Using the Bounded Choice Model as an Analytical Tool: A Case Study of Heaven's Gate [1]

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to describe the "bounded choice" theory and to illustrate how this new model can be used as a tool for examining and analyzing high-demand groups, sometimes called cults. Based on findings from a comparative study of two cultic groups, a social-psychological theory is developed to interpret the behavior of true believers in a closed, charismatic context. Based on textual analysis and interview data, the Heaven's Gate cult is used to illustrate the conceptual framework, which is comprised of four organizational aspects: charismatic authority, the transcendent belief system, the system of control, and the system of influence. The result of this interactive dynamic is a "self-sealing system," that is, a social system that is closed to disconfirming evidence and structured in such a way that everything reinforces the system. Drawing on Anthony Giddens's (1984) theory of structuration, Herbert Simon's (1955, 1956, 1976) theory of bounded rationality, and Robert Jay Lifton's (1961) theory of personal closure, "bounded choice" theory helps us understand the seemingly irrational behavior of the most dedicated adherents. The theory attempts to take into account individual choice within the context of an authoritarian, transcendent, closed group.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the "bounded choice" theoretical model and to illustrate how this new model can be used as a tool for examining and analyzing high-demand groups or situations, sometimes called cults. This new approach uses a conceptual framework of four interlocking dimensions that I submit are integral to the social dynamic found in cults. The four dimensions are charismatic authority, transcendent belief system, systems of control, and systems of influence. The dimensions involve both structure and process. That is, they make up the framework of the social system, and they include social processes that uphold and reinforce that social structure. The four dimensions are defined briefly as:

Charismatic authority: This is the emotional bond between leader and followers. It lends legitimacy to the leader and grants authority to his or her actions while at the same time justifying and reinforcing followers' responses to the leader and/or the leader's ideas and goals. The relational aspect of charisma is the hook that links a devotee to a leader and/or his or her ideas.

Transcendent belief system: This is the overarching ideology that binds adherents to the group and keeps them behaving according to the group's rules and norms. It is transcendent because it offers a total explanation of past, present, and future, including a path to salvation. Most important, the leader/group also specifies the exact methodology (or recipe) for the personal transformation necessary to qualify one to travel on that path.

Systems of control: This is the network of acknowledged, or visible, regulatory mechanisms that guide the operation of the group. It includes the overt rules, regulations, and procedures that guide and control members' behavior.

Systems of influence: This is the network of interactions and social influence residing in the group's social relations. This is the human interaction and group culture from which members learn to adapt their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to their new beliefs.

The interrelated and interlocking nature of the four dimensions form a "self-sealing system," a social system closed in on itself and closed to the outside world. It is characterized by ideological totalism and processes of influence and control that may lead adherents to a high degree of commitment that I have identified as "charismatic commitment." Now the dedicated adherent becomes a "true believer" in the sense of being a deployable agent for the group or leader. Living within the bounded reality of the cultic social system, the cult member encounters no meaningful reality checks and becomes more and more enmeshed with and invested in the closed world of the group. For some, this may lead to a state of "personal closure," or the individualized version of the self-sealing system. The member's life and choices are constrained not only by the system but also, and perhaps even more powerfully, by the close-mindedness of the individual him- or herself who is functioning in alliance with that system. Now the dedicated adherent has entered a social-psychological state of being that I am calling bounded choice: in essence, life outside the cult has become impossible to imagine.

The exemplar group studied here is the Heaven's Gate cult, which came to prominence when the members committed collective suicide. On March 27, 1997, thirty-nine dead bodies were found in a mansion in Rancho Santa Fe, California. The deceased were followers of Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite (known to their devotees as Ti and Do).[2] In addition to the male leader, Applewhite, among the dead were twenty-one women and seventeen men. According to announcements by the local coroner's office, the deaths had been caused by ingestion of a mixture of drugs and alcohol, and suffocation by plastic bag over the head. Because the group's Web site (www.heavensgate.com) garnered so much attention after the suicides, this group, previously known as the Bo Peep cult by those who had some familiarity with the group, came to be called Heaven's Gate.

