Life Crises among the Religiously Committed: Do Sectarian Differences Matter?*

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Members of three sectarian groups (Catholic Charismatics, Christian Scientists, and Baha'is) were studied in terms of their perceptions of the number, types and reactions to crises they had experienced. It was hypothesized that ideological and structural differences between groups would result in differential perceptions of and adaptations to crises. It was found that the groups did not differ in the number of crises reported by members Further, in all but a few cases, definitions of *types* of crises experienced were a function of member characteristics rather than group affiliation. We found, however, that sectarian differences exert a consistent effect regardless of member characteristics on *reactions* to crises

The relationship between religion and adaptation to stress, or life crises, constitutes an on-going debate in the literature. While theorists of religion such as Durkheim (1915), Jung (1933), Allport (1950), and Frankl (1955), saw religion as a potentially positive force in people's lives, those following Freud's lead (1927) argued that religion was an illusion which hindered mature and healthy development in individuals and constituted a "crutch" for psychologically unstable people.

The myriad of empirical research studies over the past several decades analyzing the role of religion in psychological adjustment, as well as its impact in the more generalized and nebulous area of anxiety, is a maze of mixed conclusions. One set of studies finds religiosity and religious commitment variables related positively to psychological maladjustment (Graff & Ladd, 1971; Heintzelman & Fehr, 1976; Fehr & Heintzelman, 1977; Wilson, et al, 1967) and greater anxiety (Rokeach & Kemp, 1960; Dittes, 1969; Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975). However, there are other studies which show that the religiously affiliated or committed are better adjusted than the non-religious (Srole, Langner, Michael, & Opler, 1962; Lindethal, Myers, Pepper & Stern, 1970; Stark, 1971).[1]

Despite the fact that the issue of religion and adaptation to stress has been studied by numerous researchers utilizing various measures of both religion and adjustment, one

1 A major difficulty in interpreting and synthesizing conclusions regarding religion and adaptations to stress lies in the numerous definitions and operational measures of both religion and stress utilized in specific studies. As Baker and Gorsuch (1982) point out, simplistic definitions of religion have caused comparisons of studies to be almost impossible. Likewise, adjustment and maladjustment can be operationalized either in terms of a generalized state or specific manifestations of anxiety

glaring lacuna in the literature is the influence of different religious ideologies on the perception of stressful events and reactions to stress or crises.[2] Sociologists of religion have traditionally argued that one of the major functions of religion is to provide systems of meaning to people, especially in times of crisis and suffering (e.g., Malinowski, 1925; Wach, 1944; Durkheim, 1915, O'Dea, 1966). But, while all religious groups share a transcendental referent in terms of their ideologies, they differ radically in ways of interpreting the world and events that occur in the lives of individuals. It could well be the case that the type of religious group with which one identifies is more predictive of adaptation to stress than the religious-nonreligious variable utilized in most previous studies, whether affiliation/non-affiliation (Wilson, 1965; Wilson & Kawamura, 1967), frequency of attendance (Lilliston & Brown, 1981; Gurin, Veroff & Field, 1960; McCann, 1962), degree of devoutness (Berman, 1974), involvement in intense religious experience (Ness & Wintrob, 1980; Lilliston & Brown, 1981), or intrinsic-extrinsic orientations (Shaw, 1970; Hood, 1974).

Religious group membership and its relationship to psychological stress may be especially salient when considering sects and the many new religious movements, since ideological differences are more pronounced among them than among traditional denominations. Gary Schwartz (1970) contends that the most important deficiency in the contemporary sociological theory of religious affiliation is precisely that it tends to underestimate the significance of normative variations in sect ideologies. He argues that, while ideological differences between religious groups are secondary to the members of traditional denominations, sectarian groups believe that their ideology and no other points out the correct road to salvation (77).

