

SEARCHING FOR SPIRITS: ASSESSING THE CREATION AND MAINTENANCE OF
BELIEFS WITHIN A SPIRITUALIST NEW RELIGIOUS MOVEMENT

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

at

Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
April 2017

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To my wife

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Abstract

This study is an ethnographic account of belief creation and maintenance within a spiritualist new religious movement (specifically, the Spiritual Science Fellowship or SSF). The emphasis is placed on personal experiences over a one-year research period, historical research of spiritualist new religious movements, and review of contemporary conversion theories within sociology.

The purpose of this study is to examine social factors in the movement, which may account for the creation and maintenance of specific beliefs held by its members. I utilize personal experiences obtained through participant observation to elucidate these factors. I also compare and contrast other contemporary conversion theories including deprivation and brainwashing against my experiences with this particular spiritualist group.

List of Abbreviations Used

NRM – New Religious Movement

SSF – Spiritual Science Fellowship

Acknowledgements

This research was possible due to the continued support and expertise of my academic advisor, Dr. Christopher Helland. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Howard Ramos and Dr. Karen Foster for their time and effort in helping me refine this thesis research. I would like to thank Dr. Liesl Gambold, Dr. Lindsay DuBois, and Dr. Jean-Sebastian Guy for their continued support of my research efforts.

I would like to thank my parents for their unending support in my academic journey. I would also like to thank my wife's parents for their support and continual excitement about my academic advancements. Finally, I would like to thank my wife for her encouragement, insight, and patience without which this research would not have been imaginable.

Chapter 1: Introduction

New Religious Movements (NRMs) or cults, as mass media usually refers to them, have captured the attention of the public for many years. Sociologists took interest in the 1960's when several of these groups displayed violent behaviors, including sexual assault, suicide, and murder (Lewis & Peterson, 2005). However, it was not until the early 1990's when specific groups, such as the Branch Davidians and Heaven's Gate, were in the news for a standoff with police and a mass suicide, that new religious movements became a significant research interest for sociologists of religion (Lewis & Peterson, 2005). It was then deemed valuable for sociologists to determine why people would abandon mainstream religion and in some cases, their entire families, in order to adopt a set of unorthodox beliefs.

Many theories of conversion to non-mainstream religions were created with varying degrees of acceptance by sociologists. The most polarizing of these theories, brainwashing, divided researchers into two groups, the meso-micro specialists and the macro-meso specialists (Zablocki, 2001). The meso-micro specialists believed that these NRMs were using brainwashing techniques that rendered individuals helpless to leave the groups on their own accord. The macro-meso specialists argued that the NRMs were merely a new form of religious expression and the vast majority of the groups were harmless (Zablocki, 2001). This debate continues today, although the macro-meso specialists far overshadow the meso-micro specialists in the sociological realm.

Overall interest in both academia and the media of NRMs has waned since the 1990's. Therefore, no significant new theories within this literature have been

presented over the past 15 years. This leads to the concern that researchers are using theories from the 1960-1990's to assess NRMs within a more modern and changed world. Also, many of the accepted conversion theories in the study of NRMs have a substantial amount of criticism. The lack of updates and abundant criticisms to these contemporary theories makes the study of modern NRMs much more difficult.

There is also concern by some sociologists of religion regarding groups that have been the focus within NRM literature. The majority of research was conducted with either Scientology or violent types of NRMs such as Aum Shinrikyo or The People's Temple (Lewis & Peterson, 2005). This has left a gap in the literature on NRMs in which non-influential and non-violent NRMs would be found. This means that conversion theories, which were primarily determined based upon data from violent groups, are being used to make generalizations about non-violent groups. New research is needed to assess how the available conversion theories apply to these non-violent and non-influential groups. This becomes even more important when realizing that the incidence of violence in NRMs is much lower than the average violent crime levels in the United States (Dawson, 2006).

In order to address the aforementioned issues, I have conducted a year of research that focused specifically on assessing the older contemporary theories on belief formation and maintenance within a non-violent and non-influential NRM. I used participant observation to address the gap in the literature with these types of NRMs by becoming a member of the Spiritual Science Fellowship or SSF. My participant observation included taking part in the group's activities; thereby,

providing me with opportunity to better assess what these experiences might mean to members.

I have structured the thesis to provide relevant information on NRMs and Spiritualism, which will be necessary to understand and appreciate my experience and research conclusions. The literature review in chapter 2 serves to inform the reader about some contemporary theories used by sociologists of religion to explain how and why individuals adopt the beliefs of an NRM. This section also contains a brief history of sociological research regarding NRMs.

Chapter 3 focuses on Spiritualism in the context of new religious movements. A historical overview has been provided to give context to modern day spiritualism and specific beliefs held by members of the SSF are discussed. The goal of this chapter is to create a coherent timeline to help the reader understand the spiritual milieu in which the SSF currently exists.

Chapter 4 explains the methods used to obtain the data. It contains information on auto-ethnography, participant observation and interviews. This section will give the reader a more complete understanding of the research methods, which were used in order to accumulate the needed data.

Chapter 5 is an ethnographic representation of the data that was gathered. This section contains first person accounts of the most relevant aspects of the research period. The intent of this chapter is to allow the reader deeper, more meaningful insight into the personal experiences that occurred during my time with the SSF.

Chapter 6 contains the results of the ethnographic work reviewed in chapter 5. I present six factors, which are a framework for how beliefs are created and maintained in the SSF. These factors represent my theory on how a person may obtain new beliefs and how those beliefs are maintained over time in similar NRMs.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis with a comparison of the contemporary theories presented in chapter 2 with the results of the current research. This chapter will assess similarities and differences between the current research and other contemporary theories. Future research possibilities are also discussed here.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

NRM is a term that was coined by sociological researchers of religion in response to an increasingly pejorative meaning associated with the term “cult”(Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Some sociologists introduced the term NRM as use of the term “cult” became condemnatory when used in legal cases. These cases often involved the anti-cult movement, which was made up of psychologists and concerned parents (Dawson, 2006). These psychologists and parents were making accusations of brainwashing and kidnapping by small non-mainstream religious groups across the United States (Dawson, 2006). In the sociology of religion, NRM has the same meaning as cult, but it is perceived by lay people more neutrally; therefore, it continues to be used. Throughout this paper I will use NRM and cult interchangeably as much of the research from pre 1990 uses the term cult to describe many different aspects of these groups.

Research on NRMs in the 1960’s through the 1990’s was primarily made up of apologists’ (macro-meso) and the anti-cult movement’s (meso-micro) differing claims. Sociologist Eileen Barker describes the differences between the two groups by noting that sociologists attempt to create “unbiased and objective sociological description,” while the anti-cult movement attempts to “warn, expose, control and destroy” (Barker, 1995).

The sociological community has had much to say on why individuals might adopt the beliefs of NRMs. As previously mentioned, many of these theories were created in the 1960’s and have not yet been applied to NRMs in the 21st century. In

order to better understand how the current research compares with other contemporary research, I will discuss two different theories on cult classification.

Cult Classifications

Roy Wallis' work on NRMs describes three types or classifications: world affirming, world rejecting, and world accommodating (Wallis, 1984). Stark and Bainbridge also suggest three categories, which build off of but differ from those presented by Wallis. These categories include audience cults, client cults, and cult movements (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). These two classification theories are considered helpful, but also flawed, as NRMs do not always perfectly fit into the classifications as will be demonstrated below in the context of the SSF.

In 1984, Roy Wallis published his work "Three Types of New Religious Movements." His theory outlined a typology for cults that split them into three categories. The three categories included world rejecting, world accommodating, and world affirming (Wallis, 1984). Each of these will be discussed individually and then compared to Spiritualism.

Movements fitting into the world rejecting category support a general sense that mankind has lost its connection to God. The movement may see people outside of the group as pursuant of non-spiritual goals. They also believe that this perceived obsession with material items has created a world of hate, conflict, and greed. Those in world rejecting movements discard a path to materialism and focus on a rural way of living while orienting their entire lives to a God (Wallis, 1984). Peter Berger suggests the belief that society has strayed from God may stem from

Protestant streamlining of religion that reduced the sacred and supernatural from the world (Berger, 1967).

These types of movements also tend to claim knowledge of and anticipate the end of the world, as it is currently known. This belief in the end of the world comes in two forms. First, the world will be destroyed and those who believe will be saved by the God figure. Second, the movement itself will spread throughout the world getting rid of the negative attributes the members believe are plaguing society; thereby, bringing into existence a new type of world (Dawson, 1996).

Most often, members of these groups will leave their jobs, homes, and families to join the movement (Wallis, 1984). By leaving these aspects of life behind, there is a creation of a complete separation from the “ills” of society. The new member may also be required to give any money they have to the movement. This could include money from the sale of a house, child support, and welfare payments. Once in the group, the person will live, eat, and often work for the movement (Wallis, 1984).

Some of the better known world-rejecting groups include: The Solar Temple, Branch Davidians, Aum Shinrikyo, The People’s Temple, and Heaven’s Gate. Many of these groups have become infamous through mass media, for instances of sexual abuse, violence, and mass suicide (Dawson, 2006).

The world affirming movements are at the opposite end of the cult spectrum from the world rejecting movements. They focus less on collective worship and theology, and members spend most of their time focusing on the inherent untapped

power of the human mind. Groups in this category include: Transcendental Meditation, Silva Mind Control, *est*, and Soka Gakkai (Wallis, 1984).

World affirming groups claim to be able to teach anyone how to unlock hidden physical, mental, and spiritual powers currently unknown to them, if they are willing to learn. Unlike the world rejecting groups, joining a world-affirming group does not usually require abandoning a previous lifestyle and giving up belongings to support the cause. Most often, participants engage in the group by attending a weekend seminar during which they are required to follow certain rules. The rules may consist of following a strict schedule during the day and ceasing consumption of drugs and alcohol (Wallis, 1984).

Wallis outlines three themes that are at the core of the world affirming movements. First, individual achievement, which is gaining the supernatural abilities that will allow the individual to increase income, have better personal relationships, gain greater intelligence, and live an overall healthier and happier life. Second, coping with a sense of constraint. This theme promotes letting go of inhibitions gained from negative life experiences. Once these inhibitions are gone, the person is allowed, and able, to find their true self. Third, handling loneliness in the modern world. World affirming groups provide opportunities for individuals to make connections with other like-minded people without the social awkwardness that would accompany such a meeting outside of the structured group (Dawson, 1996).

A unique characteristic of the world affirming groups is that they are generally considered to be only quasi-religious. This is due to the limited focus on worshipping a God or any other type of spiritual entity. Wallis argues that these groups “straddle a vague boundary between religion and psychology, and which side they are held to fall upon will depend entirely on the nature of the definition of religion employed” (Dawson, 1996, p. 64).

World accommodating groups differ distinctly from both previously discussed movements, as the focus of the world accommodating groups is a disagreement with the manner in which mainstream religious institutions discuss connecting with God. World accommodating cults generally attempt to better the individual lives of the members, which in contrast to the other two groups is done through increasing the person’s individual experience with a God. Examples of this category include: the Neo-Pentecostal movement and the Charismatic Renewal Movement (Wallis, 1984).

Often, members of this type of cult were, or continue to be, faithful members of more mainstream churches. In a 1975 survey, Fichter found that 76% of members of the world-accommodating group, the American Catholic Pentecostals, attended mass more regularly after becoming a part of the world accommodating movement (Fichter, 1975). This type of movement is also not limited to those with a Christian background. Wallis notes that the Subud, which is a Muslim mystic movement, fits the world-accommodating category as well (Wallis, 1984).

It is more functional to use Wallis’ three typologies to declare what Spiritualism is not, as opposed to what Spiritualism is. Assessing spiritualism within

each of the three typologies highlights flaws in Wallis' theory and also attests to its non-static nature. While aspects of Spiritualism could coincide with concepts within the beliefs of the world accommodating or world affirming groups, it would not be consistent with the beliefs of the world-rejecting cult.

Specifically, Spiritualism would not fit into the world-rejecting category, as Spiritualism's concept of having little to no dogma and focus on personal betterment and achievement are counter to the basis of the world rejecter's beliefs.