The data for this study include interviews with former group members, sympathetic followers and believers, and families of members and other associates. Additional data were drawn from my content analysis of archival material including the group's written

documents, Internet postings, and audio and video recordings. Also I relied on the work of Robert Balch and David Taylor, who have been studying and writing about the group since the mid-1970s, as well as reviewing other scholarly and popular articles and media reports.

Charismatic Authority

The first dimension in the four-part framework is charismatic authority, characterized by leadership and specialness. The concept of charisma was introduced by sociologist Max Weber in his study of ancient religions, bureaucracy, and institution building (Weber 1946a, 1946b, 1964, 1968). Charisma is often thought of as traits that inhere in special individuals, but more to the point, charisma is a powerful social relationship. In this vein Weber wrote, "What is alone important is how the individual is actually regarded by those subject to charismatic authority, by his 'followers' or 'disciples'" (1968, 48).

In relation to this aspect, I examined and analyzed charismatic attraction, the leadership principle, and the charismatic community that grew around the leaders. Applewhite and Nettles had met by chance in their hometown of Houston, Texas in the early 1970s (Balch 1982, 1995; Balch and Taylor 1976, 1977, 2002). [3] Each gave up a "normal" life to live with the other. Nettles had worked as a nurse, and was married with four children. Applewhite had been a music professor and choir leader at southern religious colleges. He, also, had been married and had children, but was already divorced for several years before meeting Nettles. Applewhite had lived both openly and "in the closet" as a homosexual. The two met at a time of psychological crisis for Applewhite, and apparently Nettles convinced him that they were meant to be together, as platonic soul mates—and for a higher, more spiritual purpose.

Separating themselves from family and friends and living as mystics, in 1974 and '75 Applewhite and Nettles went on a recruitment drive across the southwest and western United States. Through what they described as their "awakening" experience, they became convinced that they were the two messengers talked about in the Book of Revelations in the Bible. They believed they were here to bring word of the Second Coming. Their first real success at recruiting came at a meeting in Los Angeles in April 1975, from which they amassed a few dozen followers. Afterwards, with their new band of eager followers, they staged similar meetings, finding audiences on or near college campuses or in progressive or alternative-type locales. Their advance posters tended to draw curious individuals from communities of seekers and people with an interest in UFOs and supernatural phenomena. The two leaders appeared self-assured and a little mysterious, projecting a certain aura that tended to appeal to the crowds before them. Before long, the group's numbers swelled. They gained more than one hundred followers from their first four public meetings in California, Oregon, and Colorado.

Recruits ranged in age from late teens to sixties; many had at least some college education; some had completed undergraduate and graduate degrees and other specialized training. Most of the early followers self-identified as seekers of truth who had experimented with various religious and spiritual paths, from Scientology, Eastern

religions, and Catholicism to spiritualism and magic. Some had been engaged in social activism, such as environmentalism and the women's movement. Even though some gave up seemingly successful lives and careers, most were less situationally stable at the time they ran into the group—for example, they were close to graduation from college, had just ended a relationship, had just lost someone important to them, were dissatisfied with their life in some way, or were simply on the hippie trail, as were so many others at that time.

The appeal of this group was rooted in the fact that Applewhite and Nettles were offering something different—something unique, yet familiar. They talked of reincarnation, spirit beings, UFOs, and cosmic consciousness—all familiar concepts in the growing New Age movement of the 1970s. At the same time, this was not the same old trip with the best hit of acid or the same old long-haired group spouting the same old verses out of the same old Bible or Hindu text. What these two were offering seemed to be better, combining a little bit of everything and it came across as really "far out." If nothing else, it was original. These two prophets and their newly gathered disciples sounded knowledgeable enough and mysterious enough to entice the curious and the sincere. They appeared to awaken a dormant yearning in the hearts of those who responded. One follower, who had been in and out of the group since 1976, remarked, "I knew I was linked to them in a way that I couldn't explain. It was such an intense experience.... After the second meeting I went outside and cried for joy." Another former member said, "I just felt drawn to them. You could feel the goodness."

