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Joining and leaving a new religious movement: A study of ex-members' mental health

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Abstract

The impact of membership in new, often socially contested, religious movements (NRMs) on mental health of members and ex-members is still a controversial question in the psychological literature. In the present study, we interviewed 20 ex-members of various NRMs who also completed questionnaires measuring several cognitive (need for closure, world assumptions) and affective-emotional (parental and adult attachment, social relationships, depression) constructs. Ex-members were then compared with current NRM members and with individuals not involved in NRMs. It appeared that NRM membership compensated for some previously existing vulnerabilities reported by members (insecure attachment in childhood, few social relationships, negative life events). However, this supportive effect did not persist after the destabilizing experience of disaffiliation. Yet, ex-members remained strong believers and were very inclined to spirituality.

Introduction

Most reviews of psychological and sociological research on mental-health issues relative to what scholars call New Religious Movements (NRMs), and the general public often call cultic movements, start by introducing the controversial question of the danger of NRMs to the mental health of members and ex-members (e.g., Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000; Lilliston & Shepherd, 1999; Richardson, 1985; Saliba, 1993, 2004).¹ All these authors introduced their papers by reminding the reader of the two sides of this debate. On the one hand, negative public perceptions were supported by some studies on members

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or ex-members: attraction of pathological personalities, development and contribution to mental illness, and mind control. On the other hand, a completely opposite picture emerged from another vein of studies: neutral or even positive effects of NRM membership.

Having depicted these controversial results, most authors of these critical reviews rejected the first side of the debate for mainly methodological reasons such as no systematic studies, sometimes more anecdotal than scientifically rigorous, non-standardized instruments, and participants who are also involved in therapies. However, as outlined by Aronoff et al. (2000), the paradoxical aspect of this picture could have some origins in the target population: ex-members vs. current members. With *current member* participants, positive effects were reported such as a better quality of life, for instance in terms of decreasing illicit drug consumption (Day & Peters, 1999; Ross, 1985), decreasing stress and anxiety (Galanter, Buckley, Deutsch, Rabkin, & Rabkin, 1980; Ross, 1983; Ullman, 1982), and increasing meaning in life (Doktor, 1994). Conversely, studies on NRM *ex-members* recorded an opposite pattern. Cognitive deficiencies (e.g., memory, perception, decision-making, or information-processing deficits) and emotional impairments are commonly reported. Interestingly, these clinical observations are strengthened by some empirical studies based on standardized self-report questionnaires. Ex-members differ from the general population in some important ways: they are more introverted (Day & Peters, 1999; Poling & Kenny, 1986), meticulous (Weiss & Mendoza, 1990), and depressed (Day & Peters, 1999; Walsh, Russell, & Wells, 1995).

On the basis of these findings, it would be premature to conclude that NRM membership has a deleterious effect on mental health. First, observed differences are not necessarily pathological. Second, negative differences from “normative” data are only observed among ex-members and not among current members. Thus, we cannot blame membership itself. Attention should rather be paid to what ex-members, but not members, have experienced: leaving the group. Finally, ex-members likely come from a non-random sample of members. In this case, they would already present some fragility before having left the NRM, and possibly even before having joined it.

Present study

This study had three main objectives: (1) to investigate the NRM ex-member longitudinal process (joining, belonging, and leaving the NRM), (2) to compare ex-members to current NRM members, and (3) to compare ex-members to “normative” data, i.e., people from the general population of the same country. The study was carried out in Belgium and was part of a broader project on new and/or socially contested religious movements. Other studies included in that project focused on *members’* mental-health issues (Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore, & Christians, in press) and members’ sociocognitive and moral characteristics typical of closed-mindedness (Buxant & Saroglou, 2007).

Questions and hypotheses

We integrated our questions into the three distinct periods of the ex-member longitudinal process.

Before. In our previous study on NRM members (Buxant et al., 2007), participants reported a fragile past, i.e., insecure attachment history, high need for closure, and depressive tendencies. These results were obtained when we compared NRM members to “normative” data from the general population. *Did the ex-members present similar vulnerabilities before joining the NRM?* Because ex-members were members before their exit, we expected a fragile past similar to members. More precisely, we hypothesized an insecure attachment to parents in childhood and the dissolution of important relationships (e.g., divorce or bereavement) as often observed in the literature on conversion (see, e.g., Ullman, 1982, or the meta-analysis by Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004).

However, ex-members could present some differences from those who remain members. Either ex-members would report an even more fragile past than current members, or ex-members would, on the contrary, report a less “traumatic” past. In both cases, the specificities of each kind of sample could explain (in part) why some members remain members, and others become ex-members. Being more fragile could lead to instability in long-term membership to the group, and at the opposite end of the spectrum, being less fragile than other members could mean a stronger will and capacity to leave (if so desired).

During. In our previous study (Buxant et al., 2007), NRM members reported a positive present state of being (positive world assumptions, security in adult attachment, no depression) and an optimistic future, at least on the basis of self-perceptions. Combining the results regarding the past and the present, we then concluded that belonging to an NRM seems to have a supportive compensatory role on members’ mental health. Our concern in the present study was to know whether *the experience within the NRM presents the same supportive role for ex-members as observed for members.* We mainly investigated affective and relational variables, and tested the intensity of membership and faith. However, it should not be excluded that, because of the retrospective aspect of the present study, ex-members would neglect possible positive impacts of the NRM membership (e.g., as a strategy to avoid cognitive dissonance with their choice to leave the NRM).

