Group Indoctrination: Techniques of Depersonalization and Domination of Individual Consciousness

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Fake news and fake allegations of fake news are just the currently popular forms of deception. In fact, we are surrounded by deception. Birds do it (cuckoos), bees do it (with orchids), and primates certainly do it. So it is not surprising that we humans have an extremely well developed technology for manipulating misinformation. And, as we have developed more self-reflexive perception that is capable of deconstructing deception, it is equally unsurprising that techniques for suppressing that kind of critical thought have also proliferated.

This chapter will explore one particularly disturbing form of human deception: the group manipulation of trust for the purpose of domination. When this effort is successful, individuals are discouraged from exercising critical thought about the culture of the group and encouraged to unquestioningly acquiesce to authority. Of course, all cultural groups by definition demand conformity, but the focus of this chapter will be on those groups that intentionally use techniques of depersonalization and domination of individual consciousness to ensure acquiescence to authority. And, while all communication is to some extent persuasive and goal-oriented, here the focus is on communication that is intentionally coercive towards the goal of control.

My professional background is in cognitive linguistics and intercultural communication, and my Ph.D. research was on constructivist theories of consciousness (summarized in M. Bennett & Castiglioni, 2013). This somewhat unusual combination led me to be particularly interested in the relationship of culture and consciousness. One of the foundational principles of intercultural communication is that culture operates as a kind of group consciousness – a tacit agreement among people on how they should coordinate meaning and action in the group (CF Hall, 1959). Within this definition my research has focused on how people become aware of their own cultural contexts and how they can consequently develop the ability to shift among different forms of group consciousness (M.

Bennett, 2013). I believe this development of cultural meta-consciousness (*intercultural consciousness*) is the underlying competence of intercultural communication. Specifically, my work has suggested a developmental path from *ethnocentrism*, the unconscious experience of one's culture as the only reality, to *ethnorelativism*, the ability to consciously experience the world in multiple ways (M. Bennett, 2017).

Loss of Consciousness

Through this lens of intercultural consciousness, I was struck by what appeared to be an extreme ethnocentrism generated by groups I called "culting organizations." While I was concerned with the reports of psychological abuse by former members ("brainwashing," using the controversial term used by Lifton, 1969), I was more intrigued with the strategies being used by group leaders to create such extreme social environments. That intrigue turned to severe concern after the tragedy of Jonestown in 1978, where over 900 people were murdered and committed suicide at the behest of their leader Jim Jones. During the 1980's, initially in partnership with Bill Casey, I organized my observations into a model of cult indoctrination that formed the basis of some university courses and educational programs. In 1984 I found myself the local (Portland, Oregon) media expert on the unfortunate descent into culting by the very creative and interesting Rajneeshpuram community. The 1993 travesty of the Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas where David Koresh and various U.S. government agencies created a standoff in which 4 officers were shot to death and 83 members of the group were burned to death finally brought some attention to the unique qualities of dealing with culting organizations. As part of an educational effort undertaken by the FBI, I compiled my observations into an article, "Communicating with Cults," which attempted to differentiate the worldview of an errant culting organization from that of more normal groups of criminals or hostages (M. Bennett, 1997; Van Zandt, 1997).

As implied by the title of this chapter, my concern is with group dynamics rather individual pathology. This level of analysis is important in addressing much of the criticism of Singer (1995) and others who assumed that the coercive conversion techniques of "cults" could generate individual pathology. According to Melton (1999), psychologists question both the appropriateness and the rigor of the movement's psychopathology explanations, and most psychologists came to agree with the position exemplified by Galanter (1982), who suggested that the non-critical behavior of people in cults (or, as he preferred to call them, "new religions") was simply adaptation to particular social environments. I will maintain that frame of social adaptation rather than individual pathology, but the implications of group indoctrination are really no less troubling than those of individual pathology.

Apparently, people can rather easily adapt to social conditions that demand uncritical acquiescence to authority (e.g. Asch, 1952; Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1993). This would be consistent with the suggestion of Julian Jaynes (1979) that self-reflexive, or critical, consciousness is a relatively new phenomenon in human experience. Jaynes argues that consciousness in the sense of critical self-awareness (or authorship) is not necessary to the basic coordinating function of culture, as evidenced by the aforementioned birds and bees or even ants being able to coordinate group action quite effectively without (assumedly) individual consciousness. The fact that human language is more complex than birdcalls or insect dances allows humans to coordinate more sophisticated action in larger groups, but it does not automatically imbue them with self-awareness. According to Jaynes, self-awareness is the consequence of a particular self-referential application of language that defines a "self" through the objectified metaphor of "me" and its causal analogue, "I." In this assumption he parallels Meade (1934), whose seminal work in social constructionism also posited the construction of "me" as a metaphorical social object. However, Jaynes speculates that this form of individual consciousness was originalliy an adaptation to dealing with a rapid increase in cross-cultural contact that occurred in many parts of the world about 3,000 years ago. This view is consistent with the basic assumption of adaptation that underlies current evolutionary psychology (e.g. Dawkins, 1989; Dennett, 1991).

