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Coercion, Conversion, Control: Techniques Utilized to Recruit and Indoctrinate New Members into Cult Organizations

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**COERCION, CONVERSION, CONTROL:
TECHNIQUES UTILIZED TO RECRUIT AND INDOCTRINATE
NEW MEMBERS INTO CULT ORGANIZATIONS**

by

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requirements for the degree of

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ABSTRACT

Religious belief of some form has long been a regular part of many people's lives, but when a person's devotion to doctrine becomes so all-encompassing that they structure their entire life around it, they may be in a cult. While the dogma may vary across groups, a cult is characterized as having extremely devoted disciples who often follow a charismatic leader and espouse extreme beliefs or practices not widely accepted by society. Members of cults commit themselves wholly to their leaders. Proving their commitment by turning over financial assets, obeying commands without question, and even severing all social ties outside of the group. For a cult leader to hold such incredible power of command they intentionally seek vulnerable individuals to grow their flock. These converts then become recruiters themselves, increasing the size of the congregation and the leader's power. This literature review analyzes scholarship spanning the past century on multiple cult organizations to identify the commonalities shared in practices used to recruit, indoctrinate, and maintain allegiance. Literature analysis shows that targets for indoctrination tend to display one or more risk factors characteristics such as youth, drug and alcohol abuse, or lack of support system. Tactics involving social isolation, deception, sexual acts, financial manipulation, and lifestyle control are most effective and are utilized by multiple organizations to induct members and subsequently retain authority over them. In essence, cults gradually chip away pieces of a person until they no longer have an individual identity beyond what is determined by the group.

Keywords: cult, indoctrination, coercion, abuse, manipulation, conversion, control, dogma

INTRODUCTION

Cult organizations have been recorded dating as far back as the first millennium BC in the Dodecanese Greek Islands, yet these organizations remained primarily covert until recent years (Stefanakis et al., 2023). Now with the rise of mass sharing of online and televised media their existence has become much more visible to mainstream society. Once socially insular and secretive, cults have moved out of the shadows and their doctrines are available for all to read with a simple Google search (Barker, 2015). The Britannica Dictionary defines a cult as “a small religious group that is not part of a larger and more accepted religion and that has beliefs regarded by many people as extreme or dangerous” (2023). As the visibility of modern-day cults has increased, the question can be asked what it is that inspires followers to engage in such intense devotion to leaders and beliefs that may seem foreign to the conventional mind. Why would an individual renounce all aspects of their former life to devote themselves entirely to a niche belief group?

In order to understand why cults seem to exert complete control over their follower's lives, we first need to understand why followers are attracted to join in the first place. It is common for cult organizations to manipulate their newest members physically and psychologically under the promise of a better life. This study aims to analyze literature and film regarding cult recruitment tactics to identify individual characteristics sought in ideal potential converts, and the most effective practices utilized by cult leadership to coerce new targeted recruits into joining and remaining within the group.

The term “cult” is perhaps an overly large blanket term to describe the wide array of different group structures and beliefs it encompasses. The faith, financial, social, and leadership structures vary so widely from group to group that they can appear completely unrelated, so

labeling them all the same term may seem incorrect. By identifying the common threads in leadership recruitment tactics and the ensuing convert behavior described in scholarship, this study will show that while not all cults look alike from the outside, they almost always function in similar ways. To highlight these commonalities three case studies of well-known groups will be presented describing their structure and indoctrination practices; The Charles Manson Family, Children of God, and The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). The first two groups targeted (and in some cases continue to do so to this day) a similar type of individual and used similar practices to groom and retain their members. The third case, the FLDS, differs from the first two in its initial indoctrination tactics, yet it employs nearly the same methods to ensure its followers remain obedient. Underlining the resemblances in both recruitment of followers and dominance implementation strategies across disparate cult groups will show that regardless of dogma, nearly all cults function similarly in the initial stages of inducting and securing longevity in members.

CASE STUDY: THE MANSON FAMILY

During the 1960s and 70s, Southern California was a hot spot for alternative individuals and drifters seeking purpose. Charles Manson, “Charlie,” was a combination of both with underlying sinister intent. At age 33 Charles was released from prison where he had spent nearly half of his life on and off for various minor offenses. During this most recent imprisonment, Charles became “Charlie” and discovered two new interests that would draw him to the San Francisco area, playing music and Scientology. While in prison Charlie learned to play guitar and sing and began studying the religion Scientology (the current designation of Scientology as a legitimate religious group is nebulous as some believe the group is a cult in its own right (Remini & Paley, 2015)). Upon release, Charlie headed to Southern California to pursue recognition and

become a famous musician with his new talents. While he had given up Scientology a few years prior, he had studied it for a long enough period that he understood the basic church structure. He leveraged this familiarity with the religion to gain entry to high-end parties where he would mingle with rockstars and celebrities, which only intensified his desire for renown (Guinn, 2014).

