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## Cults: A Psychological Perspective

Jonica V. Carlton Best

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CULTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Jenica V. Carlton Best  
2018



COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

CULTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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BY  
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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank all of the professors at Columbia State University for pushing me to being the student that I am. I would like to thank Dr. Neelita Terresgen for serving on my thesis board and finding a way to come to my defense despite having to take care of a sick child. I

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would like to personally thank Dr. Dana Miller and Dr. Anne Adams for being some of the most influential professors I have ever met. Thank you for being critical of my work and really

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helping me in my classes by taking the time to help me with concepts and work in your office hours. You both have helped my writing style drastically improve. I would also like to personally thank Dr. Brandt Smith for being my thesis advisor. You have helped me so much throughout my college career. Thank you for not only helping me in the psychology department, but also with medical school advice, CV advice, military advice, and personal advice in regards to working, studying, school, and motivation. I would also like to thank Dr. Cindy Tichauer for being the powerful leader of the honors college. You have helped a lot of students realize, reach, and achieve their full potential. I would also like to thank my parents, Arnold and Leticia Carlton for helping me throughout school and telling me not to give up. All of you have been so influential in my career as a college student and have made me feel like an unstoppable force.



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## ABSTRACT

Cults are communities that are seen as odd or strange. Lack of research done on cults makes it a phenomenon in society. With the help of evolutionary, social, and cognitive psychology, this phenomenon was analyzed and the behavior of the cult and its members were explained. Analysis of cults showed that there is an evolutionary need for them, for they are used as a means for social bonds and resources. Next, the identity of cult members was analyzed using a conveyor belt type method starting with social-identity followed by self-categorization and ending with deindividuation. Cult members then make decisions using a funnel-type of model starting with the charismatic leader, followed by propaganda, and then bounded rationality. Finally, forms of social influence like obedience conformity, and compliance keep members in the group and psychologically prevent them from leaving. After evaluating cults, I came to the conclusion that they are no different from any other group; the same psychological theories used to explain the behavior of other groups largely applies to cults, making them an average group from a psychological perspective.

*Keywords:* cults, influence, groups, psychology



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The word cult originates from early seventeenth century from the Latin word *colere* meaning worshiped, inhabited, and cultivated (Oxford English dictionary, 2018). From the nineteenth century to the present, the word "cult" began to be associated with any religion or denomination other than Christianity; even more so, it was used to describe the different beliefs of folk groups including the Druids in the eighteenth century (Newcombe, 2014). The inclusion



## Cults: A Psychological Perspective

A cult is defined as a small group of people who have similar religious beliefs or routines that others view as bizarre or sinister (Oxford English dictionary, 2018). A cult is also a group or movement with a shared pledge to an extreme ideology that is typically embodied by a charismatic leader (Lalich, 2017). Not much is known about cults. The lack of research and exploration of cults makes it a topic many are ignorant about. Part of this obscurity is also due to the changing of the definition of the word over time. With an inconsistent definition, cults have become an interesting topic.

Many do not know why people would join a cult; their motivations, actions, and behaviors are different. Evolutionary, social, and cognitive psychology can explain some of the behaviors and demeanors of cult members. With these, it is possible to analyze why members join, why they are easily influenced, and why they stay. Models created in this paper help convey this reasoning using a conveyor belt method of identity and a funnel of decision making. Delving into the history of the terminology of the word along with some notable cults in history will give an improved understanding on cults in general. The goal of this thesis is to analyze the phenomenon of cults through the lens of evolutionary, cognitive, and social psychology.

### *The Evolution of the Word "Cult"*

The word cult originates from early seventeenth century from the Latin word *cultus* meaning worshiped, inhabited, and cultivated (Oxford English dictionary, 2018). From the nineteenth century to the present, the word "cult" began to be associated with any religion or denomination other than Christianity; even more so, it was used to describe the different beliefs of folk groups including the Druids in the eighteenth century (Newcombe, 2014). The exclusion



of Christianity in the definition of cults was created after Constantine made Christianity the dominant religion of the Roman Empire.

Coinciding with the original religious use of the word, the modern-day adoption of the word involves a group that has charismatic leader who may be 'worshipped'. In the same sense there is present-day application of the word that is extended to refer to a group of people with an overzealous interest in a celebrity, non-mainstream band, game, book or movie (Newcombe, 2014). The interest in the topic becomes an obsession or way of life. Some of these fanatical groups may elevate the figure they admire to a godly standard. Cults who do this take on the category of a religious cult. In fact, many religions began as cults, but as they grew larger in society they became known as *bona fide* religions rather than cults. For example, Christianity was a cult of Judaism before it became one of the largest religions in the world. Religious cults fall into just one of the many categories of cults.

### Categories of Cults

Cults often have some mission, practice or objective: different aims are what groups them into categories. Categories of cults are contingent upon the groups' actions, beliefs, ideologies and members. Among the categories are doomsday cults, destructive cults and religious cults to name a few ("Cult", n.d.). Some cults like 'The Family', led by Charles Manson, are harder to place in categories. This cult masterminded a series of murders in Hollywood over a two-day period (Dubrow-Marshall & Dubrow-Marshall, 2017). Despite the goal of starting a race war, the cult is placed in the religious cult category because Manson's followers worshipped him.