Spiritualism also rarely employs the removal of members from society in order to live solely for and with the group, as is common in most world rejecting cults.

Some aspects of Spiritualism fail, and some succeed, to fit the typology as a world accommodating movement. Contrary to most world accommodating movements, generally, the beliefs in Spiritualism are not in conflict with other religions. However, similar to world accommodating cults, Spiritualism does attempt to increase the member's relationship with a God. The God within Spiritualism may not be the God of a mainstream religion, but might be an overall sense that there is something 'greater' out there; or as the SSF reverends often say "the God of your own understanding."

Spiritualism could also be considered a world affirming movement because of its focus on the betterment of the individual. This classification would be highly dependent on the specific beliefs promoted by the movement. If the main focus is betterment of the individual through communication with the dead then the Spiritualist group may fall into the world affirming type.

Overall, while Wallis' typology is helpful for categorizing many groups, it does not seem appropriate for classifying Spiritualist NRMs. The goal of Spiritualist NRMs is very loose, aside from the practice of communicating with the dead. This means that different Spiritual groups could potentially fit into any of Wallis' typologies depending on the other beliefs held by the groups. Therefore, Wallis' typologies are fine for studying individual Spiritualist NRMs, but his theory is lacking when making generalizations about Spiritualism.

One year after Wallis' work was published Stark and Bainbridge created three classifications for cults (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985). The categories presented here are not meant to replace those of Wallis as discussed above; rather, the categories give the ability to categorize based on a spectrum where the cults may fit into multiple categories often at the same time. These three categories allow different levels of cult activity to be assessed.

Audience cults are the most informal of the three types of cults as described by Stark and Bainbridge. In an audience cult, an individual can give lectures and disseminate information about a multitude of different types of quasi-religious topics without the need for a structured group. The person may give out the information at conferences, or even on a street corner. The "audience" refers to the individuals who are receiving and believing the information and goods provided by the individual lecturing. Examples of audience cults, given by Stark and Bainbridge, include: UFO enthusiasts, Spiritualists, Astrologers, food faddists and "medical quacks" (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

A client cult is a slightly more structured cult than an audience cult. In a client cult, the individual who is promoting the information is acting in a role that, according to Stark and Bainbridge, is similar to that of the relationship between a therapist and patient (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). The therapist/patient metaphor describes how the person representing the cult and the person encountering the cult interact, with the therapist being the person providing the information and the patient being the person who takes in the information. In this type of cult, the items being sold may range from physical and spiritual healing, communication with the dead, and astral projection (Dawson, 2006). Private psychics and spiritual goods storeowners may fall into this category.

A cult movement is a group that involves two aspects of belief not included in the previously described types of cults. First, they have regular meetings dedicated to their particular cause. Second, the cult has enough influence to make the members abandon other forms of worship and focus solely on the movement. Once this level of commitment has been achieved, attempts at creating social change and conversion of more members become the primary goal of the group (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Looking at Stark and Bainbridge's three typologies, where does Spiritualism fit in? As noted in the beginning of this section, NRMs may fit any of these categories and can reside in all three at the same time pending certain conditions. This is the case with Spiritualism.

The aspect of Spiritualism that falls within the context of an audience cult is the television shows depicting mediums. On national television shows, self-

proclaimed mediums, such as John Edward and Sylvia Browne, communicate with the dead on behalf of audience members. In this context, the audience for the cult is made up of the individuals watching the show live and those watching at home.

Here there is simply a dissemination of information to anyone who would watch or listen. This level of Spiritualism may be considered “New Age” Spiritualism, which tends to be used as a catch all for general conversation about Spiritualism. Here the audience has no set of rules or expectations to follow and can make their own way through the “spiritual marketplace” (Sutcliffe, 2013). The television shows could also act as a means to direct people in the audience into the next level, client cult.

Once the person watching at home decides to see a medium for themselves and pay money for their services, they have entered into the realm of a client cult. Here the medium acts in the therapist role, as described above, giving the client information about their life by communicating with the dead on their behalf. This information is then taken by the client who will do with it as they see fit. If the client continues to visit mediums every so often for their advice, then we never move beyond the client cult status.

Participation in the audience and client cults is a significant part of belief in the Spiritual NRM process. However, for a Spiritual NRM to be considered more than a casual group of spiritual enthusiasts, there must be a transition to a cult movement. Here the mediums would assume leadership roles, leading services or events with a consistent group of members. These members would then reject former religious ideals and devote themselves fully to the NRM.

A formalized Spiritual cult movement could in fact use tactics usually reserved for audience and client cults to support membership in the main movement. Conducting 'psychic fairs' which are open to the public could make money and disseminate information for the movement (Jorgensen and Jorgensen, 1982). The psychic fair would then function as something typically seen in an audience cult. The movement could also act as a client cult by having their mediums give private sessions to clients outside of the group. Using these tactics would continually bring new members to the cult movement; thereby, resulting in that type of Spiritualist group meeting the criteria of all of Stark and Bainbridge's typological categories.

Once we understand the classifications of NRMs, we can begin to look at how an individual joins one of these groups. Here we find the heart of this research in understanding how these new beliefs are created and then maintained through time. The next section contains information on conversion theories, most of which were created in the 1960s. These theories will be used to compare and contrast with the current findings presented in this thesis.

Conversion Theories

The most controversial theory of belief creation and maintenance within NRMs is that of brainwashing. Dick Anthony provides a thorough definition of brainwashing where he states that it is "the use of specialized procedures to induce an altered, hyper-suggestible, state of consciousness combined with intensive indoctrination" (Anthony, 2001, p. 219).

As mentioned above, whether or not brainwashing is being used in some NRMs has split the sociological field into two camps, the macro-meso and the meso-micro (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Macro-meso specialists are those who are mainly concerned with the “repressive over-regulation of cults by government and society” (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001, P. x). Meso-micro specialists are more concerned with the “problem of cultic exploitation of individual devotees” (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001, P.x).

In other words, the macro-meso specialists reject the claim that brainwashing occurs within NRMs and suggest that much of the information supporting brainwashing theory has been taken from disgruntled former members of the groups (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Meso-micro specialists oppose this view, saying that certain groups do use coercive techniques that disallow individuals from making rational decisions, thus resulting in their ongoing involvement with the group (Richardson, 1994).

Although the meso-micro group has fewer proponents than the macro-meso, they have raised serious questions about the work that some macro-meso specialists have done to support the belief that brainwashing does not exist. In 1998, Kent and Krebs published an article focusing on certain macro-meso specialists’ willingness to do research paid for by NRMs. This included producing publications that served as propaganda for groups, such as The Family who were attempting to get rid of the negative image they received after it was found they engaged in questionable sexual practices (Kent and Krebs, 1998). Kent and Krebs also brought to light issues of macro-meso specialists and NRMs working together

to block critical academic work from being released. In this specific case, The Family along with at least two sociologists made complaints to the publisher of a book critical of The Families' sexual practices. The book ended up being dropped by the publisher and was not released (Kent and Krebs, 1998).

This debate within the sociological community is ongoing. Neither side appears to have moved from their positions since the 1990's. Both the reality of brainwashing and the ethical behavior of sociologists are at question here. Although the question of brainwashing is not paramount to this specific research, the ethical implications of this debate are concerning. If what Kent and Krebs claim is true, it could bring all research done by the macro-meso sociologists into question.

In 1964, Charles Glock proposed an alternative to the micro-meso brainwashing theory. It addressed questions about both the formation of religious groups and why a person would be more apt to join a non-mainstream religion. Glock called his theory the Relative-Deprivation theory, based on the notion that individuals are more apt to join religious groups if they perceive themselves to be deprived in one of five separate categories: Economic, Social, Organismic, Ethical, and Psychic (Glock, 1964). The theory does not require an individual to have actual deprivation in any category, but merely a perception of deprivation. For example, a very wealthy person may still see themselves as economically deprived in comparison to their other wealthier friends and relatives (Dawson, 1996).

Another interesting aspect of the theory is that a person may have a perceived level of deprivation, but choose to deal with it in a secular manner. Glock says that if the person is able to accurately identify and deal with the deprivation,

they will likely use secular means to confront it. However, if the person inaccurately identifies the deprivation, they may turn to religious methods for relief of the distress regarding their perceived deprivation (Glock, 1964). Glock argues that using a religious solution to a problem of deprivation will not eliminate the cause of the deprivation, but will minimize the feelings of deprivation (Dawson, 1996). Although Glock's deprivation theory has been overridden by more current, comprehensive, and specialized theories; it is still heralded as one of the founding theories, which provided momentum of a scientific explanation for conversion to an NRM.

Gurney and Tierney (1982) criticized Relative-Deprivation research for failing to empirically link a person's psychological state and place within society to their participation in an NRM (Gurney & Tierney, 1982). Wilson argues that deprivation research fails to acknowledge the possibility for positive motivation (Wilson, 1990). Overall, criticism of Glock's Relative-Deprivation Theory focuses on the theory's inability to empirically identify causal links, as well as its reliance on deprivation without taking into consideration other motivating factors.

In 1965, Lofland and Stark went a step beyond the deprivation theory with their seven-step process of conversion. Where deprivation theory only explains why a person may be more likely to join a religious group, Lofland and Stark's conversion theory explains the process from the earliest stages of conversion through to the point where the member becomes a "deployable agent" for the religious group they have joined (Lofland & Stark, 1965).

Lofland and Stark gained their information through field research with an NRM called the Unification Church, more widely known as the “Moonies.” The researchers interviewed NRM members and observed the processes used by the NRM to acquire new converts. Two types of convert were identified. The first is the verbal convert, who is an early stage convert, a person who is sincere in their belief and accepted into the group but has no active role in the group yet. The second type of convert is the total convert who shows dedication to the group through verbal confirmations and physical acts (Lofland & Stark, 1965). These two types of converts represent people at the middle and at the end, respectively, of Lofland and Stark’s seven-step process. Lofland and Stark briefly describe the stages of the conversion model:

The model stipulates that for persons to convert to a cult they must (1) experience enduring, acutely felt tensions in their lives, (2) within a religious problem solving perspective (as opposed to a psychiatric or political problem-solving perspective), (3) which leads them to think of themselves as a religious seeker. With these three ‘predisposing conditions’ in place, the individuals must then (4) encounter the cult to which they convert at a turning point in their lives, (5) form an affective bond with one or more members of the cult, (6) reduce or eliminate extra-cult attachments, and (7) be exposed to intensive interaction with other converts (Dawson, 2006, p. 75).

Once the process is completed, Lofland and Stark claim that the convert can become a “deployable agent,” who can then enact on other potential converts the processes

they themselves underwent for conversion. Similar to Glock's relative-deprivation theory, Lofland and Stark's model has been scrutinized due to its tendency to be non-generalizable and to vary greatly pending the communal or non-communal status of the group (Snow & Phillips, 1980).

Many researchers have attempted to use the model with other NRMs, and have reported varying levels of success in doing so. Some researchers found only two of the seven stages to be relevant (Greil & Rudy, 1984, Snow & Phillips, 1980), while others have had success (Singer, 1988, Knox et al, 1991) in completely matching their research with that of Lofland & Stark (Dawson, 2006). Dawson suggests that researchers take care not to overgeneralize the model, but use it as a "statement of some crucial conditions of conversion (which may be of varying significance for different religions)" (Dawson, 2006, p. 76).

Rodney Stark didn't stop his research with the 7 step model. With the help of William Bainbridge and Roger Finke, Stark also applied Rational Choice Theory to NRMs in the mid 1980's. This theory was formulated based upon four premises. First, meaningful discussion of religion must acknowledge the supernatural. This premise attempts to make sure that when the theory is used, it is always in reference to a new religious movement where the supernatural is an important factor. This would exclude certain groups who are focused mainly on non-supernatural ideas like communism. Second, people seek rewards and try to avoid costs. Here, Stark and Bainbridge make the claim that individuals making decisions in a religious forum act no more irrationally than those making decisions in a secular environment. Third, the rewards that people seek are often scarce. These

scarce rewards might include eternal life or some kind of reward that will come only after death. Fourth, in the absence of these rewards, people will often create and exchange compensators, which are promises of a reward at some later time and place. These may include answers to the meaning of life or a happier and more meaningful life (Stark & Bainbridge, 1985).

