group and the actions of the leaders. In line with these examples, Margaret recounts that she experienced ‘new’ doubts when “the guards on the gates became armed” and when she witnessed fellow members have mental breakdowns and were “shunted off to the local psychiatric hospitals”. Emily explains that she has started to doubt the assertion made by the group that God wanted her to reject her previous friends and family as only the group members “were chosen”. Richard explains that he had started to experience doubts when reflecting on whether the group environment was ideal for his children. He comments: “I could see my children were being manipulated and I didn’t want that. I went into it through my own choice, I got involved in this, but what I began to see was that my children didn’t have that choice. They were born into it and they were being channelled so I started to have some doubts”. Nicholas explains that he had started to experience doubts when he observed inconsistencies between the ideals of the group and the reality of group life. He explains:

Before I joined they said the only authority they had was the Bible, it’s nothing else. But in time it became evident that this was not the case. I had listened to enough of their teachings to understand that a lot of what they had told me before I joined didn’t match up with what they actually believe in. More importantly than that, the life that they claim to have, I could now
see the inequality and inaccuracy in it. They talked about coming into their family and never being lonely again, but everywhere I went there were the outcasts who nobody liked.

Furthermore, in line with comments made by other social selves, Nicholas adds that he had started to question the value of group practices such as the physical discipline of children and the prohibition of seeking appropriate medical care, which jeopardised the life of one of his children. Nonetheless, despite their descriptions of these doubts and uncertainties in the context of ‘disaffiliation’, these social selves observe that ‘having some doubts’ did not significantly hinder their commitment to the group, and definitely was not ‘troublesome’ enough to motivate exit. Comments such as “some of it started to annoy me a bit, but it was ok” (Gabrielle), “I saw a few things I became unsure about, but that’s not when I left” (Margaret). “I missed my friends at times, but I reminded myself that what I had in the group was of greater importance” (Emily) were common. These participants explain that, when possible, they resolved their doubts within the context of the NRM and sustained commitment.

In particular, as described previously, the social selves in this study describe managing or resolving their uncertainties through the use of strategies such as denial and avoidance, and rationalisations or reinterpretations. They explain that to substantiate rationalisations or reinterpretations the groups commonly provided members with appropriate ‘scripts’, which they argue were carefully developed to facilitate the resolution of doubts and encourage ongoing commitment. The social selves in this study provide numerous examples of the way in which they managed to resolve doubts and avoid exit through engagement with such ‘scripts’. For instance, when Nicholas expressed difficulties ‘believing’ in some of the group practices, he was informed that it’s ok not to believe at times, but it’s important to manage this by “holding onto someone else’s belief”. When Margaret struggled to accept the treatment of members with mental health problems she was provided with a ‘script’ that justified this treatment on accounts of “karma” and other such explanations. As observed by Margaret: “Looking at it now I realise how stupid all of it is, but at the time these explanations seemed entirely acceptable. It’s ridiculous, really”.

The social narrative suggests that because of their aptitude at aligning their selves with the group these participants generally managed doubts or dissonances by conforming to the group expectations, and by doing so, carefully avoiding the risk of loss of identity following exit, and maintaining identity ‘security’. This suggestion that exit from ‘identity defining’ environments such as NRMs is difficult and avoided when possible, despite experiences of doubts and ambivalence, is well supported (Davidman & Greil, 2007; Ebaugh, 1988a; Healy, 2011; Jacobs, 1989; Richardson, 2008; Solomon, 1981; Wright, 1987). Even though an obvious and effective way in which doubts or dissonances can be managed or resolved pertains to exiting the environment in which dissonance occurs (Jansz & Timmers, 2002; Mauss, 1998), it is suggested that because of their difficulties with autonomy and
high dependency on others, for the social selves in this study disaffiliation was not a preferred ‘dissonance management strategy’. The data indicates that for most of these participants, exit was avoided until engagement with the group and the group ‘script’ was interrupted, and an alternative ‘script’ or interpretation became available through which dissonances could be resolved. As is demonstrated in the next sections, for those social selves who had maintained some form of connection to non-group ‘others’, or who had become ‘re-connected’ to such identities, reengagement with, or investment in, an alternate identity or ‘other’ facilitated exit. For those social selves who had little or no access to non-group resources, exit occurred as the result of a ‘crisis’, under condition of extreme dissonance or following expulsion.

The role of ‘others’ in facilitating exit

For most of the social selves in this study exit only occurred when dissonance became managed in the context of alternate ‘discourses’ or a (re)connection to pre-involvement identities or alternative groups. Alternate discursive resources facilitated exit by allowing engagement with a non-NRM ‘script’. For example, Trudy explains disaffiliation in the context of engagement with a workshop run by a Christian women’s group, which offered her an alternate perspective to the one offered by the group. She explains:

I’d joined a Christian women’s group ... They were doing a workshop called Boundaries ... The women were learning to be more empowered by setting boundaries and I remember the first lecture I went to, the first sentence was ‘you can say no’... That was a profound turning point for me because I had lost the ability and the belief that I had the right to say no to any of the churches demands. I kept going to that group and eventually I said to my ex-husband ‘I’m not going to your church anymore’.... When you’re in a cult you think what you’re experiencing is normal a lot of the time, and I thought ‘this is normal ... but when I started mixing with these other Christian women I thought ‘Oh My God, this is so not normal’ and it really shocked me... Also, one of my friends said ‘what you are into Trudy is child abuse’ and that really hit me, I hadn’t thought of it that way.

Similarly, despite experiences of dissonance and doubt, for Margaret exit was avoided until an alternate explanation or interpretation of the group became available. She explains:

I went into Bangalore and I went to this coffee shop and the American in there said ‘what are you doing still in that cult?’ I thought: what! He said, don’t you realise that he sexually
abuses the boys, and it only took me a second. One minute I was a believer, and the next I wasn’t a believer and never budged. I thought ‘I’ve been totally conned’. He’s demonic. I went from one extreme to the other. Now everything makes sense. I thought I had just woken, up, finally seeing things clearly. I was in an absolute panic, I have to get my stuff and get out of here. I felt tormented. He’s not God so he must be the devil. Someone is going to chase me down… I’m on a spiritual journey, and I met up with the devil.

For these participants exit was avoided until non-group ‘identity’ resources became available through which they could interpret their experiences. This suggestion that individuals may engage with discursive resources for their construction of self is consistent with a body of SI literature that positions contemporary discourses as primary ‘others’ that inform and influence the individuals’ sense of self (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

The analysis also identified the availability of alternate social networks, in particular pre-involvement social networks, a different NRM or Church, and the ACM, as having facilitated or prompted exit for some of these participants. For example, Nicholas describes exiting in the context of his parents’ efforts in re-establishing a relationship with him, and the way in which they reminded him of the person he had been prior to involvement. He explains that interaction with his parents re-connected him to, and reminded him of, previously important identities. This he describes as gradually strengthening his previous sense of self, while weakening the importance of the NRM identity. Similarly, Alice explains that exit occurred when she was faced with the risk of losing her marriage and the friendship networks in which she had been previously embedded; the risk of divorce reminded her of the many happy years of marriage she had enjoyed prior to membership. Alice describes that a recommitment to her marriage and her previous friendships prompted, and, in turn facilitated exit. While, like Nicholas and Alice, some social selves describe a reconnection to previous identities as facilitating exit, others describe exit as facilitated by interaction with a new religious group. As explained by Max:

*What happened for me … one Sunday I heard the singing of a church we used to drive by, and I thought I’d like to go there. So we went. The minister came to me in the middle of his sermon and said a few words about being brought out of a darkness … the words were so right…. I didn’t make a conscious decision to say to the [group] I’m leaving. I didn’t walk as much as I was led to what I would regard as a proper Christian faith; a faith with Joy… My transition was more that I had a lucky escape… It wasn’t the case of me leaving and going into a vacuum. I was simply led into something else.*
Consistent with previous observations, analysis also identified interaction with the ACM as important to understanding disaffiliation (Bromley, 1998a; Mauss, 1998; Richardson, 2008). However, despite an emphasis on the role of the ACM in disaffiliation in the NRM literature, only one of the participants in this study describes disaffiliation in the context of engagement with the ACM. While many of the participants describe interaction with the ACM after exit had already occurred, only Emily describe exit as facilitated by the ACM. As is outlined in Chapter 10, for Emily exit occurred through ‘exit counselling’ in which she was offered a reinterpretation of her NRM experience, based on the brainwashing thesis. While Emily attributes exit to her experiences with ‘exit counselling’, she observes that ‘exit counselling’ did not so much instil doubts as resolve already existing doubts. Challenging the common observation that interaction with the ACM instigates doubts (Bromley, 1998a; Mauss, 1998; Richardson, 2008) Emily’s narrative suggests that, while interaction with the ACM may have initially increased doubts, engagement with anti-cult discourses was prompted by already existing doubts and discomfort. She notes:

_They pointed out all these things that made me realise how much was wrong with that group, but it wasn’t anything that I didn’t kind of already know, I just didn’t know what to do with it... In a sense they gave me answers to questions that I already had, even though I didn’t admit that._

For Emily, rather than having caused exit through the implantation of doubts and dissonance, interaction with the ACM facilitated exit in its provision of an avenue through which doubts could become resolved. Emily describes the brainwashing discourses as helpful in offering a solution to already existing dissonances, in particular pertaining to the tensions between her ‘devotion’ to the group on the one hand, and the doubts she experienced in terms of the legitimacy of some of the claims made by the group on the other. In addition to providing discursive resources through which she could resolve uncertainties, the ACM also provided Emily with an identity as ‘anti-cult crusader’ in which she anchored her sense of following exit. In this way, for Emily, the ACM served both a discursive and ‘social network’ function; the ACM provided discursive resources for self-construction as well as a community of ‘others’ in which she could anchor her sense of self. The role of exit counselling and the ACM in facilitating exit and adjustment to life after NRM membership is explored in detail in the next Chapter.

Even though from an SI perspective the multiplicity of others used for self-construction is recognised, the extent to which selves are understood as anchored in multiplicity and diversity varies (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Thoits, 1983, 2003b). While some selves are considered highly diversified, as previously argued, the social selves in this study are conceptualised as highly dependent on ‘stable’ others for the construction of ‘stable’ selves. Consistent with their perceived dependency on
‘authoritarian’ or ‘controlling’ parents during childhood, and a stable NRM identity during membership, the social exit narratives describe disaffiliation as negotiated in the context of different relatively ‘stable’ others in which they could anchor their sense of self. This observation is consistent with previous findings which most commonly describe disaffiliation as negotiated in the context alternate ‘others’. NRM scholars have found that disaffiliation most often occurs when the members’ isolation from the outside world becomes disrupted, and when members establish new social networks or reconnect to previous friendship groups (Healy, 2011; Richardson, 2008; Wright, 1987). In line with current observations, Richardson (2008) describes exit as a gradual process whereby doubts become resolved through gradual distancing from the group identity, and strengthening of new or previous identities.

In accordance with SI theorising, the social narrative suggests that, for the majority of the social selves in this study, disaffiliation, and the ensuing loss of a primary source of identity, was negotiated in the context of alternate resources for self-construction or ‘identity solutions’. Consistent with their perceived high dependency on others in their construction of self, these participants avoided the loss of a primary source of identity, namely the NRM, until alternate identity resources became available. As demonstrated, the findings indicate that for some exit was negotiated in the context of discursive identity resources, while others relied primarily on the availability of new or former social networks. With an alternate ‘other’ available for self-construction, the potentially overwhelming identity uncertainty following the loss of a primary source of identity was evaded or at least lessened (Thoits, 1999, 2003b). While most of the social selves in this study exited in the context of alternate ‘others’, it appears that a number of social selves had limited or no access to non-NRM resources, and the findings suggest that for these participants exit was delayed until the conditions became ‘unbearable’ or expulsion occurred. The experiences of these participants are described in the next section.

**Disaffiliation in the context of a crisis**

Those participants who exited without the availability of alternative resources for self-construction describe disaffiliation as particularly troublesome (Bromley, 2004; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Richardson, 2008). The five social selves in this study who did not describe disaffiliation as facilitated by interaction with an alternate ‘other’ portray exit as an overwhelming and painful experience that occurred in the context of excessive and unresolvable conflict. These five participants had all been members of their respective groups in excess of ten years, each describing their sense of self and social life as entirely tied up with the group. As they were highly invested in a NRM and lacked alternate others these social selves avoided exit until dissonance was excessive or expulsion occurred.
The primary circumstance described by these participants that generated sufficient dissonance to warrant exit pertains to a dramatic change in their own status as a member of the group. Those social selves who left voluntarily, but without the availability of an ‘identity solution’, frequently describe exit as related to the conflict or distress caused by first being promoted to leadership roles and then demoted. Gabrielle, Thomas, and Lauren explain that the loss of a leadership identity that had become integral to their sense of self, combined with an expectation to re-conform to a lower status identity, caused unresolvable dissonance that instigated exit. For example, as described by Thomas:

_We were pretty dedicated so were promoted to middle leadership. We really noticed how there was a big difference with how people treated you. From one day to the next we were treated with total respect, and total obedience. Just because you were made a leader so God was now speaking to you. So everyone, from one day to the next, wanted to know your thoughts on everything, from their relationships, you have power over people’s marriages. You could tell people to separate and you could send people from one town to another and they’d go, you had total power over people’s lives. So now we had about 90 adults at our command ... After three years of that we were seen to be disobedient and it was also decided that all leadership should be demoted to teach humility and we were part of that. We were now taken to task on all kind of little things, including washing the dishes. All responsibility stripped away. You were treated as nothing basically. I wasn’t even trusted to count the literature. So we had no faith put in us, all responsibility taken away, and all we heard was criticism so I was pretty much a basket case... Our kids were even more over-disciplined, physical punishment was ok, the belt was quite ok to use and it was important to have your children toe the line because if they didn’t this was a reflection of your spirituality and you were taken to task even more. A big crunch came when our kids then contracted measles and I didn’t quarantine them effectively and we infected the whole town. I was the devil incarnate then. That led to us leaving the group._

Lauren, Thomas’ wife also described the changed expectations following demotion as leading to exit. She notes:

_We now lived in this small crappy apartment with this really cruel, harsh leadership over us, picking us apart... The group had also taken a very introspective turn where we had to sit around in circles and spill our guts about what was really on our mind, and we now had to do homework and write diaries, and hand them in to your superior the next morning and they would say things like ‘you could do better there’ and ‘read this passage in the Bible’ and ‘I don’t think you should say that to your partner’ and ‘you’re not a good mother to your_
children’ and ... It was a pretty intense time... We now also had to follow all these rules on how you wash the dishes, on how many pieces of toilet paper you’re allowed to use, how to raise your kids, how you spank your kids, what you say to your partner in bed, how to make love, how to do everything. We were never good enough, we tried really hard to be good enough, and we just weren’t, and that started to wear on me... We set an ultimatum that by a certain date, if things weren’t any better we would go back to Australia and take a break from the group... The time after we got demoted was the time I was unhappiest in the group. My kids are still saying ‘that’s the time that you cried every day’. And it was” (Lauren).

Similarly, Gabrielle also describes her experience of exit in terms of first being promoted to eldership, and then demoted. She notes:

So I was told that now I no longer had my responsibilities. ‘We’ve reassessed the role of women in the congregation and we’ve decided that you no longer can have these responsibilities’. So they tore away the stuff that I was enjoying doing... First I was an elder, now they treated me like a child in need of guidance... I couldn’t accept that.

For these participants the dissonance between an identity as leaders and an identity as obedient followers was too hard to consolidate and resulted in exit. Despite the centrality of the NRM identity to these social selves’ sense of self, the level of dissonance caused by the loss of a leadership role was sufficiently intense to forego the identity security of the NRM and disaffiliate. The data suggest that without an alternate ‘other’ in which to anchor the self and ease disaffiliation and lessen the dramatic loss of identity associated with NRM disaffiliation, these participants employed other ‘identity solutions’; for example, it appears that Thomas and Lauren endeavoured to ‘reduce’ the loss of identity following exit by initially framing their exit as “taking a break”. Thomas and Lauren also exited together which may also have eased the identity transition.

Hillary and Richard also describe struggling with overwhelming dissonance that they could not resolve; in their cases it was not a demotion but family division and unemployment. They explain that, despite doubts and uncertainty, neither of them wanted to disaffiliate without their respective spouses and children so continued their membership. Despite their continuing efforts to conform to the group expectations, they were each expelled. Hillary attributes expulsion to the dissonance she struggled to resolve between her desire to conform to the group’s demands and her desire to remain in contact with her daughter who was no longer a member of the group. She describes:

[My daughter was given] a week to leave our home and the stipulation was that I was not permitted to have any relationship with her whatsoever. I was not even allowed to forward on
letters to her and was not permitted to go and see where she lived. When she walked out of
the door it was like my daughter had walked into nothingness, into a void. For a mother, I
can’t tell you the horror that puts you through… I was considered a wicked, un-submitted,
rebellious woman; because I wouldn’t submit, in their eyes, evicting me from my home was a
discipline strategy to break me… Once I got out, the condition for going back, I had three
conditions, I could go back and live at home provided I obeyed and submitted to my husband
and provided I obeyed and submitted to the elders and provided that I cut off my daughter
and had nothing to do with her. I said to my then husband that I could try to submit to two of
those conditions but I would never cut off my daughter again. He said ‘if you can’t fulfil the
three conditions you are never welcome back’.

Similarly, Richard explains that he was expelled because he struggled to resolve his doubts, and failed
to conform to the group ideal. He notes:

_I had become unemployed after 30 years…. If you weren’t working that was seen as something
wrong with you. You were seen as out of step with God’s word, or you weren’t submitting to
the elders, obeying their word and directions. You were seen to be a person who wasn’t
malleable… I tried to find new work, but it wasn’t easy at my age. I really tried to do as
expected. But I also started missing meetings… I started to draw back because I was
struggled within myself… I was looking to these leaders for guidance, and wanted them to
help me sort out my uncertainties … but they just said I was being rebellious because I was
not working, not fathering my family right; so I was just pushed to the side… I would have
been seen more as a burden rather than an asset… I was kicked out._

Consistent with the current observations, the overall limited theory or research on expulsion
(Beckford, 1985; S. Hunt, 2003) suggests that members are most likely to be expelled when they are
perceived as not totally loyal or opposed to new directions (Jacobs, 1984; Robbins, 1988a). The
current findings contribute to this relatively small body of literature by suggesting that for Hillary and
Richard expulsion was preceded by hard to resolve or unresolvable doubt and conflict.

The narrative of the social self appears, by and large, consistent with the previous scholarship on
disaffiliation. In accordance with previous findings, the current study suggests that for the social
selves in this study exit occurred when doubts could no longer be resolved through coping strategies
such as denial, and most commonly occurred when the participants’ isolation from the outside world
became disrupted and external influences or identity resources became available (Healy, 2011; Mauss,
1998; Richardson, 2008; Wright, 1987), or, less frequently, in the context of irresolvable conflict or a
‘crisis’ (Bromley, 1997, 2004; Skonovd, 1983). The findings suggest that for these participants
disaffiliation was a difficult experience that represented a potential loss of ‘self’ through which they went reluctantly (Bromley, 1997, 2004; Coates, 2010a; Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1991).

Whilst the social selves were able to resolve doubts and dissonances and sustain membership until the occurrence of a ‘crisis’ or the availability of an identity solution, this is not the narrative of the protected selves. They describe the management of dissonance during membership as challenging and stressful due to their strong sense of autonomy and independence. For the protected selves in this study exit was a positive experience that signified a solution to the difficulties of membership, and these experiences are described in the next section.

“I just wanted to be left alone, I was exhausted”: The narrative of the Protected Selves

In opposition to the social selves who depict exit as best avoided in order to maintain ‘identity security’ as a member of a NRM, the protected selves in this study celebrate exit as a positive experience that offered ‘relief’ and an opportunity to be ‘themselves again’. While the social selves describe doubts as ‘cyclical’ and relatively easily resolved until their moment of crisis, the protected selves describe struggling with unresolved doubts and discomfort as primary to their experience of membership. The findings suggest that these participants never successfully ‘resolved’ their doubts and sense of ‘displacement’, and struggled to ‘genuinely’ conform and become emotionally and cognitive connected to, or engaged, with NRM membership. Despite their desire for self-change, the majority of these participants describe ‘conformity’ to the group demands as a façade behind which their genuine beliefs and feelings remained hidden, albeit to varying degrees.

Most of these participants ascribe disaffiliation to the ongoing stress and exhaustion of pretending, combined with the ‘realisation’ that NRM membership was not an effective avenue for self-change. These participants consistently describe disaffiliation along the following lines: “I realised I wasn’t happier than when I first joined, and I got sick of pretending to be something I was not” (Adam), “I realised that [the leader] wasn’t so switched on, and that I was better off on my own … I left because I was no wiser, no better, and very, very stressed out... I was sick of not being me” (Michael), “I couldn’t do it anymore, I was exhausted, I had to pull back. I wanted to be myself again” (Kerry) and “I felt really, really tense, I wasn’t getting better, I was getting worse” (Lindsay).

Similarly, Joe describes disaffiliation in more detail as follows:
My reason for leaving was, I just had a strong feeling that this wasn’t getting me anywhere, I have done all this stuff and all that’s happened was that I’m really tired... I was stressed in the group. The leader could see that I felt awkward around those people, mostly because they were fucking weird. It was like being put in a room with a bunch of people that you don’t like, who spend meetings going on about what’s wrong with you. It’s not a real version of relating to people, it’s just weird. It made me incredibly tense ... Everyone goes to the meetings scared stiff; they might get attacked or abused for like four hours... The group that I was involved with had this thing about accessing which is where you purge emotional baggage that you’ve supposedly picked up from this life, past lives, your parents, that sort of thing. From quite early on I was told repeatedly that I needed to start doing that in order to deal with this difficult period that I was having...I just couldn’t do it ... I always felt that I had to force myself to do and I felt like I could never do it.... It’s a pretty drastic thing when you think your happiness depends on something that you can’t make happen... I was sick of trying to make something happen that wasn’t happening ... tired of doing stuff that never felt right... It created a real dilemma for me, and it was really stressful and it didn’t help me at all.

The findings suggests that, for these participants, disaffiliation was caused by the perceived ineffectiveness of membership as an avenue for self-change combined with the exhaustion and stress of “trying to make something happen that wasn’t happening” (Joe) or ‘pretending’. Related to their reported histories of isolation, independence and autonomy, it is suggested that for the majority of protected selves attempted ‘group life’ and conformity to the NRM demands was sufficiently incongruent with their existing sense of self to cause significant strain and warrant exit, despite not having achieved desired self-change. While these participants describe membership as motivated by a desire for social and emotional connectedness or a sense of belonging, they report also wanting to feel “authentic”. For example, Adam explains: “I wanted to be part of a community, but I also wanted to be able to express myself fully and honestly, and find my authentic way... But there was no room for me to be me”. Only a small subgroup of these participants, the managed selves who will be discussed later in this Chapter, describe exit as a strategic decision following the satisfactory achievement of desired self-change; however, these participants also describe membership as exhausting and stressful and report experiencing a sense of relief when disaffiliation occurred.

While the data suggest that for most of these participants the strain of ‘pretending’ resulted in voluntary exit, Kerry argues that the exhaustion she suffered of “having to pretend all the time” resulted in expulsion. Kerry explains that despite her exhaustion she wanted to remain connected to the group because her children and husband were fellow members. She notes that rather than exiting when the strain of ‘pretending’ became intolerable, she simply stopped pretending, but did not
disaffiliate. Kerry speculates that when she stopped attempting, and pretending to conform, in the eyes of the leader she was perceived as ‘competition’ and was expelled. She describes:

*I just wanted to be me... and that’s why I was disliked so much in there by the women. [The leader] used to say that I didn’t like women and that I’m competitive and this and that, but I wasn’t that, I was just being me and I’m sorry if I don’t look like these people or if they can’t do what I do. She didn’t like it because I was the main contender to her... So she kicked me out* (Kerry).

This notion that ongoing efforts to conform to expectations that are incongruent with internal feelings or thoughts can cause significant distress, stress and exhaustion is well established. A significant body of research has consistently shown that sustained efforts to conform without genuine conviction or a sense of emotional participation through the use of ‘pretence’ strategies such as ‘surface acting’ or ‘impression management’ can result in a sense of ‘self-alienation’ or ‘inauthenticity’ and cause stress, exhaustion and ‘burnout’ (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993; Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Francis, 2003; Grandey, 2000, 2003; Hochschild, 1983; Hussain & Langer, 2003; Parkinson, 1991; Pennebaker, 1985; Thoits, 1985, 1986, 1990; Wharton, 2009).

For these participants exit signified an attempt to resolve their experiences of discomfort and stress and sense of ‘self-alienation’ by ‘reconnecting’ to their tendency towards autonomy and social disconnectedness. Unlike the social selves who describe disaffiliation as a difficult and traumatic experience which signified a ‘loss of self’, these participants describe disaffiliation as a resolution to the discomfort and ‘inauthenticity’ of membership and describe exit as “a relief” (Kerry). This observation is consistent with literature that argues that the most likely and straightforward way in which individuals can resolve the discomfort caused by disequilibrium between their perceived ‘authentic’ sense of self and social or cultural expectations is by exiting the ‘identity disconfirming’ environment (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Jansz & Timmers, 2002; Thoits, 1985; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). For a small subgroup of protected selves this was a deliberate strategy.

Because of their commitment to ‘self-change’ and the development of an increased sense of social and emotional connectedness, for five participants in this study disaffiliation was postponed until they perceived themselves as sufficiently changed through their experiences of membership and had established an alternate social network despite an ongoing sense of displacement and discomfort. Flora explains that despite experiencing the strain and stress of attempted self-change, she spent six years “planning her exit” and “gaining what could be gained”. She notes:
In that transition period I made all new friends, I made social contact; I had a life so I could just walk out. I didn’t walk out and wonder how I was going to cope; the transition was long and deliberate. I knew I would have to do this.

