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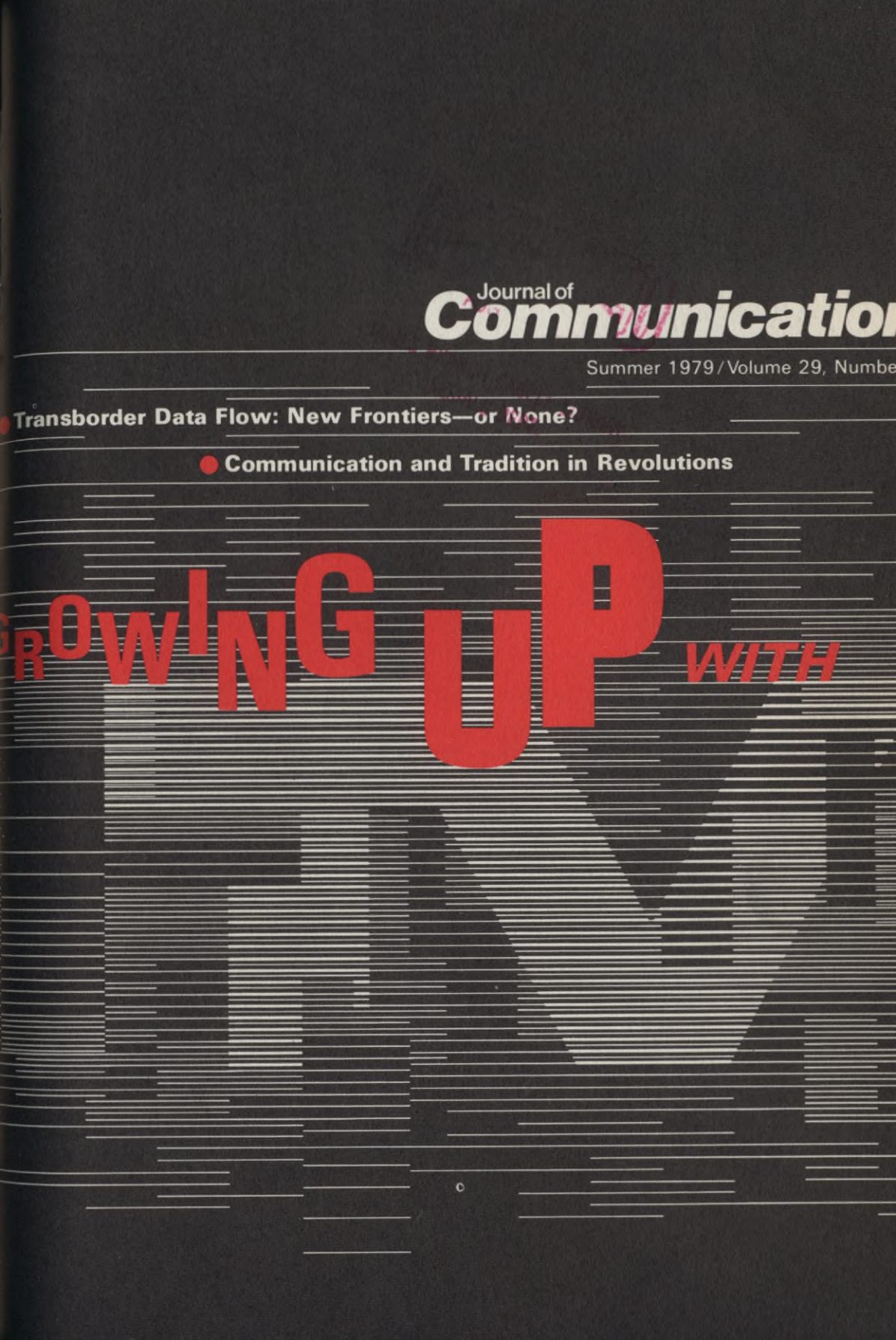
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(Continued on back inside cover)

Atrocity Tales, the Unification Church, and the Social Construction of Evil

by David G. Bromley, Anson D. Shupe, Jr., and J. C. Ventimiglia

By evoking outrage at the alleged acts of a religious group, newspaper accounts of atrocities serve to validate "evil" and thereby legitimize social control.

