On the Presumed Fragility
of Unconventional Beliefs*

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Upon encountering an unconventional belief system, people are often heard to exclaim "How could anyone in his right mind believe such nonsense?" This sentiment is not restricted to the lay-person A more subtle version of it is featured in some of the social scientific literature on religious cults an movements. As such, it gives rise to explanations of cult or movement viability that are premised on an assumption that unconventional religious beliefs are highly vulnerable to everyday experience and therefore inherently fragile This assumption prompts some scholars to propose the existence of elaborate "plausibility structures" that are presumably required to maintain the tenuous beliefs and to protect their respective adherents from cognitive dissonance This paper challenges the view that unconventional belief systems are necessarily fragile and owe their persistence primarily to the power of plausibility structures It is also argued that such assumptions can function as barriers to understanding of contemporary religious movements and other unconventional beliefs

Two couples standing outside of a Los Angeles restaurant are asked by a neatly dressed caucasian female if they have ever heard of *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo*. They look at her as if to say, "What are you talking about?" Noting their confusion, the proselytizer asks if they want to be happy and fulfill their dreams. They respond that they are quite content. The proselytizer emphasizes that they could get whatever they want — materially, physically, or spiritually — if only they chanted. She then indicates how chanting has provided her with greater meaning and purpose, enabled her to get better grades in school, and improved her relationship with her parents. Their response was still one of disinterest, so the proselytizer moves on in search of other prospects. One of the members of the party then remarked to another that it was hardly worth getting excited over, especially since what was being promoted was just another of the "many strange and fanatical religious groups" that grace the Los Angeles scene. "No question about it," scoffed another member of the party, "those people are really strange, if not downright sick." "Yea," added another, "how else could anyone believe such crap?"[1]

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1   This vignette is excerpted from the senior author's field notes based on his ethnographic study of the Nichiren Shoshu movement in America Also known as Nichiren Shoshu Academy or just NSA, Nichiren Shoshu is a Japanese-based, culturally transplanted, proselytizing Buddhist movement that seeks to change the world by changing individuals It was formally introduced into America in 1960 and claims to have since attracted more than 200,000 members, most of whom are Occidental and have joined since the mid-1960s For further discussion of the movement's beliefs, goals, and operation in America, see Snow (1976, 1979) and Snow and Phillips (1980)

There is little unusual about the above scenario. Not only have hundreds of thousands of people been solicited by religious enthusiasts during the past decade, but they have often dismissed categorically the various movements and philosophies encountered. Indeed, such a response constitutes a form of verbal exorcism typically employed when our taken-for-granted world, or what Schutz (1971) referred to as our "paramount reality," is breached and challenged by an alternative reality. As Lofland (1966: 193) observed during the course of his study of the early American devotees of Sun Myung Moon, the common sense response to members of such groups "is, in effect, 'My God, how can they believe such obvious nonsense?' "

Such sentiments are not restricted to the layperson. They are also prominent in some of the social scientific literature on religious cults and movements and on the carriers of other unconventional beliefs.[2] Bainbridge and Stark (1980), for example, have argued recently that the beliefs and claims of Scientologists are "impossible" to validate and therefore seemingly incredible. They thus raise for investigation "the question of how thousands of individuals could be seriously mistaken about their own" claims and beliefs (Bainbridge & Stark, 1980: 128). Though few other students of unconventional beliefs, religious or otherwise, are as bold about their observations as Bainbridge and Stark, most seem to subscribe to the assumption that unconventional beliefs are highly vulnerable to everyday experience and therefore inherently fragile. Given this presumed fragility, it is further assumed that believers are continuously confronted with the problem of salvaging their beliefs in the face of disconfirming evidence. This discrepancy between belief and experience is assumed to induce cognitive dissonance that must be resolved if belief is to persist. As such, much of the literature rests on the additional assumption that the viability of unconventional beliefs and their organizational carriers is contingent on the existence of elaborate plausibility structures and strategies (Bainbridge & Stark, 1980; Bittner, 1963; Festinger et al., 1956; Prus, 1976; Simmons, 1964; Wallis, 1977).

