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Cognitive and emotional characteristics of New Religious Movement members:

New questions and data on the mental health issue

Coralie Buxant, Vassilis Saroglou, Stefania Casalfiore, and Louis-Léon Christians

Université catholique de Louvain, Centre for Psychology of Religion

Correspondence should be addressed to:

Vassilis Saroglou, Université catholique de Louvain, Department of Psychology,  
Place du Cardinal Mercier 10, B-1348 Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

E-mail: [Vassilis.Saroglou@psp.ucl.ac.be](mailto:Vassilis.Saroglou@psp.ucl.ac.be)

Phone: + 32 10 47 82 74

Fax: + 32 10 47 48 34

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### Abstract

The common assumption that members of so-called “cults” and New Religious Movements (NRMs) have mental health problems is usually countered by empirical research suggesting a normal personality profile. Going further than the normality-pathology distinction, we investigated affective-relational (parental and adult attachment) and cognitive (need for closure) needs, world assumptions, and past and present depression as reported by members ( $N = 113$ ) of a variety of NRMs in Belgium that are somewhat socially contested. Comparisons were made with data from the general population. Results suggest a fragile past (insecure attachment history, high need for closure, and depressive tendencies) but a positive present (positive world assumptions, security in adult attachment, no depression) and an optimistic future, at least on the basis of self-perceptions. Overall, the pattern of results fit well with what we know from psychology of conversion in general.

### Keywords

New religious movements, religious personality, world assumptions, need for closure, attachment, well-being

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Common representations of people who join groups called “cults” by some parts of society or “new religious movements” (NRMs) by many scholars in religious studies include the idea of some pathology or psychological disturbance in their adherents. Either these people are seen as psychologically ill--if not they would not have joined these groups--or the groups may cause psychological harm and have a negative impact on mental, if not physical, health (see e.g. Abgrall, 1996, and Singer, 1995, for the French- and the English-speaking world, respectively). Contrary to such assumptions, some recent reviews of empirical studies emphasize the general conclusion that, with regard to many important mental health variables, members of NRMs or so-called “cults” are not psychologically ill: they do not differ from the general population, or at least their mean scores are within what are considered normal limits, or the incidence of some unhealthy patterns is not higher than in the average population (e.g., Anthony and Robbins, 2004; Lilliston & Shepherd, 1999; Richardson, 1995; Saliba, 2004).

Interestingly, this rather positive picture is often in contrast with other sources of information, mainly, ex-members of NRMs or their psychiatrists or counselors (see Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinosky, 2000). These sources are often criticized for possible biases such as self-selection of clients or benefits from self-definition as a victim (see Saliba, 2004). However, there is still room to question the positive picture. First, when one focuses not on the broad distinction between normality and pathology but on more specific personality traits related to well-being, studies suggest some emotional instability of people who join NRMs (Aronoff et al., 2000, for a review). Second, as Aronoff et al. (2000) observed, some methodological weaknesses in previous studies (e.g., insufficient statistical power) may have masked the presence of negative indicators of mental health among NRM members.

*The present study*

The first aim of the present study was to go further than the normality vs. pathology debate and focus on psychological dimensions that, although non pathological, may indicate some psychological vulnerability of NRM members, especially on the emotional-relational and cognitive levels of functioning. As we will elaborate below, this concerns *quality in attachment, need for cognitive closure, basic world assumptions, and depressive tendencies*. Not only were most of these realities not previously investigated in the context of the NRMs, but also members of NRMs are here compared for each of these realities to the general population in Belgium. Such a comparison strategy has not often been adopted in previous research on the NRMs.

The second aim of the study was to integrate the consideration and interpretation of results into what we know from psychology of religion in general. Most NRMs or cults are religious groups: they make reference to a kind of Transcendence and they include the main components of religion as theorized by Glock (1962), i.e. specific ideas and doctrines, rules of behavior, ritual, community, and emotions. Again, such an integration of results into psychology of religion in general is not often present or explicit in previous research, as if the NRM psychological literature were mainly distinct.

The third aim of the study was to focus on a European country where no empirical psychological studies on NRM members have been carried out, i.e. Belgium. Indeed, most of the empirical psychological research on cults and NRMs has been conducted in the USA or in Anglo-Saxon countries in general (see reviews by Anthony & Robbins, 2004; Aronoff et al., 2000). It is thus interesting to carry out a study in a country that, contrary to the multi-religious, melting-pot character of the USA--probably promoting more tolerance towards marginal religious groups--is still strongly marked by a dominant Catholic tradition. In such a context, joining a new, marginal, and often socially contested religious movement may not be

simply a question of free choice between equal opportunities, but may reflect psychological characteristics that ask for more attention by researchers. In other words, we are not convinced that, psychologically speaking, the main characteristic of NRMs is that they are new and, consequently, that people who join them are simply individuals open to novelty.

A fourth objective of this study was to control for social desirability: positive self-reported information given by NRM members is often seen with suspicion. Although it is debatable today whether social desirability (SD) scales tap a self-presentation bias or a real personality dimension (see, e.g., Ones, Viswesvaran, & Reiss, 1996), especially in the context of religious people (see, e.g., Lewis, 1999), it is still interesting to include a SD measure. Of course, a high impact of SD on results cannot be considered to indicate with certainty a self-presentation bias because it may simply indicate a “true” personality reality. However, the absence of such an effect suggests that the information provided can be taken seriously.

