

Working with cult survivors

Gillie Jenkinson describes the sophisticated techniques used by cults to manipulate members, and the lasting effects on their sense of self

Illustration by Clare Nicholas

In 1973, aged 21, I joined what I thought was a group of passionate, loving people. I had no idea that I would be trapped for years. It was the start of a lost decade for me. The group I joined was called 'The Love of God Community' (LOGC). It had little to do with love or with God.

I left the cult in 1980, and only when it imploded and ceased to exist. I have spent many years since processing my own experience and researching the experiences of others who also became involved in cults. After years of feeling convinced that my entrapment was somehow my fault, I know now that it is nothing to do with personal weakness or character defect; nor is it all about my childhood and family upbringing. Cults are powerful bodies that use potent psychological techniques to entrap their victims. People who are seduced into and abused in a cult deserve the same understanding as victims of rape.

For me, a good analogy is that of a frog in boiling water. If you put a frog into boiling water it will immediately jump out to try to escape the danger. But if you put it in cold water and then slowly heat it up, by the time the frog realises it is in danger, it is too late.

I initially joined LOGC because they offered free counselling and a radical form of Christianity that seemed more interesting than that on offer in most orthodox Anglican churches. Like many other young people then (and now), I was looking for meaning in my life. I wanted to feel less depressed, to make the world a better place and to belong. I turned to spirituality and Christianity to try to fill the void. Many of the people in LOGC were genuinely good and committed; a lot of love was shared; we had a vision. Looking back, there was little substance to our vision but at the time it was exciting. Many others have also described how this 'love bombing' drew them in.

At first it was a very positive experience. But, with the arrival of a new leader, the group changed; it became authoritarian, dedicated to a form of puritanical Christianity that demanded total obedience from its members, and used physical punishment and sexual abuse to exert control. We were all harmed psychologically and many were harmed physically by sexual abuse and beatings, which were described as punishments for 'sin'. I eventually managed to leave, but only because the group collapsed, and even then the controls and triggers stayed with me. I remained trapped in fear and cultic thinking for a further 14 years. I continued to look to authority figures to tell me what to do and assumed they knew me better than I knew myself – and that has been a hard one to break.

Why do people join?

No one knowingly joins a group that is going to harm them. People join a group because of the benefits it seems to offer them. Cults can be predatory and, like any predator, they prey on the vulnerable. They also tend to target people who are going to be of benefit for them, financially or otherwise. Anyone can be sucked in.¹ Research does suggest that vulnerability to cult recruitment is particularly high during key transitional periods,² especially from child to adulthood.¹ Family environment is not necessarily a significant factor in cult involvement,³ although key periods of vulnerability are the 12 months following a stressful event, such as relationship breakdown, death of close friends or relatives, and failure in school or at work.

Cult leaders use highly sophisticated techniques to keep their members. Cialdini⁴ lists the weapons of influence that are used powerfully in the hothouse atmosphere of a high demand group or cult. They include:

love

love ♡

love

love ♡

love ♡

love ♡

love ♡



Practice

References

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What is a cult?

Langone defines a cult as 'a group or movement that, to a significant degree:⁵

- a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing
- b) uses a thought-reform programme to persuade, control, and socialise members (ie to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices)
- c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members
- d) exploits members to advance the leadership's

goals, and e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community.'

Kendall⁶ uses the term 'high demand group' to describe cult-like groups. This is a better description for cults that have a very high intensity but are not closed to outside influences. Another commonly used term is 'extremist authoritarian sect'.⁶ Sociologists use the term New Religious Movements (NRMs) or New Religions, but not all cults are religious and not all new religions are cultic.

A cult can be any size. It can even be a one-on-one relationship where one individual has a hold over the other and uses spiritual/mental or physical violence to exert their power. Some domestic violence situations can be defined as cultic.

Cults can be spiritual, self-developmental or political. Psychotherapy cults can be some of the most damaging and toxic.⁷

A number of cases have been reported where a therapist has drawn clients and therapeutic group members into an intense relationship where the

therapist controls and micro-manages their lives. In some cases huge sums of money have been extracted from clients. When a therapist evolves into a spiritual leader the dynamics of the 'therapeutic' and 'spiritual' can combine in a lethal mix to render their clients helpless, dependent, traumatised and psychologically imprisoned.