In this paper, we analyze perceptions of and responses to life crises by members of three different sectarian groups: Christian Scientists, Catholic Charismatics, and Baha'is. The groups were selected, in part, because their theologies differ significantly in terms of definitions of phenomena such as illness, tragedy, psychological stress, and death. In addition, both official teachings and structural mechanisms available to assist members differentiate the groups in terms of possible responses to crises. One reason group differences have not been taken into account in previous studies is, no doubt, the fact that the relationship between religion and stress has been traditionally viewed from a social psychological perspective alone. However, structural variables, such as a group's ideology and the nature of the roles assumed by leaders, clergy, and lay persons, are central to understanding social psychological phenomena such as individuals' coping responses. In this paper we analyze individual data concerning respondents' perceptions of crises and behavioral responses to them in the context of their religious group affiliation.

HYPOTHESES

Given the ideological and organizational differences among the three religious groups studied, the following hypotheses directed the research reported in this paper:

Hypothesis I: Christian Scientists will experience fewer crises than either of the other

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2   A computer search of Psychological Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, and MEDLINE sources from 1968-1981 did not reveal a single comparative study in which ideological differences between religious groups were analyzed in terms of differential reactions to crises on the part of members

two groups. Catholic Charismatics are encouraged to admit their weakness and turn for help to God as Healer. To admit crises, therefore, is a first step in acknowledging the need for God's help. Within the Baha'i faith, there is a conscious effort to interpret personal and social change as inevitable and related to the achievement of a new world order; unique crises, therefore, are seen as part of a larger world event and as a natural facet of life. Because the Christian Science philosophy states that false beliefs are the result of sin or error, life crises are often considered illusory and simply the manifestation of improper thought. It follows that such crises might be more easily denied by members.

Hypothesis II: Catholic Charismatics will experience more self crises than either of the other two groups, while Christian Scientists will experience more health crises. For Baha'is, life structure/life goals crises will be greater than for either the Charismatics or Christian Scientists. In the Charismatic Renewal, the concept "self" is stressed by placing emphasis on becoming comfortable with oneself. Individuals are encouraged to keep a diary of feelings and thoughts, talk to other members about problems, consult with the priests and nuns about personal weaknesses, and pray that Jesus will overcome one's weakness with his strength. Therefore, attention is focused on the self which should enhance the perception of crises dealing with the self. Among the Christian Scientists, on the other hand, to admit weakness and fault is to indicate improper thinking. Good health is indicative of overcoming sin with right thought. As a result, health issues ought to be highly salient to Christian Scientists. Baha'i ideology emphasizes that the goals of the individual, as well as the structure of one's daily life, should fit into the larger pattern of inevitable and constant change moving humankind toward universal peace and unity. Therefore, we expect heightened sensitivity to life structure/goals issues among Baha'is.

Hypothesis III: Catholic Charismatics and Baha'is will be more likely to react to a crisis by turning toward the group membership for help and support, while Christian Scientists will rely more on the self to solve crises. Among the Charismatics, fellowship is very important as an intensive support system, communal meetings forming the core of their religious practice. Likewise, communal activities are frequent for Baha'is and members are encouraged to consult with the group about major life decisions and problems. Conversely, Christian Scientists place emphasis upon individual action in striving for correct thinking. Only in very specific instances is a practitioner called on. Moreover, group meetings tend to focus on personal testimony about healings rather than on direct interaction among members.

SAMPLE AND METHODS

For each of the three religious groups, the Christian Scientists, Catholic Charismatics, and Baha'is, samples of 50 active members were interviewed during 1978. All resided in the Houston metropolitan area. Subjects from all three groups were administered a common interview instrument, consisting of both closed and open-ended questions, and lasting an average of two hours. Working through the leadership of each group, combined snowball-quota samples were selected. The total number of individuals active in each group was examined in terms of selected characteristics (income, education, occupation, sex, age, and length of time in the group), and the final samples were chosen to reflect these distributions. Core members of each group suggested members to interview whose

characteristics matched the quotas. Therefore, it can be assumed that sample subjects represent the more active and fully committed members of their groups, and that the samples represent their groups at least demographically.

The present study is unique in that we used the same interview instrument for all three groups. Most comparative studies in the area of sects and new religious movements rely on secondary analysis of responses to questions which are not identical across groups (e.g., Snow, Zurcher & Ekland-Olson, 1980; Stark & Bainbridge, 1980). In such studies it is difficult to assure reliability among questions. In addition, most comparative studies of religious groups are conducted at various times, often years apart, and for a variety of purposes. Historical factors, therefore, and differences in research purposes frequently make comparisons difficult. In order to minimize such problems, we developed a standard instrument for all three groups, which was administered to all respondents within a three-month period and under as similar conditions as possible.