Despite his efforts, all doors to the music industry shut on Charlie. Denied stardom and reduced to panhandling, Charlie sought prominence from the fellow transients surrounding him. He searched out young women whom he could charm into caring for him, beginning with 22-year-old Mary Brunner, who could provide housing, income, sexual gratification, and transportation. With his basic needs handled by Mary, Charlie began to bring younger and more disenfranchised female youth from the streets of San Francisco into his orbit and influence (Bugliosi & Gentry, 1974).

By the “Summer of Love” Manson had enticed roughly eighteen very young women, some in their early teens, to live with him in Mary’s home. He was sexually intimate with all of these women, at times with multiple at the same time or would direct the girls to partner with each other. These would become the first members of the Manson Family. These new additions to the inner circle came from different familial and socio-economic backgrounds, but primarily they had recently arrived in the city on their own and were looking for shelter and community. During this time Charlie rebranded himself as “Charles Willis Manson” and began to recruit more followers, both male and female, by promoting himself around the Haight Ashbury district as a guru. Utilizing his group of young female disciples Manson began prostituting them for income and as a means to lure new members to his “family.” During this time, while primarily

existing under Manson's control, the followers were living in a city setting and were still free to interact with outsiders unsupervised (Lake & Herman, 2017).

This freedom was ended in 1968 when Manson moved his entire family follower unit to the Spahn Ranch, a remote location just outside Los Angeles. Here with his followers' attention and existence held captive, Manson enjoyed complete control over their every activity and relationship. Children of the female members were raised communally so that mothers would not direct all their attention to their children or become overly attached. These same women were responsible not only for preparing food and cleaning the living spaces, but also for granting sexual favors to guests Charles would invite. It was particularly important that the women take care of the aged landowner, George Spahn, who allowed the family to live on his land as long as he was both physically and sexually looked after by Charlie's girls (Lake & Herman, 2017).

With the group now cut off from society, Manson began to cement himself as an unquestionable leader. Using a mixture of his self-composed songs, interpretations of biblical passages, imposed sexuality, and mandated group hallucinogen usage Manson directed the group in how they were meant to think, believe, and act (Guinn, 2014). This directed thought and body control was intentionally designed to reprogram his acolytes to "submit totally to his will" (Smith, 1971). Manson organized the time and settings when all members of his "family" would ingest high doses of psychedelics together, while he alone would take a lessened amount to stay cognizant so that he could remain in control of his follower's altered states of consciousness. Often these psychedelic rituals would begin with Charles singing his compositions with the group chanting back and would devolve into directed multiple partnered sexual displays which encircled Manson, who would observe from an elevated location in the center of the room (Lake & Herman, 2017).

By this point, Manson had successfully stripped his “family” of their access to basic resources, even their own autonomy. All members renounced being called by their previous given names upon joining in favor of the names the family would bestow upon them. As Manson preached the evils of the law enforcement “pigs”, members were regularly sent out on assignments to shoplift and commit petty thefts to provide income for Manson, who never himself took part in these missions. The females of the group were required to tend to the eighty-year-old George Spahn’s every demand without complaint, as well as make themselves available for guests and the resident males should they request it. Basic quality of life was in sharp decline as the housing for the members at Spahn Ranch was comprised of decrepit structures that had long ago fallen apart and food supply was stretched very thin across the group (Lake & Herman, 2017). Yet still this group of people were completely loyal to Charles Manson and obeyed him without question.

The members in Manson’s “family” were hand-picked intentionally by him. They were young and newly independent with no one to turn to, nowhere to go, and nothing to believe in except for him. He relished the power of running his brigade and giving out orders. He utilized his initial female followers for both income through prostitution, and as bait to attract males into the group to provide muscle. If he was never going to become wealthy and famous through the music industry, he would create his own platform to be idolized. Through a combination of isolation, deprivation, humiliation, sublimation, and degradation tactics Charles Manson broke the consciousnesses of his followers to such a degree that they would end up committing unspeakable atrocities on his command without a trace of remorse. Even afterward, they remained unwaveringly loyal to Charles Manson.

CASE STUDY: CHILDREN OF GOD

Roughly the same time that the Manson Family were relocating to Spahn Ranch, another man who had previously studied religious theology was in the process of cultivating his own disciples less than an hour and a half south down the California coast. David Berg, a former Christian missionary, and current Evangelical preacher began building his following as many cult leaders do, by claiming to have received a divine message from the Almighty. Berg had been preaching in a suburb of Los Angeles and was leading a youth group he had nicknamed “Uncle Dave’s Teens for Christ.” This youth group consisted of adolescents who dressed and acted in a scandalous manner deemed inappropriate by other area church elders despite the group’s claims of doing so only to serve Jesus. Teen members in the group would solicit other teen peers attempting to persuade them to dedicate their lives to Christ, at which point David Berg would direct the new converts to renounce all prior relationships from their lives before they came to Christ, and to move into his home. After receiving much pushback from concerned community religious leaders Berg was delivered a well-timed revelation that California was doomed to be devastated by a massive earthquake, and that the faithful who wished to survive must leave and follow him where he may go. Roughly 100 members of all ages from his congregation joined him on this exodus and began to caravan around the United States seeking a place to settle. At each overnight stop, Berg would send his Teens for Christ into the community to lure new potential followers to the group (Chancellor, 2000).

