

Why Do People Join Cults?

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INTRODUCTION

Forty years of my life were lost as a direct result of the cult known as Jehovah's Witnesses. Three generations of my family needlessly suffered due to my membership in that particular organization. My unique perspective stems from both my experience in the cult as well as the twenty-two years of recovery from the abuses that were suffered. The thousands of people who leave cults every day are in dire need of support, exit counseling, and psychiatric care. Since there are thousands of cults in the world today, and the size and scope of this paper is limited, this paper shall only examine cults in the United States, particularly ones that use coercion, manipulation and/or psychological abuse. We will examine the extreme examples of cults that use psychological, mental, physical and/or sexual abuse. Certain questions immediately arise when the subject of cults comes up. What is a cult? Why would anyone join a cult? Do cults really use coercive persuasion also known as mind control? What is the psychology of cult leaders? Does being in a cult cause psychological harm? What kind of help do former members need in order to recover?

Over two million people today are members of approximately five thousand separate cults here in the United States. Every day more people are being deceived by the manipulative techniques employed by cults. The people most at risk for joining a cult are the lonely, the uneducated, young adults who have just left home, and anyone who has recently suffered a loss, such as death or divorce. Anyone not familiar with critical thinking, logical fallacies and propaganda is also at risk. No one joins a cult, they join a movement, a cause, a religion. Cults deceive and have a hidden agenda; they are harmful and dangerous, however, they may appear

friendly as they shower prospective members with affection and attention. They take away individual freedom and provide a false sense of security. Most insidious of all, when persuasion and manipulation fail, they resort to coercion using fear, obligation, and guilt to manipulate members into compliance (Foward, 2003).

What is a Cult?

In any discussion of cults, what qualifies as a cult must be addressed before delving into specifics of what harm is caused to the individuals who join them. There are certain features which clearly identify the group, religion, or movement as a cult. Christian cults have a charismatic leader or leaders who increasingly becomes an object of worship, who claim to have received his or her teachings from a divine source and therefore cannot be questioned. Cults use psychological processes, known as “coercive persuasion” or “thought reform” and a pattern emerges of manipulation and exploitation from the leadership and idealism on the part of the members (Foward, 2018). While cultic groups vary (political, religious, and social) they often operate in similar ways, instilling black and white thinking and isolating the member from the outside world, by separating them from friends and family (Salande & Perkins, 2011, pp. 381-384).

Further characteristics of cults include the power of the authority, be it a single charismatic leader or group of leaders in order to induce compliance, which plays an integral role in cult integration (Salande & Perkins, 2011, pp. 381-384). Cult members must comply with certain regulations which are presented as guidelines. Failure to comply results in expulsion, which subsequently results in the loss of family and friends if they also happen to be members of

the cult. Cults use emotional blackmail, threatening the loss of family and friends. Shunning is one of the features that identifies a cult and is well known among Scientologists, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses, for example (Why People Stay in Cults, 2016). The tactics the cults employ in order to gain influence over their members, as well as the psychological harm that occurs are among the features which help to identify the cult (Hassan, 2018).

Most scholars avoid the word cult altogether because it carries a negative connotation and prefer to use *sect* or *new religious movements*. While it was difficult years ago to provide examples in each case as new religious movements vary so widely, in recent years more studies have been done on this growing trend and now the criteria and data have enabled scholars to pinpoint what constitutes a cult or new religious movement (Szubin, Jensen, & Gregg, 2000, p. 16). In understanding what constitutes a cult, Goransson and Holmqvist explain, "It may be difficult to decide which group is a cult and which is not, and there have been many suggestions in the literature about how to define a cult. To do this, Woody (2009) emphasized the importance of focusing on the conditions in the group and the consequences of being a member, irrespective of the professed thought model" (Goransson & Holmqvist, 2018, p. 43).

In helping to define what a cult is Steven Hassan, a former member of the "The Unification Church", whose members were commonly referred to as Moonies, and now an expert on cults and undue influence, states: "In these groups, basic respect for the individual is secondary to the leader's whim and ideology. People are manipulated and coerced to think, feel, and behave in a single "right way." Individuals become totally dependent on the group and lose the ability to act or think on their own. They are typically exploited for the sake of the group's economic or political ends" (Hassan, 2018, pg. 39).

Another leading cult expert, Margaret Singer, who authored the book “*Cults in Our Midst the Continuing Fight Against Their Hidden Menace*,” states: “Cult structure is basically authoritarian thus the personality of the leader or leaders becomes all important. Cults come to reflect the idea, style, and whims of the leader and become extensions of the leader. Legend has it that all cult leaders are charismatic. In reality, charisma is less important than skills of persuasion and the ability to manipulate others” (Singer, 2003, p xxiv).

