

The Cultic Phenomenon of Youths: An Educational Perspective

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Abstract

This article reviews the literature and research information on cultic phenomenon of today's young people. Attention is directed to an effort to analyze the youth cultic phenomenon and what social and personal factors seen to enhance cult involvement. The final portion of this article discusses implications for educational services. It concludes that teachers or counsellors working with those who join and leave cults need to develop an awareness of clinical symptoms associated with doing so and use appropriate interventions.

Keywords: *Cultic Phenomenon; Adolescence; Spirituality*

A variety of groups that function on the fringes of both religion and psychotherapy have been evident in many societies (e.g., Australia, United Kingdom, United States) since the 1960s, with perhaps their greatest presence noted in the 1970s. Many of these groups created havoc with their followers' lives and the lives of the followers' families. Studies show that between 2 and 5 million young adults between the ages of 18 and 25 in the United States are involved in approximately 2,000 to 5,000 cult groups [1]. Zimbardo and Hartley [2] also reported that approximately 50% of the high school students included in their survey had been approached to join a cult. Furthermore, Wright and Piper [3] also pointed out that cults are most successful in recruiting individuals between 18 and 23 years of age, when persons are most likely to be seeking "perfect" answers to life's questions and problems. In reality, some cults like Satanism appear to be composed of adolescent rather than adults [4].

This article reviews the literature and research information since the 1990s. Attention is directed to an effort to analyze the youth cultic phenomenon and what social and personal factors seen to enhance cult involvement. The final portion of this article discusses implications for education.

Definition, Characteristics, Categories of Cults Their Differences between Religions

Cults are defined as groups having the characteristics of a group of people following a strong, living leader. They make absolute claims about the leaders' abilities, character, or knowledge and require of complete loyalty to the leaders [5]. Generally speaking, every cult can be defined as a group having all of the following five characteristics: (a) using psychological coercion to recruit, indoctrinate and retain its member; (b) forming an elitist totalitarian society; (c) founder leader is self-appointed, dogmatic, messianic, not accountable and has charisma; (d) believing "the end justifies the means" in order to solicit funds recruit people and (e) wealth does not benefit its members or society [5].

According to Cult Information Center [5], there are two basic categories of cults. Their characteristics are as follows:

Religious Cults	Therapy Cults
Communal living common.	Communal Living rare.
Members may leave or not join society’s workforce.	Members usually stay in society’s workforce.
Average age at the point of recruitment is in the 20’s.	Average age at the point of recruitment is in the mid 30’s
Registered as religious groups.	Registered as “non profit making” groups.
Appear to offer association with a group interested in making the world a better place via political, spiritual or other means.	Appear to offer association with a group giving courses in some kind of self-improvement or self-help technique or therapy.

In addition, there are some of the newer cults, termed psychotherapy cults, allege that they enable people to have more power over their own lives, to be more productive, and to be happier- all goals consistent with traditional mainstream psychotherapy. They are closer to Scientology (i.e., a religious system whose adherents seek self-knowledge a spiritual fulfilment through graduated courses of study and training) in this orientation than to the more religiously based cults in which salvation at the time of Armageddon is promised only to those who believe [4]. However, their practices frequently violate the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and similar professional organizations, particularly as they deviate from the ethics code [6] in the areas of “confidentiality, dual relationships, informed consent, professional competency, dependency and autonomy, financial practices, professional development, and separation and termination” [7].

Cults are different from religions. A religion is a particular system of faith and worship based on a belief in a superhuman controlling power, especially in a personal God or gods entitled to obedience and worship [8]. It includes service or adoration of God or gods as expressed in forms of worship. Religions generally have official doctrines that explain their practices and beliefs, while a cult is an extreme group or movement that shows excessive dedication to a person or cause [5]. Healthy religions respect individual’s rights and freedom, cults enforce compliance; conversion to religions involves unfolding of internal process, while cultic conversion involves an unaware surrender to external forces that don’t care for individual personal identity [5]. For example, a Christian group, it teaches that God alone is worthy of worship and God saves through Jesus Christ, while for some cults, people can become objects of worship and people can save themselves.