This paper challenges the aforementioned assumptions. It is our contention that they impede rather than facilitate understanding of new religious movements and other unconventional beliefs. We begin with a critical examination of the relation between unconventional beliefs and plausibility structures. We then assess the fragility assumption by examining the nature of belief systems in general and unconventional beliefs in particular. Here we argue that variation in some of the characteristics of belief systems accounts in part for their differential viability. Next, we evaluate the dissonance assumption. Finally, we contend that the credibility of unconventional beliefs is also attributable to what phenomenologists call the "natural attitude." This discussion turns the focus of much of the literature on its head by suggesting that perhaps it is disbelief rather than belief that is in need of attention. Throughout the paper we present illustrative data drawn from a number of secondary sources and from the senior author's research on the Nichiren Shoshu Buddhist movement in America.[3]

2   The term unconventional beliefs is used broadly to refer to beliefs that depart from and/or challenge culturally dominant beliefs Within the sociology of religion, for example, this would distinguish the beliefs of cults and sects from those of denominations Although we do not use the term "deviant beliefs," others have used it in lieu of unconventional beliefs (Lofland & Stark, 1965, Lofland, 1966, Simmons, 1964)

3   The data pertaining to Nichiren Shoshu were gathered by the senior author over the course of a year and a half of association with the movement as a participant observer For discussion of the research, see Snow (1976 1-39, 1979)

PLAUSIBILITY STRUCTURES AND UNCONVENTIONAL BELIEFS

Premised on the assumption of the fundamentally tenuous nature of unconventional beliefs, research about such beliefs has typically sought various organizational devices that account for their maintenance. For example, Bittner (1963: 934), in his work on radicalism, argued that since radical beliefs are contradicted by practical experience in the everyday world, "radical action groups must have some way to reduce the horizon of possible encounters and cause the remaining contingencies of potential embarrassment to be seen as either not pertaining, or, when 'correctly' seen, further boosting the doctrine." In examining the belief system of a small group of "mystics" located in southeastern United States, Simmons (1964: 250) similarly focused on "the means through which [their] divergent beliefs are maintained in the face of a disbelieving larger society." More recently, Wallis (1977: 226) has argued that belief in Scientology is maintained by a set of organizational strategies that function to protect believers from the conventional world, which, from Wallis' standpoint, constitutes "a major challenge to the legitimacy or validity of their definition of reality." Bainbridge and Stark (1980: 128), who similarly see Scientologists' beliefs and claims as "highly subject to empirical disconfirmation," also attribute the persistence of those beliefs to the existence of a number of elaborate organizational strategies.

Taken together, such work suggests that the credibility of unconventional beliefs depends upon the existence of various reality-maintaining structures and processes that serve to control, eliminate, or accommodate the omnipresent challenges that presumably emanate from the everyday commonsense world. At first glance, such a view seems quite reasonable. As students of the sociology of knowledge have long noted, acquiring a particular set of beliefs, whatever their substance, provides no assurance of their persistence (Berger, 1967; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Borhek & Curtis, 1975; Schutz, 1971). Not only are there a multitude of realities, but those compelling conviction in one setting may appear embarrassingly transparent and insubstantial in another. Consequently, sociologists have generally argued that maintenance of belief in a particular configuration of ideas is contingent on involvement in interaction networks that are simultaneously based on and devoted to sustaining those very ideas. Berger and Luckman (1966: 154-155) refer to such social infrastructures as "plausibility structures" and contend that "subjective reality . . . is always dependent upon" them.

This established focus on the role of social structures in validating and sustaining beliefs is typically found in the work on new religious movements and on other unconventional beliefs. Unfortunately, however, that focus, when overworked, can yield a truncated understanding of unconventional beliefs and their organizational carriers. Let us expand on this point.