Types of Cults

There are four main types of cults, with religious cults being the most well-known and most numerous. Some are loosely based on the Bible, or the Koran, while others are based on Eastern religion or the occult. Extremist Political cults are probably the most well known and often make the news. These groups are often organized around a particular political agenda. Less well known are psychotherapy/educational cults which typically hold expensive workshops and seminars providing participants with “insight” and/or “enlightenment.” These cults use many basic mind techniques and customers are manipulated into signing up for more expensive courses. Lastly, there are commercial cults who deceive and manipulate people to work for little to no pay in the hope of getting a large sum but in actuality fleece their victims. They also destroy their victims’ self-esteem so they will not complain (Hassan, 2018, pg. 83-86).

Some of the more extreme cults which were harmful and a danger to society were the followers of Jim Jones which ended in tragedy at Jonestown, David Koresh who led the Branch Davidians and Heaven’s Gate. People were murdered at the instigation of the charismatic leader of these religious groups. Another group people may not realize is dangerous is Scientology. A booklet was released in Germany entitled, ‘*New Religious and Ideological Movements and*

Psychological Groups' identifying thirty religious groups as potentially dangerous with Scientology being included on that list (Dein & Barlow, 1999, pg. 75).

Cult leaders

One trait cults have in common is a charismatic leader. The leader typically suffers from a type of personality disorder such as narcissism and/or antisocial personality disorder. Studies have been done as ex-cult members gave eyewitness accounts of antisocial behaviors by cult leaders. The antisocial behavior referred to is manipulation and transgressing society's standards of fairness, justice and moral behavior (Martin, Langone, Dole & Siltrout, 1992; Tobias & Lalich, 1994; West & Martin, 1999; and Kent, 2004 as qtd in Burke, 2006). Cult leaders who mistreat cult members but do not have criminal histories are more difficult to identify. Exerting dominance and control over others are among the personality traits observed which sometimes includes aggressive behavior. These cult leaders actively intrude upon and violate the rights of others. Other less aggressive cult leaders seek to control their members using fear, obligation, guilt, manipulation and/or coercion. Some cults are more subtle, thus their manipulation is more difficult to discern to those who are unfamiliar with this behavior (Burke, 2006).

Heaven's Gate

The founders of Heaven's Gate, Marshall Herff Applewhite, and Bonnie Lu Nettles, met in a psychiatric hospital in 1972. Applewhite struggled with depression and hearing voices and checked into a psychiatric hospital. Registered nurse Bonnie Nettles managed to convince Applewhite that they were aliens who had known each other in a previous life. They developed their bizarre religion, believing they had been sent to Earth to warn humanity that our civilization was about to collapse. The only way to escape the coming holocaust was to be beamed up to a

spacecraft operated by aliens and taken to the gates of heaven. In March of 1997, thirty-nine men and women were found dead in a mansion outside San Diego, all victims of mass suicide. This UFO cult is a perfect example of a truly dangerous cult (Lewis, 1998).

Jonestown

On November 18, 1978, the deaths of 913 followers of the Reverend Jim Jones flooded the news. Disturbing images of the bodies of men, women, and children flashed across the airwaves. They died following the command of their leader in the remote jungle of British Guyana, on the northern coast of South America. Jones used manipulation, intimidation, threats, and coercion to maintain complete control over the people. The people engaged in regular suicide drills, called “White Nights” as a test of loyalty. Children, as well as adult men and women, were physically and/or sexually abused. There was no way to escape as passports were confiscated, nor were doubts or challenges to the leadership tolerated. Children were forcefully given the lethal mix of cyanide and flavor-aid; afterward, adults had the “choice” to drink it or face gunfire. It wasn’t only Jones and his followers who died, but 314 innocent children, a U.S. Congressman and four members of the press. Some survivors of the group refer to the incident as mass murder since there was resistance when the Kool-Aid was being administered. Many tried to leave and were met with gunfire at the airport (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

Branch Davidians

David Koresh, the leader of the Branch Davidian cult, was a ninth-grade dropout with a learning disability. He will always be remembered for the deadly standoff against the FBI and the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms. He and his followers stockpiled weapons in preparation for the Apocalypse. On February 28, 1993, the Federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco,

and Firearms raided the Davidian compound outside of Waco, Texas. It ended with the compound erupting in a blazing inferno where Koresh, who shot himself, was among the dozens who were found dead, including twenty-two children. In typical cult fashion, Koresh proclaimed himself the leader and his teachings included the practice of “spiritual weddings” in which he could bed any of the female followers. Sexual abuse is commonly exhibited in cults, though in many it is hidden (Lalich, 2009).

