

Survey on the Awareness of the Cult Phenomenon in Italy

Results of the Ce.S.A.P. (Center for the Study of Psychological Abuse) Survey

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Introduction: The Cult Phenomenon

- Cultic groups: Use of psychological abuse strategies for control and subjugation.
 - Various terminology: "cults", "abusive groups", "high-demand groups".
- Constant feature: Psychological abuse (sometimes physical/sexual).
- Irrelevance of orientation (religious, philosophical, commercial) for definition.
- Social relevance: Destructive impact (abuse, murders, suicides) and lasting psychological consequences on members and families.

Introduction: Context and Study Objective

- Complexity of the phenomenon: Often misunderstood by non-specialists.
- Previous COPC study (Catalonia): Survey on awareness among Spanish mental health professionals.
- Ce.S.A.P. Objective: Replicate the survey in Italy, targeting Psychology graduates.
- Collaboration: Order of Psychologists of Puglia (OPP), Master's in Legal Psychology Univ. Bari.
- Report Structure: 1) Participants, 2) Self-assessment of knowledge, 3) Direct experiences.

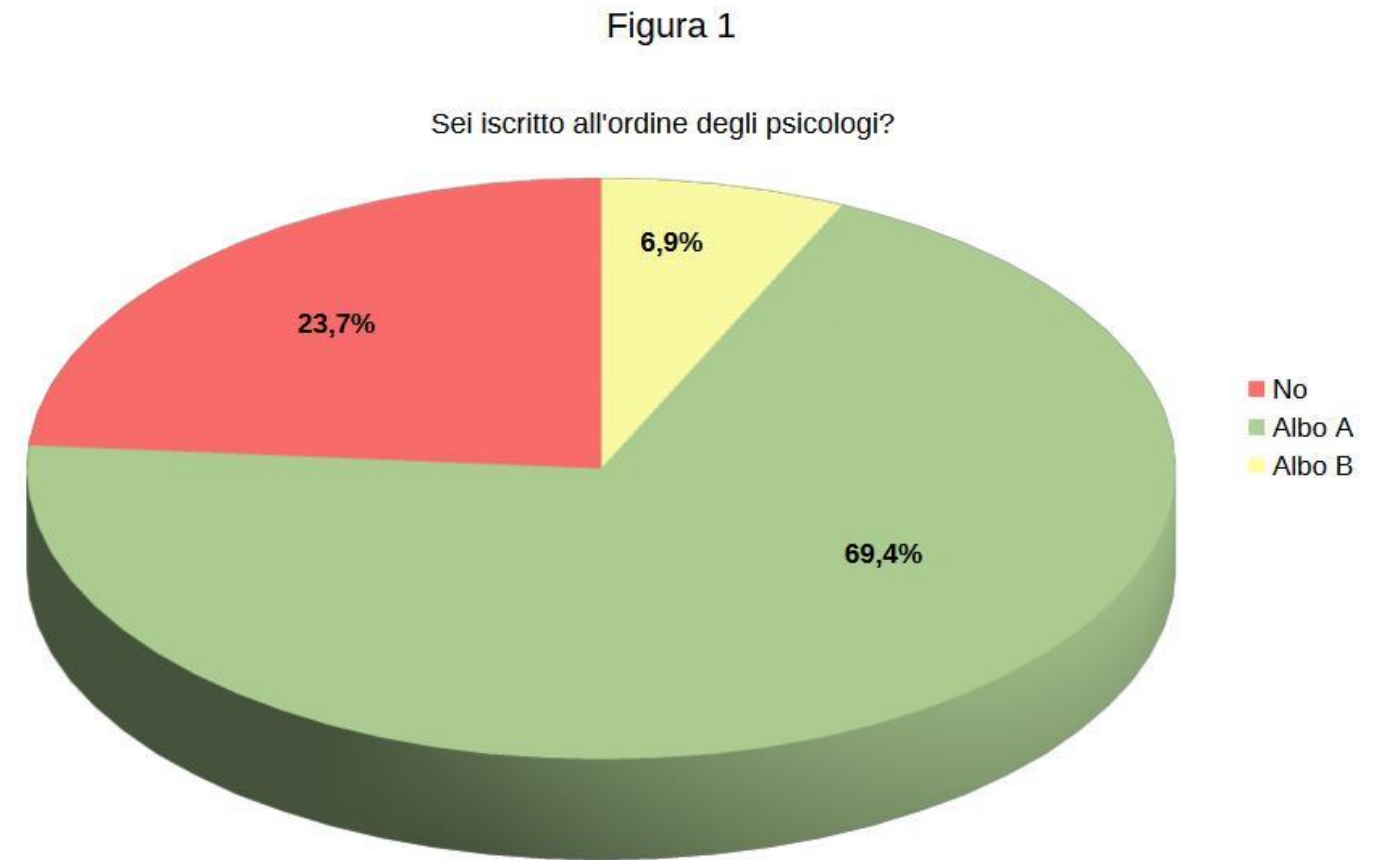


Survey Methodology

- Tool: Online questionnaire.
- Period: November 2024 - April 2025.
- Dissemination: Email to CNOP, regional Orders, institutions; Social media.
- Target: Psychology graduates in Italy.
- Dissemination goal: Obtain a varied and representative sample.

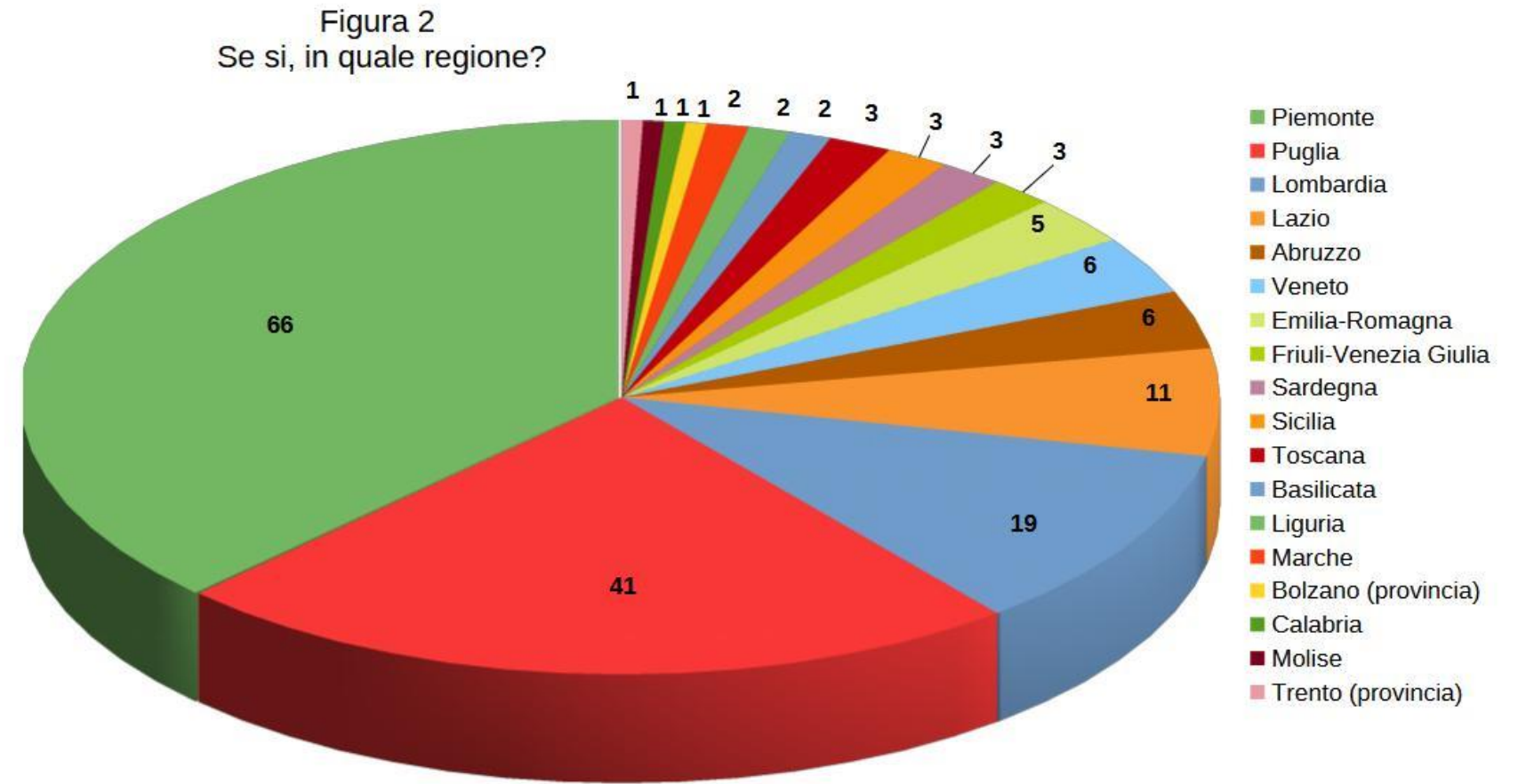
Participant Description (1)