Like the other theories on conversion to NRMs, rational choice theory also has its detractors. Dawson and Thiessen contend that rational choice theory's biggest flaw is that most of it is untested (Dawson & Thiessen, 2014 p. 89). Dawson bases this claim not as something that has yet to be done but something that is unlikely to be able to be done due to the subjective nature of beliefs between different religious groups.

Others like Simmons and Kent have argued that Stark and Bainbridge did not give enough attention to punishment in their analysis. Using examples from a group called "The Children of God," Simmons and Kent determined that compensators and punishments work together in order to exert social control over members. In regards to Rational Choice Theory, they state that it "underemphasizes or ignores the crucial control functions played by punishment systems" (Simmons & Kent, 2015, p.42).

In conclusion to the literature review, most literature on the subject of conversion in NRMs is contested. A combination of dated theories, bias among researchers and the inability to properly validate the data makes it difficult to know what, if any, relevance they have on NRMs today. In the next chapter I will discuss

the methods I used to gather the data, which will be compared and contrasted against the above conversion theories.

Chapter 3: Methods

This study has been undertaken using an auto-ethnographic style to obtain a rich first-person narrative. I utilized personal experience and employed qualitative methods, including participant observation with the SSF, interviews with lead members of the group, and analysis of historical data from literature and media on Spiritualism. These methods were chosen to gain insights into the social relationships, historical events, and psychic phenomena that create an environment where adoption of new beliefs and conversion to the group is promoted.

I attended SSF services beginning in October of 2015 in a non-research role to satisfy my own curiosity and to assess if the group would be willing to engage in the proposed research. I became familiar with all three reverends, one of the student ministers, and several of the members. After developing these relationships I decided that the SSF would make a good research focus. The leaders of the SSF consented to my proposed research with the group, and I began officially in May 2016.

Auto-ethnography is a combination of autobiography and ethnography that encompasses both the research process and the research outcome (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 2010), in this case, my master's thesis. This method was chosen as it has been used by other contemporary researchers to gain similar data in non-religious settings. I also decided to use this method in order to more fully understand, on a personal level, what happens in the mind of a SSF member.

Ellis, Adams and Bochner describe auto-ethnography in the following way:

“When researchers do auto-ethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity” (Ellis et al., 2010, section 2 para. 4).

This description is consistent with my research. As discussed previously, I engaged with the SSF on a regular basis attempting to learn about the beliefs of the group and successfully became integrated in their culture. When researchers write auto-ethnographies, they seek to produce aesthetic and evocative thick descriptions of personal and interpersonal experience (Ellis et al., 2010). This was my goal through use of participant observation. I was able to make meaningful comments and descriptions of my own personal experiences related to the beliefs of the SSF and its members.

Using an auto-ethnographic style of research and writing allowed me to better grasp the nuances of the SSF. This was imperative in obtaining data that would allow me as the researcher and the participant to experience similar feelings and emotions to those of any new member in the SSF. I was able to better situate the SSF in the milieu of NRMs based on contemporary conversion theories as discussed in the literature review section. It also allowed me to understand from a personal perspective, what phenomena occur to maintain a member’s psychic beliefs overtime by experiencing it for myself.

In the literature, it is common to see use of comprehensive interviews and surveys, but it is not often that the researcher actually spends the time to become a part of the group. This may be due to the violent nature of some of the groups. I feel

that in the case of studying the beliefs of the SSF, the quality of my research increased with first hand experience of the group's activities.

A significant part of the auto-ethnographic research style is the use of participant observation. Participant observation has often been used in the study of NRMs. It has provided researchers with some of the most significant findings in the field (Bromley, 2007). I used participant observation as a means to become immersed in the group with the hope of experiencing the phenomena (communication with the spirit world) claimed to be occurring in the group. Participant observation is often used in the study of NRMs but researchers often don't utilize it in conjunction with auto-ethnography. In other words, they participate with the group, but do not become fully immersed.

Participant observation was conducted in three settings. First, I attended the SSF weekly services at the Universalist Unitarian Church in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I attended these services as regularly as possible to develop rapport with members of the group. This portion of the research allowed me to experience aspects of the service I otherwise would have only heard about from participants during qualitative interviews.

Second, I participated by attending classes that were offered by the SSF. In my preliminary attendance at services, I found that these classes occur one or two times per month. Classes ranged in content, including topics such as crystal healing, psychic development training, and "Quantum Touch" workshops. These classes required either membership in the SSF or cost between fifteen to fifty dollars to attend.

Third, I attended and volunteered at the SSF's yearly psychic fair in the summer of 2016. The psychic fair was organized by the SSF as a fundraising event for the group. This provided me with an opportunity to interact with the general psychic community in the Halifax area.

Finally, on my own time I engaged in the skills I learned from the group. This allowed me to attempt to see and feel for myself what kind of things might be facilitating belief in the psychic phenomena. This type of participant observation is similar to that done by Loic Wacquant, who became a boxer in 1989 in order to understand the sociological subtleties of that position in the Chicago ghetto (Wacquant, 2006). This style of personal experience and reflection is directly linked to the auto-ethnographic nature of the research.

In order to achieve an even richer understanding of the SSF I also spent time individually with two of the group's reverends. Formal interviews have been a significant part of NRM research in the past and are responsible for many breakthroughs. I conducted two one on one interviews with reverends of the SSF, which lasted one hour in length each. Interviews were audio recorded with a handheld digital recording device. Handwritten notes were also taken during this time. The questions asked in the interviews focused on the participant's religious history, how they came to join the SSF, their current religious/spiritual identification, and their specific beliefs about psychic ability.

Interviews and field notes were transcribed and coded for themes. Names and identifying information have been changed or slightly altered in order to protect anyone who may not have explicitly given permission to be identified. The

identification of the individuals involved in the group will have no bearing on the results of the research. Themes from notes and interviews included: beliefs, psychic abilities, unexplained experiences, and family and friend influences. All data has been compared with the two parts of the research question. First, how psychic beliefs developed in SSF members, and second, how those beliefs have been maintained over time. Classic conversion theories from anti-cult supporters and sociologists were also taken into consideration.

Finally, I conducted historical research on Spiritualism from its inception in the mid 1800's through to its modern-day form. I did this by reviewing primary and secondary historical accounts of Spiritualism. This review was completed in order to give the reader a better understanding of the historical timeline and events that changed spiritualism from its original form into what we see today.

In conclusion to the methods section, I would like to note that the research style I have chosen to collect this data was done so in the hope that it would bring to light the personal experience of being a spiritualist. I have intentionally avoided a quantitative focus with this research in order to maintain the personal experience so often involved in the adoption of new religious beliefs. I do not consider the lack of quantitative methods a weakness of the research but an opportunity to shine a light on the often-neglected emotional and behavioral aspects of religious beliefs.

Chapter 4: A Brief History of Spiritualism

Prior to discussing Spiritualism in the context of NRMs, the general concept of Spiritualism must first be defined. This task proves to be difficult as many Spiritualist groups have differing ideas and understandings of what it is to be a part of a Spiritualist movement. In fact, Flanagan and Jupp describe Spiritualism as “subjective, experiential, non-rational, unverifiable and serendipitous” (Flanagan and Jupp, 2007, p.2). With this broad definition in mind, it is necessary to narrow our definition based upon the group I encountered in Halifax. Nigel Scotland provides a working definition by summarizing the shared concept of Spiritualism as communication with the “spirit realm through gifted or psychic individuals” (Partridge, 2004, p.319).

Communication with the dead, or “channeling spirits” as it is commonly referred to, is the key concept when discussing Spiritualism. This should not be confused with the common concept of prayer or feeling connected with a religious movement. This communication with the dead occurs when a psychic or medium claims to make contact with the spirit world and relays information to a living person.

The SSF fits within Scotland’s definition of Spiritualism. Members are able to communicate with the spirit realm through the reverends that claim to bring messages directly from spirits to the member. Members are also able to experience communication while in a state of meditation during the service. Although beliefs in the SSF are not limited to communication with the spirit realm, I would consider it the defining aspect of the group.

In order to properly grasp Spiritualism in its current state, I will attempt to describe a historical account of when the phenomenon of Spiritualism began and how it has changed throughout time. This will be completed through an analysis of literature from the late 1800's and early 1900's to make inferences about current Spiritualism and psychic phenomenon. I will include information about magicians and mentalists of the time who were performing similar feats as Spiritualists, but generally did not incorporate a spiritual component to their acts. My analysis will also include research participants' personal accounts of the history of the SSF and accounts of the progression of Spiritualism from modern magicians who practice the physical manifestations that were popular in the early years of the Spiritualist movement. By employing this research I will create a coherent timeline to help elucidate how Spiritualism has come to its current form.

Spiritualism (within the context of this research) originated in 1848 in upper New York State, where two sisters (known as the Fox sisters) claimed to be in communication with several spirits who lived in their home (Gallagher, 2004). Word of this phenomenon spread throughout the sisters' home state of New York, and soon thereafter through all of the United States and Canada. Claims of the Fox sisters' work helped give rise to a new category of supernatural beliefs called Spiritualism.

As Spiritualism grew it developed into séances that were held in dark backrooms (Burger, 1986). These séances included experiences that were seemingly caused by the spirits of dead individuals, such as floating objects, instruments playing by themselves, and ectoplasm exuding from the nose mouth

and ears of the psychic or medium leading the event (Spencer, 2001). All of these phenomena were claimed to be the result of communication with the spirit world. Authors, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, detail these phenomena in their publications giving us first-person accounts on the matter. Some books on Spiritualism in the early twentieth century went so far as to give step-by-step instructions to those wanting to scientifically investigate claims of psychic phenomena (Crawford, 1915). This type of Spiritualist practice carried on until the 1920's.

By the 1920's, several individuals began to debunk psychics/mediums and their supposed abilities to communicate with the dead. The most notable of these individuals was the magician Harry Houdini (Spencer, 2001). Houdini uncovered the techniques that these psychics were using and used his notoriety as a magician to make it known to the general public that these people were, in his opinion, frauds. The notion of debunking mediums became so popular during the 1920's; there are many documented cases of magicians and mediums having contests to see who could perform the more impressive conjurations (Dyson, 2012). These debunking challenges were lead by magicians or 'mentalists,' such as Ted Anneman and Joseph Dunninger (Rauscher, 2002).

After the 1920's, it became less popular for people to believe in seeing the physical manifestations of the spirit world. Instead, psychics began to focus more on the intangible aspect of their work (Burger, 1986). This shift in focus ushered in New Age Channeling or what is now known as modern Spiritualism (Spencer, 2001). Spencer noted two main differences between the old and new forms of Spiritualism. First, new Spiritualism does not include any of the physical manifestations of the

spirit world (such as, the spontaneous playing of musical instruments) that occurred during the late 1800's and early 1900's. In new Spiritualism, the medium relays messages from the spirits, but the spirit in no way manifests itself visually. Second, instead of contacting long dead relatives of those in attendance at the sessions, mediums of the new form of Spiritualism tend to contact masters, angels, aliens, and historical personalities (Spencer, 2001). This focus on the psychic or medium contacting the spirit world and relaying a verbal message to a person is the main focus of modern Spiritualism.

Individuals in Spiritualist NRMs believe in modern Spiritualism; however, given the variability between these groups in their focus on the different phenomena related to psychic abilities, it is difficult to find an all-encompassing definition for Spiritualist NRMs. For the purposes of this research, I have chosen a definition of Spiritualist NRMs put forth by Nigel Scotland:

A variety of differing networks and groups, some of which hold some specifically Christian beliefs and others of which are almost totally devoid of any religious dogma. They all, however, share one central concept – communication with the spirit realm through gifted or psychic individuals. (Scotland in Partridge, 2006, p.319)

This definition best describes the focus on the specific belief of communication with the dead, which is a main aspect of beliefs within the NRM researched for this project, the SSF. Now that Spiritualism has been defined, I will discuss specifics about the SSF. This will include general information to give a

better understanding of what the SSF looks like on a week-to-week basis. It will also contain information on the group's stated and unstated beliefs.

