

How Do They Control: An Insight into Cult Manipulation

Yining Zhang*

UWC ISAK Japan, Karuizawa, Japan

* Corresponding Author Email: 2024.yining.zhang@uwcisak.jp

Abstract. This paper is focused on the mechanisms behind cult control, both existing methods and mindset behind the implementation. It generally divides cult leaders' techniques into two broad categories and discusses them with reference to the other: physical and psychological. Physical controls are based on changing an individual's biological body structure and function, including diets, drastic activities, and even drug usage. Psychological controls, on the other hand, are the methods that are more generally known for manipulation and are mostly based on one's mind. The essay provides an outline of the set of means behind the manipulation of cult members and illustrates the methods with specific cases connected to the impacts that the methods would have on individuals. It discusses the specific cases of Heaven's Gate and Jenny (cult pseudo-personality), using them to demonstrate possible outcomes of cult control to make a clear connection between the manipulation methods and their impacts.

Keywords: Cult manipulation, personality, psychological control, physical control.

1. Introduction

The first definitions of "cult" are based on spiritualism, an ideology that originated in the United States in 1848. Spiritualists believe in the proven survival of one's mind after physical death and that communication with the spirits of the dead can be achieved through various means [1]. This ideology is closely related to a lot of religions, which is why the earliest cults probably stemmed from major religions such as Christianity, and since they are sub-branches that are usually small in size-are believed to be "the most ephemeral of all types of religious structure. [2]" However, cults are no longer limited to major religions as society progresses. Instead, they become a more general concept that describes groups showing fervent passion toward a particular person, object, or ideology willing to dedicate themselves to the cause that the leaders are building.

Cult is not a concept slowly going into extinction, unlike assumed by most people; instead, cultic groups could be disguised as institutions in daily life: restaurants, business-training workshops, self-help groups, psychotherapy clinics, and much more. As could be deduced from its mode of operation, cult leaders implement all means of administration to ensure that members stay under control. Though not 100% successful in their recruitment processes, cultic group leaders are intelligent in using a series of persuasion techniques to build an image that attracts individuals to follow and therefore advance the leaders' goals [3].

Mechanisms of cult control are almost entirely based on the leaders and how they utilize their abilities and resources to manipulate the members of their cults. The common personality feature that all cult leaders seem to share is charisma. While being a special quality of leadership, charisma is much more than that, as it consists of factors in the environment and "the leader's belief in his or her destiny to lead and the follower's faith in this," which makes up a connection between the leader and their followers. Through their charismatic leadership, cult leaders can implement large-scale "hypnosis" over members and control them to obey whatever order that the leaders give [4].

This paper aims to explore the mechanism behind cult leaders' manipulation of individuals. It will generalize cult behaviors into a set of mechanisms that leaders usually implement to reach their goals through the exploitation of their followers. The results of this research will be of use to future studies on cult manipulation by providing a general outline of the behaviors of cult leaders and serving as a reference.

2. Methodology

This paper adopts an analytical approach where relevant literature on the topic and specific significant cases are reviewed to reach an extensive conclusion. The database used for this study includes Google Scholars and JSTOR. Studies were generally filtered through the keywords “cult manipulation” and “cult psychology”; the results were then short-listed again based on the year of publication, relevance to the topic, and their abstracts. Information from the paper is closely analyzed with questions such as “How can this specific behavior be generalized to the universal mechanism shared between all cult-like groups?” and “What impacts does this mean of control have?”.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Definitions and Theoretical Framework of Analysis

In general, a cult can be identified as a group with tendencies to devote fervently to some person or idea, whose ideologies are usually spread through forcing psychological dependency in and exploiting individuals involved in the cult, and most likely results in devastating harm to members, their families, and the community [5].

It is known to the public that cult groups implement control on members and guide them into fulfilling the leaders’ objectives or even committing crimes; however, the structure and methods behind cult manipulation have not been discussed enough to become information that is common to most people in order to serve as a mean of protection. The following literature review aims to integrate past research results and specific cases to conclude a set of basic ways that cult leaders use to establish control. Based on the above, the following research question is developed to navigate the direction of the research: How do cult leaders effectively implement control on individuals?