- Total responses: 232 psychology graduates.
 - Registered with the Order:
177 (76.3%) - (161 Register A, 16 Register B).
 - Not registered: 55 (23.7%).
- **Critical issue: Participation rate lower than expected.**
 - Possible cause: Limited perception of the topic's importance.
 - Implications: Possible impact on representativeness and reliability of conclusions.

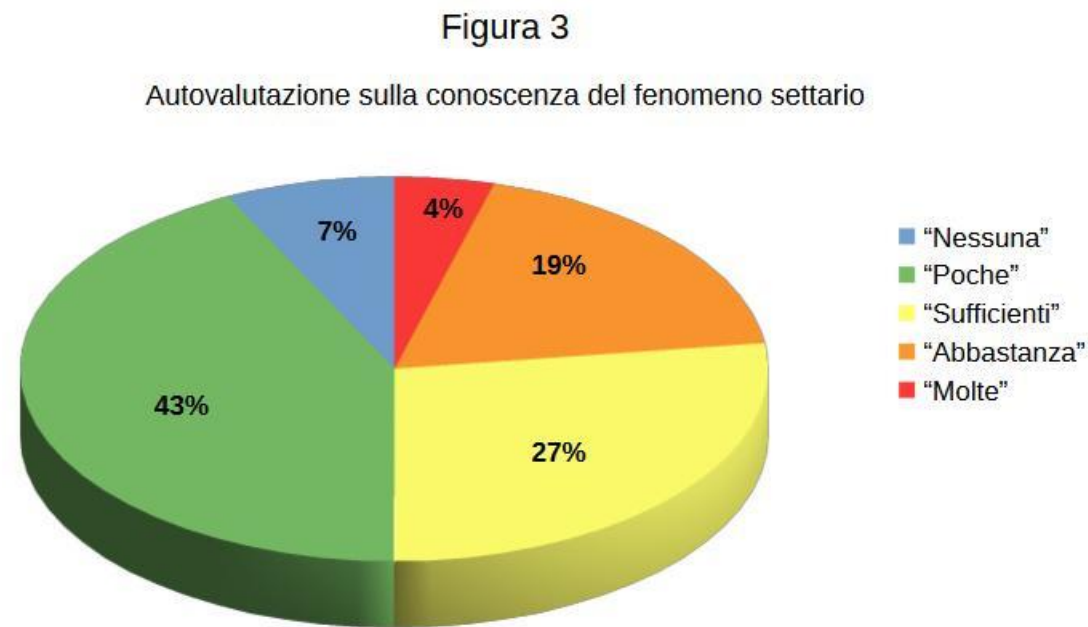


Participant Description (2)

- Average age: 44.65 years (SD=16.19).
- Geographical distribution (main): Piedmont (37.5%), Puglia (23.3%), Lombardy (10.8%).
- Prevalent education: Specialization in Psychotherapy (49.6%), Specialist/Master's Degree (32.3%).
- Post-graduate Master's: 45 (Level I), 58 (Level II).
- Prevalent work setting (multiple answers): Clinical (145), School/Educational (37), Studying/Unemployed (27), Corporate (27), Legal (18), Social Intervention (30).
- Professional experience: <5 years (68), 5-10 years (40), 10-20 years (60), >20 years (64).



