

Summer 6-2023

Cultic Studies Cultivate Libertory Language

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Heckathorn, Todd, "Cultic Studies Cultivate Libertory Language" (2023). *University Honors Theses*. Paper 1378.

<https://doi.org/10.15760/honors.1409>

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Cultic Studies Cultivate Libertory Language

by

Todd Heckathorn

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts

in

University Honors

and

English

Thesis Adviser

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2023

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Abstract

Coercive abuse at its most extreme manifests in cultic groups. These groups abuse their members using the same tactics that a domestic abuser or totalitarian government would to make their victims completely dependent on and subservient to them. Cultic studies investigate these tactics to define cults, coercive control, thought reform, indoctrination, and group psychological abuse behaviors. This fairly recent area of study has significant overlap with abolition feminist studies, which compare interpersonal and systemic abuse to liberate oppressed Americans, such as Black and Indigenous people, queer and disabled people, and women. This thesis combines cultic studies and abolition feminist studies to discuss the importance of relationship literacy and coercive abuse education to create sustainable American communities. Reviewing abolition feminist and cultic studies' literature illustrates the importance of providing language to describe behavior as abusive or healthy in the process of relating. A focus on the linguistics of cultic recruitment and coercive abuse at interpersonal, familial, group, and government levels creates a framework for sustainable relationships in a post COVID-19 United States.

Keywords: cultic studies, abolitionist feminism, linguistics, abuse, psychology, coercion

Acknowledgements

I want to give a huge thank you to my advisor, Dr. Marie Lo, for her ongoing encouragement and support. I want to thank Ashlen Hilliard for her guidance in this thesis and her support of my academic work continuing on at Salford University's Masters in Coercive Control program. I want to thank all my peers who reviewed this thesis, particularly Jasmine Malone for providing abolition feminist resources. Finally, I want to thank my mother, Lenneke Heckathorn, for her unwavering faith in me and for giving me the chance to tell our story.

I. A Personal Note: *Bad Religion*

In the words of millennial, bisexual icon, Frank Ocean: “Unrequited love, to me, it’s just a one-man cult, with cyanide in my styrofoam cup. I can never make him love me. It’s a bad religion to be in love with someone who could never love you” (Ocean, 2:02-2:36). These lyrics express a deep truth about the essential nature of abuse, regardless of whether that abuse takes place in relationships, families, organizations, or systems. Perhaps Ocean read scholar bell hooks: “Abuse and neglect negate love. Care and affirmation, the opposite of abuse and humiliation, are the foundation of love. No one can rightfully claim to be loving when behaving abusively” (*about love*, 53). There is a profound misunderstanding of abuse as love in most fields of relating and communicating. As a voice of our generation, Ocean illustrates a massive problem facing American youth and young adults: we have no idea how to have healthy relationships and create supportive communities. “Love is an action” with specific methods, in the same way that abuse utilizes particular tactics (*about love*, 216). Each context and method is different, but many conditions and essential actions remain the same in socializing and communicating healthfully or harmfully. Ocean and hooks, as queer Black voices, describe systemic and interpersonal problems as inseparable. The personal is political. Effectively, the language and tools used in cult recovery in tandem with abolition feminist scholarship can create equitable governments, communities, and families through relationship literacy and abuse education.

America has a cultic abuse problem, whether it be a scenario like Ocean’s one-man cult or the Jonestown People’s Temple tragedy he references. In an increasingly digital world, people are isolated from physical communities and socialization occurs mostly online for many children. Without concrete support or relational education, millennials become susceptible to

abusive and coercive relationships with partners, families, or extremist groups. Lack of internet literacy has also led baby boomers to increased vulnerability to cultic misinformation. “Noted cult expert and clinical psychologist, Dr. Margaret Singer estimated ten to twenty million people at some point in recent years have been in one or more” cults (Lalich, 2). Another estimate guesses that there are 5000 cults in the United States (Lalich, 2). “The National Cult Awareness Network reported receiving about 20,000 inquiries a year” (Lalich, 2). Yet another expert offered:

Cults exert tremendous economic clout by buying up huge blocks of real estate and taking over hundreds of businesses...Some seek to influence the judicial system by spending millions of dollars annually on top attorneys to bend the law to their will (Hassan, 149-151).

Labor and sex trafficking are frequently employed as economic tactics of cultic groups. Political organizations and lobbyists are deeply influenced by money from cultic groups, and more and more politicians are openly claiming cultic affiliations. For example, Hawaii congressional representative Tulsi Gabbard is a lifelong member of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (Sanneh). Many folks are familiar with her group, colloquially known as the Hare Krishnas and famous for their orange robes and their connection to The Beatles. Similarly, many people are aware of Tom Cruise’s billion dollar scientology organization, and Mormon polygamists—like the group fought by Andrew Garfield in the television series *Under the Banner of Heaven*. However, there is not enough accurate reporting on the bigger problem of American cults. “Abusive relationships in which cult methods are used to dominate the victim are not widely acknowledged” (Lalich, 77). In order to present a fuller view of the problems presented

by American cultic abuse, I will use my own experiences as an introductory example. These experiences provide a basis and a catalyst for my study of abuse tactics and relational literacy.