Although there are many categories, cults will often overlap in classification. This is due to an intertwining of views and lifestyle of cult members. For example, the Peoples Temple was a cult led by Jim Jones; it involved different beliefs in social ideas and religions; the cult also ended in



a mass murder-suicide (Osherow, 2013). Due to the destructive nature of the cult and the religious affiliation, the cult is deemed both a destructive cult and religious cult. Despite there being many categories of cults, some categories are more common than others. For example, most cults are known as religious cults because they worship some deity or prominent figure. Sometimes, this figure is also a part of the cult like in the Branch Davidians and The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). Although some categories are named something other than religious, they do follow this type of pattern and hierarchy.

#### *Racist Cults*

Racist cults often practice prejudice, discrimination, and hatred towards a group that is of a different race than the cult members ("Cult", n.d.). They may gather in rallies to speak about their mission against other races, discuss their hatred for other races in group meetings, or even commit illegal acts against people of other races which may be seen as hate crimes. Besides their beliefs and ideals, members also share their image. For example, a racist cult that is known to many Americans is the Ku Klux Klan. Not only does this group share the ideas and beliefs that non-Aryans are inferior, but most of their members are Aryan (of Indo-European background) or Caucasian.

Another racist cult is the New Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. This organization is an American, black nationalist cult. Although it may have the same moniker as the Black Panther Party from the civil rights era, the New Black Panther Party has very different goals and ideals. These include placing a bounty on George Zimmerman, the man who murder Trayvon Martin, a 17-year old black teenager; along with threats to kill those who follow Judaism and to kill Caucasians. This is now deemed as both an anti-Semitic and anti-Caucasian cult (Martin, 2011).



### Religious Cults

*Doomsday Cults* are religious cults the most notorious type of cult, but other categories of cults

overlap. Doomsday cults refer to groups who believe in some sort of apocalyptic end or who choose to bring about some sort of calamity in society (“Cult”, n.d.). These groups usually acquire numerous resources to prepare for some sort of drastic end. The resources may include money, food, weapons, or medicine. One prime example of a doomsday cult would be the Aum Shinrikyo. The Family followed Charles Manson and Aum Shinrikyo followed Shoko Ashara.

This cult founded by Shoko Ashara was originally dedicated to practicing yoga and other meditating techniques. The group incorporated elements of early Indian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity into their practice (*Aptitude for Destruction*, 2005). In addition to these religious doctrines, Ashara also fused the prophecies of Nostradamus, a physician and prophet, into his practices. However, like with most other cults, the group’s ideologies began to grow darker and more crazed. Ashara soon predicted a catastrophic judgement day termed “Nuclear Armageddon”. He preached to both his followers and outsiders that if they did not join or remain in Aum Shinrikyo, they were doomed. The continued to follow the doomsday pattern with several incidents including several suspected assassinations, holding members against their will, and the murder of a member who tried to escape. The cult’s activities came to a halt when it executed a chemical attack in Tokyo across five different subway trains injuring somewhere between 6,000-7,000 people (*Aum Shinriko*, 2005). This occurrence led to the police raids that uncovered different chemical warfare agents, materials to create drugs, and prisoners. During this time, many cult members were arrested, and just this past year (in July 2018) twelve members including Ashara were executed by hanging.



*Religious Cults*

Not only are religious cults the most notorious type of cult, but other categories of cults overlap as religious ones ("Cult", n.d.). For example, the Branch Davidians, a cult that foresaw an apocalyptic ending while still practicing religion, could be seen as both a doomsday cult and a religious cult. The Peoples Temple may also be seen as a destructive and religious cult. Most cults follow or worship some sort of important figure, god, or superhuman making it an actual religion. The Family followed Charles Manson and Aum Shinrikyo followed Shoko Ashara. These do not seem like religions to common people, but in the eyes of members of the cult, they are such a thing.

One religious cult that is infamous is the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). This church practiced polygamy, the act of marriage between more than two people. The church has also been a part of several scandalous acts since the thirties. These acts include adultery, rape, and underaged marriages (Walker, 2004). The most notorious incident involves the time period when Warren Jeffs led the FLDS. Jeffs practiced many of the church's beliefs, but an issue arose when he began using the church and its members as a resource for frowned-upon behavior. These corrupt acts included the expulsion of numerous male church members, several marriages to underaged girls, and self-announced requirements for entry into heaven. Jeffs' actions eventually met their consequences. In June 2005, Jeffs was indicted on sex crimes in Arizona including forcing underaged marriages and rape (Adams, 2006). He was even placed on the FBI's Most Wanted list. In the end, Jeffs was convicted, but he still had a large group of loyal followers behind him; this is seen as an aspect of social influence known as obedience.



### **Other Prominent Cults in History**

Cults have been around for centuries, but they have made a stronger appearance in the second half of the twentieth century. These cults follow the odd and bizarre patterns described in the typical definition of cults. The stereotypical patterns will later be explained by psychological theories.