Most of the time most members did not know the whereabouts of their two leaders. The Two (as they were often called in those days) simply arrived for meetings, and on occasion, entertained visits at their home from their Elders or Helpers. The two leaders continuously maintained that being around others lowered their vibrational level. Ultimately, though, their reclusive behavior was a useful pattern in keeping them apart from their followers, while adding to their mystique and perpetuating the leader myth. Yet, the pooled money of their followers was supporting them in that elusive behavior. The members' fear of losing their leaders and/or their sense of frustration over their absences were emotions that were handily transformed into a sense of stimulation and anticipation. "We never knew if we would see them again," said one former follower who had been among the first batch of recruits. Some drifted away during those times, but those who stayed and became the core group developed an ever-increasing dependency on their leaders.

Transcendent Belief System

Humans create symbolic models, or belief systems, from which they organize their social and psychological processes. Without these "symbolic templates," human behavior would be too diffuse, without boundaries or guidelines. The power of any particular belief system inheres in its ability to formulate social realities for its adherents (Geertz 1973). A belief system, then, serves to mediate complex realities for the individuals who are drawn to it, or guided by it.

A transcendent belief system, as used here, is one in which the symbol system provides a template for going beyond the ordinary everyday reality; it offers grand solutions by means of authoritative concepts and persuasive imagery. It is transcendent in the sense that it looks to, indeed predicts, a radical change—either progressive or reactionary—in the social order (Giddens 1984). It not only holds forth a utopian vision, but also offers the actual means by which to get to the new world (Smelser 1962). When that aspect is present, a belief system becomes an ideology. "Ideologies always assume that one idea is sufficient to explain everything," wrote Hannah Arendt in her classic work on totalitarianism (1951, p. 168).

To examine and analyze this particular dimension, I looked at the appeal of the message, the moral imperative embedded in the beliefs, the sense of urgency and freedom, and the responses to and consequences of crises and shifts in various tenets of the beliefs. The Heaven's Gate belief system tended to be both transcendent and intensely ideological in that it was a single-tracked, insular thought system. It could also be described as totalistic. To the extent that members were true believers, they accepted the certitude with which their respective leaders put forth, developed—and sometimes changed—aspects of the belief system. For the most part, devotees accepted their leaders' points of view and adaptations without question. When they did not do so, when they dared to question, individual members (or groups of members) left (or were ejected from) the group.

There are two major components to their belief system. The first is a visionary component, which consists of the transcendent ideal. It is illustrated in this quote from a follower: "For the first time in my life I have a firm faith that there is something higher." The second component is organizational and consists of the methodology for achieving the goal embedded in the vision. This is exemplified in this quote from a devotee: "We represent the only way that exists that can offer anyone true freedom—liberation—from what binds them." These two components were intertwined and inseparable; they upheld and reinforced each other—one might say that together they sealed the fate of the believer.

The Heaven's Gate belief system was an amalgam of Theosophy and spiritualism. The two originators drew on Nettles's metaphysical background (as a medium and follower of New Age thought) and added a heavy dose of fundamentalist Christianity from Applewhite's background (as the son of a Baptist preacher with years of seminary training). When The Two needed to explain or justify a particularly strict regime or code of conduct, such as separation from families, they turned to select scriptures from the Bible or New Age precepts to bolster their own authority.

The foundation of the belief system was built around the idea that Ti and Do would be killed by opponents (most likely the authorities), and three and one-half days later a spaceship would arrive to lift them off to the "Next Level," or the "Level Above Human." The Two dubbed this event "the Demonstration" in that it was to demonstrate the truth of their message. The Next Level was portrayed by them as an actual physical place, not a spirit world as in other belief systems. They called it "home." To be saved, one had to follow these Two who claimed to be "Representatives" of the Next Level.

Initially, this demonstration was to be imminent, then soon, then when? Days, months, years, even decades passed as Ti, Do, and their followers waited for the spaceship to retrieve them, all that time living within their specially constructed social system.