“People don’t join cults. Cults recruit people,” and many people are born into these environments (Hassan, 187). I grew up in an ashram cult devoted to an Indian guru in between San Francisco and Sacramento, California. Northern California is notorious for these kinds of communities, as hippies and international teachers flocked there in the 1960’s. The white middle class transformed itself with new and imported religions, communes, pseudo-sciences, and psychologies (Lalich). In 1976, a teacher named Dhyanyogi and his young protegee, Anandi Ma, drove all over the United States recruiting followers. “The recruiter’s work is made considerably easier because...many of the larger ones have grown hugely wealthy through public fundraising” (Hassan, 165). It was at one of these fundraising meditation events that my, then twenty-five year-old, father was recruited and he has lived with the group ever since. My mother was introduced to the group by her mother at age seventeen, making me a third generation cult member. “If you were recruited at any time after your teens, you already had a distinct personality...the pre-cult self” (Lalich, 3). In this way, my father was the only person in my immediate family who had known adult life outside the cult, and in many ways, had a more stable and aggressive sense of self. My parents belonged to a small group of hardcore *disciples*, who lived at the ashram year-round. I was the only child who lived at the ashram full time. I was, in many ways, a *golden child*—a child revered as a pure embodiment of the group’s values. When I was small, the group would perform devotional ceremonies called *pujas*, in which I was offered gifts as a deity-manifestation, and I was once described as the person who would “solve global warming”.

As I became an adult, I was responsible for managing resources and interactions for hundreds of people during the group's intensive retreats. While the retreats were more reasonably priced than many of the other comparable events in the Bay Area, attendees were essentially paying to do labor for the building while attending lectures and meditation sessions. Each day began around five AM and didn't end till eleven PM, or even involved all-night prayer sessions. Many participants were *fringe members*: "affiliated very loosely in a behavioral sense may still be indoctrinated into the belief system...[who] are influenced and involved with the destructive cult, but not to the extent of someone who works on staff 80 hours a week" (Hassan, 176). As a result, many were unaware of the emotional conflict between the full time disciples who lived there year-round. Despite trying my hardest to keep up with the intensive work ethic of the group, I was exhausted and became increasingly depressed. I was expected to work full time in order to make enough money to live and to donate to the ashram; perform many hours of free labor for the temple and the guru's home; and keep up an intensive daily meditation and mantra recitation practice. Eventually, I began to distance myself as tensions between my father and I grew. After two members (a mother and a son close to my age) of our community committed suicide, my father accused them of disgracing the guru with their deaths. At twenty-three, I decided to enroll in college full time about forty-five minutes away from the ashram because I knew if I didn't make a change, I might take my own life too.

Luckily, my life improved as I made a community outside the ashram where I lived in Oakland. When I was twenty-five, my mother asked me to come to therapy with her, around the end of 2019. I had found her a therapist that year, as her mother's health declined via dementia. That day, my life changed forever, as she told me that Dhyanyogi had molested her as a teenager. I had never met him in person as he died the year I was born, but he was our central figure of

worship. We bowed to his photos and life-sized statues daily. He was our “God on Earth”, and “always with us”. Throughout my life, I had dreams and meditative visions of him blessing me. Our daily meditations revolved around recordings of Dhyanyogi’s voice. I’ll never forget the sound that escaped my lips as my mom revealed that this *god* was merely an egomaniacal pedophile. The revelation made me physically ill, and I suffered through a bout of pneumonia for the following three months—likely caused by a then unknown case of COVID-19. In February 2020, I cut ties with all but my mother, and left California to settle in Portland, Oregon. As I tried to find support and community to deal with my experiences, I found a profound lack of resources. “More often than not, people coming out of cults have tremendous difficulty finding practical information” (Lalich, 4). It made sense to me that cult survivors would not want to meet again in groups. However, the community that cults provide is an essential, human need—and I still needed it. My therapist suggested I attend Al-Anon but that felt too “cult-y” to me, with its mantra-like repetitions and scripture-like books. My parents and other members of the group were always expected to adhere to sobriety and celibacy. While I related to the children of addicts as a parentified child, our experiences were deeply different. Eventually, I found Portland’s Spiritual Abuse Forum for Education (SAFE), and began to get information on recovering from cult abuse.

As COVID-19 raged around me and I tried to recover, the isolation was deafening. Now, in 2023, Dr. Vivek H. Murthy (Surgeon General of the United States) reports that loneliness is “associated with greater risk of cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, depression, anxiety, and premature death” (Murthy, 4). This loneliness is part of what makes people so susceptible to coercive groups and relationships as it literally deteriorates minds and bodies. Political and religious cults find people who need purpose and community, and cognitively damage them via