After. What are, today, after the exit, the consequences of the membership on (1) self-perceptions about well-being, (2) definition of the self, (3) faith and religiosity, and (4) social relationships? We examined whether the effects of belonging to an NRM (whether they are positive or not) persist in the life of our participants now that they have left the movement. We also focused on the specific moment of the exit itself. Finally, attention was paid to many variables (such as the strength of membership, the reasons for leaving, the exit context

itself, and the personal means of resilience) that may have played a role in mental health and social adaptability.

Method

Procedure

Small posters were displayed in various public places (university buildings, streets, shops, psycho-social centers, family planning offices, and churches) of the largest cities in the French-speaking part of Belgium. An advertisement was also placed in a free local paper and on various websites, which intend to inform and help victims of the so-called cultic groups. Our explicit call for participants concerned people who were members of “a socially contested religious/spiritual group, a new religious movement or a cult.” We invited participants to take part in a semi-structured interview (90 min on average) conducted at our research-center building. Transport costs were refunded. Some interviews were undertaken at the participants’ homes when requested. With participants’ permission, interviews were audiotaped in order to allow for coding by a judge not present at the interview. After the interview, participants were given a questionnaire to fill in at home and return by mail². Advertising of the study, interviews, and collection of questionnaires took 8 months, from October 2004 to May 2005.

Participants

Study participants were 20 people who left 13 different NRMs, without having been deprogrammed or having followed psychological (or even familial) counseling. Sixteen of them also filled in and returned the questionnaire. Note that it was participants themselves who self-identified as being members of “a socially contested religious/spiritual group, a new religious movement or a cult” (our advertising of the study) and not we, as researchers, who selected or classified them.

Ten different NRMs were represented: Opus Dei, a Catholic Biblical Community, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), the Christian Church of Jehovah Witnesses, and different Evangelical Protestant Communities; three international Centers offering meditation, yoga teaching, and a community life (Spiritual Human Yoga, Ogyen Kunzang Chöling, a Belgian center teaching Vipassana meditation); Unification Church (Moon); and the spiritualism center of Allan Kardec. These religious groups show several obvious differences; their respective religious roots are the most evident. However, they are all new and contested with regard to the Belgian, traditionally Catholic, society, and the psychological processes related to joining and leaving them can reasonably be considered as common across the various groups. In order then not to make a series of case studies but to be able to carry out quantitative analyses, we rather treated the sample as a whole.

The mean age of the sample was 44 years old ($SD = 14$, range = 19–72 years old). Fourteen of the 20 participants joined the NRM after 17 years of age. The six others were in the group before the age of 18 because of their parents' choice. Except for two participants who stayed in their group for a very short time (10 days and less than 4 months), all ex-members were members for a minimum of 1 year ($M = 17$, $SD = 14$; maximum = 44). On average, participants left the NRM 8 years prior to taking part in the study. Five participants had been ex-members for less than 5 years, 10 ex-members left the group 5–10 years ago, and the five remaining participants left more than 10 years ago.

Eleven ex-members were married, four were unmarried, and five were divorced (and single at the time of the study). Among the married: four were already married before they belonged to the NRM (in three couples, the two partners converted together and, in the fourth couple, only one partner converted), five married a member (a Jehovah Witness or a Mormon), and two got married—with a non-member—after their exit.

Interview

The 20 ex-members were interviewed about the six following themes (open-ended questions):

- (1) *Definition of the self.* The objective was to determine the impact of joining and leaving an NRM on self-definition. Two questions opened the interview, without making any reference to the NRM: "If you had to write a book on your life, what would be the first lines?" and "On the back cover, under your picture, which information about you would you want to appear?"
- (2) *Major life events.* We investigated the life events of ex-members by asking them to write a line on the major, negative and positive, events in their lives. Attention was focused on the spontaneously selected event types and on their chronology (to evaluate, for instance, their concomitance).
- (3) *Intensity of belonging.* Participants were asked to score on a 10-point scale their feeling of belonging when they were members. Similarly, we evaluated the exclusivity of their belonging by asking them if they had any other activities external to the religious group. Participants were also invited to cite the three major events they had lived during the period of belonging, not necessarily events linked with the religious group itself. Our aim was to obtain a measure of the importance they gave to their NRM membership in the context of their whole life.
- (4) *Social adaptation.* In order to know the social adaptability of our participants, we questioned them about their current feelings and reactions in two different social situations: being alone and being with other people. They were asked which situation they preferred.
- (5) *Evolution of faith.* Participants were requested to draw a curve representing the evolution of their own faith from birth to the present and to specify this

- evolution according to four significant periods or moments: joining the NRM, being an active member, leaving the NRM, and today, after the exit.
- (6) *Social and familial cohesion*. Our main purpose with this topic was to compare the size and nature of participants' social networks at three distinct periods: childhood, during NRM membership, and today. We were inspired by the *Family System Test* (FAST: Gehring & Debry, 1999), a checkerboard composed of 81 squares on which participants had to place female and male figurines. We simplified and adapted instructions and analyses: we paid attention to the number of figurines used, persons represented by these figurines, and distances between them. Ex-members were asked to "represent the relations between them and their entourage" for the three distinct and specific periods reported above.

