

NEWS COMMENTARY

Cults are coming. Are they crazy or bearing critical messages?

By Philip Zimbardo, PhD

How do we make sense of the mass suicide of 21 female and 18 male members of the Heaven's Gate extra-terrestrial "cult" on March 23? Typical explanations of all such strange, unexpected behavior involve a "rush to the dispositional," locating the problems in defective personalities of the actors. Those whose behavior violates our expectations about what is normal and appropriate are dismissed as kooks, weirdos, gullible, stupid, evil or masochistic deviants.

Similar characterizations were evident in the media and public's reaction to other mass suicides in The Order of the Solar Temple in Europe and Canada, murder-suicide deaths ordered by Rev. Jim Jones of his Peoples Temple members, as well as of the recent flaming deaths of David Koresh's Branch Davidians and the gassing of Japanese citizens by followers of the Aum Shinrikyo group. And there will be more of the same in the coming years as cults proliferate in the United States and world wide in anticipation of the millennium.

Avoiding the stereotypes

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chological research of colleagues, we can argue the following propositions, some of which will be elaborated:

- No one ever joins a "cult." People join interesting groups that promise to fulfill their pressing needs. They become "cults" when they are seen as deceptive, defective, dangerous, or as opposing basic values of their society.
- Cults represent each society's "default values," filling in its missing functions. The cult epidemic is diagnostic of where and how society is failing its citizens.
- If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything. As basic human values are being strained, distorted and lost in our rapidly evolving culture, illusions and promissory notes are too readily believed and bought—without reality validation or credit checks.
- Whatever any member of a cult has done, you and I could be recruited or seduced into doing—under the right or wrong conditions. The majority of "normal, average, intelligent" individuals can be led to engage in immoral, illegal, irrational, aggressive and self-destructive actions that are contrary to their values or personality—when manipulated situationally—when manipulated situationally over individual dispositional power.

events, lectures, churches, or drop-in dinners and free personal assessment workshops. The Heaven's Gate group made us aware that recruiting is now also active over the Internet and across the World Wide Web.

In a 1980 study where we (C. Hartley and I) surveyed and interviewed more than 1,000 randomly selected high school students in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, 54 percent reported they had at least one active recruiting attempt by someone they identified with a cult, and 40 percent said they had experienced three to five such contacts. And that was long before electronic cult recruiting could be a new allure for a generation of youngsters growing up as web surfers.

What makes any of us especially vulnerable to cult appeals? Someone is in a transitional phase in life: moved to a new city or country, lost a job, dropped out of school, parents divorced, romantic relationship broken, gave up traditional religion as personally

demand that members sever ties with former family and friends which creates total dependence on the group for self identity, recognition, social reinforcement. Unquestioning obedience to the leader and following arbitrary rules and regulations eliminates independent, critical thinking, and the exercise of free will. Such cerebral straightjacketing is a terrible danger that can lead in turn to the ultimate twin dangers of committing suicide upon command or destroying the cult's enemies.

Potential for the worst abuse is found in "total situations" where the group is physically and socially isolated from the outside community. The accompanying total milieu and informational control permits idiosyncratic and paranoid thinking to flourish and be shared without limits. The madness of any leader then becomes normalized as members embrace it, and the folly of one becomes folie à deux, and finally, with three or more adherents, it becomes a constitutionally protected belief system that is an ideology defended to the death.

A remarkable thing about cult mind control is that it's so ordinary in the tactics and strategies of social influence employed. They are variants of well-known social psychological principles of compliance, conformity, persuasion, dissonance, reactance, framing, emotional manipulation, and others that are used on all of us daily to entice us: to buy, to try, to donate, to vote, to join, to change, to believe, to love, to hate the enemy.

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Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD

ing how societal pathology is implicated in contributing to the rise in shyness among adults and children in America.

A society in transition

Our society is in a curious transitional phase; as science and technology make remarkable advances, antiscientific values and beliefs in the paranormal and occult abound, family values are stridently promoted in Congress and pulpits, yet divorce is rising along with divorce and child

Avoiding the stereotypes
Such pseudo-explanations are really moralistic judgments; framed with the wisdom of hindsight, they miss the mark. They start at the wrong end of the inquiry. Instead, our search for meaning should begin at the beginning: "What was so appealing about this group that so many people were recruited/ seduced into joining it voluntarily?" We want to know also, "What needs was this group fulfilling that were not being met by "traditional society?"

Such alternative framings shift the analytical focus from condemning the actors, mindlessly blaming the victims, defining them as different from us, to searching for a common ground in the forces that shape all human behavior. By acknowledging our own vulnerability to the operation of the powerful, often subtle situational forces that controlled their actions, we can begin to find ways to prevent or combat that power from exerting its similar, sometimes sinister, influence on us and our kin.

Any stereotyped collective personality analysis of the Heaven's Gate members proves inadequate when tallied against the resumes of individual members. They represented a wide range of demographic backgrounds, ages, talents, interests and careers prior to committing themselves to a new ideology embodied in the totally regimented, obedient lifestyle that would end with an eternal transformation. Comparable individual diversity has been evident among the members of many different cult groups I've studied over the past several decades. What is common are the recruiting promises, influence agendas and group's coercive influence power that compromise the personal exercise of free will and critical thinking. On the basis of my investigations and the psy-

self destructive actions that are contrary to their values or personality—when manipulated situational conditions exert their power over individual dispositions.