In attempting to account for the persistence of unconventional beliefs in terms of plausibility structures, many students of such beliefs have tended to ignore the fact that all belief systems, whether deviant of conventional, secular or sacred, rest in part on plausibility structures. Wallis (1977: 225-41), for example, indicates that Scientologists have minimized the threat of challenge to their world view by, among other things, strategically compartmentalizing and segregating their beliefs and behavior, and by developing a specialized language that functions "to render Scientological conversation and internal documentation all but unintelligible to the uninitiated." We have no quarrel with Wallis'

observations. However, it is important to emphasize that there is nothing particularly unusual about these kinds of reality-maintaining devices. Not only are beliefs and behaviors routinely compartmentalized and segregated in the modern bureaucractic world, but all conventional religions, professions, and academic disciplines, including sociology, have their own specialized languages that function in a manner similar to Scientology's argot. That is, they help to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, they function to establish and maintain the boundaries of the system, and they support the validity of its claims and practices.

Such observations suggest there may be little qualitative difference between the plausibility structures advanced in support of unconventional beliefs and those associated with conventional or dominant realities. If so, then it follows that the differential viability of belief systems cannot be accounted for merely in terms of underlying plausibility structures, for it treats as unique to some groups that which is, in fact, commonplace. It also deflects attention from other possible sources of validation, thereby precluding a fuller understanding of the appeal and credibility of unconventional beliefs.

THE SELF-VALIDATING NATURE OF UNCONVENTIONAL BELIEFS

That most sociological examinations of unconventional beliefs have sought to account for the latter's viability primarily in terms of plausibility structures is due only in part to the sociologist's interest in social forces and processes. As noted earlier, much of the literature on unconventional beliefs seems premised on the assumption that such beliefs are highly vulnerable to everyday experience and therefore inherently fragile. There are, however, a number of studies of religious movements strongly suggesting that this fragility assumption is ill-founded. Zygmunt's (1970) research on Jehovah's Witnesses indicates that even though the movement experienced a succession of prophetic failures between 1878 and 1925, neither the belief system nor its following has dissolved. Zygmunt attributes the movement's resiliency partly to the self-fulfilling nature of its belief system. He notes that the prophecies were phrased in such a manner that they were open to chronological but not substantive disconfirmation. As such, group members believed that "unfulfilled prophecies . . . would surely come to pass in the proximate future" (Zygmunt, 1970: 944). Moreover, the belief system was flexible enough to allow believers to convert retrospectively the prophetic failures "into partial successes, sustaining chiliastic sentiment and providing a basis for renewed prophesying and evangelization" (Zygmunt, 1970: 944-45).

Lofland's (1966) research on the Unification Church during the early days of its operation in America suggests that its belief system was even less assailable than the Witness world view. Lofland (1966: 195) reports that the movement's belief system was "logically impossible to confront with disconfirming or negative evidence" because it "was designed so that all experience, all counter-arguments, would only produce confirmation." Though the movement's beliefs were supported by various plausibility structures, it was the belief system's "enormous explanatory scope and confirmational" capacity that Lofland (1966: 196) found most interesting and impressive.

Our findings regarding the Nichiren Shoshu belief system indicates that its formidable interpretive scheme is not highly vulnerable to contradiction and challenge. Not only does it protect believers from negative evidence, but it defines virtually all events and experiences

as confirmation of the system. Two major elements of the belief system perform this validation function and provide members with a handy rationale for all occurrances. On the one hand, anything perceived as negative, undesirable, impeding members' progress, or interfering with Nichiren Shoshu activities is attributed to three obstacles and four devils (*Sansho Shima*).[4] On the other hand, anything beneficial to the member or the movement is attributed to the power of chanting *Nam-Myoho-Renge-Kyo* to the *Gohonzon* (sacred scroll). Thus, whatever happens, whether good or bad, intended or unintended, is explained in terms of *Sansho Shima* or chanting. The system cannot fail, for the very occurrence of an event provides its confirmation.

The foregoing observations indicate that some unconventional belief systems are amazingly resilient and apparently invulnerable to disconfirmation. Such findings not only render questionable the fragility assumption, but they suggest that a thorough understanding of the beliefs themselves may reveal some features that enable them to persist in the face of contradictory evidence.