These participants describe exit as a strategic decision following the realisation that that they were no longer gaining from membership, and were now ready to ‘tackle’ other goals that had become important, related to employment and relationships (Vicki, William, Flora, Michelle). Vicki comments “I realised ongoing membership would hold me back from living the life I was now ready to live. To move forward I needed to leave and live life”. This subgroup can be described as ‘managed selves’ because of their deliberate and strategic withdrawal of the situation.

Despite experiencing dissonance, ‘managed selves’ remained committed until desired self-change was achieved. While it is suggested that the protected selves managed the dissonance between their sense of self and the cultural expectations of the group through disaffiliation, due to their high commitment to self-change, the managed selves managed their sense of displacement and discomfort by continuing their efforts in changing their ‘selves’ (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Jansz & Timmers, 2002). The process through which these participants are perceived as having achieved desire self-change is outlined in Chapter 13.

While the social narrative highlighted here appears more developed in the NRM literature, this study also contributes to the argument that disaffiliation from a NRM may be caused by the stress and emotional exhaustion associated with membership (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Namini & Murken, 2009; Skonovd, 1983; Weiss & Mendoza, 1990). This study has established that some of the diversity of accounts of NRM s relates to the different experiences and strategies recounted by former members and argues that the different circumstances under which participants disaffiliated relates to the varying ways in which they construct their sense of self.

Conclusion

Consistent with previous observations, the current findings suggest that for the majority of the former members in this study disaffiliation occurred in the context of doubts and dissonance, and was for many of these participants facilitated by interaction with alternate identity resources. While to a large degree the current study supports previous findings, it goes beyond the existing literature in its focus on the variations in the disaffiliation narratives described by the participants in this study. Although the management of doubts and dissonance was central to disaffiliation for all the participants in this
study, the nature of these dissonances, and the way in which disaffiliation signified a ‘solution’ to these dissonances varied. While the findings depict disaffiliation as a dissonance management strategy, it is suggested that for the social selves in this study the dissonances that precipitated exit were primarily resolved through interaction with non-NRM ‘others’, whereas for the protected selves these dissonances were primarily resolved through a ‘reconnection’ to the self as autonomous.

The social narrative describes doubts and dissonance as relatively minor, primarily caused by organisational changes, inconsistencies in the teachings, or discrepancies in the group’s ideals and practices and easily resolved. Although the findings generally suggest that these doubts were resolved through interaction with the NRM scripts, it appears that exit took place when NRM interaction was interrupted and alternate discourses or other identity resources became available through which dissonances could become resolved. Analysis of the social narratives identified ‘others’ as key to the management of a potential identity loss associated with disaffiliation, and this is conceptualised as related to these participants’ perceived high dependency on others in their construction of self.

Unlike the social selves who describe the conflicts that preceded exit as related to specific group practices or beliefs, the protected selves describe the difficulties that precipitated disaffiliation as pertaining to their experiences of displacement or ‘inauthenticity’ during membership. These participants describe membership as a stressful and emotionally exhausting experience, throughout which they struggled to resolve tensions between the groups’ expectation of conformity and their personal beliefs, feelings and commitment to autonomy. In accordance with the SI study of emotions, it is suggested that for these participants the discrepancy between their sense of self as highly autonomous and their attempts at conformity resulted in the negative emotions that precipitated disaffiliation. Unable to resolve the disequilibrium between their perceived ‘authentic’ sense of self and the NRM’s demands, it is suggested that for these participants disaffiliation was caused by ‘burnout’ and signified a solution to the stress of membership.

This notion that, for some former members, disaffiliation from an identity defining environment may represent ‘a relief’ and a reconnection to an ‘authentic’ sense of self challenges the most common conception of NRM exit as resulting in a dramatic loss of identity. The most common conception of disaffiliation outlined in the existing literature depicts NRM members as highly dependent on the NRM identity for their sense of self, and as reluctant to disengage unless they had already secured an alternate ‘identity solution’ or ‘other’ to inform their sense of self. While this conceptualisation of disaffiliation is supported by the current findings, the protected narrative adds to this body of literature by positing that, for some of the former members, exit signified a solution to the accumulated stress of attempted conformity to social demands that were experienced as incongruent with their exiting sense of self. It appears that, rather than negotiated through interaction with
alternative identity resources, for these participants disaffiliation was negotiated in the context of a reconnection to the self as independent and autonomous. Although the managed selves were similar in many ways to the rest of the protected selves, their narratives suggest that for these participants exit was not motivated by a desire to reconnect to the independent self, nor negotiated in the context of others, but was a strategic and carefully planned decision. This will be outlined further in Chapter 13 where the process through which these participants developed an increased ability to connect is outlined.

Challenging the brainwashing claims which are argued to understate the individuals’ capacity for personal agency (Barker, 1997; Healy, 2011), the current findings depict disaffiliation as a gradual process that was to a large extent personally negotiated by the former members in this study. While the active nature of voluntary exit seems obvious (Healy, 2011; Namini & Murken, 2009; Richardson, et al., 1986), consistent with previous observations, the current study also posits expulsion and exit through exit counselling as to some extent personally negotiated by the participants in this study (Richardson, et al., 1986). As described in the following Chapter, Emily’s exit narrative suggests that she actively engaged with exit counselling in order to resolve already existing doubt and uncertainty, and most of those participants who experienced expulsion attribute being expelled to difficulties resolving doubts and dissonances. In the following Chapter the role of the ACM in disaffiliation is outlined.
Chapter 10

The significance and purpose of the Anti-Cult Movement:
Resources for self-construction or a justificatory ‘account’

While the previous Chapter discussed the experiences of disaffiliation described by the participants and argued that this was largely an intentional and emotional process, the present Chapter addresses their involvement with the ACM discourse of recovery from brainwashing and the need for exit counselling. There is significant evidence to suggest that the majority of NRM members, like those in this study, personally negotiate disaffiliation after some time. Nevertheless, there is a popular belief put forward by the ACM that because ‘cults’ employ psychologically damaging practices such as brainwashing to entrap current members, they need to be rescued by ‘trained professionals’ (Jenkinson, 2008, 2010). While initially the term ACM referred to a group of parents of current members and disgruntled former members, now this term is used more broadly and refers to any professional or group who work with current or former members including helping professionals, pastoral carers, and family- or community based movements (Healy, 2011, p. 3). These professionals almost invariably espouse the brainwashing thesis to some extent in their work (Jenkinson, 2008, 2010; Singer, 2003; Ward, 2002). The current Chapter evaluates the significance and purpose of participation in the ACM or engagement with ACM discourses for the participants in this study.

There has been a process of development in ACMs both worldwide and in Australia. In the 1970s and early 80s the ACM was associated with the practice of ‘deprogramming’ which was designed to cause disaffiliation and involved kidnapping current members from their groups and forcibly detaining them while they were presented with anti-cult information. By the late-1980s, as the result of increased participation of psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers in the ACM, ‘deprogramming’ had become replaced by the allegedly less coercive practice of exit counselling (Aronoff-McKibben, et al., 2000; Kent & Szimhart, 2002; Robbins, 1988b; Shupe & Darnell, 2003). Exit counselling refers to carefully planned information sessions that aim to facilitate disaffiliation by redefining the group and its leader(s) in the eyes of the member. Members are provided with information about the nature of brainwashing and shown films and journalistic writing that depict the group in a negative light (Richardson, 1996; Richardson, et al., 1986; Robbins, 1988a). Although proponents of exit counselling argue that participation is ‘voluntary’, this remains a subject of much debate (Shupe & Darnell, 2003; Wright, 1998). For example, while positing exit counselling as ‘voluntary’, the ‘exit counsellor’ Steven Hassan undermines this assertion when he argues that this practice can be ‘covert’
and suggests that ‘false pretences’ or deception might need to be used to secure the member’s participation in the exit counselling process (Hassan, 1988, p. 123).

While the term ‘exit counselling’ was coined in reference to practices that were specifically designed to instigate disaffiliation from so called ‘cults’ by current members of such groups, the participants in this study used this term more broadly in reference to any type of ‘counselling’ offered by ‘cult aware’ or ‘cult specialised’ health professionals who are informed by the brainwashing thesis in their work. While initially exit counselling was aimed at ‘rescuing’ current members, and frequently based on the exit counsellors’ personal experiences as former members themselves (for example Giambalvo, 1993; Hassan, 2000) this practice has gained some level of professionalism. Former members have started to obtain credentials as counsellors and specialise in what they define as cult-precipitated disorders; they no longer restrict their services to current members but also ‘assist’ with former members of such groups (Bromley, 1998b; Richardson, et al., 1986). Almost invariably, these counsellors argue that for former members to resolve difficulties and successfully ‘recover’ from NRM membership they need to have a comprehensive understanding of the process of brainwashing. From this perspective it is argued that when working with former members the primary task of counselling concerns the ‘undoing’ of the negative impacts of ‘having been brainwashed’; in particular, the elimination or weakening of the ‘cult pseudo identity’ and the strengthening of the perceived ‘pre-cult’ ‘authentic’ self (Dowhower, 1993; Goldberg, 1993; Halperin, 1993; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993a; Markowitz, 1993; P. R. Martin, 1993; Morse & Morse, 1987; Moyers, 1994; Rohmann, 2006; Ward, 2000, 2002; West & Martin, 1994; Whitsett & Kent, 2003).

This specialisation has been criticised for not allowing former members to make sense of their experiences in their own way, and for not recognising that some of the psychological symptoms experienced by former members may be better attributed to the grief or distress resulting from the loss of a social bond rather than best attributed to ‘having been brainwashed’(Boeri, 2002; Coates, 2010a; Healy, 2011; Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1984, 1987). These scholars argue that the continued reliance on brainwashing accounts that construct former members as ‘passive’ victims of abuse is inconsistent with extensive evidence that shows that NRM members are actively involved in membership, and that the use of a victim model of treatment may unduly complicate the therapeutic helping process (Coates, 2009; Healy, 2011).

Little of this sociological critique and debate about NRM and processes of affiliation and disaffiliation is gaining the attention of the ACM. Even though the application of brainwashing to NRM affiliation has consistently been rejected by many of those who study NRM, it has found lasting favour with health professionals and cult information services (Barker, 1997; Coates, 2009;
Despite limited empirical support for its practices, the ACM remains influential, and brainwashing notions of membership are widespread and continue to be promoted by the media, popular literature and a plethora of websites. While previously the influence of the ACM was somewhat restricted to community supports groups and brainwashing informed ‘counselling’, the ACM’s reach becomes increasingly widespread as anti-cult propaganda is now easily disseminated through a wide range of online discussion boards, blogs, internet sites and via emails (Possamai, 2011).

An extensive body of literature has evaluated the impact of the ACM on current and former members of NRMs; this literature shows that, despite its limited empirical support, the influence of the ACM remains extensive, and has a significant impact on the way in which current and former members negotiate the transition from group member to non-group member (Barker, 2007; Bromley, 1988, 1998a, 1998b; Carter, 1998; J. Lewis & Bromley, 1987; Robbins & Anthony, 1982; Shupe, 1998; Shupe, Darnell, & Moxon, 2003; Shupe, Hardin, & Bromley, 1983).

**Anti-cult counselling in Australia**

The vast majority of the ACM literature describes the ACM in the United States (Beckford, 1981, 1985; Shupe, 1998; Shupe & Darnell, 2003; Shupe, et al., 2003; Shupe, et al., 1983), and the study of the Australian ACM appears to have been somewhat neglected. The limited literature specific to anti-cult practices in Australia states that there is no nationwide anti-cult network (Clarke, 2005a), and that negative perceptions of ‘cults’ can, to a large degree, be attributed to the influence of the Australian media which advocates the brainwashing thesis (Richardson, 1996).

While the Australian anti-cult network may not be as well developed as in the United States, there is an anti-cult network in Australia and this is reflected in the experiences of the interviewees. Eleven out of the 23 former members in this study report former or current affiliation or ‘contact’ with the Australian cult information service CIFS. The information available on this cult information service’s website, as well as the accounts provided by those participants who report former or current ACM affiliation, is consistent with the anti-cult practices described in the literature. The findings indicate that the services or practices offered by the Australian ACM include peer support, ‘traditional’ ‘exit counselling’ and counselling offered by ‘brainwashing informed’ health professionals, called ‘anti-cult counselling’ in this work.

All those participants who report former or current affiliation with the Australian ACM describe this network as a peer support group that also offers professional support and education. They note that
while some of the professional services are offered by Australian exit- or anti-cult counsellors, there continues to be a strong dependency or reliance on American anti-cult ‘experts’. In regards to the ‘professional’ services associated with this network, a number of the participants in this study describe their experiences with exit counselling, either as a recipient of this type of counselling or as an ‘assistant counsellor’, as well as their experiences with anti-cult counselling. This Chapter examines some extended accounts of having been involved in exit counselling with the aim of developing a nuanced understanding of the role of the ACM in the lives of the participants. The first account clearly contradicts the ACM narrative that exit counselling is a forceful and necessary way of detaching a member from their cult involvement and asserts that it is itself potentially abusive and cult-like.

Margaret describes her experience as an assistant exit counsellor as one of ethical discomfort in which she plays an ambivalent role as champion of the young woman being ‘counselling’ but also as implicated in an unskilled, exploitative and dangerous process:

[A leading exit counsellor] from the States called me asking whether I would do exit counselling. I said, I’m sorry I am not in this field. He said, don’t worry, I will lead you. It was a bloody disaster. First I had to investigate this group and I’m being paid astronomical amounts of money by this wealthy family just to do research and check out this group. I’m getting paid $80 per hour to do research. I got $20000 for two weeks work. There’s all these phone conferences and there’s the exit counsellor, me and an ex Hara Krishna guy in America, and then there’s this family... They spent a fortune on private investigators for this girl who’s 18, who got caught up with this group. All I knew is that there was potential harm with this group; that was absolutely clear.

Her father talked her into going on a holiday together, so under false pretences she got to meet all of us, including the leading exit counsellor in the world... This poor girl, we are all there, the whole team to rescue the girl... It was the most bizarre experience of my life. We were there one week. It was like a cult experience. I thought I was in a landmark personal development group, trying to break down this girl’s defences. We had these long marathon sessions with her. At first we all met her... she’s in a state of shock. The father had taken away her passport so she can’t leave.... So she’s not physically imprisoned but she really is a mental prisoner, so we all tell our stories, the three of us, the bully brother, sister, parents. What they said to her is all we want is one week. And she agrees.

The sessions start happening and the exit counsellor is the boss; he is a troubled and arrogant man. The long sessions would go all day and all night. I couldn’t do it, I had to get
up and go for a walk. And he had this big screen. He starts showing full on videos, Jim Jones, all these documentaries, the most extreme ones, and all the thought control stuff. She was sitting there and said ‘isn’t it terrible, but it’s nothing like what I’ve experienced’.

It became very clear on the second day that the girl had not been damaged. She hadn’t been sexually abused, she was very brave and courageous and would sit there, with 7 of us ganging up on her. We were full on. Very dangerous. The girl was exhausted, she ran away one day and I found her and brought her back ... I saw her walking and she came up to me and I just started crying and I said ‘I’m sorry, so sorry’. She was upset; she said she felt like she was in a prison. I told her it was not right what we were doing ... She was more hurt by us than the groups. We accuse group of brainwashing, but what we did was no different. She hadn’t been hurt by the group, yet.

Exit counsellors are dangerous. They are too black and white, they do not have the training, and they have all their baggage. I think you need to do other sort of therapy to get through it; you don’t necessarily have to have someone who has been through the experience. What we did to that girl was not right, I will never do anything like that again. Some groups harm some people sometimes. That’s where I’m at. The anti-cultists are way too negative... The anti-cultist and the media are doing a disservice. They are missing it. It is so much more complex and complicated than that. The attitude of ‘they are all evil’ ... it’s much more nuanced (Margaret).

Emily describes being on the receiving end of exit counselling from the perspective of having exited a Christian based group through “an intervention”. She identifies the experience of agreeing to take part in the belief that her membership was unassailable, experiencing fear and anxiety, defensiveness followed by a revelation which changed her views:

I went home and mum and dad had organised an exit counselling session or an intervention with some exit counsellor who they’d flown over from the States ... So [my family] asked ‘would you be able to talk to someone who knows a little bit more about your group than we do, and you shouldn’t be afraid because you have love on your side and you have God on your side and if your group is right than there should be nothing to worry about’. Of course I’m like ‘yeah sure fine’... I agreed to go and they quickly called up the former members and the counsellors that were here from the States, mum and dad had brought them out, they had been in the same group ... I thought I have the Truth and I’ll convert them as well.
So we went down to my grandmother’s place and the first thing I thought of when I walked in and I saw this big Texan man with his beard and his Texan boots on and his hat and this big American accent and another two Americans, I thought I was going to be kidnapped. I instantly started looking for a way out. I wasn’t at home, I had no phone calls, I did say I would do it as long as it takes and I had promised to do it without any contact with the group because for two and a half years I had been part of this group and not had very much contact with my family...

For the first full day I sat there with my arms crossed, cold as cold can be. I just shrugged my shoulders, hardly answered anything. I listened to their stories, they told me their stories and I kept on saying ‘my church isn’t like that, we’re not like that, we are different’. But things did resonate with me, there were … things were the same but I didn’t want to admit that, I didn’t want to admit in front of my family that that sort of rubbish went on’.

The next day was quite horrendous but I started to take notice of a lot of what they were showing me without letting them know that I was taking notice. There wasn’t any conflict, it wasn’t ‘you are wrong, we are right’. Everything that they showed me was either a biblical viewpoint or it was the church’s own material, their newsletters, their magazines, their transcripts from their tapes, their speeches of the leader and all that sort of stuff. I couldn’t say you’re just showing me spiritual pornography because they were showing me their material…

It wasn’t until the counsellor read out the criteria of mind control and I said yes of course that was my church, yes of course, yes of course …the charismatic leader, the desire to change the world for the good, the unity within the group and the exclusivity of the group with you are the only people doing the right thing and it’s the only way … yes, yes, yes of course this is my group, and being very proud of it. He handed it to me and at the top it had the criteria of Hitler’s army…. By this stage I was like ‘show me more, show me more, what else do you have’. The meeting that day took 16 hours.

For me … I have seen it in other interventions I have been part of, but the walls just come crashing down. I was no longer in the mode of self-righteousness and I really wanted to know. There is something wrong and I want to know what it is because I can’t put my finger on it now … Going back to the group after exit counselling I now really started to see a lot of the manipulation and a lot of the harsh words that were used … before I would have gone ‘Yeah!’ Now I was going ‘no, that’s not right’ … I started to disagree with stuff, especially considering what I’d learned through exit counselling… So I packed up and I left.
A number of participants also describe their experiences with ‘anti-cult counselling’ which they received after expulsion or voluntary exit, although they use the term ‘exit counselling’ in their accounts. Catheline describes her experiences with ‘anti-cult counselling’ after she was expelled from a personal development NRM. She explains:

An [Australian exit counsellor] came over to mum’s house to talk to me. I thought she was a friend of mum’s, I didn’t know she was an exit counsellor. [The exit counsellor] started showing me videos on mind control and I got it, I realised she was trying to change what I think… I sensed that she was trying to help me… She also brought a former member of my group to talk to me. I felt utterly confused… It was almost a foreign experience. But I wanted them to stay and explain; I wanted to understand…

There was a snapping point after the first day of counselling, that night after meeting an ex member of the group I had been in … I remember having this panic attack and thinking that everything was falling apart and I can’t understand this… I felt so hurt and confused and I needed that input…

I was invited to go and stay at the [exit counsellor’s] home and I did. I stayed there for about a week. She had lots of books about cults. I found it interesting to learn that there are other groups and cults and she left me alone and I just watched videos and read and also she was really happy just to chat. I felt safe. I was beginning to understand that there was this group that I’d randomly met and it wasn’t my fault that this had happened…

I do remember feeling angry during the intervention. Why are these people talking to me, why are they taking this away from me? But then I’ve met people who haven’t had interventions and I’m so glad that I don’t still carry the beliefs that they do…. Who knows what would have happened without it. I think just being able to make logical sense of my experiences was just so good…. It helped put things in perspective. It was the groundwork of me being able to progress after leaving the group, and I continue to build on that. I still think that what they said at the time was helpful.

Similarly, Alice describes her experiences with anti-cult counselling following voluntary exit. She explains:

My husband’s parents were aware that we were in this group and they had done their own research and knew it was a cult… And they had bought some books to read… Around the time
we exited my husband was put in contact with an [exit counsellor] … At that stage he’s totally confused about things … I also felt like my head was going to explode, it was all too much… But I spoke to [the exit counsellor] every day, every couple of days, weeks and she was a continual source of support for me. She explained how mind control works and showed us some videos. The videos showed how easily people can be influenced. She did a lot of talking about what had happened… I also started to read a lot of books on cult and started to talk to ex members… I started to understand how I had been tricked.

As noted, scholars have critiqued the counselling practices described above arguing that these practices are potentially harmful and may complicate recovery (Durocher, 1999; Healy, 2011). While the current author, to a large degree, agrees with these assertions, the findings suggest that for some former members temporary adherence to the brainwashing thesis may be helpful. As is argued in the next sections, the current findings suggest that for some the participants in this study affiliation with the ACM may have served a therapeutic purpose in that it provided them with a way in which to explain, or make sense of, their experiences of a time of great loss and uncertainty. Consistent with previous observation made by Coates (2009) the current findings suggest that for some of the former members in this study participation in the ACM and adherence to the brainwashing thesis offered a much needed sense of direction and identity. While some participants explain their engagement with the ACM discourses of brainwashing as helpful in as far that they offered an ‘excuse’ or explanation through which to recount NRM affiliation, others describe engagement with the ACM as previously, or currently, salient to their sense of self.

“The brainwashing theories offered a handy excuse”: ACM discourses as justificatory ‘accounts’

All the participants in this study, including those who report very limited to no affiliation with the Australian ACM, report familiarity with the brainwashing understanding of affiliation, and, to varying degrees, made reference to these theories when recounting or explaining their personal experiences. This general familiarity with the brainwashing thesis seems unsurprising, and can, at least to some extent, be attributed to the continued promotion of this thesis by the media. It is suggested that for some of the participants in this study the ACM discourses have significantly influenced or informed their sense of self, whereas for others it appears that the influence of these discourses is limited to their capacity in offering an ‘excuse’ or narrative through which to recount or justify their experiences of membership. The impact of the ACM can be understood as a continuum with the social selves, to
varying degrees, adopting the ACM as a new identity, while the protected selves tend towards the use of the brainwashing thesis as an excuse. It is however important to stress that this is not considered a dichotomy as the majority of the participants are understood as positioned somewhere in between these two poles.

Regardless of the perceived significance or centrality of the ACM discourses to the selves of these former members, during the interviews all of the participants made some references to the brainwashing understanding of affiliation. The findings indicate that to varying degrees, all of the participants in this study had previously relied, or continued to rely, on the brainwashing theories to explain or recount their experiences of membership. It is suggested that for the vast majority of these participants the brainwashing discourses provided them with a suitable ‘account’ through which they could explain, justify or narrate their experiences. Even though the social selves appear to believe in this ‘account’ more than the protected selves, the narratives indicate that most of the participants found having a discourse through which they could explain their experiences to both themselves as well as others helpful, regardless of whether they perceived these discourses as accurate or not. For example, Lauren comments “Even though I know that the experiences[sic] wasn’t all bad the way the brainwashing people argue, it helped me understand and offered some explanations. It also gave me a way to explain where I’d been all these years, and my family deserved an explanation”. Similarly, Hillary comments: “The thing with the cult recovery is that your brain searches for answers; I think it is programmed that way… to search for meaning and answers. Participation in the [ACM] has given me a way of understanding”.

In addition to its ability to ‘explain’ NRM affiliation, the narratives indicate that for many of the participants the brainwashing thesis helped to negate personal responsibility and alleviate their sense of guilt and embarrassment, especially during the period immediately following exit. Comments such as “It helped me understand I wasn’t weak” (Lindsay), “It helped me feel less silly” (Gabrielle), “Brainwashing explains some of the ridiculous things we did… It gives a story to explain my present situation, especially with 7 kids … and I’m a great storyteller” (Trudy), “After we left people would say ‘wow, how can you be so stupid!’ but we’d explain that we were brainwashed, it was a process that we got ourselves stuck in” (Kerry) were common. Other comments that portray the brainwashing discourses as ‘handy accounts’ through which membership can be explained include:

Involvement with [the ACM] helped demonstrate that it didn’t just happen to us, that it happens to a lot of people … it helped explain that we’re not just stupid for having become involved… I now know that I was a normal person that got sucked into a group and I think that if it can happen to me it can happen to anyone(Alice).
I felt a lot of guilt about having joined. ‘Why did I do that?’ most people don’t believe that you can change your morality or that you can change your ethics, but brainwashing explains that you can quite easily ... It was understanding that, and not blaming me as a perpetrator and realising that I was a victim took a while... [Engagement with the ACM] helped solidify the reasons I had joined(Nicholas).

The exit counsellors helped me manage my loss of face ... it helped me not feel so embarrassed, so stupid... Now I could stop feeling so guilty that I had let these people down and that I had done it all wrong. They helped me understand that it happens to heaps of people... There is always a bit of ego and pride involved in all of this... At some level you still feel like you stuffed up (Catheline).

This observation that the brainwashing thesis may serve the function of ‘handy account’ through which membership can be explained without placing responsibility on the current or former member is consistent with previous sociological argument (Bromley, 1998b; Mauss, 1998; Richardson, 2008; Richardson, et al., 1986; Wright, 1998). NRM scholars commonly describe the brainwashing thesis as a justificatory account through which former members can manage the potential stigma associated with their former affiliation with what is often perceived as a deviant group. From this perspective it is argued that brainwashing accounts of affiliation that depict NRM members as victims have been developed to serve the needs of both former members who may be embarrassed by their involvement, as well as exit counsellors and parents who are engaged in ‘extracting’ current members of such groups (Bromley, 1998b; Mauss, 1998; Richardson, 2008; Richardson, et al., 1986; Wright, 1998).

