THE PSYCHOLOGY OF THE CULT EXPERIENCE

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The same story makes the headlines again and again. An anguished family is trying to "rescue" its child, who has, the parents charge, been "stolen" by a cult, sometimes after only a single weekend of involvement. The parents describe the child as a humorless "zombie" - where formerly he or she was self-possessed, intelligent and completely "normal." And, as family members begin to consult the clergy, lawyers and deprogrammers, they keep expressing confusion about exactly what has happened, and why.

A new understanding of the psychology of the cult experience is emerging from the work of researchers and clinicians who have studied current and former cult members. While stating that not all cults are necessarily psychologically damaging to their members, the researchers' findings offer insights about the proper treatment of those who have been harmed, as well as the techniques that cults use to hold the loyalty of old members and attract new ones.

Some researchers suggest that the study of the cult experience has important implications for theories about the functioning of the human brain.

"Many cult groups have developed basically similar and quite compelling conversion techniques for exploiting the vulnerabilities of potential converts," said John G. Clark Jr., an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the Harvard University Medical School. The Marks of a New Disease

Dr. Clark has, in his private practice and with colleagues in Boston, treated and studied more than 500 current and former cult members since 1974. "In some respects," he said, "the destructive effects of cult conversions amount to a new disease in an era of psychological manipulation."
"When kids come out of cults, they have symptoms you just don't normally see," said Stanley H. Cath, a psychoanalyst and associate professor of psychiatry at the Tufts University School of Medicine who has treated and studied 60 former cult members over the last decade. "But many practitioners are ignorant of this 'disease,' and don't know how to treat it."

Although the researchers said it is possible for those who have left cults to integrate their experience into their lives in healthy ways, many are unable to. Among the common negative characteristics exhibited by the former cult members studied, said Dr. Clark, are depression, guilt, fear, paranoia, slow speech, rigidity of facial expression and body posture, indifference to physical appearance, passivity and memory impairment.

Robert Jay Lifton, professor of psychiatry at Yale University Medical School, said that many in the psychological professions may not be aware of, or deny the existence of, clinical difficulties posed by cults. "There is a widespread misunderstanding of the phenomenon of persuasion that can bring about intense change in people," he said. A Matter of Brainwashing

Margaret T. Singer, professor of psychology at the University of California at Berkeley, said, "The techniques of many cults fall under the general rubric of brainwashing." Dr. Singer has studied 700 cult members since 1974, and has investigated mind-control techniques since she did research on repatriated American prisoners of war for the Army during the Korean War.

"Consciously and manipulatively," said Dr. Singer, "cult leaders and their trainers exert a systematic social influence that can produce great behavioral changes."

Dr. Singer explained that such groups "have taken techniques from the human-potential movement, from the encounter, sensitivity training and humanistic-psychology movements, and combined them with cult ideology and persuasive sales methods - and packaged them in various combinations."
Dr. Singer estimates that there are 2,500 to 3,000 cults in the United States, "with dozens of small cults too numerous to keep track of." The number of cult members nationally is variously estimated at 300,000 to three million.

Not all cults are destructive, the researchers said, and many of those who join and remain in cults do so out of a sincere quest for religious connection. Whether or not a cult is destructive is determined by the morality of the cult leader and the nature of the leader's charismatic dream, said Dr. Cath. "Most of the malign cults are frightening to people when their tenets are revealed, as with the People's Temple after Jonestown," he said. A Cult Defined

Dr. Cath defined a cult as a group of people joined together by a common ideological system fostered by a charismatic leader, where, he said, "the expectation is that they can transcend the imperfections and finitude of life."

He said: "Often they set up a we-they philosophy: We have the truth and you do not." In what Dr. Clark called healthy, valid groups, conversion is achieved in good faith without coercion, and the individual is encouraged to reconcile himself to his history, his family and his culture, even when he may be working for change in his society. "But in destructive cults," said Dr. Clark, "current and prior connectedness is denied."

Dr. Clark said that the pattern of manipulated cult conversions may not appear especially radical to outsiders, since no one is beaten or otherwise physically harmed. "But hundreds of ex-cult members and their families have attested to the enticement practices of these groups," he said. "Under the force of the conversion experience, people disappeared from their families and changed, sometimes after only a few days."

