

Inside the cult controversies: Recovery from abusive groups
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Prior to and since coming to MCES, I have had an “other career” as a cult specialist and *exit counselor*. Cults are a controversial and colorful topic. Since 1980, I have been an educator and intervention specialist and have done more than 500 “exit counselings” internationally, and spent countless hours of volunteer time helping former cult members.

Almost all exit counselors (AKA deprogrammers) have been former cult members. I am no exception. Most who have tried their hand at the business, quit after a year or two. My cult chapter began with a deep interest as an artist in Theosophy (primarily Agni Yoga)¹ in the 1970s. By 1979, I became caught-up in a large, apocalyptic, puritanical New Age sect rooted in Theosophy.² Attending several conferences with 4,000 enthusiastic devotees in California changed me to the point that it ruined my first marriage. After recognizing a host of conflicts a year after our divorce, I defected, or rather struggled away, on my own in 1980.

Recovery demanded an enormous amount of self-education and social, psychological and spiritual adjustment. My efforts and lectures drew attention from, the media, deprogrammers and exit counselors. Subsequently, I chaired and lectured for a cult awareness and counseling group from 1985-1992 in New Mexico and began my international exit counseling career.

Exit counseling cases typically take several days to a week or more away from home. It is very demanding on many levels, and requires a working knowledge of many hundreds of cultic groups, group behavior, influence techniques, social psychology, comparative religion, and legal systems in different nations. Making public statements about controversial organizations can be risky. No insurance company will protect against liability (e.g., I was sued twice by a large martial arts cult and a larger new age cult and was deposed by Church of Scientology and Ramtha School of Enlightenment). I regularly get inquires from graduate students, but none have followed up after learning what it requires and the risk involved. As a result, exit counseling has shrunk to less than a handful of full time cult interventionists in America today.

My goal here is to briefly: (1) define the problem, (2) describe the solutions, and (3) offer some informational resources.

Cults have been around since humans devised rites to influence natural forces, fickle gods, ancestors, and objects with magical power. Ancient Greek and pagan religion was in reality an extensive collection of non-exclusive cults directed at deities like the Sun (Helios), Zeus, Apollo, and Mithra. The term “cult” came to mean *spurious, radical and possibly harmful groups with charismatic leaders of questionable character and motive*. It is this definition of *cult* that I use here. By mid-20th Century, primarily among Evangelicals, a cult was any form of worship not in compliance with Evangelical interpretation of the Bible. Similar attitudes exist among Muslim and Hindu fundamentalists. In other words, cults are “other” religions to a Fundamentalist. However, in my view, this is not a religious belief problem but it involves questions regarding knowledge and how that influences conduct and governance.

The cult problem is more about behavior than belief. Harmful cult behavior is the problem, but what constitutes harm? Many scholars have proposed models and definitions.

Janja Lalich, PhD, a professor of sociology, developed one of the recent models called “Bounded Choice” which she published as a book by that title in 2004.³ After a college, Lalich ventured into the human rights field and joined the Democratic Workers Party headed by a charismatic woman. After 11 years, Lalich and others broke away from the DWP thus dissolving the small but potent organization, realizing a deep violation of personal freedom imposed by social and psychological forces that blinded her as to what was really going on. As Lalich states, “I wanted to figure out what the heck happened to me.” She soon got involved, with cult awareness groups and with scholars in “brainwashing” theory including Dr Benjamin Zablocki (Rutgers), Dr Margaret T Singer (1921-2003), Dr L Jolyn West (1924-99), and Dr Robert Jay Lifton (b1926).

Lalich’s Bounded Choice model compares her political cult experience with that of the Heaven’s Gate “UFO” cult led by Marshall Applewhite. Heaven’s Gate made headlines in 1997 when 39 members were found dead in California after a ritual suicide. Although Marshall Applewhite quietly co-led this cult under various other names (*He and She; Bo and Peep; The Overcomers*) for over 25 years, the final act is what people recall. Until that final act, most people and the press will generally ignore eccentric groups much as they ignore a homeless person with schizophrenia until that person defaces a national monument or kills a celebrity.