#### *The Matamoros Cult*

The Matamoros cult is classified as a religious cult. During the time the cult was active, a series of murders took place on the Mexico-Texas border. These thirteen murders involved Satanic rituals, mutilations, and sexual abuse (Steinberg & Ham, 1989). The murders consisted of victims who had various parts of their anatomy ripped from them while they were still alive. Upon discovery of the cult's hideout, law enforcement discovered artifacts, idols, and a cauldron filled with blood, turtle parts, a goat's head, and human brains (Steinberg et al., 1989). These items were used in rituals performed by the cult for protection from the police. The murders were necessary for the completion of the ritual. The members were not only a part of a Satanic cult, they were also drug dealers. They believed that human sacrifice would keep them safe from being caught by law enforcement in addition to being bulletproof.

#### *Order of the Solar Temple*

The Order of the Solar Temple, another doomsday cult, believed there was an apocalyptic ending in their near future. Like Heaven's Gate, a cult led by Marshall Applewhite that believed in extraterrestrial beings, they too believed they needed to commit suicide to make a spiritual transformation; only this time, the group believed they had to burn themselves alive to



ascend to the next spiritual plane to survive the apocalypse (Zeller, 2014). Not only was there suicide by fire, but members were also injected with tranquilizers, suffocated by bags over the head, and shot. One farm in Switzerland and two houses in Canada were set on fire. Twenty-five bodies were found at Granges-sur-Salvan in Switzerland and 23 more were found at a farm in Cheiry near Fribourg in Switzerland (Rouleau, 1994). Despite this behavior appearing to be extraneous, it actually poses a needed psychological function.

### The Need for Cults

Cult leaders use their personality and charm to attract followers. Following a pyramidal-type pattern, earlier members in cults will attract newer ones, building the cult framework. Cults are skilled on who to target, often focusing on people who have recently moved or who have undergone a personal or professional loss. Loneliness or the drive to feel significant or needed often makes people susceptible to affable people offering community or friendship (Lalich, 2017). These events are probable to occur in the life of an average person: loss, loneliness, community, and friendship. As with nature and evolution, humans have developed survival tactic or strategy to cope with the elements (Vugt & Schaller, 2008). These gambits have roots in evolution and survival.

### Evolutionary Need for Cults

Cults can provide a basic need for individuals. Charles Darwin, a prominent figure of Evolutionary Theory, has stated that groups function as an adaptive strategy for humans. Some forms of cult persuasion play on the natural inclination of people to imitate social behavior or follow orders (Lalich, 2017). For example, social primates tend to have a hierarchy which places



individuals at different positions in the pecking order. In the same way, people do not often desire to venture to out of the natural hierarchy: doing so may bring danger or peril to the individual. To avoid possible pitfalls, individuals will obey or conform to others higher on the social ladder. By doing this, they solidify social and interpersonal relationships. An evolutionary drive to belong is another a reason for people to remain in or join cults; they also want attainment of desired rewards (Lalich, 2017).

Groups are a key factor to human survival and reproduction; as stated earlier they can act as a safeguard against dangerous environments and as an aid for access to resources fundamental for survival (Vugt et al., 2008). In addition to groups, humans have evolved to have several psychological mechanisms to aid them for survival. For example, in ancient times, a group member may have survived by sharing valuable resources such as food, fire, water, or shelter. By sharing, they may have instilled trust within other group members, creating a bond that increased the individual's lifespan. This bond predicts that the other group member may share their resources when the individual who shared in the first scenario is in need. Individuals may have also developed mechanisms that facilitate the identification, avoidance, and ostracism of those not willing to share (Vugt et al., 2008).

Overall, the evolutionary approach to group dynamics can be beneficial to individuals in several ways: an evolutionary perspective can provide a better understanding of group processes and can help alleviate some of the discrepancies in group studies like those in altruism and kinship; it can draw conclusions to hypotheses based on group anomalies; and it can expand the boundaries of scientific inquiry into group dynamics by illustration how group phenomena have been ignored and over looked (Vugt et al., 2008).



**Survival** responses that others would use to protect themselves. In spite of cults satisfying the

The ability for individuals to adapt physically and mentally to a changing world is what keeps them alive. Here, it is evident that there are psychological mechanisms used for survival. For example, fear is an evolved psychological mechanism people have (*The Skills*, 2015).

Fear is defined as our emotional response to dangerous situations that we believe have the potential to cause death, injury, or illness; harm in this case is not just limited to physical damage; the threat to one's emotional and mental well-being can generate fear as well (*The Skills*, 2015). Fear, however, can be beneficial because it demonstrates the need for individuals to be cautious in situations that are dangerous or can cause harm to the individual. Anxiety is also an evolved psychological mechanism that goes correlates with fear. It is defined as an uneasy, apprehensive feeling we get when faced with dangerous situations (physical, mental, and emotional); anxiety urges us to act to terminate, or comprehend, the dangers that threaten our existence (*The Skills*, 2015).