Scientology

Scientology was founded by L. Ron Hubbard, a science-fiction writer, who authored the book “*Dianetics: The Modern Science of Mental Health*” which was published in 1950 and quickly became a best-seller. Scientology did not get its start as a religion but as a science. Former Scientologist, Leah Remini describes the appeal of the cult this way: “... the central tenet of Scientology, as stated by its founder, L. Ron Hubbard, is incredibly alluring. Scientology offers a clearly laid out scientific process that helps you to overcome your limitations and realize your full potential for greatness. It is presented as a well-defined path to achieving total spiritual freedom and enlightenment and a full understanding of yourself and others” (Remini, 2018). Hubbard wrote that the aims of Scientology are “a civilization without insanity, without criminals and without war, where the able can prosper and honest beings can have rights, and where Man is free to rise to greater heights” (Remini, 2018). Scientology was granted tax-free status in the U.S. in October of 1993, which only added to the delusion that it is a religion.

A statement by John Lewis, author of *Scientology: Sect, science, or scam?* explains: “The Church of Scientology (CoS) is arguably the most persistently controversial new religious

movement (NRM) of modern times. One of the chief criticisms leveled against CoS is that it is a money-making business — or, more harshly, a money making scam”(Lewis, 2015).

What is Mind Control?

In order to understand how someone can be deceived to such a degree that they will give up their money, family, jobs, college, a lucrative career and even their own freedom we must look at the social and psychological influence techniques used by cult groups. Deceptions are used during the recruitment phase and prospective members are not at all aware of what will be expected of them once they join (Foward, 2006).

Psychologist Steven Hassan, another cult expert, helps define what mind control is. As a former member of Sun Myung Moon Unification Church, Steven Hassan is a foremost authority on cults, undue influence, and the psychology cults use to control their members. In his book, “*Combatting Mind Control*” he states: “Mind control is any system of influence that disrupts an individual’s authentic identity and replaces it with a new false one. In most cases, that new identity is one the person would strongly reject if they had been asked for their consent” (Hassan p. 42). Today, using undue influence or mind-control is far more sophisticated than the brainwashing procedures used by Communist countries on prisoners of war. The mind control of today is far more subtle. This is evident by the fact that no one who is in a cult knows he or she is in a cult. No one who is under the influence of mind control *knows* he or she is being strongly influenced as to what to think and believe by outside forces. Ask any cult member and he or she will strongly assert they joined of their own free will, are able to leave at any time, and all their thoughts are their own (Hassan, 2018).

We can see how undue influence, or mind control, has become far more subtle in recent years if we compare it with prisoners of war admitting to their so-called crimes on public television (Hassan, 2018). Today, we see cults attempting to present their ideas in an appealing fashion and promising to make the world a better place if only you join, pledge your loyalty and convert the rest of the world. Whether it's by means of pretty pictures of an Edenic paradise or promising to bring members to a higher level of consciousness, it's all carefully presented in such a way as to entice the public. "Mind control involves little to no overt physical abuse. Instead, hypnotic processes are combined with group dynamics to create potent indoctrination effect. The individual is deceived and manipulated-but not directly threatened-into making the prescribed choices" (Hassan, 2018). "Over the past half century, undue influence has become more of a science. Since World War II, intelligence agencies around the world have been aggressively engaged in mind control research and development. The CIA admits to having performed drug, electroshock, and hypnosis experiments since the early 1950's under the code name MK-ULTRA" (Hassan, 2018).

Most people today, including psychologists and scholars, would consider cults destructive. Why? "Because the cult violates the members' rights and damages them through the abusive techniques of unethical mind control. It distinguishes itself from a normal, healthy social or religious group by subjecting its members to systematic control of behavior, information, thoughts, and control (BITE) to keep them dependent and obedient"(Hassan, 2018, p. 82). After a cult has used coercion and psychological abuse, the cult members are no longer able to think and reason for themselves. All critical thinking and rational thought have now been effectively removed from the cult member's mind.

In recent decades, something new has been added: the systematic use of modern psychological techniques to reduce a person's will and gain control over their thoughts, feelings, and behavior (Hassan, 2018, p. 83). After gaining the interest of a prospective member the next step is earning the members' trust. After a person has put their faith and trust into the cult they join their belief system, which is characterized by closed-mindedness. They are no longer interested in a rational cognitive evaluation of the facts. They have accepted what the cult teaches as truth, hence anything that disagrees with these teachings is false. There is no rational exploration or investigation into researching for truth, rather, everything that disagrees with the cult teachings is instantly dismissed. The organizational structure interprets the facts to the cultist (Martin, 2004).

