

## What are cults and how do they operate?

Cult profiles and activities share certain consistent characteristics across country and cultural setting and spiritual orientation. Within the Australian context, a Royal Commission is currently investigating institutional abuse, which includes a focus on the attributes and activity of organised religions and other institutions facing allegations of systematic long-term abuse.

## Why do people become involved in cults?

There is an inherent façade, a misrepresentation that all cults share. Cults do not state they are a cult that will ultimately replace member's sense of self with high levels of dependency. Rather they present as a group or community that may provide idealism, friendship, love, freedom, belonging, mission, sincerity, salvation, enlightenment. People do not join a cult they join a community they are lead to believe, through thought reform strategies, will provide the things they are seeking.

Most cults appeal to the normal desires of ordinary people, but cult recruitment tends to increase those desires through a kind of courtship ritual. The prospective devotee is wooed with the promise of reward [such as spiritual growth or enlightenment]... the cult leader becomes like a genie holding out the promise of wish fulfilment. (Lalich & Tobias, 1994, p.43)

People often search for assistance and direction in times of major stress and life transition. Research supports the idea that the majority of people who become involved with cults do so at such times and in fact do not have a prior psychological condition (Langone, 1993).

A number of factors however have been identified by Clark, Langone, Schecter and Daly (1981) to increase vulnerability to cults including: high levels of dissatisfaction with daily life, holding a pre-existing religious framework, dependency, low tolerance for ambiguity, and susceptibility to trance states.

## How do cults induct people?

Here are some methods commonly employed by cults:

- Induced dissociation and other altered states e.g., chanting, meditation, public examinations
- Control and manipulation of information going in and out of the group environment

- Isolation from family and friends
- Emotional manipulation and abuse
- Control of personal life, including finances, time, relationships, self-existence
- Sleep and food deprivation
- Peer and leadership pressure; pressure to conform
- Extensive indoctrination sessions, such as extensive one-on-one sessions with leaders, processing sessions
- Rigid security regulations and daily rules

Robert Lifton, author of *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, identifies eight “psychological themes” for evaluating if an organisation is operating as a totalist cult:

- (1) *Milieu control* is the control of all communication and information, which includes each follower’s internal self-communication. This sets up what Lifton calls “personal closure”, meaning that people no longer have to struggle or think about what is true or real: prevents doubting and self-questioning
- (2) *Mystical manipulation* is the claim of authority that asserts that the ends justifies the means, because the end is directed by a higher purpose. Who can question “higher purpose’ after all?
- (3) *The demand for purity* is essentially a black-and-white worldview with the leader as the ultimate moral arbiter. This creates an atmosphere of guilt and shame, where punishment and humiliation are expected. It also sets up an environment where spy and report on one another: members lose their moral bearing.
- (4) *The cult of confession* involves an act of surrender and total exposure. The follower experiences a loss of boundaries between what is secret (known to the inner self) and what the group knows. Followers are pressured to disclosure and hesitancy to do so is interpreted as personal weakness.
- (5) *The sacred science* describes how the group’s doctrine is seen as the Ultimate Truth: no questions are allowed.
- (6) *Loading the language* is the use of jargon internal to (and only understandable by) the group. Constricting language constricts the person. Capacities for thinking and feeling are significantly reduced.
- (7) *Doctrine over person* is denial of the self and any perception other than the group’s perception. There is no longer any personal reality.
- (8) *Dispensing of existence* is the process whereby the group becomes the ultimate arbiter and all nonbelievers become so-called evil or non-people: the “haters” for example. This process creates an us-versus-them mentality that breeds fear in followers who learn that life depends on a willingness to obey. This is when individuals merge with the group’s beliefs. Further, Many cults convey phobic messages such as: “if you leave you are doomed to countless cycles of incarnation”,

“You will go crazy or die if you leave this group” “if you leave you will never attain enlightenment” “you have come so far but if you leave now it will all be a waste”.

In addition, cults typically engage in Double bind, which is defined as ‘a psychological predicament in which a [usually dependent] person receives from a single source conflicting messages that allow no appropriate response to be made. Often a cult member faces disparagement no matter what they do. The double bind imparts a message of hopelessness: *you are damned if you do and damned if you don't* (Lalich, 2004).

---

#### References

- Clark, J.G, Langone, M.D., Schecter, R.E., & Daly, R.C.B. (1981). *Destructive cult conversion: theory, research & treatment*. Massachusetts; American Family Foundation.
- Lalich, J. A. (2004). *Bounded choice: true believers and charismatic cults*. University of California Press.
- Lalich, J. A. & Tobias, M. (1994). *Take back your life: recovery from cults and abusive relationships*. Bay Tree Press.
- Langone, M.D. (Ed). (1993). *Recovery from cults: Help for victims of psychological and spiritual abuse*. New York: W. Norton & Co.
- Lifton, R.J. (1961). *Thought reform and the psychology of totalism*. New York; W.W Norton.