On using the term cult

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Even though we have each studied cults and educated people about this subject for more than 20 years, neither of us has ever felt completely comfortable with the term “cult.” No other term, however, serves more effectively the linked educational and research aims of ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association, founded as American Family Foundation in 1979), the organization that we serve as president (Rosedale) and executive director (Langone). In order to help others who have asked questions about the term “cult,” we here offer some thoughts on the definition and use of this term.

Review of Definitions of the term “Cult”

According to the “Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary” (1971) the term, “cult,” originally referred to “worship; reverential homage rendered to a divine being or beings…a particular form or system of religious worship; especially in reference to its external rites and ceremonies…devotion or homage to a particular person or thing.” More recently, the term has taken on additional connotations:

3 : A religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious…

4 : A system for the cure of disease based on dogma set forth by its promulgator…

5 a. great devotion to a person, idea, object, movement, or work…b. a usually small group of people characterized by such devotion.” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, Tenth Edition, 1994)

Robbins’s (1988) review of recent sociological contributions to the study of cults identifies four definitional perspectives:

(1) cults as dangerous, authoritarian groups;

(2) cults as culturally innovative or transcultural groups;

(3) cults as loosely structured protoreligions;

(4) Stark and Bainbridge’s (1985) subtypology that distinguishes among “audience cults” (members seek to receive information, e.g., through a lecture or tape series) “client cults” (members seek some specific benefit, e.g., psychotherapy, spiritual guidance), and “cult movements” (organizations that demand a high level of commitment from members). The Stark and Bainbridge typology relates to their finding that cult membership increases as church membership decreases.

Rutgers University professor Benjamin Zablocki (1997) says that sociologists often distinguish “cult” from “church,” “sect,” and “denomination.” Cults are innovative, fervent groups. If they become accepted into the mainstream, cults, in his view, lose their fervor and become more organized and integrated into the community; they become churches. When people within churches become dissatisfied and break off into fervent splinter groups, the new groups are called sects. As sects become more stolid and integrated into the community, they become denominations. Zablocki defines a cult as “an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment.” According to Zablocki, cults are at high risk of becoming abusive to members, in part because members’ adulation of charismatic leaders contributes to their becoming corrupted by the power they seek and are accorded.

Definitions proposed at various times by associates of ICSA tend to presume the manifestation of what is potential in Zablocki’s definition. These definitions tend to emphasize elements of authoritarian structure, deception, and manipulation and the fact that groups may be psychotherapeutic, political, or commercial, as well as religious. One of the more commonly quoted definitions of “cult” was articulated at an ICSA/UCLA Wingspread Conference on Cultism in 1985:

Cult (totalist type): A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subervience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, etc.), designed to advance the goals of the group’s leaders, to the actual or
Using the Term Cult: Considerations

The concept “cult,” as with other concepts (e.g., “right wing,” “left wing”), is a theoretical type against which actual groups are compared as best as one can with the information at one’s disposal. The theoretical type should serve as a benchmark, not as an organizing structure that selects only those observations that confirm a stereotype. It is vital that each case be evaluated individually with regard to the group environment and the person(s) interacting within and with that environment.

Much as people may wish that it were so, the fact is that, at least at present, no scientific “test” incontrovertibly establishes whether or not a group is indeed a “cult.” Although ICSA’s Group Psychological Abuse Scale (Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994) is a useful and promising tool for assessing groups scientifically, this self-report measure needs further psychometric development and should be supplemented by observational measures yet to be devised. Cult research is in a stage similar to that of depression research when the first objective measures of depression as a mental and emotional state were being developed. The lack of objective measures did not nullify the utility of definitions of depression then in use, but the development of such measures enhanced definitional understanding and classification reliability. In the years ahead, we hope to see similar progress in cultic studies.