Although cult members may appear happier and may seem well-adjusted, cults are by nature and design, deceptive. Thus, cult members do not realize they are in a cult. To the uninitiated, only the basics are shared. Cults begin with a charismatic leader, an opportunistic leader who runs a con game. Some of these leaders actually believe their own teachings, however outlandish they may be. Other cult leaders set out to intentionally defraud their members in the hopes of gaining fame, power, and money. Cult leaders who believe their own teachings, the self-ordained prophets, apostles, and ministers may undergo great sacrifices, including death, for the sake of their message (Szubin, 2000, p. 3).

Why Do People Join Cults?

Even so, cult expert Margaret Singer explains: "Cults are not always easy to recognize at first glance. Most people have a general idea of what a cult is, however, what people are not generally aware of is how cults achieve the control of people's lives that they appear to

have.” (Singer, 2006). In order to understand how someone can be so thoroughly deceived as to join a cult, to the degree that they give up their family, their job, and/or their education the psychological influence and deception of the cult must be examined (Singer, 2006).

People are more vulnerable to flattery, deception, and enticements when they are lonely or suffering. A death in the family makes a person particularly susceptible to the misleading promises of a cult. A young person off to college and away from home, far removed from family and friends, is an easy target. At such times, people are more easily manipulated, flattered by all the attention typically given new recruits, and more likely to be deceived by the alluring promises of deceptive people with an agenda. Cults target people, they prey upon those who are not familiar with them, the grieving, the young, the innocent, the gullible (Singer, 2006).

Author of the article appearing in *Cultic Studies Review* entitled “The Violent Outcomes of Ideological Extremism: “What Have We Learned Since Jonestown?” Janja Lalich, Ph.D., who has been studying cults for twenty years, tells how she gained her B.A. with honors at the University of Wisconsin, followed by a Fulbright fellowship in France and subsequently moved to New York City and joined a cult. She tells of her own background in order to shatter the enduring myth that only the stupid or weak-willed could be deceived into joining a cult (Lalich, 2009).

Indeed, cults are by nature deceptive. The cult members themselves are deceived, fully believing what they are teaching, thus in their genuineness, they are able to convince others more readily. The full nature of the beliefs of the cult are not fully revealed to outsiders. In truth, many cult members themselves don’t fully know all the details about their cult. They are only given the basics, the minimum knowledge needed in order to entice them to join and then recruit more

members. It is not until one rises to higher ranks within the organization that more information is revealed (Hassan, 2016).

Since cult members are not free to leave, it stands to reason that no one knowingly joins a cult. The key word here is *knowingly*. People generally believe they are joining a cause, movement or what they imagine is the one true religion. People join and become members because they are searching for the meaning of life, seeking fulfillment, social change, happiness and a sense of belonging to a community. People join a group that promises to make the world a better place or claims to *have the truth* and suddenly this secret needs to be shared with the world so everyone can join and be saved. The process is deliberate and done both slowly and carefully. By the time a person joins, they have no idea they have been psychologically manipulated (Salande & Perkins, 2011, p. 381).

Common misconceptions about brainwashing persist because it is difficult to understand why anyone would join such a demanding, controlling organization or religion. Many people think no sane person would ever join unless they were forced physically or mentally. It's commonly thought people who join cults are not intelligent. What people fail to realize is the deception of the cult, and the allure of gaining a purpose in life, or gaining not only an instant community but also promises of secret knowledge. Cults appeal to those who feel lonely, or unfulfilled (Szubin, 2000, p. 3).

Finding fulfillment by belonging to the group, causes members to feel they have surpassed the abilities and knowledge of the outside world. This *hidden knowledge* or *secret knowledge* is what entices many to examine the teachings. This special knowledge or salvation is reserved exclusively for the group members. Thus, cult members see themselves as more

enlightened and informed than the population at large. This attitude is often manifested as an arrogant dismissal of the mainstream way of thinking or acting (Salande & Perkins, 2011, pp. 381-384).

An example of this arrogance is illustrated by Jim Jones and the People's Temple which culminated with the Guyana massacre that left 900 cult members dead and which gave rise to the expression "Drink the Kool-Aid". Others may think of Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church whose cult members were more commonly known simply as "Moonies". Among other cults, there are Charles Manson, as well as David Koresh, and the Branch Davidians. Large cults have gone mainstream and become very sophisticated and now hire top law firms, notably among these is Scientology. Few would realize that in the 1800's new cults emerged, such as the Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Christian Scientists. Some of these larger cults have now been accepted by the mainstream and few may realize they are actually cults, with all the rules, control and psychological damage that typically occurs to the members (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018).