### *Questions and hypotheses*

*Attachment to parents in childhood.* Recent theory and research emphasize the role played by attachment history and quality of parental attachment on religion and specific trajectories relative to religion (Kirkpatrick, 2005, for a review; see also Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004; Ullman, 1982). According to the *correspondence* model, secure attachment to parents seems to be generalizable to other relationships, which implies a positive relation with God and continuity with the parents’ religion when individuals are religiously socialized. According to the *compensation* model, people with insecure attachment to parents become religious seekers for emotional stability purposes: they may find in God a substitute attachment figure, experience intensification of religion and radical conversions, or abandon their parents’ faith. The religious group may also be seen as providing emotional and social support. To our knowledge, no empirical study has been carried out on attachment and

religion in the context of cults or NRMs (but see Granqvist & Hagekull, 2001, for a study focusing on interest in the New Age). Our hypothesis was that NRM members have a history of insecure parental attachment. Many of them have abandoned their parents' faith and converted to new religions or new religious groups. Many if not most of these groups are of small size, imply high entitativity (Hogg, 2004), and are characterized by strong social ties between members and strong emphasis on emotions and emotional expression (Champion & Hervieu-Léger, 1990), a context that could answer to the need for affective regulation.

*Adult attachment to partner.* The correspondence and compensation models can also apply to adult attachment (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Security in adult attachment may generalize to other contexts such as work or religion. But insecure relationships with the partner may also push people to find a source of emotional and relational stability in religion and religious groups. Because of the cross-sectional character of our study it is unclear whether the NRM participants should be highly secure or insecure. For instance, people who are actively interested in spirituality books are prone to report high anxiety in their adult attachment (Saroglou, Kempeneers, & Seynhaeve, 2003). However, if intensification of--an eventually new--faith and belonging to a religious group has a stabilizing effect, we can expect these participants to be rather secure in their attachment or at least not to be insecure.

*Need for cognitive closure.* Individual differences in need for closure (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) mean that some people are high in need for order, structure, and predictability in their internal and external world. They prefer answers rather than keeping questions open, and they may be intolerant of ambiguity or uncertainty. Interestingly, this need for cognitive closure does not necessarily mean the need for a *simple* structure. Recent studies showed that the need for closure is related to dogmatism and can lead to difficulties and bias in information treatment; it can also predict rejection of diverging opinions and desire for consensus in a group (Webster & Kruglanski, 1998, for a review). People high in

need for closure prefer homogenous and self-resembling groups (Kruglanski, Shah, Pierro, & Mannetti, 2002), autocratic leadership and a centralized form of power (Chirumbolo, Areni, & Sensales, 2004; Pierro, Mannetti, De Grada, Livi, & Kruglanski, 2003).

We hypothesized then that NRM members are high in need for closure. This can indirectly be based on the nature of the groups they join. New, marginal, small, and/or contested religious groups are often supposed to provide clear--and sometimes simple--answers and beliefs regarding the meaning of life, world views, and theological assumptions, as well as clear-cut rules for religious practice and behavior in general. We have to note that simple religiousness--not only orthodox or fundamentalist religiosity--has been found to reflect high need for closure, especially need for order, at least if we refer to studies in Belgium on participants from the Catholic tradition (Duriez, 2003; Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003).

*Basic world assumptions.* As theorized by Janoff-Bulman (1989, 1992), individuals construct perceptions of the world and themselves through basic assumptions that provide a sense of invulnerability. The author proposed three primary categories of assumptions: (a) benevolence of the world, i.e. the degree to which one views the impersonal world and people positively or negatively, (b) meaningfulness of the world, i.e. the degree to which one believes that good and bad outcomes happen to people following a certain logic such as justice and not randomness, and (c) self-worth, i.e. assumptions of people that they themselves are good, lucky, and worthy.

Theoretically, it is assumed that NRM and cults members make a strong distinction between a negative, external world and a positive, internal one; other people are seen as threatening and the world in general is seen as chaotic and disorganized (see Barker, 1996). People who hold such negative worldviews may lack self-esteem and may not have



confidence in themselves or their capacities. Belonging to a cult-like NRM is even suspected of maintaining or strengthening these negative world views in people.

If NRM or cult members are so vulnerable, as they are often depicted, and/or if these groups have a negative impact on trust in oneself and the world, we may expect members of these groups to differ from the average person in holding lower levels of Janoff-Bulman's world assumptions. Interestingly, in a study comparing majority (European ancestry) to minority (mostly African) Americans, it was found that minority persons saw the world, personal or general, as less benevolent and saw themselves as less lucky (Calhoun & Cann, 1994).

*Depressive tendencies.* Social support and strong social ties, regularity and frequency of rituals and other religious activities, opportunities for emotional expression and euphoric atmosphere may be important mechanisms through which religion and religious groups can be beneficial in facing depressive tendencies and depressive symptoms. Indeed, in a recent meta-analysis, it was found that greater religiousness is negatively, albeit weakly, associated with depressive symptoms (Smith, McCullough, & Poll, 2003). However, such a negative association only reflects a cross-sectional reality. Similarly to the literature on attachment and religion, one can hypothesize that either people who are low in depression “fit” well with religious activities (correspondence model) or that religion has a euphoric impact, especially on people with depressive tendencies (compensation model).