Recent events have focussed attention upon the large numbers of younger converts to marginal religious sects, and have in some way encouraged public opinion against these marginal religious groups. But the Fourth Amendment guarantee of religious freedom has thus far forestalled any formal action against these groups. Yet action has been taken on an individual basis in the so-called "deprogramming" movement. In these cases most often the parents of the religious convert authorize the "deprogrammer" to bring their child "back to his or her senses" by any means possible, means which often involve illegal acts. A number of organizations have addressed themselves to both sides of this philosophical dilemma. Some organizations, composed largely of ex-members of these marginal religions and their relatives, have formed to provide information and/or assistance to families of marginal religious converts (19). Civil libertarian groups have formed to oppose deprogramming and have initiated legal actions to deter it (1, 2, 13). The media, particularly newspapers and magazines, have also given the issue substantial coverage in their stories about the spectacular charges relating to "kidnapping," "brainwashing," and "deprogramming" (e.g., 5, 8, 11, 15, and 16).

Because their position is regarded by many as "outside the law," it is important to consider how deprogrammers and their advocates are able to legitimate their activities. When a group feels that its interests are threatened, it is likely to attempt to vest its interests and activities with the mantle of legitimacy by contending that its rights and privileges flow from and support a basic cultural

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value. Hence this makes the legitimation of extreme measures against that group contestable. When two groups such as the deprogrammers and the Unification Church are both able to contend that their actions are legitimized by cultural values, a war of accusations ensues.

What results may be called a struggle for the construction of social reality. Each side is attempting to construct definitions of its own and its opponents' motives that serve to legitimate its own activities and discredit those of the other side. In concrete terms this means that to the extent that the Unification Church (and its civil libertarian sympathizers) is successful in promulgating its definition of the situation, severe legal sanctions could be brought against deprogrammers and even parents. Conversely, if the "deprogramming movement" is successful, deprogramming will at least be tolerated, conservatorships will be granted, and a variety of other legal pressures will be brought to bear on the Church.

One effective tactic in the "war of accusations" is the atrocity tale.

An *atrocity* may be defined as an event which is viewed as a flagrant violation of a fundamental cultural value. Accordingly, an *atrocity tale* is a presentation of that event (real or imaginary) in such a way as to (a) evoke moral outrage by specifying and detailing the value violations, (b) authorize, implicitly or explicitly, punitive sanctions, and (c) mobilize control efforts against the alleged perpetrators. A pure case of an atrocity story should contain each of these three elements. However, since the "deprogramming movement" has (until recently) been a relatively uncoordinated effort, and the telling of atrocity tales is filtered through journalists who may or may not accept or alter the presentations, individual atrocity tales are presumed only to approximate the pure type.

It is not of importance whether the allegations made in atrocity stories are actually true or false. The intent of such tales is not to present the complexity of

events dispassionately but rather, as Garfinkel (7) has noted, to make the event and individual stand out from the ordinary. Each contestant in this struggle to define reality will portray events as he or she sees them or wishes others to see them. Whether such stories represent some kernel of "truth" is not only difficult to validate in many cases but is also irrelevant. The stories gain their persuasiveness and motivating power from their larger-than-life quality.

The allegations in the atrocity stories are primarily made against the group rather than the individual. This is aptly illustrated by the case against the Unification Church. Since the Church membership is composed largely of the young adult offspring of parents who are leading and supporting the deprogramming movement, to argue that the Church membership is evil is to cast aspersion upon those children one hopes to save and, indirectly, upon the parents who raised them. One way of resolving this dilemma is to label the organization, rather than its members, as evil, and to treat individual members as victims. Shupe *et al.* (18, p. 951) outlined the implicit reasoning in labeling the members as victims:

1. My (son, daughter, family member) has embraced a "strange" religion;
2. Only inherently "strange" people would be voluntarily attracted to such a religion;
3. My (son, daughter, family member) is obviously not an inherently "strange" person;
4. Hence, he or she must have been hoodwinked or brainwashed into participating.