The idea that the self provides accounts for justifying conduct, especially in potentially stigmatising situations is well established (Adler & Adler, 2008; Anderson & Bondi, 1988; Doering, 2010; Goffman, 1959, 1963; Harding, 2003; Herman, 1993; Inderbitzin, 2009; Jarvinen, 2003; Klingemann, 1999; Link, Cullen, Frank, & Wozniak, 1987; Loseke & Cahill, 1992; Oselin, 2009; Shover, 1985; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). From an SI perspective accounts are commonly understood in terms of their stigma management function, and described as ‘formula stories’ (Loseke, 2001) that can be drawn upon to justify conduct and negotiate guilt and responsibility (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1959, 1961, 1963; Mills, 1940; M. B. Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snow & Anderson, 1993). While there is a general agreement that ‘accounts’, such the brainwashing account of affiliation, are ‘stories’ through which individuals can explain or narrate their experiences, symbolic interactionists present varying views on the extent to which individuals can be understood as informed by such stories or discourses in their construction of self. Some symbolic interactionists emphasize the self’s capacity to remain separate from these accounts (Goffman, 1963), whereas others describe accounts as resources for self-construction and argue that individuals are highly informed or influenced by
contemporary discourses in their construction of self (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Goffman (1963) and those following in this tradition describe accounts as resources that protect, rather than inform, the self. From this perspective, accounts are described as impression management resources or stories that individuals do not necessarily believe in, but utilise in potentially stigmatising situations. In this body of literature the individuals’ capacity to remain separate from the narratives they employ to explain or justify conduct is highlighted. Questioning this conceptualisation of the self as separate from available narratives or discourses, contemporary symbolic interactionists such as Gubrium and Holstein (2001) portray the self as highly embedded in contemporary discourses. Setting out to meld interactionist and postmodern insights into the self in their analytical work, in accordance with traditional SI thought, these scholars continue to view the self as constructed through interaction with ‘others’ (Mead, 1934), but, drawing from Foucault, they describe these ‘others’ in terms of the discursive influences on the self. While they recognise that the contemporary Western self is no longer anchored in the stable institutions that were available in traditional society, they argue that the self continues to be institutionally mediated and call attention to the numerous social institutions that offer discourses through which the self can be interpreted. From this perspective, the contemporary self is understood as informed by contemporary discourses of ‘who we ought to be’ promoted by schools, counselling centres, treatment programs, self-help groups, and the myriad of other social institutions in which the self has become embedded. While conceptualised as discursively influenced, from this perspective the self continues to be understood as constructed in experience through involvement with the social institutions that advocate ‘identity relevant’ discourses. To this extent, discourses, such as the brainwashing discourses, are not merely considered ‘accounts’ through which individuals can present ‘favourable’ selves and avoid potential stigmatisation, but as resources that are available for self-construction (Gubrium & Holstein, 1994, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Specific to the significance and purpose of the brainwashing discourses to the selves of former members most NRM scholarship describes these discourses in terms of their impression management function and their capacity to ‘protect’ the former members from potential stigma (Bromley, 1988). Nonetheless, while less developed, increasingly scholars have started to call attention to the significance of these discourses as resources through which former members can construct ‘new’ selves following the loss of a NRM identity (Coates, 2009; Richardson, 2008). The different emphases in the literature on the purpose of the ACM discourses as resources that can ‘protect’ versus ‘inform’ the self is not understood as a dichotomy but rather as a continuum, with the way in which individuals employ these discourses and the extent to which they become influenced by these discourses understood to vary (Richardson, 2008; Wright, 1998). As a contribution to this literature, the current study describes the way in which the significance and purpose of the ACM discourses as
primarily resources that ‘protect’ or ‘inform’ the self varies for the participants in this study. The findings suggest that for the social selves in this study the ACM discourses served, or continues to serve, an important function as ‘identity resource’, while for the protected selves these discourses were unimportant to their sense of self and were only drawn upon as a tool or story through which they could justify membership and avoid potential stigmatisation.

The protected selves had had no or very limited interaction with the ACM and made comparatively few references to the brainwashing thesis during the interviews. The relatively few references made to brainwashing by these participants were primarily at the beginning of the interview and highlighted their exculpatory function. It appeared that as the interview progressed and they became more comfortable in providing their own interpretations of involvement the brainwashing accounts were no longer relied upon and they started to describe their experiences in their own way. On the other hand, as is demonstrated in the next section, the social selves relied more heavily on the brainwashing explanations in their self-descriptions and accounts of NRM membership. In addition to the centrality of the ACM discourses to their narratives, these participants also describe former or current active participation in the ACM.

“It gave me a sense of self when I most needed one”: The ACM as a resource for self-construction

The findings suggest that for the social selves in this study the ACM was not only a source of justification and explanation, but also served an important identity function. To varying degrees, the narratives of these participants depict the ACM as a resource for self-construction. For these participants the ACM discourses provided a resource in which they could anchor their sense of self at a time of loss. This observation is demonstrated by comments such as: “Being involved with the [ACM] and reading about brainwashing and stuff was part of making a new identity for myself” (Catheline), “Being involved in exit counselling gave me a sense of self when I was lacking one” (Emily), “The brainwashing ideas helped me understand I was a victim, and helped me value myself again in a way” (Nicholas) and “It helped me recognise what had happened to us and gave us something else to be passionate about... It’s given me direction” (Alice).

The narratives indicate that for these participants, following the loss of a salient other in which the self was embedded, namely a NRM, the ACM provided an alternate other through which they could construct new selves. While for a few social selves the influence of the ACM appeared primarily discursive (Gabrielle), it is argued that for the majority of these participants the salience of the ACM
discourses to their sense of self motivated, and in turn strengthened and became reinforced by, participation in the ACM as trainee exit counsellors, newsletter editors, conference organisers, etc. While it is not uncommon for former members to take up occupational or professional roles within the ACM such as counsellor, exit counsellor, conference speaker, administrative officer, etc. (Bromley, 1998; Wright, 1998) the high percentage of research participants in this study who report former or current ACM affiliation is unusual (Wright, 1998) and can, at least in part, be attributed to the way in which these participants were recruited. As noted, the majority of participants in this study were recruited through the ACM, either directly or indirectly as the result of modified snowball sampling.

The findings suggest that for the majority of these participants ACM participation was motivated by engagement with the ACM discourses. It is suggested that only those participants who already relied heavily on the brainwashing theories to manage their sense of loss and uncertainty became motivated to actively engage with the ACM. This observation is consistent with the theoretical work of Holstein and Gubrium (2000) which conceptualises membership in contemporary social institutions as discursively influenced and motivated. These scholars suggest that in contemporary society people become motivated to participate in social institutions such as community support networks or churches because of the discourses they promote and their perceived ability to respond to existing personal questions, dilemmas and troubles. While it is recognised that some individuals may draw on contemporary discourses to make sense of their experiences privately, for others the perceived suitability or appropriateness of promoted discourses will motivate participation. For example, from this perspective it is argued that participation in counselling services is influenced by the availability of ‘victim’ discourses which can inform the individual’s sense of self. To this extent, while they recognise that the ‘others’ that influence individuals’ sense of self in contemporary Western society are distinctly different from those in traditional societies, they posit that the self continues to be institutionally mediated (Gubrium & Holstein, 2000, 2001) and is not merely discursively constructed as some postmodernists suggest (Gergen, 1991; Hall, 2000).

Consistent with this literature, it is suggested that for the former members in this study participation in the ACM provided them with a sense of self at a time of identity loss, and was, at least to some extent, motivated by the perceived suitability of the brainwashing explanations of NRM membership. The social narratives indicate that, for these participants, sharing their understanding of brainwashing and ‘helping’ others affected by ‘cults’ through anti-cult work helped to solidify their own understandings of NRM membership, and provided them with a sense of meaning, purpose and direction. In regards to the purpose and significance of participation in the ACM social selves observe:

*Helping out as an assistant exit counsellor helped me better understand what had happened to me, and it gave me a role as helper rather than just victim*(Catheline).
I felt really lost so I’d started to read a lot, trying to make sense of my experiences and the brainwashing thesis made sense… That’s how I got involved with the [ACM]” (Thomas).

Helping other former members has definitely been part of my journey, it’s a big learning curve going from being an ex-member needing help to still being an ex-member but trying to help other people. Sometimes I feel out of my depth but I’m learning more and more about what happened to me as I go along ... There’s a group of us working together and we help each other understand... It is incredibly helpful on so many levels ... Going from needing help to giving help helped me recover and make sense of my own experiences(Alice).

Emily describes the significance of ACM participation to her sense of self in more detail as follows:

I had a bit of a celebrity status in the group and had a sense of superiority, and now I’d lost that... The group provided an identity and then leaving that again was really hard... my identity, there was none... and it wasn’t until I started helping people with my story or helping people understand what I went through that it became ‘oh, I’m valued’. I now had an identity of someone who is able to relate to other people who had been through this...

As I learned more about brainwashing I could now explain what had happened, and could also help other people in similar situations... Then the offer came up for me to go and work oversees to work with the exit counsellor... I took up that opportunity and went away.... So when I went on the first counselling session with him, I told my story to this guy who responded to it rather well. And suddenly I felt it was not all bad, I can help someone here, or I can be of assistance in some way and I suppose that self-confidence comes back a bit that I’m not just useless...

When I came back to Australia people started contacting me, people who left the group started contacting me, churches who didn’t know much about the group wanted me to talk to them, and talk to their youth group to try and prevent them from getting into things like that. For a year I talked to people about what I had been through, how it affected me, about mind control and those sorts of things. So coming out I suppose I didn’t have anything for a while until I understood brainwashing and started to help other people, and then I started to become a celebrity almost and people wanted to hear my story and that gave me an identity of I’m valued and people want to hear me.
The argument that ACM participation was, at least to some extent, discursively influenced and motivated is also supported by the way in which social selves describe the helpfulness or supportiveness of building friendships with other former members. A number of these participants describe that while ‘hanging out’ with former members was helpful, this was only helpful if they shared interpretation of membership that supported the brainwashing thesis. These participants explain that while they experienced a strong connection to those former members who shared an understanding of brainwashing, they struggled to connect to former members who did not adhere to these theories. Comments that illustrate this include:

_The people that are the most help to you who are ex members who have fully gotten themselves out, not the ones who sit on the fringe; they’re not helpful because they can make you have doubts again. The ones who are completely out are the most help and the most support_ (Alice).

_People who have left and see things similar to me have been helpful. People who have left and still hold on to many of the beliefs … we never really clicked and we had disagreements. Those who found they had been under mind control and found they had been in a cult, those ones were great_ (Catheline).

_The connection you can form with ex members is special … I find that I can get that connection with them because there is that shared understanding of the abuses suffered in the group. They know where you’re coming from_ (Thomas).

Social selves comment that while ACM participation provided them with a sense of identity, purpose and direction it should not be compared to “another cult”. They argue that unlike in a NRM, ACM participation is not all encompassing, and it encourages critical thinking. For example, Hillary, Catheline and Emily argue that an understanding of the ease at which people can become influenced as promoted by the ACM discourses assisted them in becoming more attuned to social pressures and better able to resist influences. In addition, in line with Coates’ (2009) previous suggestion that ACM involvement may serve a transitory purpose in its ability to relieve overwhelming distress associated with a dramatic identity void, social selves comment that without the availability of the ACM they may have been overwhelmed by loss. They suggest that thanks to their participation in the ACM they did not simply join another NRM to alleviate uncertainty as they argue is the case for many former members (Hillary, Catheline, Emily). The social narratives suggest that for some social selves ACM participation offered enough ‘identity’ and certainty so the need/desire to join another NRM was lessened. They highlight that while a NRM is a ‘closed environment’ that dictates the behaviours, beliefs and emotions of its members, the ACM offers some guidance without dictating all aspects of
participants’ lives. They are or were free to participate in the ACM to the extent that it suits their own needs.

The extent to which the ACM informed the selves of former members varied. While all social selves appeared to rely or have relied upon the ACM discourses for self-construction, for some these resources seemed more salient to their sense of self than for others. The findings suggest that those former members who suffered the greatest loss upon exit were most likely to adhere to the ACM discourses and construct a salient identity as a member of the ACM, especially immediately following exit. Those former members who are perceived as having suffered extensive loss following exit appear most influenced by the ACM discourses and describe ongoing participation in the ACM. In particular Richard’s and Hillary’s sense of self appears most strongly informed by the ACM. As is outlined in the following Chapter, Hillary and Richard were both expelled from their groups after in excess of 20 years of involvement and forced to leave behind their families and an extensive community of friends.

Hillary is heavily involved in the ACM and her narrative was heavily informed by the brainwashing thesis. Not only did she explain her decision to join in terms of the brainwashing thesis, she also described her disconnection from her former husband and adult children and their continued involvement in the NRM entirely in terms of these discourses. Hillary explains:

[My husband] said to me “I’ve never loved you more than I love you now” as he was kicking me out. It sounds bizarre to the whole world. How can a man kick you out of a marriage, take away your children and grandchildren and say “I’ve never loved you more than now”. He isn’t lying … you have to see the problem in another light to understand how a man with integrity could say that. He can say that because they have messed with his thinking…. My son may not be kidnapped physically, but he is kidnapped in his mind by deception and lies … It’s like someone has taken your children and they have them in a captive situation. And you know they are captive, and you know who’s taken them captive, you understand the mechanisms by which they are held captive, you know that there is a way that they could be freed if they chose to be freed, and yet you’re left with this nightmare of knowing that there is nothing you can do and there is nowhere you can go for help … I’m a mother and a grandmother and I will always be working towards seeing my children free… I rebuild and I am involved in lots of things and I am happy in that I see fulfilment, and I see a lot of potential in what I have been through to help others.

As also argued in Coates (2009) it is suggested that the brainwashing thesis can be a tool through which former members like Hillary can make sense of immense loss without becoming overwhelmed
by guilt and self-doubt. It is suggested that the significance of the brainwashing thesis for Hillary in managing her extensive loss motivated ACM participation. Other social selves, whose loss were perhaps less extensive, did not rely on the ACM as a resource for self-construction to the same extent as Hillary. They managed to resolve their identity uncertainty by drawing on a variety of identity resources including alternate religious institutions (Max) or previous friendship networks (Nicholas).

The observation that some individuals may endeavour to resolve dramatic identity loss in the context of engagement with an oppositional group is not new. Other studies that have investigated the way in which individuals negotiate the transition away from ‘deviant’ identities have found that it is not uncommon for individuals to negotiate the loss of a previously salient ‘deviant’ identity by embracing ‘oppositional’, more socially accepted, identities (Brown, 1991a, 1991b; Klingemann, 1999; Sharp & Hope, 2001). For example, many former alcoholics become alcohol and drug counsellors, and, Brown (1991a, 1991b) argues that by doing so they manage both the loss of their previous sense of self as ‘an alcoholic’ and legitimise or manage the potential stigma associated with their past deviance. The findings suggest that for the participants in this study engagement with an oppositional group, namely, the ACM, was not a permanent identity solution, but, in accordance with previous observation made by Coates (2009) was generally short lived and merely served a ‘transitory function’ by providing a source of identity which these participants employed to navigate through a time of potentially overwhelming uncertainty and loss. It appears that for most of the participants in this study involvement in the ACM and adherence to the brainwashing thesis was most important immediately following exit, and gradually lost its importance as former members adjusted to life after involvement.

**Conclusion**

Consistent with previous observations, the current findings portray the ACM as a resource through which potential stigma can be negotiated as well as a potential identity solution following the loss of a salient identity as a member of a NRM (Bromley, 1998b; Mauss, 1998; Wright, 1998). The findings suggest that, to varying degrees, for many of the participants in this study engagement with the ACM and its discourses provided both a way in which they could manage potential stigma and a resource in which they could anchor their sense of self at a time of loss. While all of the participants, to varying degrees, make reference to the stigma management function of the brainwashing discourses, it is argued that for many of the participants in this study the significance of the ACM does not pertain to the management of stigma but regards its ability to provide a sense of identity and direction. To this extent, the primary contribution of this Chapter regards its emphasis on the significance of the ACM in
providing former members with a sense of identity following the dramatic loss of identity following disaffiliation. While previous scholars have recognised the significance of the ACM in providing former members with a source of identity at a time of great loss and uncertainty, this position appears underdeveloped in the ACM scholarship which emphasises the potential of the ACM in managing stigma and possible embarrassment. It also suggests that the ‘brainwashing thesis’ does not necessarily render former members as passive victims, but the ‘victim identity’ can be mobilised into a new institutional affiliation and sense of purpose.

This observation that for some former members engagement with the ACM may serve a valuable identity function at a time of great loss contributes to the debate pertaining to the appropriateness of anti-cult counselling. While scholars have argued that offering former members brainwashing interpretation of their involvement may impede rather than facilitate ‘recovery’ the findings suggest that some of the former members in this study found this helpful at the time, even if they are now sceptical of its accuracy. It is suggested that for those former members who are at risk of becoming overwhelmed by their sense of loss and uncertainty following NRM disaffiliation, being provided with an explanation may help manage dramatic loss and uncertainty, and be helpful regardless of how accurate this explanation is.

The suggestion that for many former members disaffiliation from a NRM is a difficult and painful process characterised by dramatic identity loss and uncertainty is well established (Coates, 2010a; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Galanter, 1983; Jacobs, 1987, 1989; Rothbaum, 1988). A number of scholars have attributed the difficulties associated with exit from a NRM described by many former members to the uncertainty following the loss of a salient identity; in particular, to the lack of a cultural script or discourse through which former members can interpret their experiences and negotiate the transition from being a member of an intense religious group to being a non-member (Aldridge, 2007; Beckford, 1985; Davidman & Greil, 2007; Ebaugh, 1988a, 1988b; Hickson & Gudz, 1995).

Without the availability of an alternate or more sociologically informed discourse through which to make sense of their experiences (Healy, 2011) it is suggested here that the ACM provided a much needed identity resource for some of the participants in this study. Considering that the social selves in the current study are conceptualised as individuals who are highly informed by others, the availability of ‘others’ or identity resources through which to construct a sense of self following the loss of a salient or master identity is understood as important. It is suggested that until alternate discourses become readily available, the role of the ACM is significant in that it provides an identity resource during a period of intense loss, uncertainty and potential stigmatisation through which former members can negotiate the transition away from a NRM identity.
It is suggested that for some of the participants in this study the ACM offered them a helpful ‘victim’ or ‘recovery’ identity which helped to manage their uncertainty and distress. This suggestion that temporary ‘recovery’ or ‘victim’ identities can help negotiate a period of identity change or transition by providing some identity continuity or clarity at a time of great loss or uncertainty is well established (Howard, 2006; Leisenring, 2006; Loseke, 2001). A significant body of literature has found that the availability of a narrative or discourse through which individuals can explain potentially distressing or overwhelming experiences may resolve or ease distress, regardless of the ‘accuracy’ of these explanations (Francis, 1997, 2003; Pennebaker, 1990; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

This Chapter suggests that engagement with the ACM was helpful for many of the participants because of its ability to manage stigma, provide explanations at a time of overwhelming uncertainty, and offer a source of identity. This challenges the argument put forward by anti-cult counsellors that the reason that an understanding of the brainwashing theories is ‘helpful’ or important for former members is that it helps undo the negative impact of ‘having been brainwashed’ but it also modifies the argument that being offered exit counselling and the ‘brainwashing’ explanation necessarily renders the former member passive.

The following Chapter describes the perceived positive and negative impacts of membership, and suggests that through their experience of membership and exit many of the participants in this study became better equipped to manage the tensions between individuality and social connectedness.
Chapter 11

The harms and benefits of NRM affiliation and disaffiliation:
“The gains outweigh the losses”

This Chapter addresses the issue of the harms and benefits described by the interviewees as a result of their experiences, and it seeks to provide a balanced account of the effects of NRM membership. In particular it seeks to distinguish different types of effects on the level of reflexivity demonstrated depending on the previous personalities and vulnerabilities of the members. Contemporary discourses and public perceptions of NRMs put forward by the mass media and popular literature posit membership as invariably emotionally damaging. This view is supported by a number of quantitative studies and clinical case studies with former members that describe membership as a negative experience that is psychologically harmful. The negative impacts of membership are conceptualised as potentially lifelong pathologies that result from ‘having been brainwashed’, and this body of literature is highly influential in the treatment of former members of such groups.

Challenging this view of membership as invariably harmful, a growing body of qualitative research presents a more balanced account. These studies make sense of the challenges reported by former members in light of the loss of a social group and subsequent problems re-adjusting to society. These studies have found that in addition to the grief and distress related to the loss of a social bond, former members report positive impacts including improved critical thinking, coping skills, wisdom, insight and empathy (Buxant, 2008; Coates, 2009, 2010a; Goldman, 1995; Namini & Murken, 2009; Wright, 1987).

With a few notable exceptions (Buxant, 2008; Coates, 2011; Namini & Murken, 2009) few studies have evaluated the challenges reported by former members following exit in light of their wider life stories. In this Chapter the impacts of membership reported by the participants are considered in the light of their wider life histories; possible relationships between the reasons for joining or pre-involvement factors and the perceived positive or negative impacts of involvement are considered.
The significance of NRM membership and exit in developing reflexivity

Many of the participants in this study report that the positives gained from membership far outweigh the negatives, and many of them describe their experiences as having helped to resolve some of the psychological factors that precipitated involvement. As argued in Chapter 6, the findings suggest that prior to involvement participants struggled to negotiate a reflexive balance between a sense of individuality and connectedness. It is argued here that the experience of membership and the difficulties around exit facilitated the development of selves that are more able to manage the complexities of mainstream society than prior to involvement. To this extent, they are conceptualised as having become more reflexive.

It is important to note that the experiences of increased reflexivity analysed here comprise both cognitive and emotional change. While discussions of reflexivity have predominantly focussed on the construction of individuality, and highlight the importance of cognitions in this process, increasingly sociologists are extending notions of reflexivity to include the importance of social connectedness, which is understood as fundamentally emotional (M. Adams, 2003; Archer, 2003, 2007; Bendle, 2002; Holmes, 2010, 2011; King, 2006). The term reflexivity is increasingly used in reference to the self’s ability to interpret and connect to both personal as well as others’ cognitions and emotions (M. Adams, 2003; Fuchs, 2001; Holmes, 2010). In the current study, individuals perceived as high in reflexivity are conceptualised as both connected to- as well as aware of, and able to resist internal as well as external forces or influences on the self, at both an emotional and a cognitive level (Archer, 2003, 2007; Campbell, 2009; Fuchs, 2001; Holmes, 2010; King, 2006). While more in-depth discussions of reflexivity are provided in the following Chapters, the term reflexivity is used here in reference to the self’s ability to negotiate tensions between the need for individuality and autonomy as well as social connectedness.

The current findings suggest that as the result of their experience of membership and exit, the majority of participants have gained in reflexivity and have become more capable of negotiating a balance between autonomy and connectedness. It is suggested that as the result of membership and exit the majority of participants have transitioned closer to the centre of the continuum between excessive connectedness and excessive autonomy and developed selves that are more strongly anchored in both individuality as well as connectedness. It is argued that in this sense both ends of the continuum have become more reflexive.
While it is not argued that there are no negative effects from membership, rather than ongoing psychopathology resulting from membership, the majority of the negative effects reported here appear specific to the period of transition immediately following exit, and are considered minor in comparison to the positives gained. For social selves the negatives appear to primarily concern the identity void experienced upon exit, whereas for protected selves the negatives regard the stresses and exhaustion following an unsuccessful attempt at self-change. The exceptions are those participants who exited the group without their families; they suffer long term negative consequences of involvement, namely the loss of their loved ones.

The loss of family and friends

The argument of this Chapter is that former members of NRMs do not invariably experience psychopathology and long term distress. However, some negatives cannot be ignored. Two participants, Hillary and Richard lost their children and marriage to the group, and they are understood as having suffered extensively as the result of their involvement, having lost far more than they have gained.

Hillary was expelled from the group after more than 20 years of involvement. Her husband and adult children remained committed to the group, and ceased all contact. She explains:

*I lost everything that I lived for, everything that I loved and cherished... Within 7 days, I’d left my home, and they’d changed the locks the next day. After 29 years of marriage, I had no home, no marriage, lost two of my children and grand-children. Overnight I lost my husband who was my childhood friend, my lover, my sweetheart, my soul mate, the father of my children; we’d spent a lifetime together...*

*I had very little money. I took as many things in the car as I could take... I was so screwed up that I had lost all my dignity as a person, all my self-esteem, all my credibility... everything was gone... I think possibly for the first three years the only way I could have described those years is pure survival. If I got through a day I thought I had achieved a lot. Apart from that I was shell shocked and alone. If the cult stuff doesn’t kill you, the loneliness does. I had never lived alone in my entire life and suddenly at this age you’re cast out...*

*My trauma continues... It’s easier to see the positives if you get out of the cult with your family intact. After 10 years I still have a lot of pain and grief... Your love for your children*
doesn’t lessen over the years… Every year my grandchildren get older and they have another birthday and I realise, the eldest is 7 now turning 8, I have missed all of her childhood, I have missed all of those years… This year I sent a present and card to my eldest when she had her birthday and it was returned to me, returned to sender… There is that dilemma that you live with of wanting to be normal and re-enter society and build a new life and yet to a certain degree you can’t … They’ve taken everything.

Being expelled after 30 years of commitment, like Hillary, Richard reports experiencing debilitating loss upon exit, which he continues to struggle with today.