Meanwhile, their immediate goal was to evolve via individual transformation into the genderless ideal, the "Next Level creature." Such a transformation was required in order to get on the spaceship. The specific methodology for generating this change, which was conceived of as a physical metamorphosis, was known to them as "The Process." The idea was to overcome all human tendencies and habits, especially human emotions. The change would occur by each member meeting the tests given by the Next Level and striving at all times to be connected to "Next Level Mind" via their leaders, also called "Older Members." In her written exit statement one devotee, who joined in 1976, described this relationship as follows:

> The only REAL "family" relationship that can be maintained is that between an Older Member and a younger member. As long as the younger member keeps his eyes on his Older Member, and wants with all his heart, mind and soul to please his Older Member, that relationship is forever.

Walking out of the door of one's life was the first step toward transformation, while other detailed daily routines and more complicated practices evolved over time as the group went into seclusion. Being engaged in The Process bound members to each other and to their leaders, just as it solidified their belief in the message. Over time, the group-defined reality became the only reality by which to live.

Systems of Control

In relation to the systems of control I examined and analyzed the group's hierarchy and command structure, organizational structures and processes, and the rules and regulations that guided everyday life in the group. The systems of control in Heaven's Gate can be characterized by discipline and subjugation. As one devotee said, in discussing the requirements for this group, "It will not be easy for you, or anyone." In self-sealing systems such as this one was, typically, the operating philosophy is "the ends justify the means."

The context for the transformation described in the previous section was "the Class," established in April 1976. The Two called their followers together in a campground in the national forest in Laramie, Wyoming. Quickly, the group's size reduced by half or more as stringent rules and regulations were established to guide the members' daily lives. Before the formation of the Class, the group had been erratic in its behavior and its own internal discipline. But the Class changed everything, giving structure and a great deal of order to what was until then a rather diffuse movement with little direct leadership. The followers were now "students" of the Next Level, and Ti and Do were their "Teachers," to be emulated as Older Members of the Next Level. Students were subjected to extensive and extreme regimentation, such as each student reporting every twelve minutes to a central post to see if Ti or Do needed something. If they were away from the

group's central location, students were to "report" in their minds, stopping everything to "tune in" to their leaders. Also Ti and Do conjured up bizarre diets and exercise regimens, and instituted other routines and disciplines, such as expanses of time without speaking and prolonged periods of students covering their heads and faces with hoods. Exercises such as those and more were used to encourage a type of extreme conformity. All of this was explained as their recipe for change, the necessary personal transformation. As Do described it, speaking of his followers:

> They will attempt to rid themselves of their old minds, their identities, in exchange for the mind that flows through me, as they attempt to be accepted as one of my "children." It will "cost" them everything of this world—which they will desperately desire to be quickly rid of.

Immediately upon joining the group, members were to choose new names. At first, they took Biblical names; later, their names changed and were reduced to symbolic ones, with three letters in the first syllable, followed by "ody." In their writings and in his exit video [4], Do explained that the "ody" names were considered diminutives: "These" (as he referred to his followers in a neutral and distanced tone) are "young'uns, children of God, children of the Next Level," he explained. Thus, the transition to being students carried with it another identity shift, a regressive one. Students were thought of—and thought of themselves—as children, younger, inexperienced, and learning. Their task was to get themselves ready for space travel and for acceptance by the Next Level. The rules only got more severe as weak-willed, disinterested, and skeptical followers drifted away or were ejected from the group. As resistance dwindled, the pressures of the mechanisms of conformity and control were all the more effective.

Ti and Do were always clear about being in charge, although their leadership style was one that relied primarily on indirect methods—for example, explaining what they thought about something or what they were going to do, and then telling their followers that it was up to them to decide for themselves what they were going to do; yet, all the while it was quite clear what the preference was. That particular leadership tactic set up what might be called the illusion of choice, for, indeed, followers knew exactly what was expected of them if they wanted to remain students in this particular Class. Ironically, alongside the indirect leadership method were plenty of rules and regulations for practically everything, from the exact diameter of a breakfast pancake to the exact amount of toothpaste to put on a toothbrush. Errors and backsliding were handled through criticism sessions called "slippage meetings." The process was not easy, and students clung together in their determination to succeed. Ridding themselves of any semblance of individuality was a main task, as was purging their minds of any tendency to question or to challenge.