Why Are Cults Harmful?

Cults prey upon a person’s fears through a systematic process of “brainwashing” and “programming.” They recruit aggressively. Strong efforts are made to separate members from family and former associates- to cut them off from their past—in order to establish new values and standards requiring total dependence on, and devotion to, the cult itself [5]. To remain within the strict mental and social confines of a cult for even a short time can have disastrous effects. Cult Information Center [5] summarizes them as follows:

- (a) loss of choice and free will;
- (b) diminished intellectual ability, vocabulary and sense of humor;
- (c) reduced use of irony, abstractions and metaphors;
- (d) reduced capacity to form flexible and intimate relationships;
- (e) poor judgment;
- (f) physical deterioration;
- (g) malnutrition;
- (h) hallucinations, panic, dissociation, guilt, identity diffusion and paranoia; and
- (i) neurotic, psychotic or suicidal tendencies.

In addition, as Schwartz [4] has pointed out, the natural result of prolonged affiliation within a cult has been the birth of children to cult members. These children are raised within the group, and are frequently abused and poorly schooled [4]. The children meanwhile are subject to psychological abuse, medical neglect (possibly resulting in death as parents rely on prayer or the leader’s “spiritual healing” instead of immunization or treatment), and physical abuse and neglect. In many cases, children have been virtually enslaved, with severe deprivations or punishment if they did not meet whatever performance standard was set for them, including that for sexual activity [4].

Some cults, for example, Satanism, often involve chemical abuse, along with an array of other potentially destructive and risky behaviors [9]. Adolescents often find the language, attitudes, and ideas associated with cults to be appealing [10]. In fact, the particular devel-

opmental issues of adolescence make the teen years a time ripe for attraction to the self-gratification and sexual exaltation emphasized in the “theology” of cults. In the case of troubled youths, however, affiliation with some cults (e.g., Satanism) is less a religious matter than a license for a set of problematic behaviors and drug use.

Why Join Cults?

According to the literature reviewed, there are six issues of adolescent development related to cults: family relationship, spirituality, belonging, authority identity and sexuality. Let us consider how each of these issues heightens the appeal of cults for youths.

Family relationship: Studies show that alienation from family relationships precedes cult membership. The strength of the parent-child relationship seems to be critical in its effects on the vulnerability of youth to cult affiliation [4]. Studies also indicate that families of cult members tend to have a rigid, enmeshed structure [1]. On the other hand, youths having a secure parental attachment, especially to the father, do not typically affiliate with a cult. Sirkin [11] concluded that a clash of values between parents and child often underlies cult affiliation.

According to Robinson and Frye [1], there are several family dynamics have been correlated with a tendency to affiliate with a cult group. One family factor related to cult affiliation is setting unattainable standards. Parents placing excessive demand on their children may encourage them to seek acceptance and reinforcement from a cult group. Families expressing less emotion and more criticism had children with a higher rate of cult involvement [11]. Sirkin [11] also speculated that the cult-involved individuals may be fulfilling their roles as family scapegoats.

Spirituality: Cult involvement typically occurs during the transitional period of adolescence. Youths are intellectually and spiritually open to new ideas. Unfortunately, they have not achieved the balance of experience and maturity that would enable them to sort truth from illusion and reality from fantasy in all situations. Sirkin [11] concluded that cult involved individuals seem to be predisposed to seeking religious solutions to problems. He also hypothesized that cult involvement is the child’s method of protesting the lack of religious involvement his or her parents have demonstrated.

