Totalist Systems

Definition of a Cult or Totalist System (cults, totalitarian nations, one-on-one relationships):

- Closed, hierarchical social system
- Charismatic and authoritarian leader
- Use of coercive persuasion (also called: thought reform, mind control, brainwashing)
- Followers are controlled and exploited by leader
- All-or-nothing (total) ideology or belief system

Charisma and Authoritarianism

- Definition of Charisma:
  Relationship between leader and follower based on follower’s devotion to what are perceived as heroic, saintly, or exemplary character traits. – Weber

- Definition of Authoritarianism
  Punitive, controlling personality with a “power-oriented, exploitatively dependent attitude.” - Adorno

Examples: Cults

- Asahara: Aum Shinrikyo. Tokyo subways sarin gassing, 1995
- Heaven’s Gate, California, 39 die in collective “suicide”, 1997
- Movement for Rest. Of 10 Commandments, 800 murdered, Uganda, 2000

Recent example

- Children of God / The Family

Examples: Active Political Cults

- Lyndon LaRouche: Youth Movement
- Christian Identity Movement: Aryan Nations, Posse Comitatus
- Rev. Moon: Unification Church, “Moonies”
- Scientology
- Al Qaeda
- Lord’s Resistance Army – Uganda
Many Social-psych processes at work

- Obedience to authority – Milgram
- In-group/out-group – Sherif
- Conforming to group norms – Asch
- Cognitive Dissonance - Festinger

Processes and Mechanisms

- Coercive Persuasion: A generally non-violent method of inducing radical personality shifts, changes in beliefs, and extreme compliance.
- Also called: brainwashing, mind control, thought reform, or coercive persuasion
- Relies on isolation, fear creation, and resulting emotional and cognitive dissociation

Assault and Leniency Cycle - Part 1

- Leniency Phase: Starts with loving attention – “love-bombing” or other attention. Attract follower.
- Isolation: Removal of prior attachment relationships – Isolate the follower/victim

Cults rely on isolating followers

Three kinds of isolation:

- From the outside world
- From others in the group
- From one’s own internal dialog

- The isolation does not have to be physical isolation.

Assault and Leniency Part 2

- Follower is isolated
- Assault Phase: Control now escalated. Control, demands, or other factors, create fear. Fear triggers attachment response – to leader or group
- Leniency again: Follower attaches to leader/abuser and is rewarded. Bond is strengthened

Trauma Bond Creates Extreme Compliance

“Fright without solution” creates dissociation and disorientation – like PTSD. You literally cannot think your way out:

- Follower/victim has a radical shift in identity and “blind” loyalty to charismatic leader/abuser
- Extreme demands can now be made: violence, torture, exploitation
- Trauma bond is very difficult to break – especially when isolation continues
### Resistance Methods

- Knowledge of mechanisms of coercive persuasion
- Avoid isolation; or emotional participation in totalist situation
- Identity reinforcement – hobbies, beliefs, personal objects
- Neutralizing attitude – Humor, passive resistance
- Dissident group – preserve safe, non-isolated arena

### What You Can Do

- Choose not to participate if you’re uncomfortable with a given program or exercise.
- Resist peer pressure to cross personal boundaries. Forgo social norms of politeness, etc. if needed.
- Refuse to be humiliated in a group exercise. Choose to leave. Know that you’re protecting yourself despite the reaction this may engender.
- Ask questions. Choose to leave if questions are not answered.
- Reject secrecy.
- Learn the warning signs - handout

### Resources

- International Cultic Studies Association (International organization on psychological manipulation): [www.csj.org](http://www.csj.org)
- Cults in Our Midst. Singer
- Captive Hearts, Captive Minds. Tobias and Lalich
- Inside Out - [www.alexandrastein.com](http://www.alexandrastein.com)