Systems of Influence

In relation to the final dimension of the social structure, I examined and analyzed group norms, peer influence and modeling, and commitment. The push to conform was very strong in this group, but in some ways not too different from the norms of conformity

found throughout our society. The specifics of this particular context—the ideas, their appearance, their language, the deference to Ti and Do—may seem odd to the outsider, but such conformism is rampant everywhere, as citizens flock to buy the latest fashion or "hot" product or kowtow to their boss or their political leaders. It is the very normalcy of that behavior that made it easy for Ti and Do's followers to go along with the program. Yet the specifics of this program were excessive and very strict. The Heaven's Gate systems of influence can be characterized by rejection and self-renunciation.

One former member explained that at all times students were to ponder, "What would my Older Member *have* me do?" when considering how to behave or react in any activity. An important factor of social influence in this group was the fact that at the time of the group's formation, both leaders were in their mid-forties and were quite a bit older than most of their followers, who, for the most part, were in their twenties when they were recruited. In that sense, The Two played a parental role, and often fit the part. In interviews after the suicides, one long-time member who had left several years before made the point that when he and his "Classmates" became followers, Applewhite did not look like a "bug-eyed, bald-headed fanatic," as seen in the media clips taken from his exit video; rather, this follower noted that originally both leaders had soft, gentle appearances and were "just like your folks, only nicer."

But at the extreme, a feeling of self-hate was instilled in Heaven's Gate members, reframed as a hatred of their human self, known as the "vehicle" in their parlance. Distaste and disdain for anything human was fostered in them, an attitude that some have speculated had its roots in the self-hatred Applewhite may have experienced in his own troubled life regarding his sexuality. In the exit video recorded by the group members, the troublesome vehicle was one of the most talked-about themes. Evidently struggling with one's vehicle was a requirement, and a daily reality; yet, the vehicle also served as the intermediary between the human world and the Next Level. This made having a vehicle (or human body) necessary in order to be a student, but at the same time this vehicle was to be rejected because it originated outside the Class and students understood that it would not be needed in the Next Level.

Such a dichotomous worldview becomes all encompassing. Given how sequestered the group was, this worldview rather swiftly became their reified version of reality. For them, life here on planet Earth was merely a training ground, and a torturous one at that. Ti and Do's students understood that they had to completely separate from the human world in order to achieve their goal. Anything associated with human existence was seen as a threat to their advancement, to their ultimate goal of getting off the planet. Earth and its inhabitants stood for everything that was negative; this world was described as corrupt, polluted, evil, primitive, and barbaric. Human life was equated with ignorance and death. With their leaders as the ultimate role models, the students worked long and hard to achieve their goal.

Charismatic Commitment

The conflation of the four dimensions of the social structure with their accompanying social processes generate in the most devoted members what I call charismatic commitment. This is the juncture at which there is fusion between the ideal of personal freedom (as promised in the stated goal of the group or its ideology) and the demand for self-renunciation (as prescribed by the rules and norms). At this point, the believer becomes a true believer at the service of a charismatic leader or ideology. In such a context, in relation to personal power and individual decision making, that person's options are severely limited as the devotee lives in a narrow realm of constraint and control, of dedication and duty.

Ti and Do spared no effort at conveying the seriousness of their mission, which helped to foster such a deep commitment. In early meetings as far back as 1975, they had asked their followers how far they would go for the cause. Former members recalled Ti and Do asking such questions as: "Would you be willing to bear arms for this cause?" "Would you do anything?" "Are you prepared to do anything for the Next Level...to adjust that fast?" At other times, students were asked to write commitment notes describing the extent of their commitment. And Applewhite readily conveyed the need for such a commitment in his writings, talks with his followers, and audio and video recordings.