Thus, what some would consider to be just another branch of Christianity, these cults are free to deceive and present their teachings in such a way as to intrigue the unwary. Leah Remini, a former member of the Church of Scientology describes the allure of Scientology in this way, "...the central tenet of Scientology, as stated by its founder, L. Ron Hubbard (LRH), is incredibly alluring. Scientology offers a clearly laid out scientific process that helps you to overcome your limitations and realize your full potential for greatness. It is presented as a well-defined path to achieving total spiritual freedom and enlightenment and a full understanding of yourself and others" (Remini, 2015, location 73).

Why Do Cults Appeal to People?

Cults come in all shapes and sizes, designed to appeal to the public hiding their real agenda. They are masters of deception. Once a person has been unduly influenced and is convinced of the truthfulness of the cult, they become convincing recruiters. Not all cults are religious or political as many people may think. As stated previously, some people are searching for fulfillment or a deeper meaning to life, while others are lonely and are seeking a community. Some people are in the midst of an emotional upheaval due to a death in the family or a divorce for example. A recent move can leave a person without the support of family or friends nearby. Any one of these things can leave a person susceptible. This isolation and loneliness may lead them to seek 'something better' (Dein & Barlow, 1999, pp.75, 80-81). Some, like members who join Hare Krishna, are impressed by their philosophy. The fact that they do not eat meat or eggs, nor take drugs or alcohol may sound appealing. No illicit sex is allowed, nor gambling. Members report feeling happier and experience a great sense of belonging. Members who joined emphasized that the philosophy of clean living and clean eating gave meaning to their life. The instant friendships and community feel emphasized this philosophy and the members were impressed by the non-materialistic lifestyle (Dein & Barlow, 1999, pp. 80-82).

Do Cults Cause Harm?

Cults vary in how much power and control they wield over their members. Since cult leaders typically deceive their members, it's not surprising to see there are a number of psychological weapons that cults use against their members, most notably fear, obligation, and guilt. Of course, when a person first encounters a cult member and shows interest, these strategies are not employed. The first step is to entice a possible new recruit with promises of

acceptance, a community, and a purpose in life. Once a person begins to accept the proposed teachings the psychological warfare of a cult begins (Hassan, 2018, p. 43).

Cults present themselves as indispensable, all-knowing, all-wise, having all the answers to life's questions, thus creating a dependence of the individual on the cult leader. This is referred to as an attachment analysis and helps to explain the emotional and cognitive mechanisms that are taking place. The cult makes sure the members rely upon the cult leader to provide a safe haven, leaving the members child-like and unable to use critical thinking. Emotionally, this leads to trauma bonding, a powerful, entangled bond with the cult leaders, similar to Stockholm syndrome. Cognitively, this can lead to dissociation as the cult members continue to deal with the fear instilled by the leaders (Stein & Russell, 2016, pp. 18-21).

The closed, fearful world within a cult is designed to promote a dependent relationship. The cult uses fear to control the members, whether that is by threatening abandonment or fear of impending disaster, such as God's war against mankind, known as Armageddon. This is continually used and escalates as pictures are printed and finally, videos are produced, showing the members in hiding, as the police come in with assault weapons blazing (Stein & Russell, 2016, pp. 18-21).

Cults also use manipulation, fear, obligation, and guilt. Susan Forward addresses this in her book "*Lost in the Fog*" and states: "Blackmailers pump an engulfing FOG (fear, obligation, guilt) into their relationships, ensuring that we will feel afraid to cross them, obligated to give them their way, and terribly guilty if we don't." She asks the following questions stating if you answer yes to even one of them you are being manipulated, emotionally blackmailed. Do they:

- Threaten to make your life difficult if you don't do what they want?

- Always want more, no matter how much you give?
- Regularly assume you will give in to them?
- Regularly ignore or discount your feelings and needs?
- Shower you with approval when you give in to them, and take it away when you don't? (Forward, 1997).

This kind of toxic, manipulating behavior is also used by cults. When people are fortunate enough to break free and seek psychological help for their PTSD, they discover they have been both manipulated and the subject of coercion (Zieman, 2015).

Since cults promote a dependent relationship, it isolates their members, separating them from society which causes psychological harm. Individuals are taught to be dependent upon and obedient to the leaders, often ignoring their own needs and desires. Total allegiance to the leaders, who claim to be specially chosen by God, is required. Dependency upon the cult is instilled in the members to the point that the thought of leaving instills fear and panic.

Individuals are strongly encouraged to conform regarding the dress code, dating, and what the members are allowed to read, listen to, watch, and believe. Anything that disagrees with the cult, questions it or encourages critical thinking is not permitted (Morse & Morse, 1987, pp. 563-565).