I had a suitcase of clothes. I had nowhere to go. I was out on the street. After 30 years of marriage and family life I ended living in a shared house with a student who I never knew; in a strange house with a strange person… [The group] shuns people who are outside. You are told to have no contact with them… I knew nobody. It was devastating. I had no family. It was like a knife cutting you off from your very being…

For the first 18 months I was in wilderness. I would go back to the shopping centre where we used to shop hoping to see a familiar face that I could talk to… The first Christmas I remember crying my eyes out, absolutely besides myself. Not even a call, happy Christmas Dad. I spent that Christmas with some friends who were kind to me.

As time went on I gradually started to meet with other people… You get on with your life, but that part was 30 years, it’s a big portion of my life, and it’s as if it never existed in some ways. The longer I am separated from my family the more distant that these memories are becoming. They say time heals things but it doesn’t take it away all together… People who have come out of the group with their families intact can’t relate to the fact that you have lost your family and that your family was split in pieces… Many of us have lost families, everything.

It is well established that some groups try and prevent former members from communicating with their former friends (Aldridge, 2007). Not surprisingly, in line with the experience of Hillary and Richard, it is common for former members to experience grief following the loss of loved ones to the group (Aldridge, 2007; Boeri, 2002; Coates, 2010a; Durocher, 1999; Robbins, 1988b). However, with some research suggesting that most married couples leave a group intact (Wright, 1986), few studies recognise the extent of the loss suffered by Hillary and Richard. Though very different from psychopathology resulting from having been brainwashed, the losses described by Hillary and Richard are considered devastating and have long term negative consequences.
In the rest of this Chapter, the contrasting experiences of the social and protected selves in moving towards increased reflexivity are described as follows. In the first instance, the experience of the social selves are outlined, in particular their experience of loss and the development of an increased sense of autonomy and individuality. This is followed by a discussion of the protected selves and a subgroup of the protected selves labelled the managed selves. The managed selves developed an increased ability to relate and connect to others, while the remaining six protected selves primarily report negative impacts such as stress and strain.

The loss of belonging: Transition as an opportunity for growth and the development of individuality

A loss of identity and direction

With the exception of the losses suffered by those who exited without their families, the primary negatives reported by social selves regard anxiety and uncertainty experienced during the period immediately following exit. Many social selves describe the period of transition as more difficult and stressful than membership itself. Comments such as “Leaving the cult was traumatic but being in it was often fun. We had some good times” (Gabrielle) were common. Many of the social selves identified the loss of identity and belonging upon exit as the most painful and difficult consequence of membership. The challenges following exit are described in terms of “loss of belonging” (Thomas), “loss of acceptance” (Catheline), “identity void” (Emily), “lack of direction” (Lauren), “loss of beliefs and values” (Gabrielle) and “a sense of aimlessness” (Thomas). Comments such as “I felt unsure of myself and my new environment” (Thomas), “My self esteem took a big hit” (Emily) “I felt anxious not knowing how or what to be” (Catheline), “All of a sudden I didn’t know who I was anymore” (Gabrielle), and “I was embarrassed to have been so stupid to join a cult” (Alice) were common. As is outlined later in this Chapter, issues for protected selves are somewhat different as they had not surrendered their sense of self to the group like social selves.

Most social selves describe the difficulties they experienced upon exit and the challenges of adjusting to mainstream society in similar ways. They describe this transition period as follows:

I was very depressed although never diagnosed, I was very down and cried every night, didn’t know whether I was right or wrong or up or down; I didn’t have many happy days... At the time I likened it to what it must feel like when you have a divorce but you don’t want to
have a divorce, but you are forced to have a divorce and there is fighting going on and bad talk about either side and you’re sort of in the middle. It felt like the tearing apart of two compatible people (Emily).

Coming out of a cult is similar to a prisoner coming out of gaol. Suddenly, they are faced with life. In prison you don’t have to worry about what to eat today, what to cook. Everything is done. It’s the same in the army... army officers are good with working in a framework of having to delegate, but they are not good at seeing an issue because their role has been to take an order and then have that order carried out (Max).

Trying to put a resume together, what do you put on a resume when you’ve been off the planet for 10 years? I didn’t know where to go in this country for anything, we had no furniture; we had nothing. The most basic of things were a dilemma for us… For example, is it ok for the kids to watch TV? Is it ok to watch Sesame Street? It wasn’t ok in [the group]. I can still remember the day we decided to see if Sesame Street was as bad as what we’d been told by [the group]. We all sat down and watch Sesame Street and loved it! (Lauren).

Despite the magnitude of the difficulties faced during the immediate period following exit, social selves recognise that these were transitory difficulties following an experience of loss, not a long lasting pathology. As noted by Catheline:

Straight after leaving I felt like I had been through one of the worst things one could possibly experience. I felt really hurt and abused, now I think it couldn’t have been that bad as I am ok now. If it had been that bad I wouldn’t be where I am now.

Further highlighting the transitory nature of some of the negative impacts commonly associated with NRM membership, a number of social selves explain that while they would have previously described membership in negative terms, describing it as “harmful” or “a waste of time”, they are now glad to have had the experience. As observed by Thomas:

Initially I looked at it as 11 wasted years; now I think it was part of growth and learning and I look back at it very positively to the point that if I was to have my life over again I would not want it any other way.

Similar, Alice notes:
I now recognise that it wasn’t a waste of time; it’s a life experience that has brought me many realisations. Mind you, perhaps I could have learned another way, but if it wasn’t through this path, it would have been another.

This observation contributes to commonly reported former member perception of NRM membership as a ‘waste of time’ (Coates, 2010a; Goski, 1994; Singer, 2003; Wright, 1984, 1987) by highlighting the potentially transitory nature of this sentiment. In addition to the suggestion that the negative impacts of membership may be transitory in nature, a number of participants comment that the identification of NRM impacts is highly subjective in nature. Thomas notes: “What I perceived as negative consequences of the cult, I now understand as very much related to who I am as a person”. Similarly, Catheline observes: “I’m always thinking would I have gone through this anyway or is this really to do with the group, it’s hard to distinguish”.

The challenges reported by these social selves appear related to the experience of a significant loss of identity and community. Considering the centrality of group membership to the selves of many of its members it is hardly surprising that exit would constitute a dramatic sense of loss and uncertainty, and be commonly described as a harrowing experience (Coates, 2010a; Mauss, 1998; Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1998). The notion that the loss of an important source of identity is a significant source of stress and anxiety is well established (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Thoits, 1999). The challenges reported by these social selves are understood as consistent with the difficulties reported by others who have faced major life transitions or have suffered a major loss of identity. Exit from a NRM has been previously compared to the experience of divorce (Wright, 1984, 1991), leaving a monastery (Mapel, 2007), or the experiences of immigrants (Coates, 2009).

While the difficulties experienced by these social selves are conceptualised as comparable to the experiences of others who have suffered major life transitions or significant loss, it is suggested that the ‘deviant’ nature of NRM membership (Coates, 2012) may further complicate the adjustment process following exit. Given the stigma and labelling associated with deviant identities, transitioning from a deviant identity to a ‘non-deviant’ identity is generally understood as more complex than transitions across non-deviant identities (Becker, 1963; Goffman, 1963). Not only did social selves lose a sense of identity following exit, they also describe struggling with embarrassment at “having been stupid enough to join a cult” (Alice) and a fear of being stigmatised. To this extent, the experiences of former members are perhaps best compared to the others who have transitioned away from stigmatised identities such as former drug dealers (Adler & Adler, 1983), former drug addicts (Anderson & Bondi, 1988), former alcoholics (Brown, 1991a, 1991b), former burglars (Shover, 1985), former prostitutes (Oselin, 2009) and former convicts (Inderbitzin, 2009; Winnick & Bodkin, 2008). By and large, the narratives of the former members in the current study appear in line with the
experiences of others who have transitioned away from stigmatised identities such as reported in the studies outlined above.

In addition to the relationship between the centrality of the NRM identity and post involvement challenges, the manner of departure or the suddenness of the identity loss is also commonly linked to post involvement difficulties. The majority of the literature suggests that the more sudden the loss, the more likely the transition period will be difficult (Coates, 2009, 2010a; Rothbaum, 1988; Wright, 1984, 1987). To this extent, the transition period is likely to be less complicated following voluntary exit and a gradual loss of identity (Coates, 2009; Durocher, 1999; Robbins, 1988b) than following expulsion (Hassan, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006) or ‘exit counselling’ (Bromley, 1997, 1998b). In line with previous observations, the nature of the exit and the suddenness at which an identity loss was experienced was identified as important for understanding the adjustment period. The findings suggest that social selves who exited voluntarily experienced a less challenging adjustment period than those who were expelled or exit counselled. As noted by Catheline:

_The people I’ve spoken to who just made that choice to leave dealt with the immediate time after leaving better than I did. They had chosen it and I hadn’t come to that... I think it is harder to be kicked out._

Despite the complexity and intensity of post involvement difficulties, these challenges are conceptualised as the expected result of the loss of a salient, and sometimes perceived as a deviant, identity and should not be mistaken for psychopathology as the result of having been brainwashed. Despite the challenges of transition and loss, as outlined in the next section, social selves overwhelming report positives of involvement.

**An increased sense of autonomy and individuality**

For the social selves their experiences of affiliation and disaffiliation may have ameliorated their previous tendency to refer authority to others and derive their identity from others. Comments that suggest an increased sense of autonomy and individuality include: “I feel in control of my own path, I realise now that at the end of the day I have the last say on what I do, I have the last responsibility about my life” (Catheline), “I have a stronger sense of who I am” (Nicholas), “Now I think it’s up to you Trudy to change things; it’s up to you; don’t leave your life to someone else” (Trudy), “I take personal responsibility a lot better now” (Hillary, Catheline) and “I now prefer to answer for my own actions instead of deferring to others” (Hillary).
In addition to these more direct statements, the majority of the other positive impacts reported by
these participants also relate to the development of an increased sense of autonomy or individuality.
In particular they explain having developed an increased sense of control over their lives, increased
self-awareness and understanding of personal emotions, an increased ability to resist social influence,
an increased tolerance for uncertainty and ‘not belonging’, and improved critical thinking skills. It is
suggested that their experiences of involvement and exit facilitated the development of an increased
sense of autonomy and individuality by highlighting the risks and pitfalls of blindly deriving a sense
of identity from others. Having become confronted with identity uncertainty or an identity void
following the loss of the NRM identity and becoming aware of the extent to which they were
influenced by others instigated the development a more individualised sense of self. This argument is
further developed in the following Chapter.

A major area of change reported by social selves relates to an increased ability to recognise and
understand their own emotions. Having previously been guided by others in the way in which they
experienced and expressed emotions they explain that the loss of the NRM instigated an
understanding of themselves as emotionally separate from others. They note that the experience
forced them into ‘getting in touch with their feelings’. Comments such as “I now have a greater
understanding of emotions” (Catheline) and “I understand the value of emotions better” (Margaret)
were common. In particular Margaret describes how NRM membership and loss transitioned her from
someone who was emotionally highly enmeshed or dependent on others to an increased emotional
awareness, understanding and confidence. She explains:

My experiences enriched me... I don’t like the repression of emotions so common in society.
Before I didn’t know what to feel and needed to be part of a group to feel confident. I was the
most nervous shut down person, so nervous, too scared to walk down the street, and now I
can get up in front of a crowd of 500 without a second thought. A lot of that was going to [a
cult] and finding therapy. The cults are representing something that is wrong with our
society. And I think why I got caught up with this group was because I needed to learn to feel
emotions. This is what we should be doing in our society; people are too shut down
emotionally, desperately seeking approval. That to me is the big gift I got, through my
journey, I now understand emotions and the importance of expressing emotions.

Another common positive impact reported by these selves is an increased ability to resist social
influence. This they explain was instigated by recognising the extent to which they had been
influenced by the NRM in the construction of their identity. They explain that recognising the extent
and ease at which they were influenced has given them an increased sense of control, and better
equipped them in determining their own ‘path in life’. Comments such as “I’m not easily influenced anymore, I now make decisions and I’m in control of my own life” (Catheline) and “I now understand human behaviour a lot better, and know how to take more control” (Nicholas) were common.

Specific to the benefit of understanding influence Alice notes:

> It’s definitely given me that ability to stand back and see the bigger picture ... I have become more aware of people’s willingness of be influenced, and I can now resist that better. I am no longer that easily influenced by other people’s behaviour ... I think it has been an enormous benefit for our family in pointing out how easily you can be influenced and I think they’d be very aware of it. I think that is a good thing.

While an increased ability to resist social influence is identified in the literature as a common impact of NRM membership, it is most commonly presented in a negative light by using terminology such as ‘loss of innocence’ or ‘not trusting easily anymore’ (Goski, 1994; Hassan, 1988, 2000; Singer, 1979, 2003). Considering the extent to which social selves described themselves as influenced by others prior to, and during, involvement, it is argued here that a ‘loss of innocence’ or ‘not trusting’ could be conceptualised as a positive consequence of involvement. The participants in this study describe ‘a loss of innocence’ in positive terms, highlighting that only by being less willing to surrender their power to others did they develop an ability to take control over their own biography.

Social selves also describe having developed an increased tolerance for uncertainty and ‘not belonging’. This is conceptualised as resulting from the loss of identity following exit, which, in a sense, ‘forced’ them into uncertainty. As the result of their experience, social selves describe themselves as no longer dependent on ‘connectedness’, and more capable of tolerating ‘existential angst’ (Giddens, 1991) or the discomfort of uncertainty and a lack of belonging or acceptance. Comments such as “Now I don’t mind standing up for what I believe, and I don’t mind being the odd one out quite as much anymore” (Emily) and “I think I cope better with people in general, and at work, I’m probably less sensitive, stronger in myself. Less sensitive to what people say to me... I now feel more comfortable in myself” (Alice) were common. Emily explains that having become confronted with the cost of conformity she no longer has an intense need to belong and be accepted, and is better able to manage conflict. Whereas previously she would rather have conformed than feel excluded, she is now better able to tolerate the discomfort of conflict and a lack of acceptance. She explains:

> I hated conflict; I would always say yes. Now I still hate conflict but I can deal with it much better... I think I am stronger in the sense that I won’t let anyone push me around and I have
become capable of saying no, and holding onto myself... What I have learned from my experience has certainly shaped the way I view things, and I am so not afraid to question something if I do not agree with it. I am not afraid to say, ‘you know what, no!’ Whereas before I was a little bit of a yes person, I would do whatever to please people. I was criticised for that in the group too, I was criticised for being a people pleaser, just trying to keep people happy and please people whereas now, not that I like to see people unhappy but I think that I need also to look after myself and I now won’t push myself to the point of unhappiness just so that your needs are always fulfilled for a certain purpose; it’s a degree, it’s a degree of things.

Another common positive impact reported by most social selves is an improved ability to think critically. While previously they were quick to surrender to the authority of others, it appears that as the result of their experience they have gained an increased ability to critically reflect and take control over their personal decisions. Comments such as “I can think critically now” (Trudy), “I value logic” (Catheline), “I always think before I do things now” (Catheline) “I never take things at face value anymore” (Gabrielle), “I now truly appreciate the importance of critical analysis” (Nicholas) and “I am very tolerant of different perspectives now; I like diversity and different opinions” (Gabrielle) were common. Critical thinking is often reported as “not allowed” (Adam) in environments where cohesion is important such as NRMs. It is argued that requirements of cohesion and members’ heightened need for belonging impedes critical thinking skills (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003). It is suggested here that as former members become more capable of ‘not belonging’ they develop an increased ability to critically engage with their environment, and are better able to develop and maintain a sense of autonomy.

Despite initial challenges after exit, the majority of impacts of membership outlined above suggest the development of more ‘reflexive selves’ that are more capable of maintaining a sense of separateness and control over their own biography (Giddens, 1991). With the exception of those selves who lost their families to the group, social selves note that they have gained a lot from their experience and are now better able to negotiate the complexities of mainstream society than prior to involvement. Despite the losses and pains suffered, the majority comment that they “would not change a thing” (Thomas) and that they have “learned and grown so much thanks to the experience” (Emily) and have “become so much stronger” (Alice). Other comments that reflect this sentiment include:

I’ve thought if I wanted my life to be different, how would I want it to be different? And after thinking it through and reflecting on it, I wouldn’t want to change a thing. It’s made me who I am and it’s given me an insight into so many things that I wouldn’t normally have an insight into that I wouldn’t want to pass that up in order to have a normal life... It has been the
single most forming experience in my life and it’s directed my thinking, it’s directed my goals, it’s been a motivator to change and to move forward. It gives me such a greater depth of understanding that I wouldn’t have had (Thomas).

It has had an immense and profound impact on my entire life... It’s made me the person I am today. I think that if I wouldn’t have run into [the group] I don’t think my life would have been a bed of roses either. I was going to experiment with something; perhaps three different partners or something... I feel I have drawn a lot of out of it. I feel it’s given me insight and wisdom (Lauren).

I have changed fundamentally as a person because of the group. I have a lot more wisdom now and am a much stronger person because of it and a lot more determined and focussed on what I want from life. I think my growth while I was in there, I was only in there for two and a half years, but my growth period in that was more than my previous thirty years... And I am glad I went through it to get the life that I now have... I would not change my experience for the world (Nicholas).

While the social selves report an increased sense of control and autonomy the picture was more complex for the protected selves. As described in Chapter 7, these people had joined a NRM in search of an increased ability to relate and connect. About half of this group perceive themselves as having gained in this ability and these participants are the ‘managed selves’. The remaining six remain in the protected selves group; they describe membership in less favourable terms, mostly highlighting the stresses of an unsuccessful attempt at self-change. The experiences of the protected selves are outlined in the next section followed by those who had ‘managed’ themselves into increased connectedness.

**Clinging to the Protected self: NRM membership as an ineffective avenue for change**

Those participants labelled the protected selves primarily report negative impacts such as exhaustion, stress, anxiety, and despair. These negative impacts are understood as consistent with the struggles that initially motivated membership, and for which they had hoped membership would constitute a solution. Rather than resulting from having been brainwashed, these difficulties can be understood as primarily related to pre-involvement factors as well as the stress and disappointment of unsuccessful self-change. A few comments that describe their ongoing challenges include:
I now have a disorder of the jaw which happens when a person is stressed and the joint and the muscles become really tense, it’s really painful because it gives you really bad headaches, neck aches and it offsets the muscles in your arms…. I’m increasingly tense, finding it more and more difficult to relax. My interpersonal relationships suffer because I can’t relax around people. I’ve always been tense but it’s worse now … I pretty much have PTSD, which tends to reinforce stress because it means that your autonomic nervous system is on a hair trigger and your base level is not relaxation; it’s hyper wariness. I am constantly having nightmares and I still have tension in my jaw and I have chronic pelvic pain disorder... When your nervous system is on edge your pelvic muscles become tense and that’s what causes chronic pain (Joe).

My switch is stuck to the on position... I have spent a high proportion of my life, even as a child I was on high alert not to let anything bad happen to me again. So my system has been on high alert most of my life and now the switch is stuck. I have been trying to find the off-switch … I have been diagnosed with acute depression anxiety disorder … But it’s the anxiety that knocks me off my feet every so often and I will be put into bed for a couple of days. Mine becomes so acute that my body actually cramps. It’s like I am a massive rubber band for a couple of days. Once the tension goes off the rubber band, the cramps set in. Mine manifests itself as pain which is a real bugger (Lindsay).

While not all of those six participants who remain in the protected group describe ongoing issues of anxiety such as the ones described above, they all describe NRM as an ineffective avenue of change and continue to struggle with a sense of social disconnection and/or anxiety. As previously described, to varying degrees protected selves report histories of social isolation or loneliness, anxiety or stress that date back to their experiences in childhood. It is suggested that their current difficulties are likely to find their origin in unfavourable childhood experiences and are not primarily attributable and not attributed by them to NRM membership. As noted by Lindsay “Even though I’d like to pin all my anxiety problems onto my cult experience, it’s likely that the sexual abuse as a child has something to do with it as well”.

In addition to being anchored in negative childhood experiences, the symptoms of stress, strain and exhaustion reported by protected selves are also conceptualised as related to the experience of attempted but unsuccessful self-change. In their attempts to change, the data suggest that protected selves ‘denied’ or ‘repressed’ their ‘existing’ selves, pretending to conform to the group without ever really believing or feeling it. The notion that ‘self-denial’ is exhausting and stressful is well established, and has been linked to NRM membership (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Lalich & Tobias,
Weiss & Mendoza, 1990). Similarly to the observations made about the social selves, negative impacts such as stress and exhaustion are understood as largely temporary difficulties and not long lasting pathology.

Not all the protected selves experienced this unsatisfactory outcome. The sub-group of ‘managed selves’ report having achieved the desired self-changes. They describe themselves as having gained an increased ability to relate and connect to others, and a better understanding of and ability to manage or regulate their previously very intense emotions. Comments such as “I went there and I had a need and I fulfilled my need” (Julie); “I needed to learn to deal with stress, and I’ve learned it” (William); “I didn’t know how to have relationships, and now I do” (Vicki); “I didn’t know how to live, but I do now” (Flora) were common. The positives they have gained from membership are outlined in the next section.

**Achieving change through self-management: NRM membership as an avenue for the development of connectedness**

For this subgroup of the protected selves NRM involvement is understood as having ameliorated previous vulnerabilities just as the ‘social selves’ had ameliorated theirs but in a different direction. While protected selves report themselves as previously overwhelmed by negative emotions and a sense of disconnection from others, the findings suggest that some of them have developed into more highly reflexive selves that are now less overwhelmed by their internal experiences and more capable of connecting to others. These are now referred to as ‘managed selves’ because of their increased ability to reflect and manage self-change.

Managed selves describe having developed an increased ability to tolerate and regulate their intense emotions. Comments such as “The group kept me alive long enough, and I learned to manage my anxiety better” (Vicki), “I can manage stress a lot better” (William), “The group helped me understand my emotions better” (Adam) and “I don’t need drugs anymore to manage my feelings” (Julie) were common. Both Flora and Vicki note that if it wasn’t for the group, their inability to regulate their intense negative emotions could have likely resulted in suicide. As noted by Flora: “If it wasn’t for the church I would be dead, no question, I would have killed myself; I wouldn’t have made 20”. In regards to the way in which group involvement contributed to an improved ability to manage emotions Julie comments:
I had addiction problems and I believe the group helped me with that... I can’t explain exactly how it helped me but I can say now for sure that I do not have a problem anymore... I’ve started to think that I have definitely developed some coping skill, there’s definitely a lot that I have gotten out of it... That process of being in a group every week and people hammering you on your shit every week ... you couldn’t just sit there and get away with anything, people would know that you were trying to hide something...

I now have self-awareness. Basically, before I had done these courses I had no idea what emotions were, I was either happy or not happy; that was it... Sometimes I would be sad, people would say things that would hurt me but I really didn’t realise how upset I was. I really didn’t know how to manage my emotions. Now I got that self-awareness, I really am aware of my emotions now, and I know what to do with them better.

I am also more expressive, I let myself cry and I let myself feel the way that I am feeling and if people do something to me that I think is inappropriate I just tell them straight exactly how they have affected me. I learned this all throughout the process. I would definitely say that being part of the group helped me cope, so I don’t need drugs anymore. It’s helped me with my addiction.

The managed selves all describe membership as having facilitated the development of an increased ability to connect and relate to others. Comments such as “I have learned to connect to people better” (Adam), “I know how to have friends now” (Michelle), “The whole experience has brought us closer together as a family” (William) and “Before I was a bit of a manipulator, always in control, but now I am straight and I know when I have a game going on in my head ... so I can have better relationships” (Julie) were common.

In particular, Flora explains how membership helped her become more ‘socialised’ and ‘functional’. In comparison to her experiences with her family of origin, she describes the group as very functional, and akin to a ‘halfway house’. She notes:

Before I could function in the world and relate to normal people, I had to learn to read and things like that; I couldn’t read when I got there but they taught me... These people know how to get up in the morning, make breakfast for their children, make their beds, and get to work. I’d never seen anything so functional. I came a long way while I was there, no question… There was a lot of good community work and for many people, like me, their lives were transformed. Now I am capable of connection and intimate relationships (Flora).
Conclusion

Whilst acknowledging the grief and loss suffered by some former members and the high levels of stress experienced by others, this Chapter has challenged contemporary discourses of inevitable emotional damage from NRM membership; the findings posit NRM involvement as a beneficial experience for many of the former members in this study. Supporting the argument that the impacts of NRM membership can best be understood in light of reasons for joining and pre involvement vulnerabilities (Buxant, 2008; Coates, 2010a, 2011; S. Levine, 1984; Namini & Murken, 2009; Rochford, Purvis, & Eastman, 1989; Rothbaum, 1988), the findings suggest that involvement can be understood as compensating for, or even resolving, previous vulnerabilities for most participants.

In support of previous observations that posit the exit process as more challenging than the actual experience of membership (Buxant & Saroglou, 2008; J. Lewis & Bromley, 1987), the findings suggest that the majority of the challenges reported by participants are temporary and specific to the period of transition following exit rather than long lasting pathology as the result of ‘having been brainwashed’. This observation challenges much of the current thinking on NRMs, in particular as it relates to the majority of the available support offered to former members by health professionals. The primary ‘treatment’ model employed by those who work with former members pertains to helping the former members resolve or ‘undo’ the negative impacts of having been ‘brainwashed’, with a focus on assisting former members in restoring their former identities (Dowhower, 1993; Halperin, 1993; Langone, 1993a; Rohmann, 2006; Walsh & Bor, 1996; Ward, 2000, 2002). In line with previous observation, considering the many positives reported by the participants, a treatment model that assumes significant negative impacts of membership may not be the most appropriate model, and a more general counselling approach that is focussed on the management of issues such as stress, grief and loss may be more suitable in helping former members negotiate a transition following exit (Coates, 2009; Healy, 2010, 2011). Rather than a harmful experience that invariably results in psychopathology for which former members need to undergo specialised treatment, the findings suggest that while the transition period following exit was challenging, for many participants membership signified an opportunity for growth.