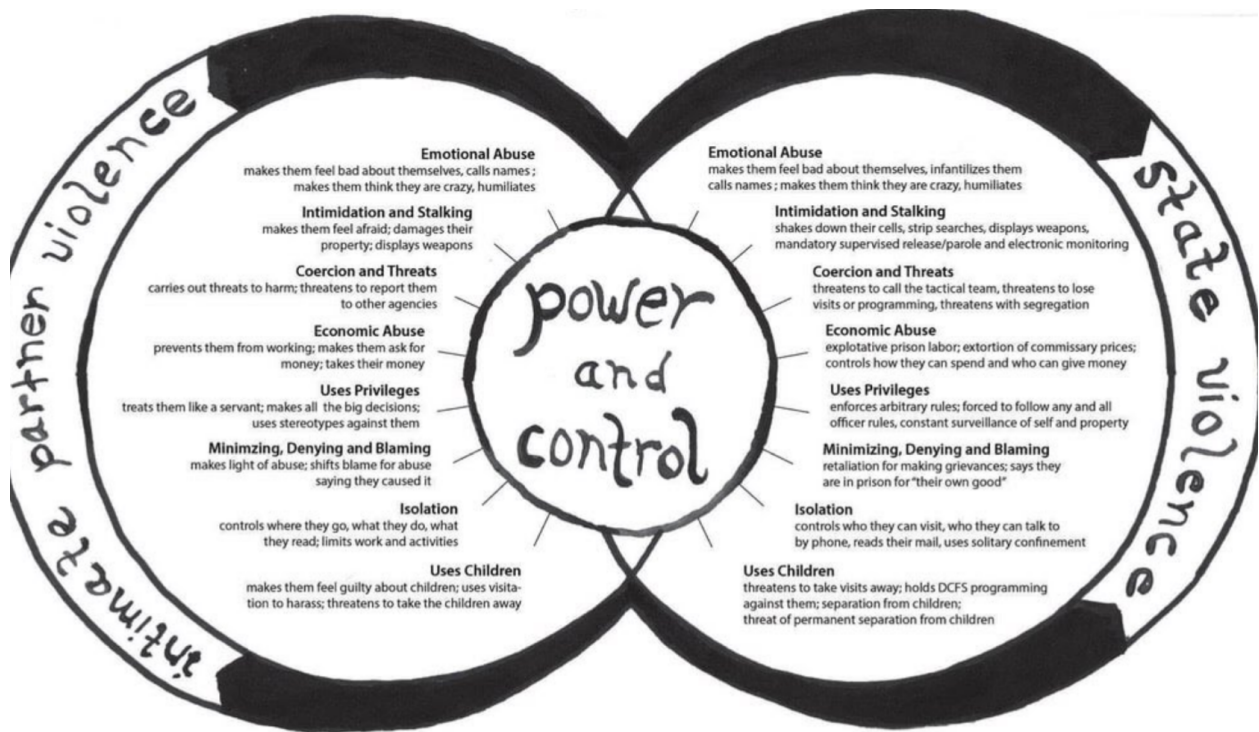
indoctrination and ruthless recruitment. The cognitive dissonance of Ocean's "unrequited love" is too much to bear. In these years of infrastructural instability and social unrest, isolation has pushed people into cults on the internet, many of which are centered on conspiracy theories surrounding COVID-19. In order to leave a worthwhile world to the younger generations growing up in this chaos, it is urgent that people begin to build relational literacy and create healthy communities. This thesis and my ongoing work in cultic studies are aimed at demystifying the tactics of these groups, drawing attention to coercive power structures' relevance, and creating resources for the many people who have been abused spiritually, emotionally, physically, and sexually.

II. Background: The Value of Cultic Studies and Relationship Literacy

Anyone can be recruited into a cult. In fact, “many people may be involved in these types of abusive relationships without realizing it” (Lalich, 72). Many people assume negative things about people recruited into cults, like they were lazy or stupid. In actuality, “most cult members are of above average intelligence, well-adjusted, adaptable, and perhaps a bit idealistic. In relatively few cases is there a history of a pre-existing mental disorder” (Lalich, 22). Steve Hassan has been a premier cult recovery specialist in the United States, and writes in his guide *Combatting Cult Mind Control*: “Often people look at a cult victim and say mistakenly, ‘What a weak-minded person; he must have been looking for a way to escape responsibility and have someone control his life’” (Hassan, 169). Victim blaming normalizes abuse in a white supremacist rape culture. It also serves to “keep the person unaware of what is going on and how she or he is being changed a step at a time...control the person’s social and/or physical environment; especially the person’s time...[and] systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person” (Ward, 43). Cults simply serve as another arena for blaming abuse survivors for the pain they have suffered, in both being recruited to and abused by groups or relationships.

Cults in the United States magnify the most destructive parts of American culture to its most extreme lengths. “Many of the power relations that women experience in wider society are mirrored in the cultic systems” (Ward, 49). As a culture originating in chattel slavery and patriarchy, much cultural destruction is aimed at women, children, and people who are not white. “One in five American women experience sexual assault. One in nine girls and one in fifty-three boys in the United States experience sexual abuse” writes scholar Megan Goodwin (Goodwin, 1). Violent White Christian nationalist groups target everyone who is not a cis white man, and recently achieved a major milestone in their agenda by overturning *Roe v Wade*. Goodwin

references the National Sexual Violence Resource Center’s statistics that 27% of survivors report their assaults and their perpetrators have a 0.4% chance of being punished for their crimes (Goodwin, 2). Her term *contraceptive nationalism* theorizes that American culture at large demonizes cultic sexual abuse as an individual group or family problem, as opposed to a rampant national problem merely extremified by religion and/or isolation (Goodwin, 3). In this way, people deny the reality that the same thing could happen to them. “People believe that ‘it can never happen to them’ because they want to believe they are stronger and better than the many millions who have fallen victim to mind control” (Hassan, 169). Anyone can be a victim of violence (sexual or otherwise), whether it is perpetrated by a government, partner, a family member, or a cult. Abolition feminists Moni Cosby and Sarah Ross created the following diagram to show the connections between domestic and state violence (Cosby):



Victim blaming, isolation, threats, and leveraging children or money are common themes in coercive abuse, regardless of who the perpetrator is.