3.2. Overview of Manipulation

Though not all individuals whom cults have approached end up joining the cult, the people that do end up joining and staying for an amount of time significant enough to pose a problem for society can be dramatically affected by their experiences associated with cults, and the control mechanisms behind the significant influences can be superficially divided into two categories that are closely intertwined and often used together in most cases: physical and psychological.

3.3. Physical Control

3.3.1 General Physical Control

Physical controls, as implied by its name, are ways that manipulate individuals’ physical bodies more than their brains (as the two are inseparable if leaders intend for complete domination) to reach the intended effects. In Singer’s 2003 book, they compared physical manipulation with businessmen promoting their products to customers. The most important aspect of a product that would lead to its success is its capability to bring a change to users, and cult leaders’ job, like sellers, is to convince individuals (“customers”) that the “product” (in this case the person, object, or ideology that the cult follows) is indeed causing a positive change in them [3].

Therefore, cult leaders need to come up with evidence. Generally, they combine two methods together to create evidence: Firstly, by putting members into designed circumstances and inducing predictable responses, cult leaders can interpret these responses in desirable ways that benefit them (former cult members chanting tongues and feeling dizzy could be effect of hyperventilation, but leaders interpret as effect of the cult’s ideologies); and secondly, through the imposition of pressure and manipulation on members, cult leaders most likely would receive responses that they can use to further members’ dependence on the cult in multiple aspects (putting members on unhealthy vegetarian diets) [3].

The process of luring members deeper into the cult starts simple, inexpensive (it is important to be aware that joining cults usually involves a rudimental payment), and seemingly harmless procedures

that old members of the cult practice, most likely pushed by the leader. Then, the newly joined individuals were offered to participate in more intense and high-priced courses, which the cultic groups usually refer to as “intensives” and are meant to help participants reach their goal of perfection or some achievement faster [3]. Activities that these groups use to stimulate the physiological sensations of members may include merely gathering around on the ground of a darkened room and repeatedly chanting phrases such as “fear” or “out, Satan, out.” These sorts of activities would create a stimulus to the brain and biologically cause the physical body to quiver or feel excitement. Then the leaders would turn on the light, wait for people to calm down, and tell them, “See, it has an effect.” Similar effects could also have been achieved through changes in physical activities (sleep, diet, living habits), relaxation, or increased stress. Referring to the two general techniques in the previous paragraph, these physical experiences could trick individuals into thinking that the group or activity that they have participated in has the power to change their lives to help them become who they wish to be. In the beginning, even if some of them within the group notice the loopholes in the leader’s logic or evidence, peer pressure coming from other newly joined or older members prevents suspicious individuals from speaking out, and they would eventually convince or even gaslight, themselves into believing that the practices are truly helpful, beneficial, and has substantial effects to both their physical and mental health.

3.3.2 A Case of Physical Control: Heaven’s Gate

Heaven’s Gate was a religious group formed in 1974 that scholars classified as Christian millenarianism and ufology. They believed in the idea that the physical body, for some people, is merely a temporary container of the soul, which will eventually rise towards heaven and live on a UFO without concerns. The group was led by Bonnie Nettles and Marshall Applewhite, who met in 1972, went on a journey of spiritual discovery, and gained hundreds of followers by claiming to be witnesses of Revelation (the story in the last book of the New Testaments). The group ended with the largest mass suicide in US history with 39 victims, all found dead in a rented mansion in San Diego in 1997, with the timing strangely close to the approach of comet Hale-Bopp. Also, the last message updated on Heaven’s Gate’s official website supports the group’s fanatic belief in UFOs [6].

Nettles and Applewhite, or Ti and Do as referred to in the group, were able to gain the trust of their followers because of their ability to reach out to people who had lost hope for society and religion, and to appeal to each of their personal needs [7]. The group lived a lifestyle that resembled a monastery, according to Rio DiAngelo, a former Heaven’s Gate member, and sought to transform themselves into beings that surpass nature and eventually ascend to heaven in the physical body that they possess. Christians who adopt monastic lifestyles are known to be isolated from society, eating simply and living a life wholeheartedly dedicated to their beliefs. However, social networking in the broader society has been proven to be a statistically significant predictor in determining an individual’s mental health [8], which means that the lifestyle that the group adopted would have biologically affected the behavior and mode of thinking of members, let alone the insufficient protein intake from diets that would cause significant physiological effects that were most likely interpreted as a stage that was necessary for the soul to ascend.