To seal the deal, members were motivated by a compelling moral imperative. Rather early on in the life of the group, adherents learned and came to believe that at an earlier time in their lives they had received a "deposit" of Next Level knowledge. Believing you had such a deposit was regarded as proof that you were destined to be with the group. It meant that you had had some connection to Ti and Do in a previous life. In other words, once you *knew,* you *had* to act. Having a Next Level deposit was acknowledged by the group as a sense of "knowing," or an internal recognition. The opposite of having this special knowledge, of course, was to be ignorant, which meant having no knowledge of the Next Level, or perhaps once having had it and rejecting it. This growing sense of elitism in the group was expressed by one long-time member when he said, "The Class is only open to people that are part of this family, that have that deposit of Next Level mind." That right was both an opportunity and an obligation. Even if someone had the deposit, he or she still had to go through the tests, train to develop, and prove readiness to the Next Level. Ti and Do, as the Next Level's representatives here on Earth, were key to that process. Nothing was given, except that which was given by their leaders.

After a time, based on group discussions, adherents understood something even more significant than the deposit of knowledge. They came to understand that they, like their leaders, were also beings from the Next Level who had assumed, or taken over, human bodies. *Thus, it was not only Ti and Do who were not human, but also the students were not human, had never been human, and did not belong here. They were all part of an extraterrestrial crew sent here for training and now waiting to go home.* This is a very significant factor affecting the group's sense of cohesion, as well as a major source of each member's loyalty to the group. This idea, perhaps more than any other, bound them to the system, to each other, and to their leaders. The Heaven's Gate worldview cleverly served to make sense of the adherents' pre-group lives by reframing their past experiences. The alienation prevalent among many of their generation was particularized

in each one of them by the group's teachings. The result was that students believed that any sense of alienation they might have felt was directly attributable to a prior connection to the Next Level and their real purpose here on Earth, which was to leave and go back home.

The Self-Sealing System: Bounded Reality

As the social dynamic closes in on itself, adherents find themselves living within a bounded reality whose parameters are enclosed and defined by the self-sealing system. This is evidenced in each dimension as follows:

>Charismatic authority: leadership was secretive and inaccessible

>Transcendent belief system: group doctrine was inviolable, came down from on high, and required personal transformation according to a formula set out by the leader/group

>Systems of control: rigid boundaries defined inaccessible space and topics closed to discussion or inquiry

>Systems of influence: internalized norms, all-pervasive modeling, and constant peer monitoring ruled out inappropriate questioning

In the case of Heaven's Gate, this social reality evolved as a self-fulfilling prophecy. As the years passed, Applewhite and his students grew old together. During the many years of being sequestered, the members had bonded into a closed, unified group. In August 1994 they produced a poster with a bold, all-capitalized headline blaring out at the world:

>UFO TWO AND CREW SAY:

>"THE SHEDDING OF OUR BORROWED HUMAN BODIES MAY BE REQUIRED IN ORDER TO TAKE OUR NEW BODIES BELONGING TO THE NEXT WORLD."

>IF YOU WANT TO LEAVE WITH US YOU MUST BE WILLING TO LOSE EVERYTHING OF THIS WORLD IN ORDER TO HAVE LIFE IN THE NEXT.

>CLING TO THIS WORLD AND YOU'LL SURELY DIE.

From this statement it is apparent that the physical metamorphosis talked about in the early years had evolved into an understanding that they would be leaving behind their human bodies, mere "vehicles" to be shed "like an old used car," as one student remarked in his exit statement.

