Chapter 3

Cults of Personality

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"It is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma."
– *Max Weber, sociologist*

Introduction

To date, an evidence-based understanding of cults has been limited by a lack of systematic, peer-reviewed research studies on the subject along with an extant literature dominated by anecdotal accounts published in books by self-styled experts. Many of these accounts have been written from a clinical perspective based on the select experiences of ex-followers of specific groups, limiting their generalizability to the broader cult spectrum and its membership. To make matters worse, there is no universally accepted definition of the term "cult" that adequately balances its intended meaning with the diversity of the phenomenon. As such, just what a cult is remains open to debate.

Historically, the term "cult" was most often applied to religious groups where differentiation from a "sect" depended on whether a deviant religious organization was based on traditional or novel beliefs and practices. In other words, unlike religious sects that are schismatic offshoots of established religious groups, cults have been defined as lacking ties to existing groups with a firm foothold in mainstream society [1]. The phenomenon of cults has since been scrutinized across a variety of academic disciplines. Consequently, theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychiatrists have each modeled cults according to distinct frameworks (e.g., sociologists emphasize a group's relationship to society whereas psychiatrists focus on the psychological make-up of its individual members) [2]. Cults also have been widely covered in the media, resulting in the use of the term to encompass all manner of social organizations centered around ideological beliefs including political, entrepreneurial, psychotherapeutic, self-help, and pseudoscientific movements.

The term "cult" been diluted through the years such that it has been used indiscriminately to describe mainstream political movements (e.g., "the cult of Donald Trump") or loose affiliation with ideologies that have spread around the world without any central organizational structure or leadership (e.g., QAnon). Moreover, it also has become almost uniformly pejorative. This negative valence began in the 1970s as part of a moral panic in response to the perceived risk of young people being lured away from their families and lost to the likes of the Hare Krishnas and the Unification Church along with the extremist violence of the Manson Family and Jim Jones' Peoples Temple. This in turn gave birth to the "anticult" movement that popularized cults as a threat to society due to

their alleged ability to use "mind control" to "brainwash" members into subservience. The anticult movement, spearheaded by ex-cult members and mental health professionals with newfound careers trying to help them, popularized the practice of involuntary extraction from cult affiliation and forced "deprogramming" as the best hope for a cult member's salvation [3]. By the time of the Branch Davidians' incendiary standoff in Waco, Texas and the mass suicide of Heaven's Gate in the 1990s, this mainstream view of cults as dangerous if not outright evil and cult members as victims robbed of free will and in need of rescue and rehabilitation became firmly entrenched so that it remains a prominent trope within public consciousness today.

The demonization of cults in the public eye has occurred despite significant pushback by some academic scholars who have noted that the methods of "coercive persuasion" often used to identify cults can often be found in the recruitment tactics of mainstream religious groups, the military, or corporate entities like Amway [4, 5]. This counterargument was strongly supported by a 1992 study that presented participants with a vignette describing a young male college student who left school to join a group that subjected him to "isolation of the individual, total control of the individual's environment, control of all channels of information and communication, and manipulation of guilt" [5, p. 532]. When the study participants were told that the group was the Moonies (i.e., the Unification Church), they were significantly more likely to prefer the term "brainwashing" to describe the indoctrination process and more likely to rate the group as "negative," "unfair," and "coercive" than when the groups was identified as the Marines or a Catholic seminary. Similarly, respondents were also significantly more likely to rate the young man as unhappy, less intelligent, less responsible, and lacking in power to resist when the group was identified as the Moonies compared to the Marines or the Catholic Church. Notably, the vast majority of the sample described "television, newspapers, magazines, or radio" as their primary source of information about cults.

Given this negative bias against cults and the parallels between modern anticult attitudes and historical prejudices against Masons, Mormons, and Catholics before they became part of mainstream religion in the US, it has been recommended that the term "cult" be replaced by value-neutral terms like "new religious movement" or "emergent religion." However, there remains no nonpejorative alternative to describe nonreligious ideological groups.

That the term "cult" is often used as a pejorative should not be taken to mean that there is no such thing as a cult or that the concept lacks validity. Rather, it could be argued that the term's utility lies in calling attention to the fact that cults are by definition "highly manipulative groups that exploit and otherwise abuse their members" [6]. Indeed, some authors have attempted to resolve the indiscriminately pejorative use of the term "cult" by specifying that it should be reserved for groups guilty of abusive practices and a significant potential for membership to cause personal harm. For example, Chambers and colleagues defined cults as "groups that often exploit members psychologically and/or financially, typically by making members comply with leadership's demands through certain types of psychological manipulation ... through the inculcation of deep-seated anxious dependency on the group and its leaders" [7, n.p.]. This definition was based on factor analysis of results from administering the Group Psychological Abuse Scale to 308 former cult followers from 101 different groups. In a similar vein, West and Martin specified that a "totalist cult" ought to be defined as

> a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of

> persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressure, information management, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, suspension of individuality and critical judgment, and so on, designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the possible or actual detriment of members, their families, or the community). [8, n.p.]