The Spiritual Science Fellowship is located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Services are held at a Universalist Unitarian church, which is rented by the group weekly. The group consists of 15-20 core members and a number of non-core participants whose participation varies pending the week. Three reverends are associated with the group, they conduct the Sunday services. Occasionally, all three reverends will attend, but more often there is a rotation in place where one or two reverends will be at any particular service. There is one student minister who takes care of the setup for the services and performs a pre-service healing for anyone who arrives to service early.

According to one of the reverends, the SSF has a history going back to at least the 1940s-50s. At that time the group was known as the "Spook Troop" which met in private places. The meetings were private because according to the reverend, certain aspects of what the group did were illegal at the time. The "Spook Troop" eventually gained more members and over time became the SSF.

For the purposes of this research I will define two types of beliefs within the SSF. First, are the stated beliefs that are apart of the literature that can be found in SSF songbooks and on the SSF's website. The second, which will be discussed below, are unstated beliefs that many of the members hold but are not specifically stated as beliefs of the group.

The following is a list of the stated beliefs of the SSF. These can be found in SSF literature and on their website. Every service I attended started with a song and

the statement of these ten principles. I present this list as a means of identifying and separating stated beliefs from unstated beliefs. The differences in these types of beliefs will become more important when discussing conversion and belief formation.

The Spiritual Science Fellowship has no dogmas or creeds and welcomes persons from all traditions. It is based upon higher truths shared in many of the world's great religious traditions. Our Foundations rest upon insights from the Modern Spiritualist Movement and Classical Yoga, as well as other ancient and modern traditions for the development of human potential, including Metaphysics and New Age Thought. 1) We believe in Infinite, Creative, Universal Intelligence, which we know as God, the Highest Form of Love, Power and Wisdom. 2) We believe that the phenomena of Nature, both physical and spiritual, are expressions of this Infinite Intelligence. 3) We affirm that a correct understanding of such expression, and living in accordance therewith, constitute true spirituality. 4) We affirm that the existence and personal identity of the individual continue after the change called death. 5) We affirm that communication with the so-called dead—in a universal communion of saints and spirits—is a fact. It is believed in most of the world's higher religions but experientially shared through mediumship and other psychic and spirit phenomena. 6) We affirm that the practices of clairvoyance, clairaudience, clairsentience, psychometry, aura-sensing, spiritual and psychic healing, prophecy, divination, higher forms of intuition, and communication with the Spiritual World, are both

natural human potentials and gifts of the Spirit. 7) We believe the morality contained in the Golden Rule, "Whatsoever ye would that others should do unto you, do ye also unto them." We also believe that forgiveness of others is a Divine Act, opening the door to healing, love and inner peace. 8) We affirm the moral responsibility of the individual, and that we make our own happiness or unhappiness as we obey or disobey Nature's physical and spiritual laws. 9) We acknowledge that God has inspired Masters, Teachers, Prophets and Sages to enlighten and raise the consciousness of peoples of all races and faiths throughout the ages. 10) We affirm that the doorway to reformation is never closed against any human soul here or hereafter. Divine grace is freely available to all regardless of race, religion, or ideology. The Divine Plan includes transformation of consciousness into higher modes of expression on the planet earth, and in the worlds to come. (Spiritual Science Fellowship, 2015)

Over time in my attendance at services, I began to understand that these are the core beliefs of the SSF. I want to be clear in that they are beliefs that are specific to the SSF and not Spiritualism in general. Different groups not related to the SSF may have slightly different core stated beliefs. It was also mentioned to me by one of the reverends "other churches under the IIIHS banner no longer state the beliefs out loud." The reverend said this comment with a sense of importance; and I think he felt that the SSF was still consistent to the true manner in which their form of spiritualism should be conducted.

There is also a need to also discuss the unstated beliefs, which I became aware of while attending SSF services and interacting with the members. These beliefs are not necessarily covered in the group's stated beliefs and are also not necessarily agreed upon by all members. I learned about these beliefs from individual conversations with members, interactions with non-members at a Psychic fair, in-service lectures, and during my own personal research on increasing my psychic abilities. These unstated beliefs are paramount to both the creation and maintenance of beliefs, which will be addressed in the discussion chapter of this text.

During my year of research, I came across several different beliefs that may or may not have any relevance to Spiritualism but are non-the less strongly held among some members. I will not attempt to list all of the beliefs here, but will instead highlight a few of the instances when a member brought these unstated beliefs to my attention. All of the following events are paraphrased from memory and notes written immediately after I left the service.

After a service, during the social hour a woman approached me with a very grave look on her face. I smiled and said hello to her and she replied as follows:

Woman: Are you aware of full disclosure?

Jon: Uhm, I guess it depends on what the disclosure is referring to.

Woman: Full disclosure is what we are trying to get the government to give us.

Jon: Ok, so what are you trying to get the government to disclose?

Woman: Well, information on UFOs. There is a doctor, I do not remember his name, but he has done a lot of research and he made a movie now all about disclosure.

Jon: Wow, that seems pretty interesting. Do they have some kind of evidence of aliens being here or what are they expecting to find out?

Woman: It's free energy. It's all free energy. The government doesn't want to stop selling oil so they are hiding the free energy sources. Just go watch the movie, it explains everything.

The conversation continued on like this for a few moments and then I excused myself as I felt the conversation was going around in circles. This was the first time that someone had brought the topic of extra-terrestrials up to me. There was one other members beside this woman who also enjoyed discussing UFOs (unidentified flying objects); an older gentleman who regularly wore a brown hat upon which he had written "UFOs" in permanent marker.

During the psychic fair, I spoke at length with a man and woman at various times throughout the day. I was volunteering at the front desk taking admission costs from the attendees. The man and woman discussed many different things including the accuracy of the psychics who were at the fair; the one topic that caught my attention was something they described as past life regression. At the time, I was not particularly familiar with the concept, aside from that it had something to do with understanding who you were in a past life. The conversation was as follows:

Joe: So, I am quite certain that I lived in England sometime in the last 200 years. When I was doing the regression I could remember the street I lived on and

even the color of the house that I lived in! Yeah, so the woman that was helping me with this said I was really quite accurate in recalling all these things.

Debbie: Oh that's so interesting. You know I sometimes have these very odd dreams where I do not know quite where I am but I seem to know a lot of people but I do not know them from this life.

Joe: Oh that's definitely memories from a past life. I get those types of dreams all the time.

Again these alternative interests and beliefs are not essential to the spiritualist experience but are generally accepted by the group. Participants are always congratulated and supported in seeking these supplementary beliefs, even when other members do not share the same belief.

In conclusion to this discussion on history and beliefs, Spiritualism's propensity for change and variability confines this research to the SSF. Given the non-static nature of Spiritualism, it would be unwise for myself or anyone else to make wide sweeping judgments about it based on the current research. In order to apply this research to other Spiritualist NRMs or NRMs in general, much more data would need to be collected and compared. Even with increased data it is unlikely that any generalizable theories can be formed.

Chapter 5: Ethnography

In October 2015, I found information on a group of Spiritualists called the SSF located in Halifax, Nova Scotia. This group meets weekly, using the Universalist Unitarian church as its place of meeting. I had been looking for potential research topics for my master's thesis, so I connected with the SSF to see if they might be willing to participate and also fit the criteria for my research.

This form of research selection was taken from Loic Wacquant's ethnographic work. In his research, he began attending a gym in the ghetto of Chicago. He eventually turned his experience into his doctoral thesis and topic of a book he would write several years later (Wacquant, 2006). So, it should be noted that my research did not officially start with the SSF until April 2016. However, the SSF events and services are open to the public, which allowed me to use information I gathered before my official research began in order to better orient the current research.

I attended my first meeting in October 2015. Services are always held on Sunday nights from 7 pm to around 9 pm. On the evening of my first attendance, I arrived at the church around 6:45pm and was immediately greeted by a woman wearing all white clothes. I could see several other people sitting on a bench outside of the worship area. She greeted me and asked my name. I told her my name; she introduced herself, and then gave me a brief synopsis of the "welcome table." This welcome table included a great deal of literature specific to the SSF, books on Spiritualist and psychic beliefs, and information on joining the group. The woman

then introduced me to one of the three reverends, of whom I would eventually meet all three of them.

Rev. Carmen who was seated in a wheelchair next to the bench, smiled and said hello. I returned her greeting and went for a handshake, which she immediately turned down and instead reached out with her fist for a fist bump. I thought this was pretty odd. The original lady who met me at the door then explained that the reverend and she had gone through training in Africa that had made them high priestesses, and they were therefore not allowed to shake hands due to the rituals they went through. I shook my head to affirm that I understood, and at that time I understood nothing.

After meeting Rev. Carmen, I was quickly ushered into the worship room, which was fairly small with seats set up for around 50 people. I was given a spiral bound book that said SSF on the front with a picture of open gates leading to what looked like some kind of heavenly place. I thanked the woman who was showing me around, and I looked around the room. There were only six or seven people in the room, and it was at that time five minutes to seven. I took a seat on the far side of the room and began looking through the book I had been handed. In the front of the book, there were two pages that were a statement of what the SSF was about and about their specific beliefs. I skimmed these pages and noted one particular passage about the different types of psychic abilities in which they believed. This excited me because I knew that I wanted to find people who really believed in these types of things.

Another few minutes past and more people trickled in. That night there were about 20 people in attendance. The service started with the reverends walking in from the back door and everyone singing a song. I took a look through the songbook and many of the songs were similar to those I recall singing as a child growing up in a Lutheran church. Other songs were popular ones from singers such as John Lennon. The reverends took seats at the front except for Rev. Michael who did the introductions. There were two reverends in attendance that day and one student minister. After the introductions, Rev. Carmen was invited to guide the meditation. The lights were dimmed and everyone in the audience closed their eyes. I had never done a guided meditation in a public place before, so it was a bit awkward so I just took a lead from everyone else and did the same as they did. Rev. Carmen took us on a 10-minute meditation where she had us envision that we were trees reaching up to the sun and soaking in all the positive energy. She also focused on how we had deep roots that were able to connect us to mother nature. The concepts of connection to mother nature and the ability to soak up or gather positive energy would be repeated many times throughout my next year of service attendance.

In the service, after the meditation came more singing, followed by collection plates being passed around for money collection. The student minister took two plates and passed them around while the audience sang a song. The reverend was specific that if you could not share a monetary gift then the gift of prayer was appreciated. I threw in a two-dollar coin and continued to sing. It seemed like most of the people in attendance were contributing. After the plates were passed around, the plates were brought to the front and everyone raised their hands, pointing their

palms to the plates. The reverend then said a prayer and it seemed as if everyone was trying to send physical power from their hands to the money in order to “help it create good things” for the group.

At this point, the service had nearly an hour long and there was a lecture provided by one of the members of the church. She talked at length about symbols from her Latvian and Swedish heritage. She had handouts and was very specific with her handling of the swastika symbol, making sure we knew that it had a prior, more positive meaning before the Nazis took it for use. I found this lecture to be tremendously boring, and at that point I was considering that the SSF might not be a good place to complete my research. However, then the third act of the service was began; It was time to receive messages from the spiritual world.

Messages begin with a brief introduction on how they work from one of the reverends. Rev. Michael said that if a reverend asks if they can come to you, you may say yes or no to signify if you would like a message or not. I figured this was simple enough and was excited to see what kind of things the reverends came up with for the different people in the audience. Rev. Carmen began and wheeled across the room in her chair while rubbing her hands together as if she was trying to summon some kind of spiritual power to help her obtain the messages. She did this for a moment, stopped in front of me and asked if I wanted a message. I stammered a bit as I was not prepared to be the first to receive a message without having ever seen one provided before. I eventually said “yes, please” and Rev. Carmen began providing me with a message.