A study was done by Goransson and Holmqvist in the *International Journal of Cultic Studies* in which they interviewed a number of former cult members; results showed impaired psychological well-being and high levels of psychological distress. Leaving the cult led to a separation from family and friends was an added trauma for former members' psychological well-being. Members did not report having these problems before entering the group. The most prominent problems were anxiety, panic anxiety disorder, and feelings of guilt. Post-Traumatic

Stress Disorder was commonly reported. Almost half of the participants had symptoms similar to psychotic symptoms and almost twenty-five percent had tried to commit suicide (Goransson & Holmqvist, 2018, pp. 43-45).

What is the Psychology of Cult Leaders?

A study done by J. Burke states: “It has been suggested that cult leaders might be better classified as meeting the criteria for narcissistic personality disorder. Studies have shown the common trait of being antisocial while some are typically devious which becomes apparent only after extensive evaluation.” (Burke, 2006, 390). Traits of narcissism, antisocial behavior and aggression were all seen and elevated. Since dominance (exerting influence or control over others) and aggressiveness were commonly seen in cult leaders, the question arises, what happens when an aggressive, controlling, narcissist is put into a position of absolute power over a group of people?

What’s Wrong With Ex-Cult Members?

Given the abuses heaped upon cult members, the need for psychological assistance when a member exits the cult becomes obvious. There is a need for more knowledge about the mental health of former cult members among psychologists today. Critical research has been done about whether cult membership is harmful and most researchers agree that former cult members have more psychological problems than the normal population. Despite this fact, it is often difficult for these members to get the appropriate help they need (Goransson and Holmqvist, 2018). Many former cult members report psychological problems similar to those of people who have been subjects of brainwashing or mind control (Robbins & Anthony, 1982 as qtd by Goransson and Holmqvist, 2018). According to this study, former cult members are sometimes classified as

psychotic because they have thoughts similar to psychotic thoughts and yet these thoughts are just reflections of the doctrines of their group (Swartling & Swartling, 1992, as qtd. by Goransson and Holmqvist 2018). According to Winocaur-Craig's 1995 study the more psychological abuse cult members experienced in the group the more psychological problems they have (Goransson and Holmqvist 2018). According to a Gasde & Block study done in 1998, the longer a former cult member was an active member of the group the more psychological problems they have (Gasde & Block, 1998 as qtd. by Goransson and Holmqvist 2018). Psychological well-being was expected to be better the longer a person had defected (Gasde & Block 1998, Walsh et al., 1995 as qtd. by Goransson and Holmqvist 2018). Among the participants in this study were Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and Children of God. Other less well known cults were also participants however, they were members of a cult in Sweden therefore not included in this paper (Goransson and Holmqvist 2018). It's fairly common for former members to suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (Hassan, 2018, p 275).

What Kind of Help Do Former Cult Members Need.

Former members of a cult, having been psychologically manipulated, coerced and abused suffer various kinds of psychological damage as a result of their membership in a controlling organization. Every person who has been in a cult is different and has had different experiences and therefore has different needs in their recovery. How quickly they recover is largely dependent upon the level of abuse, the number of years they were members and how much support and help they received during their recovery process. Those who seek psychological support recover more quickly as do those who have the support of family and/or a community (Hassan, 2016).

After all is said and done, the former member of a cult has to find their own way. For some it's therapy, for others, it's self-help books, along with the support of family or friends. It can take many years to recover, but it's best not done alone. It's an infinitely easier and shorter path to recovery with support. Unfortunately, finding a mental health professional who is familiar with cults is difficult. There have been books written on the subject of spiritual abuse and this has helped many former members and helped bring this problem to the attention of the public. Steven Hassan sums it up in perhaps a rather simplistic way, "Perhaps most importantly, former members have to learn to trust themselves again. They have to realize they didn't choose to be lied to or abused. They are not at fault" (Hassan, 2018, p. 289).

What Do Statistics Show?

In a 2018 survey conducted at Pima Community College, 1,000 former members of the cult known as Jehovah's Witnesses responded. The survey asked the respondents questions regarding the effects of the cult on their lives once they left the Jehovah's Witnesses. The results showed 96.7% of the respondents reported emotional and psychological problems as a result of having been a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses. Of the respondents answering the survey, 62.1% reported suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder; however, it should be noted that several reported known symptoms of PTSD but failed to recognize they were suffering from it. In the aforementioned survey, 75.8% report they are currently being shunned. Most alarming was the discovery of 68.9% of respondents who knew someone who died or was put at risk as a direct result of adhering to the rules of the Jehovah's Witness cult. A different career path would have been chosen by 88.9% who responded and 59.9% reported they have sought out psychiatric help. An additional 85.2% report they would now take blood if necessary (something prohibited

by the Jehovah's Witnesses). Another 58% report they either have or are considering going to college (Survey, 2018) which the cult does not allow.