If self-reflexive consciousness is a relatively new human capability, it is likely to be inconsistent and unstable; consciousness may be adaptive to differing degrees in different or shifting contexts. For instance, people who need to manage higher levels of cross-cultural contact may be impelled to develop more skill in contextual awareness, an observation consistent with most treatments of intercultural communication (M. Bennett, 2017). Or, as is commonly observed in liberal arts education, higher levels of critical thinking may correlate with exposure to multiple disciplinary perspectives (Scheuer, 2015). By contrast, the restriction of access to multiple perspectives typical of doctrinal parochial education, cults, or new religions is likely to inhibit the development of self-reflexive consciousness and critical thinking. If it is true, as claimed by Jaynes, that the pre-conscious human world was ruled by gods and god-kings whose authority was conveyed by hallucinatory voices, then most of human existence has been lived in an unquestionable condition of acquiescence to authority – of obeying the voices of the gods. So a return to that condition is not pathological, as the term "brainwashing" might imply, but rather a diminution of certain adaptive behavior.

In a recent related publication, I argued that the instability of critical consciousness could explain the apparent ease with which people retreat from

tolerance to systematic hatred towards groups of others (M. Bennett, 2016). Here I will further suggest that group leaders can intentionally, systematically, and relatively easily create the conditions for suppression of self-reflexive consciousness. Like building a fire that exercises a mysterious draw on people around it, they are building a structure that evokes a kind of species memory. As Jaynes (1976) states it,

> The mind is still haunted with its old unconscious
> ways; it broods on lost authorities; and the yearning,
> the deep and hollowing yearning for divine volition
> and service is with us still (p 314).

Culting Techniques

There are three techniques that appear in nearly every description of culting groups: *control, coercion, and conversion*. In the following paragraphs I will explicate each technique, and then in the subsequent section I will describe the sequential process of applying the techniques that allows groups to recruit and maintain obedient members. For reasons of possible legal liability I will sometimes avoid mentioning the names of groups. I leave it to the readers to determine if my descriptions of the general pattern fit their personal experience or knowledge of such groups.

Control. Culting groups often have a charismatic leader who consistently exercises authority – notoriously, Jim Jones of People's Temple, or Reverend Sun Moon of the Unification Church. While these and a few other leaders of large groups are well known for their authoritarianism, such leadership is more common in smaller groups that operate like "personality cults." In larger groups, the founder of the group may have abdicated or died, yet the group maintains control nevertheless. This is because authority is institutionalized in what Robert Lifton (1981) calls "milieu control:"

> Milieu control is maintained and expressed by intense
> group process, continuous psychological pressure, and
> isolation by geographical distance, unavailability of
> transportation, or even physical restraint. Often the
> group creates an increasingly intense sequence of
> events such as seminars, lectures and encounters
> which makes leaving extremely difficult, both
> physically and psychologically.

In his seminal work, Lifton (1969) noted that for "brainwashing" to be effective, the victim must be restricted from leaving the context (e.g. imprisoned). In his later work (e.g. Lifton, 1991), he affirms that the restriction might not just be a physical restraint; it could be a self-imposed reluctance to leave the context. For instance, the lure of graduating to a higher spiritual level could impel one to voluntarily accept degrading treatment or choose to turn over large sums of money. While from the outside, those actions might seem imposed, they could well be experienced both at the time and later as free choices. The line between freely buying the product and being conned is not so clear. In the scholarly treatment of her own culting experience, Lalich (2004) calls this a "bounded choice" – yes, a choice, but one that is heavily influenced by the boundaries of a desired context.

A new form of "bounded choice" may be our reliance on social media and other internet groups. For instance, in a study of exchange students Castiglioni (2011) found that voluntary participation in social media dramatically reduced students' willingness to engage a new cultural environment. This and similar observations (e.g. Turkle, 2011) point to a new form of self-imposed control – addictive participation in virtual groups that exercise milieu control at a distance. On the surface, addiction to social media seems to be destructive of actual social relations. But a deeper implication of these studies may be that, in accepting a high level of milieu control, people are making themselves susceptible to culting manipulations. Stories of individuals radicalized by the Islamic State (ISIS) seem to be examples of this phenomenon. In an exploration of the culting aspects of ISIS, Woods (2015) suggests that its rise to power is like "the realization of a dystopian alternate reality in which David Koresh or Jim Jones survived to wield absolute power over not just a few hundred people, but some 8 million." In an investigation of ISIS's recruiting, Graham (2017) points to the sophisticated internet materials that make up the bulk of ISIS's communication with outsiders:

> ISIS recruiting pitches on the Internet are warm and welcoming, with stirring imagery and professionally produced videos. Most are reasonable in tone and content. They are expertly targeted to address real or imagined ambitions and grievances, to appeal to a potential recruit's sense of adventure, and to offer an attractive cause worth fighting for. The pitches are designed to produce and support a virtual community of ISIS fans, an echo chamber reinforcing the description of ISIS as a social movement devoted to protecting Muslims and to fighting an unfair global system.