The following is paraphrased from my memory and the note I wrote down after leaving the service that night:

“Ok, do you have kids? Because, I’m getting a strong feeling that you have children or you are very good with children. I’m not really sure why that is coming up, oh, and I guess they are telling me it’s none of my business. Well then. I feel like you are studying right now as well, or you are doing a lot of writing [Rev. Carmen uses her hands to simulate writing]. Spirit says you must continue on with that writing. Even when you do not want to just write, write, write. Spirit says, that in time this writing and this work that you are doing now is going to help you get a job or more education later on in life. Does that make sense? (no pause to allow for confirmation) Ok, I’ll leave that with you, say god bless.”

I was not really sure what to make out of what had just happened, so I said “god bless” and Rev. Carmen moved on to the next person. I did not even pay attention to the next person’s message as I was too caught up with the one I had just received. I was finally able to catch up with the messages a minute or so later. Most of the messages were similar in content with variations on the theme. After 3 readings, Rev. Carmen returned to her seat and Rev. Michael began providing readings. He approached his messages differently. He presented the person with a bag out of which they were to choose three stones. Each of the stones portrayed a symbol that would relate to their life and guide the message. Rev. Michael did two readings for other individuals, and then he came to me. Some people had not received even one message and on my first night I was receiving two! I was so surprised. Rev. Michael held out the bag and I reached in to grab three smooth

stones. I gave them to him and he held them close to his body. He then proceeded with the message, again which is paraphrased from my memory and the note I wrote down after leaving the service that night:

I'm getting an image of you on a boat. Yes, it looks like you are on a boat in the ocean, it's a sailboat. But, the sails are down. I'm getting that you are on the right path with what you are doing but sometimes it might feel like you are going nowhere. I'm hearing that you need to put your sail back up. I'm hearing that you know what you need to do, but you just need to keep doing it. Do not give up on what you are doing even if it seems to not be working for the time being. Ok, if it's your studies, then keep on with those studies. Work harder and you will be rewarded. Ok, I'm also hearing that there is going to be travel for you in the next 6 months, yes, it is expected but it will be more pleasant than you expect. I'll leave that with you. (Rev. Michael, 2016)

Again, the quick pace at which the reverends gave messages put me back a bit. There was never any time to confirm or deny anything that they were saying. Rev. Michael went on to do 4 or 5 more readings and then returned to his seat. The first thing I noticed when he sat down was the dejected look on several of the members' faces that did not receive a reading. It seemed as though they were upset that they did not get to participate in the most significant part of the evening.

After the readings were finished, the reverends asked everyone to come to the front and join hands in a circle. We closed the service by singing Kumbaya.

After the singing, everyone helped restack the chairs and eventually we all moved

towards the entrance area near the kitchen, where a short social hour was held after the service. Members volunteer to bring cookies and coffee was served. After that first service I attended, I was completely discombobulated with many ideas and thoughts of what I had just seen and experience. I only stayed at the social hour for a few minutes, awkwardly, as I had no one with whom to talk. So, I left, not yet realizing that I would repeat this Sunday night event nearly every week for the next year.

Before most Sunday services, student minister Pearl would hold healing sessions. This consisted of Pearl working with one person at a time and performing a 3-5 minutes healing on them. The participant would sit in a chair and was told to relax and close their eyes. Pearl would then wave her hands in various ways around the participant. This process seemed similar to what I have seen of Reiki healing. Pearl appeared to be attempting to push away some type of invisible energy while putting her own energy into areas of the participant's body.

I watched this process several times over multiple weeks before I decided to participate myself. I sat in the chair and Pearl told me to relax and close my eyes. She did not ask me anything specific about any ailments I had. I closed my eyes and relaxed as Pearl began to do her hand waving. I could sense her around me and could feel the breeze of her hands as they passed around me. I did not feel anything specific, but it was an enjoyable moment of relaxation.

It seems as though the healing services provided by the SSF were operating similarly to other healing techniques, such as Reiki, crystal healing, and sound healing. Individuals like Magician James Randi have debunked these practices as

false and have explained any perceived results as placebo effect (Randi, 1982). After my experience I would tend to agree with the scientific studies. This is, of course, due to my overall non-belief in the efficacy of the procedure. If one truly believes that the healing will work, it is much more likely to have a significant effect. This type of healing, regardless, of its actual effectiveness continues to be a regular part of SSF beliefs.

During my time with the SSF, it was often brought up that in order to advance in one's psychic experiences, one needs to practice. At first I was a bit confused about how one would go about doing this as I thought that you either have the ability or you do not. However, the belief within the Spiritualist groups is that anyone is able to achieve psychic abilities; some might just require more practice than others. With this in mind, I began to do research on the Internet and read books specific to psychic abilities. Much of what I came across was exactly what would be found in the new age section of a bookshop. Crystal healing, Reiki, Tarot, and other concepts similar to these were plentiful in their availability. I researched some of these concepts, but none of them really seemed to relate directly to what was being done in the SSF.

Then in April 2016, I purchased a CD from the SSF's leader, Marilyn Rossner. The CD was specifically designed, as Marilyn said, "to increase one's psychic abilities and help them more easily get in touch with the spirit world." This sounded a bit more like what I was looking for, so I purchased the CD for ten dollars. I brought the CD home and spent an hour listening to it in hopes that I would receive some kind of

insight. It turns out that the CD was based on meditation. At that point I had little success with the meditation during the Sunday services, so I was a bit disappointed.

I listened to the CD multiple times over the coming weeks but couldn't seem to get much of anything out of it. I felt relaxed but nothing significant occurred to make me think that my psychic abilities were growing. It was at this point that I started becoming concerned that I wouldn't be able to achieve the altered state that the other members seemed to be achieving.

After 6 months of attending SSF services, I had yet to have anything that could be described as an altered state and I became discouraged. This was not for lack of trying. I had made an honest effort to cast off my preconceptions about religious beliefs and fully immerse myself in the services. Regardless of my efforts, I had gained very little in the way of any epiphanies about my spiritual self. Then, after 6 months of trying, something happened during one of Rev. Michael's meditations. The lights were dimmed, and the 15 of us in attendance closed our eyes and relaxed. Rev. Michael began with some guided imagery work in which we were to imagine ourselves being planted into the ground with our feet branching out into mother earth. He had us breath in and out, rhythmically as if to sink our bodies with the natural waxing and waning of the universe itself. Most of the time during the meditations I would become relaxed, but I would always become slightly distracted. The church where the services were held was right next to a busy road, so cars and busses driving by were a common occurrence.

However, for me, that night was different, as I found myself tingling first in my ankles and then in the back of my neck. Rev. Michael then guided me verbally

on a path to meet a “being” as he called it. He told us to envision a garden, green and full of life. To find ourselves on a path. To walk along the path and come to a small clearing in the woods. A being of pure blue light approaches. At this point, Rev. Michael says that the being would show us an object or symbol that would be relevant to our lives. This theme of a being showing us an important object was used often and I had never seen an object of any kind. However, this night was different. After 6 months of meditating with the group, the being showed me a white daisy. I immediately felt very warm and accomplished. After all, my spirit being showed me a white daisy! Of course I am still an atheist, I even had that thought in my mind when I was looking at the spirit being in my mind. For some reason, in that moment I did not care. My body felt good and my mind felt good. Nothing ever came of the white daisy, but it was my first insight into why members of the SSF believe.

This was the first time I experienced an altered state. Altered states are described as “a situation in which the individual’s consciousness is relatively remote from the sphere of everyday reality” (McGuire, 1997 p.19). Illicit substances often bring on these altered state moments, but in this case it had occurred purely through the natural process of participating with the SSF.

Although this was the first time I had experienced anything like this, I had the sense that I had now “unlocked” some ability that I didn’t have before. After this night I regularly was able to achieve the altered state required to have a deeply meaningful meditation. As I will discuss below, this ability to enter into an altered

state helped to gain significant insight into other events that I experienced during my time with the SSF.

Workshops

Near the end of my year of research with the SSF, there was a three-day (three-hours each day) workshop offered over three consecutive evenings. The workshops focused on increasing your psychic abilities and finding your spirit guides. I was unable to attend the first evening workshop, but attended the second and third.

By the time I attended this workshop, I knew the regular attendees at the SSF, the reverends, and had even volunteered many times to help out at group events. I had seen messages given from the spirit world and I had spoke to reverends and members about their varied experiences with spirits, psychic abilities, past life regression, UFOs, and many other supernatural oddities. At this point, it would be helpful to note, that at no time in my adult life have I believed in a god, let alone spirit communication.

The night of the workshop was something different all together. To provide some context to the workshop I will be describing, I should not that occasionally, the SSF would have a guest speaker, an individual who was visiting the Halifax area and would provide classes based on their specialty. When I first started with the SSF, a class about quantum touch therapy had just been taught. As I had missed that class, I was excited for the next class to be offered. It took nearly a full year for that to occur.

Rev. Mikael was from Spain. Revs. Carmen and Michael spoke very highly about Rev. Mikael for months before he arrived. They said he was so popular in Spain that he had a one-year wait list to get a reading done by him. They created a sense of urgency that we should hurry to get this man's attention and be grateful for it. It was also announced that Rev. Mikael would be putting on three workshops during his visit. The first two were to be on developing your psychic abilities and a third on getting in touch with your spirit guides. I had missed Monday's class due to a conflict in scheduling. However, the second night I was at the church early to help out with check-in and collecting admission fees. Volunteering at SSF is common for members, and volunteers are able to get access to the event without having to pay for it. For example, in April 2016, I volunteered at the psychic fair, which was hosted by the SSF. I sat for the majority of those two days collecting admission fees, but I was also able to go around the fair for free and see some of the mini-lectures. For Rev. Mikael's workshop, the cost was significant; 30 dollars for non-members and 20 dollars for members. Membership to the SSF costs twenty dollars per year. My intention in volunteering was not necessarily to save money, but to have increased access to and interactions with some of the more invested SSF members including the reverends. For most events, there would be two volunteers, along with one of the reverends who setup a table covered with SSF pamphlets. The volunteers and reverend would usually sit and chat until people started to show up. The night of the second workshop was interesting as the people at the admission table were myself, Rev. Carmen, and one of the other members.

I do not remember how the topic came up, but Rev. Carmen began talking about an accident she had in the 1980's. Basically, she was in a bad car accident in which her husband and son were injured, but were able to get out of the car. She was not able to escape and the car started on fire. She told the story as if she had done so a thousand times. After she recounted her recovery from the accident, she began describing how she became involved with the SSF. It was the trauma of the accident that lead her to seek out something bigger and more meaningful than herself. This story fits directly with Glock's theory on deprivation. Rev. Carmen had felt a gap in her needs and sought out a way to fill it. She found a way with the SSF. Rev. Carmen then studied to become a minister in the church and had been with the SSF ever since.

While Rev. Carmen was telling this story, people started to arrive for the workshop. There were ten people that came to the workshop. Most of them I knew from Sunday services, but there were also a few faces I had never seen before. Jack was the first one in the door. He was at nearly every SSF service I had attended in the past year. He paid his admission fee and sat down with us as we waited for more people to arrive. I asked what I could expect from the evening, as I was the only one who had never attending a class like this. While I had seen some of Rev. Mikael's work the previous Sunday, I was unsure of what the workshop would be like. At the previous Sunday service, Rev. Mikael had been the special guest reverend, which meant that he gave a lecture and readings to everyone who attended the service. During his readings, I could tell that he handled himself differently from the reverends I was used to getting readings from at the SSF. He

had an increased level of charisma. He was intense, fast-talking, and direct with the person receiving the message. He was so intense that he had a couple of different women in tears when he brought up children who had died.

My message that evening consisted of two main parts. He started off by comparing me to Elvis. He said that I'm not a great singer, but that I would have three sons, one of which would be a very talented musician. I gave him no confirmation on this, as it is fairly unlikely that I will be having children due to a vasectomy. After I gave no positive confirmation to his comment about my sons, he switched gears and said he was sensing a dead grandmother that wanted to speak to me. I again gave him no positive confirmation because both of my grandmothers are still alive. He provided no real chance for me to reply and only seems to be looking for positive or negative facial reactions.