It becomes critical to educate the public about what abuse looks like and how to protect people from coercive violence. Psychologist Dr. Robert Jay Lifton writes, “with greater knowledge about [cults], people are less susceptible to deception” (Lalich, 7). Linguistic tools used to fight cult abuse can also be used to remedy systemic abuse, because they define harm regardless if it is perpetrated by systems, groups, families, substances, or one-on-one relationships. “The best way [to avoid cult recruitment] is to be able to instantly recognize the [coercive] ways in which cults make their appeals for membership,” recommends Hassan (187). U.S. culture is rooted in imperialist violence resulting in genocide, sexual violence, and racism. Once citizens become cognizant of how coercion works, it is plain to see coercive abuse everywhere they look. Cult interventionist Ashlen Hilliard states:

Education surrounding cults is so needed, but also education on coercive control is vital.

When it comes to coercive control, there’s almost more of this universality of experience for those who have been affected by coercive control. Not everyone has been in a cult, but haven’t we all experienced coercion in some way? (Hilliard, 0:53:31–0:54:01)

Arming individuals with language to describe their experiences and identify the signs of potential abuse creates a larger revolutionary and liberatory power. Cultic studies providing language to describe coercive abuse not only protects societies from cults; it enables them to create more equitable conditions overall. To quote again the marvelous hooks, “Feminism is a wise and loving politic. The soul of our politics is the commitment to ending domination. Love can never take root in a relationship based on domination and coercion” (*feminism for everyone*, 41). These sentiments are echoed by Angela Y. Davis: “Abolition feminism demands social

transformation as the only means to ensure safety for survivors [of abuse]” (Davis, 161).

Feminism and cultic studies both provide language to remedy misogynist and racist abuse at interpersonal, familial, organizational, and systemic levels. Cultic definitions of coercive behavior provide warning signs for abuse, language to describe survivors’ experiences, and education in relationship literacy to create a more feminist society.

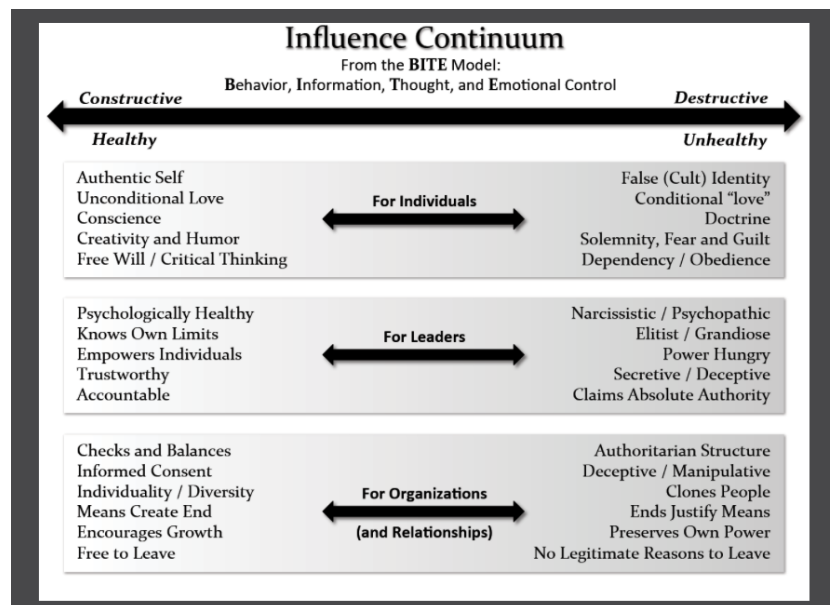
III. Literature Review: Defining *Cults, Undue Influence and Coercive Abuse*

There are as many different definitions of cults as there are types of cults. Cult experts Janja Lalich and Madeleine Tobias write, “A group or relationship earns the label ‘cult’ on the basis of its methods or behaviors, not on the basis of its beliefs” (Lalich, 4). They go on to reference the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) President Michael Langone’s cult criteria: “unquestioning commitment to the identity and leadership of the group...members are manipulated and exploited...[and] harm may come to the members, their families, and/or society” (Lalich, 11). Cultic relationships can occur between spouses, partners, employer/employees, pastor/parishioners, parent/children, therapist/clients, gang or social club members, and teacher/students. Cultic abuse can exist in domestic partnerships, families, and many kind of groups, including but not limited to: religious/eastern/christian, political/racist/terrorist, therapeutic/educational, commercial/multi-marketing, new age/mass transformational, and satanic/black magic cults. “The processes of influence start from the moment we are born, so it’s easy to take the position that everything is mind control...But, just as sex is a normal part of life but...rape is not, influence is a natural part of life, but undue influence is not” (Hassan, 167). There is a spectrum of influence encompassing a vast landscape of relationships. On one end are totalistic influences “likened to authoritarian societies” (Lalich, 10) and on the other may be a “helicopter mom” or a friend helping someone make a hard choice. “A key in determining the degree of control the group exercises over its members is the amount of time spent in mind-altering activities: prayer, chanting, meditation, group rituals, psychodrama, and confession” (Lalich, 12). The more time and money demanded improves the chances of a relationship becoming coercive. Scholars often refer to Dr. Singer’s words:

Recruits eventually spend most of their time and energy in the group, and become very dependent on it. The group becomes the norm for what is considered true, just, or desirable. Internalization of group behavior and language further reduces the ability for reality testing and makes it very difficult to leave (Ward, 43).