Graham uses the popular term "echo chamber," which here and in other situations such as the 2016 US American presidential race refers to the idea that people voluntarily wall themselves into a network of contacts and information that is extremely susceptible to manipulation. For example, alt-right groups introduce explicitly racist, sexist, and fascist material into the echo chambers with an overlay of irony and cynicism, allowing people who actually agree with the material to disavow (perhaps even to themselves) that agreement (Romano, 2017). The groups exercise virtual control by discouraging participants from venturing outside the network, much as the Unification Church (Moonies) once insisted on members cutting ties to their families and avoiding contact with nonbelievers (Underwood and Underwood, 1979).

The alt-right redefinition of "trolling" is one way that culting groups do not just control the environment – they control the meaning that is attached to all behavior inside and outside the boundary of the group. So for instance, once having bought the idea that a spaceship will extract chosen people from the impending apocalypse, it is relatively easy for the group to transform 'abusive behavior' into something like 'the redemptive punishment for past sins that must be endured to enable the transition.' The control of meaning is intertwined with the control of behavior. This of course is the point notably made by Orwell (1949); in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thought control is supported by a Ministry of Truth, whose function is to rewrite history and translate it into newspeak. In my own research on communication with cults, I repeatedly encountered cases where group members were instructed in secret new meanings for common terms. In the many groups that define "levels" of enlightenment, learning the new meanings was part of the initiation into higher levels. Failure to use words in the newly defined ways was cause for correction of group insiders and for ridicule or condemnation of outsiders (M. Bennett, 1997)

Coercion. Classical rhetoric distinguishes among *information, persuasion,* and *coercion* (Howell, 1973). Information increases choices by generating more viable alternatives, persuasion argues for making one viable choice over another, while coercion restricts choice by making all but one choice unviable. For instance, providing information about different religious beliefs increases the number of choices available for spiritual experience, allowing for a persuasive argument that spiritual experience A is superior to spiritual experience B. The persuasion shades into coercion when experience B is labeled as an evil that damns one to eternal perdition, while A is presented as the only path to salvation. Of course, the ultimate coercion is, "do this or I will kill you."

Schein (1961) uses the term "coercive persuasion" to convey the idea that brainwashing is not so much a violent imposition as a form of manipulation. Under the controlled conditions described above, aggressive persuasive takes on the character of coercion by making agreement with the argued choice the only viable way to remain a member of the beloved group. Culting organizations coercively limit information in several ways: (I) the living environment of members may be specified; (2) contact with outsiders is prohibited; (3) news and other information originating outside the group is considered suspect, if not intentionally misleading (fake news!). Through these and other techniques, the culting group limits alternatives to only two: the absolute verity of the group's philosophy or the abysmal perversion of any other position. The penalty for choosing falsehood over truth is unequivocal damnation or its equivalent, eternal separation from the group. In some cases that I personally investigated, former members believed that if they deviated in thought or deed from the group dogma, they would die. In this condition, attempts by outsiders to exert persuasion or counter-coercion will usually fail. If group members are already in the ultimate state of coercion -- they must believe or die -- no other argument or threat is meaningful.

Conversion. Unlike other groups that may use control and coercion, culting organizations have the specific agenda of conversion. While this may seem a small distinction, it restricts our discussion to groups that are attempting to control both beliefs and behavior. For instance, while evangelical religious groups focus on conversion, they may or may not use control and coercion as part of their effort. If they do not, then they are engaging in ordinary missionary efforts – activity that should not be conflated with culting. Similarly, activities such as military training may use control and coercion, but they are not usually aimed at conversion, and thus they also should not be seen as culting. The restriction of "culting" to the combination of all three elements addresses some of the criticism of earlier treatments of cults, which was that too many new religious or political groups were being unfairly labeled with the term (Melton & Moore, 1982).