Borhek and Curtis (1975: 112-113), in their general theory of belief, identify two variable characteristics of belief systems that influence the degree to which a given belief system can withstand the "pressure of events," that is, challenges from "the real world." They refer to these characteristics as the "degree of system" and "empirical relevance." The first pertains to the logical interrelatedness of a belief system's substantive components, the second to its testability. Belief systems can vary considerably in terms of both characteristics, ranging from the tightly integrated (high system) to the loosely coupled (low system), and from the empirically pertinent (high empirical relevance) to those belief systems for which the empirical world is almost totally irrelevant (low empirical relevance). The cross-classification of these two dimensions yields four general and distinct types of belief systems. Figure 1 portrays these alternative perspectives, each of which is differentially vulnerable to challenge from within and disconfirmation from without.

Among these types of belief systems, the most vulnerable are those highly systematic and directly empirically relevant. Perhaps the best example is deductive scientific theory. The vulnerability to disconfirmation in this case, of course, is a matter of design. The scrupulous theorist actually hopes that logical fallability or predictive inaccuracy will force a modification if not outright abandonment of the proposed theory. Deductive scientific theory is intended to be falsifiable, even if the theorist privately indulges in the hope of proposing a theory resistant to falsification. Systematization exposes the entire corpus of a belief system to internal flaws in any of its parts, and empirical relevance subjects it to the pressure of events.

At the other extreme are belief systems lacking both empirical relevance and internal logical consistency. They are the least vulnerable to falsification. It is evident enough that belief systems which fail to make precise claims about the empirical world are unlikely to be disconfirmed by empirical events. It is less clear that the very ambiguity, generality,

4   *Sansho* refers to three obstacles. *Shima* refers to four devils *Sho* of *Sansho* literally means impediment or interference The three obstacles are (1) *Bon'no-sho* — hindrance due to earthy desires caused by the three life impurities of avarice, anger, and stupidity, (2) *Go-sho* — interference in the form of opposition from wife and children, and (3) *Ho-Sho* — obstacles caused by one's sovereign, parents, teachers, or other superiors *Ma* of *Shima* refers to life-denying force The four devils or life-denying forces are (1) *On-ma* — hardships deriving from physical illnesses or weaknesses, (2) *Bon'no-ma* — delusions caused by confusion that arises from earthly desires, (3) *Shi-ma* — death by accident or from illness, and (4) *Tenji-ma* — oppression by national authorities

TIGHTLY
INTEGRATED

(1) Vulnerable to
Logical Incon-
sistency and
to External
Evidence

(3) Vulnerable to
Internal Contra-
diction and
Schism

HIGH
EMPIRICAL
RELEVANCE

LOW
EMPIRICAL
RELEVANCE

(2) Vulnerable to
External
Evidence

(4) Low Vulnerability
to Internal Contra-
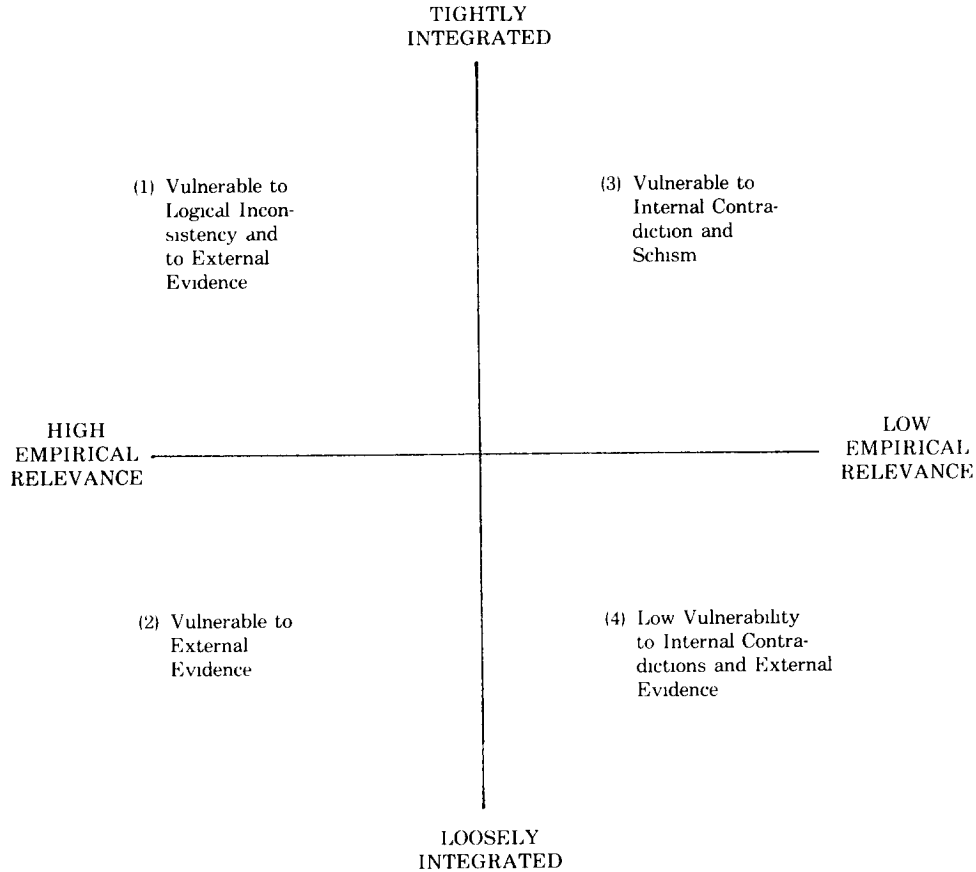dictions and External
Evidence

