MEMBERSHIP IN THE NEW AGE GROUP SILVA MIND CONTROL

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ABSTRACT

This research reports the findings of an exploratory study of the members of the New Age group Silva Mind Control. To date, there have been few empirical studies of New Age groups, and little is known about what types of people practice New Age beliefs. The findings of this research show that members of this New Age group: tend to be middle to upper-class white females, come from religious backgrounds, and still participate in traditional churches. The research also examines commitment among members of Silva Mind Control and found that social networks were the most important predictors of group commitment. Specifically, those who had friends and family members who were members of Silva Mind Control, were more committed to the group.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last two decades there has been an emergence of a number of very diverse quasi-religious movements. Some of these movements are based on elements borrowed from many ancient beliefs such as astrology or Zen Buddhism; while others are based on concepts from popular psychology and the "human potential movement". In the 1980's the media categorized these movements as part of the "New Age Movement" (McGuire 1987; Melton, Lewis 1992).

The New Age Movement encompasses such a wide variety of beliefs and groups that much of the literature expresses some difficulty in defining it. There are a vast number of practices and beliefs that are associated with the New Age Movement, such as meditation, astrology, tarot card reading, ESP, channeling, and belief in extra-terrestrials. There are also a variety of organizations one can go to practice these beliefs. Defining the movement is further complicated by the manner in which it crosses or infiltrates the boundaries of many religious groups that one might anticipate would be hostile to nontraditional spirituality. There are many members of mainstream religious denominations, for example, who practice meditation, explore alternative healing techniques, or follow astrological advice. These persons often consider themselves to be good Christians, Jews, or whatever, and can be missed in research which classifies populations into mutually exclusive categories. There are others, however, that have left "traditional" religions and have totally immersed themselves into New Age groups and beliefs (Lewis 1992).

Although New Age ideas and practices have become an emerging part of American culture, the New Age Movement has frequently been regarded as a fringe movement and has often been given less attention than a passing fad (Campbell, Brennan 1990). In fact, when examining an overview of the social scientific perspectives of the New Age Movement, Melton and Lewis (1992) found little in the way of empirical research and believe one direction that should be immediately pursued is quantitative research.

This research is concerned with the constituency of the New Age group Silva Mind Control. It is an exploratory analysis and has two purposes. First, the research will attempt to determine the kinds of persons who identify themselves with Silva Mind Control (SMC). This will focus on the respondents' demographic characteristics and religious beliefs. Second, the research will investigate why persons join SMC and what type of persons are most likely to remain committed to the group. This article will describe the findings and assess them in regard to conclusions established in previous research.

SILVA MIND CONTROL

Silva Mind Control (SMC) is one of many New Age groups whose primary focus is self-discovery and self-improvement (Kyle 1993). Such groups are characterized by a convergence of modern Western psychotherapy with many ancient philosophies of Eastern religions. They often attempt to put their members in touch with themselves, with others, and with the universal forces of the cosmos (Kyle 1993; Melton, Lewis 1992). Members of these types of groups resist conceiving their lives as driven by forces against their will, subservient to fate or chance. Rather, they believe that people have the ability to control their own lives and destiny.

> Even should they do this with the aid of someone else—therapist or guru—they try to do so as equal partners in the enterprise, taking sole responsibility for themselves. (Appelbaum 1981)

Silva Mind Control was founded in the late 1960s by Jose Silva who, after several years of

research, developed his own methods to teach people how to reduce stress, improve their memory, and develop psychic clairvoyance. Like many New Age groups, SMC trains its members through lectures and seminars which are offered for a fee. The seminars attempt to teach students certain philosophies of life, improve their psychic abilities, diagnose and heal physical and emotional illnesses, and make use of exercises that promote altered states of consciousness. SMC usually gains members through word of mouth and through free introductory lectures and demonstrations.

The Basic Silva Mind Control instruction series consists of four sequential courses which can be taken individually or as a unit. The entire series is completed through forty-eight hours of intensive instruction. Instructors are trained at the Silva Institute in Laredo, Texas and are chosen for their above average psychic ability and proficient oral skills.