Over time the group's discourse had turned more to evacuation and leaving the planet. On the Internet members were posting more and more statements about leaving and about

the wasteland of planet Earth and human life. Apparently their messages were not well received by Netizens, which added to Applewhite's and his followers' level of frustration and growing sense of demoralization, as well as contributing to the decision to depart. They wrote, "The weeds have taken over the garden and truly disturbed its usefulness beyond repair—it is time for the civilization to be recycled—'spaded under.'" The Heaven's Gate book (a self-published historical rendering written primarily by Do but which also included other documents, such as flyers, newspaper advertisements, various position papers, and members' exit statements) was added to their Web site in April 1996, along with a notice implying that this might be their last interaction with the human level (Representatives from the Kingdom of Heaven 1996). By this time they were referring to themselves as the "Away Team." They were completing their task and about to leave for home. In February 1997 members posted an Internet message and also left a message at the entry to their Web site about the Hale-Bopp comet. They indicated that it was a sign of the end, the marker they had been waiting for.

Personal Closure and Bounded Choice

Apparently at the time of his death Marshall Applewhite was suffering from severe heart disease and had been at high risk for a heart attack (Clark 1997). Within the grapevine of former followers, cult-watchers, and academics who studied the group, there were rumors that Applewhite thought he had liver cancer or prostate cancer. He had told at least some of his followers that he thought he was dying. Whatever the final decisive factor—and surely, there were at least several—it is likely that the members of this close-knit group, who waited so patiently over the years for the spaceship to come, and who submitted to a life of struggle and deprivation, were ecstatic that the time had come when they were finally going to be able to leave. Some had been waiting more than twenty years.

Ironically, the biggest draw of Ti and Do's belief system was related to its promise of overcoming death. Members who joined and worked hard enough were supposed to be saved from death. Even if they did not make it this time, their soul would be put on ice for a later pickup. Following Ti and Do was believed to be the only way to end the cycle of reincarnation; suicide was not in that picture. Yet, in the end, Applewhite and his followers decided the time had come and that suicide was acceptable, even though he and they maintained that they were not dying but were going to the Next Level. In the end, he and his followers precipitated their departure by imbibing a fatally poisonous drink. From their video-recorded farewell statements, we can surmise that they expected to wake up aboard a spacecraft on their way home. As Do said in his exit video, in a spirit of resolve and with a tinge of anger in his voice:

> Our cause is to let you know we are returning to life after a visitation with death….

> Suicide is separation from the Kingdom when the Kingdom has reached out and offered life to you.

> It is suicide <u>not</u> to leave.

It is to take life to leave.

This is not life to us. This is primitive, barbaric. This is history.

We are about to regain life.

Given the degree of dependency the followers had on Applewhite and Nettles, it is not surprising that they chose to go with him when he was ready to exit. Perhaps the fear of being left alone was greater than confronting the possibility that perhaps Applewhite was wrong. One followers exit statement expressed that sentiment clearly:

> I **know** who my Older Members, Ti and Do, are. I believe in, cleave to, trust in, and rely totally upon them. I know my Older Member, Do, is going to his Older Member, Ti, at this time. Once He is gone, there is nothing left here on the face of the Earth for me, no reason to stay a moment longer. Furthermore, I know that my graft to Them would be jeopardized if I linger here once They have departed. I know my classmates/siblings feel the same as I do and will be choosing to go when Do goes. I want to stay with my Next Level family. Choosing to exit this borrowed human vehicle or body and go home to the Next Level is an opportunity for me to demonstrate my loyalty, commitment, love, trust, and faith in Ti and Do and the Next Level.

Ultimately, the devoted and enmeshed Heaven's Gate students stayed with their leader, going wherever his decision and course of action would take them. As time wore on, the formerly unthinkable option of death by their own doing (suicide) became an acceptable act because it meant they could finally leave. Leaving took precedence over overcoming death. The final promise of freedom from life on Earth was theirs at last.