It was during this initial pilgrimage that Berg first encountered a young new convert named Karen Zerby (later known as Maria). Although a married and self-touted pious man, Berg and Zerby began a sexual relationship, the existence of which was known to all within his inner circle of disciples. Now called “Father David,” the leader made an announcement to all that the

old system of the Evangelical church had been rejected by God in favor of this group's practices, the Children of God (COG). It was also announced that Father David had renounced his former wife, and that Maria (Karen Zerby) would be his new wife in the eyes of God (Chancellor, 2000).

As the congregation continued to traverse the United States, Berg established a hierarchy of upper-level individuals within the group, and then quietly withdrew from sight. From then on in-person contact was reserved for high-ranking members alone and all communication with followers was delivered through letters, "MO letters," distributed by his chosen elite. After two years of traveling America proselytizing and inducting new members, American media had begun to report on the dangers of joining cult-like organizations. Parents of children traveling with Berg's following formed FREECOG (Free Children of God) in 1972 in an effort to locate and reconnect with their missing sons and daughters. Conveniently, it was then that Berg received yet another revelation in a dream. He announced via letter that the United States would be besieged by mass destruction. He directed his followers to leave the country for their safety and become missionaries who would spread the new message of Jesus (Kent & Hall, 2000).

Berg's followers dispersed in factions across Europe and Latin America tasked to preach and recruit, but not before they had surrendered all earthly possessions to the head of the church. This effort was successful, with many new additions across multiple countries joining COG. Berg, however, felt that the growth was not sufficient, that the message was not reaching enough people globally. Now residing with his inner circle in the Canary Islands, in 1974 Berg piloted a program called "Flirty Fishing," or "FFing." Berg directed his female disciples, regardless of their relationship status, to seduce and have sexual relations with non-COG men from their local communities to entice them into joining the group. Women were encouraged to demonstrate their

faith and devotion in this way by utilizing their bodies as a form of ministry (Raine, 2007). After initial success in the Canary Islands, a 1976 MO letter to all COG colonies declared Fing the new preferred method of ministration for women, stating “God’s only Law is Love!” (Chancellor, 2000). This phrase was also used to inform husbands that their wives would now engage in outside sexual encounters to serve God, and through accepting this they too served the Almighty (Chancellor, 2000).

David Berg frequently espoused in his MO letter communications that sex was a beautiful, natural creation of God and encouraged followers to demonstrate devotion through sexual acts with multiple partners. The use of sex as a sacrament was widely accepted by COG members, even after a series of MO letters published between 1978 and 1983 implied that sexual contact was encouraged between all, including young children. A subsequent MO letter titled “Nudes can be beautiful!” published in March of 1981 encouraged the purchase of video recording equipment to create “Love Videos.” These tapes would feature nude women, and sometimes nude young girls, dancing on film with scarves to music and were sent to Father David as a visual glorification of “God’s beauty and artistry” (Jones, et al., 2007).

Through MO letters Berg evangelized frequent multi-partnered sexual acts, which resulted in the congregation’s birth rate rising exponentially. This large influx of new infants and their need for parental care became a problem for the COG organization. Caring for a young child restricted the number of hours parents were able to engage in church activities such as Fing, proselytizing, and generating income to tithe. To combat this issue, group homes for children were established in multiple countries where parents were instructed to send their child to live as soon as it was weaned. Children would then be raised communally by members of the church in accordance with Berg’s manifesto on child rearing. *The Story of Davidito*. Parents were

not able to visit or communicate with their children on a regular basis, care of the children was entirely entrusted to church-appointed staff members. In these group homes children were subjected to multiple forms of abuse and groomed to become ideal COG disciples far from parental interjections. The church held control over where children were placed and had full authority to move them internationally without parental consent (Jones, et al., 2007).