This is the logic of what Toch (22, p. 226) called "the seduction premise." Atrocity tales function as a prerequisite step in such a labeling process by providing dramatic "evidence" that a religious group such as the Unification Church is indeed "strange." In this way, individual members are absolved of responsibility for their "bizarre" actions while under the "control" of the Church. Upon their "return" to conventional society they may resume their "normal identities," and parents are relieved of any feelings of guilt for "kidnapping" children or for having inadvertently predisposed them to take up "strange" beliefs.

Finally, when deprogramming is undertaken, the process creates its own justification. If it is successful, the individual leaves the Unification Church and usually issues a public statement of renunciation. This has the effect of confirming that the former member had been brainwashed and was unable to break the Church's hold independently. However, if deprogramming is not successful, the brainwashing premise is also confirmed. The individual is seen as so strongly possessed by the evil that even the best efforts of the deprogrammers and confrontation with the "truth" cannot break its grip. This outcome only serves to further validate the atrocity stories and to authorize more drastic action against the Unification Church.

Atrocity stories have been used at other times to validate other issues as well. There is some mention of atrocity stories in propaganda campaigns (3, 9, 14), and from stories about lynchings (4, 10), racial troubles (12), wartime massacres (6), and degradation ceremonies (7), it can be inferred that atrocity tales are an integral part of these processes. The recounting of atrocity tales should be

distinguished from efforts to justify or account for prior behavior (see 17, 21). While atrocity tales frequently do contain statements by their authors which attempt to rationalize prior behavior, we are concerned with the function of the tales as they legitimate future actions.

To further explore the nature and function of atrocity tales, we obtained a sample of 190 newspaper articles about former members of the Unification Church published between 1974 and 1977. This sample of articles was drawn from an extensive, ongoing "clipping" file maintained by the Unification Church's national headquarters in New York City, to which the Church's regional offices across the country contribute all locally printed media accounts of Church activities. Of the 190 articles, 188 contained at least one atrocity story about the Unification Church and thus were used for our analysis. This high percentage of negative stories reflects the fact that from 1974 on media accounts of the Unification Church were primarily hostile. While the sample was not strictly random, regional distribution of the newspapers was representative of clustered populations: 46 percent of the articles came from newspapers in the Northeast (New York, in fact, contributed a quarter of the entire sample), 14 percent came from Southern newspapers, 30 percent came from North-Central states, and 6 percent came from Western states (composed of both Pacific and Mountain states but largely representing California).

For each article we noted the year of publication and the person who alleged that atrocities had occurred. Next we identified six types of atrocities according to type of value violated: physical (nutritional, rest, comfort, safety, locomotion), psychological (independence-autonomy, achievement-recognition, cognitive stimulation, ego security), economic (members' property ownership, fair exchange with non-members), associative (family loyalty, heterosexuality, other relational freedom, veracity with non-members), political-legal (patriotism, fair play, observance of law), and general cultural. Atrocities in each category were counted only once for each article, regardless of how many times a particular type of atrocity was mentioned. Therefore, one article could be coded for up to six atrocities.

Using this scheme we coded 709 atrocities for the 188 articles, though the actual number, considering repetitions within articles, was far greater. The average article contained at least three atrocities. Table 1 shows the frequency of

Table 1: Percent and types of allegations by number of allegations per story

	Number of types of allegations			
	One %	Two %	Three %	Four to six %
Physical	27.0	6.8	14.4	15.1
Psychological	50.0	37.5	32.2	22.0
Economic	2.3	12.5	8.6	16.1
Associative	11.0	23.9	23.0	20.9
Political-legal	5.0	13.6	10.3	13.4
General cultural	5.0	5.7	11.5	12.4
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Number of allegations	44	88	174	186
Number of articles	44	44	58	42

the occurrence of the six types of values violated according to the number of total atrocities per story. There were no discernable patterns either in the frequency or type of atrocities in the newspaper by year. Of the 239 individual persons who had alleged in the stories that atrocities had been committed, over 40 percent were former Unification Church members. Parents and experts (religious leaders, legal officials, psychiatrists, and political leaders) each accounted for approximately 20 percent, while the remainder were journalists.[1]

The most frequently reported atrocity was the psychological violation of personal freedom and autonomy.