Cults of Personality

The term "personality cult" (or "cult of personality") has been around since at least the late 1800s when it was used to describe the public's widespread devotion to certain political leaders. It was given new life when Nikita Khrushchev, while addressing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in 1956, denounced the "personality cult" of Joseph Stalin in the name of heralding a return to the principles of Marxism-Leninism [9]. Much like the evolution of the word "cult" itself, the terms "cult of personality" and "modern personality cult" [10] have since been applied in casual discourse to political regimes with leaders like Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Kim Jong-Il, and Donald Trump. Moreover, it is also applied to a wider range of religious and secular cults with prominent leaders such as Reverend Sun Myung Moon, Charles Manson, Jim Jones, and David Koresh. Indeed, owing to the fact that having a central cult leader has become a stereotypical cult feature, "cults" and "cults of personality" have become almost synonymous. For example, Levine defined a cult as a "group of people which follows a dominant leader [who] makes absolute claims about his being . . . that he is divine . . . omniscient and infallible" and whose "membership is contingent on complete and literal acceptance of his doctrines and dogma" with "unquestioning loyalty . . . and total willingness to obey the cult leader's commands without question" [11, p. 593]. Adopting this broader meaning of the term without limiting it to the political sphere, this chapter defines "cult of personality" as any cult whose members are held in thrall by an identifiable leader.

Characteristics of Leaders

Central to the concept of a cult of personality is a relational dynamic that involves the reverence if not outright worship of its leader by its followers. Along with the extremes to which cult followers are often willing to go at the behest of their leader, this dynamic naturally begs the question of what characteristics the leader of a "personality cult" might possess that would command such authority, obedience, and devotion.

Charisma

In order to account for "cults of personality" in the political realm, the sociologist Max Weber developed a theory of "charismatic leadership" to describe the ability of some leaders to attract substantial followings by virtue of their extraordinary personal characteristics rather than through an appeal to tradition or rationality. Weber described charisma as a "certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" [12, p. 538]. However, he did not delineate what those qualities were and instead characterized charisma in value-neutral and utilitarian terms without distinguishing between the charisma of Jesus Christ or

Napoleon Bonaparte [13]. To Weber, who wrote "it is recognition on the part of those subject to authority which is decisive for the validity of charisma," the defining feature of charismatic leadership isn't *how* a charismatic leader attracts a following – whether through one's personality, persuasiveness, or espoused ideology – but *that* the leader is able to do so [12, p. 539].

Looking beyond mass political movements to the broader spectrum of cults that includes leaders with more modest numbers of followers, it becomes apparent that charisma, like beauty or sex appeal, lies in the eye of the beholder. Indeed, such subjectivity is central to the cult concept inasmuch as the labeling of leaders and followers as part of a cult requires that the rest of society looks upon them with incredulity. In other words, were everyone wholly impressed by the charisma of a cult leader, no one would be claiming that they were a leader of a cult – "cult" labels are typically assigned by those unimpressed if not repulsed by cults and their leaders.

Characterizations of political "cults of personality" have long recognized that charisma may be as much an inherent inspirational quality of a leader as it is manufactured through propaganda and misinformation, media depiction, and statecraft, as well as by instituting a culture of fear in the populace. For example, the "cult of Stalin" has been attributed to his iron-fisted rule including publicly witnessed "purges and mass killings" of political opponents [10]. This is also true of smaller religious and secular cults where "boundary controls" [14] – including all of the geographical, digital, or ideological factors that restrict interaction between cult members and the outside world – together with ritual practice create a closed social order where followers are exposed to a simulated, ideal representation of a leader.

Personality

If "cults of personality" are defined by the presence of a charismatic leader, it follows that charisma ought to be definable in terms of personality traits. At the same time, since the term "cult" is typically used as a pejorative, it should come as no surprise that cult leaders have almost invariably been characterized in "negative" terms of personality disorder rather than in "positive" terms of personality traits that might account for their charisma.