Drawing on Anthony Giddens’s (1984) theory of structuration, Herbert Simon’s (1955, 1956, 1976) theory of bounded rationality, and Robert Jay Lifton’s (1961) theory of personal closure, Lalich identifies four “organizational aspects” that contribute to harmful cult behavior:

1. Charismatic Authority: Relating to leader as godlike, heroic, messiah, or genius
2. Transcendent Belief System: Universal or “sacred” theme that transcends individuality; transpersonal goals
3. System of Control: Rules, code of conduct, sense of “family,” selective information
4. System of Influence: Rituals, workshops, peer pressure, crisis management

Lalich says, “The result of this interactive dynamic is a “self-sealing system,” that is, a social system that is closed to disconfirming evidence and structured in such a way that everything reinforces the system. “Bounded choice” theory helps us understand the seemingly irrational behavior of the most dedicated adherents. The theory attempts to take into account individual choice within the context of an authoritarian, transcendent, closed group.”⁴

Lalich taps Lifton’s “theory of personal closure” or the experience adherents have under thought reform systems with Totalist agendas. Dr Lifton’s 1961 book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A study of “brainwashing” in Communist China* remains a seminal resource. Lifton identified eight “themes” that appear to create a climate of thought reform (*hsi-nao* in Chinese means ‘cleanse mind’ or ‘wash brain’ but properly translated means *thought reform*) to create a deployable agent for a sacred cause. These themes occur throughout military training, corporate behavior codes, and almost any exclusive group, club or gang formation to some degree, but Lifton is clear that the more “totalist” an agenda becomes, the more closure or bounded choice an individual will experience.

Lifton's eight themes:

1. Milieu Control: Social and psychological environment under pervasive influence
2. Doctrine over Person: Loyalty to teaching, testament, codes; suppress self
3. "Sacred" Science: Doctrine is true and transcendent, thus cannot be questioned
4. Doctrine of Purity: One must continually "improve" according to god-like goals
5. Mystical Manipulation: Personal experience is covertly engineered by managers
6. Loaded Language: Code words and internal jargon identify one as a cult member
7. Cult of Confession: Revealing doubts, infractions obsessively for correction
8. Dispensing of Existence: Devaluing outsiders, naming who gets saved

High-demand or totalist cult systems, according to Lifton and Lalich, create an elite atmosphere wherein loyal members can never do enough, know enough or be pure enough, thus setting up a continual feeling of shame and guilt that the managers can readily exploit.

Dr Kathleen Taylor (2006), a neuroscientist, wrote *Brainwashing: The Science of Thought Control* using Lifton's eight themes as a sociological structure to help explain her research on how our brains work when thinking creatively as opposed to unhealthy, inflexible "neuro-pathways" that develop under influence of cults and in abusive relationships.⁵ More importantly, Taylor offers a remedy to brainwashing by explaining how "stop and think" techniques primarily located in the pre-frontal cortex work to keep our brains healthy and our choices wise.

Dr Arthur Deikman (2003), a psychiatrist, expanding on his 1994 version of this book, defines cult behavior in *Them and Us: Cult thinking and terrorist threat*⁶ according to four behaviors:

1. Compliance with a Group: Peer pressure, team over self
2. Dependence on a Leader: Hero worship; hierarchy; authoritarian
3. Avoiding Dissent: Suppress doubt, avoid critics, harmony at all cost
4. Devaluing the Outsider: Defines 'them and us'

My four-part model of a harmful a cult was published several years ago:⁷

1. Transcendental Attraction: A grand scheme, special or secret knowledge,
2. Exclusive Leadership: Unique, charismatic authority with no peers
3. Circular Tension: Despite great effort to comply, or maintain a tight orbit around a central idea and authority, actual gain to perfection remains unrealized
4. Exit Perils: Outside world is demonized, loss of salvation and social connection feared, entire personal investment wasted if one defects

Cults often begin after a leader or "hero" establishes a charismatic relationship with followers or fans. Sometimes this hero worship involves a philosopher or innovator in behavioral health. Stone's *The Plato Cult* addresses adulation for famous philosophers⁸ and brings them down to earth:

"The case of Plato is not at all unique, merely extreme. In fact, all great philosophers attract a reverence which is far stronger and more widespread than that which, by any rational estimate, they are entitled to. The idolatry of Aristotle, for four hundred years after the revival of his philosophy in the twelfth century, is a stock example. But Kant, similarly, has enjoyed for two hundred years a reputation as a philosopher which is

ridiculously exaggerated: as is the odour of Enlightenment-sanctity which surrounds his life. Hegel's philosophy is now as much respected as it deserves to be despised, and even his most prosaic (not to say sordid) political adjustments are represented, in retrospect, as Absolute Spirit working itself out in history. And so on."⁹

In the same vein, Robert Lifton in *The Protean Self* (1993) offers an antidote to not only the sense of fragmentation we experience in the modern world but also the temptation we all have to accept soothing, totalist answers to deal with fragmentation. Lifton points to notable behavioral science theorists that created a charismatic relationship with their academic followers. Regarding behavioral health theorists, Lifton writes: "Laing, Lacan, and Kohut experienced an irony in common: each took on a powerful charisma for an immediate group of followers, a process that inevitably "stops time," imparts a form of magic to intellectual exchange, and thereby undermines the original exploratory impulse."

In a sense, cults create a transcendent experience that "stops time" for the follower who feels the aura of a final answer to life's questions. Thereby, "the original exploratory impulse" that got them there freezes. All that remains is to deflect criticism and doubt and to stay in orbit around the perceived savior or guru.

In the US, there is no established scientific or legal definition of harmful cult mind control or brainwashing. The law does acknowledge contributing factors such as undue influence, fraud, harassment, terroristic threat. A number of American, British and Australian scholars have been contentiously arguing over the validity of thought reform theory since the 1970s.¹⁰ Existing religions and eccentric social clubs are wary of established legal parameters regarding aggressive recruitment and conversion techniques. Official positions regarding cults vary from nation to nation with Germany, Israel, Russia and France having perhaps the most rigorous national safeguards.

Recovery is the best revenge!

Most people, as I did, leave cults on their own. Some studies estimate that 80% of new recruits defect within the first few years. Cult life can be very demanding. Think of a modified boot camp that never ends! The demands can also be quite subtle yet deeply psychological. A loyal cult member can maintain a mainstream job with an apparently seamless co-existence in society. Think of the men one year before they piloted airplanes into the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Many cult members defect out of shame and not because they see anything wrong with the group. They feel inadequate for the demanding, holy, or total task. Others, realizing how deeply they were duped, go through stages of anger, grief and retaliation all at once and not in any sequence as I did. Most however choose not to retaliate recognizing the toll this might take on emotional and psychological recovery, not to mention personal risk. Some of my colleagues and I have been defamed, harassed, picketed and sued by cult groups. I presented papers twice at annual meetings of the Association for Sociology of Religion. Scientology operatives attended and demanded that I not be permitted to speak. In 1992, an IRS agent informed me that a martial arts cult, whose leader went to jail as a result of my work exiting several high-ranking members,

had a “hit” out on me. That group also sued me for “slander.” The judge in Houston threw it out but lawyers do not come cheap!

The intervention “industry” began in during the 1970s after new mass therapies like “est”, Jesus movements like the Children of God and Peoples Temple, Eastern movements led by gurus and Zen masters from India, Japan and Korea, and channeling cults led by people who “spoke” as gods and angels mushroomed in Europe and America. By some counts, more than 3,000 new cultic groups existed in America by the late 1970s. Although many of these groups have imploded, faded away, or been absorbed into mainstream after de-radicalization, new ones are always appearing. The cult problem may have changed due to a new era of Internet and social mobility, but it has not gone away.

“Deprogramming” was coined around 1974 by Ted Patrick and others who would sometimes resort to kidnapping or house arrest to “rescue” someone from a purported cult. Judges in the United States might sign restraining orders or involuntary commitment papers to temporarily detain cult members for deprogramming. This practice was challenged by *Katz v. Superior Court* (1977), which ended court orders for deprogramming adults in America.¹¹ Thereafter, anyone who coercively detained an adult for exit counseling risked criminal charges. Close to half of all coercive interventions fail so legal retaliation is a strong possibility. I was once tried in Idaho, two years after a failed, coercively initiated intervention, but was acquitted of all charges.¹² Coercive deprogramming effectively ended in the United States 20 years ago.