We expected that, as converts, members of NRMs would have a history of some depressive tendencies and moments. A large body of research suggests that negative life events and subsequent stress and depression are often present previous to conversion (Paloutzian, Richardson, & Rambo, 1999). This may also apply to cults and NRMs. For instance, Galanter (1996) found that converts to the Unification Church reported high psychological distress before joining the group compared to a matched control sample;

interestingly, a “relief effect” was found as a consequence of joining the group, i.e. a decline in the feeling of psychological distress. However, it is not to be excluded that, even if there is an increase in well-being after joining the group, NRM or cult members may still be lower in depression than the general population (see, e.g., Day and Peters, 1999).

*Comparisons between converted and non-converted members.* Finally, we intended to compare those NRM members who were already religious before joining the group--even if they had another religious affiliation--with those who, although non-believers previously, “found” the faith. With regard to the quality of attachment and to depression, as mentioned above, previous theory and literature pushes us to hypothesize some insecurity in parental attachment as well as some depressive tendencies in the period previous to joining the group. No previous theoretical or empirical work exists regarding the need for closure or world assumptions among converted people. However, if a core element of conversion is the creation or restoration of a new meaning system (see Paloutzian, 2005), one may expect converted NRM members to be high in need for closure (need for structuring and ordering meaning and life) but not necessarily high or low in world assumptions (both possibilities may help NRM converts to give meaning to their existence).

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

The present study was conducted among members of religious groups that are rather new and small in size, somewhat marginal, and often contested by parts of Belgian society. These groups may be Christian or not, but it is the above-mentioned characteristics that allowed us to consider them as a whole and to compare their members with samples from the average population in Belgium where believers are traditionally Catholic. All groups to whom

we addressed our request for participation were cited during the sessions of the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on cults (Chambre Belge des Représentants, 1997) and were also cited as an object of worry for citizens in a recent report of the Belgian Center for Information and Advice on Dangerous Cults (2005). Undoubtedly, other groups have also been mentioned in these reports, but we selected groups that were at least somewhat representative in Belgium.

After sending a letter to the head(s) of these groups explaining in general terms the study's objectives ("finding individual and situational psychological mechanisms that are related to religiousness and spirituality as experienced in an engaged manner within specific groups"), we met with the head(s) of each group and we specified that the goal of the study was not to make a study of the groups themselves but to have data on the psychological parameters of religiousness among people with high religious engagement within specific groups in order to better understand this reality in comparison to general religiousness. The head(s) distributed the questionnaires to the members of their groups; they promised not to be selective in the distribution. Those NRM members who accepted to participate filled in the questionnaire anonymously and sent it directly to the researchers at the expense of the latter. The leaders of the groups were thanked for their collaboration. Later on, they received a summary of the results and they were free to communicate them to their members if they wished to do so; and individual participants who requested a summary of the results also received one.

In total, 405 questionnaires were distributed and 113 (28%) were returned. Gender was distributed as follows: 56% women and 44% men. Mean age was 49.1 ( $SD = 15.3$ ). More precisely, the participants in the present study come from: the Belgium Center of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON;  $n = 19$ ), different Catholic charismatic groups ( $n = 28$ ), Protestant Evangelical congregations ( $n = 25$ ), the Church of

Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons;  $n = 12$ ), the Seventh-day Adventist Church ( $n = 22$ ), and some other groups of Protestant inspiration but not members of the United Protestant Church of Belgium ( $n = 7$ ). Most participants were “first generation” members: only 25% of participants were born into the group or joined it before age 18 (all or almost all members of Charismatic groups, Adventists or Hare Krishna joined these groups as adults). Finally, we have to note that only two groups to whom we addressed our request did not accept to collaborate: the Church of Scientology and the Catholic movement Opus Dei. It is unclear whether these groups, which are seen very negatively by Belgian society, were afraid of or not open to researchers.

#### *Comparison samples*

There exists no unique sample of Belgian adults from the general population, and particularly from the French-speaking part of the country, where one can find data on all the measures we used in the present study. Thus, in order to make comparisons between NRM members and the general population possible, we used data collected in a variety of previous studies cited below. In all these studies, participants were Belgian adults from the same linguistic (French-speaking) community recruited through friends and acquaintances of the respective authors cited below (except when otherwise specified) and who volunteered to participate in the study without any reward. For the *attachment to parents in childhood*, we combined two samples from Buxant's (2002) and Saroglou, Delpierre, and Kempeneers' (2002) studies: respectively, 320 adults (mean age = 28, age range = 18-65, 40% male respondents) and 120 adults (mean age = 37, age range = 25-57, 36% men). To make the comparisons in the *romantic attachment with the adult partner*, we used the 181 adults from Saroglou et al. (2003), i.e. people approached when exiting big general bookstores (mean age = 27, age range = 18-58, 35% men) and the 196 married adults recruited by Lacour (2002)