Linguistic hypnosis occurs via mantras, chanting, continual use of jargon, manipulative mistranslations, and renaming members. This process also functions to isolate members from anyone who does not know the new language they have learned from the group.

Hassan uses his B.I.T.E. model to measure this spectrum of “damaging [the recruited partner or member] through the abusive techniques of unethical mind control...by subjecting them to systematic control of behavior, information, thoughts and emotions (B.I.T.E.) to keep them dependent and obedient” (Hassan, 152). His continuum is pictured below (171):



This image can be used to educate people about what healthy relationships can look like and what to classify as coercive abuse. “The more a group seeks to control any or all of these aspects of its members' lives, the closer to the extreme end of the influence continuum it falls—and the

more likely it is to be a cult” (Hassan, 174). Cultic scholars do not aim to demonize all groups or religions, but to differentiate domination from communion. Lalich’s personal definition of *cult* is:

A social system (group, relationship, or family) with an imbalanced power structure, a transcendent belief system, and structural and social mechanisms of influence and control. A thought-reform program...refers to social-psychological processes and pressures that bring about desired behavioral changes in a variety of contexts. The use of a thought-reform program does not necessarily signal cult status, but almost all cults employ some type of thought-reform to influence and control their members (Lalich, 41).

Cultic abuse occurs through thought reform, or coercive abuse, which applies undue influence through a cumulative indoctrination process.

Over a length of time or through considerable biological extremities (food or sleep restriction, induced dissociation, or drug and sexual exploitation), abusers’ persuasion becomes *undue influence*: “‘undue’ because these practices violate personal boundaries and human integrity, as well as ethics and, often, the law” (Hassan, 74). *Undue Influence* is a legal term used to describe taking advantage of seniors, children, and people with disabilities that also applies to cult members whose cognitive capacities have been diminished by cult indoctrination. It is applied through isolation, cognitive debilitation, heightened suggestibility, group pressure, financial exploitation, information management, suspension of judgment, promotion of total dependency, instillation of phobias, sleep and food deprivation, induced dissociation, and inadequate housing and/or medical care. Labeling these tactics as coercive abuse refutes any efforts to normalize these kinds of behaviors. At their core, these tactics all feature:

A restriction of autonomy and that restriction of autonomy can look very different depending on the context. Sometimes it can be as extreme as physical safety—where you

can go, who you can talk to—but sometimes the restriction of autonomy has to do more in the psychological, spiritual realm: what can I question, what can I read, what can I believe without fear (Hilliard, 0:47:25–0:48:15).

This restriction of autonomy is enforced by groups via the undue influence of thought reform. As cultic studies evolve, a new generation of scholars build on a long legacy of linguistics to create communities that empower their members with autonomy. Thought reform, or coercive abuse, was defined in 2006 by Lalich as “intense psychological and social influence and control” (Lalich, 5). Lalich expanded Dr. Singer’s work, which expanded from Dr. Lifton. Singer’s 1994 *Continuum of Influence and Persuasion* is as follows (Singer, 2):

	Education	Advertising	Propaganda	Indoctrination	Thought Reform
Focus of body of knowledge	Many bodies of knowledge, based on scientific findings in various fields.	Body of knowledge concerns product, competitors; how to sell and influence via legal persuasion.	Body of knowledge centers on political persuasion of masses of people.	Body of knowledge is explicitly designed to inculcate organizational values.	Body of knowledge centers on changing people without their knowledge.
Direction & degree of exchange	Two way pupil-teacher exchange encouraged.	Exchange can occur but communication generally one-sided.	Some exchange occurs but communication generally one-sided.	Limited exchange occurs, communication is one-sided.	No exchange occurs, communication is one-sided.
Ability to change	Change occurs as science advances; as students and other scholars offer criticisms; as students & citizens evaluate programs.	Change made by those who pay for it, based upon the success of ad programs by consumers law, & in response to consumer complaints.	Change based on changing tides in world politics and on political need to promote the group, nation, or international organization.	Change made through formal channels, via written suggestions to higher-ups.	Change occurs rarely; organization remains fairly rigid; change occurs primarily to improve thought-reform effectiveness.
Structure of persuasion	Uses teacher-pupil structure; logical thinking encouraged.	Uses an instructional mode to persuade consumer/buyer.	Takes authoritarian stance to persuade masses.	Takes authoritarian & hierarchical stance.	Takes authoritarian & hierarchical stance; No full awareness on part of learner.
Type of relationship	Instruction is time-limited: consensual.	Consumer/buyer can accept or ignore communication.	Learner support & engrossment expected.	Instruction is contractual: consensual	Group attempts to retain people forever.
Deceptiveness	Is not deceptive.	Can be deceptive, selecting only positive views.	Can be deceptive, often exaggerated.	Is not deceptive.	Is deceptive.
Breadth of learning	Focuses on learning to learn & learning about reality; broad goal is rounded knowledge for development of the individual.	Has a narrow goal of swaying opinion to promote and sell an idea, object, or program; another goal is to enhance seller & possibly buyer.	Targets large political masses to make them believe a specific view or circumstance is good.	Stresses narrow learning for a specific goal; to become something or to train for performance of duties.	Individualized target; hidden agenda (you will be changed one step at a time to become deployable to serve leaders).
Tolerance	Respects differences.	Puts down competition.	Wants to lessen opposition.	Aware of differences.	No respect for differences.
Methods	Instructional techniques.	Mild to heavy persuasion.	Overt persuasion sometimes unethical.	Disciplinary techniques.	Improper and unethical techniques.