• Cult methods of recruiting, indoctrinating and influencing their members are not exotic forms of mind control, but only more intensely applied mundane tactics of social influence practiced daily by all compliance professionals and societal agents of influence.

The appeal

What is the appeal of cults? Imagine being part of a group in which you will find instant friendship, a caring family, respect for your contributions, an identity, safety, security, simplicity, and an organized daily agenda. You will learn new skills, have a respected position, gain personal insight, improve your personality and intelligence. There is no crime or violence and your healthy lifestyle means there is no illness.

Your leader may promise not only to heal any sickness and foretell the future, but give you the gift of immortality, if you are a true believer. In addition, your group's ideology represents a unique spiritual/religious agenda (in other cults it is political, social or personal enhancement) that if followed, will enhance the Human Condition somewhere in the world or cosmos.

Who would fall for such appeals? Most of us, if they were made by someone we trusted, in a setting that was familiar, and especially if we had unfulfilled needs.

Much cult recruitment is done by family, friends, neighbors, coworkers, teachers and highly trained professional recruiters. They recruit not on the streets or airports, but in contexts that are "home bases" for the potential recruit; at schools, in the home, coffee houses, on the job, at sports

Someone is in a transitional phase in life: moved to a new city or country, lost a job, dropped out of school, parents divorced, romantic relationship broken, gave up traditional religion as personally irrelevant. Add to the recipe, all those who find their work tedious and trivial, education abstractly meaningless, social life absent or inconsistent, family remote or dysfunctional, friends too busy to find time for you and trust in government eroded.

Cults promise to fulfill most of those personal individual's needs and also to compensate for a litany of societal failures: to make their slice of the world safe, healthy, caring, predictable and controllable. They will eliminate the increasing feelings of isolation and alienation being created by mobility, technology, competition, meritocracy, incivility, and dehumanized living and working conditions in our society.

In general, cult leaders offer simple solutions to the increasingly complex world problems we all face daily. They offer the simple path to happiness, to success, to salvation by following their simple rules, simple group regimentation and simple total lifestyle. Ultimately, each new member contributes to the power of the leader by trading his or her freedom for the illusion of security and reflected glory that group membership holds out.

It seems like a "win-win" trade for those whose freedom is without power to make a difference in their lives. This may be especially so for the shy among us. Shyness among adults is now escalating to epidemic proportions, according to recent research by Dr. B. Carducci in Indiana and my research team in California. More than 50 percent of college-aged adults report being chronically shy (lacking social skills, low self-esteem, awkward in many social encounters). As with the rise in cult membership, a public health model is essential for understand-

advances, antiscientific values and beliefs in the paranormal and occult abound, family values are stridently promoted in Congress and pulpits, yet divorce is rising along with spouse and child abuse, fear of nuclear annihilation in superpower wars is replaced by fears of crime in our streets and drugs in our schools, and the economic gap grows exponentially between the rich and powerful and our legions of poor and powerless.

Such change and confusion create intellectual chaos that makes it difficult for many citizens to believe in anything, to trust anyone, to stand for anything substantial. On such shifting sands of time and resolve, the cult leader stands firm with simple directions for what to think and feel, and how to act. "Follow me, I know the path to sanity, security and salvation," proclaims Marshall Applewhite, with other cult leaders chanting the same lyric in that celestial chorus. And many will follow.

What makes cults dangerous? It depends in part on the kind of cult since they come in many sizes, purposes and disguises. Some cults are in the business of power and money. They need members to give money, work for free, beg and recruit new members. They won't go the deathly route of the Heaven's Gates; their danger lies in deception, mindless devotion, and failure to deliver on the recruiting promises.

Danger also comes in the form of insisting on contributions of exorbitant amounts of money (tithing, signing over life insurance, social security or property, and fees for personal testing and training).

Add exhausting labor as another danger (spending all one's waking time begging for money, recruiting new members, or doing menial service for little or no remuneration). Most cult groups

daily to entice us: to buy, to try, to donate, to vote, to join, to change, to believe, to love, to hate the enemy.

Cult mind control is not different in kind from these everyday varieties, but in its greater intensity, persistence, duration, and scope. One difference is in its greater efforts to block quitting the group, by imposing high exit costs, replete with induced phobias of harm, failure, and personal isolation.

What's the solution?

Heaven's Gate mass suicides have made cults front page news. While their number and ritually methodical formula are unusual, cults are not. They exist as part of the frayed edges of our society and have vital messages for us to reflect upon if we want to prevent such tragedies or our children and neighbors from joining such destructive groups that are on the near horizon.

The solution? Simple. All we have to do is to create an alternative, "perfect cult." We need to work together to find ways to make our society actually deliver on many of those cult promises, to co-opt their appeal, without their deception, distortion and potential for destruction.

No man or woman is an island unto itself, nor a space traveller without an earthly control center. Finding that center, spreading that continent of connections, enriching that core of common humanity should be our first priority as we learn and share a vital lesson from the tragedy of Heaven's Gate. ♪

Philip C. Zimbardo, PhD, is professor of psychology at Stanford University and a former WVA president. He has interviewed and worked closely with survivors of Peoples Temple and their family members, as well as former members of the Unification Church, Scientology, Synanon, Churches of Christ and other cults.