Questionnaire

The six following measures were included in the questionnaire:

- (1) *Parental attachment* (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). We used the retrospective descriptions of attachment to parents—distinctly for father and mother—established by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in order to measure attachment styles, i.e., secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant attachment. As in most other studies, participants gave an evaluation for each of the six (two parents \times three styles) paragraphs in a Likert-type format (7-point scales).
- (2) *Experiences in Close Relationships Scale—Revised* (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000). This is a 7-point Likert-format scale of 36 items measuring the two orthogonal dimensions of adult attachment, i.e., *anxiety* (anxiety about the self and the relationship) and *avoidance* (discomfort with contact with others). The two-factor structure in our French translation was replicated in a previous study (Saroglou, Kempeneers, & Seynhaeve, 2003). Reliabilities in the present study were satisfactory: $\alpha = 0.90$ and 0.92 , respectively, for *anxiety* and *avoidance*.
- (3) *Need for Closure Scale* (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; French translation by Caroff, Berjot, Fievet, & Drozda-Senkowska, 2002). In order to reduce the length and time of the administration of the whole scale (42 items), we used only the subscales of Preference for *order* and Preference for *predictability*, which contain 10 and 8 items, respectively. These two subscales (5-point Likert format) explain a substantial part of the total variance of the scale and constitute its most representative dimensions (see e.g., D. Dreu, Koole, & Oldersma, 1999). Respective reliabilities in the present study were $\alpha = 0.81$ and 0.80 .
- (4) *World Assumptions Scale* (Janoff-Bulman, 1989; French translation by Sydor, 1993). This consists of eight 4-item subscales representing assumptions (I) about benevolence: (a) *benevolence of the world* and (b) *benevolence of people*; (II) about the meaningfulness of the world: (c) *justice*, (d) *controllability*, and (e) *randomness*; and (III) about the self: (f) *luck*, (g) *self-controllability*,

and (h) *self-worth*. For each of these subscales, reliabilities were, respectively 0.75, 0.77, 0.68, 0.68, 0.73, 0.85, 0.75, and 0.85. One item of the justice sub-scale was removed, allowing the reliability for this scale to reach a Cronbach alpha of 0.86.

- (5) *Well-being* (3TSS: *The Three Time Dimensions Synoptic Scale*, de Leval, 2001). This French scale measures the opposite aspect of depression, called “perceived well-being.” Low scores thus indicate depression. This scale includes 40 items (5-point Likert) on which participants had to evaluate themselves (e.g., “I am happy,” “I am self-confident,” or as reverse-scored items; “I hold myself to blame” and “I feel tired from the morning onwards”) three times corresponding to the three periods of their lives: *past*, *present*, and *future*. Reliabilities in the present study were satisfactory: $\alpha = 0.89$ (past), 0.96 (present), and 0.92 (future).
- (6) *Religiosity*. Three items with 7-point Likert scales were administered asking about the importance of God, the importance of religion, and the importance of spirituality in life. These questions were asked three times, once for the period before joining the group, once for the membership period, and once for the present.

Comparison samples

The questionnaire-based data were compared with (a) data from NRM members and (b) “normative” data from the general population. The data from NRM current members come from 113 Belgian adults (56% women, 44% men; mean age: 49.1, $SD = 15.3$) who were belonging to the following groups: the Belgium Center of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, different Catholic charismatic groups, Protestant Evangelical congregations, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Seventh-day Adventist Church, and some other groups of Protestant inspiration but not members of the United Protestant Church of Belgium (see Buxant et al., 2007, for more details).

The “normative,” non-NRM data came from various previous studies; no unique sample exists of Belgian adults from the general population, where one can find data for all the variables concerned. All participants of these comparison samples were Belgian adults from the same linguistic (French-speaking) community. These data were already used in a previous study as comparison norms for data from NRM members (Buxant et al., 2007). Following are the studies that provided these “normative” data for each construct: (1) *Attachment to parents in childhood* (Buxant, 2002; Saroglou, Delpierre, & Kempeneers, 2002); (2) *Romantic attachment with the adult partner* (Lacour, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003); (3) *Need for closure* (Saroglou et al., 2003); (4) *Basic world assumptions* (Sydor, 1993, and data we collected especially for the study on NRM members); (5) *Depressive tendencies* (Hue, 2000; Hynderick, 2003, for non-clinical; and de Leval, 2000, for clinical samples); (6) *Religiosity* (Saroglou, 2003).

Results

Results from interviews and questionnaires are gathered and presented below in three distinct parts following the chronological order of the process of joining and leaving the NRM, i.e., before joining the group, the belonging period, and after (leaving and today). Regarding the quantitative analyses, despite the small sample size ($n = 16$), several interesting and meaningful significant results were observed. For these analyses, descriptive statistics and t tests are presented in Table I.

Before joining the NRM

Insecure parental attachment during childhood. On average, participants reported an insecure parental attachment in their childhood, both with the father and with the mother; more insecure than average people but also NRM members who are already more insecure than non-NRM people (Buxant et al., in press). More precisely, in comparison with “normative” data, ex-members reported more insecurity with their mother: higher avoidance, Cohen’s $d = 0.81$, higher

Table I. Means, standards deviations, and t tests for measures in NRM ex-members, NRM members, and the comparison samples.