Contrary to common belief, cults are not an American phenomenon: there are an estimated 800 NRMs⁸ and between 1,000 and 1,500 cults currently in the UK.⁹

- reciprocity – the pressure to repay what another person has provided. This rule can kick in from the very first contact with a cult when the victim is entrapped by the offer of spiritual enlightenment, a free meal, mystical experiences or simply love bombing
- commitment and consistency – once someone has been manipulated into making the initial commitment, they will be more ready to agree to further requests
- social proof – you are told that others, who may be role models, have done whatever they want you to do
- liking – people tend to say yes to requests from people they know and like, so cults will often present a friendly and loving face
- authority – Milgram's studies on obedience demonstrate how easily we will comply with requests from an authority figure
- scarcity – cults use high pressure sales techniques to persuade the

victim of their privilege in being invited to become a member.

Many cults use thought reform to create totalitarian control.¹⁰ Lifton identifies eight components of thought reform:¹⁰

- milieu control – communication, and often access to TV, newspapers, food, sleep and sex, are controlled
- mystical manipulation – contrived spontaneity creates mystique, which is then used to justify manipulation
- the demand for purity – who you were is of no account any more; you have to become 'pure' as defined by the group
- the cult of confession – recruits are pressured into confessing 'sins', 'lack of enlightenment' or 'negativity' and this is then used against them by the group or cult leader
- the 'sacred science' – it is only the cult leader or group that holds the ultimate moral vision
- loading the language – use of thought-

terminating clichés that only members understand or think they understand

- doctrine over person – the belief system is more important than the reality and wellbeing of individuals
- dispensing of existence – the group or cult leader decides who has the right to exist and who does not – those outside are 'going to hell', 'part of the negativity', 'unenlightened'.

Other common techniques include provoking phobias and fears to enforce obedience and ensure that members are too frightened to leave, for fear that something awful will happen to them,¹¹ and separating people from all that is familiar, including family and friends. New recruits may be taken away on encounter groups or high intensity training courses in an unfamiliar place, which can very quickly destabilise them. Some cults move their members around the world; in some cases parents have not seen or heard from their adult children for many years.

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All of these psychological techniques create control and lead to identity loss and confusion, which in turn lead to the creation of a cult pseudo-personality.^{1,12} In West's words:¹³ 'Individuals subjected to [prolonged stress] may adapt through dissociation by generating an altered persona, or pseudo identity.'

I underwent a complete change in personality after joining the cult. I had been feisty, flirtatious, depressed at times and 'quite a character'. When I left I was timid, cried a good deal of the time, was desperate to be 'a good girl' and terrified I would step out of line or upset others. I now see this as my 'cult pseudo-personality' and it is one of the major issues with which former members may struggle on leaving.¹³ The development of the cult pseudo-personality can be seen as a form of introjection. It was only when I began to understand how these dynamics had worked on me in LOGC that I was able to start my walk towards freedom.

How therapists can help

People leave a cult for a number of reasons. Some are asked to leave (throw-aways); some leave of their own volition (runaways); some have mental breakdowns and are no longer useful to the group and are therefore thrown out (castaways).¹⁴ It is difficult for anyone leaving a cult; throw-aways and castaways may feel rejected and a failure, alongside the feeling of relief at being out. Those who leave a large group that continues after their departure have particular difficulties, especially with self-doubt: if all those other people stayed, maybe I am wrong and they are right? Some people may be leaving family and friends behind in the cult – perhaps the only family and friends they have – which is both difficult and dangerous because they may be at higher risk of going back or even suicide.

Writing this article has been hard for me. Even though I have spent many years researching and working through my cult experience and now work therapeutically with former cult members, I still fear that people will judge me or think me stupid for joining a cult. This is why it can be so hard for former cult members to go to a therapist for help.¹

You are likely to ask what drew me into a cult. This will leave me feeling even more foolish: I should have known better; obviously it was because I was so messed up. If you had asked me 'How does that feel?' I could not have told you, because I spent years learning not to feel. I (my cult pseudo-personality) was defined by others; they told me who I was and what I believed. I had to sever all emotional ties with friends, family and with my heritage.¹⁵ I lost the ability to think my own thoughts and feel my own feelings. All I knew was what the cult taught me: that it was my fault.

