

Soc 304: Cults and Religious Deviance

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(http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cult#Cult.2C_NRM_and_the_sociology_and_psychology_of_religion)

Cult, New Religious Movements and the sociology and psychology of religion

The problem with defining the word cult is that (1) purported cult members generally resist being called a cult, and (2) the word cult is often used to marginalize religious groups with which one does not agree or sympathize. Some serious researchers of religion and sociology prefer to use terms such as new religious movement (NRM) in their research on cults. Such usage may lead to confusion because some religious movements are "new" but not necessarily cults, and some purported cults are not religious or overtly religious. Where a cult practices physical or mental abuse, some psychologists and other mental health professionals use the terms cult, abusive cult, or destructive cult. The popular press also commonly uses these terms. However, not all cults function abusively or destructively, and among those that psychologists believe are abusive, few members would agree that they suffer abuse. Other researchers like David V. Barrett hold the view that classifying a religious movement as a cult is generally used as a subjective and negative label and has no added value; instead, he argues that one should investigate the beliefs and practices of the religious movement.

The field of cults and new religious movements is studied by sociologists, religious scholars, and psychologists and psychiatrists. The debates about a certain purported cult and cults in general are often polarized with widely divergent opinions, not only among current followers of a purported cult and disaffected former members, but sometimes even among scholars and social scientists. For example, the American religious scholar J. Gordon Melton holds the view that cults rarely do serious harm and that stories of apostates cannot be relied upon. In correspondence with this view, he went to a trip to Japan paid by Aum Shinrikyo after the sarin gas attack and erroneously declared there that Aum Shinrikyo was innocent.

Some groups, particularly those labeled by others as cults, view the designation as insensitive, and feel persecuted by their opponents whom they often believe to be part of the "anti-cult movement".

Such groups often defend their position by comparing themselves to more established, mainstream religious groups such as Catholicism and Judaism. The argument offered in this case can usually be simplified as, "Christianity and Judaism can also be defined as cults under some definitions of the term, and therefore the term cult is superfluous and useless." Members of groups referred to as cults have been known to engage in long discussions over the definition of the word "cult." Critics of alleged cult groups state that by doing so, these persons have been known to waste large amounts of time and effort that would be better spent examining the actions of the groups in question, in order to reveal why these groups are referred to as cults.

For many scholars and professional commentators, the usage of the word "cult" applies to maleficent or abusive behavior, and not to a belief system. For members of competing religions, use of the word remains pejorative and applies primarily to rival beliefs (see memes), and only incidentally to behavior.

In the sociology of religion, the term cult is a part of the subdivision of religious groups into sects, cults, denominations and ecclesias. In these terms, it is a neutral term, referring to a religious movement with novel beliefs and a high degree of tension with the surrounding society. Cults, in this sense, may or may not be dangerous, abusive, etc. By this definition, most of the groups which have been popularly labeled cults are indeed cults

Reasons for joining a cult

Cults offer to the prospective convert a set of social factors that may be missing from his or her life. Often, new cult members are drawn into the movement by seemingly caring people who offer to the new prospect a sense of family, belonging, and possibility of raising their social status by moving up a hierarchy. Cults tend to appeal to people who are looking for personal relationships and caring that they feel they are lacking, perhaps missing strong ties to families and friends. This is not to say that all members of cults are emotionally troubled before entering – indeed, many members are well adjusted when they enter the cult, and some of the most healthy people mentally are the ones that give the highest allegiance to the cult.

Whereas traditional religions (such as Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, etc) base their beliefs and authority on what Max Weber called *Traditional Authority* (the way things have been done, unquestionable due to the status of the authority figure), cults are based on what Weber termed *Charismatic Authority*, the “cult of personality” type of authority in which the authority figure exudes charm, purpose, and is a natural leader. As long as the cult and the leader give to the members some kind of social reward they at least believe they are looking for, the cult has a hold over the people.

Cults have often (but not always) used traditional “brainwashing” techniques on adherents, such as sleep deprivation, long lectures or “sermons” several times a day, hard manual labor, powerful social pressure to remain “non-deviant” to the claims of the cult, severe punishments for rule breakers, and often strange sexual practices involving the cult leader as a sort of “sacrament” of the group. Cult leaders, using charismatic authority, often claim to be divine or at least the direct spokesperson of the Supreme Being, so their words cannot be questioned.