Self-Assessment of Knowledge of the Phenomenon



50% of participants report "Little" or "No" general knowledge.

Only 4% report "Much" knowledge.

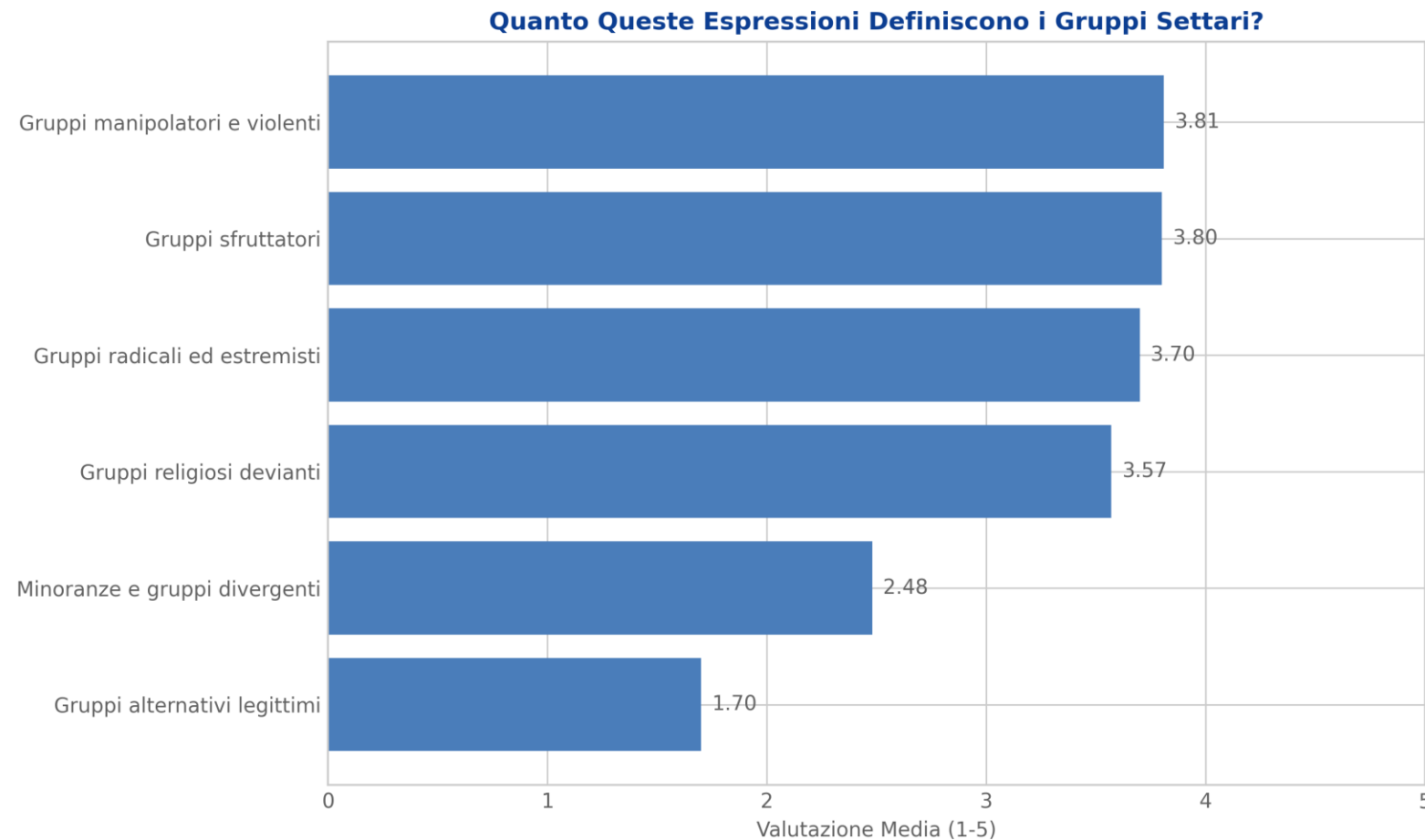
Strong interest in training: 97% consider it important.

