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Dr. Johnson is a licensed clinical social worker with a certification in forensic social work. She obtained her master's degree in social work from Columbia University and her doctoral degree in social work from the University of Tennessee.

She is a second generation adult (SGA) survivor, having spent 43 years in the Jehovah's Witnesses. She has spent most of her career working in New York State juvenile justice focusing on trauma-informed care of incarcerated youth. She is a presenter for the National Organization of Forensic Social Workers and the International Cultic Studies Association.

In her private practice, Dr. Johnson focuses on assisting indoctrinated individuals find freedom from cultic and other high-demand groups and process the trauma they experienced while being involved in systems of control or coercive groups and relationships.

She manages the Facebook and Instagram social media pages, Outside the Ark, which share educational information about cult dynamics and coercive control.

Dr. Johnson's research interests include the epistemology of women and how cultic, coercive, and misogynistic experiences influence the cognitive development of women.

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# Introduction to Cults, Coercive Persuasion, and Systems of Control



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# Clinical Implications

## How have former cult members been affected?



- Loss of personal identity
- Undue influence, threats, coercion
- Cognitive dissonance
- Dissociative symptoms, detachment
- Abuse: emotional, physical, sexual, ritualistic, cognitive/thought reform
- Neglect and isolation

## What do former cult members need?



- Safety, assistance with boundaries
- Reconnection with family, friends
- Psychoeducation, psychotherapy
- Reintegrate to mainstream society
- Regain, strengthen critical thinking skills
- Rebuild personal identity and values

## What do families of cult members need?



- Education around the psychology of cult involvement
- Support around the loss of their cult-involved family member
- Effective communication with their cult-involved family member

# Theoretical Underpinnings

Research on cults began around the 1950's by Dr. Robert J. Lifton and Dr. Margaret Singer in response to mind control and brainwashing techniques that had been imposed on American servicemen during the Korean war.

## "Eight Criteria for Thought Reform"

*Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, Robert J. Lifton, MD, 1961.

Loaded Language Sacred Science  
 Cult of Confession Mystical Manipulation Doctrine Over Person  
 Demand for Purity Milieu Control  
 Dispensing of Existence

## Leading cult theorists, researchers, and writers

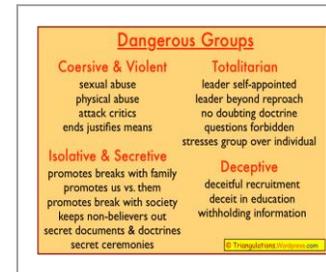
- Robert J. Lifton, MD
- Margaret Singer, PhD
- Michael Langone, PhD
- Janja Lalich, PhD
- Bill and Lorna Goldberg, LCSW, PsyA
- Daniel Shaw, LCSW
- Steven Hassan, LMHC

## Intersections with Psychology

- Human Development: Erikson; Piaget; Kohlberg; Gilligan
- Family Systems Theory: Murray Bowen
- Social Psychology and Narcissism: Fromm; Shaw

# Common Questions about Cults

## Cults, leaders, and members



What is the definition of a cult?

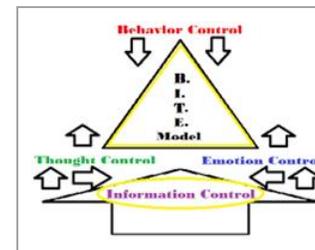
What types of groups are cults?

How do cults operate?

How can I spot a cult and cult leader?

Who joins cults and why?

## Theoretical underpinnings

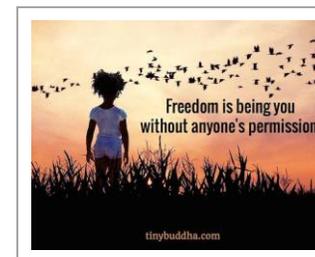


What research exists in the cult field?

Who are the leading theorists in the cult field?

How do cults affect normal human development?

## Clinical implications



What do clinicians need to know when working with cult-involved individuals?

What supports do former cult members need?

What supports do families of cult members need?

# What is a cult?

## What qualifies a group as a “cult”?

There is no clear definition that constitutes a particular group to be a cult. Rather, the dynamics by which a group operates can help us determine whether a group or relationship is coercive or controlling.

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*Destructive cults, group, movements, and/or leaders “maintain intense allegiance through the arguments of their ideology, and through social and psychological pressures and practices that, intentionally or not, amount to conditioning techniques that constrict attention, limit personal relationships, and devalue reasoning.”*

– Margaret Singer, PhD

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## Cult Leader Characteristics

Cult leaders are typically people with tremendous charisma who are proficient in

- making people feel loved, special, secure, and accepted,
- using specific tactics to attract and keep followers,
- gaining members’ reverence, admiration, and devotion,
- influencing members to obey strict requirements of conformity,
- convincing members that the leader is all knowing and the point of contact between God/Higher Power and the rest of the group,
- fostering a strong sense of belonging between members,
- convincing members to abandon outside relationships

# Who joins cults and why?

## Which individuals are most susceptible?



- Those who seek an accepting community and sense of belonging
- Those who are disenfranchised or feel powerless and unsupported
- Those seeking to find a purpose or fill an unmet need
- Those who seek validation for their own beliefs

## How do individuals get roped into joining?

- Promises of salvation, power, and/or superior knowledge
- Love-bombing
- Relief from current suffering, isolation, and/or marginalization
- Exploitation of narcissistic or submissive personality traits

## What types of groups become cults?

- Religious, social, and political groups and associations
- One-on-one relationships (interpersonal violence “IPV”) to large groups
- Terrorist groups
- Extremist followers of pop culture, sports, and/or hobbies