(mean age = 45, range = 26-62; 50% men). The same sample of 181 Belgian adults from Saroglou et al. (2003) was also used for the comparison in *need for closure*. The normative data for the comparisons in the *basic world assumptions* were constituted through a combination of some previous data (Sydor, 1993) and data we collected especially for the present study ( $N = 128$ , mean age = 37, age range = 21-74; 58% men). *Depressive tendencies* in our NRM members were compared to 676 adults (mean age = 48, age range = 45-55, with 59% men) from two studies on the general (non-clinical) population (Hue, 2000; Hynderick, 2003). We referred to de Leval (2000) for the comparison with a clinical sample of people suffering from major depression diagnosed by a psychiatrist (110 adults; mean age = 47, age range = 25-60, 44% men). Finally, for *social desirability*, we considered Saroglou, Pichon, Trompette, Verschueren, and Dernelle's study (2005, Study 4) carried out on 109 adults (mean age = 33, age range = 17-68, 33% men). Finally, to compare the *religiosity* of our participants to the norms, we used the sample of 216 adults (mean age = 38, age range = 30-50, 41% men) from Saroglou (2003).

### *Measures*

*Attachment to parents in childhood.* We used the retrospective descriptions of attachment to parents (distinctly for father and mother) established by Hazan and Shaver (1987) in order to measure attachment styles, i.e. secure, anxious/ambivalent, and avoidant attachment. As other studies usually do, participants provided an evaluation on each of the six (two parents  $\times$  three styles) paragraphs in a Likert-type format (5-point scales), a method that provides finer assessment of attachment than the categorical measure. In order to simplify the presentation of results (two rather than six variables), following Granqvist (2002), we created two indexes of global insecurity, one for the mother ( $\alpha = .78$ ) and one for the father ( $\alpha = .76$ ), by adding up the scores on the two insecurity items and the inverted scores of the security

one. The two final indexes were weakly intercorrelated,  $r = .33$ . In addition, we asked participants to rate in 5-point scales the quality of their relations with family over three different time periods: before joining the group, at the moment of entering, and today (three items, in total).

*Experiences in Close Relationships Scale-Revised* (Fraley, Waller, & Brennan, 2000; our French translation). This is a 7-point Likert-format scale of 36 items measuring the two orthogonal dimensions of adult attachment, i.e. anxiety (e.g., “I am often worry that my partner will not want to stay with me”) and avoidance (e.g., “I am nervous when partners get too close to me”). The scale is based on analyses of previous attachment scales and taps the underlined structure of these measures corresponding to two orthogonal axes: anxiety about self and discomfort with contact with others. It has higher psychometric qualities in comparison to previous multi-item attachment scales (Fraley et al., 2000). The two-factor structure in our French translation was replicated in a previous study (Saroglou et al., 2003). Reliabilities were satisfactory ( $\alpha = .85$  and  $.89$ ).

*Need for Cognitive Closure Scale* (NFCS; Webster & Kruglanski, 1994; French translation by Caroff, Berjot, Fievet, & Drozda-Senkowska, 2002). In order to reduce the length and time of the administration of the whole scale (42 items), we only used the subscales of Preference for order (10 items) and Preference for predictability (8 items). These two subscales explain a substantial part of the total variance of the scale and constitute its most representative dimensions. The subscales are in a 7-point Likert-type format. Reliabilities in our data were  $.65$  and  $.75$ . Here are representative items: “I think that having clear rules and order at work is essential for success” (order); “I hate to change my plans at the last minute” (predictability).

*World Assumptions Scale* (WAS; Janoff-Bulman, 1989; French translation by Sidor, 1993). This is a 32-item questionnaire that examines participants’ basic assumptions about the

meaningfulness and benevolence of the world and about themselves. It consists of eight 4-item subscales representing assumptions 1. about the *benevolence of the world* (sample item: “The good things that happen in this world by far outnumber the bad”) and 2. *benevolence of people* (“Human nature is basically good”); about the meaningfulness of the world: 3. *justice* (“By and large, good people get what they deserve in this world”), 4. *controllability* (“Through our actions we can prevent bad things from happening to us”), and 5. *randomness* (“In general, life is mostly a gamble”); and about the self: 6. *luck* (“I am luckier than most people”), 7. *self-controllability* (“I usually behave in ways that are likely to maximize good results for me”), and 8. *self-worth* (“I am very satisfied with the kind of person I am”). For each of these subscales, reliabilities were respectively .71, .67, .79, .50, .72, .68, .63, and .53. Two subscales (*self-worth* and *controllability*) were not considered for further analyses because of their low reliability (.53 and .50).

*Well-being (Echelle Synoptique des Trois Temps; de Leval, 2001)*. This French scale (5-point Likert format) includes 40 items through which participants have to evaluate themselves on different aspects of well-being (e.g.: “I feel happy”, “I am sure of myself”, “I feel like I’ve succeeded in life”, and “I have a stable appetite”), and this three times, corresponding to the three periods of their life: “past”, “present”, and “future”. Low scores indicate depression. The scale has been validated on 260 adults (de Leval, 2002) and clinical scores have been obtained from a sample of 110 clinically depressed clients (de Leval, 2000). Reliabilities in the present study were satisfactory:  $\alpha = .88$  (past), .91 (present), and .87 (future).