There has been a marked decline in the influence of the family and traditional religious beliefs, with a concomitant liberalization of personal values. The social climate has nourished rejection of cultural and moral standards [3]. This has left adults and especially adolescents with the dilemma of finding values with which to fill this vacuum, so as to be able to resolve old problems and discover new solutions. Mike Warnke [12], a former drug addict and satanic high priest who became involved in the anti-occult counselling program Alpha Omega Outreach, explains that a person “is constructed like a triangle, with one side representing his physical needs, the second his mental needs, and the third his spiritual needs. A person fulfilling only his physical and mental needs is not complete... [and] is consciously or subconsciously undergoing a search for spiritual fulfillment, wherever he can find it- in drugs, the occult.” The loss of society’s religious and social moorings leaves many youths adrift. The desire to become a complete person- to complete the triangle of their being- leads many, Warnke warns, into dangerous ways.

Belonging: Adolescence is a highly peer-centered time in which self-esteem strongly relates to peer acceptance and a sense of belongs. Teens establish strong peer-group identity partly through processes of exclusion. Adolescents who have encountered conflict, confusion, and frustration, often feel disoriented and anxious. Fearing rejection by a society that they do not understand, they may retreat into isolation, or demonstrate inappropriate emotional outbursts, aggression, and rebellion, and embrace radical causes. All of these are youthful cries of pain, cries for help and understanding. If an adolescent is not acceptable to healthier and normal peer groups, or not easily fit into the larger peer culture, cults offer opportunities to be part of an intimate “in” group that fulfills many of the needs for belonging [9]. Lack of experience in decision-making, the desire for peer acceptance and a sense of belonging and simple naiveté are causes of vulnerability.

Authority: Adolescents need ways, large and small, to push against external and parental authority as part of identity formation. As teens work toward internalizing the voice of moral authority that directs their lives, they often push against the external authorities who have set limits for them in the past. Male youths from abusive families are especially vulnerable to satanic cult recruitment [9].

Adolescents seeking a sense of power over their own lives as well as over others are susceptible. Teens find encouragement to defy the social and moral norms of their families and communities for the sake of defiance. This colludes with the natural development tendencies toward oppositional struggle, making cults attractive.

Identity: One of the critical developmental tasks of adolescence involves the establishment of a sense of self or identity. This usually entails some level of psychological separation from family, along with the embracing of new relationships beyond the sphere of family ties. Peers, heroes and heroines, and other adults outside of the family, help teens feel safely connected in a web of relationships while doing the hard work of establishing their own identities. At the same time, teens develop capacities for taking a third-person perspective-seeing the self as others see them-and become acutely self-conscious [9]. In addition, part of the establishment of a cohesive identity during adolescence entails combing the “actual self”, which the teen knows she or he is in real life, with the “ideal self” of fantasies and goals.

Youths are compensating for unfulfilled needs (e.g., love, sense of belonging), the lack of which hinders the development of self-esteem, social competence, and mastery of life tasks. In turn, this generates attempts to gain approval and recognition. Wright and Piper [3] indicated that the attraction to cults is strengthened by the fact that a cult’s rules often are better defined than those of the family are. Adherence to the cult lifestyle often results in radical behavior changes, along with “a loss of identity” compensated by an “enslavement to cult leaders.”

Sexuality: Adolescence is time of heightened awareness of sexuality, as well as experimentations with new behaviors, boundaries, and forms of intimacy. Part of the work of identity formation for teens involves establishing a sense of one’s own self as sexual. During adolescence this may take the form of exaggerated gender roles, as young people try to establish their place as masculine or feminine. In addition, adolescents work toward developing an ethic for their sexual behaviors and choices, since this new way of being in relation brings with it new responsibilities, risks, and ways to get hurt.

Among teens for whom negotiating the sexual issues of adolescences is especially stressful, some cults offer a resolution to the struggles by emphasizing sexual “freedom” as a primary aspect of self-gratification and encouraging people to defy conventional norms related to appropriate sexual behavior [9]. Instead of having to work out the tough emotional issues and the feelings that go along with adolescent sexuality, emotions become masked behind the satanic elevation of sexual pleasure. Some cults even subject members to sexual abuse by leaders. Mercer [9] also pointed out that one of the more troublesome aspects of cults like Satanism with adolescents concerns their use of its self-gratification ethic to support the abusive treatment of others (especially young women) in the name of pleasure.