	NRM ex-members (a)		NRM members (b)		Comparison data (c)		t -tests	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	(a-b)	(a-c)
<i>Mother attachment</i>								
Security	3.00	1.46	3.96	1.21	3.74	1.31	-2.92**	-1.95 [†]
Ambivalence	2.87	1.36	2.25	1.39	2.09	1.39	1.95*	2.22*
Avoidance	2.47	1.64	1.60	1.10	1.37	1.00	3.04**	2.59*
<i>Father attachment</i>								
Security	2.67	1.33	3.05	1.52	3.11	1.43	-1.78	-2.45*
Ambivalence	2.60	1.24	2.99	1.42	2.48	1.46	-1.25	0.37
Avoidance	2.73	1.53	2.21	1.42	1.73	1.26	1.64	2.53*
<i>World assumptions</i>								
Justice	2.75	1.19	2.93	1.30	2.52	0.96	-0.53	0.70
Benevolence people	3.71	1.04	3.92	1.13	3.47	0.81	-0.71	0.84
Benevolence world	3.95	1.08	3.73	1.21	3.62	0.88	0.71	1.10
Self-worth	4.29	1.32	4.13	0.98	3.89	0.95	0.44	1.10
Controllability	3.89	1.01	3.90	0.91	2.99	0.82	-0.04	3.22**
Self-control	4.66	0.84	4.43	0.87	4.25	0.67	0.96	1.48
Randomness	2.91	1.11	2.33	1.16	3.86	0.94	1.83 [†]	-3.08**
Being lucky	4.38	1.11	4.22	1.05	3.74	0.89	0.51	2.09*
<i>Need for closure</i>								
Order	3.33	0.69	3.72	0.60	2.92	0.75	-2.47*	2.26*
Predictability	3.12	0.86	3.31	0.81	2.66	0.75	-0.90	2.01*
<i>Well-being (no depression)</i>								
Before	101.04	19.09	111.38	18.93	118.96	13.93	-1.71 [†]	-3.24**
Today	112.62	23.69	115.04	16.58	114.34	14.75	-0.49	-0.27
In the future	132.78	14.68	124.61	14.67	121.56	14.00	1.82 [†]	2.63**

[†] $p < 0.10$; * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$.

ambivalence, $d = 0.57$, and a tendency towards less security, $d = -0.53$. Similarly, they reported a more avoidant, $d = 0.71$, and a less secure, $d = -0.60$, attachment to their father (no significant difference for ambivalence). In comparison with members, ex-members again reported a higher insecurity in their attachment to the mother: more avoidance, $d = 0.62$, and less security, $d = -0.72$ (no significant difference was observed for the ambivalent attachment style). For the attachment with the father, only a tendency towards less security, $d = -0.54$, was found.

The use of the *Family System Test* (FAST) in the interview seemed to confirm this insecurity in parental attachment styles and extended it to social relationships in general. Only seven ex-members placed their parents on the squares close to them. Eleven ex-members out of the 20 placed their parents far from them when they were asked to represent social network in their childhood. Among these 11 people, six claimed to have undergone parental violence in their childhood. Two participants did not place their parents on the checkerboard at all, although they were present at this life period. Moreover, ex-members reported a poor general social network in the period before they joined the group. Social relations, if there were any, seemed to be limited to familial ones. Interviews emphasized this observation, underlining various break-up stories and loneliness.

Negative life events before entrance. More than a third of ex-members ($n = 7$) mentioned having experienced one or more negative life event(s) just before their entrance or in the period preceding it: successive bankruptcies followed by depression and a suicide attempt, a breast cancer with mastectomy after the death of both parents in a car accident, domestic violence, divorce and depression, death of people close to them, moral harassment at work, and the accident of a child with serious physical after-effects, an event concomitant with loss of work and depression of the husband.

Need for closure. As with current members (Buxant et al., 2007), comparisons between NRM ex-members and the general population revealed lower scores of the latter in both a need for order and need for predictability, $ds = 0.57$.

Moreover, ex-members reported a higher need for order than people from current NRM members, $d = 0.60$. There was no significant difference with regard to need for predictability.

Belonging

Different reasons for entrance in the group. We noted earlier that less than a third of the participants (six out of 20) joined the NRM when they were children (through the membership of their parents). For the others ($n = 14/20$), it seems that few chose the group because of its own specific properties; only five of these 14 participants reported an attraction to the group's philosophy, doctrine or practice, whereas the majority ($n = 9/14$) gave more general reasons of entrance: looking for social relationships, answers to questions or meaning in life.

Strong sense of belonging and exclusivity. On a 10-point scale measuring the intensity of belonging to the NRM for the membership period, ex-members retrospectively reported, on average, a score of 8, thus indicating a strong sense of belonging. This membership turned out to be exclusive, either because of an explicit rule in the NRM or because of the various (and obligatory) activities in the group, which took too much time to allow investment in other activities. Most participants of this study ($n = 17$) had with the other NRM members during their membership daily contacts: 12 ex-members lived in a converted family and 5 others lived in a community.

A life outside the religious group. The three most important life events experienced during membership period and selected by participants in the interview did not refer to the NRM itself: only 19 life events among the 60 reported were related to the religious group. Among these 19 events, 11 were reported as positive ones (e.g., baptism, international meeting, friendship) and 8 as negative events (e.g., being obliged to attend the meetings, to proselytize, to baptize other members). The 41 other reported events were positively perceived and related to more universally important periods in life (e.g., marriage, birth of a child, professional promotion).