This notion that NRM membership can instigate or accelerate growth is well supported within the sociological literature (Balch & Taylor, 1977; Galanter, 1983; Goldman, 1995; Healy, 2010; Jacobs, 1989; Saroglou, et al., 2006; Wright, 1984, 1998). In accordance with the current findings, Wright (1998) found that former members often view their commitment as a necessary or meaningful episode in the individual’s spiritual, social and emotional development. In line with previous observations, the current findings suggest that as the result of their experience most of the participants have become
better equipped to negotiate the demands of contemporary society than prior to involvement. In particular, it is argued that they have developed an increased ability to negotiate the tensions between a need for individuality as well as connectedness, and in this sense can be described as having become more reflexive.

While high levels of reflexivity are commonly identified as essential for the management of today’s complex social environments, the processes through which individuals can develop increased reflexivity are not well understood (Holmes, 2010; Kiekolt & Mabry, 2000). Even though reflexivity is theorised as a differential property that some possess more than others and that can strengthen and change across the lifespan (Campbell, 2009; Fuchs, 2001; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Holmes, 2010; Zurcher, 1977), few scholars have investigated the processes through which increased reflexivity develops. Adding to this body of literature, a conceptualisation of the processes through which the social selves developed increased reflexivity, particularly in regards to the development of an increased sense of individuality and autonomy is outlined in the following Chapter. A conceptualisation of the processes that facilitated or inhibited the development of an increased ability to connect to others for the protected and managed selves is outlined in Chapter 13.
Chapter 12

The development of increased reflexivity and a ‘personal self’ for other-directed selves: The role of NRM affiliation and disaffiliation in provoking self-change

The previous Chapter has argued that NRM membership is reported by many participants as having had positive outcomes and benefits in terms of self-change. As this may seem surprising, it is important to explore the processes by which these changes are said to have occurred. This is the first of two Chapters covering the two broad types of self-change and is intended to provide detailed attention to these processes. This Chapter is based on case studies of ‘social selves’ who describe themselves as having gained in self-understanding and awareness as the result of their experience of membership. The observation that exit from a NRM may signify a transition towards an increased sense of autonomy and ability to negotiate ambiguity and uncertainty has been made before (Boeri & Pressley, 2010; Coates, 2009; Jacobs, 1989; Wright, 1987), but the process through which this transition happens seems little understood. One notable exception is a theory proposed by Boeri & Pressley (2010) which suggests that membership in a group that demands conformity and suppresses creativity may lead to the development of a more creative self that is better able to resist social influence after exit. This Chapter proposes that creativity and reflexivity share many resemblances and explores a relationship between the experience of membership, and exit from, a NRM or other ‘all-encompassing group’ and the development of increased reflexivity.

The importance of reflexivity for the self is increasingly highlighted in contemporary discussion on the self (M. Adams, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Holmes, 2010, 2011; Lash, 1994). While previously the self could rely on stable others for the construction of a relatively stable sense of self, for the contemporary self a sense of self-stability is personally constructed and maintained through the development of a personal self for guidance. In the current study a personal self is understood as the foundation from which the individual can acquire and maintain a unique biography, and from which connections with diverse, multiple, and at times contradictory others can be negotiated. A personal self is understood as an ongoing process that is constructed through cognitive and emotional reflexivity (M. Adams, 2003; Archer, 2007; Hitlin, 2003; Holmes, 2010).

Central to this thesis is the suggestion that not everyone has the reflexive abilities required for the development of this type of self-stability. Some individuals are not reflexively guided by a personal
self but acquire and maintain a sense of self stability by anchoring their selves in stable ‘others’, such as institutions, traditions or social groups. Scholars warn however that a high dependency on others for self-construction such as demonstrated by the social narrative can be harmful for the self. For social selves or ‘other-directed’ selves a loss of the ‘others’ or ‘identities’ in which they are embedded signifies a potentially dramatic loss of self and can result in an overwhelming sense of emptiness or ‘identity void’ (Adler & Adler, 1991; Thoits, 1991, 1999). The greater the proportion of one’s self conception that is vested in a single ‘other’, called salient or master identity is this body of literature, the more painful a potential loss (Burke, 2006; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Hochschild, 1983; Swann, 1999; Thoits, 1991). Scholars recommend that to avoid potentially devastating identity loss individuals who are easily influenced by others should actively develop ways in which to resist total immersion in others and learn to create a separation between themselves and their social environments (Giddens, 1991; Hochschild, 1983; King, 2006). However, how an increased separation between the self and society can be achieved is not well understood, and the study of the ways in which ‘disintegration’ between the self and society can be achieved is in need of urgent attention (Holmes, 2010, 2011; King, 2006). The current Chapter outlines the process through which the 12 social selves in this study are conceptualised as having developed increased reflexivity and a stronger personal self. The four case studies in this Chapter demonstrate the process of self-change instigated by the loss of a NRM identity, and facilitated by a period of active reflection.

“Working out what I think and feel”: The case of Margaret

Margaret’s story has appeared in this thesis grouped with the ‘social selves’. Her life history narrative suggests a history of ‘other-directedness’, and a strong tendency to rely on others in her construction of self. She describes a pattern of replacing one ‘controlled’ group or environment with another. She explains that when she became disillusioned with the beliefs and practices of one group she joined another: “I consecutively joined three Eastern meditation groups... I swapped one for another. I was a devoted disciple to three different gurus, and each time I believed this guru had the truth and was God”. What she describes as her “Eastern group period” was followed by affiliation with a Pentecostal church, born again Christians, a Baptist Church, an Anglican Church, a “radical Christian church”, and a “guru who claimed to be Jesus”. In addition to Christianity and Eastern meditation, she has been involved in “alternative spiritualities”, “new age counselling” and “the anti-cult movement”.

Margaret describes herself as “addicted” to the feeling of belonging to a group, and comments that:
Being part of a group was important to me... the Truth was more important than the purpose. I wanted Truth and certainty... I was addicted to the sense of certainty cults can offer... I wanted to be told who and what to be.

While she describes herself as a committed member who actively engaged with and genuinely believed in the various groups’ practices and teachings, she notes that she quite easily swapped one set of values and beliefs for another. She explains that she managed the loss of a group by dismissing the group as “not the Truth” and quickly embraced another as “the whole Truth”. She comments: “When I met the new cult it made sense because the teaching explained how the old group were the devil, trying to trick me... It made sense”.

However, this pattern of managing the loss of one master identity by embracing another has shifted, and Margaret now describes herself as no longer dependent on others. Margaret explains that after many years of replacing one group with another she could no longer ignore this pattern. She notes that the realisation that she was systematically replacing “one cult with another cult” prompted a period of active self-reflection, and the development of a stronger sense of individuality.

Margaret describes the transition from an ‘other-directedness’ to a sense of self that is more personally constructed as an active and deliberate process. She explains that to work out “where [she] was at” and “what she felt or believed” she needed to “investigate” or “sift through” all the different ‘identities’ or beliefs and emotions she embraced as a member of multiple and often contrasting groups. She notes

\[
\text{I had to work out who I was in relation to all these groups ... and to get a sense of ‘me’ I wrote my book... When I started writing the book I was still confused, I just wanted to make sense of my experiences. So writing the book was quite traumatic... but it helped me work out what I think and feel.}
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In addition to writing, she describes self-help and counselling as crucial for her personal development. She explains “Therapy was fantastic, I believe in therapy, it has helped me so much and I have learned so much about my emotions, it’s been fundamental”. Specific to her beliefs and thoughts, she explains that undertaking religious studies assisted her in making sense of her conflicting beliefs and thoughts pertaining to religious matters. While she still describes herself as strongly guided by and connected to others, she stresses that for the first time in her life she feels “In control of [my] own life, choices and decision... I’m in control of my path in life now... I know myself a lot better, understand my emotions and have personal beliefs and opinions.”
“I can be me”: The case of Thomas

Thomas also describes a ‘controlled’ childhood dictated by an authoritarian father. Like Margaret, he describes managing the loss of the structure and security of his childhood by joining a NRM founded in Christianity. Thomas describes himself as a committed member who was highly dependent on the group for his sense of identity and belonging. This ‘other-directedness’ became problematic for Thomas when he was expelled from the group after 11 years of membership. He describes the experience of expulsion as a highly traumatic experience that resulted in “an intense loss of identity”. In addition to a loss of social support, housing and employment, Thomas highlights his loss of identity as “incredibly painful”. With five children, no ‘legitimate’ job references or qualifications, no suitable housing, no understanding of mainstream society in terms of “current music, sport or news” he struggled to integrate into mainstream society. He explains that with little understanding of mainstream culture he struggled to relate to people outside of the group and found it very difficult to form relationships.

Thomas describes how the loss of a NRM identity combined with difficulties adjusting to mainstream society left him with an “unbearable identity void” and “an intense sense of insecurity and anxiety”. Without the group, Thomas felt overwhelmed, confused and lost. He struggled to cope and started to drink heavily. He explains:

*Adjusting to the way life outside had changed in the years we were away was very difficult... I felt like I was failing God by being in mainstream society again, and I couldn’t relate to people... I started to drink heavily and we had a lot of marriage issues.*

*[My wife] had been very controlled within a male dominated society so that was a hard thing to adjust to because I saw a patriarchal society as a biblical model and we had lived that way in the group; then when we hit mainstream society to find that my wife wanted to work, study, progress, all that sort of stuff was difficult for me to accept. I thought a woman should be at home looking after the kids and that's the way it is and should be.... I didn’t know what to do with that spiritually either. That was really a spiritual value for me, that was the right thing to do and that was something society had really gotten wrong. That was really big...*

*I wasn’t coping ... I was very troubled, very disturbed, drinking very heavily. Still holding on to some aspects of the group because I didn’t know any better; still over disciplining the kids.*
Now it was probably worse because half the time I was actually drunk.

Thomas’ narrative suggests that in addition to drinking, he managed his loss of identity by joining another group, albeit a less all-encompassing one. He explains:

*I launched myself into the church, into the evangelism sort of side of it. They accepted me with open arms as a youth group leader… I was probably the worst Christian that you could ever meet. My life was a total hypocrisy; I was on the one hand a drunken mental case and on the other hand espousing to be a Christian youth leader and some kind of moral guide to society.*

While membership in a new group offered Thomas some relief, it also provoked significant reflection. Thomas explains that he was acutely aware of the conflicts between the teachings of his former group and this new group, and the conflicts between these teachings on the one hand and his drinking on the other. To help him make sense of these dissonances, he described going on an active “search for truth”. He explains:

*I valued truth. And I was going to compare the teachings of the different groups with the Bible … Truth was important to me as I didn’t want to lose my eternal soul because of a disagreement with a group. So I had to find out what I believed. So I went on a frantic search that lasted years, reading every book that I could get hold of, on religion, on Bible explanation, on all kinds of things… Education definitely opens your mind to new thoughts and new thought processes, and it has helped me to clarify what Christianity should look like and what was wrong in the cult and what is wrong with the Church… Education has helped me work out what I think and I no longer need the Church the way I used to… When you are not under a teacher constantly and you are not simply hearing one party line constantly, you have more space to think and reflect and make up your own mind on things a bit more.*

In addition to the study of various Christian teachings which helped him identify his own religious beliefs, Thomas also engaged with the study of emotions through self-help and counselling. He notes:

*I also read multitudes of self-help books and psychology books and all that sort of stuff, and I started to study counselling and that helped me with my drinking and anxiety… This has definitely helped me to cope with normal life a lot better.*
Thomas’ narrative suggests that a period of critical reflection and active engagement with both his religious beliefs and his emotions facilitated the development of a stronger personal self that is less dependent on others. He observes:

To be honest, I don’t recognise myself. I look at how my belief system has changed and I am not the same person… My thinking changed a lot … I can now take the good and leave the bad… We haven’t been to church for the last two and a half years. In that time I have held onto my faith … but my whole approach to Christianity has changed a lot… I suppose my thinking has changed in the sense that I don’t have to prove myself to anybody anymore. I don’t have to be involved with the church system and I am quite comfortable with that, while still holding onto basic tenets of the faith

… My attitudes to homosexuals and things like that have mellowed a lot, my attitudes to divorce, my attitudes to birth control, abortion, while I still believe that they are not ideal and not functional … I’m a lot more forgiving in areas that I do not necessarily agree with. I’ve mellowed a lot in areas like that, rather than running around screaming of the roof tops ‘homosexuals are bad’ they are people and mixed up like the rest of us…

There has been a major transition in my thinking and I’m a lot calmer within myself, a lot more peaceful, a lot more accepting of life and I don’t feel like I should be someone else or do something else… I now know myself and understand myself better, and I can just be me. I can be happy… I no longer need a group to attach myself to, I can be me and I now find community in a variety of settings … I can hang out with surfers and I can hang out with Christians … It no longer has to be one or the other.

While on the one hand he describes how NRM membership and church affiliation stopped him from developing a sense of self as separate from these institutions, he also notes that it is not despite of but because of his experiences of group membership that he has developed the strong sense of self he now perceives himself to have. He notes:

I think the more understanding and experience of different sub cultures generally that you can have all helps you understand that people have different frameworks that they live within, and help you work out your own… I am a lot stronger thanks to my diverse experiences... and also more flexible.
“You’re not going to tell me what to do any more”: The case of Gabrielle

Following a 20 year commitment to a ‘fundamentalist Christian church’, Gabrielle also struggled with an identity void upon exit. She explains:

When you come out, you’re lost, with no support. Coming out of a cult is like going into a void, for example, things like social skills, you sort of have to learn how to socialise with people on the outside. It was like ‘what are the rules now? What do you talk about?’ It’s like learning a whole new language, there’s a language in the cult; if you use that language on the outside, it’s not a good … It’s also the identity thing. Joining a group becomes part of who you are… I belong to. And when you leave, you’re suddenly faced with ‘who are you?’ I am no longer an elder in that crazy group. Who am I? Am I just a teacher? Who am I? Especially if you’re single; I’m not a mother… I struggled with this… What are you?

Like Thomas and Margaret, Gabrielle managed or lessened this void by anchoring her identity in a series of different churches; each new church she describes as less all-encompassing and dogmatic than the previous. She explains:

Initially we went from one group to another. After we left the group we kept going to this church for a while until that went a bit crazy too. We were involved for 10 years, and then I decided, ‘no, I have been there and done that and I don’t want to do this anymore’… Then we went to a different church but I got sick of the guy reading his sermons… Then we went to another church, got sick of that too and now we go to a church around here … And this church we go to now, we’re not involved as such and people get annoyed because we won’t get involved in that way, we do what we want to do.

So that was 12 or 15 years after leaving that you come to the realisation that I’m still being, in some ways … there was still that tendency to want to do things to be accepted or belong or whatever, but now, between 15 and 20 years down the track, it’s ‘forget it, no’… ‘No, you’re not going to tell me what to do anymore’… Now I would describe myself as eclectic Christian.

The process through which Gabrielle transitioned from a sense of self strongly informed by fundamentalist Christianity to a more personally directed sense of self involved self-reflection and education. This involved both the study of thoughts and beliefs through theology study and emotions through counselling studies. She notes:
I decided to do the theology degree because I knew that the teachings we had had were so narrow and I wanted to get a broader theological thinking. I wanted to find out what other people believed. It’s like when you’ve been shut in a small room with nothing and suddenly they let you out and there is this great expanse of rooms full of books and things, it’s quite exciting … My studies were therapeutic for me, I could do my own exploring under the guise of extra studies… And then I did a counselling degree.

Gabrielle explains that by working through her experience she has developed an increased tolerance for uncertainty, and can now maintain a sense of self without needing to be part of a group or a rigid belief system. She now feels both connected to others, while feeling in control of her own biography and decisions in life:

I’m 61 one now, I am happy not knowing. Goodness me, does it matter? It doesn’t keep me awake at night anymore. I think life is about being given opportunities; I don’t think there is a set path that God has for people. God gave us a brain to make our own decisions and make the most of opportunities … I think your identity in time becomes more tied up in your own skills and your own challenges, your own abilities, your own view of life. I am now more into the social justice side of things rather than trying to convert the world. I’d rather feed the hungry than preach a sermon; I can do both. There is the practical application of Christianity as opposed to the wanky theoretical ethereal rubbish.

“Take the good and leave the bad”: The case of Catheline

Catheline exited a personal development group following expulsion. Like other social selves, she describes the void she experienced following disaffiliation as traumatic. She describes transitioning from “being told what to do and think” to “having to work it out for yourself” as overwhelming, and explains that having been expelled forced her, for the first time in her life, to take personal responsibility and learn to manage and tolerate uncertainty and ‘aloneness’.

During the first year following exit she notes that her distress and sense of emptiness was somewhat alleviated by her involvement with the ACM. However, her narrative suggests that her involvement with the ACM was in no way all-encompassing and did not fill the void left by the loss of the group; it merely ‘eased’ the pain of overwhelming uncertainty. Catheline notes that the first years following exit consisted of counselling, self-help and self-reflection. In particular, she explains that through honest reflection on her experiences she came to the realisation that she is in charge of her life and
who she wants to become, and she cannot continue holding others responsible for her ‘choices’. Even though she at times feels victimised by her experiences of having been “controlled by more powerful others”, she notes that she was not just a victim, but also hurt others. She explains:

*I was given the opportunity to be on the other side of the fence, I put on the uniform and I was working in the kitchen and I became the person to scream at people and to tell them to go back or do this again. I became a leader for that week. I felt powerful. And I felt like ‘Yeah, I can get them back’, I experienced it and so should they. Admitting to myself that I’ve got that in me is pretty horrible. So it makes you look at yourself in a different way than I would have if I’d never been in the group. God I’ve got all these sides to me.*

Her narrative suggests that by reflecting on the conflicts between her experiences being controlled by others as well as controlling others, her identity before involvement, as a member, as an anti-cultist, and as a “normal person in mainstream society” she started to work out what it is she feels, believes and wants. She explains that even though initially following exit anything related to the group was discarded, and she endeavoured to be “very normal” and “anti-cultist” she now recognises that she can “take the good and leave the bad” of the various identities available to her. She notes:

*Initially I dropped everything related to the group. Things that I thought were sacred and special during involvement I just dropped… But to throw all of that away is self-hurting… When I first left the group I was almost zealous about mind control “oh mind control, I have to tell everyone … but now I understand how complex the choices that we make are. How we choose to identify ourselves.*

She explains that she can now appreciate that trying to fit into mainstream society and “be the norm” is also restrictive, even though it is not as restrictive as a NRM. Through her experiences she explains that she has come to better appreciate the complexities and nuances of life. Having come face to face with the limitations of letting others define her sense of self, she has found the strength to work out who she is as an individual, separate from others. She notes: “I feel in control… I can take personal responsibility now… I feel an optimism that I haven’t felt for a long time. It’s more like an inner strength. Life is what you make it”.
Discussion

The experiences of Margaret, Thomas, Gabrielle and Catheline in regard to the transition from ‘other-directed’ selves to more highly reflexive selves that are more strongly anchored in a sense of individuality or separateness is in line with the experiences described by the other social selves in this study. All 12 participants describe experiencing an intense ‘identity void’ upon the loss of the NRM identity, followed by a period of intense uncertainty or ‘existential anxiety’ (Giddens, 1991). In an attempt to resolve these issues, they engaged in a period of active learning about personal emotions through counselling studies, engagement with self-help literature, or personal counselling. In addition to learning about emotions, the narratives also refer to a process of making sense of beliefs, primarily through studying theology or religious studies, and a period of active reflection on the dissonances and conflicts between the various identities or ‘others’ that have informed their sense of self. It is these factors of dramatic loss, overwhelming existential anxiety, the study of personal thoughts, beliefs and feelings, and active reflection on the dissonances and conflicts in their life history that are conceptualised as primary to the development of a personal self. It is argued that for these participants the development of a personal self was not an unconscious happening or ‘something that just happened’ as the result of conflict and cultural uncertainty but constituted an active and deliberate process.

A dramatic loss of self and resulting uncertainty and existential anxiety is conceptualised as primary to the development of a personal self. It is suggested that up until NRM exit these selves had not previously experienced a need to develop a personal self for guidance, but had managed to establish a sense of self continuity by anchoring their selves in stable ‘others’, such as NRM membership. Without a personal self that is to some extent separate from the social world, the loss of identity upon exit from a NRM resulted in a dramatic loss of self. Even though the loss of a NRM released these former members from prior constraints placed upon their thoughts and feelings, the ensuing identity void, as well as the task of finding an identity replacement or solution was described as a stressful and frightening experience.

This relationship between a loss of identity confirming ‘other’ and negative emotions such as stress, anxiety and depression is well established within the symbolic interactionist tradition (Athens, 1995; Burke, 1991; Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Heise, 1979; Thoits, 1991; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). Specific to the loss of a NRM identity, a number of scholars have proposed that the symptoms of despair, anxiety and depression following exit are not related to the so-called negative experiences of ‘brainwashing’ but can be better understood as the result of the dramatic loss of identity upon exit (Coates, 2009; Worden, 2003; Wright, 1987). The experience of dramatic identity loss and resultant
feelings of uncertainty are understood as having instigated increased reflexivity, and the development of a personal self. In particular, it is suggested that a transition towards increased reflexivity was instigated by the pain of the identity loss, coupled with recognition of the extent to which their sense of self was influenced by the group.

The suggestion that intense uncertainty may instigate increased reflexivity is not new. Most theories of reflexivity highlight conditions of ontological uncertainty and risk as primary to the development of more reflexive selves (Beck, 1992; Beck, et al., 1994; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Holmes, 2010), and, in turn, the reflexive development of a personal self or self-identity (Giddens, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Mead, 1934). This body of literature positions the development of a personal self, or self-identity, as resulting from unstable conditions and the loss of traditional institutions in which to anchor the self. It is suggested that a personal self develops when habitual responses break down and choices need to be made (Hitlin & Elder, 2007) or under conditions where the individual can no longer carry on routinely (Fontana & McGinnis, 2005). Dislocation from tradition or the loss of stable others is understood as producing reflexivity, and prompting the individual to reflect and reorder their own relations to self and others (Holmes, 2010). Reflexivity theorising consistently posits increases in reflexivity as brought about by a need to change or develop the self as the result of being faced with new and unpredictable surroundings or experiences (Fontana & McGinnis, 2005; Giddens, 1991; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Holmes, 2010; Zurcher, 1977). As noted by Holmes (2010) reflexivity is instigated when the individual is confronted with a need to find new “ways through the world and a place in it” and a need to respond to changing life circumstances (p. 143). This idea that conditions of uncertainty are central to reflexivity and the development of a personal self is supported by the narratives of these previously other-directed selves. In particular, the narratives suggest that an increase in reflexivity was instigated by being ‘shocked’ into self-awareness following the loss of a NRM identity.

It is suggested that the identity loss and high levels of uncertainty experienced following exit from a NRM caused sufficiently high levels of anxiety and discomfort to shock these former members into self-awareness, with this, in turn, instigating increases in reflexivity. A number of symbolic interactionists have argued that for the self to become more reflexive and more ‘self-aware’ some individuals might need to experience events that shock them out of the comfort and security of the ‘reality’ in which they are immersed (Athens, 1995; Kiekolt, 1994; Thoits, 1991; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). This idea that a ‘shock’ or stress can have a transformative function for the self is well developed by an extensive body of literature that positions loss, uncertainty and trauma as opportunities for personal development and growth (Ebaugh, 1988a, 1988b; Elder, 1986; Lancaster, 2009; Mayan, Morse, & Eldershaw, 2006; Rehorick, 2008; Tower, 2008). In accordance with these
observations, it appears that for these former members the ‘shock’ and stress of loss and uncertainty instigated increased reflexivity and a period of personal development and growth.

While it is suggested that the participants in this study were shocked into increased reflexivity, it appears that the development of a personal self was not an unconscious happening but an active and deliberate process. All these participants describe the development of a personal self in the context of ongoing study and active personal reflection. In particular, the narratives suggest that personal beliefs were developed in the context of religious study and an understanding and increased awareness of emotions developed through counselling studies, self-help literature, and personal counselling. In addition, diary writing was identified as helpful for the construction of a personal self in its ability to increase self-awareness and self-understanding (Athens, 2005; Coles, 2008). To this extent, it appears that the development of a stronger personal self involved both the study of cognitions as well as emotions. The observation that the study of emotions was important to the development of a personal self for these participants seems important, and contributes to the traditional literature on reflexivity which places cognitions at the centre of the developing of a personal self or self-identity (Giddens, 1991).

The observation that an awareness and understanding of emotions may be important to reflexivity and the development of a personal self is in line with recent theorising on ‘emotional reflexivity’ (Holmes, 2010, 2011; King, 2006). From this perspective it is argued that the development of a self that is separate from society, or “disintegration” (King, 2006) is inherently emotional in nature, and requires an ability to reflect upon- interpret and identify personal and others’ emotions (M. Adams, 2003; Elster, 1999; Glover, 1999; Holmes, 2010; King, 2006). Learning to recognise and articulate personal and others’ emotions is argued to be fundamental to successfully meeting the demands of today’s social environments (Holmes, 2010, p. 149). In support of this, the current findings suggest that the development of an increased ability to function in today’s society outside of the context of a NRM or other group or institution, the former members in this study skilled themselves in emotional reflexivity. The data suggest that an increased capacity to identify and interpret personal emotions facilitated an increased recognition and understanding of themselves as separate.