This created a scenario of what I will call "Dual Reality." Dual Reality happens when there is a discrepancy between what the audience perceives to be happening and what is actually happening. Rev. Mikael always maintained direct eye contact and a positive and hurried tone. He never became nervous or got appeared to get stuck or lost if he was not getting a positive response. This, to me and presumably the rest of the audience looked like he was just getting most everything right. The few times it looked like he was doing poorly, he had moved onto the next person who would then provide him with increased positive feedback.

In response to my question about what I could expect for the evening's workshop, Jack was reminiscing on all the different classes he had taken over the years. Unprompted, he said, "the confirmation is what keeps me coming back." Jack

was referring to the positive confirmatory praise he receives after delivering a message. This was the first time I had heard someone come right out and explain to me why he or she engages in spiritualism. Rev. Carmen and Pearl agreed with Jack's statement, I did not fully grasp the importance of this until later in the evening.

More people arrived until there were ten of us. We shut down the welcome table and all shuffled into the main room of the church where the services are usually held. The chairs in the room were setup in a large circle. Rev. Mikel Came into the room and immediately took control of who sat where. He hurriedly placed people around the circle taking care to look at who was sitting across from who and that there was a male female cycle to the circle. He repeatedly sat people down only to make them stand back up and switch to another spot. I was seated across for a man I had seen before but who wasn't a regularly attending member of the SSF. He looked to be in his 50's.

There were an even number of men and women in the circle with Mikael leading. The session began with Mikael talking about expanding psychic abilities and how it's just a matter of seeing what has been around you all along. He made it very clear that everyone has the ability to speak with spirit. After his opening talk he began a lengthy meditation. I was used to the 5-10 minute meditations with the Sunday service but this was at least 20 minutes and probably closer to 30. Mikael used visualization techniques that brought us along a beach, into a wooded area and then had us float up away from the earth so we could look back down on it.

During the meditation I had both intense physical feelings and had what I would call closed eye hallucinations. As Mikael brought us through the meditation I

had a series of tingling sensations throughout my body. When he brought us along the beach I could literally feel the warmth of the sun. As he brought us up and away from the earth I truly felt like I was floating up out of my chair. Once we were in outer space looking down on earth he told us to envision a large screen. He instructed us to look into the screen and then step through. Mikeal noted that this represented the spirit world. I could literally see myself stepping through the screen and looking back through. Mikael then allowed us to view the screen in silence. This was when we were supposed to pay attention for messages. I saw a great deal of seemingly incoherent things during the meditation. The following is a summary of most of it:

As I looked at the screen, the first thing I noticed was a lot of movement. I couldn't quite see what was going on because there was a large orange marshmallow getting in the way of the movement. The marshmallow seemed to be undulating and only allowing me to see little bits and pieces of what was going on behind it but not enough to make any sense out of it. I started to feel a sense of frustration with this situation when suddenly a large translucent elephant crawled out from underneath the marshmallow. The elephant reminded me of a scene in the Disney movie "Dumbo" where translucent elephants dance in a very odd sequence.

Just as the elephant came into view Mikael directed us to go back through the screen. Suddenly the screen was blank again in my mind. So I stepped through and looked back again as I was instructed. I could see as if I was floating above the room I was currently sitting in. I could see all the members of the group plain as day all sitting and meditating in a circle. The difference was that the room was transformed

into a giant airplane hangar. It was a wide-open expanse with tall shadows all around. As Mikael continued with the meditation I stayed in the room observing everyone from my floating perch. I then became aware of a very intense “high” throughout my entire body. I can only compare this to instances where I have taken certain drugs like marijuana. This body high was very intense and really beyond anything I had experienced. My body was tingling to the point of vibration and I almost felt like I was going to lift right off of my chair. At that point reverend Mikael brought us out of the meditation and we began a discussion about what had occurred.

Rev. Mikael asked if anyone would like to discuss what he or she saw or felt during his or her meditation. I was apprehensive at first, as I had no idea how ridiculous I would sound when I started talking about giant orange marshmallows and translucent elephants. One by one people offered their insights into what they had seen. The people who had been to these types of classes before seemed to go a bit more in-depth with their own interpretation of the events while the newer people like myself simply recounted what they had seen.

I immediately noticed the way Rev. Mikael was handling what people were saying. No matter how bizarre the vision seemed, he was able to turn the image or feeling into something relevant. He would often relate the images to the person sitting directly across from the person who had the vision. In my case I told him all about the marshmallow and the elephant. He looked across the room to a man whom I had only seen once before and said that the marshmallow might mean that he needs to watch his sugar intake or that there is a history of diabetes in his family

that he may not know about. He then suggested that the elephant probably meant the person had ties to either African or Asian culture somehow as the elephant apparently represents those two cultures. Not only was he able to spin my vision but also there was a constant approval from everyone in attendance. This not only confirmed what he was saying but it made me feel good. It was as if I had done very well with the exercise and was somehow tapping into my psychic abilities.

Shortly after this I began to feel physically sick. I had the sudden realization of just how powerful these experiences could be for people who lack the critical thinking skills to determine what had actually happened. I consider myself the most skeptical atheist I know and although the experience did not sway my beliefs, the experience itself was incredibly strong. I could clearly see how this type of altered state could serve to create new beliefs in someone experiencing it for the first time and to maintain beliefs for those who continually receive confirmation that they are being “psychically successful.”

At the end of the class everyone said their goodbyes and briefly shared how impressed they were with each other’s readings. I was congratulated multiple times on how accurate my readings were for my first time trying. It was right then and there that I realized the social power that these types of classes had. No one was wrong in any aspect throughout the whole night. Any reading or idea or vision anyone had was made to be accurate through the charisma and double talk of Rev. Mikael. Any doubts were then washed away as the other participants in the group would discuss and confirm for each other how good they were. This made Jack’s

quote from earlier that night even more relevant. It was the confirmation that kept him coming back. I'm sure it's what keeps many participants coming back.

The second day arrived and I again got to the church early to perform my volunteer duties. Rev. Carmen was also there early. We chatted for a bit about mundane things and then I asked her if she would like to do an interview for my research. She agreed and I gave her a bit of information on the types of questions I would be asking. At that point, participants began to arrive, as did Rev. Mikael. He came in and exclaimed that he was rather sick today and blamed it on the fact that all of the stores in Halifax had very cold air conditioning on, and going in and out of cold and hot temperatures had made him ill. Rev. Mikael went into the main room to setup the chairs and I continued to take admission fees as people arrived. All of the same people from the day before were present.

Just like the previous class we all entered the room and sat in a large circle. Rev. Mikael placed us around the room to his preference, and then he turned down the lights. He opened with a brief prayer and then he spoke about finding our spirit guides. Mikael explained that everyone has spirit guides, but most do not know they have them. He also said that some people have many guides, "hundreds to thousands" in fact. He then went on to explain that what we would be doing during the workshop was meditating with the specific intent of meeting our spirit guides.

Mikael told us to all relax and prepare to enter a meditative state. The beginning of the meditation was similar to the night before. The lights were lowered and we were told to close our eyes. As I was shutting my eyes, I saw some people getting into what I would call a meditative position. This position was

relaxed with the arms resting on the knees, palms up with the thumb and pointer finger touching. I thought this was a bit cliché, so I did not assume the position. Rev. Mikael asked us to focus on each body part one at a time and we were to breathe in warm healing light and exhale anxiety from those body parts. I imagined this warm healing light going into each part of my body. I specifically focused on my back as I have significant chronic pain there. I will say that after this portion of the meditation, I did feel an immediate and significant decrease in my pain.

Once the beginning portion of the meditation was over, Mikael asked us to envision a crystal palace. He said that we should envision the palace with its entire splendor and it is so tall that the top cannot be seen from where we are standing. This really threw me off as it was not what I was expecting to happen in order to find or get in touch with our spirit guides. Nevertheless, I was able to conjure up a crystal palace in my mind. It was enormously tall and sparkled in the sun. I could only see up a few hundred feet as clouds obscured the uppermost parts of the palace. Now that I think back on it, the palace was quite similar to that in the movie "Conan the Destroyer." No doubt that the image from that movie came to my mind, as it is the only crystal palace of which I have seen an image.

Rev. Mikael then asked us to enter the palace. He told us that we would find a crystal staircase that would lead us further and further up into the palace. Rev. Mikael was clear in how he was guiding us, saying things like "you feel you are traveling further and further up the staircase, you are floating with ease and experiencing no physical exertion." However, he left things vague enough for my mind to start filling in blanks. For example, the palace was crystal but I could not

see outside, it was almost as if the crystal walls just went on and on. I also started to add in features to the staircase. There were very ornate alcoves that held candles. The further I went up into the palace in my mind the more clearly I could see through the crystal walls. I still could not see outside, but it seemed that the crystal was becoming more transparent.

Rev. Mikael had been leading us up this staircase for what seemed like a very long time when he said that if we looked to our right we would see a small opening and a spirit animal may be there to greet us. I immediately saw a fox sitting to my right as I continued to float up the staircase. It was interesting that the fox was so immediate. I did not think fox and then see it; I just saw a fox. Rev. Mikael told us to continue on up the staircase. Eventually he told us that we had reached the top of the crystal palace. He described a large open hall with a large wooden door at one end. He told us to approach the door. Rev. Mikael then gave us direction on meeting our spirit guides. He told us that some of us would have many and some of us would have few. He also mentioned that if we only see a few, it did not necessarily mean that they were all we had, it was merely that they were the only ones we were prepared to see.

Rev. Mikael then told us to open the large wooden door. As I did, there was an immense light that came through the image of the door and I was disoriented at first. I then found myself on the other side of the door floating in mid-air at what seemed to be many miles above the earth. I could hardly make out anything going on down on the ground. Suddenly, I found myself still high above the ground and standing on a large floating disc with a fountain in the middle. I could still sense that

I was very high up. Unexpectedly, from behind the fountain appeared a large elephant. The elephant was very similar to the translucent elephant from the previous night however; he was fully gray and had some kind of decorative collar or necklace on. The elephant did not speak but it seemed playful, like a puppy. I just stood and watched the elephant run back and forth on the disc for a while. During this time Rev. Mikael instructed us to interact with our guides. Before I could approach the elephant I felt a presence above my head. Without warning, there was a large Viking with wings in front of me. Neither the Viking nor the elephant spoke during this time, but I had the sense that they were trying to make me feel comfortable and letting me know that they were indeed my spirit guides.

I began to look around the disc some more while the guides observed what I was doing. After a bit of looking around the Viking guided me back to the wooden door that would lead back into the crystal palace. I had the feeling of not wanting to leave that place, but the Viking sternly motioned to me that it was time to leave. At that point, Rev. Mikael had asked us to return to the staircase and begin descending down back to the entrance of the palace. This process was much quicker than it was on the way up. There was no fox and mostly just a blur of crystal as I flew down the stairs and back out the front door of the palace. Rev. Mikael then directed us to slowly open our eyes and come back to the room to discuss what we had seen.

There were a wide variety of interesting types of spirit guides that had visited the workshop participants. A tall aboriginal man with pink eyes, a sweet old lady with a picnic basket, and, of course, my playful elephant and winged Viking. The discussion was quick and seemed to focus on the wide range of different forms

that spirit guides apparently come in. After everyone had discussed their spirit guides, Rev. Mikael asked everyone to leave the room except for three people. I was not one of the chosen three so I exited with the rest of the group. Several minutes later, we were invited back into the room and three of the chairs had been separated from the others.

Rev. Mikael explained that the three people that stayed behind had sat in one of these three chairs and had made a connection with their spirit guide and had attempted to leave some kind of residual psychic energy behind in the chair. Rev. Mikael then chose three other people, including myself, and had us sit in one of the three chairs. Rev. Mikael explained that we were supposed to go into a relaxed and semi-meditative state and attempt to meet with that person's spirit guide or otherwise attempt to figure out who had sat in the chair.