LOOSELY
INTEGRATED

FIGURE 1

CLASSIFICATION OF BELIEF SYSTEMS ACCORDING TO DEGREE OF
INTERRELATEDNESS, EXTENT OF EMPIRICAL RELEVANCE, AND
VULNERABILITY TO CHALLENGE

and and even inconsistency of poorly systematized belief systems help protect their integrity. However, such a belief system may "have so many possible interpretations, or so few *necessary* connections between beliefs that neither empirical events nor textbook logic can contradict the system itself" (Borhek & Curtis, 1975: 114). In other words, the very lack of internal interrelatedness and empirical relevance protects the overall integrity of the belief system. Individual elements of the overall system may be chipped away, one at a time, by the discovery of logical inconsistencies, but the remainder of the system may remain firmly in tact.

In between the extremes of cells 1 and 4 are belief systems loosely integrated but empirically relevant (cell 2) and those with little empirical relevance but considerable integration (cell 3). Superstitions and folk sciences and medicines, such as curanderismo and witchcraft are illustrative of the former, communism and perhaps Catholicism are

illustrative of the latter. Although it is an empirical question as to how the various new religious movements might be classified in terms of the foregoing typology, we think that most would probably fall into cells 3 and 4. If so, then most of them enjoy an immunity to disconfirmation similar to Jehovah's Witnesses discussed earlier. Such immunity is certainly the case with the Unification Church, at least in its formative years (Lofland, 1966), and with Nichiren Shoshu (Snow, 1976); and we suspect that it is also the case with most of the other contemporary religious movements.

In addition to the self-validating nature of some belief systems, Borhek and Curtis (1975: 126-133) suggest, all belief systems have built into them various validation logics or strategies that also provide immunity from the pressure of events. These validation logics often take the form of invoking a belief from one end of the empirical relevance continuum in order to protect a belief or claim at the other end called into question.[5] Two such validation logics, we think, play an important role in protecting and maintaining unconventional beliefs. The first of these validation logics involves the use of "an empirically non-relevant belief to protect an empirically relevant belief" (Borhek & Curtis, 1975: 127). In other words, an unfalsifiable claim is used to support a falsifiable claim. This protective tactic is commonly invoked when prophetic claims are called into question; the typical response to such challenges is to claim the prophecy will eventually materialize. To assert a prophecy will eventually occur is, of course, unfalsifiable in principle. The very indeterminate nature of the supportive claim thus immunizes the challenged claim from empirical disconfirmation. The persistence of Christianity and other millenial movements seems to rest in part on this interpretive strategy.