You might move on to ask me about my family. You are likely to assume the cult was able to take me over because of childhood issues. That is what you are trained to do, but it just doesn't help.

The danger for therapists is that you may be unknowingly dealing with the cult pseudo-personality; you aren't reaching the pre-cult personality. The therapist needs to be able to provide information about cult techniques and how they work. This will help the client identify and understand what was done to them and the tricks that were used to lure them in and keep them in. You need to understand and be able to explain thought reform, to help the client identify how and where these influences are still dictating their life.

When I found a specialist counsellor who understood about cults and was able to give me information, I began to recover quite quickly. Once I understood about cultic dynamics,

I was able to go into psychotherapy safely. The key for me was understanding the cult and how it operated; I think this is true for other former members.

With the right sort of support and therapy, former members can recover well. I find this work hugely rewarding as I see many former members gain clarity on, and make meaning of, their experiences and start to walk free. I use my personal experience to inform my work whilst ensuring I have necessary supervision and therapeutic support. I have a passion for this work and this fuels my drive to see former members' needs heard and attended to by the therapeutic community. ■

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The International Cultic Studies Association Conference takes place in Trieste, Italy, on 4-6 July 2013. See <http://icsahome.com>

Gillie Jenkinson will be running two BACP Professional Development Day workshops on 'An introduction to working therapeutically with former members of abusive groups and relationships' on 22 June in Bristol and 7 September in Manchester. For more information and to book, please visit www.bacp.co.uk/events

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‘Practitioners need to find the balance between not being overly neutral when listening to atrocities and being open to people’s feelings of loss and grief’

Curiosity and willingness to learn

Linda Dubrow-Marshall offers advice to therapists working with former cult members

Establishing a psychotherapeutic or consultative relationship is a special challenge for people whose trust has been betrayed. People who have been in cultic groups and experienced ‘love-bombing’ and pseudo-intimate relationships, where sometimes people pretend to be similar to them in order to influence them, tend to feel that the professional relationship is cold and uncaring. Their experience of feeling special, purposeful, taken care of, and of living with rules stating exactly what to do can mean that clients pressure therapists to be directive. Some of the key tasks in working with current and former cultists are to help them to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty, and to express and accept a full range of emotions, including existential angst, anger and grief. A return to critical thinking and the ability to make decisions is of paramount importance.

Practitioners need to find the balance between not being overly neutral when listening to atrocities and being open to people’s feelings of loss and grief when they leave the cult. These are the same skills needed to work with survivors of domestic violence where it may alienate the client to demonise their former partner. It is important for

psychotherapists to acknowledge the client’s need to express the positive side of their relationships or what they may have learned or enjoyed during an otherwise traumatic experience, and to deal with personal anger and countertransference in supervision and consultation.

Psycho-education is a key element, whether working with individuals or their families, so that people can understand the experience and the principles behind undue influence. Lifton’s⁶ model is extremely helpful in explaining the processes of being in a totalistic environment. As family members come to understand the power of undue influence, their anger towards their loved one’s withdrawal or disturbing actions rightly becomes focused on the destructive group.

The field has changed; in the early days there were some forced de-programmings where people’s families kidnapped them in a desperate attempt to get them to listen to another point of view. Voluntary exit counselling has emerged since, often delivered by former members who have a great deal of specific information about the practices of various groups. Exit counsellors can also be called thought reform consultants or mediators, and they may refer clients to

mental health professionals if there are signs of psychological difficulties.

It is likely that counsellors will at some point work with people who have been involved in cultic groups. I have not been in a cult, although members of my family have. But I know what it is like to be influenced, manipulated and deceived, and I have done things under group pressure that made me feel uncomfortable. These are universal experiences that can help practitioners to work with individuals and families while displaying the core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence.

Good counselling skills, coupled with curiosity and willingness to learn about the psychology of cultic influence while listening carefully to the specifics of the person’s experience, will enable practitioners to be helpful, and they can refer to specialists for consultation as needed.

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