I was incredibly skeptical about this proposition, but was interested to see how the responses would play out, as there was a 33% chance for each of us to guess correctly. So, I sat down and closed my eyes. Everyone was looking on as Rev. Mikael told us to meet with the spirit guide and attempt to bring back a message from him or her. After a few moments he had us open our eyes. I was up first to report what I had seen. I did in fact see a spirit guide and it happened to be the tall aboriginal man with pink eyes. It turns out that the woman who identified having this spirit guide was indeed the person who was sitting in my chair. This was shocking to people in the room, as it was a direct and accurate hit. Rev. Mikael then moved onto the other two people, who had little success in identifying the spirit guide. One out of three of us had been correct which is statistically average;

however, all the people in the room wanted to talk about was my amazing correct answer. I was given praise from multiple people while the other two participants had their incorrect guesses explained away.

During the final portion of the evening we teamed up with another person from the group. I was paired with a later middle-aged woman. The goal of the activity was to have one person stand behind the other person and attempt to contact the sitting person's spirit guides. The person standing would then relay any information that the spirit guide would give them.

I assumed my standing position and was told to place my hands just above my partner's shoulders, but to not actually touch the shoulders. There was no reason given as to why this was necessary. As directed I closed my eyes and attempted to visualize myself contacting this person's spirit guides. After a few moments I did indeed begin to see things. I was in a small white room with a brown door. I walked up to the door and opened it slightly. Standing before me was a monkey. The monkey was jumping around and doing flips in the doorway. I tried to speak to the monkey, but it seemed to be too busy being goofy.

I relayed this information to my partner and she immediately confirmed that one of her spirit guides was indeed a monkey. I told her that he was not really saying anything but that he seemed very playful and fun. She confirmed that she had found him to be similar in her experience. The monkey closed the door and I opened it again to find an odd looking man. He was dressed in what appeared to be a circus ringleader outfit with a top hat and cape. Aside from his odd clothing, the man had features that I can really only describe as alien; a slightly enlarged cranium

and a slight greyish tinge to his skin tone. Neither of the spirit guides would speak to me. I tried to ask questions in my mind, but it seemed like they were not interested in speaking to me, only to show themselves to me and that was it. I again relayed the information to my partner and she confirmed everything that I said. She knew about the man that looked like an alien. I was highly skeptical about the honesty coming from my partner at this point.

After a few more unsuccessful attempts at finding spirit guides, we switched positions and my partner began to give me messages from my spirit guides. My partner turned out to be quite in tune with her Christian side. She told me that many of my spirit guides were angels. She named many different angels who were supposedly my spirit guides. She was very confident in what she was saying and did not seek confirmation from me, but rather just told me what she saw. I got the feeling that she saw herself as more seasoned with her abilities and took that opportunity to try to impress me.

I am still not sure if this style of giving information, which can not be confirmed, is purposeful or just learned over time. The reverends do it and some of the participants who have been a part of the group for a while do it as well. No definitive information is given while leaving the impression that very specific information has been given. This technique will be discussed further in this text, in the section on messages in chapter 5.

After our time with our partners, Rev. Mikael brought us back into the circle and gave us some final words of wisdom about practicing our abilities in order to develop them. He recommended meditating on a daily basis, because he noted that

if you do not practice getting in touch with your guides, they will not be able to give you important information about your life. After that, Rev. Mikael lead a brief prayer and then the participants dispersed, ending the workshop.

I left the workshop with even more insight into the beliefs system and structure than ever before. I was quite surprised that I had gained more insight in the previous two days than I had in most of the year prior to it. It seemed that there was a switch in the level of beliefs and dynamics of belief during the workshops as compared to the regular Sunday service. It seemed as if the workshop brought out the most believing of the regular participants.

These personal experiences shaped and informed my perception of how an individual adopts the beliefs of the SSF and how those beliefs are maintained over time. In the next chapter I present my seven factors for conversion into this particular spiritualist movement. These seven factors come directly from the experiences I had as a member of the SSF.

Chapter 6: Seven Factors For The Creation And Maintenance Of Beliefs

Thus far, I have discussed many of my personal experiences and related information from interviews and conversations with participants. I will now describe this data in the context of the main factors in both creating and maintaining the beliefs promoted by the SSF. I have identified seven categories that pertain to creation of beliefs, maintenance of beliefs, or both. These categories include: meditation, messages, access to alternative beliefs, charisma, religious deprivation, social confirmation, and deprivation of critical thought.

These categories are not intended to be all encompassing as that is beyond the scope of the current level of research. I consider these categories to be valid to the participants in the group observed for this research; however, these are not categories that are necessarily generalizable to everyone who takes part in spiritualist movements.

Meditation

Meditation is a weekly occurrence in the SSF. Every Sunday, participants meditate together for 5-15 minutes guided by a Reverend. During my first 6 months of participation, I did not experience anything deeply meaningful during the meditation time. However, once I had a visual experience during a Reverend led meditation, I found it to be very convincing. After this occurred I realized that I had, for a short moment, experienced an altered state. Once I experienced the initial altered state, I continued to have them each time thereafter. These visualizations were very real, and I would equate them in similarity to a lucid dream in which the

dreamer is in full control of what is happening but walks a delicate line between sleep and being awake. It felt as if it could all fade away at any moment.

Due to the need to practice before a full effect with meditation is achieved, this activity does not appear to have a significant or immediate effect on beliefs when a participant first becomes interested in the SSF or psychic abilities. The meditation seems to function as a maintainer of beliefs once the participant has reached a certain level of confidence or comfort with the concepts and the act of meditating. Once this level was reached, I could see how meditation could become very powerful in maintaining spiritualist beliefs as it provides confirmation of the SSF's espoused beliefs.

Meditation with the intent of receiving message from spirits seems to be the most active way for a participant to maintain their beliefs over time without the direct influence or guidance of a Reverend. Although a Reverend always leads meditations during the Sunday service, personal at-home meditation is promoted regularly. This allows the participants to engage with their beliefs on their own at their leisure.

Consistently being able to enter into the altered state seems to be one of the most important factors in maintaining belief over time. In my case, even though I didn't believe that I was actually in communication with spirits from beyond, the experience was still very intense and most of the time quite enjoyable. Without being focused on the research aspect of these phenomena, I could have seen myself being much more likely to buy into some of the beliefs held by the SSF.

Messages

With regard to the messages, I want to discuss how they work and do not work. I will discuss how they are used from a skeptical perspective and will also discuss the way they work to create and reinforce beliefs leading to conversion to the group. Although I cannot confirm or deny the actual legitimacy of the messages, I will make judgments based upon my experiences and research.

From a skeptical perspective, the reverends are using a mixture of what are called cold and hot reading in order to deliver messages to participants. Cold reading is the act of giving someone information that is vague and applies to most people in an attempt to make them identify that the information is specifically about them. This type of cold reading is called the Forer effect. Benjamin Forer came up with these types of statements in the late 1940's during psychological experiments ("Forer effect - The Skeptic's Dictionary - Skepdic.com", 2017). An example of this would be "you often feel disciplined and self controlled outside, but worrisome and insecure inside." These types of sentences and ideas are used often during SSF messages.

Hot reading is utilizing previously known information to give what seems to be a highly accurate message ("hot reading - The Skeptic's Dictionary - Skepdic.com", 2017). This happened to me at a special message session that occurred at the end of the day during the SSF psychic fair. I had arrived late to help volunteer that day, because my wife and I were unpacking boxes from having moved recently to a new house. I had told all three of the reverends this and had significant conversations about how there were boxes all over the place and it was a big job to

get everything unpacked. I thought nothing of this at the time, but it became relevant during the message session. This was a special session because the leader of the IIIHS (parent organization to the SSF), Rev. Marilyn, was giving readings. She was fast and furious with her messages, jumping from one person to the next. She gave five or so messages before coming to me. She immediately asked me why she was picturing milk crates. I said I had no idea and that it did not seem to have relevance to me. She stopped for a moment and then asked if my house was a mess because milk crates often refer to a messy house or disorganization. I then revealed to her that I had just moved to a new house and there were boxes everywhere. This realization had the crowd gasping. Before I knew it, she had taken off and was giving readings to other participants.

Of course, she may have fantastic psychic abilities that allow her to glean that type of information from me. However, I am more apt to believe that she was utilizing hot reading; by talking to the reverends before the message session, she was likely able to acquire information second-hand and then use it to her advantage. In any case, this type of message can be incredibly effective in creating and maintaining beliefs within the participant.

Just as important as the hot and cold reading is the psychological concept of confirmation bias. This concept holds that people are more likely to remember the hits (information that matches what they already believe or know) and forget the misses (Plous, 1993). In the case of message receiving, individuals are more likely to remember the messages that the medium got correct and to forget or ignore the

things they got wrong. This leaves the individual with a false impression and or memory of the reading they received.

Receiving readings from a reverend at the Sunday service seems to work in both the creations and maintenance of beliefs. As far as maintenance goes, the weekly readings give the participant what they believe to be special information about their lives that they would otherwise not be able to access. This information is then often confirmed in the mind of the participant over time due to its vague nature and the likelihood of the participant to draw inferences that are not necessarily there.

Alternative Beliefs

Individuals who attend SSF services are often encouraged to engage in the beliefs of the SSF outside of the Sunday service. This may come in the form of at-home meditation, tarot card reading, and participating in spiritual retreats. Although the SSF promotes specific beliefs about communication with the dead, there are a myriad of other beliefs that are loosely associated with spiritualism that are easily accessible to the group participants. These may include beliefs in crystal healing, Reiki, reflexology, positive cooking, past life regression, homeopathic remedies, UFO research, and various other alternative beliefs.

These alternative beliefs are promoted during the social hour after the regular service and are even promoted during the lecture period during service. Lecturers are often people from outside of the group who are brought in specifically to teach about certain aspects of these alternative beliefs. Although these beliefs are not literally within the scope of the SSF belief, they serve to promote fantastical and

unproven ideas. It seems that the beliefs held by SSF participants are under an umbrella of beliefs that far exceeds those espoused by the group itself. Most members, including the reverends, with whom I spoke hold several of these types of beliefs.

Multiple times throughout my research I was told to look into reflexology as it would not doubt cure all of my ailments. I was also directed to many different books that ranged in topics from light healing to government use of psychic ability in the MK Ultra program. There seemed to be no end to the vast array of alternative beliefs espoused by members of the group. Unlike my experiences in mainstream religions, none of the members were judged by other members for their alternative beliefs. I got the sense that belief was highly personal and that a “truth” for one person might differ for another.

Charisma

The charisma possessed by the reverends also appears to be incredibly important for ongoing belief to be maintained. The three regular reverends at the SSF do not have high levels of charisma when compared to reverends like Rev. Mikel. The three regular SSF reverends are all very friendly and have charisma, but they lack the essence that draws the participant into their own magical world. Although the SSF has 15 to 20 dedicated members, there is a constant flow of new people coming and going from week to week. It seems like the reverends’ low level of charisma accounts for some failure in the creation of beliefs with potential new recruits.

I did not understand the importance of charisma until I met Rev. Mikael. He is an incredible source for charisma. This is most evident during his readings. He fully engages with the person he is giving the message to. He makes direct eye contact and speaks with an inflection of pure determination and confidence. Even when he is getting things wrong he does not flinch. He merely pushes ahead and decides whether or not to continue with the person or move on to the next. This charisma maintains and creates belief as it makes the person feel a connection with the leader. Even when Mikael gave me a reading, which was completely incorrect, he was still able to make me feel that he cared a great deal about me and during those few moments I was very important.

On the one night when Rev. Mikael was advertised to be giving readings at the SSF, the attendance was up around 30 as opposed to the usual 15 to 20 people. During Rev. Mikael's time giving messages, he had several women crying over deceased children, and had others wooing over his seemingly accurate assessments of their lives. It did not seem that the content of what he was saying was all that different from the other reverends. However, the charismatic way in which he delivered it set him apart from the others.

Religious Deprivation

The idea of religious deprivation arose from interviews that were done with two of the three SSF reverends. During both interviews, the reverends discussed at length how negative experiences in their religious lives had pushed them towards a new religious organization. This concept also arose during several conversations with SSF members. I would often hear about how a member was previously

attending a church, but they did not feel fulfilled or the church's ideals did not match with their own beliefs.

