

Dominance and Submission: The Psychosexual Exploitation of Women in Cults¹

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Abstract

The author describes the prevalence of the sexual exploitation of women in cults. This may take the form of daily controls of sexuality and sex lives or more overt abuses such as arranged marriages, forced sexual activity with the leader, and rape. Sexual control is seen as the final step in objectification of the cult member by the authoritarian leader who is able to satisfy his needs through psychological manipulation leading to sexual exploitation. Key to recovering from cultic sexual abuse is psychoeducation—that is, aiding the former cult member to understand the nature of the overall system of deception and manipulation that was used to exploit her. Through an examination of the social and psychological influence techniques employed by the cult, former cult members will be able to productively confront the issues related to their sexual abuse.

With approximately 5,000 cults active in the United States today (Tobias & Lalic, 1994), and an estimated 185,000 new members being recruited each year (Martin, 1996), public or professional discussions and analyses of life inside a cult are surprisingly sparse. I define a cult as a particular type of relationship that not only is based on an enormous power imbalance between the leader and followers but also includes a hidden agenda. Whether a group or one-on-one situation, a cult relies on deception, manipulation, and exploitation, and almost certainly results in abuse. At the head of the cult is a self-proclaimed leader (or sometimes

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two or three) who demands all veneration, who makes all decisions, and who ultimately controls most aspects of the personal lives of those who are cleverly persuaded that they must follow, obey, and stay in the good graces (i.e., the grips) of the leader.

Despite the common misconception that only crazy, unstable, or weird people are in cults, research has shown that most cult members are of above-average intelligence, come from stable backgrounds, and do not have a history of psychological illness (Langone, 1993; Singer with Lalich, 1995; Tobias & Lalich, 1994). Cult leaders and cult recruiters tend to capture the hearts, minds, and souls of the best and brightest in our society. Cults look for active, productive, intelligent, energetic individuals who will perform for the cult by fund-raising, recruiting more followers, and operating cult-owned businesses or leading cult-related seminars. In the 1960s and 1970s, perhaps, it was more typical for primarily young people to get involved with a cult; this is no longer so. The young and old alike, and everyone in between, are being recruited into a wide array of cultic groups.

Cults may be formed around almost any topic, and are categorized by nine broad themes: religious, Eastern-based, New Age, business, political, psychotherapy/human potential, occult, one-on-one, and miscellaneous (such as lifestyle or personality cults). In general, cults appeal to that part of ourselves that wants something better. A better world for others or a better self—these are the genuine, heartfelt desires of decent, honest human beings. Cult recruiters are trained in how to play on those desires, how to make it look as though what the cult has to offer is exactly what you're interested in.

All cults, no matter their stripe, are a variation on a theme. The common denominator is the leadership's use of a thought-reform program (i.e., behavior control) without the knowledge or consent of the one who is being manipulated. By attacking a person's innermost self, cult leaders manage to disassemble and reformulate members according to the cult's desired image. In other words, through a variety of social and psychological influence techniques, they take away *you* and give you back a cult personality, a pseudopersonality. They punish you when the old you turns up, and they reward the new you. Before you know it, you don't

know who you are or how you got there; you only know (or you are trained to believe) that you have to stay there. In a cult there is only one way. Cults are totalitarian, set up to serve the leader's whims and desires, be they power, sex, or money (Lalich, 1996).

In many cults, the sexuality and sex lives of members are controlled, manipulated, and exploited, just as are other aspects of life. Cult leaders seem to realize rather quickly (if they didn't already have it in mind) that a great source of power can be found in the sexual control of their followers. Most people come into cults with certain personal values, including having a sense of their own sexual preferences, behaviors, norms, and expectations. But because of the influence of the group's persuasive methods, reinforced by leadership demands and peer pressure, in most cases a cult member's value system and sense of morality get altered, sometimes radically. Enforcing sexual submission may be considered the final step in the objectification of the individual as cult member.

Although sexual exploitation of male cult members is not uncommon, here I will focus on the psychosexual exploitation of women in cults. And even though cults are led by women as well as men, I will use the masculine pronoun when referring to cult leaders since, as far as we've seen, most of them are men.