The same is also true with Scientology. Practitioners are promised attainment of an almost superhuman level of mental functioning known as "clear." Yet, as Bainbridge and Stark (1980) note, there is no evidence any Scientologists have attained such a state. However, Scientologists do not necessarily interpret this failure to achieve "clear" as disconfirmation of the movement's claims. Instead, the individual Scientologist is more likely to emphasize that he has not yet attained the "appropriate mental level" prerequisite to "clear." As bainbridge and Stark report, those mental levels are continually expanding while the goal of perfect mental functioning is receding. Nonetheless, the Scientologist, like the devoted Christian, the Jehovah's Witness, and other millennial enthusiasts, can maintain faith in unfulfilled claims by invoking the unfalsifiable belief that "ultimately all the promised benefits [will] be provided" (Bainbridge & Stark, 1980: 134).

This tactic is also employed by Nichiren Shoshu Buddhists. As noted earlier, *Sansho Shima* is regularly invoked to account for both personal or movement setbacks and for the failure of chanting to produce anticipated benefits. If, for example, a member has been chanting to attend a movement event, but becomes ill and is unable to attend the activity, the illness is not seen as evidence of the failure of chanting; instead, it is attributed to *Sansho Shima.* Belief in an unfalsifiable force thus protects belief in the power of chanting,

5   Such protective tactics are possible because no matter how much a specific belief system is skewed in the direction of either greater or lesser integration and greater or lesser empirical relevance, it is never totally one-sided All belief systems contain at least some beliefs from the subordinate sides of the two dichotomies (Borhek & Curtis, 1975. 126).

the results of which are claimed to be empirically discernible.[6]

A second logic for protecting beliefs from disconfirmation is the obverse of the one just discussed. Rather than using an unfalsifiable belief to support a falsifiable one, empirically relevant beliefs are used to validate empirically nonrelevant ones (Borhek & Curtis, 1975: 129). We think this tactic is also a salient characteristic of the belief systems of many new religious movements. At least, proponents of many of those belief systems seem to be at no loss to produce "empirical evidence" in support of their claims and prophecies. That the "evidence" assumes the form of selected examples rather than rigorously generated data is of no concern to the believer. Such examples provide all the empirical grounding required for belief.

The doomsday prophecies of countless millenarian movements dating from early Christianity to the Unification Church have relied upon this tactic for validating beliefs (Cohn, 1957; Festinger *et al.*, 1956; Lofland, 1966; Wilson, 1973; Worsley, 1968; and Zygmunt, 1970). Such may seem reasonable, however, since many societies contain ample imperfections easily defined as "evidence" of impending catastrophe. For example, both domestic and international economic, energy, and military problems, as well as natural catastrophes, provide rich repositories from which inferences of doom. A particularly vivid case in point is Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth* (1970). Not only does Lindsey adduce "evidence" confirming long-standing prophecies, but the "evidence" has been used by various strands of the Jesus movement to support their claims and efforts. Again the efficacy of such a tactic is enhanced by social discourse; but, as before, the logic of the belief system itself meets the conditional requirements for its existence and persistence. Plausibility structures operate to enhance what is logically self-perpetuating.

COGNITIVE DISSONANCE AND UNCONVENTIONAL BELIEFS

Since the publication of *When Prophecy Fails* (Festinger *et al.*, 1956), social scientists have often assumed that those who subscribe to unconventional beliefs consistently face the problem of reconciling discrepancies between belief and experience. As often as not, this is said to create cognitive dissonance. Understandably, social scientists have devoted considerable effort in identifying various mechanisms for resolving dissonance (Abelson, *et al.*, 1968; Dunford & Kunz, 1973; Festinger, 1957; Prus, 1976). However, as Bem (1970: 29, 34, *passim*) has argued, and as our earlier observations suggest, cognitive dissonance may be less of a problem for the believer than for the researcher. This is clearly illustrated in the recent work of Benassi, *et al.* (1980). In a series of three experiments on occult belief, they demonstrate the remarkably durable nature of such beliefs. They found that even