Some of these psychological mechanisms are taught. For example, if you have a new born baby and it sees a snake, it may not show any fear. This is because the baby does not know what the snake is. It may even try to pet it. But, if you raise it by teaching it that snakes are evil, they bite, and that they have venom, a child is likely to develop fear of snakes. Cult members develop psychological mechanisms in the same way. They are told what to fear and what to be anxious of, developing psychological mechanisms that aid them specifically towards their group.

Unlike the majority of others in groups, members of cults often take part in behaviors seen as contra-survival. In other words, cult members behave in ways that are in opposition to or against survival. People who have contra-survival tendencies do not use the psychological mechanisms above for survival. Dangers, injury, illness, harm, or even death do not generate



emotional responses that others would use to protect themselves. In spite of cults satisfying the basic psychological needs for survival, people will often use cults for a pathological need. They will behave in drastic and undesirable ways that may hinder adaptation. This is one anomaly that may separate cults from other groups

### Protection of the Cult

Psychology explains not only why cult members are protective of their clan, but why people are protective of their groups in general. Tajfel and Turner (2004) propose that individuals who are in groups create a group identity; when these identities feel threatened, people may use self-protective strategies to defend the group and themselves from harm, outside forces, or criticism. There are several self-protective factors that can act as a barrier from the negative outside forces individuals encounter, and these strategies are responsible for protecting their self-esteem from the negative effects of personal bias (Crandall, Tsang, Harvey & Britt, 2000). The different forms of protection of the cult follow a type of conveyor belt explaining the transition of individual identity to cult identity. It starts with a positive group identity that leads to categorization, followed by complete deindividuation. The conveyor belt begins with social identity.

### Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a theory in psychology that explains how an individual can enhance their self-esteem in correspondence to their group. This theory states that humans have the need to have a positive self-concept which is presented to us through identification with our groups, meaning humans are motivated to positively evaluate their own groups and value



them over other groups (Tajfel & Turner, 2004). The positive group identity is what adds to an individual's social identity (a person's character built from membership and emotional connections from social groups). The individual sees the group as an extension of themselves. While some earlier theories suggest that self-esteem is based on experience and reflected information from the world about social acceptance, moral value, and personal accomplishment, there is also evidence that one's self-esteem may come directly from the group they are in, making the group an essential part of the individual's perception of their self-worth. Tajfel and Turner also state that positive self-identity is based on comparisons of the ingroup and outgroup; therefore, individuals who practice social identity must seek attributes that distinguish their ingroup from outgroups in a positive way (Tajfel et al., 2004).

A prime example of SIT at work within cults is in the name itself. If you were to approach a cult member and were to tell them that they were in a cult, they would immediately say they were not. Remember, cults are "weird" or "bizarre". This gives them a negative group concept. To keep a positive group concept, in return maintaining a positive self-concept, the member is likely to say: "this is not a cult, this is a religion, or this is a school of thought". They will do away with the negative terminology and replace it with a positive one. In this way, individuals also seek to categorize groups.

### **Self-Categorization Theory**

Despite the fact that some behaviors of cults are seen as weird or bizarre, individuals still act in this way, going against society's norms. Knowing that the behaviors of the group are unorthodox, they may seek guidance about their beliefs; however, they do so within the group rather than venturing outside of it. Self-categorization theory (SCT) states that self-



categorizations are motivated by the need to reduce uncertainty (Turner & Reynolds, 2012). This theory states that members of a group will reduce uncertainty or cognitive dissonance about any concept by seeking affirmation of their beliefs from members within the group. By doing so, the group member feels even more a part of the group (because everyone shares the same ideologies and ways of thinking), making those not in the group shunned (Turner et al., 2012). The theory creates a clear divide in groups and others. They make "in groups" for anyone within the circle and "out groups" for anyone who is not. This can also be demonstrated in the way information circulates in cults.

Cults claims to answers life's biggest questions like what will happen when we die, how do I get success, will I ever find love, what is true happiness, faith, or family? When members begin to have questions about topics such as these, they seek the answers within the cult.

Naturally, answers that arise from the cult are the cult's ideologies. When people take the group's answers from these major questions, they essentially become the entire group's way of thinking. Anyone who does not match these ways of thinking becomes members of the outgroup.

A number of studies have demonstrated how a group emerges using these principles of categorization. For example, Hogg and Turner (1987) demonstrated that when people were organized into groups containing a mixture of males and females or same-sex groups containing men only or females only, individuals were more likely to define themselves in terms of gender and to emphasize their similarity to those of the same gender in the mixed-sex settings as opposed to when only men or women were present (Turner et al., 2012). Being in a mixed-sex group setting made individuals want to categorize themselves in terms of gender while those in the same-sex group did not because there was no noticeable in group or out group. This explains



how and when individuals are likely to use the “us” versus “them” approach, a basic idea of the SCT. When individuals use the “us” idea, it makes it easier for them to agree in a group while giving them the expectation that others will agree too. Turner et al. (2012), states that individuals define themselves as members of a social class, when they learn or develop the appropriate and expected behaviors that coincide with membership, and differentiate it from other categories from other groups; they assign the norms and attributes of the category to themselves (internalization) through the process of deindividuation and self-stereotyping. Sometimes, the categorization overpowers individual identity of group members. With time, group members become so involved within the group, they become deindividuated: they lose themselves; they lose self-awareness. They have no conscious knowledge of their own character, feelings, motives, or desires.