The basic premise of Silva Mind Control is that people create their world through their thoughts and attitudes. People are therefore responsible for what happens in their lives and can get what they want in life by positive thinking and improved psychic ability. Silva Mind Control offers methods and techniques to help people bring out what they want in life. If you want to create a pleasant environment, for example, you should act and think optimistically. If you have negative thoughts you should cancel them out by saying "cancel cancel." If someone asks you how you are doing you should answer by saying "better and better." In this way one can make their world better simply through positive thinking.

The basic technique of instruction for SMC is meditation through "voice programming." Students are talked down and guided into different levels of consciousness by the instructors. The programming is meant to be very soothing and relaxing, and theoretically lowers one's brain frequency. Students are conscious the entire time and learn to mentally count down and back out of these mental states along with the instructor. The purpose of this programming is to teach students how to get to a level of consciousness where they will be able to release tensions and perform psychic feats such as healing or ESP. By repeating the programming process up to fifty times during the seminar a habit pattern or conditioned response is formed in which students become proficient at the technique. Students are then able to "go to level" by themselves, without the help of the instructor (Appelbaum 1981; Hen-

derson 1975; McGuire 1987).

Visualization is also a key theme in Silva training. As the students meditate, instructors talk them through several visualization techniques. With repetition students improve their visualization skills which theoretically helps them become better psychics because they become better able to visualize a problem, their goals, or future event. For example, if one is over weight, they may visualize many of their favorite unhealthy foods tasting bad. Because students are functioning in a meditative state, their visualization experiences and suggestions become tremendously powerful. Many participants claim that they have lost weight, stopped smoking or eliminated other bad habits by using this technique. Others claim to become so adept at envisioning what they want that they are able to influence future events and mentally alter the course of their lives (Henderson 1975).

After graduating from the Silva Mind Control Basic Lecturer Series students are often encouraged to take the course over again, at no extra cost, as many times as they want to get "reprogrammed." Graduates are also qualified to take the Silva Graduate and Ultra seminars. Only 13 instructors world wide are qualified to teach the graduate seminar, while only someone named Silva (Jose, his son, or daughter) can teach the Ultra seminar. Both the seminars are developed to teach graduates how to tune and refine their skills. There is also more emphasis on learning new healing techniques and reaching deeper states of meditation.

Many Silva graduates are not content with only repeating the courses. Many form their own groups which get together approximately once a week at one another's homes. Such groups usually practice "case healing", but many also practice other techniques such as energy circles. Many of the members of these groups form close friendships while trying to solve each other's problems. It is also within these groups that potential instructors refine their skills and gain experience in working with others.

DATA AND METHODS

The data were collected from a 1994 questionnaire of participates of the Silva Mind Control Ultra and Graduate Seminars. The Ultra and Graduate Seminars are the "upper-level" seminars one can take from Silva after one has completed the Silva Basic Lecture Series. Therefore, participates of these have shown at least some continued commitment to the

**Table 1: Demographic Breakdown of SMC Respondents and the Population
(in percents) (N=127)**

	SMC*		Population	
Sex	**%**	**N**	**%**	**N**
Female	71	90	58	849
Male	29	37	42	624
Race				
African American	5		13	205
Caucasian	87	111	83	1258
Other	8	10	4	54
Education				
No College	16	20	75	1024
At least some college	68	87	19	257
Holding a Graduate degree	16	20	6	84
Household Income				
$20,000 and under	18	23	29	368
$21,000 to $40,000	34	43	31	403
$41,000 and over	48	61	34	435
Refused/not applicable	--	--	6	75
Marital Status				
Legally married	42	53	60	1805
Living with a partner	8	10	--	--
Single	14	18	20	600
Divorced	29	37	11	326
Widowed	7	9	6	186
Separated	--	--	3	74
Work Status				
Full-time	56	71	50	729
Retired	21	27	13	189
Part-time	13	16	13	194
Keeping house	5	6	17	254
Student	3	4	4	62
Unemployed	2	3	3	39

*No entry suggest the surveys did not ask the same question. Chi-square comparisons of SMC
members and general population were all significant at p > .01.

group by taking one or more of these upper-level seminars. Surveys were distributed in class at four seminars given in Cleveland and Akron, OH; Las Vegas, NV; and Hollywood, FL. Respondents were assured complete confidentiality and that persons associated with SMC would not have access to the surveys. One hundred and twenty-seven complete surveys were obtained.

