DEVELOPING A GROUNDED THEORY OF JOINING AND MEMBERSHIP IN DEVIANT NONPROFIT GROUPS: ONE MAJOR CHALLENGE CONFRONTING RESEARCH ON AND THE FUNCTIONING OF THE THIRD SECTOR AND CIVIL SOCIETY

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This paper contributes 27 empirically grounded hypotheses (cf., Glaser & Strauss 1967) toward a general theory of fundamentally Deviant Nonprofit Groups ("DNGs") in any post-horticultural human society over the past millennium. We report the main results on joining and membership in DNGs from a larger case study content-analysis research project by the authors. Joining and membership in a DNG involve factors affecting who decides to belong to DNGs and why such members participate once they become members. Most DNGs studied were membership associations, often beginning as all-volunteer groups. When successful, these DNGs usually became paid-staff based nonprofit organizations but remained membership associations. The 60+ DNGs studied arose on all continents over the past 900 years of history. Major emphasis in sampling DNGs was placed on North American DNGs for practical reasons of document access.

THEORY AND RESEARCH ABOUT THE "DARK SIDE"

There is a theoretical paradigm shift that is taking place in interdisciplinary Civil Society/Nonprofit Sector (CS/NPS) Studies that involves paying MUCH more attention to the "Dark Side" of this Sector. This approach directly contradicts a prevailing view that the Nonprofit Sector can do little wrong (cf. Wagner 2000: Chap. 5 on "The Sanctified Sector"), given its most basic altruistic and humane values. This paradigm shift, correcting one of many "flat-earth paradigms" of the CS/NPS (author-identifying reference), requires extensive future theory development and empirical research on dysfunctions, deviance, misconduct, and dissent in and by nonprofit groups/organizations, including their paid-staff and volunteers of all types. This shift has been strongly encouraged by (senior author) in various prior and prospective papers (author-identifying references).

Four broad sub-categories of "Dark Side Studies" in our interdisciplinary field can be distinguished: (1) dysfunctions, both intentional and unintentional, of nonprofit groups or organizations (and their staff/volunteers) and of the whole Nonprofit Sector (e.g., Fishman 2007); (2) deviance and misconduct in or by conventional or mainstream nonprofit groups (e.g., Gibelman & Gelman 2001, 2004; Greenlee et al. 2007; Zack 2003); (3) deviance and misconduct in or by non-conventional, fundamentally deviant nonprofit groups (abbreviated here as "DNGs"; e.g., George & Wilcox 1992; Snow 2003); and (4) issues of accountability and regulation of nonprofit organizations (whether conventional or unconventional) to prevent, correct, or punish misconduct in or by them (e.g., Jordan & van Tuijl 2007; Sidel 2009).

The nonprofit groups in category #3 are distinguished from those in category #2 by the #3-type groups having either one or more basic goals, or one or more basic means of achieving their goals, or both, that are basically and persistently deviant from the most prevalent moral values and/or norms of their surrounding society at the given time.

GROUNDED THEORY DEVELOPMENT USING QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The data sources used were mainly published books that were ethnographic case studies, biographies, or histories of 60+ particular DNGs. These DNGs were chosen
purposively (not randomly) from across 900 years of human history and five continents, but with most emphasis on North American examples for practical reasons. The 24 main types of DNGs studied could be clustered into three broad categories: political influence or liberation, religious or occult, and hedonic satisfaction (with two sub-types of sensual expression and anger expression). We content-analyzed documentary sources for two or three specific DNGs (occasionally sets of specific DNGs) that fell into each of our 24 DNG types. Multiple document sources for the same specific DNG in our sample were used at times.

We sought both to develop new theoretical hypotheses (generalizations) from our data sources and to see if there was any empirical evidence to support 20 initial and the 7 new hypotheses developed by the first author. Support was considered to mean, in this exploratory research, the presence of positive empirical evidence for a given hypothesis in one or more documentary sources in at least one DNG (of the two, or sometimes three) studied in any one of the 24 DNG types. Such support was counted across the 24 DNG types studied to give a rough indication of the breadth of empirical grounding of the 27 hypotheses studied here.

RESULTS: SIGNIFICANT EMPIRICAL SUPPORT ACROSS THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE 24 DNG TYPES STUDIED FOR NEARLY ALL HYPOTHESES

The first author had developed 20 initial hypotheses about joining and membership by informal, qualitative content analysis of about 100 books on DNGs. These were read over a period of years in conjunction with a university course on the topic he taught for many years (author-identifying reference). He added another 7 hypotheses developed during the present joint project, which involved more formal and systematic content analysis. This resulted in a total of 27 final hypotheses about joining and membership in DNGs that were studied seeking empirical support. These 27 hypotheses could be categorized under two main headings, Joining and Membership, and then 8 sub-categories under these (space limitations prevent their description).

Some 23 of the 27 (85.2%) hypotheses received empirical (“grounding”) support for at least 21 of the 24 (87.5%) DNG types studied. The other four hypotheses also were supported for the large majority (15-20) of the 24 DNG group types.

CONCLUSION

A grounded theory about joining and membership in DNGs was partially developed and strongly supported by content analysis of many case studies of 24 types of these groups. All these 27 grounded theory hypotheses about joining and membership factors require future, more rigorous, empirical testing. But the present study shows that some theoretical “order out of chaos” can be achieved in the study of many quite disparate types of DNGs, contrary to what many observers might think. The DNGs studied ranged from the multinational Al Qaeda terrorist network to the North American Hell’s Angels outlaw motorcycle gang to an Australian transvestite club to the Peoples Temple new religion (“cult”) in the USA and later Guyana (Jonestown). Finding strong and consistent empirical support for the many theoretical commonalities among these and the full set of 24 DNG types that we studied is no mean feat. We have begun that process quite successfully here and elsewhere (author-identifying references).

(Note: TEXT = 999 words)
REFERENCES


