

How Cults Undermine Normal Personal Growth

In our previous webinars of this series, we have explored the role of identification with an altered state of consciousness; how active suggestion shapes cult follower's values, beliefs, and behavior while they are in that state of awareness; how people get into and out of these states of altered identification; and how paranoia arises in these groups.

In this webinar, we will continue our examination of the impact of cult involvement on the developmental matrix; and explore the different permutation of cult dynamics as they play out in abusive and exploitative relationships, in families, in groups—and yes, even entire nations can become swept up in the enthusiasm of cult-like dynamics, as witnessed in the rise of Adolph Hitler in Germany in the 1930s.

The Impact of Cults on the Developmental Matrix

We will revisit Newman and Newman's (1995) adaptation of Erik Erikson's model of the developmental life stages and their challenges. Those of you who have attended, or listened to the recording of our webinar we held on 7/13/13, "When Faith Breeds Paranoia," will recognize this chart.

Life stage	Psycho-social crisis
Infancy (birth to 2 years)	Trust versus mistrust
Toddlerhood (2 to 4)	Autonomy versus shame and doubt
Early school age (4 to 6)	Initiative versus guilt
Middle school age (6 to 12)	Industry versus inferiority
Early adolescence (12 to 18)	Group identity versus alienation
Later adolescence (18 to 22)	Individual identity versus identity confusion
Early adulthood (22 to 34)	Intimacy versus isolation

Cults act to infantilize their members and to produce dependency upon the cult leader. This impacts each stage of normal life development, and shapes cult members' personalities to serve the needs of the leader. We see this creation of dependence during recruitment into cults:

Excerpted from *Religions, Cults, and Terrorism: What the Heck Are We Doing?*

“Michael Langone (1991) portrays factors that contribute to induction into cults are portrayed (1991) as "deception, dependency, and dread.”

“In the stage of *deception*, a new recruit is first seduced into coming into the group whose true intentions, beliefs, and values are initially veiled.”

“In the *dependency* stage, he or she learns to model upon the behavior of seasoned members, and is exposed to intensified conditioning into group beliefs and practices and increased immersion in altered states of consciousness.”

“In the *dread* stage, the recruit is threatened with dire consequences or is subjected to abuse, if he or she deviates from expected behavior or belief, or attempts to leave.”

We may note that in addition to its role in cult induction, deception persuades women and men to get into dysfunctional and abusive relationships. Politicians similarly seduce citizens that they will solve all of their problems—and then, when they seize the reins of power—they become dictators and despots.

Cult leaders cultivate dependency when their direction comes to supplant the follower's own will; their judgment overshadows the follower's; their suggestions shape the follower's values, beliefs, and behavior; their “mission” dictates the follower's sense of purpose; and fulfillment of their needs and desires becomes the follower's “duty.”

How this plays out in the developmental matrix is shown in the table on the next page.

Psycho-social crisis	How Cults Interfere with Normal Development
Trust versus mistrust	Cults foster trust only in the cult leader, and mistrust of those outside of the group—even one’s parents, friends, schoolteachers, and co-workers may be cast as agents of the dark forces.
Autonomy versus shame and doubt	Cults induce shame and doubt in followers, leading them to rely upon the “superior judgment” of the cult leader to guide them, and to reform their “shameful behavior.”
Initiative versus guilt	Cults shape beliefs and values, so followers feel guilty if they deviate from approved cult doctrine and practices.
Industry versus inferiority	Cult members are always compared to the cult leader, whose virtues are extolled endlessly; the group urges the follower to work harder and with greater dedication to serve the leader, so that someday, they might earn the favor and approval of the leader.
Group identity versus alienation	Cult members become strongly identified with their group, but become alienated from their families and friends, and have difficulties relating to the society in which they live.
Individual identity versus identity confusion	Cults undermine members’ individuality, and train them to adopt an alternate, unnatural identity that requires members to remain in an altered state of awareness.
Intimacy versus isolation	Cults teach followers to attach to their inner life, and to detach from outer attachments and from relationships outside the group, so members become isolated from others, even if they are in a group setting.

The Sweeping Range of Cult Dynamics

We see these same dynamics working in the abusive relationship, the dysfunctional family, the cultic group, and the totalitarian regime. Indeed, the researchers who have studied cults find these same factors operating in a broad range of groups.

Excerpted from *Religions, Cults, and Terrorism: What the Heck Are We Doing?*

“Tobias and Lalich (1994) describe several categories of cults, which include:

- Eastern Meditation
- Religious (Judeo-Christian-based)
- Political, Racist, and Terrorist
- Psychotherapy (mass transformational groups such as Life-Spring or Scientology, and therapist-run groups)
- Commercial (multi-level marketing, wealth-building seminars)
- New Age; Satanic, Occult, and Black Magic
- One-on-One (abuse by sexual partner, psychotherapist, or spiritual teacher)
- Sundry cults of personality that arise around glamorous and charismatic rock stars, basketball players, healers, or ministers

“They believe similar factors are involved in cultic group induction and retention with each of these groups...”

How Do People Get into Cultic Groups?

There are a variety of theories how this occurs.

Hypnosis and Trance Induction – “Katchen (1992) suggests that members' induction into these groups may not be entirely voluntary, underscoring the role hypnosis may play in conversion. He further posits that individuals who are high on measures of hypnotizability may be especially vulnerable to recruitment.”

“Miller (1986) also looks to hypnosis as central to conversion. He believes cultic manipulation has two purposes: to install deep hypnotic suggestions, which are meant to change behavior and patterns of thinking, and to maintain control of the individual. He holds that cult recruitment practices routinely use trance induction as a means of behavioral influence, and this helps explain the personality transformations effected by cults.”