Underlying all the atrocity stories was a theme of the loss of individual freedom, including a personal freedom to choose a religion and the manner in which to practice it, a claim ironic in light of the Unification Church's own charges that *its* religious freedom was being threatened. Psychological atrocities, which by far were the most frequently reported, tended to emphasize the violation of free will, particularly when stories explicitly claimed deliberate manipulation on the part of Unification Church leaders. This type of atrocity story generally implies that the initial constraints on free religious choice gradually extend to all areas of the individual's life. As an ex-member recalled,

> *The philosophy teaches that your time, your life, is not rightly your own, but belongs to God who works through Moon, who works through the hierarchy of the cult. You have no* free *time because every moment must be given to God through your immediate superior. You must give your* self *completely* ("The Moon Store," *The Observer,* Farmingdale, N.Y., October 30, 1975).

This "totalism" leads ex-members and unsympathetic observers of the Unification Church to refer to "entrapped" members as "zombies," "robots," "mental three-year-olds," or "automatons," to imply their loss of autonomy.

Other atrocity tales describe the techniques of recruitment and indoctrination by which this extraordinary compliance of "Moonies" is said to be achieved. Atrocity tales of recruitment procedures emphasize the alleged deception involved in proselytization, particularly when young converts are unacquainted with specific elements of the "Biblical authority" legitimizing the Church's claims or when they are involved in a period of personal transition. Indoctrination as described by the tales encompasses a number of tactics, including rote learning, creating "childlike dependence," enmeshing the recruit in a complex network of personal relationships, and even directly "capturing" the will of the person by Svengalian art.

[1] The actual influence which journalists have over the content of the printed atrocity tale is underestimated by this small percentage. For example, the choice of headlines illustrates how journalists can semantically slant the tone of articles in a negative direction, e.g., "Rev. Moon Beams Only at His Money," "Moonie Experience Not Sunny," "Moon Glow Dims for 2 Followers," "Moon People Have Landed in Dover," and "Rabbi Sheds Light on the Moonstruck." Of 73 specific references to the Unification Church contained in article headlines, 68 percent used the more pejorative label of "cult" while another 10 percent referred to it as a sect, movement, or other marginal group. Only 22 percent used the word "church" to refer to the organization.

The gravity of such compliance to the Unification Church is accentuated by the stories' descriptions of what members' lives might have been had they not become "ensnared." Descriptions abound of these persons as honor students in college, complete with scholarships, active social lives, and promising careers. Young adulthood, customarily a time of life when preparation is made for participation in secular educational, occupational, and domestic institutions, becomes seen as a tragedy of great waste, of diverting youthful exuberance away from productive channels.

A final aspect of alleged psychological atrocities concerns violations of ego security and imposed guilt. The implication of these tales is that Church doctrines produce a morbid preoccupation with illusory sins, weakening personality integration by harming the person's otherwise relatively consistent sense of positive self. Many tales report how rigorous standards of doctrinal single-mindedness and asceticism are quickly internalized by new members and how this internalization serves to enforce conformity.

One particularly lurid variation of the guilt theme is sexual. Conventional heterosexual behavior, even at the relatively "innocent" level of unspoken interest in another person, is forbidden by the Unification Church, and stories told by ex-members emphasize the relentless pangs of guilt which tormented them. Such atrocity tales cut across several values by providing families with evidence that the Unification Church is forbidding culturally accepted heterosexual contact and thereby stifling normal human development.