Even though David Berg had long before removed himself from public interaction with his congregation, his internationally dispersed followers were fed a constant stream of doctrine and decrees in the form of MO letters which they took to heart and obeyed. What began as an Evangelical Christian teen group grew into an intercontinental network of loyal followers. Initially, David Berg targeted young impressionable adolescents, bringing them into his home and grooming them to recruit their peers. To keep his budding church group isolated from concerned familial influence, he moved the congregation to travel the American highways, and then to international territories. Using his position as head of the church, Berg published literature that directed female disciples to utilize their sexuality to grow the size of his church population, causing romantic relationship dynamic deterioration amongst couples. To further isolate members from forming close bonds, he removed the offspring that resulted from these unions to be raised in a manner and location under his control. By strategically moving people between countries, David Berg isolated his followers while preventing them from forming attachments to locations or individuals. In essence, cutting them off from any outside or familial contact, even including individuals belonging to the church itself. He decided where they would live, when they moved, and what their occupation would be, demonstrating his complete control over their lives. His doctrines regarding and promoting hyper-sexuality removed the option of consent from adult followers and brought about the rape of children who could not have given

consent regardless of the circumstance. After David Berg died in 1994, his second wife Maria (Karen Zerby) became head of the church and rebranded it as “The Family International” (TFI) in an attempt to distance the group from the child sex abuse allegations that had been brought against Children of God. Although a large portion of followers left the COG/TFI following Berg’s death, the group is still an active religious organization with 1,400 current members across the globe who continue to follow doctrines received by letter (The Family International, 2024).

CASE STUDY: FUNDAMENTALIST CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (FLDS)

While the majority of cult organizations must actively recruit new members to fill their ranks, some groups have such a lengthy history and established following that recruitment is unnecessary. Their existing members can simply give birth to new members, and with each new child the congregation grows. The current mainstream Mormon Church of Latter-Day Saints traces its origin to a man called Joseph Smith. In 1823 Smith claimed to have received visitations from “Father God” and his son Jesus, who instructed him to join no current established church as they all followed false doctrine. Instead, during one of these visions the location of sacred texts inscribed on golden plates was revealed to Joseph and he was tasked to translate the message into English and share it with the world. One of the tenets of this newly established Mormon church (also called the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, or LDS) was the practice of plural marriage, also called polygamy. However, after much pressure and restrictive legislation from the American government that condemned the joining of one man with multiple wives, the LDS church publicly renounced and banned the practice of polygamy in 1890. After factions of the

church continued the practice the LDS church began excommunicating those members who still engaged in plural marriage in 1904 (Bigelow, 2008).

Several Mormons who had been raised in and currently lived a polygamist lifestyle refused to give up this way of life, and despite the main Mormon church threats of excommunication, formed an offshoot sect of the church; the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). In the FLDS, followers continued to believe in complete adherence to Joseph Smith's scripture and obeyed the dictations of the head of their priesthood, called the Prophet (Bigelow, 2008). Over the next century priesthood leadership would change hands between influential families upon the passing of Prophets, until in 2002 Warren Jeffs succeeded his father Rulon Jeffs as head of the FLDS church and declared himself "God's voice on Earth". (Berg, 2015).

Warren Jeffs, one of Rulon Jeff's estimated sixty children born of his multiple wives, was favored from a young age and was given leadership positions within the FLDS community as a young adult. In his first authority role as principal of the community school, the Alta Academy, Jeffs instituted and enforced strict codes of conduct that emphasized the importance of obedience, chaste behavior, and disallowed any platonic social contact between girls and boys (Jessop & Palmer, 2007).

Following his father's death and his ascension to the self-titled role of "President and Prophet, Seer and Revelator" (Dretzin & McNally, 2022) Jeffs would go on to instill further restrictions upon not only the children of the congregation but the adult members as well. Tithing amounts were drastically increased on families, and all member's private property ownership rights were to be surrendered to the church. Television sets, radios, newspapers, and books not published by or endorsed by the church were banned from all homes. Recreational activities and

public events were strongly discouraged, with only community gatherings sanctioned by Jeffs deemed acceptable to continue. The already conservative dress codes for both men and women became more restrictive, banning the color red from being worn and dictating the exact hairstyles and undergarments all followers must wear. If a congregant was found to have broken one of these rules and did not demonstrate contrition to Jeffs' satisfaction, they faced excommunication. Once excommunicated from the FLDS church, an individual would be labeled an apostate, and likely would never again see their spouse, children, or relatives as all were directed to shun them (Dretzin & McNally, 2022).

In the FLDS church men alone are given positions of power in the governing hierarchy, and the number of wives they have is a determining factor in their status (Wall & Pulitzer, 2009). Less than one week after Rulon Jeffs' 2002 passing his son married all but two of his father's youngest wives, bringing his wife total to over forty women. As the taking of multiple wives remains illegal in the United States there is no legal documentation for each marriage within the FLDS, but the current estimated total of Warren Jeffs' wives totals over 78 brides.