### **Deindividuation**

Cults act as a collective. There is no difference of individual personality, emotions, or thoughts seen in cult members. Human beings learn from and follow each other: they bandwagon thinking and traits. They adopt identical behaviors, buy the same things, and follow trends based on people who impact them. People then become so involved with other people, they tend to become deindividuated and lose self-awareness. When people are a part of a group, they tend to extend this to having the group generate their feelings and emotions that a part of that cult's identity. The bigger the group, the greater the facility of changing mindsets and swaying emotions (Darley & Latane, 1968).

### **Conveyor Belt of Cult Identity**



Social identity theory, self-categorization theory, and deindividuation all make up the Convey Belt of Cult Identity. It starts with social identity theory: group members are creating a positive identity and try to lessen off any negative external criticism. Next, after exhibiting social identity theory, members begin to self-categorize. They ask other group members about things they are uncertain about, creating a group mentality and overall group category. Once they have that group mentality, that becomes one of the few resources group members have to rely on. They become so group-involved that they become the group. Their individual identity dissociates and they lose their personal existence, character, feelings, motives, or desires.

### **Following the Cult Leader**

There are many different ways people can become the leader of a group: elections, nominations, forming the group, or overthrowing an already existing power. A part of the phenomenon of cults is the cult leader. Analyzing the leadership style of cults will gain insight in why cult members choose to follow them. This analysis will also explain the phenomenon that some describe as brainwashing that occurs within cults. This can be explained using a funnel-type model of cult decision making. The funnel includes the charismatic leader at the top, propaganda in the middle, and bounded rationality at the bottom. The charismatic leader influences cult members with propaganda which then minimizes their decision space.

### **The Charismatic Leader**

The charismatic leader is a leadership style that uses propaganda; this type of leader relies on personality to persuade people to follow. Cults demand obedience to leaders who are persuasive people with authoritarian and narcissistic tendencies motivated by money, sex, power,



or a combination of all three (Lalich, 2017). Although the charismatic leader has the personality of someone corrupt, their followers see them as an amazing person. This person is actually a manipulator who promises them anything they wish. The charismatic leadership style is often thought of as the most effective leadership style that delivers results through a seductive approach which engages and stimulates members of the group (Biviano, 2000).

Charisma has been seen as a characteristic of infamous figures in society and it has been determined that there are psychological mechanisms which lead to the emergence of charismatic leaders and their attraction to the people that follow them. For example, the charismatic leader gains power based on personal features rather than knowledge or experience (Takala, 2005). They use their charisma as a tool. This may be sexual attractiveness, personality, or even humor. In fact, an aspect of charisma is to appear to be well informed about a topic despite not being truly knowledgeable about it (Smith & Zarate 2015).

A study by Smith and Zarate (2015) demonstrated how powerful charisma is in influencing decision making. They explored how the effects of religious priming and the charismatic leadership style influenced decision-making. In the study, they had participants assigned to a priming condition that included either having the participants write about the role of religion in society or about their favorite movie. The participants were then given a presentation of either hydro-fracture mining or solar energy alternatives. Then while in the treatment of a charismatic or non-charismatic confederate, they were to hypothetically distribute funds to either the hydro-fracture mining or solar energy alternatives. The confederate in both situations supported hydro-fracture mining and recommended the funding go towards it. They found that a charismatic leader was more effective when participants were first primed with



religion (Smith et al., 2015). This shows that a charismatic leader is able to influence people about a topic that they have no expertise in.

### **Persuasion**

Persuasion is used as a means of influence: it plays an essential role in politics, religion, psychotherapy, education, and everyday social interactions (Petty & Brinol, 2008). Like charisma, it is a tool used by the cult. Persuasion is seen as a power tactic to get cult members to participate in behaviors they otherwise would not. Some methods of cult influence include techniques of compelled persuasion involving guilt, shame, or fear (Lalich, 2017). Persuasion is a form of social influence that involves changing other's thoughts, or behaviors by applying rational and/or emotional arguments to convince them to adopt a certain position or view (Cialdini, 2017).

#### *The Elaboration Likelihood Model*

The elaboration likelihood model (ELM) is a cognitive model of persuasion which states that a target's attention, involvement, distraction, motivation, self-esteem, education, and intelligence all influence central and/or peripheral processing of a persuasive message (Budzynska & Weger, 2011). This model consists of two routes of processing. The central route involves an engaged and effortful processing of information while the peripheral route involves the use of cues that may be marginal or unconnected with the information. Human beings rarely ever use the central route of the ELM because it involves effortful cognition and thought processing (Budzynska et al., 2011) It is easier to use the peripheral route because it is less taxing on the mind. People who are masters of persuasion often use the peripheral route to get



people to agree with their message. The peripheral route to persuasion is activated when the person involved decides whether to agree and comply with the message presented by the persuader based on subtle cues (Budzynska et al. 2011). For example, a listener may decide to agree with a message because the source appears to be an expert: they may wear a white lab coat, nod during the presentation or may be attractive. They do not pay attention to any facts or details because this would involve the central route of processing. Another type of model of persuasion that closely follows this one is the heuristic-systematic model.