Negative experience as a whole but also some positive elements. Interviews highlighted some reserve in speaking about experiences lived in the NRMs. The general impact reported was negative. However, when ex-members were asked “what did this experience bring to you, all things considered?,” most participants mentioned specific positive elements, mainly the acquisition of aptitudes and knowledge ($n = 14/20$):

“There was a lifestyle inside the group that I liked; I will keep it”; “I have learned to join a group; I didn’t feel rejected there”; “I have acquired some aptitudes, perceptions, talents [...]”. For example, I have sent energy to a person who needed it during a surgery”; “The only positive thing that I have got out of it is learning to feel at ease in public situations, a facility to get in touch with people; it helps me a lot in my actual life.”

Only two participants reported no contribution, neither positive nor negative.

After

Lack of autonomy and contradictions between attitude and doctrine. Leaving the group was, for all participants, a personal choice. One reason for leaving was the awakening of contradictions between group doctrine and events. Some ex-members ($n = 5$) were deeply shocked at the attitude of an important group member (a senior or a parent) who did not respect the NRM’s recommended values (e.g., marital fidelity). Another frequent reason reported by participants was their gradual personal conflict with the doctrine. Despite this clash, these members continued to meet other members until they gradually reduced their involvement. Lastly, obligations, constraints, and pressure were also reported as motives for leaving the group; staying a member would have become too demanding, alongside the decrease in interests and convictions.

Social rupture as a consequence of leaving the NRM. Disaffiliation from the NRM was accompanied by social and/or familial break-up for most ex-members ($n = 14$). Four of them left the group by abandoning their partner, who wanted to remain a member. A large number of ex-members ($n = 12$) left the group alone, and the other eight ex-members left together with their partner. After having left the group, ex-members reported having undergone pressure from members encouraging them to return to the NRM. Ex-members spontaneously reported in the interviews that they considered this attitude as harassment.

Ex-members still have faith. Information provided through self-report questionnaires underlined a general stability of ex-members' faith when we compare the two periods, i.e., during and after (see Figure 1). Ex-members still give the same importance to God and spirituality today as they did during their involvement in the NRM. However, interestingly, religion has less importance today than when they were members, $F(1, 13) = 15.85$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.55$. Similarly, when compared with adults from the general population, ex-members still today consider God and spirituality more important in their life, $ds = 0.49$ and 0.83 ; this however is not the case with religion.

Individualization of faith. This maintained faith is manifested in another way today. Participants do not share it with other people in a particular religious group but experience it by themselves. Most ex-members claimed that they could no longer enjoy a religious group. They are even resistant to the idea of belonging to any kind of group (religious or otherwise), mainly because of the constraints, the relations of authority, and the important amount of daily time devoted to the group.

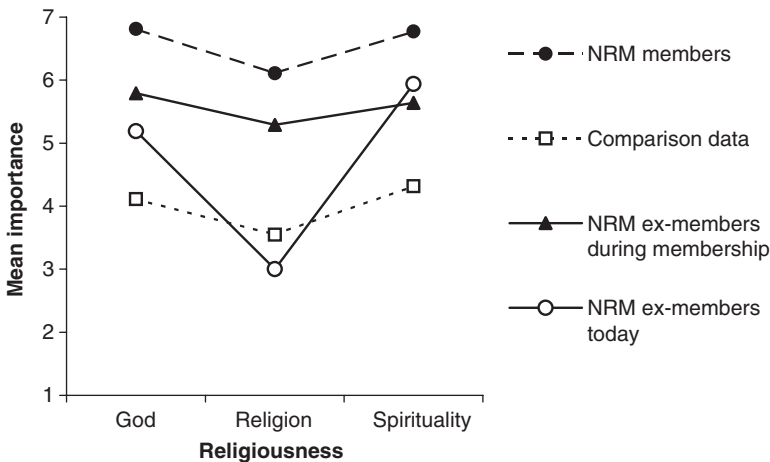


Figure 1. Mean importance of religiousness among NRM ex-members (today and before), NRM members, and people with normative data.

“I want to leave this isolation; I am conscious of being in a system where I work and I have only my family. I have no social relationships. But, at the same time, when I am in a group [a singing lesson], I am afraid to return to this group. [...] I realize only now that I am free in this group [...] I like it but, unconsciously, this reminds me of the moments when I had to go to the meetings [of the NRM]. It took me a year and a half to be cool in this kind of group; now, that’s a weight off my mind.” “When I left the group, I tried to find another group, but I ran away each time. Groups are very dangerous. I have gone to other religions. I wanted to know, to try to go beyond what I have heard. But each time I told myself no, I can’t, I can’t anymore. I was confronted with the same phenomenon: one person who gives the message. It doesn’t suit me. I have to think by myself, I have to make my own belief, for the moment, for the time being, which could change.”

Today, only four ex-members are members of a religious group. But even these four people are resistant to some of these groups’ inherent characteristics such as obligations. Nevertheless, the majority of participants of our study ($n = 17$) seem to be active in personal growth and high in spiritual quest. They attend lectures (e.g., on parapsychology, on alternative medicine, or on Eastern philosophy), take part in retreats, and buy books on spirituality, psychology, parapsychology, or esotericism.