Marriages within the church are arranged exclusively by the Prophet, largely without input from the selected individuals unless the male enjoys a high status. Unwed women are informed that the prophet has discerned the identity of their divine husband, and widowed or husband-estranged women and their children are "reassigned" to another powerful man within the church. Often, brides are not able to become acquainted with their selected husband prior to standing at the altar and could be placed as young as twelve years old (Jessop & Palmer, 2007). To maintain a consistent supply of brides to his most loyal followers, Jeffs ensured the ratio of males to females in his flock was weighted towards the female population by arbitrarily excommunicating and banning young men from the community. These exiled men deemed the

“lost boys,” (Wall & Pulitzer, 2009) were sent from the insular world of the FLDS without money, support, or knowledge of the outside world and left to fend for themselves. By thinning the population of young male followers seeking marriage, young women of marriageable age were less likely to form romantic attachments to peers. These women were then free to be placed as one of the multiple wives of Jeffs’ favored disciples (Jeffs & Szalavitz, 2009).

Jeffs exerted extreme control over every facet of his congregation’s daily lives. From birth to death, or in some cases ex-communication, followers lived under and obeyed his every decree. To question or disobey would result in expulsion from the community. By promising salvation in return for blind obedience he manipulated relationships and families, placing and removing people at his discretion. In this way, Jeffs created a sense of impermanence in the family or marital unit, a form of isolative manipulation. Capitalizing on the multitude of children born into the church, Jeffs did not have to seek out new members for his flock to indoctrinate as the children were already raised to obey him in every way by their parents. By arranging strategic spiritual marriages between followers and threatening ex-communication to defectors, Jeffs bound his congregation to one another as he saw fit. In the sanctioning of child bride marriages, Jeffs further asserted his control over followers’ lives by directing the futures of vulnerable girls before they grew old enough to question the decisions. A successful cult leader dictates and his followers obey. Warren Jeffs’ mantra for his church, was “keep sweet, pray, and obey” (Dretzin & McNally, 2022).

DISCUSSION

Recruitment

As the last case study on the FLDS points out not all cults find it necessary to actively recruit members, but those groups that do recruit generally seek a similar profile of converts.

Cult organizations seek members who can be easily manipulated, so they target at-risk vulnerable populations. Generalized ego-weakness, emotional vulnerability, tenuous or deteriorated familial support systems, proclivities toward substance abuse, situational stress and crisis, and intolerable socioeconomic situations are key factors that raise a person's likelihood of being targeted for conversion by a cult organization (Curtis & Curtis, 1993). A person who exhibits one or more of these factors is more susceptible to initiation tactics such as intimidation, coercion, and indoctrination (Castaño et al., 2022).

In many cults which initially practice grassroots recruitment tactics the first converts sought by the leader are generally extremely young and primarily female (Hunter, 1998). These young people had not yet experienced much of the world and were looking for purpose in life. Manson targeted runaway homeless teen girls on the San Francisco streets who lacked support systems and offered them care in exchange for devotion. David Berg leveraged his position of power as the trusted leader of an Evangelical teen group to begin molding minds that would conform to his will. These leaders intentionally chose impressionable individuals seeking love and inspiration, then capitalized on their innocence to manipulate them.

Manson and Berg were skilled at discerning what a potential convert sought most in the world and used this information to gain control over them. Be it salvation for Berg's Teens for Christ, or shelter and community for Manson's girls, these men convinced their followers that only by devoting themselves fully would they be able to attain their goals. By pinpointing weaknesses and offering the solutions desired, they established themselves as the only answer to life's problems. Proselytizing ideas of faith, love, acceptance, and security (occasionally with the aid of administered intoxicants (Chancellor, 2000) (Lake & Herman, 2017)), Berg and Manson slowly grew their flocks. Once these initial followers were successfully brought under complete

control, Manson and Berg began to grow their groups earnestly, utilizing the assistance of those already loyal.

Predominantly cult groups are headed by men, and their female followers have historically been violently abused and manipulated sexually, physically, emotionally, and mentally for the gratification of the male leaders they serve (Whitsett & Post Rosow, 2020). In the case of the Manson and Berg groups, the initial most obedient female converts were utilized for physical labor, sexual favors, income, and most importantly recruitment. With both groups struggling to induct followers past their initial small number, the job of luring in new believers was tasked to the young females of the congregation.

Manson found that his self-proclaimed status as a “guru of the people” in San Francisco was not attracting the number of followers he had expected, and his followers comprised almost entirely of women. To both grow and diversify his ranks, he began prostituting his young female followers in an attempt to raise funds and attract male followers to his orbit. This tactic of trading sex for devotion from males proved successful, as by the time “The Family” was arrested in a series of raids conducted in 1969, 28 of the 59 followers apprehended were male (Manson Family Members, n.d.).