#### *Heuristic-Systematic Model*

The heuristic-systematic model is a model of persuasion which states that of the two routes of persuasion, heuristic or systematic, people tend to use heuristics more; this is due to humans having a natural inclination towards effort minimization (Bohner, Moskowitz, & Chaiken, 1995). Heuristics are short-cuts that people use to learn, without using real processing. The systematic approach, on the other hand, involves thinking and logical input. Once again, it is seen that shortcuts are taken to reduce any cognitive effort. It is easier for people to rely on heuristics rather than try to think their way through learning. An example of the model at work would be an extension of the previous example of the ELM. If a person listens to two people with the same argument, with the only difference being one is wearing a lab coat while the other is not, the person is more likely to agree with the one wearing the lab coat. This is because the person is relying on the heuristic that lab coats equal knowledge. In the same way, a person is likely to follow a cult leader because the person may seem to know what they are talking about based on their follower count or the way they speak; this person may not try to systematically process what the cult leader is actually saying.



With the influence of both the charismatic leader and forms of persuasion, the cult member has trouble making formal judgement and decisions. They have trouble processing or deciding actions to take. The perceived stress and pressure from both the charismatic leader and persuasion creates a mental boundary in decision-making. Another reason as to why a person may follow a cult leader is limited decision space.

### *Propaganda Techniques*

#### **Decision Space**

Human beings perceive the time and space in which they have to make decisions as short and small respectively. When several factors come into play at once, they may make hasty decisions or depend on their heuristics or peripheral processing. At the same time, factors in cognition become blurred. These factors are perception, intuition, reasoning, content, and process (Kahneman, 2005). These factors also differ in complexity, adding to the stress of making a decision. A deficit of these along with little availability of information makes it necessary to rely on the heuristics and peripheral processing seen in the heuristic-systematic model and the elaboration likelihood model respectively. Using the cognitive tools that they have available, the individual will make a decision. The decision made with these forces acting on their cognitive resources is bounded rationality.

#### *Bounded Rationality*

Bounded rationality theory states that decision-making and subsequent behavior is limited by the information that is presented, cognitive limitations, attitudes, biases, stereotypes, heuristics, and the amount of time that a person has to plan; it also states people will learn to achieve success through experience and that bounded rational behavior will disappear over time



if the environment remains stable (Grune-Yanoff, 2007). Bounded rationality is a way that humans make decisions quickly without using too much cognitive effort; however, when they use this, they are known to make hasty and irrational decisions, but to them the decision seems rational. Another factor that will limit decision space is propaganda.

### *Propaganda Techniques*

Propaganda is a deliberate attempt to persuade people, by any available media, to think in a manner desired by the source (Markova, 2016). It does so by working on the peripheral and heuristic part of cognitive processing. Propaganda can be considered a weapon when it comes to manipulation. Propagandists can offer suggestions to people, making it seem like their own decisions. This makes it seem like the person is acting of their own free will, when in reality they are being manipulated. The true goals and intentions of those behind propaganda is never clear due to the fact that they are playing on peripheral cues and heuristics. In essence, they are molding minds of their members by discouraging critical thinking and effortful processing. Propaganda has several techniques that it uses to work on individuals.

### *Use of Stereotypes*

People often use stereotypes for simplicity in their social circles. Stereotypes are thoughts or schemas that we create about certain individuals that we then generalize to represent their entire group. Stereotypes too work on the peripheral route of processing and it uses heuristics. It is a way to reserve cognitive energy. In this way, people have a natural way of using stereotypes (Eldersveld, 1956). This also makes it easier to claim others as an outgroup.

### *Substitution of Names*



To further make those as an outgroup, propaganda will substitute the names of groups. They usually do this by using ethnic or religious slurs (Eldersveld, 1956). The technique of substituting names de-humanizes an outgroup. This allows the person getting manipulated by propaganda to push the outgroup further away from them in a social sense, making it easier to see them as the “other” or enemy.

#### *Selection of Facts*

Those who create propaganda will make one-sided arguments. They will leave out any arguments for the opposing side and only make their point. Propagandists will do so by omission of facts that could possibly weaken their argument or even make the target think or question their point of view. The goal, of course, is to lessen thinking by any means (Eldersveld, 1956).

#### *Assertion*

Propagandists must be clear and to the point with their argument. They must leave no room for debate. They make sure their aims are justified and everything is in clear terms. They try to contradict any logical arguments made by the other side to show their assertion. The cult environment discourages critical thinking, making it hard to voice doubts to the group when others are modeling absolute faith; this results in cognitive dissonance (Lalich, 2017).

#### *Cognitive Dissonance Theory*

Cognitive dissonance theory is a theory of attitude change, manufactured by Leon Festinger, that states that if inconsistency exists among our attitudes, or between our attitudes and behavior, we experience an unpleasant state of arousal called cognitive dissonance (Miller, Clark, & Jehle, 2015). To alleviate cognitive dissonance, people either adjust their understanding of a situation or change the situation completely in their mind, while not actually facing the reality of the situation. Each compromise makes it more painful for the individual involved to



admit that they have been deceived (Lalich, 2017). Humans are motivated to reduce or eliminate cognitive dissonance because it is mentally discomfoting. Because the mental strife is so troubling, people will go a step further and move past changing the situation in their mind to complete denial or rejection of any dilemma having taken place.