Culting organizations do usually define themselves as contrarian, like many new religious or political groups. However, they particularly want to maneuver recruits into a position where previous beliefs can be 'disintegrated' and supplanted by the new beliefs touted by the group. As noted by Hoffer (1951) in his definition of a *true believer*, there is nothing more powerful than a newly acquired belief, and culting organizations seek that level of commitment from their members. For instance, ISIS does not just want to reinforce Islam, it wants to convert Muslims into its particular fundamentalist belief system (Woods, 2015). The resulting true believerism supports the extreme behavior of the group and generates a strong

desire to convert others to the new belief. In nearly all culting groups that I encountered in my research, a doctrine like "heavenly deception" encouraged those conversion efforts to be duplicitous. (see Underwood and Underwood, 1979, for a long description of heavenly deception.) The benign appearance of ISIS recruitment efforts or the cynical mask of alt-right racism extends duplicitous conversion efforts into virtual space.

The Culting Process

To further restrict the definition of a "culting groups" to those that are intentionally using duplicitous and coercive methods to convert people, it has been useful to identify a sequential process commonly used by such groups. I have named four "stages" of that process 1) Seduction, 2) Disorientation, 3) Snapping, and 4) Maintenance (M. Bennett, 1997). It is possible to observe other kinds of groups using some of the techniques described below, but by definition only culting organizations exhibit all four of the stages in this order. Further, the techniques as they operate in the culting process appear to be orchestrated – almost as if there exists a manual on how to do it. In fact, one culting group (EST) that spawned several imitators is well-known for providing such directions (Rhinehart, 1976). In the current internet environment, finding directions for doing just about anything is taken for granted, and it apparently is not difficult to hire an expert in data manipulation. But for the most part, the culting process is so prevalent because it works – a fact that is discovered repeatedly by aspiring leaders.

Seduction

Recruitment into culting organizations is usually deceptive. Seduction is *the effort to attract new members to a group whose hidden purpose is conversion.* In some cases the term is literally descriptive; recruits are tempted by offers of sex. But more often, recruits are figuratively seduced by appeals to various other needs. In my earlier study of culting groups I concluded that these appeals are so sophisticated and so varied that anyone, no matter how mentally stable, is potentially susceptible to one of them.

Recruitment is a central activity for culting organizations. In some cases the motivation for recruitment is clear – fund-raising. New recruits may be encouraged to contribute their entire savings and sign over their homes to the group. The recent documentary on the Rajneeshees, Wild Wild West (2018), notes that at many people contributed their entire worth to Rajneeshpahram in Antelope, Oregon as a sign of their devotion. That was just part of a sophisticated fund-raising effort conducted by the group from its beginning in India (Zaitz, 1985) – an effort that depended on

fresh supplies of devotees to fund the group's activities (including maintaining a fleet of Rolls Royce automobiles for the Bagwan Rajneesh).

A less obvious, but perhaps more important, reason for ongoing recruitment is to maintain the "salvation" mission of the group. While the Rajneeshees were apparently not motivated by traditional salvation, most culting organizations portray themselves as purveyors of some truth that will save members from an ignoble end, frequently one that is imminent. The apocalyptic vision may be the traditional biblical one, or it may predict various forms of social, economic, or galactic collapse. A surprising number of long-lived groups were originally founded around immediate end-of-the-world scenarios, which then needed to be down-played as deadlines passed. Still, the apocalyptic vision may continue to be accepted by members as the motivation for recruiting and saving as many (deserving) people as possible (Festinger, 1956).

The seductive specializations of culting groups can be roughly categorized by Maslow's (1968) Hierarchy of Needs:

Physiological needs. Survivalist groups do this best, providing members with woodsman skills, freeze-dried food, and weapons training to protect their stocks from others with less foresight. These groups are nearly always driven by an apocalyptic theme, and the seduction is simple physical survival. Like all culting groups, there is also the seduction of elitism: we, and only we, have the foresight to prepare for this cataclysm, and so we will be the most deserving of survival. Following a military model, many of these groups use control techniques extensively.

Security needs. The "prosperity cults" specialize at this level, usually taking the form of weekend seminars or pyramid marketing schemes. Recruits are seduced by the assurance of riches, frequently attainable without much effort or training via special imaging techniques taught in subsequent (expensive) sessions. This seduction is often driven by testimonials from people who have ostensibly used the system successfully. While certainly oriented toward conversion, generally these groups are not heavily controlling or coercive.

A more enduring type of group that addresses security needs is the "therapy cult" –organizations that offer salvation from alcohol, other drugs, or debilitating mental conditions. The seduction is getting straight or becoming centered, but the route to that stability is pure culting process. Testimonials are employed extensively in the seduction, along with reminders of the sorry state in which recruits have arrived. With the rationale that addicts respond only to this treatment, culting therapy groups depend heavily on control and coercion to achieve conversion. As a

result, these groups have a higher probability of becoming virulent; for instance, Jim Jones' People's Temple began as a therapy cult.