Conclusion

Many people today are not familiar with what a cult is, and may not be aware of how psychologically harmful they are, or how easy it is to be deceived by them. What is a cult? There are certain identifying features which help to identify which groups and religions are cults. This paper focused on the cults in the U.S. that cause psychological harm. Some of the features which identify a cult include: having a charismatic leader, not permitting the questioning of the leadership, and using coercive persuasion, also known as mind control. Do people who join cults lack intelligence? No, research shows people are deceived into joining. No one joins a cult, they join a movement, a cause or a religion. This is not a matter of intelligence, but it is the lack of critical thinking skills, and the inability to recognize the use of propaganda or the appeal to emotion. The most susceptible people at risk of joining a cult are people who are lonely, disillusioned, the young and inexperienced as well as anyone facing a personal crises.

Do cults use coercive persuasion? Cults control their members and do not allow them to disagree, question or research outside sources. Members are coerced and punished into obedience without question. The repetition of information is used in order to convince the cult member of the validity of the information presented. Cult members sound identical, parroting the information they have been systematically fed. Research shows cult leaders are often charismatic, narcissist and have antisocial personality. Leaders who demand control and obedience become abusive.

Cults appeal to the mainstream by tailoring their presentation to appeal to the particular circumstances of the person they are speaking to. Cult members often feel they are specially chosen or have special knowledge outsiders are not privy to, which makes them feel like the elite and leads to arrogance. Since they lack critical thinking skills and objectivity, the cult member's attachment is emotional. This makes having rational conversation with a cult member very difficult. Showing a cult member how the cult has lied to them, providing evidence, has been somewhat successful. Helping a cult member realize they have been deceived is a challenge to those of us trying to reach them.

Do cults cause harm? A survey of 1,000 former cult members reveals 96.7% report suffering from emotional and psychological harm as a result of being members of Jehovah's Witnesses. The majority report suffering from PTSD and seeking professional help.

It's evident from the results of the research and the survey that former cult members are in need of professional help. Former cult members who lack insurance or cannot afford it benefit by talking about their experiences with people who empathize and understand the dynamics of abuse. Now that spiritual abuse has become recognized among professionals and psychologists self-help books have been written on the subject and this has helped former cult members in their recovery.

While some cults have ended in tragedy such as Jonestown and Waco, many have continued to grow in number and become somewhat acceptable to the mainstream, such as the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses. Since they have been organized for some time and are no longer in the first generation, this lends to their image of respectability making them an even greater danger as the public is largely unaware that both these groups are cults.

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Implications for Further Research:

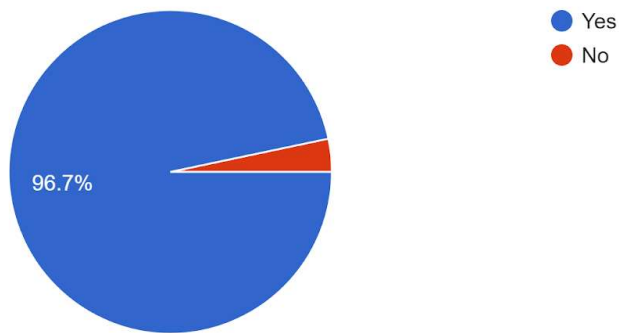
Given the page restrictions and time constriction I was unable to include this in the research paper. Recently, there was a fascinating story in the New York Times about a group of women inside a so-called secretive group, a self-help organization called Nxivm. Nxivm said it was designed to bring about greater self-fulfillment by eliminating psychological and emotional barriers. The women were coerced into having sex and getting branded with the leaders initials. Raniere, the leader of this sex cult, remains behind bars in Mexico.

Page restrictions also prevented me from going into details regarding some other cults in the United States, such as the Mormons, which given its long history would require a paper dedicated to just the Mormon faith. Even though the Mormon faith is the largest cult in the United States, it has a long and complicated history which this paper simply could not cover in its entirety. The Quakers, Amish and the Hutterites were also not included. Oneness Pentecostals can be equally abusive, but not each and every church of that particular denomination is, therefore, they were not included.