*Social Desirability Questionnaire* (Tournois, Mesnil, & Kop, 2000). We included 20 items (7-point Likert format scale) from this validated French scale (total 36 items) measuring the two dimensions of social desirability ( $2 \times 10$  items), i.e. impression management and self-deception, similarly to the Paulhus (1991) Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding

(BIDR). The 20 items were selected on the basis of results from a previous study (Saroglou & Galand, 2004) on 250 young adults where these items were found to clearly constitute two distinct and unrelated factors. Reliabilities in the present data were satisfactory ( $\alpha = .77$ , for impression management, and  $\alpha = .82$ , for self-deception); the two dimensions were modestly intercorrelated,  $r = .34$ ,  $p < .05$ . Here are some sample items: “I always speak well about others”, “I always listen carefully when others are speaking to me” (impression management); “Sometimes I’m sad”, “Sometimes I doubt my own abilities” (self-deception).

*Religiosity.* Finally, three religious indexes (7-point scales) were administered asking for the importance of God, the importance of religion, and the importance of spirituality in life. These questions were asked twice, once for the present and once for the period before joining the group.

## Results

*Preliminary analyses.* Participants were highly religious. Mean importance of God, religion, and spirituality in their life was respectively 6.81, 6.11, and 6.77 (on a 7-point scale), whereas the same means are 4.11, 3.55, and 4.32 in adults of similar age from the general population in Belgium (Saroglou, 2003). As our sample was thus particularly religious, we could not use the religiosity dimension as a continuous variable for computing correlations.

The sample size of each group being small--although not negligible, given the difficulty for gaining access to these populations--we decided to treat all participants as a whole ( $N = 113$ ) when comparing them to samples from general population. We did this in order to avoid the risk of Type II error, i.e. rejecting true effects if we made distinct by group comparisons. In addition, ANOVA analyses indicated only few (8) between-NRM group differences comparatively to the number of variables (21) and respective comparisons.



Interestingly, post-hoc comparisons revealed that no group was systematically different from the others.

*Relations with family and parental and adult attachment.* As detailed in Table 1, participants reported an average positive quality in their relations with their family today. However, relations with family were less positive (but still above the median) before joining the group,  $F(1, 106) = 25.56, p < .001, \eta^2 = .19$ . The latter relations seemed to be even less positive at the moment of joining the group,  $F(1, 107) = 3.38, p = .07, \eta^2 = .03$ . Not surprisingly, the three indicators of the quality of relations with family were negatively related to the two scores of insecurity in parental attachment ( $r$ s varied from  $-.28$  to  $-.35$  for the father and from  $-.19$  to  $-.24$  for the mother).

As also detailed in Table 1, in comparison with data from adults in the average population (Buxant, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2002), participants of the present study retrospectively reported higher insecurity in attachment to the father. No significant difference was observed in attachment to the mother. When moving to adult attachment, significant differences were also observed, but in a somewhat opposite direction than in parental attachment. NRM members reported lower levels of anxiety in present relations with their partner when compared to normative data (Lacour, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003). However, they did not differ from the comparison data on avoidance in adult attachment.

*Need for cognitive closure.* As also presented in Table 1, members of the NMR reported both higher need for order and higher need for predictability than the adults of the comparison sample (Saroglou et al., 2003). Since high need for closure (especially order) seems to be typical of religious people in general (Saroglou, 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003; see also Duriez, 2003), we thus compared our results with the ones of highly religious (Catholic) people from the above-mentioned comparison sample of Belgian adults (Saroglou et al., 2003), i.e. people having scored 6 or 7 on the 7-point scale of importance of God in life. As

depicted in Figure 1, the NRM members reported higher levels of both need for order and need for predictability when compared with mainstream Catholic highly religious persons ( $M_s = 3.18, 2.81$ ;  $SD_s = 0.69, 0.80$ ;  $t_s = 7.61, 5.69$ ,  $p < .001$ , Cohen's  $d = 0.84, 0.62$ ).

*Basic world assumptions.* When the NRM members of the present study were compared to a sample coming from the general population (Sydor, 1993, and data collected by the authors for the present study), they were found to hold stronger beliefs on justice, benevolence of people, self-controllability, and on being lucky (see Table 1). Similarly, they believed less than the comparison group in the randomness of the world.

*Well-being.* In comparison with data from non-clinical population (Hue, 2000; Hynderick, 2003), NRM members were found to retrospectively report lower well-being (higher depression) in the past and to report somewhat--marginal significance--higher well-being in the perception of their future. However, no difference was observed regarding well-being as a current perception applied to the present (see Table 1).

Interestingly, the temporal--linear--evolution that seemed to be specific to our participants (see Figure 2) was significant: the perception of the past was more negative than the perception of the present,  $F(1, 95) = 4.16$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ , whereas the perception of the future was more optimistic than the perception of the present,  $F(1, 94) = 42.37$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .31$ . A linear evolution from present to future was also observed in the comparison data, although in their case the perception of the past was less negative than among NRM members.