Social needs. All culting organizations, like most other voluntary associations, stress the social benefits of belonging to the group. In a culting organization, however, the benefits are often exaggerated in deceptive ways. For example, one group is known for "love bombing" prospective recruits. This procedure is defined by a former member as "persistent psychological effort to disarm a skeptical recruit by excessive attention in order to get him or her into the cult" (Underwood & Underwood, 1979, p. 300). Prospective recruits may be overwhelmed by the ostensible acceptance they experience and thus be drawn further into the culting process (Appel, 1983).

Status and self-esteem needs. Most groups also play on these needs as part of their seduction, but some groups are particularly effective at this level. Elitism may be fed by the promise of attaining secret knowledge, meeting the new avatar, hanging out with celebrities, or acquiring special cosmic skills such as astral travel, reading auras, or levitation. Groups at this level may be less coercive than some others, and control is exercised through a kind of "keeping up with the Joneses" conformity. An exception to this generalization is when self-esteem is being offered as a remedy for people who have been disadvantaged by discrimination, poverty, or addiction. Despite being couched in self-esteem terms, these groups look and act like "therapy cults," and they have more potential for becoming seriously coercive.

Self-actualization needs. Many culting groups operate seductions at this level, including both those that label themselves as secular and those that claim to be religious. Completing a "personality test" and receiving information on how to clear your life of obstacles certainly appeals to this need for psychological growth. Other appeals are to altruism, unconditional love, self-knowledge (including knowledge of past lives), and the attainment of happiness. In self-actualization groups, the exercise of control and coercion is mixed. At the entry levels of many of these groups, there is more persuasion than coercion, and control follows the conformity model of the self-esteem groups. However, the advanced training conducted by the weekend groups and the "development" courses offered by other groups involve increasing amounts of control and, by some accounts, extreme coercion against advanced participants who leave or criticize the group (Conway & Siegelman, 1979).

Transcendent needs. Most of the Western and Eastern religion-based culting groups appeal predominantly to these needs. The seduction is "oneness" with a supernatural order or being – a condition that can only be attained through the special procedures taught by the group. Neo-Christian groups generally appeal to

dissatisfaction with mainstream churches and propose radical alternatives that claim previously hidden truths. These groups additionally offer a disciplined morality and salvation from ambiguity. Non-Western groups in the United States are often based on small sects of Hindu, Buddhist, or Islamic traditions that have been fanned into new life by emigrant charismatic leaders. They offer trendy meditation practices and a new vocabulary for discussing consciousness. Previously, New Age groups succeeded in addressing self-esteem, self-actualization, and transcendent needs with custom-designed beliefs drawn from traditional religions, ancient wisdom, magic, psychic phenomena, psychology, and capitalism. In the current polarized political climate of the USA and many other nations, political culting groups also are appealing to transcendent needs in this way. Of course, national socialism under Hitler was a classic example of the mix of quasi-religious symbolism, psychic phenomena, and industrialism. As noted by many (e.g. Rieman, 2018; Berlet & Lyons, 2000), populist movements are brewing a similar mix of ingredients, now potentiated by manipulative and coercive uses of the internet.

Because their philosophies are all encompassing, quasi-religious culting groups are more likely to be pervasive in their influence on members. Traditionally, control has been exercised through required communal living, group rituals, nonstop proselytizing, and fund-raising activities. With the development of internet connectivity, control also can be exercised in the echo chambers of social media. Leaders of these groups are more likely to fit the "charismatic" model, and the potential for virulence is high.

The purpose of the seduction is usually to move a potential recruit into a controlled environment where the next stage of culting can occur. A controlled environment is one where, for physical or psychological reasons, exiting is difficult. The place might be a somewhat isolated camp, a large room with "guards" at the doors, or any other place where social pressure can be applied to discourage leaving. Most writers such as Lifton (1991), referenced earlier, suggest that the pressure applied at this stage is rarely, if ever, physical; people are not forcefully restrained. But the calculated use of psychological and social pressure is so effective that leaving is either unthinkable or extremely difficult.

Disorientation

Once in a controlled environment, recruits are subjected to intentional disorientation. For these purposes we can consider disorientation to be *over-stimulation or under-stimulation for the purpose of decreasing reasoning abilities and increasing suggestibility*. This idea is similar, of course, to Robert Lifton's notion of "brainwashing" discussed in the classic book on this subject, *Thought Reform and*

the Psychology of Totalism (1969). But here the term is used in a less politicized way. Disorientation can used at varying levels of intensity, by any person or group, for any purpose. For instance, therapists sometimes use disorientation techniques with their clients, discount grocery stores employ low levels of disorientation to encourage buying, and all sorts of bands, shows, and other forms of entertainment use some of these techniques to enhance their performances. At the other extreme, disorientation can be used for torture. In a recent discussion of that topic, Leach (2016) suggested that when people are in environments "marked by more intense stimuli and a real or perceived lack of control" they may experience psychological disorientation (isolation, sensory deprivation, sensory overload, sleep deprivation, temporal disorientation), psychophysiological disorientation (thermal, stress positions), and psychosocial disorientation (cultural humiliation, sexual degradation). According to Leach, these stimulus conditions can be coordinated to undermine the will or resistance of people in controlled situations.