The legal intervention, sometimes called non-coercive exit counseling, developed over the past four decades. Nearly all interventions with cult members take place by surprise after extensive preparation. The preparation of families can last one to three days prior to actual intervention. Most occur weeks to many months down the road. Access to the cult member can be a big problem as most have already had arguments with spouses or family, thus the topic is avoided. In most cases, access and communication have already been cut off.

The ideal intervention begins with the client away from the group or person of influence in a comfortable setting that will allow for many hours to several days of conversation and discussion. In my experience, during interventions of this type, 10-16 hour days were typical. Marathon discussions included educational video, extensive documentation and interaction with ex-members in person or over the phone. Family members were always present.

Exit counselors rarely work one-on-one for a various reasons (e.g., liability.). The client (cult member) can end the discussions at any time. Exit counselors will leave the premises if the client no longer wants to interact. The family may continue to try to persuade the client to re-engage. Interventions can stall for hours or even days. Due to the education shared during exit counseling, recovery begins during the process. Recovery means that “stop and think” parts of the brain have been re-engaged regarding ingrained beliefs, charismatic attachments, and constricted behaviors. Although most of the following factors are addressed during intervention, re-socialization after a cult experience depends on many factors including finances, mental health, employment, relocation, children, medical condition, cult induced phobias, etc. There is no set recovery plan that works for everyone. *Take Back Your Life: Recovering from cults and abusive relationships* offers solid information useful for most any former cult member.¹³

In the Middle East and elsewhere, moderate Muslim clerics use an exit counseling technique to re-socialize Islamist radicals and terrorists.¹⁴ This is a fascinating phenomenon with highly successful results. It depends wholly on what one young Egyptian student said after 9/11 when asked, “What will it take to defeat extremists?” He answered with one word: “Education.” Exit counseling is primarily an educational process that uses principles of healthy skepticism, civility, verifiable facts from history, group dynamics, and choice theory. The tough part is getting it started without excessive or illegal coercion.

An old controversy remains: Civil libertarians will claim that these “prisoners” are being coerced to renounce their religious beliefs, thus violating civil rights. To me this is tantamount to arguing it is wrong to re-educate an engineer who designs high rise buildings with flawed techniques for building a foundation. In the very least, that engineer must be stopped from contributing to another high rise structure if he does not accept re-education.

There is a lot I have not covered. One-on-one dominance through folie à deux, spousal abuse or battered women’s syndrome, crime syndicates, boot camps for recovery from addictions¹⁵, and gang formation to name a few. Here are some websites that you may find useful:

<http://cultresearch.org/>
<http://rickross.com>
<http://freedomofmind.com/>

Notes:

¹ <http://www.agniyoga.org/> (around 3 million people in Russia today adhere to Agni Yoga. Notable US members: Alan Arkin, the American actor and Henry Wallace, Sect. of Agriculture under the F D Roosevelt)

² Founded in 1958 by Mark Prophet (real name; died 1973) the *Summit Lighthouse* changed its name to Church Universal and Triumphant under the dynamic leadership of Mark Prophet’s second wife, Elizabeth Clare Prophet (1939-2007). Today it primarily goes by Summit Lighthouse again.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Janja_Lalich

⁴ http://www.icsahome.com/infoserv_articles/lalich_janja_boundedchoice_abs.htm

⁵ http://www.amazon.com/Brainwashing-Science-Thought-Kathleen-Taylor/dp/0199204780/ref=ntt_at_ep_dpt_1

⁶ <http://www.deikman.com/wrong.html>

⁷ http://www.icsahome.com/logon/elibdocview_new.asp?Subject=Razor%27s+Edge+Indeed%3A+A+Deprogramme+r%27s+View+of+Harmful+Cult+Activity

⁸ David Stone. *The Plato Cult: And other philosophical follies* (Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1991)

⁹ IBID xii

¹⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coercive_persuasion

¹¹ http://www.icsahome.com/infoserv_articles/van_hoey_sara_cults_in_court.htm

¹² <http://www.psywww.com/psyrelig/szimhart.htm>

¹³ <http://www.baytreepublish.com/take-back-life-fr.html>

¹⁴ <http://www.ucm.es/info/unisci/revistas/UNISCI%20DP%2021%20-%20ROHAN.pdf>;

<http://www.cultnews.com/?cat=18>

¹⁵ <http://stinkin-thinkin.com/2011/09/07/essential-reading-from-maia-szalavitz/>

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