Cult Activity: A Global Phenomenon

A note-worthy change in cult activity is that it has become more international. Some studies show that an increasing number of adolescents are falling under the influence of Satanism. Evidence includes the desecration of cemeteries and the theft of bodies; the appearance of satanic symbols and themes in contemporary literature, art, and music; and in an extreme case, the satanic, ritualistic murders in Matamoros, Mexico and many forms of mass suicide worldwide [13]. In 1993, the events at Waco, Texas led by David Koresh, exemplify one form of mass suicide in which 85 members of the Branch Davidian group died, and more recently, the Heaven’s Gates believers in San Diego also committed group suicide of [13].

The Family, formerly the Children of God group, has recently functioned more in Europe, where Berg had moved before his death, than in the U.S [4]. According to one report, The Family and its affiliates have been active in more than 75 countries and faced more than 20 court cases in Europe and elsewhere involving abduction and child molestation charges [4]. In 1997, the Russian Parliament passed laws legitimizing only a few carefully chosen religions, and the cults were not among them.

In 2001, the cult behind the Tokyo subway gas attack was reported to have embarked on a large-scale e-mail recruitment campaign. Tokyo police believed that the Aum Shinri Kyo cult may have used university records to contact more than 40,000 college students. Authorities have continued to monitor the group’s activities since the March 1995 sarin gas attack that killed 12 people. According to the

Asahi newspaper, Tokyo police found the exhaustive e-mail address lists-which have been culled from some of Japan's top colleges - while examining CD-ROMs confiscated from Aum-owned residences last year [14]. In January 2002, the Justice Ministry of Japan warned that the group, which now calls itself Aleph-is growing steadily, reasserting its influence via the web [14].

Falun Gong, a sect originated from China, now claims to have 100 million followers worldwide [15]. Falun Gong is a mixture of Buddhist and Taoist teaching and exercises similar to Tai Chi. Many Falun Gong members have committed suicides in pursuit of the "sacred wheel" or the "heavenly kingdom," with some cutting their chests open and others jumping to death from high buildings. Some young people suffer from schizophrenia as a result of practicing Falun Gong [16]. It is reported that Falun Gong has caused deaths of more than 1,400 innocent people on the Chinese mainland, in addition to countless injuries [16,17].

Although society in the 21st century is quite different from that of the 1960s and 1970s, when the cults loomed large as a part of the flourishing counterculture, many of the factors that rendered young people vulnerable to cult recruiting then still confront late adolescents and young adults (as well as, now, senior citizens).

Conclusions and Implications

As mentioned, many studies show that although cults have high conversion rates, they also have high rates of disaffiliation (e.g., Mercer, 1993; Robinson, 1997). Teachers or counsellors working with those who join and leave cults need to develop an awareness of clinical symptoms associated with doing so and use appropriate interventions. School and youth organizations can be particularly helpful. The sensitive teacher or counsellor can be watchful for the warning signs-confusion, alienation, sudden changes in personality or behavior, withdrawal from home and social activities, the development of antisocial attitudes, a decline in academic achievement, the assumption of an unusual style of dress, and preference for music with satanic themes-and intervene in a timely fashion.

Another useful strategy in treatment settings involves helping the young person unmask the dynamics underlying their involvement, encouraging them to identify for themselves how cults function for them. Teens engaged in a recovery program can readily identify the ways their cult-related behaviors gave them a sense of power and control [9].

The cooperation and support of religious institutions, civic organizations, and government agencies must be enlisted. Human beings often have spiritual needs that we attempt to fill by other means, such as chemicals or food or TV or sex or work. As Mercer [9] puts it so well: "Teen involvement with cults can be described as a spiritual quest of sorts: an effort to find a sense of peace and wholeness and well-being that seems unattainable to them in their everyday lives. Supporting that yearning for wholeness provides the foundation for recovery".

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