In the case of culting groups under consideration here, techniques of disorientation are used to alter normal states of consciousness – normal perceptual functioning that is tuned to a particular kind and level of stimulus is disrupted, creating an altered state of consciousness. In a controlled environment, the natural tendency to return to a normal state of consciousness is blocked by continued disorientation, so the altered state becomes fixed. New perceptual connections are sought to re-stabilize the worldview in the altered state, and thus the conditions for conversion are established. Further, in culting groups these techniques are employed as part of a carefully orchestrated effort that began with Seduction and will continue into Snapping and Maintenance.

Psychological and psychophysiological disorientation is a common part of the culting process. For instance, many culting groups immediately require recruits to fast or in other ways radically change their diets, and nearly all deprive them of sleep. Overstimulation may occur through excessive exercise, marathon lecturing, loud music or noise, frenetic activity, and instigation of anger, fear, or other high-intensity emotional states. Under-stimulation techniques include silence, low lighting, confinement, long meditation or prayer, and breathing exercises. In some cases, drugs may also be used to induce disorientation.

Psychosocial disorientation occurs when normal patterns of human interaction are disrupted. For instance, many former members report that as recruits they were accompanied by members at all times, even when using the toilet. Other disorienting events that have been reported are personal confessions, self-abrogation, restriction of privacy, intimate questioning and the reliving of traumatic experience, restriction of normal feedback in communication, and public attacks.

Public attacks are not only disorienting to the immediate target, but they are also disorienting to those who witness them. Any dramatic breaking of social norms has this disorienting effect, and masters of the culting process use that fact with extreme effectiveness. (See Zimbardo & Anderson, 1993, for more examples of this kind of disorientation.)

In addition to the categories of disorientation suggested by Leach (2016), I would add the category of *cognitive disorientation*. Severe attacks on peoples' beliefs in controlled circumstances can lead to an ambiguity and uncertainty of thought. In uncontrolled situations people might argue with the attacker or, if the attacker seemed closed to dialogue, they might just leave. In a controlled culting environment, leaving is not a viable option. Some former "trainers" reported to me that they welcomed argument; it gave them a chance to ridicule and humiliate the intrepid participant, thus adding social disruption to the overall cognitive disorientation. Recruits sometimes feel that leaders or trainers can "read their thoughts," so uncannily accurate is their rendering of the predictable attempts recruits make to protect their beliefs. One by one, these beliefs are deconstructed, dismantled, and destroyed, leaving a void waiting to be filled with new meaning.

The orchestration of stimuli in Disorientation yields massive amounts of ambiguity. Everything is uncertain – how you feel, who you are, and what you believe. At just the right moment, a resolution of the ambiguity is offered, setting up the next stage of Snapping.

Snapping

This term is borrowed from the title of Conway and Siegelman's 1979 book. The book was an early (before Jonestown) look at the proliferation of culting groups in the seventies. The authors noted the growing incidence of "sudden personality change" that seemed to accompany membership in some groups, a phenomenon they labeled "snapping." The definition of snapping I use here is "a radical and sudden shift in belief system." It is the adaptation to an abrupt shift in worldview that generates the appearance of personality change, probably not a change in the basic structure of personality. Rather than being pathological in those terms, snapping is more like a prolonged case of culture shock.

When enough ambiguity has been generated by disorientation, recruits are offered a complete new belief system that mitigates the uncertainty. It really doesn't matter what the new beliefs are, nor is it even important that they are internally consistent. The crucial factor seems to be that the beliefs are proffered at

the correct time, and that they are presented as comprehensive and absolute. When these conditions are met, the recruit "snaps" into the new beliefs.

Accompanying the sudden shift is a whole host of physiological and emotional symptoms. It does not matter what beliefs are abandoned or what beliefs are newly embraced – the same symptoms occur. Vision takes on a new clarity. Smells become almost unbearably intense. One's body feels strong and light, muscles taut. Relationships seem bottomless in their depth and limitless in their intensity. People are suffused with a feeling of certainty, of knowing, as if the universe had suddenly opened to their view. The new belief is attached to these experiences. When a person such as a charismatic leader or guru is the focus of the snap, recruits are encouraged to attribute their feelings to the overwhelming love of the leader for them. If the focus of the group is a philosophy, the snapping is attributed to the inherent truth and power of the ideas. In all cases, the recruit is presented with what seems to be a simple empirical proof: "You would not be feeling this way if this idea (or person) were not uniquely powerful."