Most cults, while controlling of their followers, are not dangerous in the physical sense of the word to their followers, and in fact many followers are very happy to be members of the group, as it fits their social and psychological needs (presumably, such needs could not be met fully in traditional religious groups.) Some people are forcibly removed from the cult and given to a professional “deprogrammer” who attempts to remove the cult programming from the person by making them face the strange doctrines they have taken to believe apart from the cult. Beyond the legal questions of kidnaping and holding a person by force, the question of a person’s freedom of religion is an issue here: provided the person has not been physically coerced to remain a member of the cult, there is nothing illegal or wrong with their membership legally speaking.

Terrorism as Cult Practice

Terrorism is a controversial term with multiple definitions. One definition means a violent action targeting civilians exclusively. Another definition is the use or threatened use of violence for the purpose of creating fear in order to achieve a political, religious, or ideological goal. In general, however, terrorists target civilians with the hopes of coercing a government to deal with them by making the civilian population afraid and demanding of action by the government to acquiesce to the terms of the terrorists.

Terrorist groups share many traits with cults: 1. Recruits taken to isolated areas, cut off from family, 2. Endless indoctrination into the ideology of the group, 3. Led by a charismatic leader (eg: Osama bin-Laden), 4. Minimal conditions, forced from bed at odd hours, 5. Taught to hate “the enemy” and 6. Use of apocalyptic imagery (end of the world, new order is coming, etc).

Theories of Joining Cult and Terrorist Groups

1. Robert Agnew's General Theory of Strain

Strain is a disjunction between socially approved goals and the means to attain those goals. Merton, basing his work on Durkheim, identified strain in this way, and Robert Agnew expanded on Merton by pointing out strain is caused by three factors:

Lack of ability to achieve positively valued goals
Removal of valued life events or chances
Subjected to negative events

Strain leads to persons using deviant means to alleviate it. When a person feels a certain type of strain, he or she looks for a means to escape from it. Considering that marginalized people, who lack strong positive life chances, are often the targets of joining either cults or terrorist groups, we could say that people who cannot achieve their personal and social goals, have had many of their positive life events removed from their lives either in actuality or based on their feelings (lack of family, job, friends, status, etc), while at the same time subjected to a series of negative events such as unemployment, violent victimization, destruction of personal property, loss of loved ones, etc), joining a cult or a terrorist group (which is a cult in its own right) may be a stronger possibility. Remember that not all people who join cults and terrorist organizations are of the lower class – most of the 9/11 hijackers were middle to upper class members of their communities, but had had their personal needs met by the charismatic authority of Osama bin-Laden.

2. Glaser's Differential Identification

People inclined to deviant behaviors will identify with a powerful, charismatic person (ie: a cult or terrorist leader) who becomes a role model for their future behaviors. The deviant behaviors that are promoted by the cult or terrorist group are overlooked as the identification with the leader legitimizes the actions. Thus, a person will give up their life savings, their relationships, their marriage, and their “normal” means of gaining prestige in society for the cult/terrorist leader. The powerful leader becomes a role model of “proper” behavior for the newly recruited cult member or terrorist, and when coupled with the typical brainwashing techniques used in both types of groups, it is fairly obvious how members can be indoctrinated, controlled, and sometimes give their lives in a mass suicide or terrorist activity.

An important part of both cult and terrorist “programming” is the resocialization that the members is given when joining the group. The old life that the person lived previously is viewed with hostility and scorn, and it is replaced with a new lifestyle that is taught to the member to be far superior. Both cults and terrorist groups are *total institutions*, a term derived by Goffman to mean a group that has total control of the member, and the existence of the member starts and stops at the boundaries of the group (for example, prisons and the military are both conventional groups that are total institutions). As both cults and terrorist groups claim the total life of the member, the resocialization given in the group is powerful, and the cult/terrorist leader can reform the members into whatever he/she desires after a while. Those with more powerful self-concepts and identities are usually rejected after a while, with the group being told that the “evil must be sent away from us.”