Despite any worries or concerns gathered from others, individuals who join cults always find some way to rationalize their decisions. Admitting their faults or seeing the faults in people they believe is too cognitively discomfoting, so they must rationalize it to alleviate the discomfort.

### **Reluctance to Leaving the Cult**

Cults seek to control their members in every respect; these can be seen from personal relations and family to financial assets and living arrangements (Lalich, 2017). The cult may also control their members by using psychological influences similar to brainwashing. Among these psychological holds are several forms of social influence which are correlated with the natural need and drive for belonging that humans possess. These forms of social influence somewhat overlap in definition, but have distinct differences and play a major role in deference to the cult.

### **Obedience**

Obedience is a social influence process involving modification of behavior in response to a command from an authority figure (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004). The authority figure in all cult situations that the followers are obedient to is the cult leader. Obedience follows a chain of command. The cult leader is at the peak while the other members fall behind him, making him the dominant authority figure. The cult leader gathers this influence from social power. Although



the leader may ask difficult requests or even harm their people, their people remain obedient. The same can be said for people who stay in abusive relationships. Despite it seeming ridiculous to anyone on the outside, the person in the relationship finds it rational and normal due to obedience. This is because there is unequal sharing of power in the relationship, like there is unequal sharing of power in cults. An experiment that demonstrates the power of obedience is Stanley Milgram's Obedience to Authority.

In Milgram's study, volunteers were recruited for an experiment that was suppose to measure learning. In actuality, the experiment measured obedience to authority figures (Milgram, 1963). In the experiment, there was one participant who was appointed as the teacher and two confederates who played the roles of the experimenter and learner. The learner was placed in a room with an electric chair while the teacher and experimenter were in another room. The learner was strapped to a chair with electrodes, then was given a list of words to learn and recall from the teacher. If a mistake was made, the experimenter told the teacher to administer a shock to the learner. Every time the learner made a mistake, the teacher was to increase the increments of the voltage of the shock. Due to the true nature of the experiment, the learner purposely gave incorrect answers. The teacher in turn gave the learner the appropriate shock, but after the intensity got high, the teachers were reluctant to continue. The experimenter then gave the teacher instructions to continue (Milgram, 1963). Milgram found that the participants were likely to obey to the requests of the authority figures. This experiment explains why people in cults are obedient to their members: they do so because they are the authority.

### **Conformity**



Unlike obedience, conformity deals with a request rather than a social hierarchy. It also involves following other people rather than listening to someone of authority. Conformity is defined as a social influence process that involves modifying behavior in response to real or imagined pressure from others (Cialdini et al., 2004). It is the need to be socially accepted. Not following others or conforming leads an individual to become an outcast. This is socially and psychologically uncomfortable. Like the natural tendency of most human beings, those who are affected this way try their best to relieve the discomfort. They do so by conforming to the standards of those around them to become socially accepted. Conformity also has a positive correlation with the size of groups. A popular experiment that explored the phenomenon of conformity is Solomon Asch's conformity study.

Asch, in his study, gathered male college students for what was thought to be an experiment that measured visual perception. In the study, students were put into small groups consisting of all confederates except for one, the real participant (Asch, 1951). The visual perception test had two white notecards: one with a standard line and the other with three other lines, varying in size with one representative of the standard. The participants, including the confederates, were to verbally announce which line was the same as the standard. The experiment was designed to have the participant give their answer last. The confederates, who had gone before the participant, purposely gave a wrong answer. On average, despite knowing the line chosen was the wrong one, the participant decided to answer the way the group had (Asch, 1951). They had conformed to the majority.

### **Compliance**



*Doors* Compliance is the social influence process that involves modifying behavior in response to a direct request (Cialdini et al., 2004). Compliance goes hand in hand with conformity and obedience in the sense that the individual tries to go along with the group; however, unlike obedience, compliance does not follow a social hierarchy. Compliance occurs simply because a person is asked to act in some way or asked to complete some task. This can explain the phenomenon on why cult members are so inclined to do tasks; however, it is a series of requests that make their action of compliance possible. Cults will gain compliance from their members by either weaning a larger request or building a smaller request.

#### *Foot-in-the-door technique*

Cult behavior may seem like unethical or impractical behavior. At first, when presented with tasks that are impractical or immoral, a person is likely to deny those tasks. However, when a smaller request is made and several requests increasing in both importance and impracticality are made after that, the task that was once seen as impractical no longer has that label: it is seen as feasible. The foot-in-the-door technique is a social influence process in which a small request is made before a larger request, resulting in more compliance to the larger request than if the larger request were made alone (Freedman & Fraser, 1966). Increasing the task, increases the perceived stress on the individual, forcing them to comply in situations. It is reflected in the saying, "if you give them an inch, they'll take a mile" (Freedman et al., 1966). A person is likely to do the small task and gradually move to larger task. This type of conveyor belt method makes it easy to ease the person on to bigger tasks. Another technique in compliance can be seen using an opposite approach with the same goal in mind.