Tales of physical atrocities are the next most frequently cited type. They typically focus on violations in three areas—proper nutrition, sufficient rest, and physical safety—which few could oppose as necessary to sustain life. This category also includes lesser atrocities that under other circumstances (e.g., summer camp or a slumber party) might be viewed as adventurous inconveniences, such as sleeping on floors in sleeping bags in overcrowded, stuffy rooms, or participating in workshops staged at remote rural locations.

While psychological and physical atrocities are generally unfamiliar occurrences to non-members, economic violations have a more widely experienced, concrete referent.

Members of marginal religious groups, whether the Unification Church, Hare Krishna, or others, have become a common sight soliciting funds on street corners, in parking lots, or in places of public conveyance. Ex-members of the Church usually reserve their bitterest condemnations for this aspect of service in the Unification Church, perhaps because of its high priority in members' expenditures of time.

Tales citing economic atrocities focus on two areas. The first includes violations of members' private property rights, such as the Church "absorbing" their saleable possessions (cars, electronic equipment, clothing) and savings accounts upon joining, or exploiting members to work long hours, with only a subsistence return, for the financial gain of a few leaders. The second includes violations of "fair exchange" in disposing of the monies earned or donated by the members. The atrocity tales were replete with claims of members being encouraged to

disguise the destination of contributions, i.e., constructing stories of bogus charities to play on the sympathies of non-Church members (a technique referred to by members as "heavenly deception"), and of selling candy and other inexpensive goods at exorbitantly marked-up prices.

Associative atrocities are alleged violations of conventional patterns of relationships, in this case between members and non-members of the Unification Church.

The most sensational form of this atrocity deals with the severing of the parent-child bond. Unification theology teaches that parents not "saved" (i.e., not accepting the Church's grace-imparting doctrine) conceived their children in sin; hence the children, if "saved," have an obligation to accept their "true" spiritual parents (Rev. and Mrs. Moon) and reject the biological parents if the latter oppose them. A complete break in communication between parents and their children as part of Church-encouraged estrangement is one frequently cited atrocity of this type. Atrocities cited toward the family also included the ultimate cultural taboo—extinction of the biological parents if necessary: "He was taught that if parents stand in the way of your duty to God [belonging to the cult], killing the parents would be permissible" ("Steps to Prevent Spread of Moon Cult Requested," *The Free Press*, Burlington, Vt., February 24, 1976).

One alleged violation of sexuality similar to those of the psychological type falls in this category—the thwarting of conventional heterosexual marriage. The mass-arranged marriages within the Unification Church (for which members must pay $400 apiece), often joining American Caucasians with Asians, violate not only an explicit American value on free mate selection but also an implicit, still widespread norm against miscegnation. Tales of atrocities concerning mate selection often emphasized the lack of choice involved in accepting the Unification Church marriage.

Relations with other people also was an area of concern and one frequently cited in atrocity tales and violations dealt with the deceptions employed in proselytizing and fund-raising. In Unification theology, gaining new members or donations does not reflect a member's own talents or persuasive powers as much as it indicates both God's favor and reward for proper faith and spiritual achievement, in the Calvinistic sense. This spiritual achievement, in the crucial days of "the advent of the third Adam" preached by Rev. Moon, encourages a pragmatic emphasis on the ends at the expense of the means. The following testimony puts this type of atrocity into sharper relief:

> *Moonies put an ad in an Austin paper that read, "Conscientious, creative people who want to help the world, call Janis at (phone number)." We received 70 calls a day and were taught how to lure the callers into the center by twisting the conversation around to their interests and then relating to them. They poured into the center, one scheduled every 15 minutes; our purpose was to get them to attend a weekend workshop* ("I Was Moon's Programmed Robot," *The Dallas Morning News*, Dallas, Tx., October 1975).

Such a story reaffirms to anti-Church persons that free will and "normal" inhibitions have been completely suppressed when their children relate such seemingly unscrupulous deeds.