89% wish to receive the study results.

Direct experiences: About half had personal experiences or followed involved patients.

Previous training: Almost half attended seminars/courses on the topic.

How Are Cultic Groups Defined?



Qualitative analysis (fundamental characteristics):

- Psychological manipulation.
- Charismatic/authoritarian leadership.
- Psychological abuse/Coercion.
- Dualistic, uncritical, anti-scientific thinking.

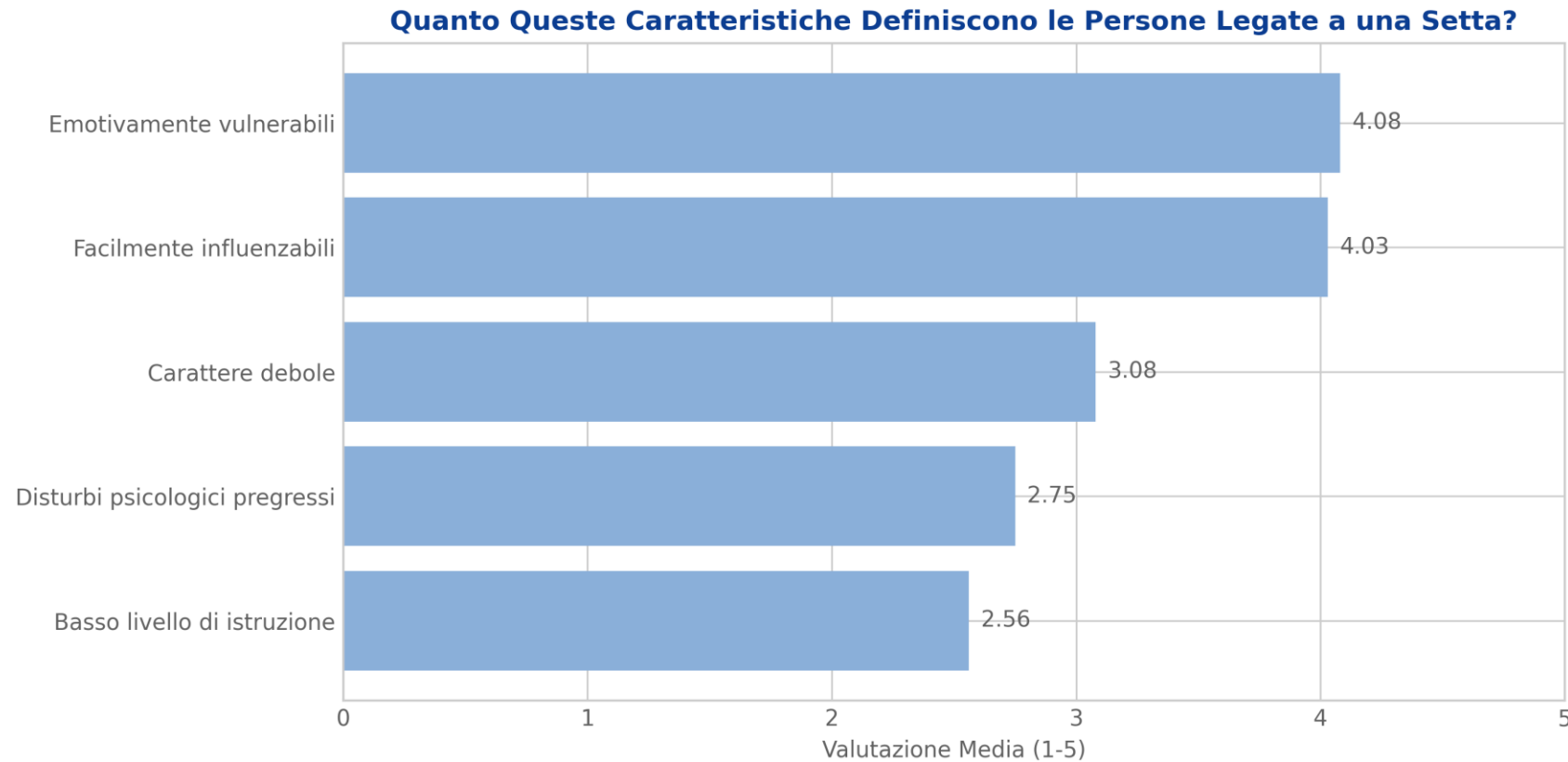
Quantitative analysis (most representative definitions):

- "Manipulative and violent groups" (Mean 3.81).
- "Exploitative groups" (Mean 3.80).
- "Radical and extremist groups" (Mean 3.70).

