Festinger (1956)

When Prophecy fails

Background

The classic 1954 study by Festinger carried out a study of a small UFO cult called the Seekers that believed that a great flood was imminent and that spacemen would rescue those who were true believers. Festinger wanted to find out how the members of the cult would cope when they realized that this apocalyptic event did not happen.

The cult was led by Dorothy Martin (aka Marian Keech in Festinger’s book) who received “messages” through “automatic writing” – that is, she would write messages as a channel of the spacemen. Members of the cult left their jobs and families and gave away money and possessions to prepare for the arrival of the flying saucer. Keech claimed to receive messages from the planet Clarion. She said that the world would end on December 21, 1954.

On 20 December the group awaited a visitor from outer space to call upon them at midnight and to escort them to a waiting spacecraft. As instructed, the group went to great lengths to remove all metallic items. At 12:10 a.m. the group was noticeably shocked that no visitor had arrived. At 4:45 a.m. Keech received a message from the God of the Earth: The little group, sitting all night long, had spread so much light that God had saved the world from destruction. The flood had been called off as a result of their devotion. By that afternoon, members of the cult had engaged in spreading the message to as many people as they could. According to Festinger, they had rationalized the situation in a way that maintained their sense of self-esteem.

Method

Festinger and his team carried out a covert participant observation. It was covert because the members of the cult were unaware that the researchers were studying them. They believed that they were members of the cult. It was a participant observation because the researchers became members of the group that they were studying - and interacted with them.

Festinger found out about the flood prophecy in late September by reading an article in the paper. When he decided that this was a phenomenon that he wanted to study, it took another month to train the team of observers. The cult was located in two homes. One was located in "Lake City" in the home of Ms Keech; the other was located in "Collegeville" in the home of Mr Armstrong. Both names used in the text were pseudonyms.

To gain entry to the cult was difficult. They decided to pretend from the start that they were true believers. For example, one of the researchers told Mr Armstrong how he and some friends had picked up a hitchhiker – an old Mexican peasant woman – who had warned them of the coming flood. We she went silent, they turned around to see what had happened, and she had disappeared, even though they had never stopped the car. This got them an invitation to a Seekers’ meeting. Altogether there were four observers - two of each gender in each house. All observers were students or staff members in the department of psychology and had previous experience in interviewing and observation techniques.

The goal of the observations was first to determine the degree to which each member was convinced of the truth of the belief system. In addition, they were to document what actions had been taken by the members up to this point and what further actions would they take as the 21st approached? In this way, they were measuring the foot in the door paradigm - that is, the level of commitment exhibited by the members. The theory was that the more of a commitment they had made, the less likely they were to change their behaviour, even in spite of a major disappointment.

The observations were difficult because there was no regular pattern of activities. The observers did not live in the house, they only attended meetings there. They were not informed of meetings until only a few days before the meeting would take place. The observations took place between Nov 19 and Jan 7. From the 17th to the 22nd, the female observers lived in the houses with the leaders.

Taking notes of the meetings and activities of the cult was very difficult. Observers were rarely alone inside the house. They would take notes in the bathroom, but could not go too frequently, lest they arouse suspicion. They would have to alternate going to the bathroom to record data or "take a walk for fresh air." After the meetings, they would then dictate their notes into a tape recorder. This took place on average about 3 – 4 hours after a meeting. From the 17th to the 22nd Festinger maintained a hotel headquarters about a half mile from Ms Keech’s home. This allowed all data to be recorded within an hour. In addition, the cult had taped all incoming calls. The team was able to get access to these phone records and transcribe all the data.

Evaluation
The study was the first of its type and provided very interesting information about how the cult members coped with finding out that their strong beliefs were wrong. He proposed his theory of cognitive dissonance which argues that when they realized that they had sacrificed so much - both personally and professionally - in order to join the cult, but that the predications appear to have been wrong, this led to extreme anxiety. One way to alleviate this anxiety was to justify their behaviour. They did this through accepting Ms Keech's automatically written message that they had saved this world. This defies all logic and outsiders would wonder why if she had defrauded them to that point, would they believe her now? But this all has to do with maintaining a sense of self-esteem and alleviating cognitive dissonance.

In spite of the strength of the findings, there are several limitations of the study. Most obviously, there is the question of ethics. Covert observations violate trust. The people in the cult welcomed the researchers as fellow believers. They did not know until later that they were lied to. Even though Festinger used pseudonyms for the book, the public nature of the cult's activities means that it is possible to determine who was who in the study.

There were also several methodological problems with the study. Festinger admitted that the various stories that the researchers told to gain entry to the cult only reaffirmed the beliefs of the cult members. In addition, an upsurge in membership in a few days led to a feeling that “things were happening.”

Since this was a participant observation, there is always the danger that the researchers may influence the behaviour of the people that they are studying. For example, Ms. Keech told the researchers that they had to quit their jobs. They refused. This could cause doubt in the minds of the other members who had actually done so.

In addition, thanks to a network outside of the cult that kept them informed of what was happening in the other house, Keech believed that they were being informed by "the Guardians." This added to their "mystical nature" and further confirmed the beliefs of the cult members.

The researchers suffered from observer fatigue. The observers had other responsibilities - including families and their regular jobs. They were mentally and physically exhausted. This could affect how they gathered data, especially since they were reliant on memory in order to record the data. The researchers had to stay with the group for long hours without having an opportunity to record what they had learned. This further increases the chance of memory distortion. It was also exhausting to have to the role of a "true-believer" in a rather incredible situation and appear to accept everything as true.

Finally, there is the problem of measurement. Because of the lack of a regular schedule of events, the secrecy of the cult and the fact that this was a covert observation, there was no way to use any standardized tool of measurement. They could not measure the strength of their belief before the date of the UFO's arrival and the days after their prophecy failed. Therefore, all discussion of the strength of their belief is simply judged by what is publicly stated and behaviour that is observed.