While sixty disciples may be a decent amount for some groups, David Berg desired a following of much greater size, he too employed his female devotees in the recruitment process. In the early years when COG was still forming, Berg sent his Teens for Christ into new communities as the group traversed the United States to preach to and tempt new members into joining the traveling faith group. Once COG had moved internationally, Berg decided that this practice of enlisting through gospel was not effective enough, and so he created the practice of “Flirty Fishing,” in which female followers would have sexual relations with individuals outside

the group in order to convert them to Berg's doctrine. FFinng was termed a form of "witnessing and disciple winning," and was not only a means to mass recruit male members to the group, but became the primary income source for Berg. Women were encouraged to seek wealthy and influential "fish," and should the fish not wish to convert they were asked to contribute to COG instead. This practice of using female disciples' sexuality as bait for new converts proved a success, with an estimated 9,000 persons per year being led to Jesus through FFinng between 1978 to 1983 (Chancellor, 2000).

Recruitment for established churches such as the FLDS differs from these common cult practices of targeting vulnerable populations, coercing them into obedience, and using the followers themselves to further grow the congregation. They do not recruit outsiders to their order, and in fact they discourage any contact with non-FLDS individuals completely to maintain community insularity. Their recruitment story began with a captive vulnerable population rejected by their faith, seeking acceptance and leadership from a new source. Following the 1935 ex-communication from the LDS church of all parishioners who continued to practice polygamy, John Y. Barlow took advantage of this population of disenfranchised Mormons and declared himself the head of temporal affairs and the Priesthood. In doing so he became the head of his own cult organization with an already existing population of disciples, rendering the employment of recruitment tactics superfluous (Foster & Watson, 2015).

Where cults do engage in active enlistment activities monetary gain for the group in question is often involved, as is shown by the Manson Family and COG's prostitution and FFinng. It could therefore be argued that by attaching financial acquisition requirements to recruitment tactics, the practice could be reframed not as spiritual proselytization but as a business transaction. Multi-Level Marketing Companies (MLMs) function in much the same way as cult

organizations in the acquisition of customers/followers and revenue/tithes. MLMs, also called “pyramid schemes,” encourage employees to promote their products and services directly to their individual networks to increase yield and recruit further employees. Beginning with a single CEO or manager at the top of the pyramid, each individual underneath them will bring in newly recruited members who are now under their management. These new employees will continue this process, the company will grow exponentially, and the overall increase in income funnels upward to benefit the CEO at the peak of the pyramid (Tarver, 2021).

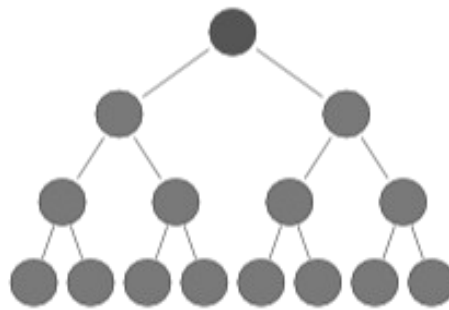


Figure 1: Basic structure of multilevel marketing companies

Cults that utilize their disciples as recruitment agents similarly create a pyramid shape, with the leader set at the pinnacle. Where Manson and Berg began with a small number of followers, by utilizing a loose interpretation of an MLM pyramid, they managed to grow their following swiftly. In the same way, even cults that do not recruit members such as the FLDS employ the pyramid strategy to grow their congregation. In the FLDS the higher number of wives and children a man has signifies his importance within the community. Placing the Priesthood head at the pinnacle of the pyramid, with his male followers below him, and their wives below them, the number of children born into the community on the fourth tier of the pyramid rises exponentially and the congregation grows larger.

Indoctrination and Retention

For a cult leader to exert complete control over the minds and bodies of their disciples, they must implement a culture where followers depend on them completely for every aspect of their lives. Their position as absolute head of the group in all matters must be unquestionable. To successfully recruit, initiate, influence, indoctrinate, and retain large quantities of believers, some of which they will likely never interact with in person, the leader must position themselves as the center of their congregation's universe. All members must be fully committed to the idea that they will flourish or fail only by obeying the decrees of their leader (Schwartz, 1991).

Instilling this sense of dependence upon the leader for all need fulfillment is integral to the success of a cult organization. Abraham Maslow proposed in 1943 that human needs were arranged in a hierarchical system, often illustrated as a pyramid, where the more basic needs for survival must first be met before higher intellectual needs could be addressed. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is an outline of the required need fulfillment categories to become self-actualized, or completely fulfilled (McLeod, 2024).



Figure 2: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (McLeod, 2024)

Using Maslow's hierarchy of needs pyramid, cult organizations' manipulation tactics of followers to foster dependence can be analyzed on a need-by-need basis. Physiological needs, the biological requirements for sustaining human life, are the most basic and instinctive needs humans seek to fulfill; food, water, shelter, warmth, health, and sleep. Cult organizations often target potential converts whose physiological needs are currently not being met and then exert control over how those needs will be met in the future once initiated into the group.