In order to make comparisons between responses of the Silva graduates and the general population, data from the 1994 General Social Survey were used. The General Social Survey has been an ongoing survey of social indicators of the American population since 1972. Data for the General Social Survey were collected from a national multistage probability sample of English-speaking persons 18 years of age or over who were living in noninstitutional settings within the continental United States.

Commitment to SMC was measured by creating an Organizational Commitment Index composed of nine items: attendance at seminars, frequency of meditation or "going to level", frequency of using Silva healing techniques, frequency of using other Silva techniques, amount of group literature read, amount of time listening to group tapes, frequency of using Silva techniques to help others, frequency of using Silva methods to solve one's own personal problems, and

Table 2: Religious Demographics and Beliefs of SMC Respondents and the General Population (N=127)

	SMC		Population	
	%	N	%	N
In what religion were you raised?				
Protestant	40	51	61	1809
Catholic	43	55	30	917
Jewish	7	9	2	51
Other/None	10	12	7	205
How often do you attend religious services?				
Never	23	29	19	464
Once or twice a year or less	24	31	17	413
Several times a year	9	11	16	389
About once a month	5	6	9	216
Nearly every week	16	20	6	142
Every week	11	14	24	582
Several times a week	12	15	10	241
How often did your family attend religious services?				
Never	4	5	5	53
Once or twice a year or less	13	17	6	62
Several times a year	7	9	10	113
About once a month	4	5	4	50
Nearly every week	25	32	26	299
Every week	42	53	38	435
Several times a week	5	6	11	124
Rate your church in meeting your spiritual needs				
A	18	23	34	278
B	13	16	35	287
C	26	33	22	182
D	21	27	5	45
F	22	28	4	33
Please circle which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.				
I don't believe in God.	0	0	2	53
I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is anyway to find out.	0	0	4	116
I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.	25	32	7	209
I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others.	1	1	5	134
While I have my doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.	11	14	19	520
I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.	63	80	63	1773
Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible?				
The Bible is the actual word of God and it is to be taken literally, word for word.	1	2	36	357
The Bible is the inspired word of God, but not everything should be taken literally.	63	80	49	488
The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, & moral perceptions recorded by man.	36	45	15	144

Chi-square comparisons of members of SMC and the General Population are all significant at the p > .01, except for current church attendance, family's church attendance, and belief in God.

number of times that one participates in activities with other group members other than seminars. The nine items were weighted equally. Reliability as measured by Cronbach's alpha was .75. The mean was 24.94, with a standard deviation of 5.43.

RESULTS
General Demographics

Very few studies have focused on the demographics of persons who practice New Age beliefs. Bird and Reimer (1982) analyzed participation rates in new religious and para-religious movements as indicated by surveys administered in Montreal. In comparison to the population in general, Bird and Reimer (1982) found that participants in para-religious movements were likely to be single, female, and middle-class.

Two other empirical studies concerning New Age believers were done by Wuthnow (1976) and Feher (1992), both of which focused specifically on persons who practiced astrology. From a sample of persons in the San Francisco Bay area, Wuthnow (1976) found that those who believed in astrology were of lower education, black or hispanic, and were more likely to be separated or divorced. In contrast to Wuthnow, Feher (1992) found that those involved in astrology were overwhelmingly white and highly educated. The only similarity between the two studies was that the majority of respondents in both samples were female.

Demographically, the majority of respondents in this study tended to be middle to upper-class white females. A demographic comparison of members of Silva Mind Control with the general population is reported in Table 1. Eighty-seven percent of the members of SMC surveyed were white and 71 percent were female. When compared to the general population, members of SMC had higher incomes and were more highly educated. Over 48 percent of the Silva graduates had a household income greater than $41,000 and 84 percent had completed at least some college. Members of SMC also had higher rates of divorce than the general population. Twenty-nine percent of SMC current marital status was divorced, while 11 percent of those in the general population were divorced. Demographic differences between SMC members and the general population were all significant at the .05 level.