Notably, such characterizations have not typically involved any systematic psychological or psychiatric assessment of cult leaders, but rather suppositions about individual cases based on news reports, the testimony of ex-cult "survivors," and overarching generalizations based on backward reasoning that presumes that a cult leader must be "bad" in some way. For example, in their provocatively titled 1994 book *Captive Hearts, Captive Minds*, Tobias and Lalich claimed that "researchers and clinicians who have observed these individuals describe [cult leaders] variously as neurotic, psychotic, on a spectrum exhibiting neurotic, sociopathic, and psychotic characteristics, or suffering from personality disorder . . . we can surmise that there is a significant psychological dysfunctioning in some cult leaders and that their behavior demonstrates features rather consistent with the disorder known as psychopathy" [15, pp. 68–69]. They enumerate 15 traits of psychopathy including pathological lying, lack of remorse, incapacity for love, callousness, promiscuous sexual behavior, and criminal or entrepreneurial versatility as a "tool to help . . . label and demystify traits" of cult leaders [15, p. 72]. In a similar vein, Burke cited "a number of peer-reviewed studies . . . based on clinical interviews with

ex-cult members, which report various antisocial acts and behaviors ... [that] detail examples of mistreatment, psychological intimidation, and physical and sexual abuse of cult members by cult leaders" to conclude that the behavior of cult leaders can be explained by antisocial personality disorder or possibly narcissistic personality disorder [16, n.p.].

Turning to individual case studies, Akimoto proposed that Shoko Asahara – the leader of the Aum Shinrikyo cult responsible for the 1995 sarin gas attacks in Tokyo – suffered from "pseudologica phantastica" and "severe incarceration psychosis" [17]. This assessment seems to have been based on news accounts of Asahara including his reported behavior in court rather than any independent medical examination. Goldberg similarly described psychodynamic therapy with an "ex-cultist prosecuted for criminal behavior" and, based solely on her patient's claims, attributed her "antisocial behavior" to the influence of "her idealized cult leader's version of morality" [18, p. 15].

Owing to a lack of rigorous study of cult leaders and a biased sampling of the accounts of ex-cult members, it would be prudent to view existing generalizations about the personality of cult leaders with a skeptical eye. This statement does not deny that some cult leaders who are guilty of abusive criminal behavior might have personality traits such as narcissism, sociopathy, or psychopathy, but at the same time cautions against claims that this is necessarily true of any leader of a group labeled as a "cult." Acknowledging that "the study of the cult leader has been rather neglected" [2, p. 18], the Group for Advancement of Psychiatry provided a less pathological typology of cult leaders including the "charismatic figure," the "hero," the "outsider," the "narcissist," and the "entrepreneur" that highlights that there is no one-size-fits-all profile of a cult leader.

It should be noted that, as with cult followers, it remains possible that the behavior and personality traits of cult leaders are characteristics that emerged as a consequence of involvement within the interpersonal dynamics of cult groups. Psychological studies of role identity such as the well-known Stanford prison experiment [19] provide support for the dictum that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely," suggesting that the apparent personality stylings of cult leaders may be more of a "state" than a "trait" phenomenon. In the absence of prospective personality assessments of cult leaders prior to and throughout their cult affiliation, however, this possibility remains untested.

Brainwashing, Mind Control, and Coercive Persuasion

Cult leaders are often portrayed as Svengalis, capable of manipulating and exploiting hapless victims through a psychological process of indoctrination that has been variably referred to as "brainwashing," "thought reform," "mind control," or "coercive persuasion." After all, casual observers might ask, how else could followers come to fall under the apparent spell of charismatic leaders?

Unfortunately, efforts to detail this process have been thwarted by failures to validate a scientifically plausible explanatory mechanism or to convincingly demonstrate that it compromises free will. For example, some authors have theorized that the process involves hypnotic suggestion and have invoked the "Stockholm syndrome" to account for cult followers' identification with an oppressive cult leader [8, 20]. Others have referred to the induction of dissociative states [21] and the practice of "love bombing" [22] and "grooming" [23] to seduce converts. Still others have emphasized how

overarching efforts to control behavior, information, thinking, and emotions within a cult's closed system can result in conformity and a new "pseudo-identity" or "dual" identity of cult followers [8, 23].

In contrast to such proposals, the notion that the free will of cult followers is truly compromised has been challenged with the contention that "the concept of coercive persuasion as a means of thought control fails to pass scientific muster" [4]. Calling attention to the biased subjectivity of the term, Robbins quoted Thomas Szasz who wrote, "[w]e do not call all types of personal or psychological influences 'brainwashing.' We reserve this term for influences of which we disapprove" [22, p. 241]. Indeed, as noted earlier, it has also been argued that much like the term "cult" itself, the term "coercive persuasion" has been overgeneralized across a spectrum of indoctrination practices. It has been further noted that, upon closer scrutiny, the process of deprogramming promoted by anticultists could be considered to be just as coercive as cult indoctrination so that it amounts to "counterbrainwashing" [24].