Charles Manson sought young homeless females who lacked access to shelter and sustenance. By providing for these girls and meeting their physiological needs he initiated their sense of dependence upon him for survival. As his following grew larger, he no longer had the means to house his flock in San Francisco, so he moved his growing "family" to the Spahn Ranch, where he could better tighten his grip on their daily lives. Food was scarce on the ranch and housing was in poor shape, but his followers were given enough that their physiological needs were met by the mercy of their leader, Manson.

David Berg however began his church within the established Evangelical religion, and his first would-be followers came from homes in which they were fed, sheltered, and clothed without assistance from him. To create a need for dependence, Berg invited his Teens for Christ group to move into his home with him and cut off relations with their previous family members. Now under his roof, he held control over what they were fed and their basic living conditions. When the community grew suspicious of Berg sheltering so many youths in his home, he decreed that they must all take to the road and become mobile voices for Christ, again placing his followers' living situations under his direct control free from outside scrutiny. Later, Berg would further dictate the exact living conditions for his members by creating overcrowded group homes

in multiple countries where his congregants were sent to live under poor conditions with meager supplies to sustain themselves.

When John Y. Barlow founded the FLDS sect of the LDS church in 1942, he also launched an initiative called the “United Effort Plan” (UEP). Under the UEP follower’s land, homes, and businesses were to be donated to and controlled by the church in an effort to live the LDS doctrine of the “Law of Conscription” (Bigelow, 2008). FLDS members were allowed to remain living on and working in their homes and businesses, but without rights of ownership so they could be removed from them at the church’s discretion. The FLDS controlled not only the careers and housing of its members but their food and clothing as well. Believers were not allowed to shop at or interact with outside individuals, called apostates, and so the products available to them were under church control. With no legal rights to the homes they inhabited or outside avenues to procure necessities, the FLDS faithful were completely dependent on the church for their basic survival needs.

When basic physiological needs are met, Maslow’s hierarchy states that the human need for safety is the next priority. Humans seek order and routine in their lives and crave predictability and security. Most important to note is that the need for safety equates to a sense of need for control over one’s own life, a quality that cult organizations categorically deny their members.

Cult leaders seek not only obedience from their followers in thought and action, but strict adherence to all commands dictating their daily lifestyle as well. By controlling the basic aspects of life (food, shelter, clothing) which satiate their follower’s physiological needs, cult leaders then control when and where these needs will be met. Across the board each case study presented shows evidence of leaders interfering with their group member’s ability to feel safe

and secure. Whenever members began to establish a routine or displayed comfort in their surroundings, Manson and Berg would move their followers to new locations or send them on missions that compromised their safety such as Ffing or petty crime assignments. Warren Jeffs retained complete control over his congregation by holding the threat of excommunication over their heads. Simply because a man and woman had been married in the church and had children was not a guarantee they would spend the rest of their lives together, members who disobeyed could be excommunicated and wives and children could be reassigned to new men on a whim if Jeffs saw fit to do so. Demonstrating constant unwavering adherence to all decrees regardless of personal opinion was imperative in all three groups to retain your home, family, and livelihood. Cult organizations strip their members of the security that they have any control over their lives, their families, their living situation, their finances, or their safety. They are entirely dependent upon the head of the organization to provide these things for them, lest they be cast out completely alone and unequipped to handle the world.

Maslow's pyramid states that after physiological and safety needs are met to some degree, humans seek to fulfill their emotional need for love and belonging. This can take the form of friendship, family connection, intimate trusted relationships, and the giving and receiving of affection from others. Cult organizations excel in manipulating the perceptions of love and belonging feelings amongst their followers, by once again creating dependence. Isolation is one of the most effective techniques utilized by abusers to encourage their victims to become dependent on them alone while also fostering a mistrust of others (Duron et al., 2021). When individuals in cult religions have a strong network of varied close relationships they not only have trusted confidants to turn to should they question their lifestyle, but those same people are also watching out for the member, and may potentially cajole them into questioning their

lifestyle if they aren't already. For a cult leader the potential for outside influence on their followers is too great a risk to take, so isolation is a key factor in bringing members under complete control. However, the human need for love and belonging is still important, so while the leader must isolate the follower from all outside contact not under their control, they must at the same time do so in a way that tricks the follower into believing that they are leaving behind harmful relationships in pursuit of better ones. In essence, cults replace converts' legitimate family and friends with their own members who will become the new "real" family and friends, while always enforcing that the group loves them, but the leader loves them most of all.