Alteration of Brain Functioning – “Conway and Siegelman (1979) believe that induction into the cultic modality is achieved primarily through *"snapping,"* which they define as *"the sudden, drastic alteration of personality in all its many forms."*

The information that an individual receives from "a massive physical, intellectual, or emotional experience"— e.g., through emotional religious conversion, *prolonged suspension of normal awareness in an altered state of consciousness, or physical stress or trauma*—“*may be powerful enough to destroy deep and long-standing information pathways in the brain.*” This precipitates a type of "information disease," which effectively dismantles the structure of personality, and leaves the individual in "a state of disorientation and emotional disarray."

“They believe personality is holographic in nature; hence tampering with any aspect of the whole can have a profound impact on the global organization of personality structure.”

“Other researchers delineate the techniques by which cult manipulation is accomplished. William Sargant (1957) details the role of "fasting, chastening of the flesh by scourging and physical discomfort, regulation of breathing, disclosure of awesome mysteries, drumming, dancing, singing, inducement of panic fear, weird or glorious lighting, incense, intoxicant drugs" are but some of the many methods used *to modify normal brain functions* for religious purposes, in breaking down the defenses against the cult's message.”

Cognitive Restructuring and Persuasion – “Keiser and Keiser (1987) [believe] that the effective ingredient in conversion is cognitive restructuring, noting that *once a convert takes on new beliefs, he will act in a manner consistent with those new beliefs*. They believe that conversion involves processes that characterize attitude and belief change in general, and that no evidence exists for brain damage theories such as advanced by Sargant, or information disease theories advocated by Conway and Siegelman.”

“They also question whether coercion, which involves force or intimidation, is truly as effective conversion as *persuasion, which acts to change belief and attitudes gradually*.”

“They also hold that cult members have not lost their critical faculties, but have been taught to suspend them to because they believe it will lead to desirable outcomes. Destructive persuasion does exist, and [this] involves manipulation of needs and information control. Keiser and Keiser believe getting out of these groups may require deprogramming, which is at bottom a form of cognitive restructuring.”

Coercive Methods – “Larson (1982) identifies several coercive cult techniques used by these groups. They”

- (1) Demand absolute loyalty
- (2) Alter diet (low-protein diets are seen as debilitating)
- (3) Utilize chanting and meditation to produce altered states of consciousness
- (4) Require conformity in dress and language
- (5) Create doctrinal confusion (complex ideas presented in a way as to discourage rational thought)
- (6) Promote a sense of exclusivity (creation of an "us" versus "them" mentality)

- (7) Demand financial commitment of all or part of members' assets
- (8) Induce hypnotic states
- (9) Isolate from outside contact
- (10) Encourage lack of privacy (this prevents the potential convert from critically analyzing the cult's message)
- (11) Use affection and attention (e.g., the love-bombing used in the Unification Church) to create a sense of camaraderie
- (12) Indoctrinate through long, confusing lectures, which overwhelm critical thinking
- (13) Establish new cult relationships and dissolve former relationships outside the cult
- (14) Play games to make a person dependent on a group leader to give direction, creating a mind set for further influence
- (15) Enhance confusion and dependency through behavioral modification techniques of punishment and reward
- (16) Influence through peer pressure, which aids in overcoming doubts and exploits the potential convert's needs for acceptance
- (17) Wear down resistance through fatigue and sensory deprivation, which further increases suggestibility
- (18) Heighten vulnerability and loss of ego defenses by use of confession
- (19) Require absolute submission (discouraging questions or challenges about the leader's behavior or about cult doctrine)
- (20) Persuade the potential convert to reject former beliefs and values

“Zimbardo, Ebesen and Maslach (1977) point to the role of coercive methods used to bring new members into the group.”

“An influence attempt is considered coercive when there is

- (1) No informed consent
- (2) Physical confinement or psychological constraint
- (3) Inaccessibility to normal sources of information and social supports
- (4) Intensive direct contact with agents of control
- (5) Threat of dire consequences for failure to change
- (6) Use of "non-ordinary" techniques that overwhelm reason
- (7) Vulnerability of the "victim" due to tender age, educational level, mental condition or other personal characteristics

“While these methods do appear in cultic groups, and many writers and researchers concur that some cultic groups appear to use some type of coercive methods to bring new members into the fold, not everyone agrees that these methods are either as alien or widespread as the proponents of coercion contend.”

A Extreme Version of Mainstream Conversion Methods –
“Isser (1991) reminds us that cult recruitment practices "are deeply rooted as an integral part of the Western Christian mainstream religious experience," and *many of these same practices can be found in evangelistic ministries.*

“She believes that cults with deviant doctrines arouse the antipathy of the community because their proselytization techniques utilize more blatant deception and brainwashing than mainstream faiths.”

Once inducted into a cultic group, the consequences of that involvement can have multiple and significant impact on personality functioning; psychotherapy or exit counseling is often required return ex-cult members to normalized functioning again.



- Have you—or someone you know—ever been involved in a group that you believe is a cult?
- Did this group use deceptive practices for recruiting new members? What methods did they use?
- Did the group foster dependency? In what ways did you or the person you know become dependent upon the leader of the group?
- If you have left the group, did the group make it difficult for you to leave?
- What levels of functioning did group involvement impact?
 - Trust versus mistrust?
 - Autonomy versus shame and doubt?
 - Initiative versus guilt?
 - Industry versus inferiority?
 - Group identity versus alienation?
 - Individual identity versus identity confusion?
 - Intimacy versus isolation?
- With what type(s) of cultic group(s) were you involved?
- What types of strategies were used to induct you into the group?
 - Hypnosis or trance induction?
 - Altering your brain functioning?
 - Cognitive restructuring?
 - Coercive methods?
 - Radical conversion strategies?

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Thank you for attending our webinar today!