Prevalence of Sexual Exploitation in Cults

For the purposes of this article, sexual exploitation is defined as the exercise of power for the purpose of controlling, using, or abusing another person sexually in order to satisfy the conscious or unconscious needs of the person in power—whether those needs be sexual, financial, emotional, or physical. Sexual abuse can range from having to live in a sexually coercive environment (whether or not one is personally abused) to unwanted touching to rape. It may masquerade as a marriage to the leader or as some form of spiritual practice, or it may come about as the overt seduction of vulnerable females (or males) by those in power. In many groups, if not the leader, then the husbands are given absolute control over their wives (and children), including a license for sexual activities without mutual consent. Marital rape is an accepted standard in certain cults.

Sexual exploitation includes reproductive and general sexual controls through such policies as enforced celibacy, arranged marriages, mandated relationships or intimacies, and regulated childbearing. Even if no such specific practices are overtly employed, most cults govern the sex lives of members with myriad rules and regulations.

Although no research has been done on the incidence of sexual abuse in cults, at one postcult recovery workshop, 40% of the women present said they had been sexually abused in their cult (Tobias & Lalich, 1994, p. 171). If we were to take that figure as an indicator of the prevalence of sexual abuse in cults, I would predict that when solid research is finally done in this area, we will find that 40% is actually an extremely low figure. I base this on my own work as a cult information specialist and educator who meets regularly with former cult members to help them get some clarity on their cultic experiences. The 26 female former cult members seen by me in the past 9 months came from a wide spectrum of cults.² Fifteen of the women were directly abused (14 by their leader and on occasion also by others in the cult, and 1 raped by her cult husband at the leader=s orders). Eight had their personal, marital, and/or sex lives manipulated and controlled by the cult. The remaining three were not personally abused but eventually became aware of the sexual victimization of other female members by the leader. In four of these cases, the sexual activity included lesbian and/or bisexual liaisons; and in three, the women were also subjected to physical abuse, one of which was ongoing and extreme.

From these data, it becomes apparent that the sexual exploitation of women in cults of all types is widespread, and, to date, is possibly the

²The 26 women came out of 21 different cults that fall within the various categories of types of cults. Three of the cults had a female leader. The 21 cults break down as follows: 2 guru-based Eastern meditation, 1 guru-based meditation/psychotherapy, 4 Bible-based (from large and well known to very small and nomadic), 2 self-development/transformational (large and well-known), 2 self-development/martial arts, 4 transformational/political (small, communal), 2 New Age eclectic, 1 psychotherapy/political, 1 psychotherapy (bodywork), 1 New Age/Fourth Way (Gurdjieff-based), 1 one-on-one cultic relationship, Christian-based.

least talked about, and certainly the least researched, aspect of cult life. There is, in my opinion, a twofold reason for the prevalence of sexual misdeeds in cults.

First, those who wish to dominate others discover that their power increases as their areas of influence over the other person become more intimate and personal. Therefore, controlling someone's sexuality or sex life is an effective method of all-inclusive manipulation and control. Once sexual control is in place, no part of life is left untouched by the cult leader's influence. The satisfaction of the leader's desires (be they real or conjured up for the purposes of sheer display of power) becomes an expression of the cult member's faithCher cross to bear, so to speak.

Second, many cult leaders fit the profile of the psychopath.³ Psychologist Robert Hare, a specialist in the study of this particular personality disorder, estimates that there are at least two million psychopaths in North America. He wrote:

Psychopaths are social predators who charm, manipulate, and ruthlessly plow their way through life, leaving a broad trail of broken hearts, shattered expectations, and empty wallets. Completely lacking in conscience and in feelings for others, they selfishly take what they want and do as they please, violating social norms and expectations without the slightest sense of guilt or regret. (Hare, 1993, p. xi)

Certainly not all psychopaths become cult leaders, nor are all cult leaders necessarily psychopaths. Yet, when studied, the backgrounds, personalities, and behaviors of many of those who have led and lead cults fit quite nicely into the framework for this particular character disorder. Several of the psychopath's characteristic traits lend themselves to acts of sexual exploitation and abuse of others. Those are (1) need for stimulation, (2) callousness and lack of empathy, (3) poor behavioral controls, (4) promiscuous sexual behavior and infidelity, (5) glibness and superficial

³This thesis is described in more detail in *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds: Freedom and Recovery from Cults and Abusive Relationships* (Tobias & Lalich, 1994).

charm, (6) grandiose sense of self, (7) pathological lying, (8) lack of remorse, shame, or guilt, (9) manipulation and conning, and (10) incapacity for love.