Dr. Singer's spectrum covers a vast sphere of interaction that Hassan narrowed down to a model more specific to cultic groups. Dr. Singer was also one of the first to use the term *gaslight effect* to describe cultic abuse (Lalich, 72). Her work applies language as curative empowerment for survivors across a huge realm of abuse.

Historically, cults began to be described by American academics concurrent to the rise of Maoism. Dr. Lifton began to describe *brainwashing*, a translated Chinese word, in his work *Eight Psychological Themes for Thought-reform Environments*. Dr. Lifton studied prisoners of the Korean War to describe the mechanisms of coerced personality shifts under extreme duress at the same time the Central Intelligence Agency was performing mind-control experiments for the *MK-Ultra* Project. "Since World War II, intelligence agencies around the world have been aggressively engaged in mind control research and development. The CIA admits to having performed drug, electroshock, and hypnosis experiments since the early 1950s under the code name *MK-Ultra*" (Hassan, 154-155). Psychological operations have become routine in American intelligence or law enforcement strategies, mirroring and even sometimes inciting cult violence. For example, the 1993 Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) siege on David Koresh's cult in Waco, Texas used unwarranted, violent psychological tactics. The fifty-three day siege resulted in the death of seventy-six people (including twenty-five children), and inspired many Christian nationalist militia to organize against the government (Baron, 238). On the second anniversary of the Waco Siege's conclusion in 1995, two white supremacist extremists killed 168 people by bombing the Alfred P. Murrah federal building. The Oklahoma City Bombing "remains the deadliest domestic terrorist attack in U.S. history" and the terrorists insisted that their actions served as revenge for the government attack in Waco (Potok). Effectively, U.S. military and white supremacist separatist militias have an ongoing historical

chain of violence using physically and psychologically coercive tactics. The most recent waves of violent anti-government sentiment have been perpetuated by *QAnon*. The group is led by a shadowy internet figure known only as *Q* who speaks via encrypted and coded messages on fringe message boards. These “Q drops” have been instrumental in spreading misinformation around the COVID-19 pandemic and vaccine. The federally funded Council of Canadian Academies recently reported that this kind of misinformation resulted in \$300 million and 2800 lives lost (Major).

Language and psychology are inevitably linked in the harm caused via deceptive groups by manipulation and misinformation. It may be simplistic to attribute societal improvement to the mere act of describing unwanted behavior, but the profundity of words creates new worlds. Describing coercive abuse can expand people’s vision of what a community can look like and how interpersonal relationships can be most fulfilling. Salford scholar Hilliard states “language is really important and for some people who have left high control, coercively controlling situations...to understand what a cult means to them” (Hilliard, 0:49:52–0:50:56). Rhetoric and language are tools that can be used to dominate and coerce or free and expressively liberate people. The term *cult* can “be extremely empowering because it really can put a term to your situation in a way that can be understood. Language can be really powerful...to better understand the variables involved in creating totalist systems” (Hilliard, 0:49:52–0:50:56). Labeling red flags of interpersonal behavior helps people avoid coercion and labeling green flags serves to set a standard of behavior relationally. Psychotherapist Esther Perel shares that “it is the quality of your relationships that will ultimately determine the quality of your lives” (*Summit*). In an epidemic of loneliness, the quality of someone’s relationships can literally be the difference between life and death.

IV. Discussion: The Indoctrinated Self

Lalich and Tobias write this haunting sentence to those recovering from cultic abuse: “You may even forget who you were before you joined” (Lalich, 33). Thought reform processes of coercive control and undue influence serve to indoctrinate recruited members into a group identity and kill the individual spirit. In 1961, Dr. Lifton “conceptualized indoctrination as a process that manipulated guilt, shame, and anxiety to produce a ‘death’ of the original self and a ‘rebirth’ of a reeducated self” (Baron, 239). Theories of personality multiplicity have been gaining attention in both psychological and media spheres. The phenomenon of personality splitting is organized into a science in many cults. Hassan defines this process as: “any system of influence that disrupts an individual’s authentic identity and replaces it with a false, new one...[that] the person would strongly reject, if they had been asked for their informed consent” (Hassan, 74). The psychological process of dissociation refers to a splitting from a former sense of self—often as a defense mechanism the mind uses to slow down processing a traumatic event. “Whether we call it doubling, cult personality, or pseudo-personality...personality adaptations are both a cult-imposed requirement and a means of survival” (Lalich, 48). Sometimes cults even identify dissociation as a goal of their techniques, like an *ultimate state of bliss*. These techniques of coercive abuse serve as an indoctrination process for cult recruits, beginning with what Dr. Robert Baron terms a “period of psychological and physical stress...[that] alters values, behaviors, and sense of self” (Baron, 238).

Indoctrination occurs through a number of methods and different groups use different kinds of cultic abuse. Dr. Baron summarizes the effects of cult indoctrination:

Arousing emotions [fear and anger] decrease the effort people employ when processing persuasive content...[and] are indeed common in charismatic groups in which adherence to doctrine and loyalty to the group are proffered as means of avoiding the various threats and dangers made salient (Baron, 244).