Definition of the self: Impact of NRM membership. In answer to the first question of the interview, i.e., asking participants to give a hypothetical title of their autobiography, seven participants underlined their status of ex-member. For the first lines of their book, one of them gave a general answer without any specifications, but the other six ex-members would start the book with specific sentences referring to their experience in the NRMs:

“The title would be *Time lost, time stolen*. I would protect people from those who want to take your energy; life is short”; “I would speak about my life in the cult because it is more than 40 years of my life. I would also speak about my childhood and about the reasons of my affiliation and my exit”; “The title of my book would be *The ascendancy*. I would recount my first childhood memories associated with this ascendancy; the group taught us to lie”; “The first lines would be *How to live as an adult when childhood innocence is abused*”; “The message would be about education, which must be neutral, without intention, without influence, the same for each human being”; “I would start with this sentence: *Eight years of my life lost in a cult...*”

To the second question, i.e., self-description on the back cover of the hypothetic biographical book, four ex-members among these previous seven ex-members gave an answer linked with the membership experience:

“He has managed to get out; he had to do it alone, he fought, it made him better, it gave him tools to fight”; “A developing person who has the aim to help other people to avoid ascendancy, especially cultic ascendancy”; “A description of my professional status in order to show that we can become normal people”; “This is the real life of someone who has crossed the devil of [the name of the group] and who has managed to get out after a fight. Hoping this testimony will alert people who want to enter onto this path, and to help those who are already on this path and want to get out, because it is very hard to do so.”

Our sample could be split into two groups: one group with ex-members whose answers to these two questions were linked to their membership experience, their ex-member status ($n = 7$), and another group with ex-members who did not refer to the NRM when they answered ($n = 13$). This latter group did not report any elements that could remind the reader that the “authors” had been members

of an NRM. One factor that seemed to distinguish these two sub-samples was the length of time spent in the group and, thus, the age at entrance. Indeed, five of the seven ex-members who gave a definition of themselves in relation to their membership experience had been in an NRM since their childhood and stayed there for more than 23 years (and one of them for 40 years). The two other ex-members whose self-definition was affected by the negative experience in an NRM were not members since childhood. However, one of them stayed for 44 years in the group, and the other is a mother who brought all her family into the religious group and who still feels deeply guilty for this today.

Well-being and optimism. In general, and as Figure 2 shows, there is a positive evolution of well-being, $F(2, 10) = 9.08$, $p < 0.01$, $\eta^2 = 0.48$. More specifically, the ex-members' perception of well-being in the future is more optimistic than that of well-being in the present, $F(1, 11) = 6.73$, $p < 0.05$, $\eta^2 = 0.38$. However, and despite what the figure seems to show, there is no significant difference between the perception of the past and the perception of the present, $F(1, 11) = 2.08$, $p = 0.18$, $\eta^2 = 0.16$.

In comparison with data from a non-clinical population of adults (de Leval, 2002), ex-members were found to retrospectively report lower well-being (higher depression) in the past, $d = -1.15$, but higher well-being expected for the future, $d = 1.22$ (see also Figure 2). No difference was observed regarding well-being as a current perception applied to the present. In comparison with a clinical sample of depressive people (de Leval, 2000), ex-members had nothing in common with the depressive profile (see Figure 2).

Up to now, we have generalized, as if all members had this optimistic profile of well-being. But, on this measure, one of the 12 ex-members who returned the questionnaire had a similar profile to the depressive one (see the "V" depressive

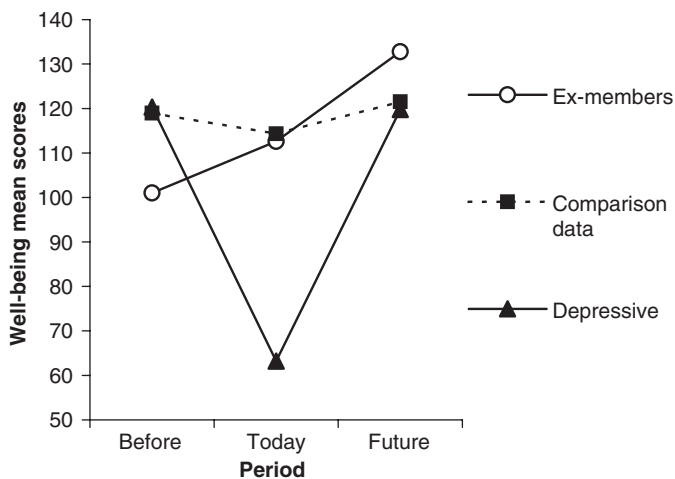


Figure 2. Well-being as reported before, now and in the future among NRM ex-members, people with normative data, and clinically depressive people.

curve in Figure 2). And, moreover, among the eight ex-members who did not fill in the questionnaire, three reported a depressive state in the interview. Thus, in total, four ex-members looked like depressive types.

Our main interest in these depressive tendencies was to verify if they were due to the experience in the NRM. For three out of these four ex-members, this did not seem to be the case. They showed depressive antecedents (depressive periods in childhood or later), resorting to psychotherapy and drugs. Only one participant out of the four had never presented depressive tendencies before. He was the only one who did not make an explicit association between his present state and his membership to the NRM. According to what he said about his medical file, this ex-member seems to present a serious depressive disorder. The scale used in the questionnaire (3TSS, de Leval, 2001) confirmed this diagnostic (his observed profile was similar to the depressive one).