Sexual acting out of all sorts is frequent among cult leaders; and for them, as with psychopaths, sex is primarily a control and power issue. Such behavior goes hand in hand with more flagrant forms of irresponsibility. In one cult, for example, multiple sexual relations were encouraged even while one of the top leaders was known to be HIV positive. This kind of negligence toward others is not uncommon in the world of cults. Whether sexual behaviors are kept hidden or are part of the accepted and expected group practices, the fact remains that because of the power imbalance between leader and followers, sexual contact is never truly consensual and is likely to have damaging consequences for the follower.

How Submission Is Obtained: The Cult Rationale

The sexual exploitation in cults takes place on both the group and personal levels. Sometimes everyone in the group must exhibit certain attitudes and demonstrate certain behaviors. In other cases, only select female members must conform to particular sexual mores. Since cults are essentially mirror images of the central leader figure, how this transpires in each group will depend on the whims, preferences, and predilections of the man in charge. The following are control strategies that turn up repeatedly in my study of cults and in reports of former cult members.⁴

Group Rules

By controlling sex, marriage, and procreation, the cult is better able to control its membership. Rules of all sorts will be put into place to govern the members' daily lives, including their intimate relationships. This can range from standards of free love and free sex to strict behaviors. Some cults literally instruct their members when and how to have sexual intercourse.

⁴Some of the ideas presented in this section first appeared in *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds* (Tobias & Lalich, 1994).

Oftentimes cult policies will clearly define personal and sexual behaviors. Female members may be expected to dress a certain way (e.g., wear long skirts and look Awomanly@), behave a certain way (e.g., never look the men in the eye, always look down when in the presence of others, be passive and joyful at all times), and speak a certain way (e.g., refer to the leader as AMaster@). Other regulations may provide specific guidelines for dating, cohabitation, marriage and divorce, sexual relations, and so on. Female cult members are sometimes used to procure recruits through seduction and sexual favors. Some cults force women into prostitution to help finance the cult leader=s personal lifestyle. In others, men regularly flirt with and seduce women into friendships or relationships in order to recruit them into the cult; once in, the woman is usually turned over to someone else to Ahandle.@

In many cults, leadership decides who should have children and how many. In some, women are discouraged from bearing children, with sterilization or abortion used as means of birth control. In others, childbearing is expected and sometimes ordered by leadership in order to bring about more little cult members. Cults that particularly deride Athe family@ will have children taken away from their birth parents to be raised by other cult members, or sometimes even sent away to noncult relatives or foster homes. Marriages and partnerships are arranged and broken at the whim of the cult leader. Members merely become pawns in an abusive play, where the leader gets to act out.

Two popular control mechanisms are the demand for sexual abstinence or celibacy, and the enforcement of certain prohibitions (for example, against homosexual relationships or other unsanctioned relationships). At first glance such rules may provide relief from the confusion of trying to master the intricacies of sexuality and intimate relationships, especially for young adults who may be struggling with these issues. In reality, however, the rules merely serve as yet another cultic manipulation.

Given the arbitrary and erratic nature of cult leaders and their reasoning, rules may change often and unexpectedly. But no matter what the set-up, behaviors and attitudes are directed from on high and are not to be disputed. The cult leadership justifies these rules by explaining that the particular lifestyle is necessary to reach the purported goalCwhether it be

spiritual awakening, political or social revolution, personal development, or even financial prosperity.

Ultimately, once someone has been led to accept the cult leader's philosophy, then just about anything goes. He calls the shots, and members are expected to go along with the program or get out. Threat of expulsion gets equated with losing a chance at salvation, and can be too grim a prospect for a person who is psychologically trapped in a cultic system. Even the risk of losing the camaraderie and emotional support of fellow members can carry enough weight to keep a person tied to the cult.