New culting groups create an ever-expanding list of words to describe snapping, each new term implying its uniqueness from all the other snapping experiences: getting visions, new clarity, ecstasy, complete realization, theophany, eureka, born again, getting it, enlightenment, blissing out, finding it, getting clear, epiphany, letting go and letting god, seeing the light, coming over, arriving, getting there, ah-ha, getting elegant, celestialized, finding your diamond, waked ... and more. Clearly the experience is a powerful one, and this discussion is not meant to trivialize its importance. But when the experience is embedded in the culting process, the experience of snapping is turned from exploration to exploitation, from commitment to conversion. Many of the world's great religions teach us to accept the self and seek transcendence. In contrast, the culting process leads us to reject the self and develop dependence.

At this point, leaders of culting organizations face a choice. They can consider their job of conversion accomplished and send the recruits home, where they will encourage their friends and partners to enroll in the next seminar ("I can't tell you any more about it – you just have to experience it yourself"). Or the organization can decide that it is a community that should have a separate identity. It is the latter decision that sets up the final stage of culting.

Maintenance

New belief systems instilled during Snapping are not very resilient in the everyday world. They quickly fall prey to the prevalent worldview of family and society unless

they are reinforced and nurtured in a like-minded community. So culting organizations set up Maintenance: *the use of group cohesion techniques to reinforce commitment to new beliefs and new community*. This attempt to maintain and intensify the conversion often seems to have a life of its own, leading groups to become more and more isolated and fearful.

The first phase of group maintenance does not look dissimilar from other support groups. A minimal degree of cohesion creates an *us/them group*. With this relatively mild distinction, people recognize one another as "members" without exaggerating their separation from society at large. If members live together in the same house, the arrangement tends to be a casual one with people moving in and out of the environment. More often, groups in this phase simply have meetings together where they share testimonials and affirm their commitment to the group philosophy. If the preceding culting stages have not been particularly strong, groups may stay in this phase. However, maintenance at this level seems to be the exception rather than the rule for culting groups.

The second phase of Maintenance is a *superiority group*. Here the us/them distinction is hardened, generating fairly clear boundaries between group insiders and outsiders. Commitment to the group does not just distinguish the members from others; it makes them better. In most cases, the superiority group simply provides its members with an exaggerated sense of importance at the expense of others who unfortunately or foolishly missed the teaching. Occasionally, such groups denigrate outsiders, a tendency that is intensified in the next level.

The third phase is the *restricted contact group*. At this point, outsiders are at least inferior to group members, and they may be evil. In the latter case, outsiders have the capacity to taint the purity of members simply through contact. These groups nearly always live in communal situations. Certain trusted members of the group whose belief is strong enough to withstand the contamination of the outside world are chosen as spokespersons and recruiters. If relations with families and friends on the outside are maintained at all, they become stilted and instrumental, tending mostly toward rationalizing beliefs or soliciting money.

The structure of maintenance groups begins to change at this level. Once contact with the environment is restricted, the social mechanisms that normally contribute to group stability and adaptability are lost. These mechanisms need to be replaced with something, or the group becomes increasingly disorganized and chaotic. That something is nearly always *authority*. The more isolated the group, the more authoritarian it becomes. Usually, the authority manifests as a rigid hierarchy composed of many well-defined layers of control, replete with "lieutenants" who

have special access to the leader and thus rule in his or her name. More lowly members of the group do not complain about the harsh treatment because they believe people higher in authority are also more enlightened. The acceptance of authority may become so extreme that sexual predation, beatings, and even murder can be countenanced as divine right.

The last stage of Maintenance is the *paranoid group*. Outsiders are now not only evil – they are conspiring to destroy the group. Isolation is intensified, and even recruitment may be suspended. Weapons may be acquired and elaborate defense plans fabricated. The organization severs most of the ties that anchored it within a wider social context, and, like other organisms cut off from their environment, it begins to die. To compensate for the ensuing entropy and instability, greater authority is brought into play. Structures and procedures that were authoritarian at the last level become draconian in the paranoid group. Unchecked by any normal process within or outside the group, leaders and their lieutenants may pursue insane courses of action, including preemptive strikes on the alleged enemy.

Paranoid groups cannot last long. In my observation, these groups disintegrate in one of three ways: (1) many members become fed up with the escalating authoritarianism and leave the group, often with sorrow at the "change" in the group; (2) one faction leads a rebellion against another faction, bifurcating the group and creating two more benign organizations; or (3) the group literally self-destructs, either through suicide or through such provocation of outside authorities that they are killed.

Regaining Consciousness

In the early days of the anti-cult movement some success was reported in using counter-conversion strategies to break down the effects of the culting process. People such as Ted Patrick (1976) claimed that they could reverse the effects of conversion by "deprogramming" group members, which sometimes involved the use of deception, dualistic argument, and even physical restraint. Aside from the ethical question of means and ends that this procedure calls forth, there were obvious legal difficulties associated with it (Melton & Moore, 1982). Other counter-conversion efforts under the name "exit counseling" were more educational and consensual, although, like the culting process itself, they are carefully orchestrated (Clark, Giambalvo, Giambalvo, Garvey, & Langone, 1993; Singer, 1995).