In addition, and perhaps most fundamentally to the development of a personal self, it is suggested that the study of emotions also facilitated the development of an increased tolerance for ontological uncertainty or existential anxiety. Previously struggling to tolerate uncertainty and a lack of belonging, it is posited that through engagement with self-help and counselling these participants developed the anxiety management techniques and strategies necessary for the development of a self that can tolerate the levels of uncertainty common in today’s society. This is consistent with previous theorising that suggests that it is increasingly important for individuals to learn to tolerate the
emotional states of uncertainty generated by the cultural conditions of contemporary society to the extent that uncertainty should be understood as a positive dynamic (Elliott, 1996; Holmes, 2010). From this perspective, the development of a strong sense of self is considered fundamentally emotional in that it requires a capacity to tolerate the unknown and resist social influence (Elliott, 1996). In light of the importance of tolerating uncertainty for the development of increased reflexivity and a personal self, uncertainty or anxiety management or tolerance skills are conceptualised as primary to the construction of a personal self. Now better able to tolerate uncertainty, it is suggested that the tendency of previously ‘other-directed’ selves to refer authority to others lessened and a sense of individuality strengthened.

Despite increasing awareness of themselves as separate from others, these former member narratives do not portray the development of a personal self as an ‘isolated undertaking’ but as occurring in the context of connectedness or social interaction. The narratives describe the construction of a personal self as an ongoing process through which the self gradually transitions from highly constructed in others to increasingly personally constructed, with this occurring through a process of connection to, and disconnection from, others. As demonstrated by the case studies, while disaffiliation from a NRM prompted a period of personal growth and development, personal development did not occur in isolation but was negotiated through ongoing interaction with multiple ‘others’, including alternate religious affiliations, educational institutions and counselling services. While skills in emotional and cognitive reflexivity may facilitate the development of increased individuality or autonomy, the personal self is not in any way considered ‘disconnected’ from others. In line with SI conceptualisations, a reflexive self anchored in a sense of individuality continues to be understood as flexible and capable of change and development through connection to multiple and changing others (Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Orrange, 2003). To this extent, rather than engulfing the self, for selves anchored in a personal self, connection to others no longer signifies a loss of self but may present an opportunity for growth and development. For the participants in this study affiliation with an ‘alternate’ group following exit from a NRM did not necessarily inhibit the development of a personal self but can be understood as having facilitated this process.

The narratives demonstrate that in addition to personal study, the former members managed their intense loss and uncertainty following exit in the context of affiliation with an alternate group or institution. For example, Thomas joined a fundamentalist church and Margaret describes an ongoing pattern of replacing one group with another. This tendency of former members of NRMs to manage the loss of one group with the replacement of the group by another is well established (Mauss, 1998; Richardson, 1978; Richardson, et al., 1986). It is suggested that upon the loss of the NRM identity, the social selves in this study managed the overwhelming anxiety and uncertainty of an ‘identity void’ by embracing another salient identity or ‘other’ for guidance. This new identity is not understood as a
permanent identity solution but merely as a stepping stone or ‘transition bridge’ (Ashforth, 2001) that helps alleviate some of the immediate distress following exit, and is understood as helping to prevent the former member from becoming overwhelmed, and in turn paralysed, by identity uncertainty (Ashforth, 2001; Coates, 2009).

It is proposed that the experience of having anchored their sense of self in multiple and at times contradictory others is crucial for the development of highly reflexive selves. In line with a theory proposed by Zurcher’s (1977) about the development of increased reflexivity, through a cycle of replacing one lost all-encompassing identity with another slightly less salient identity, the social selves in this study are understood as gradually transitioning from being highly constructed in the realm of others to being increasingly personally constructed. It is proposed that each time an identity is lost and a new identity embraced the self becomes more reflexive and personally constructed, and less socially constructed or defined by others. Through this cycle of primary identity acquisition and loss, a more balanced sense of self develops that is no longer defined by one prevailing identity. This notion that the acquisition and loss of multiple and even contrasting identities may facilitate rather than inhibit the development of a personal self is consistent with SI conceptualisations of the self as developed through active reflection on the different expectations and perceptions of multiple salient others (Athens, 1994; Blumer, 1969; Coles, 2008; Hitlin, 2003; Mead, 1934). From this perspective, the development of a personal self is understood as achieved through reflection on the conflict and dissonances between the different, and at times contrasting identities in which the individual is embedded (Burke, 2003b; Coles, 2008; Gecas, 2000; Hitlin, 2003; Hitlin & Elder, 2007; J. C. Olson, Colasanti, & Trujillo, 2006; Schachter, 2005; Wilsom & Deaney, 2010; Zurcher, 1972). Consistent with SI notions of self, for the social selves in this study it appears that a willingness or ability to embrace a range of identifications within the self and in dealings with others was developed through a process of identity acquisition, dramatic loss and reflection.

The suggestion that NRM membership may facilitate the development of highly reflexive selves rather than inhibit this process challenges the common view that conflicts and contradictions between the NRM identity and previous and subsequent identities is an issue that warrants great concern. In particular, it is suggested that the experience of having been highly influenced by others in their construction of selves, and most importantly, having become aware of this influence, has equipped social selves with the level of tolerance for contradictions and the ability to resist social pressures they now describe. The experience of having become confronted with their ‘other-directedness’ upon the loss of the NRM, combined with increased self-awareness instigated by the pain and discomfort of loss and uncertainty, is conceptualised as primary to the development of highly reflexive selves. For example, for Thomas, the development of a personal self was instigated by a recognition of the extent to which he had been influenced by his “authoritarian father”, the NRM and subsequent religious
affiliations. Thomas described in some detail how the acquisition and loss of multiple identities made him acutely aware of the contradictions in his behaviour and identities, and how this prompted a period of active reflection on the dissonance and conflicts in his behaviour, feelings and history. To this extent, it is proposed that the experience of having become dramatically influenced by multiple and conflicting others did not inhibit but facilitated the development of high reflexivity for the selves in this study. Health professionals who work with former members consistently argue that former members need to identify or reconnect with their ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ self, suggesting that NRM membership obscured their ‘authentic’ selves (Hassan, 1988, 2000; Jenkinson, 2008, 2010; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993a; Langone & Eisenberg, 1993; Singer, 2003). Challenging this notion, it is suggested here that the dramatic dissonances between the various identities in which the social selves have been anchored throughout their lifespan could be better understood as having facilitated the development of their current selves rather than as having hindered this process.

The experiences of the social selves in this study are perceived as akin to the experiences of marginalised individuals more generally who are commonly described as unusually high in reflexivity. Those who study marginalisation often attribute the high levels of reflexivity observed in marginalised individuals as related to the experience of being ‘stuck’ between cultures and not truly belonging anywhere (Coles, 2008; Fontana & McGinnis, 2005; E. Stone, 2002). As commented by Stone (2002) the marginalised position is argued not to be simply one of deprivation but is an entry way to realms of knowledge and feelings that the dominant culture hides and denies. As the result of their experiences with cultural contradictions and displacement and the resultant development for contradictions, the social selves in this study, like marginalised selves, are perceived as having developed an unusually high ability to resist social influence (Coles, 2008). Through the loss, the accumulation of, and reflection upon different identities the social selves in this study are understood as having developed into highly complex selves.

**Conclusion**

The narratives of social selves suggest that the development of a personal self was not an unconscious happening as the result of conflict, but an active and deliberate process that took time and effort. This is consistent with previous descriptions of the development of a self as separate from others as requiring concerted and ‘vigorou...
reflexivity was enhanced by the active study of emotions, thoughts and beliefs, and active reflection on the dissonances in their personal histories, behaviours, emotions and beliefs. Increases in self-awareness are understood as interconnected to an understanding and awareness of the impact of others on the self. Challenging conceptualisation of the self that give minimal attention to the role of connections to others for the self (Giddens, 1991) connectedness to multiple and at times contrasting others is understood as primary to the development of highly reflexive selves for the social selves in this study. In particular, an awareness and understanding of the ways in which the self is connected to, and influenced by, others is understood as important.

While the current Chapter outlined the process through which the social selves in this study are conceptualised as having developed a stronger sense of individuality, the following Chapter outlines the process through which protected selves in this study are conceptualised as having developed an increased sense of connectedness.
Chapter 13

The development of increased connectedness: Commitment to change and the tolerance of self-uncertainty

The current Chapter evaluates the processes that facilitated and inhibited self-change for those participants who had joined a NRM in search of change. While the social selves in this study described membership as, in varying degrees, motivated by a desire for self-certainty and continuity, the protected narratives depict membership as primarily motivated by a desire for self-change and the development of stronger social and emotional connections. While the desire for self-stability and self-continuity is well established within the SI literature (Keyes & Ryff, 2000; Large & Marcussen, 2000; Swann, 1999), it is recognised that individuals may also be motivated by the competing desire of self-change or self-enhancement (George, 1998; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993). Although this body of literature is less developed than the study of how the self maintains consistency or continuity, increasingly scholars are paying attention to the importance of self-change for the self, and the ways in which the self negotiates and manages change across the lifespan (Athens, 1995; Burke, 2006; Charmaz, 1994, 1995; Elder & O’Rand, 1995; George, 1993, 1998; Kiekolt, 1994; Kiekolt & Mabry, 2000; Milligan, 2003; Thoits, 1991). This chapter discusses the analysis of accounts of attempted self-change by the protected selves as a contribution to the study of self-change in general and the development of increased social and emotional connectedness in particular.

What exactly is meant by the term self-change is not always clear, and in accordance with the confusing and inconsistent usage of the terms self and identity more generally, it appears that the term self-change is often used in reference to different processes. The study of self-change is most developed within the psychological context of developmental changes (Erikson, 1950, 1968; Levitt, Silver, & Santos, 2007; Sheely, 1974). Within the sociological literature, this term is most commonly used in reference to changes in behaviours or social relationships (Burke, 2006; Stryker, 2000), but can also refer to changes that are ‘deeper’ and emotional in nature (Denzin, 1987b; Hochschild, 1983). The majority of symbolic interactionists, especially those within the more structural tradition, have limited the study of self-change to changes in the more externally determined or influenced aspects of the self, such as behavioural or cognitive change (Burke, 2003b; Stryker, 1980). With its conception of the self as constructed through social interaction and highly embedded within social networks and relationships, from this perspective, self-change is most commonly conceptualised as caused by changes in patterns of social interaction (Burke, 2006; Kiekolt, 1994, 2000; Stryker, 1980;
Stryker, et al., 2000). Self-change is portrayed as a gradual process that results from changes in the external influences on the self, or changes in the ‘others’ with whom the individual interacts. Self-change is considered synonymous with identity change, reflecting changes in the ‘identities’ or ‘roles’ or relationships in which the individual is embedded, and the study of self-change has mostly focussed on changes in the individual’s ‘structure’ of multiple identities as the result of ‘identity’ loss or acquisition (Burke, 2006; Howard, 2006; Inderbitzin, 2009; Kiekolt, 1994; Large & Marcussen, 2000; Markus & Nurius, 1987; Stryker, 1980; Stryker, et al., 2000; Wells & Stryker, 1988). The majority of these studies investigate the changes associated with the transition from one ‘identity’ and associated behavioural norms and expectations to another ‘identity’ (Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Drahota & Eitzen, 1998; Ebaugh, 1988a, 1988b; McPhee, 1982; Shaffir & Kleinknecht, 2005). From this perspective, the individual is considered dependent on the social relationships in which he or she is embedded, and the individual’s ability to internalise identities or ‘connect’ to its social environment is taken for granted. It is limited in its ability to explain how individuals, such as the protected selves in this study, who struggle to internalise or connect to ‘others’ increase their ability to do so, and become more flexible and capable of change in response to social and cultural changes. By not differentiating between self-change and identity change, this body of literature neglects to discuss the internal influences on the self, and the study of self-change as internally managed or directed, such as changes in the ways in which emotions are managed or experienced. The current Chapter examines the experience and management of self-change that goes beyond ‘identity’ or behavioural level changes and includes changes in the management and experience of emotions.

Relatively few sociologists have extended the study of the self and self-change to the study of emotions (Denzin, 1987b; Hochschild, 1979, 1983, 1990, 1998; Holmes, 2010, 2011; King, 2006). While a rich body of sociological literature recognises that the successful management of emotions is important in contemporary social life (Archer, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Holmes, 2010, 2011), the processes through which emotions can be managed or changed to better meet the demands of complex social environments remains less understood (Holmes, 2011). Even though sociologists argue that to navigate the demands of today’s social life individuals need to develop complex selves that can manage tensions between a need for individuality, as well as connectedness to others (Bauman, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Holmes, 2010), the process through which individuals lacking in this ability can develop more complex selves is not well developed. The majority of the sociological literature pertaining to the impacts of contemporary social life on the self is centred around individualism, and focusses on the importance and development of a strong sense of individuality or ‘self-identity’ for the contemporary self. This body of literature highlights the importance of learning to separate or dis-embed the self from its social and cultural environment (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 1990, 1991; Heelas, 1996; Heelas, et al., 1996; Lash, 1994), and with its focus on ‘disconnection’ and autonomy, sheds little light on how emotional ‘connectedness’ can be
maintained or developed in a culture of individuality. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, a lack of connectedness or difficulties in establishing connections is central to the narratives of the protected selves. The previous Chapter outlined the processes through which some former members developed increased individuality; the current Chapter analysis the processes through which some former members developed an increased sense of connectedness. By comparing the narrative of those former members who perceived themselves as having developed an increased ability to connect to others through membership to those who do not perceive themselves as changed, factors that are understood as facilitating and inhibiting self-change were identified and discussed.

Divergent paths for protected selves: Successful and unsuccessful strategies for self-change

This chapter distinguishes between two groups of ‘protected selves’; those who feel that NRM membership has not changed them and continue with their ‘protected self’, and those who have emerged with increased abilities to connect by ‘managing’ themselves and their emotions. ‘The protected selves’ do not perceive themselves as having achieved the desired self-change through NRM membership and continue to feel disconnected from others. Consistent with the challenges they experienced prior to NRM involvement, they continue to describe themselves as anchored in intense feelings, and describe ongoing challenges with anxiety disorders (Joe, Lindsay), suicidal thoughts (Michael), and a sense of disconnection from others and loneliness (Joe, Lindsay, Michael, Chris). The intensity of their emotions is understood as continuing to hinder social interaction, and inhibiting the development of meaningful connections to others. Comments such as “I can’t cope with the stress of relationships” (Kerry), “I still find social interaction challenging” (Joe, Michael), and “I don’t have a sense of community” (Chris) were common for these participants. Akin to how he described himself prior to involvement, Michael describes his current sense of disconnection as follows:

For some reason I have always wanted to leave before my time’s up and it’s been with me since I could remember… It stops me from getting into life…I do not feel fulfilled by all the worldly things on offer … What do you do when all the food on offer is bland? That’s my battle… I feel devoid of zest for life and I have become isolated from the rest of the world. But I go through the motions, I fight every day, I get up, but I don’t want to be here. I don’t want to live. I want to be at peace … I know I need to learn how to connect with everyday people. I need to know how to survive in the world, and I am not any good at that.

Similarly, Joe notes:
Some days I am tense to the point where interaction is strained. I just wish it could be understood, that there was someone who understood it who didn’t reject me for that reason.

In opposition to this, those called the ‘managed selves’ describe themselves as meaningfully connected to others for the first time in their lives (Flora, Vicki, Michelle, Julie). Attributed, at least partly, to their experience of membership, they describe themselves as better able to manage intense internal feelings such as stress and anxiety and form social relationships (William, Vicki, Flora, Michelle, Julie). Comments that describe their sense of successful self-change include: “I have more control over emotions” (Julie), “I am less anxious” (Julie, Vicki) “I no longer have a drug problem” (Julie), “I am more patient” (Vicki) “I am more capable of managing anxiety” (Vicki), “I can manage stress better” (William) and “I am the happiest I have ever been in my entire life. I know how to deal with people a lot more. I have friends, a partner, a baby, I’m in touch with my family” (Vicki).

To gain an understanding of which factors may have inhibited or facilitated successful self-change, the narratives of the managed selves were compared to those of the protected selves. Even though these narratives are understood as on a continuum, the narratives of change are sufficiently distinct to make a comparison worthwhile. Consistent with previous observations that people who engage in intentional self-change reflect on the process (Kiekolt & Mabry, 2000) the participants in this study presented well developed views on what they perceive as having facilitated or inhibited self-change. The primary differences between the two narratives regard the ways in which tensions between the self’s desire for self-change versus self-maintenance were managed and variations in the extent to which attempts at self-change were personally directed and negotiated.

In conflict with previous presentations of NRMs as instigating sudden and dramatic self-change (Hassan, 1988, 2000; James, [1902] 1979; Langone, 1993a; Shitbutani, 1961; Singer, 2003; Starbuck, 1987; Travisano, 1970), the current findings suggest that while NRM membership facilitated self-change for some members, these changes were not in any way ‘sudden’. As will be demonstrated throughout this section, the findings suggest that self-change that goes beyond behavioural or cognitive changes and include changes in the ways in which emotions are experienced and managed result from ongoing and deliberate effort. A comparison between the two narrative positions suggests variations in the extent to which participants were actively and deliberately engaged in the achievement and maintenance of emotional connectedness, both during membership as well as following exit. In particular, commitment to self-change is understood as reflected by the extent to which participants endeavoured to ‘emotionally’ partake in membership and the development and maintenance of ongoing connections to others post membership.
For protected selves who struggle to connect to others or internalise ‘identities’ it is recognised that developing a genuine conviction or emotional connection to the group is not an easy process. As outlined in Chapter 8, for selves who struggle to genuinely and easily connect to others, membership signified ‘pretending’ or conforming to the group’s demands at a purely behavioural level, at least initially. To establish an initial connection to the group, both protected selves and managed selves employed behavioural strategies such as ‘impression management strategies’ (Goffman, 1959) or ‘surface acting’ (Hochschild, 1983) to give off appropriate gestures that meet the groups’ norms and expectations, without really ‘believing’ or ‘feeling’ it. For these selves, NRM membership, at least initially, did not reflect a genuine belief or sense of belonging but was limited to ‘pretending’. Some scholars argue that engaging in ‘conforming at a purely behavioural level’ inhibits self-change in that by ‘pretending’ a separation between the ‘self’ and the environment is maintained that protects the self from external influences and change (George, 1998; Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983; Summers-Effler, 2004). On the other hand, pretending or making purely behavioural changes is also sometimes described as the first step towards more ‘genuine’ or deeper change that is cognitive and, in turn, emotional in nature (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983). From this perspective it is argued that the development of emotional connectedness often commences at a purely behavioural level and only gradually translates into cognitive and in turn emotional changes (Ashforth, 2001; Hochschild, 1983, 1990).

The intent in which ‘conformity at a purely behavioural level’ was used by these former members varied and impacted on the ways membership was experienced and negotiated, and, in turn, informed the successful or unsuccessful achievement of self change. For the managed selves connecting to the NRM by conforming to the group’s demands at a purely behavioural level was the first step in making ‘deeper’ changes and developing genuine emotional connectedness; for protected selves, ‘pretending to conform’ protected them from deeper changes by providing a façade behind which they could hide. Even though conformity to the behavioural expectations of the group was not initially motivated by a genuine ‘belief’, managed selves actively endeavour to ‘believe’ or ‘feel’ those aspects of the group identity they deemed beneficial, and through consistent effort developed a genuine sense of connection to the group. Demonstrated by comments such as “Even though I was struggling to understand or believe a lot of it, I just kept on trying because I knew they had something I was lacking” (Flora), it is suggested that managed selves actively endeavoured to move beyond the ‘rules of self presentation’ (Franzese, 2007) by actively trying to internalise the group’s standards, or at least those aspects of the group that they considered important for their personal growth. For protected selves, on the other hand, ‘conformity’ remained limited to the ‘pretence’ or behavioural level. As demonstrated by comments such as “I never really believed any of it; I just went through the motions, keeping to myself” (Kerry), despite a desire for genuine self-change, protected selves employed
impression management strategies to protect the self from changes at an emotional, or even a cognitive, level.

**Themanager selves: Change through tolerating self-uncertainty**

**The depth of involvement**

The narratives of the managed selves suggest that despite significant difficulties in doing so, they intentionally and actively tried to internalise those aspects of the group identity that they perceived as favourable to developing connections. They describe their commitment to the group as purposeful, explaining that they deliberately remained committed to the group “long enough to learn another way of relating” (Vicki) and long enough to “understand the group way of living, and learn how to be a more functional person” (Flora). Their level of commitment to self-change is reflected in Julie’s comment:

> I was putting in the 110 percent whereas some people try to go under the radar. I really wanted to change because I was convinced that if I didn’t change that I would go back to being a drug addict eventually. I was there 100 percent, I was doing it. I look back and think ‘yeah, I was really there.

Similarly, Vicki notes:

> I stayed committed to learn how to manage relationships with people. I need to learn the difference between my part and the other person’s part in a relationship, and see how I was antagonizing others. I thought learning would take time; time with other people, having a go. You make mistakes but are willing to learn from them ... We spent a lot of time sitting in coffee shops, having meetings, talking about how we felt, although it was a while before I did that. Listening to how other people felt.

The active and deliberate way in which managed selves describe trying to develop another way of being or ‘feeling’ is in line with the emotion management strategy that Hochschild (1983) named ‘deep acting’. Hochschild (1983) describes a number of techniques or strategies that can be employed to change the ways in which emotions are experienced (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Diefendorff, Croyle, & Gosserand, 2005; Hochschild, 1983, 1990; Wharton, 2009). In this body of literature, the term ‘deep acting’ is employed in reference to the deliberate use of strategies that can change or
manage the ways in which emotions are experienced. One of the most commonly described strategies
is ‘cognitive effort’, which is considered primary to facilitating emotional change. It is suggested that
through cognitive effort conformity at a purely behavioural level can become aligned with appropriate
emotional responses (Francis, 1997; Hochschild, 1983, 1990; Shott, 1979; Thoits, 2003a). In
accordance with this literature, the findings suggest cognitive effort as important to facilitating self-
change that moved beyond behavioural change to genuine changes in belief and feeling.

Managed selves explain that while initially membership primarily entailed ‘going through the
motions’, they gradually learned to understand some of the meaning behind some of the expected
behaviours, and as a result started to feel more committed or connected to the group. They describe
placing significant effort into trying to understand the purpose behind certain behaviours, and how a
better understanding of behaviours from the perspective of others facilitated the development of
connections. For example, Vicki explains that initially she wanted to be told “black and white how to
do everything” so she could conform to the group’s norms and expectations. Once she felt confident
in her ability to conform at a purely behavioural level, she started to engage cognitively, and in turn
emotionally, with the group’s practices. Vicki’s description of how she grappled with the group’s
value of ‘respect’ demonstrates this process. She explains that one of the group’s requirements
pertained to “asking for things rather than just taking”. While initially she adjusted her behaviour
without questioning this, in time she learned to understand the underlying meaning, and started to
understand this practice as reflecting “respect for others”. Linking this practice with its intended
meaning increased her commitment to the behavioural change, and this, in turn, helped facilitate the
development of connections. Vicki explained in some depth how an increased ability to understand
the impact of her behaviours on others facilitated the development of emotional connections. Another
example of how cognitive strategies were used to make sense of behavioural expectations was given
by Michelle:

*I was quite good at making some sense of the guff that was preached, to come out with
something useful that could help me make the changes I needed to make, even if it was not
what they intended. It helped me commit to the practices, and connect to the fellow members.*

The data suggest that through considerable and ongoing effort a behavioural and in turn cognitive
understanding of the group culture facilitated the development of a sense of belonging and emotional
connectedness to the group. From an SI perspective it is argued that the experience of shared
behaviours and, in turn, shared understandings or meaning is a positive emotional experience (Collins,
2004; Heise, 1979, 1999; Smith-Lovin, 1990, 1995, 2007). In line with this, the findings suggest that
through sustained effort, initially purely behavioural connection, and in turn cognitive connection
gradually facilitated the development of a sense of emotional connectedness.
Cognitive strategies were also used to help managed selves tolerate the challenges of attempted self-change. Despite their commitment to change, managed selves describe NRM membership as difficult and stressful. As explained by Michelle:

\[\text{For a very long time I really felt like I was split completely in two, which is very difficult and stressful. I felt like an imposter doing everything... I tried to do what people expected of me, whilst maintaining what I thought was my self... It's a long time and I wasn't very happy for any of it; I was very lonely but I tolerated it.}\]

This notion that attempted self-change is stressful is not new. The conflict described by Michelle between attempted self-change and her desire to be what she perceives as herself is recognised by symbolic interactionists as a source of considerable stress and discomfort. From an SI perspective, a disconnection or disequilibrium between the perceived ‘authentic’ self and cultural expectations is understood as resulting in negative emotions, and a consistency between the self and environment is understood as causing positive emotions (Burke, 1991; Burke & Stets, 1999; Heise, 1979; Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Jansz & Timmers, 2002; Stryker, 2004; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). This relationship between emotions and environmental feedback is understood as reflecting the self’s desire to maintain stability and avoid change (Swann, 1999; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). Therefore, to ‘overcome’ the self’s desire for self-maintenance and allow for change, the dissonance between the perceived ‘authentic’ self and the oppositional or conflicting environment needs to be tolerated (Burke, 1991; Hochschild, 1979, 1983). To this extent, self-change facilitated by disequilibrium between the self and interaction with a disconfirming ‘other’ is a stressful and emotionally negative experience.

Conceptualised as a disconfirming experience, the pursuit of self-change is a difficult and often unpleasant experience that requires a high level of tolerance for self-uncertainty and discomfort (Keyes & Ryff, 2000; Kiekolt, 1994; Swann, 1999). Taking into account the high levels of dissonance or disequilibrium between socially anxious and uncomfortable selves and a NRM environment that demands high levels of conformity and connectedness to others, it is suggested that attempted self-change was particularly stressful or uncomfortable for the participants in this study. The managed selves’ ability and willingness to tolerate the dissonance between their ‘authentic’ selves and the selves they were attempting to become for an extended period of time is conceptualised as important to understanding successful self-change. An ability to tolerate the discomfort of self-change was identified as a primary difference between the narratives of the managed selves versus the protected selves, and it is argued here that the ability to tolerate self-uncertainty is important for the development of connectedness to others.
To help tolerate the discomfort of self-change long enough for emotional change to occur, managed selves describe the use of cognitive strategies, in particular, motivational strategies that encouraged sustained commitment. The cognitive strategies described included reminding themselves of the inevitable discomfort of emotional self-change, the importance of self-change, and their responsibility and power in achieving self-change. Managed selves explain that when “the going got tough” (Vicki) they reminded themselves that for change to occur, they have to remain committed for an extended period of time. As noted by Julie:

"Even though I thought some of the things we were supposed to do were strange, and some of it didn’t really work for me, I saw it as tough love, I understood that I needed to learn other ways of behaving so I could relate better to people... I knew change would take time."