In addition to interview data on members, we studied organizational aspects of each group by talking to leaders, studying official documents and, most importantly, doing participant observation within each group. Members of the research team spent approximately six weeks in each group, attending every function possible and meeting informally with group members. The qualitative data that resulted proved invaluable in interpreting findings from the more structured interviews.

Three dimensions of crises were examined: *number* of crises perceived by respondents, kind or *type* of crises perceived, and *reactions* to perceived crises. In the analyses that follow, N's represent crises types or reactions, rather than respondents. Overall, 150 subjects cited 1122 crises and 1049 reactions, or an average of 7.5 crises and 7.0 reactions per subject. The total N's for this study are therefore 1122 and 1049, not 150.

The three crisis variables were operationalized in both structured and unstructured questions. For example, one question asked: "How were you feeling in your life when you first joined the group?" (Interviewer's note: Cover such topics as goals, interests, relationships with family and friends, meaning of life.) There were also a series of probes in the interview schedule which asked respondents for a sequential recounting of difficulties encountered once they joined the group. Yet another question asked the respondents to cite major life crises experienced during their life, when they occurred, and how they recall handling them. Taken together, these questions elicited responses which formed a representation of crises encountered during the individual's life course. In this approach, judgment that a problem was a crisis rested with the respondent. In other words, if the respondent volunteered to verbalize a problem, it was considered of significant magnitude to be classified a crisis.[3]

Based on previous social psychological studies on the nature of life crises (Dohrenwend & Dohrenwend, 1974; Lowenthal *et al.*, 1976; Homes & Rahe, 1967; Snow & Phillips, 1980), types of crises were coded into the following seven categories:

1) *self crises* cover problems such as poor self image, dependency on others, dependency on drugs or alcohol, depression, emptiness, suicidal thoughts, fear of going insane, and a sense of powerlessness.

3. The data reported in this paper are based on retrospective reporting, as is virtually all research in the area of new religious movements We recognize the inherent problems with this type of data However, practical considerations preclude any other method

2) *biological family crises* include parental relationship problems, both between parents and between parents and respondent; parental physical and/or mental problems, child abuse, and parental separation and/or divorce.

3) *marriage/relationship* crises include broken relationships or engagements, marital difficulties, separation, divorce, untimely or unwanted pregnancy.

4) *money, job, and school crises* include quitting school, difficulty obtaining or maintaining a job, and financial problems.

5) *life structure/goals crises* include meaninglessness of life, and conversely, taking responsibility for one's life and one's choices in life; deciding what to do in life and what kind of person one wants to be.

6) *health crises* include nervousness, headaches, physical illness or accident of self; illness, accident or death of parents, siblings, spouse, friends, or children.

7) *friends* includes absence of, or dissolved, friendships, estrangement from friends, difficulty making friends, and new or dissolved mentorships.

Finally, content analyses of the answers to the various questions and probes resulted in ten categories of *reactions* to crises:

1) *search for new friend*/new relationships;
2) *search for support*/search for way of coping/search for answers;
3) *increase group activity*/increase participation in group;
4) *joining group* because spouse a member;
5) *read scriptures*/study religious works;
6) *pray*;
7) *professional treatment* (mental or physical);
8) *consult leaders*/local spiritual assembly/practitioner/friend in group;
9) *positive thinking*; and
10) *passive responses* such as wait for the Lord/accept what the Lord sends/ withdraw/put in God's hands.

In determining whether significant differences exist among groups in regard to perceptions of type of crisis and types of reactions to them, data were submitted to chi square analysis. Likewise, contingency tables were constructed comparing the three groups while controlling for demographic variables. In these instances, chi square was again utilized to test the significance of relationships. Given the nominal level of measurement of both independent and two of the three dependent variables, this statistic is most appropriate.