Personal Abuse

When the abuse is directed at specific individuals, in most cases, either the cult leader or the person's direct leadership figure is the perpetrator. A variety of manipulations are used to get women to submit to these advances. These can range from subtle deceptions to outright rape. In almost every case, they are based on ploys that take advantage of the woman's loyalty, trust, and belief in the leader, the group, and the overall philosophy. More often than not, members submit out of pure fear. Given the imbalance of power, it is difficult to say no. Listed here are some of the most commonly used tactics to ensure submission.

A matter of honor. The woman is told that a sexual encounter with the leader is an honor, a special gift, a way of achieving further growth. This manipulative technique is a slick combination of sexual coercion and exploitation of the woman's faith. A devotee may be asked, for example, to help the leader relax or feel better. She may be led to believe that her increasing intimacy with the leader is crucial to his ongoing spiritual work, and is certainly necessary for her own path to enlightenment or salvation. In this way, sexual activities with the leader are interpreted and rationalized as spiritually beneficial.

This type of self-serving logic is quite typical of some of the guru-based cults, where even the supposedly celibate swami justifies his actions by telling each disciple that theirs is a special relationship, blessed by God or other spiritual higher-ups. Typically the woman is led to believe that she is the only one with whom the guru is involved. Bolstered by her

desire to obey and live up to her commitment, the woman pushes away any ambivalence she may feel and surrenders to her guru. Shame and secrecy, not enlightenment, are the outcomes of these liaisons.

The loyalty test. Transparent as it may seem to those not in a cult, the expectation that true followers will demonstrate their loyalty is an effective tool for manipulating cult members. The more a leader demands, the more power he gets. Soon he intrudes and controls every aspect of life. The rationale is that nothing is too sacred to withhold from the leader. Giving oneself, and sometimes even one's children, is viewed as a noble sacrifice. Physical violence and sexual abuse are incorporated into elaborate rituals in some cults, where these activities are endowed with mystical or magical meanings. In some cults, the testing of loyalty may be done in a sexually sadistic manner, further debilitating the follower and increasing personal confusion and dependency on the leader.

Testing may also take the form of controlling sexual preferences or relationships—for example, telling a lesbian that she can no longer follow her preference, or instigating a crisis situation where a person must break off a personal relationship in order to prove loyalty to the cult. Each time the person obeys the cult at the cost of forgoing her personal preference, she loses more sense of personal control, and consequently, self-esteem.

Female subservience. Women are strictly controlled in many cults. It is not uncommon for a woman to be a de facto slave of her spouse, who may not have been chosen or approved of by her. Nevertheless, she is expected to be completely submissive to all demands placed on her by her partner—or by those in leadership. Certain groups also condone punishment of women in the form of beatings or forced sexual intercourse, sometimes in front of a group. Refusing to go along is regarded as disobedience, and in a cult, disobedience is sin.

In some cults—and this is especially found in certain religious cults, whether based on Western or Eastern belief systems—women are regarded as second-class citizens. In one well-known cult, for example, members are taught that the brain of a woman is half the size of a man's. In many groups, the woman is viewed as the cause of all evil in the

universe, the one who brings the man down, diverts him from his spiritual path. The woman is Aof the flesh,@ while the man is Aof god.@ She is lesser, spiritually inferior, negative. Women learn to take the blame, feel the guilt, and carry the shame of others= behavior.

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Other exploitative scenarios include sex Atherapy,@ the guise of Atrue love,@ ritualized sex acts, group sex, and swapping of partners. Seduction, rape, forced drug use, induced altered states, manipulation of emotions, the imposition of anxiety and fear states, and other varieties of the misuse of power all surround the sexual abuse perpetrated in cults and cultic relationships. Vows of silence and pledges of obedience help perpetuate the cruel, exploitative, and sometimes violent system.

An Example of Sexual Abuse in the Name of Spiritual Enhancement⁵

In one guru-based meditation cult with a strong bias toward a transformational-psychotherapy worldview, the leader, who had taken vows of celibacy and poverty, began to have sex with various female members in his inner circle. He described his behavior to them as a Acoveted yoga practice,@ and Ameditate@ became a sort of code word for having sex. The guru extolled the virtues and value of Ameditative sex,@ and told each disciple that it was an honor to be invited into a relationship with him. He explained that he was bestowing upon them the wisdom of a 7,000-year-old secret, which only the inner circle of renunciates would share.