Another type of comparison was possible, between the present data and a clinical sample of depressive people (de Leval, 2000). As Figure 2 clearly shows, NRM members have nothing in common with the depressive profile: the latter is characterized by very low well-being in the present, not only in comparison with normative data, but also in comparison with the same depressive participants' perception of well-being in the past and in the future.

*Social desirability.* As also presented in Table 1, NRM members were found to score lower in self-deception but they did not differ in impression management when compared with data from an adult population of non-NRM members (Saroglou et al., 2005, study 4). More importantly, correlational analyses indicated that social desirability was unrelated to the indicators of attachment to parents and to the adult partner, to present quality of relations with family, to present well-being, and to world assumptions (an exception was a negative association between randomness and impression management,  $r = -.22, p = .05$ ). A positive well-being was negatively related with self-deception ( $r_s = -.22$ , present;  $-.26$ , future;  $-.27$ , past;  $p < .05$ ). Finally, impression management was related to well-being reported for the past and the future,  $r_s = .26, p < .05$ , to the need for order and predictability,  $.28$ , and  $.25, p < .05$ , and to the reported quality of relations with the family in the past,  $r = .23, p < .05$ .

*Comparisons between the “converted to faith” and the “always religious”.* Overall, participants were rather religious and spiritual already before joining the group ( $M_s = 5.41, 5.36; SD_s = 1.95, 1.99$ ), but the increase of religiosity and spirituality from then to now ( $M_s = 6.81, 6.77; SD_s = 0.94, 0.70$ ) was significant,  $F_s(1, 99) = 44.72, 56.08, p < .001, \eta^2 = .30, .36$ . Participants may have continued in the same group, changed religious group, or have converted from non-faith to faith. All of them, however, are religious today. We thus focused on participants who were not religious before joining the group (i.e. people who scored from 1 to 4 in the question on importance of God at that period and now score from 5 to 7 on the same question;  $n = 26$ ). Interestingly, in all NRMs there were four to six people belonging to this category. We thus compared these people “converted to faith” on all measures with participants who were constantly religious (importance of God from 5 to 7 both before and now,  $n = 71$ ). No differences were observed on the three well-being indicators, need for closure, social desirability, and world assumptions. However, significant differences emerged with regard to the family- and attachment-related variables. Comparatively to the “always

religious”, participants who had “converted to faith” reported higher insecure attachment to the mother,  $t(90) = 1.94, p = .05$ , Cohen’s  $d = 0.44$  (the difference was not significant for the attachment to the father,  $t(90) = 0.80, n.s., d = 0.18$ ), as well as a lower quality in relations with family before and during the period of joining the group,  $t(94) = -2.42, p < .05, d = 0.53$ , and  $t(94) = -2.76, p < .01, d = 0.61$ . Interestingly, no differences existed between the two subgroups regarding the present adult attachment and the present quality of relationships with family.

## Discussion

Using established psychological measures and comparison data from the average population, the present study provided much information relative to cognitive, emotional, and well-being characteristics of members of different NRMs constituting minority groups and seen as suspect by parts of Belgian society. Overall, the results confirm the need to go beyond the simplistic psychopathology versus normality debate in reference to the members of these groups.

First, several *signs of psychological vulnerability* of these members emerged, especially *in terms of personal history and predispositions*. These include (a) an insecure attachment to the father and (b) somewhat problematic relations with the family in the beginning (before joining the group and especially during the joining process), (c) a somewhat negative view of personal well-being in the past (a reported depressive tendency), and (d) a high need for cognitive closure. Interestingly, the insecurity in parental attachment (in this case, attachment to mother rather than father) and the low quality in past relations with family were particularly high among those who had converted from non-faith to faith compared to those who were already religious when they joined the group.

The first three findings (a-c) are in line with previous research on conversion and emotion-based religiousness (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Paloutzian et al., 1999), and especially with research on sudden conversion (Granqvist & Kirkpatrick, 2004). The last result (d) is in line with previous research where religiosity, religious fundamentalism, and orthodoxy were found to reflect high need for closure (Duriez, 2003; Saroglou 2002; Saroglou et al., 2003). The present data suggest an even higher need for closure (order and predictability) among members of NRMs compared with strong believers from the mainstream Catholic tradition. Such a finding gives some indirect support to the idea that people who prefer NRMs (others may call some of these cults) over the traditional religions are looking for particularly clear-cut answers, beliefs, practices, and rules (see Wilson, 1970).

Second, several other results suggest the *absence of present disturbance and even a possible positive effect of belonging to a NRM on well-being*. The insecurity of NRM members in past parental attachment has been replaced by a non-anxious attachment to the partner in adulthood, always in comparison with adults in general from the same country. In addition, the quality of relations with the family has now increased compared with the period preceding the joining of the group. Such a combined result (problematic past and secure present attachment) may be considered as in line with the compensation model: religion or God may serve as a substitute attachment figure in the context of an insecure attachment history (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Indeed, previous literature suggests insecurity in attachment among converts or people with emotion-based religiousness if we place ourselves in a longitudinal perspective (compensation), but secure attachment from a cross-sectional perspective (correspondence) (Kirkpatrick, 2005). Moreover, the temporal-linear evolution of scores on the well-being measure also suggests a positive effect of membership. The depressive tendencies when referring to the past seem to have been overcome in the present and an optimistic vision of the future is mentioned compared to the present.