FINDINGS

Hypothesis I, which predicted differences in the number of crises experienced by members in each religious group, was not supported by our data. The means of number of crises reported are 6.3, 6.1, and 10.1, respectively, for the Baha'is, Christian Scientists, and Catholic Charismatics. When analysis of variance was computed, no statistically significant differences were found.

When nature or types of crises reported are examined (Hypothesis II), chi square analysis yields statistically significant differences, as can be seen in Table 1. The main differences in this table are to be found in only two areas: self and health crises. As

TABLE 1

DIFFERENCES IN TYPES OF CRISES BY RELIGIOUS GROUP (percentages)

Type of Crises	Catholic Charismatics	Christian Scientists	Baha'is
Self	28%	15	18
	(142)*	(46)	(57)
Family	8	8	10
	(40)	(24)	(32)
Marriage/Relationships	13	13	17
	(67)	(40)	(51)
Money/Job/School	8	9	8
	(40)	(27)	(26)
Life Structure/Life Goals	13	10	12
	(66)	(31)	(28)
Health	23	40	28
	(114)	(120)	(87)
Friends	7	5	7
	(36)	(16)	(22)
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(505)	(304)	(313)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate number of crises

Chi Square = 41 52

df = 12

$p < 001$

predicted, given their emphasis on healing and health as religious phenomena, Christian Scientists are much more likely to report health crises than are members of the other two groups. While health crises are by far the most frequent for Christian Scientists, and comprise 40% of all reported crises, they are second in importance for Catholic Charismatics. It is the single most frequent type of crisis reported by Baha'is as well, though only a little over a quarter of all their crises are in the health area. When the Baha'is were founded in the mid-1800's in Persia, opium smoking, which was widespread throughout the Middle East, was condemned by the founder in his insistence on good health. The data in Table 1 appear to confirm the continued centrality of the concern. Conversely, and as predicted in Hypothesis II, Catholic Charismatics most frequently report self crises, which rank second for Christian Scientists and Baha'is. The latter two groups report such crises 10-13% less often than Catholic Charismatics. In no other case of crisis type do percentage differences between groups exceed four points. This means that our expectations that Baha'is experience more life structure/goal crises than others was not confirmed.

TABLE 2

DIFFERENCES IN TYPES OF CRISIS REACTIONS REPORTED BY RELIGIOUS GROUP (percentages)

Type of Reactions	Catholic Charismatics	Christian Scientists	Baha'is
New Friends	5%	3	3
	(21)*	(8)	(8)
Search for Support	39	18	44
	(178)	(57)	(121)
Increase Group Activity	3	4	1
	(12)	(12)	(3)
Joined Group Because Spouse a Member	0	3	6
	(0)	(1)	(2)
Read Scriptures	1	6	0
	(5)	(18)	(0)
Pray	31	18	34
	(142)	(56)	(93)
Professional Treatment	5	4 7	6
	(24)	(15)	(17)
Consult Leaders	3	19	10
	(15)	(60)	(28)
Positive Thinking	0	25	3
	(0)	(80)	(1)
Passive Responses	13	2	1
	(60)	(6)	(4)
Total	100%	100%	100%
(N)	(459)	(313)	(277)

*Numbers in parentheses indicate number of reactions

Chi Square = 368 93

df = 18
$p < 001$

More striking than differences in types of crises experienced by members of each group are the differences in the ways members react to those crises (Hypothesis III). As predicted, Table 2 shows that Baha'is and Catholic Charismatics are more inclined than Christian Scientists to search for support, a response given less than half as often by Christian Scientists. On the basis of qualitative data, it is apparent that the Charismatics look to group members primarily for affective, emotional support, while the Baha'is seek answers and advice based on interpretation of their sacred writings. Nevertheless, members of both groups turn to fellow members for help when facing a crisis.

Christian Scientists, as their theology suggests, most frequently engage in positive

thinking, a response all but totally absent in the other two groups. Likewise, Christian Scientists use prayer only about half as often as members of the other two groups, for whom this is the second most frequent response. One reason for this difference might well be the fact that Christian Scientists use the term "prayer" less frequently in their religious terminology than do the other two groups. Christian Scientists tend to talk about "meditation," "reflection," or "studying the Bible" rather than praying, while the Catholic Charismatics conceptualize a definite communication between the individual and Jesus Christ, and the Baha'is also visualize a personal dialogue with God.

