

What is the difference between a cult and other forms of group organisation?

In the healing professions patients are protected by each profession's governing body and their Code of Ethics. These differ slightly from profession to profession but all agree on the notion of *informed consent*. Informed Consent is when, as part of receiving treatment from a doctor, psychologist, chiropractor or the like, you are told of the risks, potential for complications, or other options for treatment. Generally you will be given details of confidentiality and the conditions under which this confidentiality may be broken, for instance if your life or the life of another is at risk. *Informed consent* is a right that protects you from any wrong doing or error on the part of the person treating you and gives you recourse to civil litigation if these rights are not upheld by the treating professional. If you join an organisation that does not declare what you could reasonably and fully expect as a result of your involvement in it from the outset but allows the nature of your involvement to unfold through deepening engagement with that organisation you may be involved in a cult.

The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) defines a cult thus:

A cult is a group or movement exhibiting great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgement, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it), designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community.

Clinical Psychologist Michael Langone describes some characteristics that distinguish cults from other communities or groups:

1. The group displays excessively zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader, and regards his/her belief system, ideology, and practices as the Truth, as law.
2. Questioning, doubt and dissent are discouraged or even punished
3. Mind altering practices (e.g. meditation, chanting, work, [self-enquiry]) are used in excess and used to suppress doubts about the group and its leader

4. The leadership dictates, sometimes in great detail, how members should think, act, and feel (e.g., members should get permission to date, change jobs, or marry)
5. The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader and its members, e.g. we are gaining enlightenment
6. The group has a polarised, us-versus-them mentality, which may cause conflict with the wider society
7. The leader is not accountable to any authorities
8. The group teaches or implies that its supposedly exalted ends justify whatever means it deems necessary, “never let the truth get in the way of a good story”
9. The leadership induces feelings of shame and/or guilt in order to influence and control members. Often this is done through peer pressure and subtle forms of persuasion
10. Subservience to the leader requires members to cut ties with family and friends and radically alter the personal goals and activities they had before entering the group. This will often be enhanced by the adoption of a new name and hence new identity
11. The group is preoccupied with bringing in new members
12. The group is preoccupied with making money
13. Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group or group activities
14. Members are encouraged to live and socialise with other group members
15. Loyal members feel that there is no life outside the group. They believe there is no other way to be, and often fear reprisals to themselves or others if they leave-or even consider leaving-the group

Consider these characteristics in regard to a group or organisation that you may be involved in. If you feel that your life has shifted direction that your relationships have changed, that you feel unclear about your own direction away from the organisation and its leadership, it may be possible that you are under the influence of a cult. If you are concerned then the best course of action is to spend some time speaking candidly and opening with an independent professional or with people who are outside of or who have left the group or organisation.