Characteristics of Followers

Just as cult leaders have often been portrayed as all-powerful Svengalis, so too have cult followers been portrayed as mindless automatons. While the concept of "coercive persuasion" suggests that this is a universal liability such that anyone could fall victim to "mind control," it has also been proposed that cult followers may represent a particularly vulnerable population.

Personality and Psychopathology

Given the diversity of cults, we might expect that accounts of the psychopathology of cult followers might be inconsistent. Indeed, some reports have noted that the majority of cult members are "basically normal" and "stable individuals" prior to joining cults [2]. Ungerleider and Wellisch likewise performed psychiatric interviews and psychometric testing of 50 unspecified cult members and found no evidence of "insanity of mental illness in the legal sense," but did report evidence of "strong ideological hunger" among followers [25, pp. 279, 282].

Most other accounts have claimed some degree of psychopathology among cult members. For example, several authors have made claims about overrepresented personality traits and disorders among those affiliated with cults including features of dependent, obsessive-compulsive, and antisocial personality disorders though such case analyses have included only a few individuals [16, 18, 26]. Turning to larger datasets, Clark conducted interviews with over 60 religious cult followers in Germany and reported that 60% were "substantially and chronically disturbed and unhappy for many years" while the remaining 40% were "essentially normal, maturing persons" [21, p. 279]. Summarizing the results of several anecdotal reports, Galanter similarly observed that "psychological distress is a frequent antecedent to joining a [charismatic religious] sect" and that members often have limited social ties before joining [14, p. 1539]. He further noted that "certain sects attract members with considerable psychopathology," citing previous studies finding that "virtually all" members of one sect reported "histories of chronic unhappiness and unsatisfactory parental relations" while the followers of other sects reported 30–38% rates of seeking "professional help" prior to group affiliation [14, p. 1540]. Based on a study of 200 interviews with followers across some 25 different cults,

Levine concluded that there was "little doubt that [members] joined the cult because of personal dissatisfaction with their lot" with a sense of alienation, demoralization, and a poor sense of self prominent among the young adult sample [11, p. 594].

A critical and more thorough review of this literature was published in 2000 by Aronoff and colleagues, who noted considerable variation in rates of psychological and psychiatric morbidity across studies and detailed a number of methodological issues that have thwarted firm conclusions [27]. For example, most studies have lacked control groups to determine whether reports of generalized experiences such as unhappiness, alienation, or ideological hunger among a predominantly young sample of cult followers represent anything out of the ordinary. In addition, due to the significant potential for biased retrospective reporting, it is unclear whether such reports reflect antecedents or subsequent effects of cult membership [20]. Studies involving ex-cult members also represent a biased sample wherein the disgruntled "witness of apostates" may be exaggerated or at the very least not necessarily generalizable to those that remain within cults [28]. While Galanter and others have argued that cults have the potential to offer group cohesion and relief of distress [14, 29, 30], the professed happiness of those actively affiliated with cults has often been questioned. Recent studies of terrorist group members provide evidence of the potential for psychological distress and mental disorder to worsen with group affiliation [31].

In what might be considered the most methodologically sound study of psychiatric aspects of cult membership to date, Rousselet and colleagues conducted semistructured interviews with 31 ex-cult followers in France and found evidence of anxiety disorder among 51% of the sample, mood disorders among 45%, and either substance use or eating disorders among 13% during the year preceding cult affiliation [32]. Rates of anxiety disorder increased throughout affiliation and peaked at 61% during the year following departure while rates of mood disorder decreased to 35% during membership and then increased to 55% after departure. These data suggest variable degrees of premorbid psychopathology among cult members and inconsistent effects of cult membership and departure on mental health. Given that the study's assessments were made retrospectively during a single interview session, however, definitive statements about the effects of joining and leaving cults on symptoms of psychopathology remain unproven in the absence of prospective, longitudinal data.

The review by Aronoff and colleagues drew three conclusions from existing studies exploring the association between cult membership and psychological or psychiatric morbidity [27]. First, it is not always the case that those joining cults suffer from psychopathology in any way. Second, while many active cult members can appear psychologically well, it is possible that evidence to the contrary is either underreported or otherwise masked. And finally, a significant proportion of those who leave or are otherwise "rescued" from cults struggle with adjustment or psychological difficulties after doing so. Taken in aggregate, the heterogeneity of findings about the psychopathology of cult members at different stages of cult affiliation suggest that the individual assessment is likely to be more reliable than attempting broad generalizations about cult followers as a group or about the psychological impact of joining or leaving a cult.