In addition to recognising that the experience of strain is inevitable for self-change, managed selves focussed on, and continuously reminded themselves of, the importance of being successful at self-change, and their personal responsibility in achieving change. Examples of this type of motivational self-talk include: “There is something wrong with me and it is my responsibility to change” (Flora) and “I knew I couldn’t relate well, I couldn’t deny that” (Michelle). Comments that highlight their personal responsibility in achieving self-change include:

“I realised that the old ‘hurt people hurt people’ is true and that you cannot be hurt that much without also having hurt... I really took responsibility for myself... the fact is, coming from an abusive background, I didn’t reciprocate well in environments that are not abusive, and it was my responsibility to develop those skills... Acknowledging who I am and what I am capable of motivates me and it actually gives control... I think people deny because their self-image would be so shattered... I don’t feel this need to shy away from difficult experiences, or from myself; I use it as it as motivating source(Flora).

“I realised how much of my misery was because of me. If you keep making other people responsible then you can’t change. You can only change yourself, not other people ... I saw that I blamed everyone for my misery. I was lazy, I didn’t want to put the hard yards in, I didn’t know how to get from A to B. I wanted it quickly; I wanted it there and then. I started to see a lot of my defects, my flaws in my character that may have led to me having the hard life that I’ve had; because to change I had to be willing to see that maybe I was the problem (Vicki).

Despite experiences of strain and discomfort, through the use of cognitive effort, managed selves endeavoured to genuinely or emotionally participate in membership and successfully delayed exit
until they perceived themselves as having sufficiently gained from membership, especially pertaining to the development of social connectedness.

In addition to attempts at mediating emotional change through cognitive effort, managed selves also described efforts in trying to change their emotions directly. As described previously, their difficulties connecting to others are understood as going hand in hand with high levels of anxiety or emotions of ‘fight’ and ‘flight’. To increase their ability to connect to the group, the managed selves used strategies that help ‘suppress’ or ‘regulate’ existing emotions (Bulan, Erickson, & Wharton, 1997; Erickson & Ritter, 2001; Erickson & Wharton, 1997; Hochschild, 1983; Pollak &Thoits, 1989; Thoits, 1986). For example, Vicki and Jenny note that membership increased their ability to manage and control their intense emotions. As noted by Vicki “the group taught me how to recognise and control my anxiety”. The process through which the group helped Jenny gain an increased sense of her emotional responses, and in turn helped her control her emotional responses more effectively, is described as follows:

Through our groups and weekly meetings and stuff, emotions came out because we were always onto each other... That process of being in a group every week and people hammering you on your shit every week... They would hammer you until you would crack and it would all come out. They would hammer me until I would crack and sometimes I needed that, and they were there for me... I now got that self-awareness, I really am aware of my emotions now, maybe too much I don’t know.... I now know how others affect me and I can manage relationships better.

Jenny describes how thanks to the group she can now tolerate, and even enjoy, connections with others, without desiring heroin or other drug use to alleviate her discomfort. In line with previous arguments, it is suggested here that learning to suppress or tolerate intense emotions facilitated the development of more ‘subtle’ or ‘socialised’ emotions associated with connectedness (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983). As noted by Lazarus (1991), in order to experience appropriate emotion for a situation, sometimes people must inhibit or suppress feelings, especially those emotions anchored in fight/flight.

In summary, the narrative of the managed self suggests that self-change was achieved through a combination of behavioural changes, cognitive strategies, as well as emotion regulation strategies that socialise intense emotions. Active engagement with the processes of change and sustained commitment were identified as primary to the development of increased ‘connectedness’ and the positive emotions associated with a sense of belonging. The data suggest that for the managed selves, through sustained effort an uncomfortable experience was transformed into an enriching and
beneficial one (Thoits, 1991). As noted by Flora: “Before I could not function in the world and relate to people ... while membership was difficult ... at least now I am capable of connection and intimate relationships.”

This is in conflict with the narrative of the protected self for whom membership was not perceived as an enriching experience that facilitated the development of increased connections. On the contrary, their narratives suggest that the stress of attempted self-change did little more than strengthen their commitment to themselves and their disconnected lives. However, before the experiences of the protected selves are discussed, a discussion of the ways in which managed selves maintained self-change following exit is included. This is considered important in that it is sometimes argued that self-change can only be called ‘successful’ if the changes can be maintained outside of the context in which they were initially achieved (Athens, 1995). Scholars have observed that once self-change is no longer enforced by external factors, such as NRM membership, individuals may revert to previous ‘selves’ (Athens, 1995). The narratives of the managed selves suggest that they did not reverse to previous ‘selves’ but continued their commitment to self-change and maintained increased connectedness to others post NRM membership. This is discussed in the next section.

**Ongoing commitment to self-change following exit**

The narratives of the managed selves suggest that following exit care was taken to maintain their increased capacity for connectedness. In addition to the ways in which membership was negotiated, the ways in which the tensions between the self and others were managed post involvement is understood as important to the maintenance of self-change. It is suggested that for ‘genuine’ self-change to occur, the individual needs to maintain self-change outside of the environment in which the new selves were initially constructed, and become consolidated within the individual’s wider biography (Athens, 1995).

Managed selves explain that they were aware that maintaining their newfound ability to connect might be challenged outside of the context of the NRM. They note that they took care “not to throw out the baby with the bathwater” (Flora, Michelle), and while they were keen to let go of some of the groups’ behaviours and practices, they were careful to maintain the value of ‘connectedness’. Even though outside the context of a NRM they were free to reconnect or surrender to their previously strong sense of separateness, they remained committed to ‘connection to others’. As commented by Julie: “I had learned a lot of important things that I didn’t want to lose; I sort of took what I believed and thought was important and threw away what I didn’t”. 
Similarly, Michelle comments:

> Even though I wasn’t sure if there was a God anymore, I wanted to go to a church for a while because I didn’t want to believe there was no God because I felt I had been hurt... I knew I had to work it out and I believed that I would never work it out if I stopped interacting with both sides of the issue.

The active way in which self-change was maintained and integrated into her wider biography following exit is described by Flora as follows:

> I really don’t think there is another way to build and keep an identity than to do it purposely; changing myself was deliberate and strategic... It’s important to integrate your story and to think ‘what have I learned from it and how can I maintain what I have learned?’... I have integrated my experiences; you can’t chop off 35 years of your life. My life really consists of chapters, and how would it be if I took a few of them out? You are born and you die and there are all these chapters, and pulling chapters out of books, to me anyway, doesn’t work. I would say that it’s important to integrate all the different facets... I have put so much hard work into building my self-image and part of it was integrating everything that has ever happened... To choose a biblical quote, it’s says ‘you’re given a new chance for a new identity but remember ‘the pit from where you were dug’; so don’t ever lose sight of where you are going, but don’t ever forget where you have come from. I think it’s very important, don’t ever forget where you have come from. Not forgetting where I’ve come from, nor where I am going, has definitely been a theme with me.

In particular, the managed narratives identified cultural values as important for the construction of selves post membership. With social connectedness no longer facilitated by group life, a number of the managed selves identified values as important for the establishment and maintenance of a sense of connectedness outside of NRM membership. Flora explains:

> Integrating my new self into my old ways of being was done by identifying core values... By working out what type of person I want to be and living accordingly... When building a self-concept you have to start with core values, they are simple like ‘what do I really believe?’, ‘what do I really want?’, ‘what are my goals?’ ‘who do I want to be?’... I really do construct myself; constructing myself is all very deliberate, very. I really try to identify values to live by... Sometimes I make mistakes and I find it hard to stay committed... But I’ll use mentors to help me focus on my values; sometimes autobiographies, immersing myself in
inspiring stories. I look at other people whether it be in movies or books or autobiographies I start thinking about how they do things, and use them as models if I need it... My core values ... I deliberately feed that part of me ... What I mean by core values is who do I want to be, without forgetting where I come from.

This notion of values as connecting the individual to the social is not new (Collins, 1990; Gecas, 2000; Hitlin, 2003). From an SI perspective, values are understood as both personally as well as socially constructed and viewed as important to the maintenance of a behavioural, cognitive and emotional connection between the individual and their social and cultural contexts. Values are considered constructs that allow for both individuality as well as cultural and social connectedness (Collins, 1990; Gecas, 2000; Hitlin, 2003). For the managed selves the identification of a number of personal values may have facilitated a sense of cultural connectedness, and by and doing so discouraged or inhibited a relapse or reconnection to their former disconnected selves.

Managed selves also explain that they put significant effort into identifying and establishing appropriate social relationships that helped maintain a balance between their sense of individuality and a sense of connection and belonging. Careful to remain connected to others, they were keen to replace the NRM with an alternate, albeit less hegemonic, group. Flora explains the importance of becoming involved with a “stable church” for the maintenance of her increased capacity for connectedness as follows:

*Joining a church was a strategic decision. I wanted to remain connected to a stable environment. My husband and I don’t come from a faith based background; we have no family between us, we have no community. We weren’t strong enough in our faith. We didn’t have enough close friends or family supporters. We struggled to be a family that was true to our beliefs, we don’t have anyone around us to model it so we carefully selected a church that we thought would be stable and help us maintain stable relationships.*

Similarly Michelle comments on the importance of maintaining connections to others as well as herself by joining a more ‘nuanced’ group that allowed for both individuality as well as connection. She describes:

*The pastor of this church is a very intelligent man. He is not a black and white kind of guy... Every single week, for probably the first six months I would say ‘I have a problem with this...’ sermon after sermon I would challenge things ... And that was ok... I now have opportunity to talk to people and be involved in discussion groups via my new church. But I also go to sceptic meetings, I hang out at other friend’s places and we talk about life, the universe and*
everything... I would say I am still a Christian now; I am still a Christian and it turns out that it is quite allowable to be a Christian and have doubts.

Similarly, Vicki joined AA support meetings, and she describes these meetings as a ‘guide’ or ‘framework’ that connects her to others while given her the freedom to make sense of her in her own way. She notes:

*I was recommended to give the 12 steps another go. I do it really gently, there is no hurry, I have the rest of my life. I can do it my way; there is no right or wrong way... They do work. They are not to be taken literally. They are a lifelong journey... The principles are guidelines, they are a moral framework...I will continue to go to AA until I have gone through the steps quite comfortably, and I have fully understood the whole process of being sober, because I don’t think I am there yet and I don’t think I will ever be there yet, I have so much yet to learn so I would not be comfortable leaving AA just yet because I want to continue to learn and I love having a place to go back to get perspective. I think I’m lucky to have AA. AA was not designed to be an all-encompassing life... Now I only do 2 meetings a week.*

It is argued here that the careful and deliberate way in which the managed selves negotiate the tensions between their sense of individuality and their desire for connectedness reflects high levels of reflexivity. This development of increased reflexivity is not reflected in the narratives of the protected selves. The narratives of the protected selves are divergent from those of the managed selves both in the way in which membership was negotiated as well as in the way in which they managed their selves following disaffiliation. While managed selves continued to be committed to a sense of connectedness to others, post membership protected selves reconnected to their selves as autonomous. The experiences of the protected selves, both during membership and post membership are discussed in the following section.

**The protected selves: The competing desire for self-verification**

**The depth of involvement**

While the managed selves actively endeavoured to genuinely understand and connect to the groups’ expectations, it is suggested that the other protected selves placed their energy into maintaining a separation between their internal experiences and the group’s demands. Rather than endeavoursing to really ‘believe’ or ‘feel’ the group expectation, the protected selves merely conformed to the group’s
norms and expectations at a purely behavioural level, pretending to be genuinely engaged while hiding or protecting their ‘true’ thoughts and feelings behind this façade (Goffman, 1959; Hochschild, 1983; Summers-Effler, 2004). For example, Michael explains that while he learned to “talk the group’s language” he never believed any of it and never experienced a sense of belonging; like other protected selves, Michael describes this surface level engagement as exceedingly stressful and exhausting. Central to the protected narrative is the suggestion that these participants struggled to tolerate or negotiate the tension between their internal experiences or sense of ‘authentic’ self and the groups’ demands. The different ways in which this tension was managed by protected selves versus the managed self is suggested to be central to understanding their narratives of unsuccessful change.

Motivated by a desire for self-change, managed selves tolerated the disequilibrium between their perceived sense of self and the groups’ expectations until they perceived themselves as having changed sufficiently. In opposition to this, despite a desire for self-change, protected selves failed to tolerate the discomfort of ongoing dissonance or self-uncertainty necessary for change, and placed their energy and effort into ‘protecting’ themselves from the cultural demands of the NRM. It is argued here that the self’s ‘desire’ for, or commitment to, self-maintenance inhibited possible self-change for these participants (George, 1998; Hogg, 2000; Swann, 1999).

Analysis of the narratives identified a desire for self-maintenance, and in particular self-verification, as the primary ‘force’ that inhibited change. For example, Adam describes how despite having joined a NRM looking for connections, his “strong sense of self” and “personal uniqueness” stood in the way of forming meaningful relationships. He describes his ongoing preoccupation with himself, in particular his drive to be recognised as unique and special, as having inhibited his previous attempts at developing meaningful and emotionally satisfying connections. While he genuinely wanted relationships, he did not want them at the expense of “himself” or at the expense of feeling recognised for his personal achievements and abilities. He notes:

*I was very unavailable and didn’t really connect because I had this real sense of who I was. I had a completeness about my world and special purpose, I wouldn’t let people get close to me... [I thought] happiness was in personal recognition and achievements, in being special... I was always highly critical of people who were just happy, happy being stupid, happy stupid people going to shops and buying their coco cola and their bags of chips. I was very intolerant and very critical of people. They haven’t got the right to be happy; they haven’t done anything with their lives... My need to be special has always stood in the way of my happiness and my ability to relate and have good relationships.*
Similarly, Michael’s narrative suggests his attempts to form relationships as inhibited by his self-focus and a strong desire to be recognised for his achievements. He comments:

*I am always met with disappointment. People never get me. I have gone to the end of the earth to find incredible things and people aren’t interested … I have been different from a young age, so I have had to formulate an understanding which felt right to me… I have always been different. I used to wait for the world to catch up… One of the things I did in my naivety, I thought that other people would want to share my experience, or care or that I had discovered these things; I thought that other people would care but if you go out in the world preaching love and spirituality, look out, because from my experience no one cares, no one wants to share it with you… If you get a PhD in spirituality, no one gives a shit unless you want to open a religion. If you discover the meaning of life, you can’t take it to the bank … People aren’t interested in your experiences … My biggest disappointed was that when I wrote programs but no one wanted to hear and no one understood … I don’t know if it’s possible to teach those things to other people… If you get a group of people it doesn’t mean that because you have sound principles that they will follow them. So there’s no point starting a commune… But I do think I have something to offer but I am just afraid of losing my head up my own arse or starting something and becoming cult-like myself.*

The protected narratives suggest that struggling to connect or relate to others, these participants endeavoured to form relationships by trying to get others to relate or connect to them. Michael conveys this idea as follows: “I want relationships but … I am just afraid of […] starting something and becoming cult-like myself” (Michael). Rather than placing their energy in becoming more flexible and learning to appreciate or understand other people’s perspectives and feelings, it appears that they placed their energy in personal achievements for which they sought recognition. Both Adam and Chris endeavoured to get recognised for their humour and wit as the group’s ‘comedian’ and Michael sought, and continues to seek, recognition for his ‘highly developed spiritual mind’. A number of sociological theories, such as self-verification theories, argue that when the self is not confirmed through interaction with likeminded or similar others, individuals may seek to manipulate their environments to bring people’s responses in line with their personal self-conceptions (Burke, 1991; Stryker, 2004; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). It is argued that if individuals fail to derive positive emotional energy from a sense of belonging and connection to peers that are based on solidarity, they may seek to derive emotional energy from power and personal recognition (Collins, 1990; Kemper, 1987, 1990).

The findings suggest that protected selves failed to tolerate, regulate or accept a sense of disconnection between themselves and the group, or a certain level of self-uncertainty, as inevitable
for self-change and the development of an ability to derive emotional energy from belonging and solidarity. Low on positive emotional energy and exhausted from maintaining the façade of ‘pretending’ it is suggested that they endeavoured to derive emotional energy by seeking recognition and acknowledgement for their selves ‘as separate’ from others. Their ongoing focus on the self inhibited the development of connectedness to others; any attempts at self-change became abandoned in favour of a reconnection to their selves as separate and autonomous. For these selves membership may have strengthened their commitment to autonomy rather than increased their connectedness.

Reconnection and commitment to the self as autonomous following exit

Unlike managed selves who were careful to negotiate a balance between autonomy and connectedness following exit, the narrative of the protected selves reflects a reconnection to, even strengthening of, their selves as ‘disconnected’ and autonomous. Having failed in their goal of establishing connections, the attitude of protected selves following exit appears to be one of disempowerment. Their narratives suggest that they are no longer motivated to pursue increased connectedness, and that meaningful social relationships are now perceived as entirely out of their reach. For example, Kerry talks about the ‘pointlessness’ of striving for meaningful connection, and she describes life as “meaningless, empty and void”. Comments such as “I would have relationships if they weren’t such a strain for me” (Joe), “I’m too busy just surviving to build relationships… even though I have a need to connect, it is too overwhelming” (Kerry); “I haven’t found my kind; I don’t know if my kind exists … I am all alone” (Michael); “Nobody understands… I have no support; even my family doesn’t understand me” (Lindsay) and “The stress of membership has made me exceedingly fragile” (Michael) were common.

Unlike the managed selves who focussed on the possible positives they had gained from membership, protected selves describe membership as a predominantly negative experience from which they have gained nothing. As demonstrated by Kerry’s comment:

_We lost 10 years. So much has happened in the world in 10 years that we were oblivious to. I resent that. In my mind I am twenty... Your twenties is when you find out who you are and establish something for yourself, a goal, a direction, and you have energy to give it. Now we’re starting but we’re low on energy. Low on energy and with an inability to cope with stress... it’s all very frustrating... Our inability to cope with reality is definitely because of the cult. It’s an energy thing. We don’t have the energy anymore; we burned three lifetimes worth; when you sleep 2 or 3 hours a night. Even to this day we can’t cope with normal stress, normal everyday things that people cope with. We’re still tired._
With NRM membership now perceived as a harmful and ineffective avenue for self-change, unlike the managed selves who took care ‘not to throw out the baby with the bathwater’, following exit the protected selves focussed on ‘undoing’ the group’s influences, and ‘reconnecting to their sense of autonomy’. Comments such as “the whole thing was based a whole lot of inaccurate principles... I have undone any influence that she might have had” (Michael), and “It’s important to reverse the cult influence” (Joe) were common. Kerry explains in some detail how she went about ‘undoing’ the perceived negative influence of membership. She explains:

We broke down the cult reactions, the cult methodologies and we weaned ourselves off that language, that style of emotional release, the regime, the lifestyle... Now we know the way we related to each other, the [group] style, is destructive and is not productive and it’s not healthy so we know how not to relate …The discovery that this identity and this way of living and this lifestyle is so wrong and so destructive, the discovery of that in itself helps detach from it and you acknowledge ‘this is what doesn’t work anymore’ and as behaviour and things pop up we can put it where it belongs and learn through that how to relate differently. That’s how it’s been happening. Especially initially I would still use [cult language] ‘you’re still dumping on me’ so in time we learned to let go of that language, of that identity, bit by bit.

In regards to the ‘undoing’ of any NRM influences on the self, it appears that the resources provided by the ACM served a helpful function. As argued in Chapter 10, it appears that for the protected selves engagement with ACM resources which aim to distance the former members from the group influences (Giambalvo, 1993; Jenkinson, 2008; Singer, 2003), was helpful in their efforts to reconnect to their selves as autonomous. As commented by Joe:

[The exit counsellor] was able to pull a lot of it apart and made me realise the extent to which a person has to address all of those dynamics because they operate at such a fundamental level. It’s your values and morality that is being tampered with and that stuff motivates actions and motivates thoughts. It produces emotions and so you have to go to a fairly deep level to address all of the damage and he showed me the amount of digging that you have to do to unearth it all... he helped me recognise that asserting yourself without input or influence from others is a good thing... One of the things he stressed to me was that ‘you’re the one who decides, never discount what you think, what your perspective is and what you believe. Never accept what other people tell you, even if it’s a psychologist or psychiatrist or doctor’. 
In addition to cognitive strategies that increased the distance between their ‘selves’ and the group, the findings suggest that protected selves endeavoured to distance themselves from residual group influences by increasing the physical distance between themselves and the group. Some protected selves moved internationally immediately following exit (Chris, Lindsay); others interstate (Kerry, Michael). As noted by Michael:

I moved [interstate]; I wanted to get away from the cult, the past, and my father and everyone that lived there; all those people I was so disappointed in. I decided I was going to start again in somewhere else. I had $100 and a suitcase and I didn’t know anybody, I spent the first night sleeping in a park.

Similarly, Chris observes:

I think we moved to here as a way of dealing with the ending of the group. The idea of staying in England seemed so grey that the idea of moving to Australia seemed inviting. It was a manic response to the whole situation, to up and leave ourselves when I felt very left by the whole community, which moved on in a way.

Parallel with ‘undoing the influence’ protected selves describe reconnecting to their selves as autonomous, and anchored in personal emotions. Comments that demonstrate this include: “I needed to return to building my own way of dealing with life” (Michael), “After my cult experience I returned exactly to that point; I hadn’t forgotten my pre-cult personality” (Adam), “The person who I am now is the person I was before. We found our way back to who we were. Just by feeling ‘what makes us happy?’” (Kerry), “I no longer associate with people who make it hard for me to be autonomous, to be myself.[I try to be] the ultimate authority over my life, with the way I think unaffected by other people’s influence or input … without any input from other people. No one has any say except me” (Joe).

Protected selves describe this process of reconnecting to the self as separate follows:

I’m creative and I let myself be guided by feeling… I’m careful to create life how I want it to be, and I’m guided by what feels right… I don’t really believe in anything other than what feels right; the cult squashed all of that… We now let our needs and desires come forth, express what’s underneath … If I see [my husband’s] eyes light up, no matter what it is, I support that. We’re guided by our passions and our dreams and what drives us and motivates us… We do whatever makes us happy now… We now just do what feels right, what we need to do. If that means that I need to have a drink and a joint to cope with the stress, we’ve done
that. If I have a drink and a smoke I am high and suddenly the creative is open and I’m happy… If I need to go for a scream in my room in my pillows, I do that… Our lives are our own, our decisions are our own; every bit of achievement now is our own(Kerry).

Following exit I returned really quickly to what I had done before which was acting and standup which I found really thrilling and very rewarding. I was good at it, I had a good sense of humour and I was a witty person… I was really enjoying it; feeling good about myself. And I realised my happiness was caused by me rather than this group… According to [the group], your path to happiness was not doing these things that you really enjoyed … Now I felt like I pursuing again my ‘real purpose’, my special purpose… I still felt that drive of I have a special purpose. I was there before I joined the cult and it morphed into something else when I was in the cult and when I left I returned to it. So I still had that drive; that was the most important thing (Adam).

Following exit, I isolated myself from the world, I lived in this empty house … I would go to work for four hours a day and I would fast, I was doing a lot of meditation and prayer. I had narrowed … I used to sit and just think and I’d ponder… it was quite a monk way to live. I intently studied the question ‘what is the purpose, why am I here, why am I doing this?’ … I believe there is an answer; I have seen it, I have actually found it… You know the light that everyone talks about when they die, it’s called the higher self… I have had that experience through meditation… your higher self is a real thing, and entity that can be experienced … you get the feeling of knowing everything, of higher love, feeling of peace, feeling of being free from the body, the feeling that everything has a purpose… For five days I fasted and I was praying every day and I was meditating and getting high. I always felt alone in the world, I felt cut off from my source, like I am here but the thing that is supposed to be with me is not here. I only ever had a few people I could connect with so I didn’t want to be here. So I had this experience while I was meditating, I was meditating and meditating and meditating…. In this world full of people who just care about material shit and no morality I found the unfindable, the invisible, I found it… If you want to know what life is and what lies beyond it you can find it, it’s fucking hard and no one will support you and the world is not geared for it(Michael).

The findings suggest that for the protected selves the development of a sense of connectedness was inhibited, or even sabotaged, by a commitment to the maintenance of their existing autonomous selves over their desire for self-change. While protecting their selves through impression management skills during membership and reconnecting to their autonomous selves following membership may have provided protected selves with a sense of power and control, in accordance with previous
observations, it is argued that these practices helped to preserve the status quo and therefore inhibited change (George, 1998; Godwin, 2004; Summers-Effler, 2004).

**Discussion**

The notion of connectedness is central to SI discussion of the self. Symbolic interactionists maintain that despite an increasing need for the self to be individualised, the individual continues to be fundamentally a relational being that is anchored in social and emotional connections to others. In accordance with SI conceptualisations, increasingly scholars are pointing to the importance of emotional connectedness for the self, even within a climate of individualisation, and have extended discussions of reflexivity from a focus on the management of individuality to include the management of connectedness to others (Archer, 2003, 2007; Holmes, 2011). From this perspective, selves high in reflexivity are described as having an understanding and awareness of, and connection to, both their own as well as others’ thoughts and emotions (Archer, 2003, 2007; Holmes, 2010). Holmes (2010) describes reflexivity as an emotional process that requires both connection to the self as well as others, and notes that specific to the self in contemporary environments “reflexivity is ever more likely to require, as well as evoke, interpretations of others’ emotions as well as one’s own” (p. 149).