I tend to agree with the critics mentioned in the introduction that have resisted the pathologizing of indoctrination techniques, and I also am critical of using the same techniques to "cure" former members of those groups. To reiterate

the introductory point, succumbing to group indoctrination is not an individual pathology – it is a retreat from self-reflexive consciousness. Particularly under the stress of rapid change, our species history inclines us to seek solace in submission to authority. An aspiring authoritarian leader does not have to be particularly clever to evoke that history, and the formula for success is clear. First, exaggerate the danger of every change and nurture the naturally stressful human reactions; second, present one's self and/or one's beliefs as an antidote to change; and third, initially request and then demand that people turn over their decision-making to you. The more mercantile of these aspiring leaders will suggest that people also turn over their money, and the more narcissistic of them will demand that they receive only compliments for their benevolence.

Culting organizations are like little temporal anomalies that open into our pre-conscious past. On a small scale, they may seem quaint, curious, or even romantic. Aside from the occasional clash with the realities of current time, we could relax and let them be. However, on a larger scale the very same processes of group indoctrination and suppression of consciousness underlie fascism and other forms of totalitarianism. The culting techniques of Control, Coercion, and Conversion and the culting process of Seduction, Disorientation, Snapping, and Maintenance are clearly exhibited in recent history (including, but not exclusive to the development of Nazism, Stalinism, and Maoism), and current developments in the year 2018 bear some disturbing parallels. Some of my sociologist and political scientist colleagues rightly point out that one cannot justifiably make comparisons such as, "Donald Trump is like Adolf Hitler." And certainly that must be true beyond the fact that Hitler apparently did not have *Mein Kampf* ghost-written. So if we cannot learn from the large scale past, maybe we can learn something from the small-scale temporal anomalies. Here are a few lessons I have drawn from my research:

Lesson One. Everyone is susceptible to culting appeals of one sort or another. Claiming invulnerability to authoritarian appeals on the basis of education, or wealth, or enlightenment is not only elitist – it is dangerous. In assuming that susceptibility is some kind of character flaw or weakness, we inappropriately conflate social processes and personal traits. This confusion of level of analysis inclines us to unrealistically hold individuals responsible for resisting social conformity and to significantly underestimate the power of group indoctrination. Just recently, *all* of us were obeying the voices of the gods. And "we have a deep and hollowing yearning…"

Lesson Two. Traditional education is insufficient to counteract culting appeals. As a professional educator, it is difficult for me to say this. I wish it were the

case that education equipped one with the kind of critical thinking that could identify the fake news, deconstruct the phony appeals, and pull back the curtain on Oz. But there is not a lot of evidence that critical thinking improves at all over four years of university education (Roksa & Arum, 2011). If education instead yields a greater store of knowledge, isn't that still a good thing? Maybe, but apparently not as a hedge against culting. The problem seems to be that knowledge is necessarily contextual and only critical thinking is good at identifying patterns across contexts. Culting organizations (including the large-scale incidences) are really good at defining themselves as unique – they explicitly disavow being part of a pattern of authoritarianism. Given our predilection towards authority in the first place, and then our inability to see through the claim of uniqueness, we think that this time, this group, this charismatic leader, is the real thing. (For some, it will be meaningful to remember Charlie Brown, Lucy, and the football.)

      Lesson Three. With humility born of the first two lessons, we can nevertheless work on preserving and improving our recent heritage of self-reflexive consciousness. To do so, we need to expand the way we've been thinking about critical thinking. Too much effort has been going into the deconstruction of context and not enough into recognizing the construction of context in the first place. We have been teaching *awareness* with the vague and vain hope that it will turn into *consciousness*. But the root of consciousness is not awareness of context – it is recognizing that we ourselves are the creators of context, including the contexts of our observation. As Maturana (1988) states in the quote below, our collective reality is constantly being modified by the explanations we make of it. We need to understand this process to be able to manage it intentionally. We haven't always needed self-reflexive consciousness to live, but in a world where consciousness has allowed our collective and individual thoughts to be intertwined, and in that same world where consciousness allows some people to deny consciousness to others, we do need it to stay alive.

> The praxis of living, the experience of the observer as such, just happens…Because of this, explanations are essentially superfluous; we as observers do not need them to happen; but when it happens to us that we explain, it turns out that between language and bodyhood the praxis of living of the observer changes as he or she generates explanations of his or her praxis of living. This is why everything that we say or think has consequences in the way we live. We can be aware of this now.

Humberto Maturana, 1988.

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