Group Dynamics

Recalling the political origins of the term "cult of personality," it is both tempting and almost tautological to speculate that cult followers' seemingly blind obeisance to a

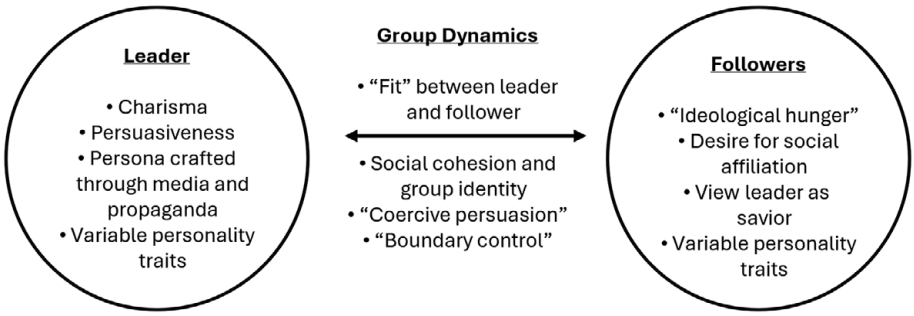

Figure 3.1 Characteristics of cults of personality

charismatic leader could be explained by the concept of the "authoritarian personality." Developed by Theodor Adorno to account for public support of fascist and antisemitic ideological movements such as that of Nazi Germany, the concept drew heavily on psychoanalytic theory to theorize that repressed and displaced hostility toward one's parents resulted in a need among certain individuals to submit to authority and, in doing so, to tolerate prejudice and out-group aggression [33]. Following critiques of the theory, more recent revisions have cast aside its explanatory psychoanalytic mechanisms to describe a willingness to submit to authority figures, a tendency to adhere to in-group conventions, and aggression against those who challenge authoritarian establishment [34]. Given that "cults of personality" are defined by the power dynamic between cult leader and cult follower, these features have face validity in reference to both the specific political and broader meanings of the term "cult." To date, however, there have been no attempts to research an explicit connection between authoritarianism and the phenomenon of cults.

Offering further critique of the concept, Duckitt noted the failure to validate the authoritarian personality as an individual trait or dimension and instead proposed that authoritarianism be conceptualized as a social phenomenon in terms of group dynamics [33]. This perspective has particular relevance to cults. For example, as previously mentioned, charisma is a subjective quality that lies in the eye of the beholder such that the apparent power and influence a cult leader has over followers is less an issue of their respective individual characteristics than it is an issue of "match" or "fit" (see Figure 3.1). Accounting for cults therefore need not rely on stereotypes involving an all-powerful Svengali followed by brainwashed automatons. Instead, the specific relationship between cult leader and followers within a group could vary substantially from cult to cult as well as from one follower to another within the same group. A better accounting of such relational dynamics is vital to understanding specific cult groups and their individual members.

As we have already noted, Galanter and others have theorized that followers typically join cults because of psychological distress and a lack of social connection, which are relieved by a sense of social cohesion and a newfound identity attained from group affiliation and a shared belief system [14, 29, 30]. The notion that cult membership can create a kind of soothing "social cocoon" for followers provides a useful and more normalizing counter-explanation of cults that stands in contrast to claims of "mind control" [29]. As with intimate relationships, this perspective does not refute that

members can be victims of abuse within cults, but rather provides an alternative account of why some individuals cede authority and control to cult leaders and remain in groups despite such victimization.

Returning to cults of personality in the political realm and Weber's theory of charismatic leadership, it has been similarly noted that distress on the part of a populace paves the way to following leaders who can convincingly portray themselves as saviors. Tucker argues that charismatic leadership is inherently "salvationist or messianic in nature" with leaders who reject old rules and demand change and followers who are "charisma-hungry" and looking for someone to "lead them out of [a] predicament" [13, pp. 742, 743, 745]. This characterization can apply just as well to cults in the broader sense of the term and reinforces the notion that the key to understanding cult dynamics lies in the match between the psychological needs of followers and the advertised benefits of cult membership, whether related to the attributes of a cult's leader, ideology, or social system.

Social Conditions

While much of the literature on cult followers has focused on distress or lack of identity attributed to an individual's personality style or psychopathology, the phenomenon of political personality cults highlights that such characteristics can also apply to large swaths of a population or society due to specific social conditions that render a populace desperate for salvation. As suggested earlier in reference to cult leaders, this means that cult followers might also be better understood in terms of "state" rather than "trait." For example, the emergence of "cults of personality" in communist history has been attributed to public demand for societal change and "revolutionary necessity" satisfied through a renewed sense of nationalism [9]. The rise of Naziism has likewise been attributed to a need for a new national identity in the wake of "the fragmentation of Germany's collective self following the narcissistic injury of defeat in World War I" [30, p. 242]. Just so, the emergence and proliferation of religious cults in the US during the 1970s has been theorized to have stemmed from "rebellion against conventional society" in the midst of the Vietnam War and political unrest that led many down a counter-cultural path in search of "alternative source[s] of structure, purpose, and support" [2, p. 26].