When challenged about these teachings, the guru would say, AI am the Teacher, you are the student, and that is that.@ In the evening, the women sat around him and he would teach and then choose which woman he would Ameditate@ with that evening. When some women from the inner circle began to marry in efforts to escape the secret sex scene, the leader, who often referred to himself as AGod=s agent,@ expanded his horizons and incorporated his sexual style into the group=s teachings. Others in the group were now expected to also participate in his secret yogic

⁵For a longer, first-person account of membership in this same group, see Katherine E. Betz=s article in this issue.

practice. The guru's yogic secret was that anyone who desired could ask any other member to take part in this spiritual technique. It did not matter who was married or partnered; everyone was up for grabs.

Feelings of jealousy and betrayal were looked down upon, seen as sins, human traits, spiritually negative and backward; divorce was not an option. So, if someone knocked on your door one night and said, 'I want to meditate with you', you'd go, like it or not. If your partner displayed or expressed any sign of jealousy, he or she was made to watch the two of you make love until all feelings of jealousy and betrayal disappeared.

One teaching meant to alleviate feelings of guilt or pangs of morality was the guru's concept of 'non-doership'. Three times a day at darshan, the guru repeated: 'Celibacy, non-doership, non-ownership. Renounce the world, including sex and money. Live a life of working contemplation and meditation.' Non-doership meant that you could do things without being responsible. The idea was that if one relaxed and let the energy of natural meditation move the body, then responsibility evaporated. It was, after all, only the energy acting. By this logic, it became acceptable even desirable to have sex with anyone through this agency-free method of natural meditation. In fact, you could be celibate and still have sex because it was your energy doing it and your energy was not you. The daily ritual evolved into 45 minutes of meditation leading to sex. By blending a form of dissociation and a philosophy of personal non-responsibility, the guru was able to justify his sexual scheme among his followers.

The guru would have sex three to four times a day, and everyone else was expected to do the same. Among this group, it was considered 'religious' and 'better' to have sex with many partners; the more sex, the more magnanimous disciples felt. And since no one was the 'doer', no one was to get upset when his or her partner had sex with others. Falling in love was verboten, and infidelity was seen as a positive attribute. The guru regularly praised those who boasted having perhaps five different partners in a day. 'You're so spiritual,' he would say.

Although the circle had broadened to include most of those living at one particular ashram, the guru was clever enough not to make this a widespread practice among his worldwide followers, so that the majority of regular members had no idea about the sexual abuse going on around the guru and certain higher level disciples. This strategy served to reinforce both the secrecy among the inner sex circle and the loyalty of all members.

When one woman decided to leave both her arranged marriage and the ashram community, she was sent before a tribunal of members, deemed unfit, and cast out. She was condemned and warned not to expose any yogic secrets. The guru came personally to her house and condemned her for seven lifetimes. Aided by the distance of the excommunication, the support of her new partner, and counseling at a rape crisis center, the woman was finally able to stop protecting the cult leader. After having given 20 years of her life to a psychological con artist, at last she was able to see that yogic secrecy was not a spiritual technique. She realized that the secrecy only served to shield her abuse and that of many others. This realization put her on the path to recovery.

Aftereffects and Treatment

Besides the typical aftereffects of cult membership (see Tobias & Lalich, 1994), women who are sexually exploited or abused in their cult have specific issues to confront. Even after leaving the cult, they frequently continue to blame themselves, often still believing that they deserved the abuse. Typically, they are still afraid to talk about their feelings for fear of betraying sacred secrets. Often they carry a great deal of confusion about sex, intimacy, and sexual relationships. In sorting through all of this, it becomes most important to help the woman see that cultic manipulations were central to the sexual exploitation.

Most likely the sexual norms within the cult and the abuses perpetrated have become so intertwined with the overall belief system that the victimized woman may not even recognize what happened to her as exploitative or harmful. Clinical psychologist Margaret Thaler Singer states that it is an intellectual mistake to equate the sexual abuse found in cults with the sexual abuse in outside society. Sexual abuse in society is more random, furtive, and associated with guilt, whereas sexual abuse in cults may be an integral, open, and accepted part of the system

(Singer, quoted in Gelman, 1993, p. 54). The interlocking and penetrating nature of the cultic system of influence and the insidiousness of its effect will certainly have a large impact on a person's recovery process.