In one conversation with an SFF member, Nancy, she told me how she felt no emotion with her past church, which was Catholic. She told me that the SSF gives her fulfillment religiously and spiritually. However, she did not cut ties completely with her Catholic church as she explained, "sometimes I miss Jesus and then I go to Mass." It was after this conversation that I started to see Spiritualism as a religious a la carte menu. The member or participant is never judged for their beliefs and can pick and choose on what they want to focus their energies. This is in contrast to most mainstream religions that tend to have its members follow its rules closely with the threat of eternal hell or social ostracism as punishment.

Social Confirmation

Social confirmation of psychic phenomenon was in my experience one of the biggest contributors to both the creation and maintenance of beliefs. I experienced this process mainly during the after service social hours and also during the two days of workshops that were discussed above. The conversations I had most often with other individuals at these meetings were addressing the accuracy of the messages that were given during the service. In one case, Nancy approached me and asked, "So do you work with kids often?" This was in reference to my message, which had focused on my ability to work with kids. I told her that I did not currently work with kids, but I had worked with children often during my previous career. She seemed satisfied with that as a confirmation that the message had been correct

as she gave me a smile and a nod to confirm that she thought it was accurate. Nancy then discussed her own message and how she interpreted it.

At other times, like during the workshops, the confirmation was immediate. When anyone spoke about what they had seen to the group, the reverend would immediately begin to draw parallels to make their information appear to be at the very least somewhat correct. For example, I had mentioned a marshmallow and an elephant during one of our meditations. The reverend immediately picked out the person across from me and asked them if they had blood sugar issues. The person looked puzzled for a moment but then said, “no, but I have been dieting and avoiding sugar lately.” The reverend jumped on this immediately, using it as a means to confirm my message. The reverend also gave immediate praise to myself and the person who confirmed the message. This process happened over and over again.

As noted above in Jack’s case, he stated he “keeps coming back for the confirmations.” I feel that this is likely the case for many members of the SSF. Receiving positive support from your peers can be extremely motivating. This continuous cycle of positive confirmation seems to act as a major influence on creation and maintenance of beliefs.

Deprivation Of Critical Thought

This seventh and final category for the creation and maintenance of beliefs in the SSF stresses a lack of critical thinking and understanding about the natural world. This category was created after much reflection on my own experiences with the group. I was able to achieve significant visions during meditation and received several messages that included seemingly very specific information. However, at

the end of my research period I was no more a believer in communication with the dead or psychic abilities than the day I began. This begs the question: why would I not be a believer?

I propose that individuals have differing abilities when it comes to being able to think critically and rationally. It is important to note that this is not a discussion of intelligence, as many intelligent people participate in many mainstream and non-mainstream religions. However, this is a discussion on people's lack of ability to use critical thinking to protect themselves from making errors in judgment regarding their religious experiences.

These seven factors are what I believe to be the most likely experiences that will convert a non-member to a member in the SSF. I do not believe that every person who comes into contact with the SSF would need to experience all of these factors, however I feel it is likely that they will. In the next chapter I will discuss how these factors compare and contrast with the other contemporary theories on conversion.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

It is now valuable to compare information from my research with those of important theorists in the field of New Religious Movements. It should be noted that the scope of this master's thesis limits the ability to give a fully realized commentary on the relevance or credibility of the theories discussed below. This chapter is provided solely as a starting point for future research, which will more closely examine the work of these researchers. Nonetheless, I will attempt to find similarities and differences between my findings with those of Glock's Relative-Deprivation Theory, Lofland & Stark's Model of Conversion, Rational-Choice Theory, and the debate on brainwashing.

Glock's Relative-Deprivation Theory specifies five different types of deprivation. I will utilize each of the types, comparing and contrasting them with the information from my research. Then I will assess the overall success of using the theory in my research with the SSF.

Glock describes economic deprivation as having "its source in differential distribution of income in societies and in the limited access of some individuals to the necessities and luxuries of life" (Glock, 1964 p.27). He goes on to discuss how economic deprivation can be subjective in nature. This means that a very wealthy person may still subjectively see themselves as economically deprived (Glock, 1964).

I do not know the specifics about the objective or subjective economic situations that SSF members are in. So, I will not be making specific claims regarding this deprivation. However, in an anecdotal sense I did observe that many

members of the SSF walked and/or took the bus to the service. I was also witness to several conversations where members were complaining about the cost of coming over the bridge and gas to get to the services. This type of conversation suggests that some of the members of the SSF perceive themselves as economically deprived.

Social deprivation, is regarded by Glock as, “the differential distribution of highly regarded attributes” (Glock, 1964 p. 27). Glock also states that it is social deprivation only when it exists apart from economic deprivation (Glock, 1964). This results in looking at a member’s social status and not their social class.

I did not collect direct information on member’s social status during my research, but did infer some generalizations while participating in the group. None of the group members discussed their lives outside of the group with me. Most conversation about social status was directed within the group. Often I would hear members talking about the reverends in high regard. It seems that there is an in-group social hierarchy that is very structured. However, Glock was not talking about social structure within the group, he was only specifying conditions prior to joining a group. Therefore, I cannot make a definitive claim about social deprivation in regards to SSF members prior to their engagement with the group.

Organismic deprivation refers to situations where a person is deprived of “good mental or physical health” (Glock, 1964). The limited scope of this research did not allow for me to assess the mental health of the participants. However, through conversation I was able to confirm that several members of the group had certain experiences that related to potential organismic deprivation. One member discussed a car accident that had left her with life-long injuries. Another member

would often discuss how many of her ailments had been cured by meditation, prayer, crystals, and reflexology. With these stories, I can confirm that at least a few members of the SSF experienced organismic deprivation before becoming a member of the group.

Ethical and psychic deprivation, which Glock describes as being similar to each other, was not found during the research period. This is not to say that they do not exist in the group however I was not able to find any information that would suggest that members of the SSF were experiencing deprivation in these categories.

Although I was unable to acquire data to confirm or refute some aspects of deprivation, my research finds that Glock's theory does in fact explain some significant reasons that members of the SSF joined the group. However, it does not address behavior that pulls the person towards the group. Things like charismatic leaders and promises of an afterlife or a better life seem to have a significant effect on a person joining the SSF or not. Although the theory fails in some aspects, as has been noted by other researchers, in this particular research many of the deprivation categories did hold valuable information (Wilson, 1990/Hine, 1974).

As discussed in Chapter 1, Lofland and Stark's model of conversion contains seven steps. I will not address each step in relation to the current research, but will discuss those that are most significant to the current research. Steps that are not discussed in this section can be assumed to have had little or no significance.

The first step according to Lofland and Stark is "Tension." Lofland and Stark contend that tension is "a felt discrepancy between some imaginary, ideal state of affairs and the circumstances in which these people saw themselves caught up"

(Lofland & Stark, 1965 p. 864). I can confirm this first step with information I obtained in two interviews with reverends of the SSF. Rev. Michael discussed acute tension that he felt during his late teens and twenties regarding his sexuality. Similarly, Rev. Mae brought up tensions between her and her church regarding a divorce. In both situations, these tensions began the individual's path toward the SSF. The second step according to Lofland and Stark is "Type of Problem-Solving Perspective" (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Here, they focus on how a person may seek out three different types of solution; psychiatric, political or religious.

The third step of the conversion theory is "Seekership" (Lofland & Stark, 1965). Seekership is developed after a person has failed to relieve the tension in their life through their problem solving perspective. I heard several stories matching the seekership concept throughout my research. Both Rev. Mae and Rev. Michael noted a period of time where they had become disillusioned with their former mainstream religions and began to seek out something to fill a spiritual void. Other members made remarks about how they had physical ailments that could not be helped by secular means. These members also discussed how "healing procedures" done by members of the SSF and others in the spiritual community had cured them of their ailments. This seems to have solidified their belief at that time.

The fifth and sixth steps of conversion according to Lofland and Stark are "Cult Affective Bonds" and "Extra-Cult Affective Bonds" (Lofland and Stark, 1965). Basically, these two steps are about developing a significant bond with a member or members of the group while limiting or terminating bonds with non-members. I did not come across these two steps in the SSF. There did not seem to be much personal

interaction going on between members and the reverends. It always seemed as though the connection to the group existed during the Sunday night services, but did not really extend outside of that time.

I also never saw or heard of anyone deciding or being forced to distance themselves from family or friends outside of the group. If anything, having close family that was not a part of the group was typical. Rev. Carmen often discussed how her husband had never attended a single SSF service and had never seen her in action in her over 20 years of being a reverend.

In direct comparison with my current research, neither theory takes into account altered states as a motivator for conversion. I don't believe that the SSF would have the members it does if it wasn't for the consistent ability of the participants to achieve an altered state, which "proves" and reinforces the beliefs of the group. This omission in and of itself shows the need for further research specific to personal experience when converting to a NRM.

In conclusion, Lofland and Stark have provided a good outline that builds off of Glock's relative-deprivation theory. However, it does not fit all groups as NRMs have a wide range of beliefs, dogmas, physical requirements, and emotional requirements. This variety in NRMs makes this conversion theory a useful tool, but not the end-all-be-all when discussing belief formation in NRMs. The SSF is no exception to this as it does not conform to all of Lofland and Stark's suppositions.

Although Rational-Choice theory is usually used when discussing religion as a whole, I found the four premises it puts forward to be beneficial when discussing belief creation and maintenance specific to the SSF. The first premise, and probably

the most important to this research, is that “any meaningful discussion of religious phenomena must acknowledge the pivotal role of the supernatural” (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). During my research, I realized that the SSF had very little to offer outside of the supernatural. Most beliefs, whether they were stated or alternative, required an acceptance of their supernatural and therefore were unverifiable in nature.

Stark maintains that participants are making rational choices with the information, which is available, to them (Stark and Bainbridge, 1985). I argue that a choice does not become rational just because you make it with information that is available to you. In order for a choice to be rational there must be a significant factual basis to support said choice. Hence, the reason I discussed the deprivation of critical thought in the above section. Without the ability to think critically about one’s own beliefs, one cannot make a rational decision. This concept makes Rational-Choice Theory much less viable. Although I found that members of the SSF do tend to seek rewards (messages and meditation) and create and exchange compensators (information on alternate beliefs and anecdotal stories), I disagree that Stark’s definition of rationality is useful in determining belief creation and maintenance and would instead recommend a focus on the seven factors as stated above.

Although brainwashing in NRMs is one of the most controversial topics currently in the field, I found no evidence of its existence within the SSF. At no point was I able to identify any use of physically coercive techniques to manipulate the beliefs of a participant. It could be argued that psychological coercion occurred with

the use of the meditations and the messages; however, this would not fit the generally accepted criteria for brainwashing which focuses on force and coercion. This supports the idea that although there may be instances of brainwashing in some NRMs, it may be worthwhile for researchers to focus their time and energy on other factors which are more likely to result in conversion. Overall, it seems that NRM research has been hung up for too long on a concept that exists in very few NRMs.

In conclusion, I have found a combination of convincing messages, meditation (altered states), religious deprivation, social confirmation, access to and practice of alternative beliefs, charisma and deprivation of critical thought serve to both create and maintain the specific beliefs espoused by the SSF. I do not intend to assess the importance of each factor compared to one another or to claim that this is a comprehensive list, but to identify that these factors were significant based on my yearlong study of this particular Spiritualist group.

In regards to the contemporary theories that were utilized to inform the research, I found them to succeed and fail to fit the creation and maintenance of beliefs in the SSF. This supports the difficulty of identifying a unified theory of conversion and belief due to the uniqueness of individual NRMs. It seems that although there are some similarities between NRMs in how their members come to find and embrace their ideals, there may be no all-encompassing theory that can account for all variables.

In future studies with Spiritualist groups, I intend to expand the scope of the research to contain several groups in multiple geographic locations. I would also

increase the number of interviews, and include interviews of members as well as reverends/leaders. I feel that these two specific changes (number of groups and interviews) will allow for a more nuanced understanding of how beliefs are created and maintained in Spiritualist groups.

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