Within the broad spectrum of cults, it should be recognized that the social conditions that give rise to them can emerge – as well as be manufactured – on both microscopic and macroscopic scales. Just as political "cults of personality" have been described as typically arising within closed societies [10], so too has the phenomenon of religious cults been attributed to enforced "boundary controls" in the form of social and ideological as opposed to physical confines [14]. Indeed, it has been argued that "totalist" cults create the conditions that result in coercive persuasion and undue influence by demanding control of all aspects of a follower's behavior to include how they dress, when and how they eat or sleep, their sexual activity, what information they consume, and even what they think and feel [23].

Just as Weber noted that charisma is unstable and often proves transitory, so too does the dynamic between cult leaders and followers shift over time. Modeling the factors that influence cult affiliation as "state" rather than merely "trait" conditions aids an appreciation of why some people join cults and leave them while others do not. For example, the

study by Rousselet and colleagues found that cult members typically leave due to loss of faith in the cult's ideology, perceptions of a cult leader's imperfection or contradiction, conflicts within the hierarchy of a group, and experience of psychological abuse [32]. These are best understood as changes in the social conditions and interpersonal dynamics of a cult rather than changes within individuals per se.

The depth and fluidity of cult involvement can also be meaningfully conceptualized along a stage-wise model of ideological commitment that includes "nonbelievers," "fence-sitters," "true believers," "activists," and "apostates" [36]. Such a model recognizes the potential for the fusion of identity and ideology among "true believers" as well as the potential for violence when ideological threats are perceived as existential threats. When cults come into conflict with the society that surrounds them, "activists" feel the need to "do something" and often take it upon themselves to defend against such perceived threats. Modeling cult affiliation in this way – that is, as a social interaction both within cult groups as well as between cults and society at large – can facilitate a better understanding of the violent potential of cults and cult members beyond the mere pejorative labeling of a group as a cult or an individual as a cult follower.

Case Example: Sherry Shriner and the "Alien Reptile Cult"

Few verified facts are known about Sherry Shriner's life. By her own account detailed in the book *Bible Codes Revealed: The Coming UFO Invasion*, she was born in Cleveland, Ohio in 1965, was "reborn" in Jesus Christ at age 5, and attended a private Christian school and church every Sunday while growing up [37]. She "read the Bible from front to back" at age 12 and was "partial to the Book of Revelation" [37, p. 2]. She then attended college at Liberty Baptist University where she worked as a campus news reporter and radio director and later transferred to Kent State University, graduating in 1991 with degrees in criminal justice, journalism, and political science. By that time, she was married, had her first child, and was aspiring to land a position at the Washington bureau of CNN.

Shriner's life instead took a different turn as she

> embarked on an intense research over the next 5 years into spiritual warfare, hell, demons, Satan, and continued into [her] favorite areas of end time events and last days prophecies . . . [studying] deception in the churches, UFOs, government black operations, the New World Order, and much, much more . . . [culminating in] an enormous journey of unraveling conspiracies and lies in our government and churches. [37, p. 4]

In 1994, she began having "visions from God" and developed an "intimate relationship with Yahweh Himself" and by 2001, she had taught herself how to "decode" the Bible and began to claim that God had called her to be "messenger, an emissary and mouthpiece" as well as "a Watchman, a Prophet, and a warrior for Him" [37, pp. 5–6]. Soon thereafter, she also claimed that God had "led me into what I have termed the Alien Agenda" including "the coming UFO and Alien invasion to America and our Earth" and revealed to her that she was the granddaughter of King David [37, pp. 6, 7]. By 2004, Shriner was running an internet talk radio show where she monologued about "the Luciferian New World Order, UFOs, Aliens, the Alien agenda, the coming UFO invasion, Planet X, NESARA, the deceptions in the churches, and the coming of the Antichrist in power" [37, p. 7].

In 2008, Shriner launched an eponymous YouTube channel where, over the next decade, she posted some 240 videos. These videos provided a sprawling account of apocalyptic biblical prophesies and conspiracy theories related to alien reptilian shape-shifters and vampires occupying the bodies of celebrities and infiltrating the highest levels of government. All of this was accompanied by an increasingly right-wing political rhetoric that claimed that mass shootings and hurricanes were "false flag operations" orchestrated by the likes of "NATO, the Illuminati, or the Democratic Party" [38]. She made a living running numerous websites that she used to proselytize, promote the three e-books she had written (including *Aliens on the Internet*, *Interview with the Devil: My Conversation with Lucifer*, and the aforementioned *Bible Codes Revealed*), and sell "orgone" – an alleged source of energy contained in crystals that she claimed could repel evil – and "Orgone Blasters" that were marketed to keep aliens, zombies, and demons at bay. In 2014, Shriner managed to raise over $150,000 through a GoFundMe crowdfunding page and by the time of her death by natural causes in 2019, she had attracted over 20,000 YouTube subscribers with over 3 million views of her videos and had come to refer to her following that "congregated" and interacted with her on her Facebook page as her "ministry" [38].