From an SI perspective the self’s reflexive ability to connect to others and experience a sense of belonging is considered to be formed in childhood. The development of socialised emotions that connect the individual to social life is understood as a process that occurs during early developmental stages. Through a process of ongoing interaction with stable and consistent significant others, bodily sensations or physiological arousal primarily anchored in a fight flight response at birth (Harter, 1983; Lazarus, 1991) becomes socialised into culturally defined or socialised emotions that connect the individual to its environment (S. L. Gordon, 1981; Hochschild, 1983; Kemper, 1990; T J Owens & Goodney, 2000; Scheff, 1988, 1997; J. H. Turner & Stets, 2005). The development of socialised emotions that connect the individual to others and provide the individual with a sense of cultural belonging and commitment is not considered a given, but is understood as dependent on the availability of stable and consistent significant others, especially during early developmental stages (Coles, 2008; Mead, 1934). If stable others are not available for the making of socialised selves, ‘unsocialised’ or less socialised selves develop that are anchored in primary emotions such as fight and flight (Harter, 1983; Lazarus, 1991). Without a relatively stable culture in regards to the experience and expression of emotions to which to conform, the individual would remain disconnected from others, anchored in less, or un-, socialised emotions such as intense emotional arousal. This scenario, as described in Chapter 6, based in reported childhood histories of abuse and
neglect, is argued to be the narrative of the protected selves. It is suggested that having grown up in environments that were limited in emotional, cognitive and behavioural guidelines for the self, many of the protected selves in this study failed to develop an emotional and cognitive ‘structure’ that facilitates connections to others. While this is true to a greater extent for some protected selves than others, it is argued that these participants previously struggled to regulate their intense feelings anchored in fight and flight. It is proposed that the childhood environments of the protected selves did not nurture the development of well-functioning coping or regulatory processes that facilitate the development of socialised emotions that allow for meaningful connections to others.

With a few notable exceptions (Hochschild, 1983) few scholars have discussed the socialisation of emotions in adulthood, and this process is not well understood. While increasingly scholars are highlighting the importance of emotions for the successful management of complex social environments, the sociological study of the processes through which emotions can be managed and changed remains neglected (Holmes, 2010, 2011). Even though the role of emotions in the reflexive management of tensions between individuality and connectedness is increasingly recognised (M. Adams, 2003; Archer, 2003, 2007; Elliott & Charles, 2006; Holmes, 2010; King, 2006), the process through which individuals can increase their emotional capacity in managing these tensions remains by and large underdeveloped. Few sociologists have studied self-change that extends to the study of emotions, especially in regards to the study of increased connectedness.

The limited sociological literature that has studied emotional self-change in adulthood by and large concludes that attempts at this type of self-change is often unsuccessful (Denzin, 1987a, 1987b; Hochschild, 1983, 1990, 1998). They note that the self’s desire for self-continuity or certainty interferes with the self’s ability to successfully change the ways in which emotions are experienced and managed, making this type of self-change unusual and hard to achieve (Athens, 1995; George, 1998; Hochschild, 1983; Swann, 1999). Scholars have observed that the achievement of this type of self-change requires ongoing and extended commitment, most likely to be successful in unusual circumstances such as membership in NRM (Robbins, Anthony, & Curtis, 1975; Schein, 1961; Travisano, 1970) or other total or semi-total institutions such as asylums (Goffman, 1961), rehabilitation facilities (Denzin, 1987b) prisons (Athens, 1995, 1997) or certain social movements (King, 2006). Considering the perceived importance of stability for the socialisation of emotions within the SI literature (Coles, 2008; Mead, 1934), it makes sense that stable or even rigid institutions such as NRM may be avenues for the socialisation of emotions, and the development of emotional connectedness.

It is argued that the protected selves in this study did not experience the level of stability required for the socialisation of emotions during childhood, and this level of stability may be hard to find in
contemporary mainstream Western culture. In their accounts, NRM membership appeared to offer the cultural stability required for this type of change. Supporting the view of NRMs as possible avenues for dramatic self-change, the findings suggest that a subgroup of five ‘managed selves’ out of a total of 11 protected selves perceive NRM membership as an effective avenue for desired self-change, albeit to varying degrees. The findings suggest that through ongoing effort and sustained commitment the managed selves in this study developed an increased ability to regulate their intense personal emotions and create emotional connections to others.

Conclusion

These findings challenge the common discourse that portrays NRM as causing sudden and unwelcome changes in its members through practice such as brainwashing; the findings suggest that self-change is based on behavioural change, that it is both cognitive and emotional in nature and that it is not at all ‘sudden’ or unwelcome but is deliberately achieved through persistent and ongoing effort. While the current findings posit membership as a possible avenue for the development of increased connectedness, it is suggested that the success of emotional self-change may depend on the extent to which the individual actively engages with, or manages, the process and is capable of tolerating the discomfort of change. The managed selves’ willingness or ability to tolerate self-uncertainty and their active engagement with the change process are understood as closely related or interlinked. The successful achievement of self-change is considered dependent on the self’s ability to manage the self’s desire or need for self-maintenance. It is suggested that by actively engaging with the change process, managed selves were better able to maintain a balance between both their desire for change and need for some continuity. By ‘taking control’ over, or actively engaging with, the change process, they remained connected to both their ‘existing’ as well as ‘desired’ selves. In opposition to this, it appears that the protected selves maintained their sense of self by ‘protecting’ themselves from external influences, thereby inhibiting change. Other factors that may have influenced the change narrative such as gender, the nature of the group, the age of the participant or time since exit were considered, but the pattern appeared to be most closely associated with habits of self-formation.

SI conceptions of the self commonly posit the self as capable of negotiating change while at the same time maintaining continuity (Goffman, 1959; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), contributing to this literature the current findings suggest that the extent to which the participants in this study were capable of negotiating these tensions varied. An ability to maintain a delicate balance between change and continuity is considered important for successful self-change, and difficulties in
managing these tensions are conceptualised as having inhibited change for the protected selves. The suggestion that an ability to tolerate dissonance between self and society, or tolerate a certain level of self-uncertainty, is important for the self’s ability to connect to others contributes to theorising on the reflexive self. While most scholars who have discussed the importance of high levels of reflexivity in today’s society highlight the importance of tolerating unstable social conditions or ‘other-uncertainty’ for the reflexive self (Elliott, 1996; Giddens, 1991; Heelas, 1996; Heelas, et al., 1996; Lash, 1994), the current findings contribute to this literature by highlighting the importance of tolerating ‘self-uncertainty’ for the development of a reflexive ability to connect to others.
Conclusion: Balancing personal autonomy and social connectedness

There is a price to be paid for the privilege of ‘being in a community’ ... The price is paid in the currency of freedom, variously called ‘autonomy’, ‘right to self assertion’, ‘right to be yourself’. Whatever you choose, you gain some and lose some. Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom. Security and freedom are two equally precious and coveted values which could be better or worse balanced, but hardly ever fully reconciled and without friction... we cannot be human without both security and freedom; but we cannot have both at the same time and both in quantities which we find fully satisfactory (Bauman, 2001, p. 5).

In comparison to the study of NRM group life with current member populations, the study of the impacts of NRM on former member populations from a sociological perspective has been somewhat neglected, especially in Australia. The current study contributes to the limited, but growing, body of research into NRMs and the experiences of former members of NRMs in Australia (Coates, 2012; Healy, 2011; Howell, 1997; Ireland & Baker, 2003; Kerkhove, 2007; McIlwain, 1990, 1994; Ross, 1983; Ward, 2002) and in particular, highlights the complex way in which NRM affiliation and disaffiliation informs and impacts upon the current participants’ constructions of self and identity.

The current study investigated the significance and impact of NRM membership on the selves and identities of 23 former members. While the data is rich in depth and scope and a thorough analysis underpins the theories proposed, this thesis adopts an interpretivist constructivist research tradition that there is no single reality. The participants’ accounts of their experiences are understood as narratives constructed to explain and present their experiences in a meaningful way. Nevertheless, these narratives are not understood as merely discursive but also as informed by lived experience (Ezzy, 1998). While the applicability of the findings to other settings remains to be explored, the experiences of the participants relate to a social phenomenon which many people in developed industrial societies experience and the analysis which has been developed is intended to be tested in other contexts.

The study’s findings posit NRM membership as a possible avenue for the development of increased reflexivity, and this is conceptualised as an increased ability to negotiate tension between individuality and social and cultural connectedness. Central to this thesis is the argument that for the participants in this study membership was motivated by difficulties in negotiating tensions between personal autonomy and social connectedness; difficulties which for many the experience of affiliation
and disaffiliation helped to resolve or ameliorate. The majority of participants explain that while they previously struggled to establish and maintain both a sense of self as well as a sense of community and belonging, they are now better able to negotiate these tensions.

The narratives of the social selves in this study describe the way in which NRM affiliation and in particular disaffiliation promoted the development of an increased sense of ‘personal self’ or individuality. Contributing to discussions of reflexivity and in particular to the importance of ‘emotional reflexivity’ for the self, these narratives suggest that to be able to navigate the complexity of contemporary Western society, a level of uncertainty tolerance is required that took time and effort to achieve for these participants. An ability to recognise, understand and tolerate emotions of ‘disconnection’ or uncertainty is important for reflexivity and the development of a sense of individuality. This is consistent with previous observations that moving beyond traditional blueprints for living and the development of selves anchored in reflexivity takes time and effort and remains unsettling because it arises from uncertainty (Holmes, 2010, p. 149).

While the social narratives posit NRMs affiliation and disaffiliation as an avenue for the development of a stronger sense of individuality, the protected narratives, in particular the subgroup constructed as the managed selves, posit membership as a possible avenue for the development of increased social connectedness. Contributing to the literature pertinent to the socialisation of emotions in adulthood, the findings suggest that the development of more socialised emotions may be achieved in adulthood through ongoing and consistent interaction with a stable cultural environment such as a NRM. The narratives of the managed selves suggest that through persistent effort and an ongoing commitment to a cultural environment such as a NRM, emotional arousal or intense emotions can become socially shaped, formed into emotions that support connectedness to others. Scholars commonly portray the development of individuality as more complicated or ‘psychologically developed’ than the development of connectedness or an ability to conform (Buchmann, 1989; Cote, 2000; Giddens, 1991; Kegan, 1994). The narratives of the protected selves challenge this idea that an ability to conform is a given or is less important than the development of individuality. For these participants a sense of autonomy was more easily achieved, and the development of social connectedness and a sense of belonging appeared particularly complicated.

The findings posit NRM membership as a possible avenue for the development of an increased ability to reflexively negotiate tension between the personal and the social rather than as necessarily damaging as is often suggested. It is proposed that for many of these participants their experience of membership and disaffiliation promoted the development of selves that are higher in reflexivity or self- and other-awareness than is perhaps the norm. In accordance with SI conceptions of the self as constructed in interaction with others, it is suggested that it is preferable to embrace or enact identities.
determined by others than not to interact at all. It is argued that for those selves who are overwhelmed by the multitude of others available for self-construction in today’s society, as is argued to have been the case for many of the former members in this study, developing a self in a limited and restricted cultural environment such as that of a NRM is preferable to not engaging at all.

The former members’ narratives indicate that despite its challenges, membership for many of these participants served as a possible solution to, or retreat from, the emotional complexity of contemporary life. While the participants’ narratives highlight the emotional risks of membership, especially for those who were highly invested in the group and lost loved ones upon exit, the findings also illuminate the potential benefits, in particular emotional benefits, associated with NRM participation. While, consistent with the current findings, a number of scholars have pointed to the emotional appeal of religious meaning and certainty, especially in a culture of individualisation (Bromley & Busching, 1988; Dull & Skokan, 1995; Fletcher, 2004; Jacobs, 1989; Matthews & Marwit, 2006; Stark, 1999; Stein et al., 2009) much of the sociological literature on emotions highlights the emotional risks of investment in a single or few identities, and posits a multiplicity of identities or relationships as important for emotional well-being. Contributing to this literature the current findings suggest that while investment in an all-encompassing community like a NRM may have painful consequences, the very deep dependency on others that puts the individual at risk may also be an avenue for self-development and change and may eventually lead to greater emotional well-being.

Even though the participants’ narratives reveal many painful and difficult experiences during membership and as the result of disaffiliation, the narratives also depict NRMs as meeting a need for community and social connectedness that they struggled, and continue to struggle, to meet in mainstream society. Many participants observe that they miss the sense of community being part of a NRM provided. Comments such as “Being part of a group is like a drug... I miss the intensity of those connections” (Margaret), “I miss the community. I miss relating” (Flora) and “Some of my experience I wish you could transfer. I wish people could live in communes and share” (Lauren) were common. A number of participants observe that while they have a renewed commitment to personal autonomy and individuality as the result of their experience, they continue to desire as sense of community that they struggle to fulfil in mainstream society. They explain:

*All this focus on being self-reflective and independent is not necessarily healthy for me. I have to be careful not to become too reflective... I make myself do things, otherwise I’ll stay and mull over things too much... And then I think ‘what’s the point?’ ‘what the meaning of life?’ And that’s a whole down because I can’t find answers and then I get depressed... Things are better if I have things to do, people to see, when I’m part of something bigger than just me...*
Being in a group gives meaning. Things make sense. After I left for a long time I felt everything lacking in meaning. I still do at times (Catheline).

Coming out of the group I found most friendships and relationships very shallow. And there was a longing for that heart connection with people again. And I don’t think I’ve really gotten over that after 20 years. To a point there is still a longing to have a real close connection with people… Meeting people and in the first meeting wanting to connect at a very personal level just doesn’t happen in secular society. But in a cult it does. You come to expect that… And even though I realise it’s not appropriate in our culture I still miss it… Secular society can seem so meaningless … I think people need meaning in their lives in order to be happy. Being part of a community can offer that (Thomas).

I haven’t found what I am searching for, I don’t think it exists. The problems with the ideals is that they involve people. People aren’t perfect and when you get a group together it’s always going to end up in the same situation, Animal Farm is an excellent example of it. Now that I don’t have that religious bent, you’re not going to get a bunch of atheists together to love and serve nobody. What I do now is I do it in my own way. I am fortunate enough that my wife brings in enough money so I don’t have to work full time and if people need a hand, I go and help. It’s not something I do for money, I don’t charge, I just do it because I can and I enjoy helping other people. I enjoy helping for the sake of helping and having each other’s company… I also love the outdoors and my rock climbing, I need to go, I need to go every two or three weeks. I haven’t been for almost two months. I need to go. I need that time. Being in beautiful places, doing physically challenging things, but there is also the mateship that goes with that and having that camaraderie and putting your life into someone else’s hands. It’s a special pursuit, and I have met some really special people doing it. That for me has replaced some of that as well, as bizarre as that sounds. I am just looking for a rock climbing cult to join … maybe I should start my own (Nicholas).

The study’s findings suggest that satisfying a need for community and connections in a culture of individualisation can be troublesome, and NRM affiliation is conceptualised as a product of these tensions. It is suggested that NRM participation may, at least in part, be attributed to the increasing emphasis on individual autonomy and rationality in Western society. This observation is consistent with previous arguments that rises in fundamentalism (Bauman, 1998, 2000; Castells, 1997; Giddens, 2003) and certain forms of religious participation (Barker, 2006; Lynch, 2007; Lyon, 2000; D. Martin, 2005; Possamai, 2011) may indicate an area of needs within the population and reflect the spiritual, social and cultural conditions of our times. The current findings contribute to a growing body of literature that argues that the contemporary emphasis on individuality and personal autonomy bring
frailty to human bonds and complicates the establishment of much desired social and emotional connectedness (Austin & Gagne, 2008; Bauman, 2001a, 2001b, 2003; Cote, 2000; A. Elliot, 1994; Holmes, 2010; Yardley, 1997).

Despite a growing body of sociological literature pertinent to the significance of emotions for the self, emotions and feelings continue to be marginalised in sociological discourse and this has only recently started to change (Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Greco, 2011). While the study of the emotions and emotional reflexivity was not a primary aim of this study, emotions were found to be important to understanding contemporary selves and NRM membership and as a result the current findings contribute to the sociological study of emotions.

The current thesis also contributes to sociological discussion on the ‘making of the self’. It is suggested that the different conceptualisations of the contemporary self put forward by symbolic interactionists and contemporary modernists are not necessarily in conflict but complement each other and represent individual differences in terms of self-construction. The current findings suggest that significant differences may exist in the way in which individuals construct and narrate their sense of self, in particular in regards to the way in which they experience and negotiate contemporary tensions between social connectedness and individuality. To this extent, theories of the self that emphasise individuality and personal uniqueness are not understood as in conflict with theories that highlight conformity and commonality, but understood as complementary, together offering a more complete understanding of the self. While a number of scholars have observed that the contemporary self has to negotiate a ‘push and pull’ between autonomy and a desire for community (Austin & Gagne, 2008; Bauman, 2001a, p. 60; Coles, 2008; Giddens, 2003, p. 46; Hurst, 2000, p. 48; Joas, 1998; Smith & Berg, 1987), the struggle between the ‘self’ and ‘others’ that is at the heart of SI understandings of the self is often missing from sociological discussion on the ‘making of the self’ (Coles, 2008, p. 21; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000) and the current thesis contributes to this literature. This thesis has responded to Bauman’s (2001a, 2003) call for more understanding of how people negotiate tensions between individuality and social connectedness. More remains to be done, in particular an exploration of how these processes take place outside hothouse environments like NRMs is recommended.

This study started by noting the gulf between the sociological and the psychological approach to NRM membership. The findings of this study suggest that while some people experience problems as a result of their experiences in a NRM, the pathologising of NRM involvement as has appeared in the psychological literature may be exaggerated. This is not to say that membership has no negative effects and that group membership is just a freely chosen activity, however, the findings demonstrate that engagement is not without agency and conscious effort and that for many of the participants the positives gained from membership outweigh the negatives. While this thesis critiques the
brainwashing explanation of membership, it is not argued that the brainwashing thesis is of no helpful or therapeutic value. The findings indicate that the brainwashing discourses and participation in the ACM served a temporary and helpful purpose for many of the participants and provided these former members with an identity resource in which to anchor their sense of self at a time of great loss or an ‘account’ through which potential stigmatisation can be avoided.

It is hoped that an increased understanding of former members’ experiences in regard to the management of self and identity across their lifespans will help inform health professionals who work with former members as well as those who work with self and identity related difficulties and challenges more generally. In particular, for the wider community and more especially for other former members, it is hoped that the current findings will contribute to a better understanding of the significance of NRM involvement to the life trajectories of former members.
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## Appendix 1

### Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

#### Social Selves

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age at the time of interview</th>
<th>Type of group</th>
<th>Approx. Years of membership</th>
<th>Approx. years since exit</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Age at the time of interview</td>
<td>Type of group</td>
<td>Approx. Years of membership</td>
<td>Years since exit</td>
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<td>Max</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>M</td>
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**Protected Selves**

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<th>Type of group</th>
<th>Approx. Years of membership</th>
<th>Years since exit</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Monthly Attendance</td>
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<td>-------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
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<td>Adam</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>23</td>
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</table>
Appendix 2

Interview schedule

Opening Question:

“What is your story?”

Sub-Questions:

- What can you tell me about your life before your involvement, including your childhood?
- What can you tell me about the time you became involved with the group? (i.e. how did you become involved? What was it like? What attracted you to the group? Did you have any hesitations about joining? Etc.)
- What can you tell me about your experience as a member of the group?
- What can you tell me about your experiences when leaving the group/since you left the group? What were the circumstances around your departure?
- What can you tell me about your experiences of transition to or adjustment to life after involvement?
- Did anything facilitate or hinder your adjustment to life after involvement? If so, what?
- Did you seek counselling after leaving the group? If so, what can you tell me about it?
- Did you use resources (the internet/books) to assist in your adjustment? Which resources did you consult? How did you go about finding these? Was this helpful?
- How did you view your involvement at the time of leaving? How has your perception changed since then?
- In retrospect, how do you feel the experience has impacted on your life?
- Have there been any positive and/or negative consequences of your involvement?

About the group

- What was the name(s) of the group you became involved with?
- What did the group believe in?
- Did your group denounce the teachings of all other (religious) groups?
About you

- When did you leave?
- When did you first become involved?
- What is your date of birth?
Appendix 3:

Information statement

Life after involvement in a new religious movement: Post involvement difficulties and attitudes

Dominiek Coates, Dr Ann Taylor, Dr Margot Ford

Document Version; 2, dated 25/09/09

You are invited to participate in the research project identified above which is being conducted by Dominiek Coates as part of her PhD studies at the University of Newcastle, supervised by Dr Ann Taylor and Dr Margot Ford from the School of Humanities and Social Science.

Why is the research being done?

The aim of this study is to add to our understanding and description of the experiences of former members of cults and new religious movements. There has been limited study in Australia of the experiences of former members of cults or new religious movements, especially using qualitative methods.

For the wider community and more especially for other former members, it is hoped for this research to promote better understanding of the potential effects of involvement, and the experiences of adjustment to life after involvement. It is believed that greater awareness may lead to greater expertise among health professionals, which, in turn, may bring about an improvement in support offered to former members.

Who can participate in the research?

We are seeking adult former members who have left the group more than 12 months previously, joined the group after the age of 18, and who are not in psychological distress. If you are excessively distressed by your involvement, we are concerned that an interview would exacerbate this, so we think it best if you do not take part. The researchers will be happy to give you contact details of people who may be able to help you.
What choice do you have?

Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate, your decision will not disadvantage you.

If you do decide to participate you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving a reason and have the option of withdrawing any data until the analysis is complete.

What would you be asked to do?

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to take part in an interview. During the interview, your experiences as a former member, with a focus on adjustment to life after your involvement, will be discussed. The period prior to joining, the time of involvement and the time since leaving will be explored.

The interviews will be conducted by Dominiek Coates. She has both research and counselling experience and training and has more than five years experience as a practitioner.

Dominiek Coates will contact you a week after you have received the research invitation statements and consent forms to find out whether you have made a decision. If you wish to participate, an interview will be arranged at a time and location convenient to you.

How much time will it take?

We estimate that the interview will take approximately 1.5 hours. If you wish to continue, one or two follow-up interviews of approximately 1.5 hours will be suggested.

What are the risks and benefits of participating?

For some former members the subject of group involvement may involve the recall of upsetting events and emotions. However, as a qualified counsellor, the researcher is well equipped to address any such distress. Creating a safe and supportive interviewer-interviewee relationship is the researcher’s highest priority. If you do feel distressed the interview can be stopped at any time, and the researcher would be able to advise you on how to access suitable support.
For some former members it is possible that the opportunity to have their views heard may prove to be beneficial.

**How will your privacy be protected?**

Your consent form with your name and contact details will be kept separately from any interviews. With your permission, the interview will be taped and transcribed to computer files to assist the researcher to interpret your responses and those of other participants. Confidentiality will be ensured as all names will be replaced by pseudonyms. Tapes and transcripts will be de-identified, and only de-identified quotes will be included in academic publications. Names will be changed and identifying details removed as far as possible. If you wish to, you will be able to review the recording and/or transcripts to edit or erase your contribution. The de-identified audio tapes will be secured until the student’s thesis has been completed. On completion of the thesis, the original tapes will be destroyed. All computer files will be password protected and only the researchers will have access to them.

Any information that you provide in the interview will be confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law, for instance if you disclose specific details of serious criminal offences, the researcher may be obliged to report the information to the Police.

**How will the information collected be used?**

The researcher hopes to discuss and publish the results in several ways. A thesis of the overall findings will be prepared for the University of Newcastle. The researcher may also prepare papers for conferences and public meetings, scientific publications in academic journals, and possibly a book or chapters for books. If you wish, you may receive a summary of the results of the research when it is completed.

Individual participants will not be identified in any reports arising from the project.

**What do you need to do to participate?**

Please read this Information Statement and be sure you understand its contents before you consent to participate. If there is anything you do not understand, or you have questions, contact the researcher.

If you would like to participate, please contact Dominiek Coates on 0424 044 990 or email, Dominiek.Coates@studentmail.newcastle.edu.au and an interview will be arranged at a time convenient to you.
Dominiek Coates will contact you one week after you’ve received this information pack to find out whether you have made a decision.

**Further information**

If you would like further information please contact Dr Ann Tayloron Ann.Taylor@newcastle.edu.au or phone (02) 4921 6834

Thank you for considering this invitation.

**Complaints about this research**

This project has been approved by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval No. H-2009-0190

Should you have concerns about your rights as a participant in this research, or you have a complaint about the manner in which the research is conducted, it may be given to the researcher, or, if an independent person is preferred, to the Human Research Ethics Officer, Research Office, The Chancellery, The University of Newcastle, University Drive, Callaghan NSW 2308, Australia, telephone (02) 49216333, email Human-Ethics@newcastle.edu.au.
Appendix 4

Consent Form

Life after involvement in a new religious movement: Post involvement difficulties and attitudes

Dominiek Coates, Dr Ann Taylor, Dr Margot Ford
Document Version: 2, dated 25/09/09

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.
I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Information Statement, a copy of which I have retained.
I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give any reason for withdrawing.
Please circle answers to the following. I consent to:

- Participating in an initial interview Yes No
- Having it recorded Yes No
- Having de-identified quotations included in published reports Yes No
- I wish to receive a copy of the summary results Yes No

I understand that if I wish to continue the interview beyond the initial time, the researcher will be happy to arrange one or two follow up interviews with me.
I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers, except as required by law.
I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name: ____________________________________________________
Preferred Contact Details (to arrange an interview):
________________________________________________________________________
Phone:______________________________________________________________________
Signature: _______________________________________________________________
Date: ___________________________________________________________________