A sense of control. Ex-members, in comparison with non-members, hold stronger beliefs regarding controllability, $d=2.01$, and luck, $d=0.64$. Similarly, ex-members reported less beliefs in randomness, $d=-0.92$. No difference was observed for the five other world assumptions. When NRM ex-members were compared with current NRM members, the only significant difference concerns a lower belief in randomness, $d=-0.51$.

Few social relationships. No significant difference was observed between ex-members and “normative” data or current NRM members on adult attachment as measured by the Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised (Fraley et al., 2000). The projective measure of social relationships used in the interview (FAST) gave complementary information. The majority ($n=12$) only referred to their close family—partner, children, and parents—and themselves. Four participants even represented themselves alone on the checkerboard with some figurines they called “people,” “society” and who were far away from them. Only five ex-members put more figurines on the checkerboard by adding to the close family the broader family and some friends.

Discussion

Before joining an NRM, ex-members of our study revealed some specificities in terms of vulnerabilities, i.e., (1) insecure attachment to their parents in childhood, (2) few social relationships, (3) negative life events, and (4) higher need for order. The last result is in line with previous literature having documented a high need for closure (at least need for order) among religious people in general (Saroglou, 2002), literal thinkers in religious issues (Duriez, 2003), people who are interested in spirituality books (Saroglou et al., 2003), and current NRM members (Buxant et al., in press). The other three results suggest a vulnerable profile, in terms of affective and environmental factors, a profile that is supported by literature on conversion in general, and on NRMs especially. First, as found in previous studies, NRM members report insecurity in attachment

during childhood (Buxant et al., 2007), an unhappy adolescence (Ullman, 1982), early loss or absence of the father (Murken & Namini, 2003), and childhood in families less emotionally expressive and more critical of their children than families of non-members (Sirkin & Grellong, 1988). Second, the limited social network of our participants does not seem to be an exception: in a study by Levine and Slater (1976), 43% of members reported feelings of loneliness, rejection, sadness, and lack of belonging before their entrance into a religious group. Third, the presence of negative life events in the years before joining a religious group was observed in previous studies on conversion in general or conversion to NRMs in particular (e.g., Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Murken & Namini, 2003; Ullman, 1982).

Interestingly, both current members (Buxant et al., 2007) and ex-members (present study) seem to share this social and affective vulnerability, which could have been a motivation to look for affective compensation by joining a religious group with high internal cohesion and strong affective bonds—what most NRMs offer. However, the present study provided additional interesting information: results showed an even higher insecurity in attachment in childhood among ex-members comparatively to members. We suspect that this insecurity reflects a general difficulty in maintaining attachment to any object in the long-term: this may lead these people to exit the group more easily than people who are not so insecure.

During the membership period, even if the majority of life events reported by participants were linked to their life outside the religious group, the NRM had an important place, if not the most important and even exclusive place in members' lives. The latter felt a strong sense of belonging, they devoted a lot of time to the group, and they were very religious. Ex-members seemed to have found something they needed, at least on the social and affective levels.

Interestingly, these interpersonal aspects, including intrapsychic ones, were the main reasons cited by members in a previous study by Levine and Slater (1976): only a minority (20%) discussed spiritual, transcendental, or mystical reasons. These results were also observed by Barker and Currie (1985), who concluded that new members first enter into a community, before becoming committed supporters. As suggested by previous literature, people converted to NRMs report being happier since their conversion (Murken & Namini, 2003), and a majority of them report relief from anxiety, depression, or anger (Ullman, 1982): this is what Galanter (1996) called the "relief effect."

As far as the reasons of exit are concerned, many participants of the present study reported that they decided to leave the group mainly because of ethical conflict, i.e., incoherence between doctrine and facts or between doctrine and their own beliefs. Interestingly, previous literature on deconversion or disaffiliation in general—i.e., from traditional religions, too—emphasizes the social disillusionment aspect of this experience and provides evidence that hypocrisy among church members and contradictions between their attitudes and the group's beliefs are important, if not the major reported motives for doubt and apostasy (e.g., Altemeyer, 2004; Brinkerhoff & Mackie, 1993). In addition,

the fact that several participants of the present study, ex-members of NRM, also reported high constraints and demands by the group as reasons for exit suggests at least a subjective feeling of reduction of autonomy during membership. Interestingly, the combination of the exit motives (discrepancy between beliefs and attitudes, restriction of autonomy) with the insecure attachment could urge future research to investigate relations between these two dimensions. For instance, one could speculate that insecurity in attachment is a major reason for exit and that the disillusionment functions as an explicit rationalization of a more hidden, affective reality.

Cognitive factors are, however, not to be excluded as motives possibly explaining the exit. Comparisons between ex-members, members, and non-members revealed that, although the former were, like the members, higher in need for order than the average population, they differed from current members in that they were lower in need for order. Apparently, people with high cognitive needs for order and structure join groups such as the NRMs, but those who will one day exit from these groups have these needs to a less excessive degree and are, like our ex-members, sensitive to experiences that reduce their feeling of autonomy.