Third, contrary to what could be expected on the basis of the anti-cult/NRM literature, *the world did not seem to be threatening or negative*. The present NRM members even reported higher intensity of world assumptions than the comparison group. These include belief in the benevolence of people, belief in a meaningful world that is governed by a principle of justice and not randomness, and belief in one's self as valuable in terms of capacity for self-control and luckiness. Interestingly, such high intensity in these beliefs is in line with the profile of religious people in general, if one looks at the previous literature on similar constructs: strong just-world beliefs (e.g., Bègue, 2002; Dalbert, Lipkus, Sallay, & Gosh, 2001), positivity and trust in interpersonal relationships (Saroglou et al., 2005), self-esteem of intrinsically religious people, and a feeling of self-control (Koenig, McCullough, & Larson, 2001; see also Webb & Whitmer, 2001). The high scores on these world assumptions may also be understood in terms of the psychology of conversion: a core element of the conversion process is the creation of a powerful meaning system that gives positive meaning to one's personal life and usually implies high interpersonal values (Paloutzian, 2005).

However, some prudence is needed with regard to high scores on these three categories of world assumptions, i.e. self-worth, meaningfulness of the world, and benevolence of the world. As an experimental study suggests, affirming that one's life is meaningful and reporting personal growth may also be "illusory" or at least a consequence of defense against trauma and threat (Davis & McKeamy, 2003). Strong world assumptions were also found to be predicted by paranormal beliefs, including belief in New Age (Irwin, 2003). Thus, the hypothesis that NRM members may have experienced events in their lives that threatened their basic world assumptions (the latter are known to be affected in traumatic situations; Catlin & Epstein, 1992) is not to be excluded. Nevertheless, even if this were the case, the present reports of the NRM members rather suggest some positive effect of

belonging to NRMs. Neither can we neglect the fact that, to some extent, “positive illusions” are known to contribute to people’s well-being (Taylor & Brown, 1994).

*No evidence was provided that the positive aspect in reports on current well-being was contaminated by social desirability.* Impression management was not higher among NRM members and self-deception was lower than in the comparison group. In addition, social desirability did not seem to have an impact on attachment styles nor on the variables indicating the present quality of life, including most world assumptions. Impression management was only related to need for closure (a result indicating that such an orientation may be valued by our participants and probably by their groups) and to the indicators of the quality of the past (relations with the family, past well-being), a finding suggesting the possibility of higher vulnerability before joining the group than the one reported.

Finally, the comparison between the “always religious” and the “converted to faith” members of NRMs only revealed differences in the relational domain (relationships with family) but not in the cognitive (need for closure) and basic beliefs domain. This pattern emphasizes once more the predominance of relational-emotional over cognitive factors when one focuses on the psychological dynamics explaining radical changes regarding faith and religion.

Taken together, the results of the present study pointing out vulnerability in predispositions suggest that joining a NRM is not simply a question of a choice exempt from psychological constraints, as religious scholars sometimes assume when they emphasize the new reality of autonomous religious “bricolage” in a pluralist, moving, and individualized society (e.g., Hervieu-Léger, 2001). At the same time, our results also suggest the absence of negative effects on members’ mental health of belonging to NRMs and even a possible structuring role of the experience within the NRM, especially in terms of quality of personal and intimate relations, stability and quality of mood (no depression), and positive world

assumptions. Such a pattern fits well with the known effects of being religious and belonging to religious groups on mental health and subjective well-being, effects made possible through a variety of social, emotional, and cognitive mechanisms (Koenig et al., 2001).

However, because of several limitations of the present study, we should exercise caution in drawing generalizations or definite conclusions. First, the cross-sectional design and the self-reported aspect of the measures could lead to a “conversion bias”: converted people tend to underestimate their personal situation previous to conversion and to overestimate their present one (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Ideally, although difficult to realize in this research context, longitudinal research and measures other than self-reports would better guarantee accurate information. Nevertheless, this risk of self-presentation biases does not seem very high since in the present data social desirability was not particularly high nor did it have an effect on the intensity of answers.

Second, the return rate, somewhat low but not excessively so given the circumstances (contested groups, no direct contact between researchers and participants, questionnaires returned by mail), should urge us to be prudent about a possible sample selection bias and to wonder about those who did not respond to the study. This is especially the case if we take into account the fact that the questionnaires were distributed by the heads of the groups--an obstacle also impossible to overcome in this research context. The fact that our participants were highly religious may imply that they are probably among the most exemplary members (although it is very likely that all members are very religious); and the fact that *they* responded may imply that they are the happiest within these groups or those who profit the most from belonging to them. On the other hand, we should be careful not to translate high societal fears into extreme suspicion about such research information, at least not more so than for any other kind of research.



Third, the comparison normative samples were not ideal: they were different for each construct and were not a priori matched to our target population. However, they constituted the only available comparable samples from the adult population of the same country and language-speaking community, and it is already an advantage of this study compared to some previous ones that such comparisons were made possible.