Tales containing political and legal atrocities describe violations in the areas of loyalty to America, fair play in American politics, and law-abiding behavior. These stories generally portray the Unification Church either as a conspiratorial force directed by a foreigner or as a public nuisance. Since many of the articles in our sample had appeared before the press had delved far into possible connections between Moon's hierarchy and the Korean CIA, we encountered few accusations that Moon is really an agent for the South Korean government. Rather, the threat conveyed in most tales containing political-legal atrocities is reminiscent of an older "Yellow Peril—Fu Manchu" genre.

The tactics of this incursion into America's political affairs spill over into the "fair play" variation of political-legal atrocities. The Unification Church, as a legally recognized religious organization, is prohibited from political lobbying. Yet some atrocity stories, tinged with hints of sexuality, describe Moon's ongoing lobbying efforts (often referred to as "love-bombing") for South Korea.

Friction between the Unification Church and local law enforcement officials constitutes another example of this type of atrocity recounted by the tales. The Church members' offending acts are not so much *prima facie* atrocities as they are merely misdemeanors: ignoring "no soliciting" signs, blocking traffic at intersections as they peddle flowers and candy, peddling without licenses, and so forth. Nevertheless, ex-members' accounts of having casually ignored local ordinances in pursuit of their "higher ends" add to the stereotype of "blind" obedience and ordinarily law-abiding youth "manipulated" into devious activities.

Although least often found in our sample, stories reporting atrocities directed against specific cultural values did occur. There are, in every cultural system, some sacred symbols, some heroic-divine statures, and some revered roles to which most mortals should not aspire lest they be accused of outrageous arrogance or irreverence. Claimants to such exalted levels cannot, in present American society, be formally punished for sacrilege. However, such pretentions still constitute an atrocity in the eyes of conventional society. For example, while exoteric presentations of Unification theology may allude to, but never directly claim, Christ-like status for Moon himself, there is an unmistakable impression in the minds of most ex-Church members that Moon considers himself the "Third Adam," "the new Messiah," and the fulfillment of Christian soteriology. As one story aptly illustrates, "when his followers use the term 'God,' they mean 'Moon' " ("Anti-Moonies Demonstrate," *Jewish Bulletin*, San Francisco, Cal., June 11, 1976).

Having established the value violations cited by the "victims" of the Unification Church, we will next look at how the stories authorize punitive actions against the Church.

Actions may be said to be authorized when they are deemed appropriate tacitly or implicitly by a group (or its representative) that is recognized as legitimately evaluating or controlling those actions. In most circumstances authori-

ties voice direct approval or disapproval of actions; however, activities may be implicitly sanctioned by the failure of the authorities to voice any opinion. Implicit approval is likely to occur, for example, when the authority faces competing principles and does not act or when the authority would prefer an action which cannot be legitimated and condones it by choosing not to apply penalties.

Deprogramming typically involves implicit authorization which emanates from the construction of the offender-victim relationship. The individual Church member is portrayed as a victim of manipulative and coercive mind control by the Church. Parents and deprogrammers thereby become agents of restoration, transferring control from the Church back to the individual. The Church, rather than being a victim of harassment, is seen as the offender, having violated individual freedom of choice and action. Once the individual Church member is defined as having diminished competence, tacit authorization is relatively easily obtained.

Atrocity tales recount this tacit authorization from a number of sources such as religious leaders, parents, law enforcement agencies, and former Church members, and they often detail the agonizing nature of the decision that had to be made. The decision to proceed with deprogramming is presented as the resolution of a conflict between the values of conformity to the rule of law and family sanctity and loyalty, with the latter being defended as the pre-eminent value. Parental and legal authorization, then, frequently are linked since deprogramming may require forcible abduction and confinement. Both parental assertion that the actions taken were in the best interest of their offspring and the willingness of authorities to "bend" the law are necessary to gain full authorization.

Perhaps the ultimate authorization is provided by statements from former Church members who themselves have undergone deprogramming—the apostates.

The apostate plays a significant role in discrediting a deviant group and in authorizing social control measures. He or she can reveal the group's inner workings and secrets in such a way as to confirm suspicions and allegations about it, condemn the group with a knowledge and certainty no outsider could muster, and reaffirm the values of conventional society by voluntarily and publicly confessing the "error" of his or her ways.