Cults and coercive abusers use a number of tactics to arouse anger and then threaten their victims into fearing them. “Complex nature of group doctrine”, “unanimous group consensus”, nonverbal confidence, cognitive debilitation, “judgment difficulty”, fear, stress, arousal, time pressure, aversive noise, “confusion, ambiguity, and low personal confidence” all increase conformity pressure (Baron, 245). Eventually these tactics can create an unbreakable doctrine for victims with instilled phobias which prevent them from leaving or disobeying. Hassan describes these phobias as “internal components” including “worrisome thoughts, negative internal images, and feelings of dread and being out of control” (Hassan, 178). Those in coercive relationships often believe they, their family members, or even the whole world will die if their abusers’ wishes are not granted. In this way, the abuser keeps his victims in an ongoing state of crisis and can invoke an apocalyptic or doomsday mentality: the idea that one’s doctrine is the only means of survival or salvation.

In 2015, Spain’s Ministry of Science and Innovation conducted an experiment to categorize and analyze “the delimitation of abusive behaviors [and] provide a critical integrating framework for research and a guide for interventions...[to] distinguish abusive behaviors from legitimate group dynamics” (Carballeira, 35-36). Relying on over thirty clinical and research experts, the scholars delimit group psychological abuse strategies and rank their severity in this landmark piece of scholarly exploration. Building on fifty years of cult studies, the team creates a clinical and legal framework to describe high-demand groups. Their taxonomy includes six

categories split into twenty-six subcategories classified into four psychosocial dimensions ordered by severity. The taxonomy outlines a “process of systematic and continuous application of pressure, control, manipulation, and coercion strategies for the purpose of dominating other people in order to achieve their submission to the group” (Carballeira, 32). The scientists’ taxonomy is pictured below (Carballeira, 35):

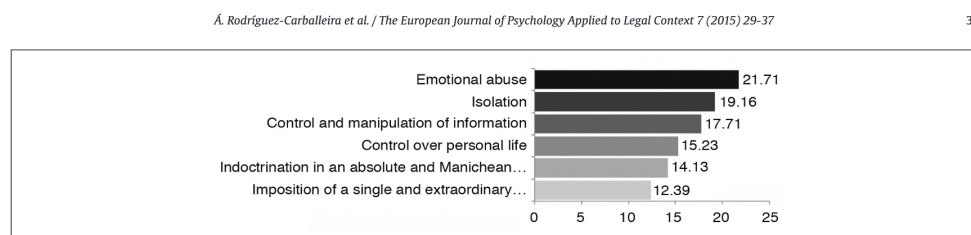


Figure 1. Hierarchical Organization of the Main Categories of the Taxonomy based on their Severity.

Spain’s Ministry of Science and Innovation published their findings in the *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, citing emotional abuse, situational strategies (such as isolation and monitoring), cognitive debilitation (via indoctrination into a manichean belief system), and strict behavioral protocols as the major signs of coercive abuse in groups.

Dr. Baron published his conclusions about the cognitive debilitation established by indoctrination processes for *The Cultic Studies Journal* in 2001. Indoctrination has a “debilitating impact...on attentional capacity and...affects several basic social psychological and cognitive processes integral to persuasion and behavior change” (Baron, 238). If one is in a constant state of fear or agitation, it becomes impossible to think clearly. Lalich and Tobias also comment on this process:

Most cult members experience an inability to think clearly or make decisions, a loss of self-esteem, a loss of self-confidence, a regression to a child-like, dependent state of mind

after having given up varying degrees of self-determination, a lack of trust in oneself and/or the outside world, and an inability to act, feeling frozen with fear (Lalich, 34-35).

Cults and coercive abusers use a number of techniques to recreate their partners, children, or followers as obedient workers. This is the same process used by human traffickers who “run their own versions of commercial cults” (Hassan, 162). Abusers strip their victims of autonomy and hand them a new personality devoted only to their professed doctrine. “It’s incredibly similar to a domestic violence situation,” says Dhyana Levey of *Generation Cult* (Hilliard, 0:41-0:41:05). Domestic abusers and cults both create an environment of fear, rage, control, and supervision to break a person down into a small part of their nervous system. This nervous system state is beyond fight or flight, known as *freeze*, and is similar to a dog “playing dead” when a threat appears. The *freeze* state pulls the individual life out of a person over long periods of time.

Counselor and author David Ward comments:

Thought-reforming environments’ effect on the sense of self...[is like] a “rape of the soul”, which leaves them feeling like an “empty shell with nothing inside”. Given that abusive systems attempt to mold central elements of self, such as worldview, ego, and basic defenses, it should come as no surprise to hear experiences of self-fragmentation from survivors of domestic abuse (Ward, 48).

Whether coercion is enacted by a family member, a partner, a politician, or a “prophet”, its long term indoctrinating effects have the same ends. “If one defines a cult in behavioral terms...it is appropriate to call battered relationships ‘cultic relationships’” (Ward, 49). Domination and control are always the goal in this type of abuse—to make the abuser’s sense of self bigger and the

victim's smaller. The Domestic Abuse Intervention Projects in Duluth, Minnesota created the following diagram to illustrate further examples of abuser tactics (theduluthmodel.org):



Whether it is a cult leader, a family member, a partner, or a government agency abducts a child, leverages economic needs, isolates, victim blames, threatens, or coerces a person; the language used to describe these behaviors remains the same. These linguistics can be used to free and protect people when they know what behaviors to avoid.