Ti’s death changed the group’s original belief. When Nettles died of cancer in 1985, followers started doubting the credibility of the ideology that Heaven’s Gate was proposing and even the credibility of Ti and Do; followers began to leave, with around 80 people remaining a few years after Ti’s death. However, Applewhite twisted the original idea a little bit based on Ti’s death and claimed that instead of ascending with the physical body that members own, the body would be left behind as they are only “containers,” and only the soul would be transported to heaven. This was more of a psychological twist and control than physical, but a cultic group could not only manipulate its members through one of the two, as they are closely intertwined and depend on each other strongly.

3.4. Psychological Control

3.4.1 General Psychological Control

Psychological control is the other main category of the manipulation enforced onto cult members, and they are usually means that are subtle and have gradual effects on an individual's identity and mode of thinking; however, after a certain amount of time, these manipulation techniques are enough even to change one's personality entirely. They are usually used with physical controls because it is impossible to implement complete control without either. This category would be broader than the previously discussed physical control, as there are numerous ways to mentally manipulate an individual even outside of a cult setting, as it has been a tool for people to reach their goals ever since the concept of the mind came into existence. These techniques are most likely driven by a sense of wanting to belong or to be fulfilled. The reason behind individuals' decisions to join cults may not be completely religious. An important reason that cults have been treated with nonchalance is the fact that the ideologies that are being preached are not mainstream and do not correspond with most of society, which is happening in a world where people are anxious to find a community that they belong to and fit in with most people. Therefore, the strong support of the unpopular ideologies that cults demonstrate could be the support that individuals who fail to fit in are looking for. Even more, cults are usually completely nonjudgmental and welcoming to all when members first join, automatically pushing people looking for a deeper inside community [9]. In addition, individuals that decide to join cults often lack something in life that they are stressing over, and cult leaders, as excellent "sellers", use this almost fervent desire to grab their attention and lure them into joining the cult [3]. Some prevailing examples of methods of psychological control will be discussed below to help outline the category.

Hypnosis and Trance Hypnosis is defined as a changed state of awareness where relaxation is furthered to increase concentration. In a cult setting, cult leaders use hypnosis to plant ideologies that are beneficial to them into members' consciousness. At the same time, their minds are vulnerable, almost coercing hypnotized individuals to join into their scheme. It is the basis of almost all psychological manipulations as it is the easiest to enter one's mind when it is vulnerable to relaxation. A trance is essentially a state of mind where the individual has no conscious control over their thoughts and behaviors (deep hypnosis) but can see, hear, sense, and respond to commands. Its use in cult settings is self-explanatory, as individuals in a trance are easy to manipulate. Entering a trance can be pleasurable to most people due to the absence of mind, reflection, and thinking, which makes the whole process almost appealing [3].

Guided Imagery Guided imagery is the process of not thinking but only picturing while listening to a story that cult leaders usually tell in a repetitive or rhythmic manner. It stems from hypnosis and has the potential to make individuals feel relaxed and absorbed into the world that the storyteller is constructing. Storytelling effectively reduces one's awareness of reality and, in turn, becomes more focused on other senses, such as audition or imagination. Some leaders incorporate body movements and other rhythmic sounds into the storytelling process to enhance emotional experiences and guide members toward the leaders' intended effects [3].

3.4.2 A Case Study of Psychological Control: Jenny (Cult Pseudo-Personality)

Jenny got involved in a Christian community at the age of 25 because she did not like the ideologies of her local church and found this new community's approaches interesting. Before this, she struggled a lot to be in a long-term stable relationship, which she ultimately blamed on herself. The community leader seems to consider her rather special, which gave her a lot of confidence and paved way for her further involvement in the cult. She then became more devoted to the cult as time passed and abandoned everything that she had. At the beginning, Jenny would question some of the things that the community assigned her, but it only resulted in coldness and beating. After a certain amount of time of being treated terribly due to her "incorrect" ideas and actions, she changed her name to Magdalene and suppressed her original personality to become a new person who is completely devoted to the God that the cult believed in. "Magdalene was 'born' so I could become the person

they expected me to be, hating my parents, rejecting all outside the community, and doing things I would never have done before-I was a stranger to myself,” Jenny said after she left the group. After the cult disbanded, Jenny (the personality) resurfaced, but she started experiencing serious post-trauma symptoms where she couldn’t live without physically being in a church, but psychologically couldn’t bear to be part of a church [10].