Neutral/positive definitions ("minorities", "alternative") with low ratings.

-> Strongly stigmatizing view from the sample.

Perceived Characteristics of Members



Qualitative analysis (fundamental characteristics):

Fragile and insecure personality (often post-trauma/bereavement).

Low self-esteem.

Strong need for belonging.

Tendency towards emotional dependence.

Difficulty facing problems, delegation of choices.

Quantitative analysis (most representative characteristics):

"Emotionally vulnerable" (Mean 4.08).

"Easily influenced" (Mean 4.03).

Less relevant: pre-existing disorders, weak character, low education level.

-> Perception focused on emotional and psychological aspects.

Leaders and Strategies Used

- **Characteristics of Leaders:**
 - Narcissistic, charismatic, and manipulative traits.
 - Compulsive need for control, inflated ego.
 - Capacity for psychological manipulation, emotional abuse, lack of empathy.
- **Most Used Strategies:**
 - Initial phase: Emotional grooming (love bombing, promises), selection of fragile individuals.
 - Control phase: Social isolation, cognitive manipulation (gaslighting, guilt), indoctrination, coercive group dynamics.
 - Maintenance phase: Traumatic bonding (alternation of rewards/punishments), psychological/material exploitation.

Characteristic and Harmful Behaviors

- **Behaviors most recognized as characteristic (Mean ≥ 4.5):**
 - Imposing group identity, absolute leader authority.
 - Psychophysical weakening, idealization of the group, rejection of the outside.
 - Control (behaviors, finances, relationships, free time).
 - Manipulation (guilt, language, critical thinking).
- **Behaviors perceived as most harmful (Mean ≥ 4.6):**
 - Psychophysical weakening (4.77), Acting on guilt (4.75).
 - Control of affective/sexual life (4.72), Absolute leader authority (4.70).
 - Intimidation/threats (4.69), Denigration of critical thinking (4.69).
- Perceived as less harmful: Activation of positive feelings (3.29), but with high variability.
- **-> Confirms image of totalizing systems with behavioral and cognitive control.**