Contrary to our expectations, Christian Scientists are more likely to consult their leaders about a crisis. Catholic Charismatics rarely do so. Passivity is also a response found among Catholic Charismatics, but rare among the other two. Given their emphasis on events as reflections of God's Divine purpose, this is perhaps not surprising. For Baha'is and Catholic Charismatics, search for support and praying constitute between 70 and 78% of their responses, while accounting for only 36, of Christian Scientist responses. Conversely, for this latter group, positive thinking and consultation with leaders constitute 44% of their responses, compared to 3% and 10% for the former two groups. Only when we drop to the third-ranking response (passivity for Catholic Charismatics and leader consultation for Baha'is) do Baha'is and Catholic Charismatics differ notably. In all other reaction categories, the percentages for all groups are quite small, but it is noteworthy that only among Christian Scientists is scriptural reading cited as a response.

On the basis of the data reported in Tables 1 and 2, it would appear that among the religiously committed, the sectarian group to which members belong shapes perceptions of the types of life crises experienced and reactions to those crises. However, there is another possible explanation for the differences found. It may be the case that very different kinds of people recruit themselves into the three different groups. If this is the case, then the differences noted may be an artifact of differences in member characteristics, and not a result of organizational affiliation. Characteristics such as age, sex, marital status and social class may influence crises experienced and crises reactions. Therefore, it is important to examine whether the three groups differ in terms of the demographic characteristics of their members, and if they differ, whether intergroup differences remain after controls are instituted for these variables.

Indeed, such demographic differences do appear to distinguish the three samples (see Table 3). On the average, Christian Scientists are 8 years older than Catholic Charismatics and 6½ years older than Baha'is (which may help to account for the greater frequency of health crises reported by Christian Scientists). Males constitute only 28-30% of the Catholic Charismatics and Christian Scientists, but 36% of the Baha'is. While only 8% of Christian Scientists are single, never married, 22% of the Catholic Charismatics and 30% of the Baha'is are, and many more Baha'is are divorced or widowed (18%) than Christian Scientists (8%) or Catholic Charismatics (4%). Educationally, where 66% of Christian Scientists at least graduated from college, the comparable figure for Baha'is is 48% and for Catholic Charismatics 36%. Likewise, Christian Scientists tend to have a somewhat higher income than do members of the other two groups. Using education and income as indicators of social class, it is therefore apparent that Christian Scientists are higher in SES than members of the other two groups.

TABLE 3

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS (percentages)

Demographic Characteristics	Catholic Charismatics (N = 50)	Christian Scientists (N = 50)	Baha'is (N = 50)
Age·			
18-22	8%	4%	6%
23-28	20	14	30
29-34	22	20	16
35-44	26	8	18
45-55	18	28	16
56-58	6	26	14
$\overline{X}$	36 56	44 76	38.26
Sex			
Male	28%	30%	36%
Female	72	70	64
Marital Status:			
Single	22%	8%	30%
Married	74	84	50
Separated or Divorced	4	2	12
Widowed	0	6	8
Education.			
<High School	0%	0%	2%
High School Diploma	24	6	16
Vocational Training	6	4	8
Some College	34	24	26
College Degree	32	44	22
Professional/Graduate Training	4	22	26
Income			
<10,000	8%	6%	14%
10-14,999	10	6	18
15-19,999	20	22	20
20-29,999	22	26	16
30-39,999	22	16	16
40-49,999	6	10	0
50-59,999	4	6	6
60-79,999	2	4	4
>80,000	6	4	4
no data	0	0	2

In order to determine whether sectarian affiliation *per se* affects crises perceptions and reactions, or whether one or more of the demographic variables account for the differences found earlier, a series of three-variable contingency tables were developed for both dependent variables, each of which controlled for one of the five demographic variables (age, sex, education, marital status and income). Chi square tests were used to determine whether the relationships between sectarian affiliation and the dependent variables (crises types and reactions) remained after controls were instituted. A simiilar analysis for number of crises reported was not done since no significant differences by sectarian affiliation

were found initially. It is not possible to reproduce all of the tables (a total of 10) in this paper. The findings, however, are relatively uniform and can be easily reported.