Beyond these limitations, the results of the current study seem meaningful and coherent with previous theory and research in psychology of religion and psychology of conversion. Some questions remain unanswered and open the ground for future research. For instance, if this positive and structuring effect of the group for the self is true, an interesting question emerges whether such effects are long-term ones, especially with respect to what happens when one leaves the group. There is a need for longitudinal research focusing on the comparison between the individual reality within the group and the new reality of the same members once they exit the group. Another important question is the one of correspondence between offer and demand. The NRMs included in this study share several common characteristics: minority status, some or much traditionalism, novelty in the religious landscape, an emphasis on the importance of community life, and a somewhat negative perception by parts of society. Further research should investigate in more depth which of the above psychological realities (alone or together with others) may be responsible for or interfere with which of the observed findings. In fact, we still do not know exactly what specific benefits are offered by which specific group and for which specific types of needs.

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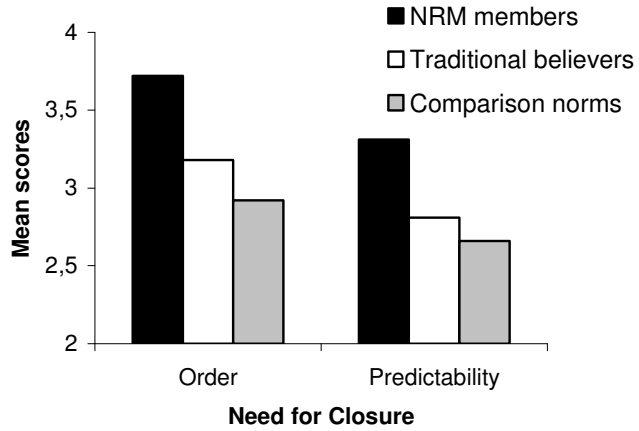
Table 1

*Means and standards deviations of measures in NRM members and the comparison groups*

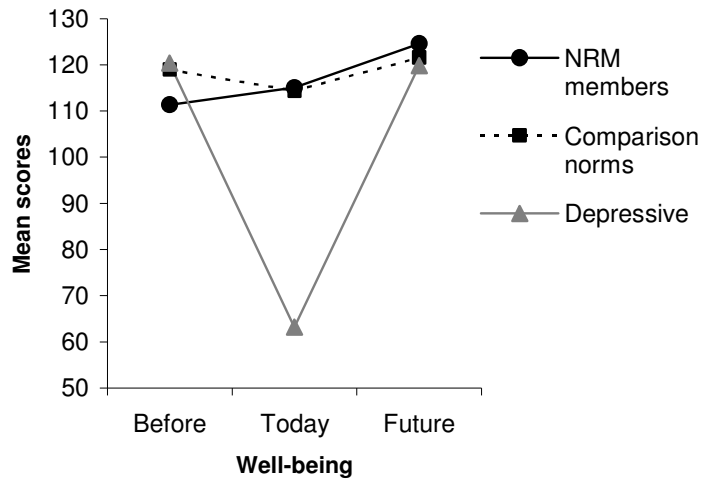
	NRM members		Comparison samples		Comparisons		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	T-tests	<i>d</i>	<i>dfs</i>
Insecurity in parental attachment							
Mother	1.98	1.06	1.91	1.23	0.59	0.06	545
Father	2.73	1.20	2.37	1.38	2.67**	0.28	545
Adult attachment							
Anxiety	2.85	1.14	3.78	1.18	-7.33***	0.80	465
Avoidance	2.43	1.03	2.53	1.00	-0.96	0.10	468
Need for closure							
Order	3.72	0.60	2.92	0.75	11.28***	1.18	282
Predictability	3.31	0.81	2.66	0.75	7.34***	0.83	281
World assumptions							
Justice	2.93	1.30	2.52	0.96	2.82**	0.36	239
Benevolence people	3.92	1.13	3.47	0.81	3.49***	0.46	238
Benevolence world	3.73	1.21	3.62	0.88	0.79	0.10	236
Being lucky	4.22	1.05	3.74	0.89	3.79***	0.49	238
Self-controllability	4.43	0.87	4.25	0.67	1.78 <sup>†</sup>	0.23	238
Randomness	2.33	1.16	3.86	0.94	-11.12***	1.45	239
Well-being (no depression)							
Before	111.38	18.93	118.96	13.93	-3.82***	0.57	773
Now	115.04	16.58	114.34	14.75	0.41	0.02	783
In the future	124.61	14.67	121.56	14.00	1.91 <sup>†</sup>	0.23	770
Social desirability							
Self-deception	3.53	1.09	4.62	1.03	-7.54***	1.03	281
Impr. management	4.96	0.89	4.83	0.82	1.17	0.15	282

Note. Cohen's *d* computed according to the formula:  $(M_1 - M_2) / \sigma_{\text{pooled}}$ .

<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$  \*\*  $p < .01$  \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



*Figure 1.* Need for closure (order and predictability) among NRM members, traditional believers, and comparison norms. Data on comparison norms and traditional believers come from Saroglou et al. (2003).



*Figure 2.* Well-being as reported before, today, and in the future among NRM members, comparison norms (Hue, 2000; Hynderick, 2003), and clinically depressive people (de Leval, 2000).