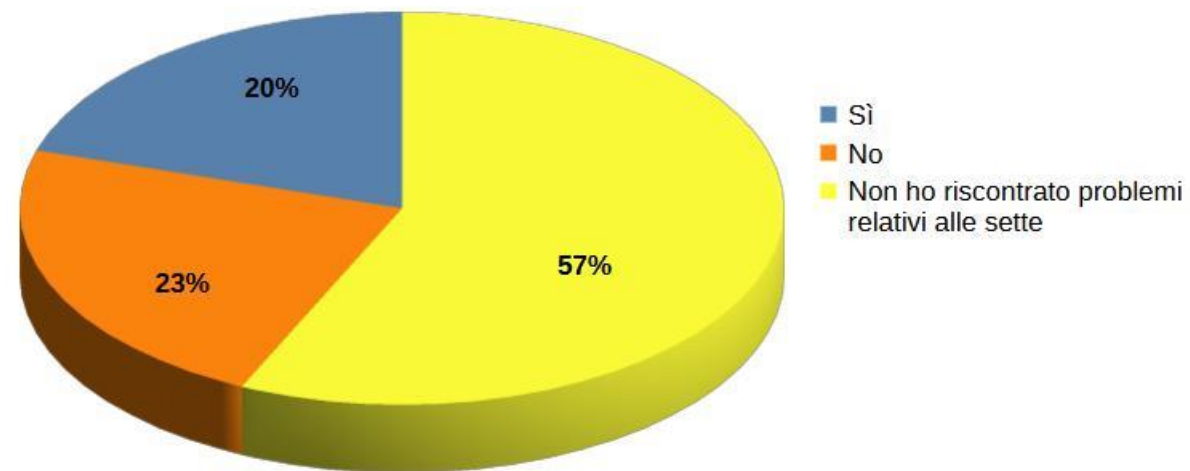
Psychosocial Difficulties of Ex-Members

- **Most characteristic difficulties (Mean ≥ 4.2):**
 - Low self-esteem (4.35), Shame and guilt (4.31).
 - Adaptation/social integration difficulties (4.30), Anxiety and fear (4.30).
 - Identity crisis (4.21), Relational problems/loneliness (4.17).
- **Difficulties perceived as most pervasive and persistent (Mean ≥ 4.0):**
 - Anxiety and fear (4.14), Shame and guilt (4.12), Low self-esteem (4.11).
 - Relational problems/loneliness (4.03), Adaptation difficulties (4.03).
- Less relevant/persistent: Eating alterations, cognitive rigidity, sexual disorders.
- **-> Most lasting impact is psychological and relational. Need for interventions on trauma, identity, reintegration.**

Direct Professional Experience

Figura 6

Hai avuto modo di intervenire personalmente?



Majority (57%) have never encountered problems related to cults.
43% reported at least one critical episode.

Prevalence in the Clinical sector (28%).

Followed by: Private/Corporate (7%), Legal (3%), Other (3%), School (2%).

Only 20% personally managed situations related to cults.

-> Need for greater attention and specific training, esp. in the clinical field.

Frequent Diagnoses and Terminology

- **Most credited diagnoses (qualitative analysis):**
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).
 - Mood disorders (Depression, Anxiety).
 - Personality disorders (Dependent, Borderline, Narcissistic).
 - Dissociative disorders, OCD, emotional dysregulation.
 - Parental alienation, social isolation (family/minor contexts).
- **Most appropriate terminology (Table 8):**
 - "Psychological manipulation" (4.79).
 - "Psychological/emotional abuse" (4.67).
 - "Mind control" (4.56), "Psychological influence" (4.54).
 - "Brainwashing", "Thought reform" also considered appropriate.

Table 8: How appropriate do you consider the following expressions in reference to cults?

Definition	Average responses (1-5)	SD
Mind control	4.56	0.75
Thought reform	4.33	0.91
Brainwashing	4.20	1.11
Psychological manipulation	4.79	0.55
Unethical manipulation	4.36	0.96
Psychological influence	4.54	0.78
Induced conversion	4.12	0.98
Personality control	4.02	1.05
Psychological/emotional abuse	4.67	0.60
Spiritual abuse	4.21	0.98

Diagnostic Tools and Preliminary Conclusions

- **Cited Diagnostic Tools:**
 - Validated in Italian: MMPI-2, MCMI-III/IV, SCID-II, Rorschach, TAT, EPQ-R.
 - Not (yet) validated in Italian: GPA, Saldana Scales, BITE Model, CRQ, SGS.
 - Also cited: generic tools (EPQ, Big Five) and multidimensional approaches.
- **Preliminary Study Conclusions:**
 - Very low general awareness among professionals (50% little/none).
 - Strong sensitivity and request for specific training (97%).
 - Perception of groups: manipulation, control, authoritarian leadership.
 - Perception of members: emotional vulnerability, suggestibility.

Study Limitations and Future Implications

- **Identified Limitations:**
 - Low participation (N=232): Potential limits to representativeness.
 - Lack of standardized tools validated in Italian for systematic assessment.
 - Heterogeneity of experience among professionals.
- **Future Implications:**
 - Need to deepen knowledge of the phenomenon.
 - Develop effective support strategies for professionals and victims.
 - Mitigate the negative effects of cultic dynamics.
 - Promote specific training paths.

Thank you for your attention

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Author Bio:

Lorita Tinelli is a clinical and forensic psychologist, criminologist, professor of a Master's program in Cult Criminology, and founder and president of the Italian organization, CeSAP (Center for the Study of Psychological Abuse). CeSAP has been studying mental manipulation and supporting cult victims since 1999.