Considering first the dependent variable, "type of crises," in only a few instances does there remain a statistically significant relationship between sectarian affiliation and crises types after controls are instituted. In other words, generally speaking, differential perception of crises types by group are an artifact of the different characteristics of the people who join each group. The exceptions to the above generalization are, however, interesting to note. The relationship between group affiliation and crises types remain statistically significant for females (but not males), the married and the divorced (but not the single), those in their early 30's and aged 46-55 (but not other ages), those who have some college but not a degree (alone among educational levels), and those earning less than $10,000 per year (but not more).

Turning now to the other dependent variable, reactions to crises, almost without exception the control variables fail to eradicate the original relationship between sectarian membership and crises reactions. Statistically significant differences remain between religious groups after sex, age, marital status, education, and income are controlled. There are only two exceptions to this, among the widowed and among those who received vocational training after high school, and in both cases the N's are very small. Unlike definitions of crises types, therefore, responses to crises clearly are mediated by group affiliation among the religiously committed.

DISCUSSION

The reasons for the exceptions of those categories of people for whom group affiliation is significant in defining types of crises (females, married and divorced, those in their early 30's and 46-55, those with some college and lower income people) is not ascertainable in our data. However, these categories tend, with the likely exception of the married, to represent people who disproportionately suffer a large number of real crises and/or an acute sense of deprivation. Those lowest in income probably suffer the largest number of crises and problems of any group, as well as a profound sense of deprivation in comparison with other income levels. Those with some college but no degree have been found in other studies (Campbell, 1981) to be more dissatisfied than any other educational category. This may reflect heightened expectations based on some college experience, ummet by reality due to their lack of degree. The two age categories specified, early 30's and "middle age" (46-55), are often viewed in the life-cycle literature as periods that are especially crisis-filled and stressful (Levinson, 1978). In an era when expectations held by females have increased but the reality of discrimination persists, a sense of relative deprivation might be prevalent for members of this sex, compounded by crises emerging from gender role changes themselves. Clearly, the divorced status is associated with both a high level of crises and a sense of deprivation (Goode, 1956).

It would appear, then, that the "exceptions," for whom sectarian affiliation does differentiate their definitions of crises types, are generally similar in being particularly vulnerable to crisis and/or a sense of deprivation. Under these conditions, religious group membership may play an especially important role in people's definitions of reality, inasmuch as it allows them to ". . . no longer compare themselves to other in terms of

their relatively lower . . . position, but in terms of their superior religious status" (Glock & Stark, 1965:244). In other words, particular theologies may have maximum impact on the self and world views of those who are most deprived (absolutely or relatively) because they are viewed as a way of coping with their deprivation. This interpretation of why certain categories of people are more influenced by religious factors than others in their perceptions of crises is congruent with the deprivation theory of religious commitment, which is well-documented in the literature (Glock, 1964; Hine, 1976; Argyle & Beit-Hallahmi, 1975; McNamara, 1978).

It is likely that definitions of the number and types of crises are constrained by "reality" for most people most of the time. The death of a spouse, divorce, job loss, etc. have a certain facticity that leaves relatively little room for differential definition. However, most such life crises have no clear "solution." Therefore, commitment to a particular theology, and a group structured around that theology, provide "solutions" unique to sectarian members.

An extensive body of literature exists which pertains to psychological mechanisms which facilitate or retard coping behavior in crises. However, very little is known about how demographically different categories of people define and react to crises. It is undoubtedly the case that individual level, psychological factors mediate the relationship between categorical membership and crises. Unfortunately, in the present study, psychological variables were not measured. However, the data presented do strongly suggest that, in addition to psychological variables, demographic factors play a role in how crises are defined and handled. Finally, the present data indicate that in addition to demographic-level variables, in certain instances sectarian ideology is highly predictive of crises reactions. In short, both psychological and sociological perspectives contribute to an understanding of how people define and respond to crises.

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