Apostates contribute substantially to the larger-than-life quality of atrocity tales. Having flouted the dominant value system, apostates can hardly expect to regain acceptance in conventional society after merely losing interest in the deviant group. It is incumbent upon them to demonstrate convincingly that their reaffirmation of the dominant values is genuine, that they share with others negative sentiments toward the group, and that their former commitment was false witnessing.

Apostates' stories in our sample typically depicted members as initially resisting efforts to separate them from the Church but later conceding that their parents had been right all along. In the process of trying to explain their own seduction and to confirm the worst fears about the group, apostates are likely to

paint a caricature of the group which is shaped more by their current role than by actual experiences in the group:

> *Here I would like to conclude that had it not been for the strong action of my parents in actually forcing me to be "deprogrammed" from this "brainwashed" state, I would still be a totally dedicated member. There was little way for me to break the bonds of their control on my own, and I would have continued to sacrifice myself, ready to lie, cheat, steal and kill for the cause of the cult. I am thankful that after ten months of blind submission I am now free of this system and its manipulation. I am deeply grateful to those people who worked behind my back and in spite of my protest to accomplish this* ("The Moon Store," *The Observer*, Farmingdale, N.Y., November 13, 1975).

Thus the unique role of the family in securing and protecting individual freedom is publicly acknowledged.

Finally, we will examine how the atrocity tales attempt to motivate individuals to take action toward a socially defined goal.

Such action is motivated first by portraying the evil involved as being very powerful and not amenable to conventional social mechanisms, and second by providing specific individual and collective actions which can be undertaken or supported. Effective mobilization of individuals requires establishing the immediate salience of the problem for them. Many of the newspaper story headlines boldly proclaimed the impending threat:

"Cult Called U.S. Greatest Threat" (*Fort Worth Star Telegram*, Fort Worth, Tx., October 1, 1975).

"Moon's Church Called Clear and Present Danger" (*The Daily Times*, Mamaroneck, N.Y., October 27, 1975).

"The Dangers of the Moon Cult to Our Youth" (*The Courier News*, Plainfield, N.J., February 1, 1977).

" 'Escapee' Says Cult Wants 1984 World" (*The News*, Mexico City, December 4, 1975).

The text accompanying such headlines describes the evil associated with the Church as immensely powerful, akin to the Hitler Youth Movement and the Manson family. Comparing the Unification Church to these groups mandates immediate action because of the consequences of inaction and inattention to these earlier, also seemingly harmless groups. Nor can containment of the Church be left to conventional authority because, it is alleged, the Church has cunningly used its status as a religious organization to thwart prosecution.

Somewhat less emphasis is placed on specific actions to be taken than might be expected. Much greater attention is paid to detailing the atrocities, establishing authorization for "rescue," and proclaiming the imminence of the threat. In large part this seems to be due to the fact that the deprogramming movement is a small, highly decentralized movement which acts only when parents request information or assistance. Without a broader agenda for action, there are rela-

tively few opportunities for formal participation which can be offered. However, since the stories provide authorization to parents who do decide to deprogram their offspring, and the names and addresses of key deprogrammers and deprogramming organizations also are frequently contained in the articles, further mobilization may be unnecessary.

In conclusion, using published atrocity tales about the Unification Church, we have attempted to illustrate how illegal actions and coercion can be legitimized, authorized, and mobilized. We have seen how atrocity tales help construct a moral basis for otherwise illegal actions, providing deprogrammers and their supporters with what Smelser (20, p. 23) called "simple reassurances that the actor need not bear all the guilt for the deed because special circumstances justify it." By associating deviant groups with reprehensible violations of fundamental values, atrocity tales function at a seminal stage of the labeling process. They are the elements out of which a social context for evil is formed. By their outrageous, larger-than-life quality, they help mobilize reactions against targets. Most importantly, they provide the "evidence" (at both visceral and intellectual levels) for negative labels that later may justify violent actions.

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