While still relatively unknown with an undetermined number of online devotees, Shriner's "fringe religion" attracted local public attention in Detroit following the 2012 suicide of Kelly Pingilley [39], a 22-year-old follower who worked as a transcriber for Shriner's radio show, accompanied her on "missions" to battle the New World Order, and was wearing an orgone pendant at the time of her death by overdose [40]. Shriner went on to claim that Pingilley had been killed by a "NATO hit squad" [39].

Shriner finally garnered national attention as the leader of an "alien reptile cult" in 2019 after Steven Mineo, another one of her former followers since the early 2000s, was fatally shot in the head at point-blank range by his girlfriend Barbara Rogers, another one-time Shriner acolyte. Although Rogers was convicted of third-degree murder and sentenced to 15–40 years in prison, the circumstances of Mineo's death remain something of a mystery. As the lone surviving witness, Rogers claimed that Mineo had urged her to end his life with his hands held together with hers on the gun due to stress related to "issues" as members of Shriner's "religious cult" [41]. In the months prior to his death, Rogers and Mineo had both been harassed and attacked online by Shriner and her followers after a falling-out that involved Shriner declaring that Rogers was a reptilian and a witch and Mineo responding by posting a series of videos denouncing Shriner as a fraud [41].

On her website following Mineo's death, Shriner denied that she was in any way responsible, noting: "They're trying to spin it that I'm responsible for Steve's death? No, Barb is . . . They want to call me a cult leader? I'm just a humble servant and Messenger of the Most High. I've spent my life serving HIM and for that, I get beat up by Cain's kids, libtards, witches, Satanists, and haters everywhere" [41]. In subsequent media interviews and on her radio show, she went on to declare, "I'm not a cult and I'm not a cult leader" [41] and "I don't run a cult. You can turn on my video or turn it off. You can turn on my podcast or turn it off. I don't have a list or a membership rule" [42].

Forensic Implications

This chapter offers a cautiously skeptical take on "cults" in recognition of the pejorative use of the term offered through the "armchair diagnosis" of those biased against their

deviance, the considerable diversity of ideological groups that are labeled as such, and the lack of systematic research on cults, cult leaders, and cult followers to inform a better understanding of such a maligned entity (see also Table 3.1). While this chapter loosely applies the term "cult of personality" to account for a wide variety of political, religious, and other types of ideological cults on both large and small scales that are identifiable by a charismatic leader and devoted followers, it concludes that more specific characterizations of cults based on coercive and abusive practices might help to avoid getting mired in debates about what constitutes a cult while potentially justifying the use of the term as a pejorative when appropriate.

Although mental health professionals may be called to serve as expert witnesses in forensic cases involving cult affiliation, it should be acknowledged that the word "cult" is not a term of clinical psychology or psychiatry and, as previously suggested, the group dynamics governing cult interactions might be understood just as well if not better within theological, sociological, and anthropological frameworks. Accordingly, the psychiatric "medicalization" of cult phenomena risks a biased and prejudicial amplification of the potential mental health issues of cult leaders and followers alike with significant implications regarding the potential liability of cult members charged with committing crimes [24]. Some have argued that the term "cult" should be prohibited in legal proceedings since allowing the label in court would amount to a "social weapon" that would be prejudicial in the extreme [43].

Rather than lumping all "cults" into a wastebasket category of derision and following backward reasoning that necessarily views cult leaders and followers through a lens of pathology, forensic discussions should instead acknowledge a spectrum of "cultic" or "cult-like" groups that can be differentiated by the degree to which they employ specific practices that might be more universally regarded as exploitative, abusive, or harmful. In doing so, they must remain vigilant for biased judgments, especially in cases falling within the "gray area" of the cultic spectrum.

Psychiatric Diagnosis

For alleged cult leaders, the potential disconnect between the perception of their constructed public image and the reality of their true personality highlights an important distinction that challenges attempts at forensic psychiatric assessment based on post-hoc review of media portrayals. For example, what we know of Sherry Shriner is largely limited to her own writing and radio show monologues where her previous experience in journalism and radio production is noteworthy. Similar to the Goldwater Rule that offers an ethical prohibition against armchair diagnosis for public figures, forensic experts should exercise considerable caution about offering opinions about purported cult leaders in the absence of a face-to-face examination.