This practice of isolating recruits from their previous associations while promoting a sense of belonging and inclusion amongst cult members is seen across the board in fringe religious organizations. Charles Manson targeted runaways, deviants, and homeless individuals specifically so that they already had no relations to isolate from. From there he was able to use the inclusive term "family" and create his own group of followers who now felt they had found social inclusion. David Berg also utilized the term "family" in the creation of his church. While officially known as Children of God, COG members referred to Berg as their father, and to each other as members of "The Family." COG inductees were instructed to leave behind their previous associations and embrace the love of their new family under their father David. The FLDS church provides perhaps the strongest examples of effective use of isolation, through enforced community seclusion rules and practices of excommunication followers were strictly forbidden from having any contact with any person outside the church. Warren Jeffs used isolation control to such a degree that when sons and husbands were excommunicated their wives, siblings, and children were simply reassigned overnight to a new man and told they had a

new husband/father. In this way, the reassigned wives and children ostensibly still had their need to be loved and belong met, but only in a manner that suited Warren Jeffs.

The highest two levels represented in Maslow's hierarchy of needs are esteem and self-actualization. Two potential states of being that threaten the complete thought control cults seek the most. An individual who has achieved self-esteem feels that they are worthy, respected, and accomplished. A person who has gone further to the level of self-actualization feels fulfilled in their life and seeks to continue to grow further in their potential through experience (McLeod, 2024). Cult organizations seek to suppress their members' independent sense of self in order to maintain complete obedience. The potential of followers achieving esteem and self-actualization inhibits this ability to control follower's minds.

Replacing the need for self-esteem and self-actualization with group-centered behavior dependent validation is an efficient method to prevent disciples from thinking for themselves. By holding the positive feelings of esteem, potential, and purpose over follower's heads and only granting validation to the most devout, cults incentivize members in their congregations even further to obey. Should a member appear to have become too positively actualized or proud, steps were taken to chasten them and remind them of their place (Pfeifer, 1992).

Charles Manson removed the personal autonomy of his followers by renaming them, dictating their sexuality, and culminated in removing their humanity by commanding murder (Lake & Herman, 2017). David Berg similarly exploited sexuality in order to control his follower's levels of self-esteem, while also promising the love and salvation of the Almighty as long as his followers did as he commanded (Jones et al., 2007). Warren Jeffs practically forbade his followers from having any feelings of pride or self-esteem not connected directly to his church or his decisions, lest they be excommunicated (Wall & Pulitzer, 2009).

Extreme religious organizations such as cults thrive on complete control of every part of a person's being. They cleverly and intentionally strip away the unique qualities that comprise an individual and replace them with what they want to see in a loyal disciple. They remove access from all things previously familiar to converts and replace them with their own versions, making followers completely dependent on the organization for survival, security, and salvation. Once initiated into a cult group a person is scrubbed of their past identity and given orders as to who they will be now. This imposed mental and physical dependence upon the leader and group, coupled with the removal of all outside influences leads to complete conversion and results in long-term membership retention (Schwartz, 1991).

CONCLUSION

Taking part in extremist religious devotion and belief systems can result in many forms of victimization and abuse, and without knowledge of what warning signs to look for it can be all too easy to fall into a cult's world without even realizing it is happening. Cult organization leaders skillfully utilize coercive tactics to identify and convert new followers into their ranks. These new recruits increase the size of the leader's following, and in doing so ultimately increase the power of direct control leaders hold over human lives. It is a deceptively simple yet effective strategy employed over and over by different groups to gain power over human minds and bodies; coercion, conversion, control.

This literature review focused on three well-known cult organizations that differed in doctrine, target audience, and church practices yet shared similar practices of manipulation; The Manson Family, Children of God, and The Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. While these groups represent an interesting cross-section of modern-day recognizable cult names, many more exist across the globe. Further psychological research and comparative

analysis of cult groups from different periods and locations may yield more refined results of the most common indoctrination and retention practices employed.

The vast majority of the most infamous American cult religions experienced the height of their popularity between the 1950s and early 2000s. These groups such as Montana's Church Universal and Triumphant (CUT), California's Heaven's Gate, Oregon's Rajneeshpuram, and the Waco Texas siege of the Branch Davidians brought extremist fringe religious groups to the forefront of America's attention and then seemingly disappeared. However, cults and cult-like organizations still very much exist across the United States and have utilized new technologies to evolve their recruitment tactics for a new generation. Utilizing technology and clever marketing, these new-era cults present themselves to potential followers as anything from religious movements to dating services to self-help programs. Current era confirmed and suspected cult organizations include NXIVM, the Church of Scientology, Twin Flames, and include long-standing groups such as COG, Hare Krishna, and CUT.

Continued in-depth psychological analysis of the evolution of recruitment and control tactics employed by these current-era organizations and others is key to understanding how cults continue to attract and subjugate new members. Identifying and cataloging the most common current methods of initiation employed by active cults would contribute to the psychology community immensely by creating a more comprehensive inventory of warning signs. Both psychology professionals and the general public will benefit by learning the tools to recognize and prevent psychological, financial, sexual, and physical trauma brought on by cult involvement.

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