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6. It should be noted that belief in *Sansho Shima* does not do this alone but is supported by a number of subsidiary beliefs First, it is believed that though *Sansho Shima* is constantly lurking along the road to enlightenment, it is most likely to surface when the member has lengthened his stride, hastened his pace, and strengthed his determination As one member put it. "It seems that obstacles or devils become stronger the harder we practice Just like the airplane, the faster our life is moving, the greater the resistance will be " Lest this resistance be interpreted as reason for frustration and despair, there is the additional belief that the surfacing of *Sansho Shima* is a sign of devotion and progress As another member explained· "It should be the cause for great joy and renewed determination. After all, how else would we know that chanting is having a profound effect on our lives?" Thus, not only is *Sansho Shima* anticipated, but, ironically, it is even welcomed on occasion, for its very appearance is interpreted as confirmation of the power of chanting

in the face of strong disconfirming evidence their subjects persisted in attributing psychic powers to a magician. Furthermore, it was discovered that despite the availability of contradictory information and alternative explanatory hypotheses, belief in psychic power remained undisturbed. It is worth noting that some of the contradictory evidence was produced by the subjects themselves. Nonetheless, the persistence of belief was not owing to personal strategies for reducing dissonance. Rather, the subjects apparently never experienced dissonance because they "simply failed to absorb the fact that these beliefs were being challenged." In the words of Benassi, *et al.* (1980: 347), "the pattern, then, was of subjects blandly ignoring input rather than resisting it."

This pattern was also observed among Nichiren Shoshu converts. Before proselytizing in city streets, for example, members would chant collectively for the success of the recruiting expedition. More often than not, however, the recruiting forays into public places were failures; members typically returned empty handed (Snow, *et al*, 1980). The senior author assumed that such experiences constituted a disconfirmation of the power of chanting, and members would as a consequence experience dissonance. However, conversational interviews with movement members revealed that was seldom the case.

The implications of such findings are crucial for understanding the persistence of unconventional beliefs. Unlike belief in science, many belief systems do not require consistent and frequent confirmatory evidence. Beliefs may withstand the pressure of disconfirming events not because of the effectiveness of dissonance-reducing strategies, but because disconfirming evidence may simply go unacknowledged. Unlike social scientists such as Bainbridge and Stark, Scientologists for example may not keep their antennae up for signals of falsification. And if, in fact, the signals are transmitted, they are by no means necessarily received. Perhaps social scientists should be counseled not to project onto their subjects their own criteria for belief.

Moreover, if we regard confirmatory empirical evidence as reinforcers, the lessons of behaviorism suggest that beliefs based on inconsistent (variable ratio or interval) reinforcement may be the most persistent (have the longest extinction periods). As Skinner (1969) has noted, the persistence of belief in the efficacy of prayer and magic may owe much to such reinforcement schedules.

In summary, we do not deny that the mechanisms for reducing dissonance such as those identified by Prus (1976) and Wallis (1977) are inoperative in maintaining belief. Rather, we argue that belief is often maintained because disconfirming evidence, however compelling to the nonbeliever, goes unnoticed by the believer.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

We have challenged the assumption that unconventional beliefs are inherently fragile. While not denying that plausibility structures are important in validating beliefs, we have explained how characteristics of belief systems themselves contribute to their perpetuation. Furthermore, we have demonstrated how belief systems may feature validation logics that help insure their persistence. Finally, we suggest that evidence discrepant with belief does not necessarily create cognitive dissonance.

How is it, then, some social scientists have come to presume the inherent instability of unconventional beliefs? Part of the answer may lie in their socialization. The norms

of science require a highly developed sensitivity and receptivity to the "pressure of events."
As the "official" arbiter of scientific belief, empirical evidence is assigned the final respon-
sibility of justifying belief or mandating disbelief. As is well-known, however, a given empiri-
cal event may allow tremendous variability of interpretation. Predictive science is extra-
ordinary by its requirement that the interpretation of an event precede its actual occurrence.
Many nonscientific belief systems are not so constrained. To the contrary, the decisions
as to whether an event confirms or falsifies belief is often not made until after the event
has occurred. In many cases, this allows the believer great interpretive discretion. Further-
more, as taught by sociologists of knowledge, one's social position is a powerful determinant
of the meanings that are ascribed to events. Simply put, "insiders" to a religious group
may believe that the suffering of children is evidence of the visitation of God's wrath on
the sins of their parents, while "outsiders" may interpret the same event as compelling
evidence against the very existence of God.