Appendix A

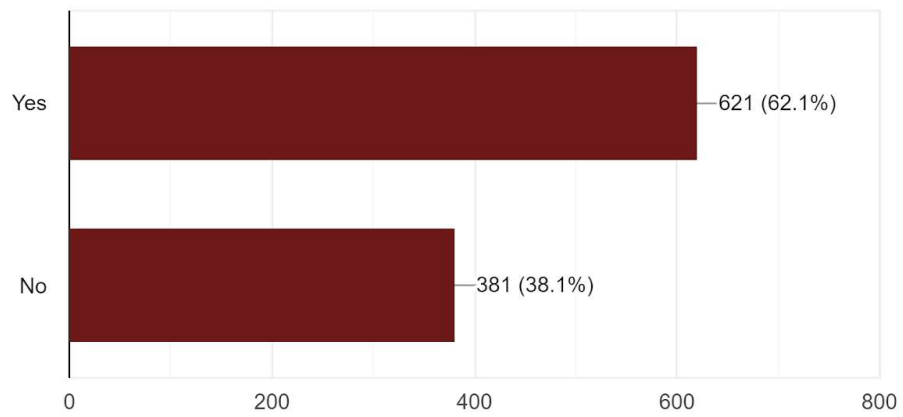
Have you experienced emotional/psychological problems as a result of being in the cult?

1,000 responses



Do you suffer from PTSD as a result of being in the cult?

1,000 responses



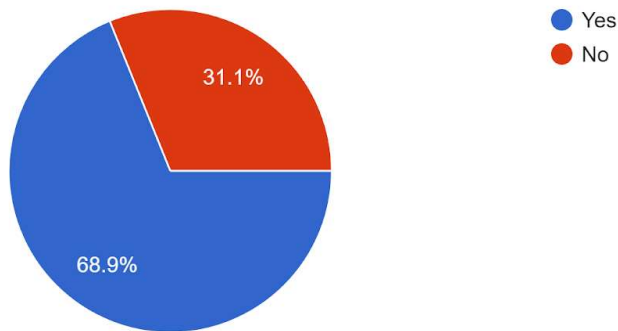
Are you currently being shunned?

1,000 responses



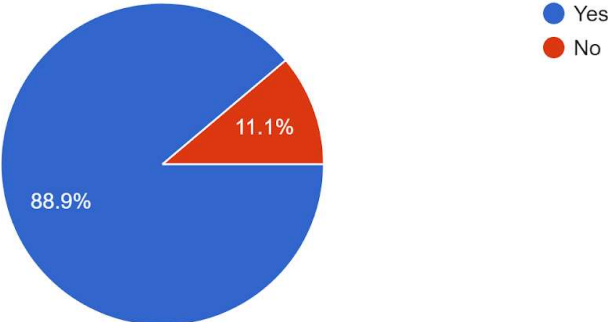
"Do you know anyone who has died, or put at risk, because of the cult's beliefs about medical treatment?" (the ...issue, organ transplants for example)

919 responses



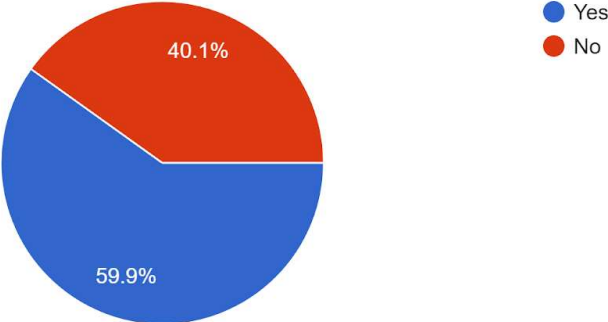
Do you feel that you would have gone down a different career path had you not been raised in?

879 responses



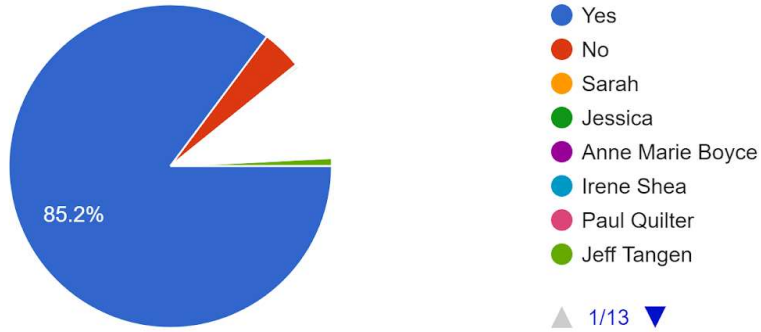
Have you ever sought out a psychiatrist for assistance with feelings related to having been a cult member?

892 responses



Would you accept a blood transfusion if your life depended on it?

1,000 responses



Did you, or are you considering going to college or attaining a degree?

892 responses

