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THE QUESTION OF CULTS

In the wake of the recent Heaven's Gate deaths, most of us are prompted to wonder how such a thing could happen: Why do people get involved with a group that seems bizarre to the majority of people? What makes us vulnerable? How do these groups get their members and keep them? Many people also want to know how to recognize cults and avoid the them.

The intent of this article is to provide some answers to these questions, in a straightforward and helpful way. Because one person's religion or philosophy can be another person's cult, the emphasis here will be on behavior versus content, categories versus names. As always, it is up to the individual to make the judgments of what group is or is not a cult, and what you do or do not believe to be true.

What gives cults their powerful allure?

Essentially, cult leaders take advantage of the "human condition." At some level, we are all afraid and yearn for comfort and certainty. Thus, cults offer emotional, physical, financial, and spiritual/existential security. Usually offered unconditionally, friends and family can be ours forever. We can rest assured that either spiritual forces and principles or our new family will supply the money, shelter, and safety we desire. And if we take the roles given us, we can know that we are valuable and that our lives have meaning and purpose.

The problem is not in wanting these things, but in believing any one person can provide them. Tragically, some of us have been so hurt, frightened, and confused that we will grasp at any apparent love, safety, and certainty that comes our way. And we may not alone have the self-esteem, strength, or resources to escape when the mirage becomes real. Additionally, cults and their leaders can play to our grandiose wishes to be more than average, to be special in a public way (which, sadly, often arises from having not felt valued at all by those we love).

It is truly no mystery that cults can find willing members from all strata of life. The less we are loved and treated with respect, the more needy and vulnerable we become. And intellectual intelligence is no safeguard, for our needs and feelings are stronger forces. Some of the most brilliant humans in history have led and joined cults.

What kinds of cults are there?

Although their methods are generally the same, cults can be organized around different purposes and expressed goals (unexpressed goals of control and self-aggrandizement remain common denominators). We are probably most familiar with groups professing "religious" or "spiritual" values (such as becoming like God, becoming God, realizing our Godhood) or goals (purifying humanity or avoiding the day of judgment). These cults can range from mutations of traditional religions, in any culture, to occult fellowships, to "new" blends of spiritual practices and beliefs.

Other cults may purport to make you a better and happier person (psychological/philosophical), save the world according to a particular political doctrine, or increase your income and earthly "abundance" (commercial). Of course, some or all of

these goals may exist in any one group.

How do I tell if a group is a cult?

As is true with so many important questions, there is often no clear or general answer. Below are indicators that are found, to varied degrees and numbers, in all groups that are considered cults. To the basic question of 'what is a cult?', maybe the best answer is simply, a group in which there are many of these indicators:

Extreme Promises - Unconditional, eternal love; financial security; complete certainty about life; answers to all questions; superhuman abilities; radical personality change; profound and constant peace of mind; perfect health; eternal life--all are promises commonly made by cults.

Restricted Freedoms - Because these groups want control, they need to limit their members' basic freedoms. This includes restricting physical mobility; forbidding doubts or questions; removing the right to choose whom to spend time with, and when; prohibiting the exploration of other ways of thinking and living.

Assumptions Of Power - Often restrictions of freedom can also become active abuses of power. The group leader, or others designated to have power, may require members to perform tasks, acquire money, perform rituals, and to provide sexual services. And rather than use outright authority, cult leaders will present these demands or requirements as "opportunities" offered to those in special favor.

A Central Leader - Virtually all cults are headed by a single person (sometimes a couple or triad) who either claims special knowledge and status or who claims special access to it (contact with superhuman intelligence). A particular indicator of a cult is being told that this person knows what is best for you, regardless of your opinion or that of others you trust. To defy him or her is dangerous and can result in anything from disapproval to ostracism to physical punishment. Although a cult may claim to follow an absent leader (dead spiritual master, a non-corporeal intelligence, a being from another planet or physical plane), there will always be a present leader who benefits from the groups' existence.

Deception and Totalitarian Views are other components of cults. We may notice that what is told to "recruits" and "outsiders" is different than what is professed within the group. This sort of lie can be as basic as soliciting money for the group under false pretenses. Also, "black or white" or "we and they" thinking is common. "They" are bad, or ignorant, or deceived, or unevolved, or dangerous. "We" are good, enlightened, special recipients, evolved, or under siege. However, in some groups, pervasive ambiguity can be used as camouflage from the cult's actual beliefs and intents.

How do cults recruit and retain members?

Given our human need for belonging, meaning, security, and understanding, cults will consciously seek to exploit these yearnings, often in sophisticated ways. To recruit, these groups will infiltrate Internet forums (e.g., alt. depression, chat rooms, recovery groups), schools, parks--anywhere they believe they will find vulnerable and naive prey. Rarely will they be aggressive; their more subtle mode is to use seductive empathy and understanding to provide the tenderness a wounded person is craving--only later introducing the costs of this kindness. Once they have drawn someone in they will increase their hold with more severe and direct tactics.

Psychological manipulation involves convincing a person that his or her worth and safety are contingent on the group and its leader. While they may state that members are always free to leave, they are being duplicitous, knowing psychological and physical freedom are

not the same.

To reduce a person's sense of individuality and confidence even further, physical measures will be employed. Sleep and food deprivation; use of "consciousness enhancers" (chemical substances); exhausting work, study and exercise regimens; sensory overload; isolation--all can be used to render a person confused and weak, and thus malleable.

On a cruder level, direct coercion is used: threats of banishment, rejection by God or guru, hellfire, and physical harm are common. Actual physical and sexual abuse also occurs, and these are usually the "sensational" events we hear about. It is important to remember, however, that a person can be quietly controlled and destroyed without the use of force.

So how do I protect myself from these groups?

Being informed is the first step. Remember the indicators noted above, and realize that all of the practices mentioned actually do occur. Denial and ignorance only make us more vulnerable.

The best prevention, however, is probably to follow a few basic principles of living:

- Avoid groups or individuals who claim to know what's best for you.
- Give your trust only to the degree it has been earned.
- Over time, develop open and ongoing relationships that are mutual and nurturing.
- Develop your assertiveness: learn to say no; value your doubts and feelings.
- Develop your critical thinking.
- Avoid black and white thinking.
- Turn to more standard and proven methods of healing and help first.
- Know that your value does not depend on any one source of judgment.

Most of us will not knowingly be solicited by a cult, largely because we will turn away from their insincere tactics and unrealistic beliefs at first exposure. However, the challenges of life can make us all vulnerable. If you have questions about your involvement with a group, if you want to increase your self-confidence and assertiveness, or if you want help in developing friendships, please use the many resources available to you here: the [Deans](#), the RA's, and the [Counseling Center](#), among others--all of which are subject to public accountability.

Jon-Patrik Pedersen
CalTech Counseling Center

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