Religious Demographics and Beliefs

The New Age movement can be hard to define for social scientists because it crosses and infiltrates the boundaries of many "traditional" religious groups that one might anticipate would be hostile to nontraditional spirituality (Melton, Lewis 1992). This presumption was explored by Donahue's (1993) research concerning the prevalence of New Age beliefs among American Protestants. When examining a nationwide sample of six Protestant denominations, Donahue (1993) found that endorsement of New Age beliefs such as astrology and reincarnation was infrequent, but attitudinal statements supportive of New Age ideologies were endorsed by nearly a third of the respondents. Donahue (1993) also found that New Age beliefs and attitudes were unrelated to other measures of religiousness, satisfaction with one's present congregation, and most demographic variables. There was evidence, however, that New Age beliefs were more common among theological liberals.

This research examined the religious demographics and beliefs of SMC graduates. The findings are presented in Table 2. In this sample, 43 percent of the respondents were raised as Catholics, 40 percent were raised as Protestants, and 17 percent were raised in other faiths. Members of SMC did not differ significantly in their rates of church attendance compared to the general population. Seventy-two percent of the SMC respondents said that, when growing up, their family went to religious services at least once a week. The results of this research show that members of SMC continue to participate in traditional churches, approximately half (53%) of those SMC members surveyed continue to participate in traditional churches at least several times a year and 38 percent attend church nearly every week. However, members of SMC did differ significantly from the general population in rating their current church. Sixty-nine percent of the SMC members gave their congregation a grade of a C or less in meeting their spiritual needs, compared to 31 percent of the general population.

When compared to the general population, there was not a significant difference in SMC members' conception of God. Over sixty percent of both the general population and members of SMC said that they had no doubt that God exists. Members of SMC, however, were more liberal in their belief in the Bible. Only 1 percent of the members of SMC believed that the Bible should be taken literally, compared to 36 percent of the general population. These differences were significant at the .05 level.

Table 3: Reasons for Joining Silva Mind Control (N=127)

	Percentage
Financial problems	43
Physical illness	40
Problems of interpersonal relationships	32
Did not join in search of a solution to a problem	24
Psychological problems	17
Disenchantment with church or religious group	9
Marital problems	8
Loneliness	8
Distress brought on because of a death	8

Note: Respondents may have given more than one answer.

Membership and Commitment to SMC

The questionnaire asked respondents their reasons or motivations for initially joining SMC. The results are presented in Table 3. The two most common reasons members gave for joining SMC were financial problems (43%) and health problems (40%). Thirty-percent stated that they joined because of problems with interpersonal relationships and 24 percent stated that they did not join in search of a solution to a problem.

Table 4 provides a series of independent variables correlated with the Silva Mind Control Commitment Index. The upper half of Table 4 shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the motives for joining SMC and continued organizational commitment. None of the initial motives for membership were significant in predicting organizational commitment.

Several demographic variables were significant in predicting organizational commitment. Whites were more committed to SMC than nonwhites ($r = -.34$). The higher one's income and educational attainment, the less one was committed to SMC ($r = -.23$ and $r = -.25$, respectively). Gender ($r = -.07$), age ($r = -.07$), and work status ($r = -.10$) were not significant predictors of commitment to SMC. Protestants did have higher degrees of commitment to SMC than non-protestants ($r = -.27$). However, other religious variables were not significant in predicting commitment, such as church attendance ($r = -.02$), childhood church attendance ($r = .05$), belief in the Bible ($r = .13$) and belief in God ($r = .17$). Those who were members of other New Age groups and practiced other types of New Age beliefs did not have a higher degree of commitment toward SMC ($r = .08$

and $r = .11$, respectively).

The two strongest predictors of commitment to SMC where number of friends and family members who were members of SMC. The more friends and family a respondent had that were members of SMC, the greater their commitment to SMC ($r = .41$ and $r = .40$, respectively).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When examining the demographic profiles of adherents to the New Age group Silva Mind Control this research found that members tend to be middle to upper-class white females, come from religious backgrounds, and still participate in traditional churches. One finding that consistently appears in research on New Age and nontraditional religious groups is that women tend to be highly represented. This may be because New Age and nonofficial religions present alternative religious roles for many women. Historically religion has been one of the most important sources of defining male and female gender roles and traditionally most mainstream religions have defined women's place in society as inferior to men's. New Age and nontraditional religious groups, however, are more open to alternative gender roles because they are based upon alternative sources of authority and often provide women with a chance to express their concerns for meaning and belonging. Throughout history women have been prominent as healers, mediums, and midwives and thus, have become leaders in many occult and nontraditional religions. This may explain why many women are attracted to the New Age movement. In the New Age movement women have the chance to develop leadership and power by becoming psychics, channelers, healers, tarot card readers, and astrologers.