Psychoeducation: One Approach to Recovery

In working with women who have been sexually manipulated, controlled, exploited, and/or abused in their cult, I have found that the most helpful approach is to assist them in understanding exactly *how* they were taken advantage of. Central to cult membership is the idea of deception. I have yet to meet a person who went out and knowingly joined a cult. Cult members are recruited, and deceptively so. If they knew what they were really getting into, they would never have joined. Once they realize the nature of the psychological swindle perpetrated on them, former cult members are less likely to continue with their attitudes of self-blame, sense of failure, and self-deprecation. Time and again, that realization has been key to the person's ability to recover from the loss, devastation, and personal harm. The hurt and sense of betrayal may remain, but once the manipulation has been exposed, life begins to seem a little more bearable.

Physical Safety

Because of the power dynamics of the cultic situation, safety and redress of wrongs are generally hard to come by so long as the victim remains in the cultic environment. If there was severe abuse or if a woman is escaping a particularly harmful cult situation, then she should seek appropriate avenues of safety and assistance, such as finding a secure place to stay, either with family, a trusted friend, or a women's shelter, and getting the necessary medical help. If need be, she may want to go to or call a rape crisis center or the police.

Psychological Recovery

Without intending to minimize the destructive nature of sexual exploitation, I believe that the approach with former cult members is essentially the same whether or not they have been in an environment of sexual control or direct sexual abuse. By this I mean that until the cult's hidden agenda has been exposed, cult members or former cult members can make little progress. Tearing apart and examining bit by bit the cult's

covert program of manipulation is critical to getting to the heart of the matter.

How is that done?

There is not one simple answer since each cult is different, and even within the same cult, conditions may vary at different times and different locations. Equally important, every person's experience is so individual, as is each person's recovery. But as much as cults might differ from one another, in certain ways, they are similar. When the ideological veil is stripped away, cults look very much alike because of their use of classic thought-reform techniques and processes (colloquially, brainwashing). That is why in support groups of former cult members, participants may come from groups that on the surface appear to be vastly different (for example, from ultra-conservative Bible-based to radical left-wing political to intensely interpersonal psychotherapeutic), yet they understand one another quite easily because, across all types of cults, the control techniques more or less boil down to the same familiar few.

Together, the former cult member and I begin to look at the system of influence to which she was subjected. If she was involved in a group I'm not already familiar with, I do whatever I can to educate myself about that particular group, the leader, and the underlying belief system. That way I can work as an interactive partner in her exploration. Other tools I use are (1) suggesting related readings, including handouts, article reprints, and books; (2) together viewing and discussing videotapes on cults, psychological cons, hypnosis, and related material; and (3) assigning homework.

One helpful task is for the woman to do a chronology of her time in the cult. I usually advise not doing this in great detail, but starting with broad outlines by year or by month. She is to reconstruct as best she can what was going on, where she was living, what work or a practice@ the group was engaged in, what policies were in place, what the leader was doing, what her level of involvement was, and so forth. Long-term cult members often have trouble piecing together a chronology. But as the person reflects on her time in the cult, more and more of the experience comes back to her, and eventually she is able to come up with a specific

sequence of events. This exercise serves at least four functions: (1) it gives substance to what is often literally a Amush@ in the woman=s brain about what went on, (2) it exposes manipulative patterns of behavior on the part of the cult leadership, (3) it demystifies the woman=s experiences and the power of the cult leader, and (4) it keeps the person focused.

I also ask recovering cult members to do some reading to help orient our discussions and their growing understanding of what happened to them. In addition to whatever might be available on the particular group, select chapters from or summaries of the work of Robert Jay Lifton, Edgar Schein, and Margaret Thaler Singer are the most helpful. Lifton, Schein, and Singer are the early researchers who studied the type of psychological influence found in cultic, or thought-reform environments.

Lifton=s (1961) book *Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism*, based on his study of brainwashing in Communist China, outlines eight psychological themes identified by him as crucial to the creation of a totalist environment. These themes are milieu control, mystical manipulation, demand for purity, the cult of confession, the Asacred science,@ loading the language, doctrine over person, and dispensing of existence.