Just after the exit, we observed among the participants of the present study a reduction in general well-being and a diminution of religious faith. Nevertheless, we also observed a temporal—linear—evolution of the perception of well-being for the three periods, i.e., from past to future, through present. Participants also reported a very active and significant spiritual quest with a high level of belief in God in the present. Spirituality remained more important than for normative people, showing that beyond contradictions observed between doctrine and some attitudes of older members, beyond what we could call disillusionment, the exit is not associated with a long-term crisis of faith or with a fundamental modification of beliefs. The interviews underlined the same scenario: despite a drop in faith just after the exit (see also Wright, 1991), the level of faith increased later after the exit for most of the participants. In other words, the reasons for leaving have certain similarities to deception in love rather than a realization that love might not exist. The general positive profile of these religious/spiritual participants (positive perception of the future, high self-esteem, confidence in controllability, in terms of basic world assumptions) can be interpreted in terms of typical profile of religious/spiritual personality.

However, even if joining an NRM plays a structuring role (Buxant et al., in press) and even if, according to the above results, leaving an NRM does not have major destructive effects in our sample, the current results are not necessarily in favor of the NRMs. Let us recall some other observations. First, for ex-members who already presented depressive tendencies, the exit might trigger the depressive state. Second, for nearly all participants, the exit was associated with considerable difficulty in rebuilding and having confidence in any relationship. Consequently, the strong “new” religiosity is no longer experienced in a community, and religion, as an institutionalized faith, no longer has such great importance for the ex-members. In the same way, Wright (1991) showed a

disruption of social cohesion after exit and Barker (1996) suggested severe problems when people leave a movement resulting from the intensity of belonging and being cut off from the rest of the world. Finally, for those who stayed many years inside the groups, this experience seemed to have been highly—too—encompassing of their entire life and has marked their self-identity.

It is important to note the limitations of the present study. First, for ex-members, the cross-sectional design and the self-reported aspect of the measures could lead to the inverse of what is called the “conversion bias” i.e., the fact that converted people tend to underestimate their personal situation previous to conversion and to overestimate their present one (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). Ex-members, contrary to members, could tend to underestimate their present situation in order to accentuate the negative effects of NRM membership, well-known among the general public. Ideally, although difficult to achieve in this research context, longitudinal research and measures other than self-reports would better guarantee accurate information. Nevertheless, this risk of such self-presentation biases does not seem to be high in the present study, results being more positive than expected on the basis of the strongly negative social perceptions of NRMs. On the other hand, it should not be excluded that some positivity in results could be due, in part, to an ex-member’s current re-interpretation of the experience in the religious group with the benefit of hindsight (e.g., see Beckford, 1978) or in order to restore a threatened self-esteem (how could I have been so blind and stay so long in such a group?). Second, given the small sample size of the present study, it would be imprudent to assume that the present findings are directly generalizable to the general population of ex-members, even for the country of reference, i.e., Belgium. Similarly, a greater sample size would allow for finer distinctions in the analyses, for instance (a) between those who had joined the group of their own volition and those who have “entered” as children because of their parents’ decision or (b) between groups that vary in their history, beliefs, and practices. Third, the comparison normative samples were not ideal: they were different for each construct and not specifically matched to our target population. However, they constituted the only available comparable samples from the adult population of the same country and language-speaking community; and it is an advantage of this study that such comparisons were made. Moreover, qualitative data from the interviews gave support to the quantitative comparisons made on the basis of questionnaires.

In conclusion, we are tempted to qualify belonging to an NRM as a “prosthesis” for the well-being of some people who were possibly vulnerable. Even if being a member of such a religious group can bring support and even compensation to previous fragilities, the present study suggests that the experience of disaffiliation is somewhat negative and destabilizing—like the breakdown of a prosthesis—and that the support from NRM membership is, indeed, a short-term one. Fortunately, ex-members seemed to (re)adapt to life. However, it should not be excluded that our participants could be the most

resilient ex-members, and thus perhaps the only ones able to speak about their experience.

An interesting result that urges future research is that, as mentioned above, the attachment of ex-members to parents in childhood was more insecure than that of current NRM members. People who leave an NRM may not necessarily be those with the highest levels of critical thinking, but seem to be people with particularly insecure attachment. It is thus intriguing, for future research, to examine, through which means ex-members, who apparently are still high believers, tend to satisfy their spiritual needs although their insecurity in attachment does not seem to help them joining again a religious or spiritual group.

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Notes

- [1] We are aware that no definition is perfect for describing this kind of movement and the corresponding literature. “Cults” or “cult-like movements” are terms highly criticized by sociologists of religion, although the higher danger of some religious movements with regard to other religious groups is not an absurd hypothesis. “New religious movements” is a term that has the advantage of avoiding an a priori stigmatization of groups that probably are perceived as bizarre by the society because they are (simply) new. In the broader project the present study is part of, we introduced the term “contested religious movements” taking into account the fact that some religious groups (mostly new worldwide, but all new for a historically Catholic country such as Belgium) are seen rather negatively by society, clearly more negatively than traditional established religious groups. (This may include also some Catholic religious groups who are seen with suspicion by the Belgian society.) However, for communicability reasons, we maintain here the term NRM.
- [2] Use of interviews is an appropriate measurement method when the sample size is rather small, as is usually the case with NRM ex-members, especially in small countries. Additionally, the use of questionnaires would allow us to quantitatively compare with previous data—when available—from NRM members or from non-NRM samples and to draw conclusions—when the results were significant. Finally, combining information, where pertinent, provided through different methods, i.e., interview and questionnaire, would enhance the strength of conclusions.

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