

## **Fact Sheet: Abusive Power Dynamics: Characteristics of Leaders of Cults, Abusive groups and Perpetrators of Intimate Violence**

How could this seemingly intelligent and normal person become involved in a cult? The answer to this question is not a simple one. Yet a key factor is undoubtedly what is referred to in the literature as the role of the *charismatic leader*.

Within our society with its focus on individualism and self-responsibility it is sometimes hard to understand how an individual or group of individuals may be so powerfully influenced by another, that they are unable to exercise what for many outside of the cult would seem to be good judgment.

Such a position fails to take into account the power of human influence to control and manipulate and the effects that exposure to such leaders have on individual autonomy and process. Many people understand the experience of being under the influence of drugs or alcohol and yet the same people find it is hard to conceive of how a personality can exhibit just as much influence, if not more, upon another's individual free will and autonomy.

Before simply moving into a description of the charismatic leader in cults and abusive groups perhaps a more familiar example of individual power and control can be found in the area of domestic violence. Battered wife syndrome, is an example where a supposedly free and autonomous person has somehow through a constant process of physical, psychological, and emotional abuse lost the ability to act in ways, which many people simply take for granted. In many ways "working with current and exiting cult members is similar to working with battered women" (Lalich & Tobias, 1994). It should also be noted that under Australian law spiritual abuse and control is a form of domestic violence (Family Law Act 1975, amended 2006).

It is important to recognise that those involved in cults are ordinary people who have been exposed to extraordinary levels of manipulation, control, and abuse. One key to exercising this control referred to in cultic studies is the matter of the charismatic leader. Cult leaders tend to possess what in psychology is termed an authoritarian style personality. An authoritarian personality has a tendency to:

- **Organise through hierarchy**
- **Move towards acquisitions of power and wealth**
- **Tendency to use people and see others as inferior or wrong**
- **Have a tendency towards sado-masochism**
- **Incapacity to be fulfilled and satisfied**
- **Suffer from feelings of paranoia and persecution**

This authoritarian personality gravitates towards situations where they are able to garner control and power over others. The charismatic leader possesses strong talent for self-expression coupled with the ability to sense and read the needs of the followers. These

needs are then normally converted into the form of seductive promises that slowly lure the individual into the personalised ideology of the cult leader. Cult leaders are often incredibly manipulative and whilst they spend a great deal of time creating an image for their followers the essence of their personality is predatory. They exhibit many of the features required for formal diagnoses under the DSM category of personality disorders.

In the text "Take your Life Back" by Lalich and Tobias (1994) they suggest a checklist to help individuals identify and demystify the traits of a sociopathic charismatic leader.

### **Glibness and Superficial Charm**

The charismatic leader is able to beguile and confuse and convince through the use of language; they are able to disarm and persuade with incredible proficiency.

### **Manipulative**

The inability to recognise the rights and needs of others enabling any self-serving behaviour to be permissible. They divide the world into those who can be manipulated, those who are one's enemies, and themselves. Many people involved in a cult unfortunately have been allocated to the category of those who can be manipulated and anyone who objects to behaviours quickly finds themselves in the position of the enemy.

### **A Grandiose Sense of Self**

Cult leaders have a tremendous feeling of entitlement, they by nature believe that they are owed and have the right to whatever behaviour they wish hence nothing is immoral or out of reach if it is in the quest to quench their insatiable desire.

### **Pathological Lying**

The cult leader is able to lie and be untruthful without any sense of impropriety. The cult leader will often construct complex self-aggrandizing narratives, which will represent them as having special or unique powers. This kind of lying is connected to something called pseudologica fantastica, which is the term given to the complex belief systems and traditions which they themselves develop (e.g., they are the manifestation of some supreme power).

### **Lack of Remorse**

The cult leader exhibiting sociopathic tendencies is unable to experience shame or guilt for their hurtful and damaging behaviors thus they see others as mere objects for the gratification of their needs. These needs are often carefully hidden and concealed within the subtext of some meaningful system of thought, which condones the lack of care and concern.

### **Lack of Emotional Depth**

The cult leader who is unable to express remorse is also likely to have difficulty with anything but shallow displays of emotion. Due to the power imbalance the emotional lack on behalf of the cult leader is often mistaken for some kind of profound equipoise gained through diligent adherence to the cult values. Much of the emotional display is designed simply to manipulate the followers.

### **Impulse Control**

Cult leaders can exhibit problems with impulse control (otherwise referred to as acting out). This acting out normally takes a number of forms, the most common of which are sexual and physical abuse. This behavior is often known only to a select few yet when it is publicly known complex explanations are offered. Usually this involves the cult leader behaving in ways that are simply beyond the understanding of their “less enlightened” followers. Thus there is often a claim to a special kind of teaching; this is particularly the case in sexual exploitation within spiritual cults. Spiritual cult leaders may claim they are passing on or helping their victim’s consciousness or spirituality. In the history of cultic studies it is usually the case that the sexual behavior of the cult leader towards the followers is never truly consensual as it has arisen through sustained and deliberate degradation of personal will via threats of violence, control as well as slow and surreptitious manipulation over extended periods of time.

It is important when dealing with individuals exiting a cult to appreciate the full extent to which psychological control and influence have been used to disempower them. Working with ex-cult members is a process of rehabilitation; the supporting and rebuilding of a person.

### **Reference:**

Lalich, J. A. & Tobias, M. (1994). *Take back your life: recovery from cults and abusive relationships*. Bay Tree Press.