Because of the current ambiguity surrounding the term “cult,” ICSA does not produce an official list of “cults,” even though some people mistakenly interpret any list (e.g., a list of groups on which we have information) as a list of “cults.” Such a list would have little utility because there are thousands of groups about which people have expressed concern, yet scientific research has been conducted on few groups. A list could even be misleading because some people might mistakenly think that the label “cult” implies that the group in question has all the significant attributes of the hypothetical type “cult,” when in fact it has only some of those attributes. Conversely, some people may mistakenly assume that because a group is not on the list, they need not be concerned. Thus, when inquirers ask us, “Is such and such a cult? ½ we tend to say, “Study our information on psychological manipulation and cultic groups, then apply this information to what you know and can find out about the group that concerns you.” Our goal is to help inquirers make more informed judgments and decisions, not to dictate those judgments and decisions.

We try to direct inquirers’ attention to potentially harmful practices, rather than to a label. In essence, we say: “These are practices that have been associated with harmful effects in some people. To what, if any extent, are these practices found in the group in question? And how might you or your loved one be affected by these practices?” One of us (Langone) tries to focus a family’s concerns by saying: “Assume, even if only for the sake of argument, that your loved one were in a ‘cult.’ What if anything about his or her behavior would trouble you?” After the troubling behaviors are identified, then the family can determine how, if at all, these behaviors are related to the group environment. A label tends to be superfluous at this point in the analysis.

Thus, we advocate a nuanced, evidence-based approach to definition and classification. We do not ignore or disparage evidence indicating that some groups may closely approach the theoretical type, “cult.” Nor do we deny the necessity to make expert judgments about whether or not a particular set of group processes harmed a specific person or persons, a judgment that mental health clinicians and other professionals sometimes have to make in therapeutic or forensic contexts. We do, however, advocate that these kinds of judgments should rest on careful analyses of structure and behavior within a specific context, rather than a superficial classification decision.

Such analyses sometimes result in the conclusion that some groups that harm some people are not necessarily cults. A new age group that is neither manipulative nor authoritarian might harm some people because it advocates a medically dangerous diet or psychologically harmful practices. A church may harm some believers because its pastor is domineering and abusive. A psychotherapist may harm some patients because she or he doesn’t adequately understand how memory works and may, with the best of intentions, induce false memories in clients. These are all examples of individual harm related to interpersonal influence. They are all examples of situations that might understandably arouse the concern of the harmed person’s family and of ICSA. But these situations are not necessarily “cult” situations, even though they may have a family resemblance to the concept “cult.” On the other hand, because appearances can deceive, especially in cults, further investigation of such cases may reveal the presence of cultic dynamics. The important point to keep in mind is that classification decisions should be based on the best available evidence and should always be subject to reevaluation.

Even though the term “cult” has limited utility, it is so embedded in popular culture that those of us concerned about helping people harmed by group involvements or preventing people from being so harmed cannot avoid using it. Whatever the term’s limitations, it points us in a meaningful direction. And no other term relevant to group psychological manipulation (e.g., sociopsychological influence, coercive persuasion, undue influence, exploitative manipulation) has ever been able to capture and sustain public interest, which is the sine qua non of public education. If, however, we cannot realistically avoid the term, let us at least strive to use it judiciously.


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Writing Down the Pain: A Case Study of the Benefits of Writing for Cult Survivors

Singer’s Six Conditions of Mind Control
Strong Indications that our Relationship with a Spiritual Teacher is unhealthy
The Manipulation of Spiritual Experience: Unethical Hypnosis in Destructive Cults
The Potential for Abuse in the Guru-Disciple Relationship
The Relational System of the Traumatizing Narcissist
Therapy with Ex-Cult Members
Thought Reform Exists: Organized, Programmatic Influence
Thought Reform Today
Trauma and Recovery (cult, brainwashing)

Types of Cults
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News

Aum Shinrikyo spinoff group Aleph ordered to pay ¥1.03 bil to victims April 11, 2019
Japan Today

April 11, 2019
The Tokyo District Court has ordered Aleph, a spinoff group of the religious cult Aum Shinrikyo, to pay over one billion yen in compensation to victims of the 1995 Tokyo subway sarin attack that killed 13 people and injured thousands, as well as victims of other crimes committed by cult members in […]

With lawsuit settled, Scientology-linked company will operate small rehab at Trout Run April 11, 2019
·        Frederick News-Post ·        By Cameron Dodd