Dr. Clark is one of the founders of the Boston Personal Development Institute, a nonprofit group that treats former cult members and advises their families. He and his associates there have treated former members of the Unification Church, the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, Scientology, the
Way International, the Divine Light Mission, the Children of God, the Church of Bible Understanding and smaller, less-prominent groups. From the Middle Classes

The majority of those studied by Dr. Clark were from the middle and upper middle classes and ranged in age from 15 to 31. Most of those treated by Dr. Cath range in age from 13 to the mid-20's, but some are in their 50's and older. Their average age is 19 1/2. More are male than female.

Frequently they are intelligent youths from sheltered environments who have had contact with religion but rejected it, Dr. Cath says. He believes that many have a history of failing to achieve intimacy, of blaming others for their failures and of constantly striving for perfectionistic goals.

But Dr. Clark feels there is no standard profile of the "destructive-cult victim." "Orthodox psychiatric opinion has generally viewed conversion to deviant groups as a function of longstanding conflicts within individuals," he said. "Our evidence strongly suggests that these individuals are succumbing to pressures within the cult milieu - pressures that can induce radical personality changes as easily in normally developing people as among disturbed ones."

Dr. Singer said that the 700 cult members she had studied presented a wide range of personality types. "You don't have to be a certain kind of person to succumb to the cults," she said.

A typical manipulated conversion, Dr. Clark said, involves a vulnerable person - a student leaving home, or at exam time, or someone who has lost a friend or lover - who is enticed by some reward: companionship, peace of mind, a place to stay or an implied sexual offering. "Cult recruiters frequent bus stations, airports, campuses, libraries, rallies, anywhere that unattached persons are likely to be passing through," he said.
"Then they narrow the attention of the recruit, in controlled social situations," Dr. Clark said. "He or she is invited to attend a special function, or series of classes. Cult members are assigned to attend the prospect constantly. Eventually they keep the mark involved in group-ecstatic activities, or use meditation, obsessive praying, constant lecturing or preaching or lack of sleep to maintain the mind in a constantly debilitated state." A Crisis Is Manufactured

At some point during the experience, he said, "the mark is placed in a panicky, disoriented state, and an emotional crisis is manufactured by the recruiters." One response to this, Dr. Clark said, is that people can become psychotic. He has treated those who became so and were "dumped" by cults that had no further interest in them.

"Another response," he said, "is that they can adapt to the situation, and accept the 'answer' or 'solution' to the crisis that the cult furnishes them with. To survive, they reidentify with their surroundings, and accept the dogma of the group."

Dr. Singer believes that there is increasing awareness of cults among mental-health professionals, especially in campus milieus where the activities of the recruiters and the effects on students are well known. "But too many professionals automatically link cult involvement to psychopathology," she said.

"There is a great need for psychiatric humility here," said Dr. Lifton of Yale. "I think it might be stressed that the whole cult phenomenon is a social, psychological, spiritual and economic problem, and the answer may not be psychiatric at all."

Dr. Clark said he does not work with deprogrammers. "However," he said, "before therapy can take place, the patient's attention has to be gotten, and the patient needs information about the cult group. In that sense,
deprogramming has a dignified provenance."

The researchers said that some of those who had joined cults had simply chosen the lesser of two evils - especially teen-agers who had escaped destructive family situations by joining cults.

A number of those interviewed, including Dr. Cath and Dr. Clark, said they had successfully treated former cult members. "Usually we can put the pieces back together again with the help of family and friends," said Dr. Clark. A Bearing on Brain Research

Several of the researchers believe that the studies of cult members may revise current theories about the workings of the brain. Dr. Cath and Dr. Clark, working independently, have been intrigued that the experiences described by cult members resemble personality changes regularly associated with disorders of the temporal lobe of the brain.

"The symptoms of temporal lobe epilepsy," said Dr. Clark, "are similar to those seen or reported as resulting from cult conversions: increased irritability, loss of libido or altered sexual interest; ritualism, compulsive attention to detail, mystical states, humorlessness and sobriety, heightened paranoia."

Dr. Cath said: "Keeping devotees constantly fatigued, deprived of sensory input and suffering protein deprivation, working extremely long hours in street solicitation or in cult-owned businesses, engaging in monotonous chanting and rhythmical singing, may induce psychophysiological changes in the brain. The rhythmical movement of the body can lead to altered states of consciousness, and changes in the pressure or vibration pattern of the brain may affect the temporal lobe."
Dr. Clark hypothesized that what he calls the "cult-conversion syndrome" represents an overload of the brain's ability to process information. He said: "The unending personalized attention given to recruits during the conversion experience works to overload the prospect's information-processing capacity. This has another important function: the induction of trancelike states. Cult proselytizers then exploit the recruit's suggestibility."