This research was also concerned with the traditional religiosity of Silva Mind Control graduates and resulted in a number of interesting findings. The research shows that SMC respondents come from religious backgrounds and tend to continue to participate in many traditional churches. However, the majority of SMC members gave their current church a low rating in meeting their spiritual needs. Compared to the general population, members of SMC were not more liberal in their conception of God, but were more liberal in their belief toward the Bible.

This research also examined members' initial motivations for joining Silva Mind Control and commitment among group members. The

Table 4: Correlations of Independent Variables with Group Commitment (N=127)

Independent Variables	Commitment to Group
Joined because of:	
Financial problems	0.10
Physical illness	-0.04
Problems of interpersonal relationships	0.18
Psychological problems	-0.17
Disenchantment with church or religious group	-0.16
Marital problems	0.09
Loneliness	-0.13
Distress brought on because of a death	-0.18
Did not join in search of a solution to a problem	0.02
Race (2=White, 1=Non-white)	-0.34
Household inccome	-0.17
Years of Education	-.25*
Work Status (1=unemployed, 2=employed)	-0.10
Sex (2=female, 1=male)	-0.07
Religious affliation (2=Protestant, 1=NonProtestant)	-0.27
Marital Status (1=married, 2= other)	0.12
Church attendance	-0.02
Childhood church attendance	0.05
Belief in the Bible	0.13
Belief in God	0.17
Current church rating (A=1, B=2, C=3, D=4, F=5)	-0.06
Participation in other new age groups	0.08
Practice of other new age techniques	0.11
Number of friends who are SMC members	.41*
Number of family who are SMC members	.40*

*$p < .05$

results showed that SMC members believed that they were motivated by some form of deprivation when joining the group. The two most common reasons members gave for joining SMC were financial problems and health problems. However, when correlated with an organizational commitment index, none of these motivations were significant predictors of group commitment. These contradictory findings may due to the fact that during the course of their participation members of SMC are provided with "reasons" or "justifications" for why they joined and continue their participation. "Vocabularies of motives" are often supplied "after the act" to explain the "underlying causes of the act" even though they may not explain how the act came about (Mills 1940). Thus, the motives or reasons for joining a group or movement may arise out of the interaction with its members and its recruitment agents (Snow, Zurcher, Ekland-Olsen 1980). In this case, SMC seminars are particularly designed to sell new recruits on the benefits of continued commitment to the group. In fact, a large part of the Silva Basic Lecture Series is devoted to case studies in which Silva graduates tell new recruits what Silva Mind control has done for their life and how SMC will benefit the recruits.

Variables measuring social networks were the strongest predictors of commitment to SMC. Those respondents who had friends and family members in SMC, reported higher commitment to the organization. This finding supports several previous studies (Geriach, Hine 1970; Heirich 1977; McAdam 1986; Snow et al 1980) which found that most important factor in predicting group activism is prior contact with another group participant. For example, when examining the process of recruitment among members in several different social movements, Snow et al (1980) found that the majority of recruits were individuals who had previous associations with movement members. While Snow's research focused on the process of recruitment, this research demonstrates the importance of social networks in continued group commitment. Even though it has been recognized that the deprived are

often associated with cults and sects (Lofland 1966); these findings show that continued group commitment did not so much involve feelings of deprivation or other social psychological factors, but may be more related to the influence of family and friends.

In conclusion, the New Age movement can no longer be considered a fringe religious fad, but it has become an emerging part of American culture. However, very few social scientific studies have examined the New Age movement and its followers. Future studies need to explore why persons join New Age groups, members' commitment to New Age groups, women's roles in the movement, as well as examining many of the rituals and beliefs of the New Age Movement.

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