Mar 30, 2019
Frederick County has settled a long-running lawsuit with a Church of Scientology-linked real estate company over plans to build a controversial drug rehabilitation center on Catoctin Mountain.
Frederick County Circuit Court approved a joint motion March 20 to dismiss the case of Social Betterment Properties International v. Frederick County […]

Elisabeth Moss on Her Relationship with Scientology: ‘You Can’t Take Away’ My Right to ‘Believe’ April 10, 2019
Dave Quinn

PEOPLE

April 10, 2019
Elisabeth Moss is standing by her involvement with the Church of Scientology, no matter what criticism might come her way.
In a wide-ranging interview with the Daily Beast published on Monday, the Emmy winner, 36, spoke out about the church — stressing that those curious about Scientology “educate themselves for themselves and […]

Trial of NXIVM leader Keith Raniere begins, ‘Smallville’ actress pleads guilty April 8, 2019
TOM HAYS

ABC7NY

April 8, 2019
NEW YORK -- With jury selection beginning at the federal case against a cult-like upstate New York group, TV actress Allison Mack pleaded guilty Monday to charges she manipulated women into becoming sex slaves for its spiritual leader.
Mack, 36, wept as she admitted her crimes and apologized to the women who […]

Elisabeth Moss pleads guilty to racketeering charges in NXIVM case April 8, 2019
Tyler McCarthy

Fox News

April 8, 2019
Former “Smallville” actress Allison Mack pleaded guilty in a Brooklyn federal court Monday to racketeering charges in relation to the cultlike group NXIVM.
Mack entered her plea shortly before jury selection was scheduled to start.
The trial was expected to detail sensational allegations that the group recruited sex slaves for its spiritual leader, Keith Raniere.
Prosecutors accused […]

CONDITIONS FOR MIND CONTROL DR. MARGARET SINGER

April 8, 2019
Margaret T. Singer, Ph.D., Emeritus Prof. of Psychology, Univ. of CA, Berkeley

THOUGHT REFORM = LANGUAGE + SOCIAL & PSYCHOLOGICAL INFLUENCE

A thought reform program: the self concept is destabilized the group/leaders attack one's evaluation of self SELF.Two Elements in one's self-concept: Peripheral Sense: adequacy of public & judgmental aspects, social status, role performance, conformity to social […]

DR. ROBERT J. LIFTON’S CRITERIA FOR THOUGHT REFORM

THOUGHT REFORM: THE PSYCHOLOGY OF TOTALISM CHAPTER 22

April 8, 2019
Chapel Hill, 1989
THE FUTURE OF IMMORTALITY CHAPTER 15 (New York 1987)

Any ideology -- that is, any set of emotionally-charged convictions about men and his relationship to the natural or supernatural world -- may be carried by its adherents in a totalistic direction. But this is most likely to occur with those ideologies which are most […]

Psychological domestic abuse becomes crime in Scotland under ‘groundbreaking’ new law April 4, 2019
Maya Oppenheim

The Independent

April 1, 2019
"He didn’t give me any money, so I always had to stay at home, I felt so isolated. He was always pushing me and abusing me in front of my family and friends,” says domestic abuse survivor

A "groundbreaking” new law has come into effect in Scotland that makes psychological domestic abuse and controlling behaviour a […]

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News
Woman Convicted in Cult-Related Slaying of Boyfriend March 31, 2019
U.S. News & World ReportMarch 30, 2019STROUDSBURG, PA. (AP) — A woman has been convicted of killing her boyfriend, which she said he asked her
to do because of issues with an online cult.Jurors in Monroe County deliberated for nine hours before convicting 42-year-old Barbara Rogers of third-
degree murder Friday in the death of 32-year-old [...]
The term cult is often used to describe new religious movements or alternative religious movements by those who wish to stereotype the movement in a negative way. These new religious movements involve a wide diversity of different groups/movements/sects. But often involve Many scholars no longer use the term ‘cult’ except in the case of groups which exhibit extreme forms of manipulation and mind control such as David Koresh’s Branch Davidians. However, concepts of what constitutes as mind control will differ depending on different perspectives. For example, to become a monk or nun within a Catholic Church would involve giving up many outer freedoms and surrendering to the abbot or Mother Superior.