V. Conclusion: Liberating Communities versus Amerikkkan Dominance

Ecological collapse set the stage for increasing cult recruitment in the United States. Scientists hypothesize a connection between COVID-19 and climate change: “Changes in environmental temperatures combined with changes in human activities have significantly impacted the migration of the bat species that carry coronaviruses” (Gupta). Either way, “Neither crisis [climate nor COVID] can be effectively mitigated without considering their interdependencies” (Khojasteh). As the U.S. grapples with the unsustainability of climate change, it faces ecological and economic collapse with 15 million Americans unable to pay rent and 20 million Americans starving (cbpp.org). COVID-19 has led to the deaths of over one million Americans (covid.cdc.gov). The pandemic has magnified the massive neglect present in American culture in the same way that cults magnify the most violent and extreme cultural milieu. Harvard Professor, Nancy Krieger, told the *New Yorker* that the disparities in COVID-19 healthcare are “revealing patterns that have been long known in public health” that exclude People of Color and women (Chotiner). The *Black Lives Matter* movement identifies patterns of racist police violence going back centuries. People are angry and they are looking for answers.

Of course Donald Trump threw gasoline on this metaphorical (and frequently literal) fire. He is not necessarily a cult leader, but perhaps a cult figure or discrete cult authority. Cult leaders present themselves:

as the only supposed trusted other – even as they are creating the stress. If the follower has been successfully isolated, this method of alternating “terror” with “love” can result in a trauma bond where the follower becomes too afraid to do anything but cling to the group. Without being able to fight or flee from the group-created threat, followers freeze in both their thoughts and their feelings, as state known as dissociation...[Trump]

positions himself as the only person who has, for example, “any idea how corrupt our elections were” and “We” have to fight to restore them. The message is: Fear others and trust Trump (Stein, 15).

Many of Trump’s supporters are Christian white nationalists who violently target anyone who is not a white man. In her statement to Congress, Dr. Alexandra Stein said, “QAnon followers’ families were torn apart, non-believers pushed away by their loved ones’ obsessive, irrationality. This also often happened with the families of Trump’s followers” (Stein, 17). QAnon is a hot topic amongst cult researchers these days. In her show, Levey stated, “There’s a lot of conversation now about QAnon, and something I hear a lot from people is, ‘it’s not a cult because there’s no leader’—and that doesn’t make it not a cult” (*Generation Cult*, 0:58:30–0:58:30). Q, the original poster disseminating the “classified information”, is a mysterious figure who may have been replaced as the group moved around different online message boards. Dr. Stein warned Congress, “cultic indoctrination results in deployable followers who are detached from reality, who can’t think clearly, who are bonded to the leader and group and, lastly, who cannot advocate for their own survival interests. We see all these signs and symptoms in the current far right” (Stein, 20). Between Trump and Q, there is a semblance of a cult leader. However, there is no doubt that there is a community built around QAnon doctrine.

Journalist Mike Rothschild has been the most prominent researcher on QAnon as the group has grown. He describes it as:

a complex web of mythology, conspiracy theories, personal interpretations, and assumptions featuring a vast range of characters, events, symbols, shibboleths, and jargon. It can be understood as a conspiracy theory, for sure, but it also touches on aspects

of cultic movements, new religions, internet scams, and political doctrine. It's impossible to fully explicate every aspect of QAnon because it is so diffuse and has so many different plot strands and meanings. But the most important thing to know is that all of it started with an anonymous poster on 4chan...[who] called themselves Q Clearance Patriot, a name that references an actual US government clearance provided by the Department of Energy (Rothschild, 27).

While not publicly endorsed by Trump, he has stated that he appreciates their support and explicitly supported an affiliated white supremacist group: *The Proud Boys*. "On January 6, 2021, an armed mob of Donald Trump supporters accomplished what no Confederate soldier, Nazi storm trooper, or Al Qaeda jihadist had ever managed to do: they sacked the United States Capitol Building" (Rothschild, 10). The Proud Boys and Sean Moon's Rod of Iron Ministries are two cults who participated in the insurrection alongside QAnon. Gavin McInnes, founder of the Proud Boys was present and "is openly racist and a proponent of quite generalized violence" (Stein, 6). Sean Moon is the son of Sun Myung Moon, founder of the Unification Church (a Korean religious cult also known as *The Moonies*). Sean Moon was present at the January 6th Insurrection. "Rod of Iron Ministries is not fringe; they are actively interwoven into the power structure of the modern GOP, carrying on political ties developed over decades by Moon's father" (Stein, 6). Their companions, the Proud Boys, require beating new recruits and violence against those not in the group as parts of their indoctrination process. They also have rules about how and when to masturbate, and are (as the name suggests) a men-only group.

Trump announced his 2024 reelection campaign this year in Waco, Texas. There is no mistaking his connection to white supremacist militias who wish to dismantle the government. Ironically, it is a government historically created for and by white men, now being attacked by

the men it was created to serve exclusively. Cultic studies are full of nuance because people are nuanced and community relationships are complicated. There is no one way to have a healthy or abusive relationship to anything—a group, a lover, or a family member. However, there are some clear warning signs of violent behavior. It is imperative that Americans arm themselves with language to create healthy and happy communities, free of indoctrinated fear and abuse—whether it be domestic, cultic, or institutional. In the words of revolutionary, Assata Shakur, “I have declared war on the rich who prosper on our poverty, the politicians who lie to us with smiling faces, and all the mindless, heartless robots who protect them and their property” (Shakur, 183). The field of cult studies will continue to grow just as the fight for abolitionist feminism will go on, as it has for centuries.

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