For cult followers, unsubstantiated claims about their mental health often emerge in the wake of unfortunate outcomes that make newspaper headlines or result in criminal charges. Kelly Pingilley's family speculated that she had schizophrenia after she died by suicide [40] while Barbara Rogers claimed to be off her medications for bipolar disorder when she was arrested by police [38]. While such claims could be valid, they should in general be regarded skeptically due to their vulnerability to both the confirmation bias of hindsight and the motives of defense strategies within forensic proceedings. In the absence of objective data to refute them, however, such claims often have an intuitive

appeal to those who read media reports about cults as well as those who find themselves sitting on trial juries. As with cult leaders, face-to-face assessment of cult members along with a thorough review of available medical records is essential for objective diagnosis.

Forensic experts should resist the temptation to limit the framing of cult involvement, whether as a leader or follower, to the level of the individual psychopathology. Instead, the "triangulation of [the] psychological, social, and relational aspects" [44, p. 9] of cults should be the guiding principle in order to gain a more nuanced and thorough understanding of this enduring and vexing phenomenon. With regard to the specific diagnostic significance of ideological beliefs shared within cults, forensic assessors must likewise take care to avoid pathologizing group beliefs and citing them as evidence of mental illness without appropriate justification. In doing so, assessors should bear in mind that religious and other subculturally sanctioned beliefs are excluded from the definition of delusion [45] as well as the fact that courts of law have not typically allowed defendants to evade culpability for criminal behavior through claims of incompetency or insanity pleas based on the delusion-like beliefs found within cult ideologies [46, 47]. While novel terminology like "extreme overvalued belief" has been recently proposed to fill the void of an appropriate psychiatric vocabulary to account for the belief systems of cults and terrorist groups while differentiating them from delusions [48, 49], the use of such medicalized terminology lacks validity and likewise presents significant potential for prosecutorial bias [45, 50]. Nonpsychiatric accounts of group beliefs and the relevant group dynamics that give rise to them, drawing from research on both peaceful new religious movements and violent terrorist groups alike, can offer a more evidence-based explanation for beliefs that are odds with mainstream society [50]. As noted previously, staging ideological commitment may offer a more useful model to understand the potential for beliefs to result in violent or other criminal behavior [51].

Coercive Persuasion

Forensic experts should be wary of claims regarding "coercive persuasion" on the basis of allegedly cult involvement without clear evidence of coercion. In order to more clearly separate them, some have drawn a brighter line between the involuntary tactics of "brainwashing" and torture in the historical context of prisoners of war that are clearly coercive and the voluntary process of cult participation that involves mere deception or the "manipulation of social variables" [52]. This distinction is more consistent with how the courts have not traditionally allowed the conflation of cult membership with claims of mental incompetency or not guilty by reason of insanity pleas when evidence of physical coercion has not been demonstrated [4, 46, 47, 52]. In the same vein, courts have also not looked favorably upon cult members' claims about loss of free will through "mind control" or "coercive persuasion" in cases involving the prosecution of cult leaders [4, 46].

Another option to resolve conflicts over coercive persuasion lies in acknowledging that terms like "coercion" can be conceptualized on a continuum "ranging from extreme physical coercion to totally autonomous decision making" [4, p. 96]. In doing so, assessments of coercion and competency within cultic environments can be decoupled and should be considered separately on a case-by-case basis [46]. The same could be said of "cults" more generally. Although the legal system typically prefers "crisp lines" when it comes to categorical definitions, in reality the borders that define "cults" and "coercion"

Table 3.1 Cautions for forensic evaluations involving cults of personality

Identifying "cults"	• Identification is subject to bias • Use of the term "cult" in legal proceedings is often pejorative and prejudicial
Describing coercive persuasion	• Coercive persuasion should be specified within a spectrum of coercive practices • Claims of "brainwashing," "mind control," or loss of free will lack validity, often fail to outline a cognitive mechanism, and must be distinguished from culpability
Characterizing psychiatric morbidity among leaders and followers	• Reliability depends on face-to-face evaluation and review of medical records rather than third-party accounts and media portrayals • Psychiatric morbidity before, during, and after cult affiliation should be differentiated • Psychopathology as the basis for cult affiliation should not be assumed at the expense of considering social dynamics and staging ideological commitment

alike are often blurry, just as they are with psychiatric diagnosis [45]. Additionally, while the definitions of "cult" and "coercion" are rooted in folk intuitions about free will, a neuroscientifically informed perspective highlights that the assumption of contracausal free will in forensic proceedings may be more illusion than reality [53]. This sobering conclusion has crucial implications for any attempts to define coercion based on distinctions between voluntary and involuntary action.

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