This disorder is referred to as pseudo-personality, and in this case, with the word “cult” before the name to explain the context. Usually, individuals affected by this disorder demonstrate an entire change in their personality to one that is more compatible with the environment that they are within in order to cope with the ideologies that their original self could not accept. In Jenkinson’s article exploring this case, she discusses both changes in “self,” defined as the moment-by-moment contact one has with self, others, and the environment, which makes it vulnerable to external stimuli (such as ones exhibited in the case) [11]; and in personality, which is relatively more enduring and predictable, and can answer questions such as “who are you,” “what are you like,” or “how do you do things” [12]. In this specific case, Jenny demonstrated changes in both, which is typical of cult members, according to MT Singer [3]. This drastic change in personality is what the author refers to as cult pseudo-identity, and it takes place as the strength of the common goal in a cult overcomes the differences between cult members [13]. The personality is not real and internal; rather, it overlays the person’s real personality since the cult denies the real one, urging the pseudo to replace it. Lifton’s eight components of thought reform are useful in explaining why the transformation (in identity) happens [14].

Instead of classifying the cult pseudo-personality under one pre-existing psychological disorder as its symptom, Jenkinson argued that none of the previously raised concepts were the true reason behind the formation of Jenny’s pseudo-personality. She raised the analogy of “the machine”, where she describes the cult as a machine that keeps on enforcing its culture and believes in Jenny, while she welcomes it until she gets completely buried. Jenkinson also brought up introjection, which can be defined as the response of one’s mental or physical body after taking in a system of behaviors but did not completely absorb it into one’s own genuine self yet. An analogy would be food: it can either be digested or not. If it is the second case, you would either have to throw it up or painfully digest it, just like cult ideologies. Cult members often only realize the true visions of cults long after they join; the community may seem welcoming and even beneficial to them at the beginning as they have no information about what the cult is truly like.

4. Conclusion

In general, the research was a successful piece of work that can provide a guideline for future studies while retaining a personal stance from time to time. A literature search is limited to only several platforms and could not possibly represent the entire field’s work on this topic, which is something to improve on. In addition, if resources allow, the categories would be further narrowed down to subgroups, which would help make a clearer distinction between the two broad groups discussed in the paper.

In conclusion, cults are groups that are religiously active in a less mainstream way and are usually operated through the manipulation of members, most of the time, to achieve the leaders’ goals, who use different mechanisms to manipulate individuals. The manipulation techniques can be broadly divided into two categories: physical and psychological. Physical control, as can be inferred from its name, refers to control mechanisms that are enforced on individuals’ physical bodies, including diets, physical punishments, and activities that can change hormone excretion. Psychological control, on the other hand, is the more commonly known type of control that is imposed mentally; with techniques including hypnosis and guided imagery, they are used by cult leaders to get into members’ brains and plan ideologies in their subconsciousness. These two methods are inseparable in terms of utilization, as they are based on one another and cannot be implemented without the other. Therefore, in most cult settings, the two are seen to be used together at the same time. In addition, each category

is enhanced with a case study that demonstrates the impacts each type of manipulation could have on individuals. This connects the techniques directly with effects, demonstrating a clear relationship between mental manipulation methods, the mechanisms behind them, and the symptoms that affected patients may manifest, creating a dynamic connection that previous works fail to showcase.

Furthermore, this paper could also be used as a guideline for future research related to this topic, as it is a summarization of essentially all information and knowledge of cult control, referencing works from not just scholars specifying in the study of cultic groups but also psychological specialists. This makes this source a credible source if one is looking for something that offers a clearly organized and reliable conclusion. However, instead of being a literature review that merely summarizes the points that professionals made previously, this research offers a lot of personal insights into the topic and even challenges some established claims about cult manipulation, which contributes to the scholarly discussion on this topic globally. The research was generally successful in achieving its initial purpose, and its publication could be a contribution to this heated discussion of cults worldwide.

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