Schein (Schein, Schneier, & Barker, 1961) wrote about coercive persuasion, using a model of three stages: unfreezing, changing, and refreezing. According to Schein, the goal of the group process is to reshape attitudes and behavior by destabilizing a person=s sense of self (unfreezing), offering a solution (changing), then reinforcing with positive feedback when the person behaves in the desired way (refreezing).

Singer=s thought-reform model revolves around the identification of six conditions found in the environment to induce change. These are (1) keep the person unaware of what=s going on, (2) gain control of the person=s environment and time, (3) create a sense of powerlessness in the person, (4) punish old behaviors, (5) reward desired behaviors, and (6) have an authoritarian structure with a closed system of logic (Singer with Lalich, 1995).

Lifton, Schein, and Singer all reinforce the point that conditions of literal imprisonment or physical restraint are not necessary to achieve the desired results of a thought-reform program. Rather, a series of social and psychological influence techniques inflicted on a vulnerable person are sufficient to break down the sense of self and induce the person to adapt the new thinking required by the cult. This subversive feature is what makes thought reform so powerful, and yet so difficult to comprehend for those who have never been caught in such a psychological trap. A cult leader need not point a gun at a follower to get her to submit; he uses far more intrusive methods to first change the very fundamental way she thinks about herself and the rest of the world and him. After that, compliance is almost always ensured.

Discussions of the basic concepts of thought reform help former cult members gain insights into their experiences. Taking each theme or condition, one at a time, a person might be asked to list the many ways a particular theme was manifest in the cult. As she does this, she begins to put together a picture of organized manipulation and control. Recognizing that she had been influenced by sophisticated and effective persuasion techniques, her feelings of confusion, guilt, and self-blame subside. Similarly, once she understands she was tricked, taken advantage of, and used by the cult leader for his own selfish needs, the woman will be able to more productively address her feelings about the sexual abuse, as well as other residuals of the cult experience.

Healing from Psychosexual Abuse

Bearing in mind that cults control their members through deceptive and manipulative techniques that induce dependency, anxiety, and fear, the recovery process for someone who has extricated herself from a cult is indeed a rocky road. Former members typically experience a range of feelings: fear, mistrust, and betrayal, as well as confusion and disorientation. At the same time, they usually feel relieved to be out of the cultic situation. Major areas of work will revolve around the following: reestablishing boundaries; regaining self-esteem and self-confidence; dealing with feelings of betrayal; learning to trust again; resolving identity crises (who am I? how did it happen?); and what I call exorcizing the hindering emotions of shame, blame, and guilt.

Given the sophisticated and totalist nature of thought reform in a cultic environment, it is hard to separate the effects of sexual abuse from the overall psychological rape perpetrated by the leader and the group. The sexual exploitation is reinforced by the psychological violation; as a result, the harm to the individual is twofold.

Another significant factor is that typically cultic sexual exploitation and abuse is not a one-time occurrence. Integral as it is to the cult philosophy and worldview, ongoing and persistent abuse is likely to be part of daily life; for some women, a decades-long reality. Therefore, the abused female cult member—similar to certain battered women who are also victims of mind manipulation—needs to unravel the psychological trappings that were imposed on her by the perpetrator to ensure submission without challenge to his authority.

In some cases, the feelings related to sexual abuse may be the deepest and last layer of cult-related trauma to explore. Acknowledging that one was sexually exploited in the name of a greater goal is often a painful process. Consequently, some cult members deny, rationalize, minimize, and distort the meaning of the experience, while others may dissociate, separate from, split off, and even "forget" what happened in order to tolerate continued membership in or loyalty toward the group. Part of the healing process will entail the recovery of such unpleasant or unwanted experiences as part of one's own past. Without such reclamation, the negative experiences tend to come back later and disrupt healthy functioning and the opportunity for satisfying personal relationships based on equality and mutual trust.

Various forms of self-expression (art, music, poetry, dance, journal keeping, drama), support groups, individual therapy, public speaking, and legal action are all means by which women have rid themselves of residual cult thinking and the unnerving aftereffects of cult abuse. Each woman's healing journey is different. But often with the help of friends, family, educators, counselors, clergy, or therapists, she will find her preferred means of working through the pain, guilt, and shame that is the inevitable legacy of cult membership.

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