To help make some sense of this picture I draw on the works of Anthony Giddens (1979, 1984); Herbert Simon (1955, 1956, 1967, 1979); Edgar Schein (1961, 1992); and Robert Jay Lifton (1961, 1968, 1986, 1987, 1999). A closed, self-sealing system, as exemplified by Heaven's Gate, holds both positive and negative aspects for its adherents. The positive, or lure of personal salvation, must be there or no one would ever be attracted to it in the first place. In cultic groups, this positive and negative dialectic unfolds constantly, as adherents twist and turn to adapt to the dualistic system. Given that expressing negatives is not allowed, members focus primarily on their positive interpretations in order to minimize their feelings of distress as they increase their expressions and acts of faith. If a member wants to stay with the group—this newfound family—then he or she quickly learns that engaging the negative is counter to the system. It is through that adaptive (and sometimes coercive) process that the adherent becomes caught in a self-sealing, cultic system in which she or he acts, but is also acted upon.

One outcome of this process is a social-psychological state called "personal closure" (Lifton, 1961). The dualistic dimensions of the self-sealing social structure create personal boundaries around and within the person and constrict the new self, the group-identified self. The member feels completely separated from his or her pre-group identity

and cannot imagine life outside the group. The state of personal closure is the individualized version of the larger self-sealing system in which he or she participates and is bound by. The person turns inward, refusing to look at or consider other ideas, beliefs, or options. The personal closure that is the culmination of cultic life is profoundly confining because the individual is closed to both the outside world and her or his own inner life (Lifton 1961). In this instance, the adherent's value structure has been altered, or shifted, by the depth and quality of the belief change and participation in the social processes (Zablocki 1998). When such a shift occurs, individual choice is no longer an individual matter.

In this context, human agency (and therefore, free will) is constrained by the duality of structure—a social-psychological state of being that I have identified as "bounded choice" (Lalich 2001, 2004). The decision-making process is skewed in favor of the collectivity. In general, organizational choices are made by the leader, for no one else is qualified or has the authority to do so. Personal choices, if and when they arise, first of all, are formulated within and constrained by the self-sealing framework and style of consideration, which always puts the organization first. Second, those choices are limited and bounded by the constriction of the member's thought patterns, which, once more, always put the organization first. Choice is constrained by both external and internalized sanctions, both real and imagined. This is the heart of the concept of bounded choice.

This perspective, although bleak, helps us understand how behaviors or actions that might look crazy or irrational to the outsider (such as committing suicide or perpetrating violent, illegal, or sectarian acts) tend to look completely rational from the perspective of that person living inside and in alignment with the cult's reality. As for free will, there is not exactly loss of free will or free choice, but free will is subsumed under the will of the group/leader and is altered and distorted. Thus, as the case of Heaven's Gate revealed, individual choices are constrained by the close-mindedness of the system and the equally limiting close-mindedness of the individual who functions in alliance with that system. If we recognize free will as voluntary choice or an informed decision, one that is "not determined by prior causes or by divine intervention" (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1993)—then what choice does the truly devoted cult member have? In my opinion, based on this study, none—other than those "given" by the bounded reality of the cult context.

Summation

It is my hope that through systematic study we might gain an understanding of the sophistication of groups such as Heaven's Gate. I have tried to do so by unraveling, describing, and analyzing the interlocking nature of the charismatic relationship, the principles of the belief system, and the mechanisms and processes of influence and control. The result, in this case, was a combination of organizational structure and human agency that served to constrain individual choices within the group context by encapsulating the worldview of the true believer. Indeed, charisma and belief make up the foundation upon which such an ideological system is constructed. But a totalistic ideology gathers its strength when it is put into practice. Making such a belief system an

everyday reality requires more than just inspirational rhetoric and urgent messages of destruction and salvation. It also requires organizational and social controls—and the energy of true believers.

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[2] Real names (Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite) and their chosen names (The Two, and Ti and Do) are used interchangeably throughout this paper.

[3] I am indebted to Balch and Taylor for much of the detail about the lives of Applewhite and Nettles at the time of their meeting, as well as for some of the information about their early years together and the early years of the group.

[4] Exit videos, sometimes referred to as goodbye videos, were left behind by the group, and were sent to sympathetic followers to distribute to various media outlets to announce and explain their "departure." There were two videos: one of Do speaking, seated before his followers, which was recorded the night before the suicides began; the other was of the students, mostly in pairs, speaking for several minutes each and saying their final farewells.