With this basic proposition in mind, we are puzzled by Bainbridge and Stark's surprise
at the persistence of Scientologists' belief in the authenticity of clear. Yet, by their own
definition as "outsiders," Bainbridge and Stark should not expect their strategies for inter-
preting events to coincide with those who are "inside" Scientology. If an event is an event
for both "insiders" and "outsiders," it does not follow that evidence is evidence for all
involved, especially since the logics according to which events are translated into evidence
are variable and socially contingent. It is thus apparent that the logic of evidence shared
by Scientologists is not that shared by Bainbridge and Stark.

Perhaps another reason for social scientists' presuming the fragility of unconventional
beliefs is their tendency to be more concerned with accounting for belief rather than for
disbelief. The persistence of belief can, of course, be approached from at least two assump-
tions: (1) believing is natural; doubting requires an "unnatural" exertion of will in order
to overcome the inertia of taken-for-grantedness; (2) doubting is natural; believing requires
an "unnatural" exertion of will to overcome the inertia of skepticism. Given the amount
of research devoted to explaining how people maintain beliefs, it seems that most social
scientists subscribe to the second assumption. Nevertheless, there is sound theoretical
reasoning on which to assume that people are typically inclined toward belief rather than
disbelief. Schutz (1971), for instance, drew a sharp distinction between the "natural
attitude" and the "scientific attitude." The "scientific attitude" is one in which "nothing
is to be taken as what it appears without evidence" (Schwartz & Jacobs, 1979: 202). In
daily existence, however, it is doubt, not belief that is typically suspended. As Schwartz
and Jacobs (1979: 202) note in their interpretation of Schutz, "we assume that things are
in fact what they appear to be unless we have reasons to do otherwise."[7]

The scientist is called upon, then, to do something quite unnatural: to suspend belief
in the paramount reality of the life world. That is, "the scientist must leave aside all pre-
suppositions about what is *of course* real and 'true' to examine the subject matter indiffer-
ently and objectively" (Morris, 1977: 19). It is thus possible that social scientists have
projected the assumptions of the "scientific attitude" onto those whose unconventional

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7   That the suspension of doubt is perhaps a characteristic feature of daily existence has been noted by scholars
other than phenomenologists (Bloch, 1973; Burke, 1980, James, 1979, Popper, 1964, Russell, 1931) Popper (1964),
for example, commented on the peculiar cultural feature of science that institutionalizes skepticism For Popper,
this trait distinguishes science from other belief systems

beliefs they would explain. As such, they regard as curious the persistence of belief in the face of what may be disconfirming evidence only to them. If so, and if the "natural attitude" is more pervasive than the "scientific attitude," then perhaps social scientists should find less curious the persistence of unconventional beliefs and begin to examine instead the question of how does doubt emerge in spite of the "natural attitude" to believe.

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Cults and Communities: The Community Interfaces of Three Marginal Religious Movements*

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Religious "cults" have been the subject of many investigations by social scientists. There is, however, still a need for research which focuses on the dynamic relationship between cults and their community environments This paper focuses on three different cults (or marginal religious movements) and their community context, a midwestern metropolitan area Of particular interest here are (1) the similar problems of cults in relation to their community context, and (2) the ways that their particular goals influence their differing "community interfaces." This concept is developed and used to extend the social movement organization literature to understand better the dynamic aspects of the movement-environment relationship Some hypotheses are offered about the relationships between types of community interfaces and directions of organizational change

$\mathbf{T}$he growth of religious "cults" has been among the more dramatic religious phenomena of the last decade. Cults have been the subject of much investigation and commentary from various scholarly perspectives. Some analyses have focused on the growth of such cult movements in relation to the youth movements of the 1960s (Larkin & Foss, 1979), while others consider the broader cultural significance (Needleman & Baker, 1978), and analytic distinctions between different types of movements (Robbins, Anthony & Richardson, 1978). Notwithstanding such literature, there is a need for research which focuses on the relationships between cults and their social environments. It is through such interaction between