*Door-in-the-face technique*

Another type of “reverse conveyor belt method” is the door in the face technique. The door-in-the-face technique is a social influence process in which a large request is made before a smaller request, resulting in more compliance to the smaller request than if the smaller request were made alone (Feely & Aloe, 2012). While in effect, the first request is rejected by the person it is asked of, and the requester has a metaphorical door slammed in their face; the requester then not dismayed by rejection, seeks compliance to a more realistic request (Feely et al., 2012). The initial shock of the large request makes it more understandable to agree to a smaller request. Most of the time when this technique is used, the large request is something outrageous while the smaller request was a part of the goal entirely.

**Drawing the Line**

Cults are ordinary groups and should be seen as such. They work on the same mechanisms that groups use. Any theory that has been stated in this paper is not exclusive to cults; instead, these theories are generalized to any group: like any other group, cults satisfy our needs. Human beings are social animals. Cults meet our needs for intimate social behavior. Indirectly, they act as a source for survival and reproduction. They give us access to resources, friends, community, partnerships, or even a sense of life. An example of a cult that practices this ideal is the KKK. The cult has given its members a sense of community, friendship, and brotherhood. Their drive to belong places them in this group that provides social bonding and helps them and their ideas survive.

Like groups cults have an identity. Any identity an individual member has dissipates the longer they are in the cult or group. When cult identities feel threatened, people may use



strategies to protect not only themselves, but more importantly the cult. These strategies defend the group from harm, criticism, or potential threats. One cult that went far to protect themselves were the Branch Davidians. When they were threatened by the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives (ATF), they not only protected themselves psychologically, but physically. The cult went down in a fiery blaze while trying to protect their compound. This is a perfect example of social categorization. Koresh made it clear to his followers that the ATF was not their friend: the ATF was the "them" in the "us vs. them" scenario. Koresh was also a charismatic leader that influenced his followers on an emotional level, facilitating their participation in the showdown.

Cults wouldn't be cults and groups wouldn't be groups unless there was a leader. The cult leader, like many other leaders, is charismatic. They use techniques of persuasion to work on the minds of its members. This is done by propaganda that works on peripheral processing and heuristics. With these in play, the members have little decision space or room to think. Charles Manson was a charismatic leader who taught his ideas into his followers and led them on a horrific massacre. His influence as a charismatic leader was so powerful over his followers, that he himself did not commit any actual crime. However, it is also due to his charisma which created the strong obedience, compliance, and conformity of his followers.

As with other groups, cults try to influence their members. They do so by using social influences that play on human beings' natural tendencies to follow hierarchies, their need to be involved or their desire to be liked. One powerful instance of social influence in history is the Jonestown massacre. Jim Jones' loyal followers did everything their leader asked of them, including moving to a faraway place, abandoning their loved ones, murdering innocent men, women, and children, and committing suicide.



These events in cult history are unusual, but they are explained by the same theories that explain any other group behavior. Cults are simply groups. They are seen as bizarre and weird; however, they play on the same psychological and social mechanisms that humans have. They sustain basic survival functions and meet our needs of social functioning. Once in the group, we feel a need to protect our group's image. We strive to only think positive of it and eventually become so deeply involved that it becomes our own identity. Sure, the practices of the cult may seem strange to an outsider, but when members seek information from others in the group, every behavior seems rational to that person. Propaganda does do its work within a cult, but it is a universal tactic used by anyone trying to instill some change. The behavior and personality of cult members may follow a conveyor belt-type method that leads from normal, rational behavior, to what some perceive as "cultish" behavior. The only discrepancy that could be accounted for between a cult and any other group would be the contra-survival behavior some cult members seem to have. Otherwise, cults are no different from churches, sororities, fraternities, book clubs, tennis teams, or even girl scouts. They are only perceived as different. The lack of knowledge and exploration of cults is what makes it a phenomenon. With more analysis and perhaps experiments, society can have a firmer understanding of cults and their behaviors. I believe that with more research done in this area, we can change the definition of cults. Instead of "bizarre" or "strange", their behaviors can be understood and researched.

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CULTS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

By

Jonica V. Carlton Best

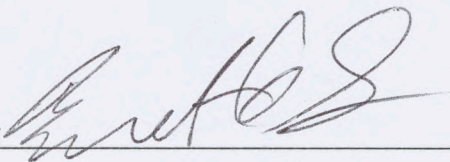
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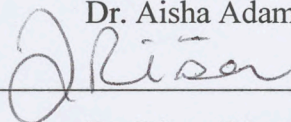


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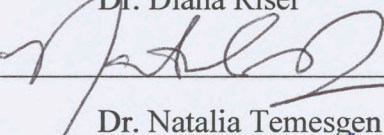


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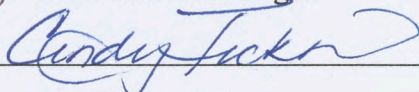


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