

Influence of a Charismatic Antisocial Cult Leader: Psychotherapy With an Ex-Cultist Prosecuted for Criminal Behavior

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Abstract¹

The author describes therapy with a former cult member who engaged in and was convicted of a criminal act she performed while in the cult. When the author examined her client's behavior both before and after her cult experience, she noted that the client's cult antisocial behavior was contrary to her precult and postcult moral code. The author focuses on the processes over time that influenced this woman's beliefs to change dramatically and theorizes that this example of antisocial behavior was the result of the group's influence, which created the conditions for her client to begin to defensively identify with her idealized cult leader's version of morality. The author thereby demonstrates that it is inadequate to rely on the diagnosis of antisocial personality for those who engaged in antisocial acts while in a cult.

Introduction

This paper describes an aspect of my clinical work with a woman convicted of a criminal act while she was a member of a cult. Her values and ideals were changed during her cult affiliation. Both before and while she was in the cult, she displayed a strict and rigid conscience, and an ego ideal of perfection that was dependent upon her compulsion throughout her life to please authority figures. Whereas this young woman did not appear to display a conscience with antisocial features before her group involvement, she revealed an array of antisocial behaviors while she was in the cult. I theorize that this personality change was the result of her defensive identification with her idealized cult leader's moral code, an adaptation that occurred following a prolonged period of

stress that she experienced. To better explain this process, I will discuss the following: (a) the charismatic cult leader's appeal and manipulation; (b) the manner in which the cult leader interacted with my client's unique character features to transform her moral code; and (c) the confluence of individual vulnerabilities and all-encompassing ideologies

The Charismatic Cult Leader's Appeal and Manipulation

Weber (1965) 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 qualities" (p. 49). The charismatic leader draws followers into the charismatic sphere of influence and depends on this influence. There is something self-perpetuating about charisma. Those who achieve a special position of power can continue to rely on the authority granted to them as a result of their privileged position. Charisma implies a two-way relationship between the leader and the followers, and this relationship can be either authoritarian or nonauthoritarian in style (Zablocki, 1980).

In attempting to gain insight into the powerful relationship between the charismatic leader and the group, Freud (1921) utilized his understanding of the process of transference. Freud described how the group begins to experience the leader as a new father figure with whom to identify. He theorized that through identification with the leader, the followers' superegos could be changed: Mutual identification of all the followers, stemming from idealization of the leader, contributes to the freeing of the followers' moral responsibility for

¹ The author wishes to thank William Goldberg, LCSW, for his valuable suggestions, encouragement, and support.

their actions, which they take at the behest of the leader. As the group becomes more authoritarian, the intensity of the absolute belief system and demand for personal commitment to the leader's ideals increase. Simultaneously, in cults, followers are induced to suppress negative feelings or doubts about the leader and the cult experience.

Throughout history, dangerous charismatic cult leaders have appealed to a wide range of individuals, with troubling consequences. These charismatic individuals have led (usually) young people, often idealistic, naïve, and hungry for a powerful parental figure, to their potential destruction. Lifton (1999) explains, in his book on Aum Shinrikyo, that those who are recruited to extremist groups often respond to the promise of being on the path to honor some version of God; they come to see their deaths as a way to provide dramatic meaning and importance to their lives.

Aberbach (1995) has theorized that the alienation and uncertainty that crisis breeds may bond group members with a charismatic leader in a way that eliminates their respective senses of alienation and anomie. Adding to Aberbach's understanding of the defensive nature of the leader, Shaw (2003) views the cult leader as experiencing his dependency needs as so shameful that he utilizes a delusion of omnipotence to ward off this intense shame. He states,

Manic defenses help sustain the delusion, but in addition, followers must be seduced and controlled so that the loathsome dependence can be externalized, located in others and thereby made controllable... So while apparently inviting others to attain his state of perfection (shamelessness) by following him, the cult leader is actually constantly involved in inducing shame in his followers, thereby maintaining his dominance and control. (p. 111)

This shame induced in the cult members further propels them to purge their former selves in order to be pure.

In my clinical work, I have treated many former members of cults who have shown the aftereffects of life with a narcissistic, paranoid, and/or antisocial charismatic cult leader. These cult leaders have unleashed their worst impulses on their own members and on the larger society.² Over time, the ex-cultists with whom I have worked have reflected on and come to a better understanding of how this abusive relationship has impacted their personalities and their present lives. Although I have focused in the past on the antisocial acts cult leaders have perpetrated on followers (including physical and sexual abuse, slave labor, financial exploitation, etc.), I have not described how cult members, after being seduced by these leaders, might begin to perform antisocial acts toward other cult members and society at large and become victimizers themselves. Although most cult members have learned to deceive those outside the cult, middle-management former cultists often were also in the position to deceive, abuse, and exploit lower-level members. Some of these cult members may have had antisocial personality tendencies prior to their cult involvement. However, in therapy I have seen only former cult members who were troubled by and have shown remorse for antisocial characteristics they displayed within the cult.

The Cult Leader's Interaction With My Client's Unique Character Features That Resulted in the Transformation of Her Moral Code

To illustrate the cult leader's influence on my client's character, I will concentrate on two areas: First, I will demonstrate how therapy served to increase my client's understanding of herself, particularly the inner and outer forces that brought her into the cult. Secondly, I will indicate how the psycho-educational model was integrated into therapy to enrich and reinforce the client's awareness of how cult manipulations

² Kernberg's (1986) description of "malignant narcissist" is applicable to this group of individuals: Kernberg highlights paranoid regressive tendencies, chronic self-destructiveness or suicidal behavior, antisocial behavior, and malignant grandiosity with overt

sadistic efforts. These behaviors are utilized in the service of triumphing over all authority (p. 195).

and her complementary responses to this served to modify her beliefs and behaviors.

Initial Therapy Sessions

Almost twenty years ago, Katie, a former member of a small, new age cult, contacted me. Katie had been sentenced on fraud and conspiracy charges stemming from acts she had committed while she was a member of this group. Upon the urging of her cult leader, Katie had convinced several other members to borrow money for student loans that never were used for assistance with education, but were handed over to the leader. When some of the members left, they realized that they were burdened with repaying large financial loans to the government. With the advice of an attorney, they reported their cult exploitation to the state attorney general's office. The state forgave the loans and, armed with the former members' testimony, chose instead to prosecute Katie and her cult leader for fraud and conspiracy.

During the trial, the attorney general's office (on behalf of the former cult members who had taken out student loans) gave evidence of the mind-controlling nature of the group and the way in which the leader and Katie, as the voice of the leader, had made the cult members believe that this fraudulent action was warranted because it served the higher purpose of the cult. Katie, who had been one of several women chosen for this leader's top echelon, had been solely responsible to deliver this plan to the membership. At the beginning of the trial, she had viewed her leader as a saintly figure, who needed to be protected. However, once Katie was separated from the leader, she had the space (both physical and emotional) and time to think for herself without his influence.

During this period, a former member who had been close to her in the group contacted Katie. With the help of this woman, Katie was able to begin to objectify her increasing doubts about the cult leader, which had been stimulated by the information presented during the trial. After 12 years in the cult, she decided to leave.

Before I began seeing Katie, I had worked as a therapist with other former members of her group, and they had described her to me as a

powerful force—someone who always demanded a high standard of performance from others. In contrast to this image, Katie sheepishly entered my office. She wore little makeup and was dressed conservatively. She told me, in an emotionally detached manner, that she knew I had heard about her crime. Initially, I had considered that her presenting behavior might be a ploy for sympathy, and I was prepared to explore potential exploitative and manipulative tendencies. However, over time, I began to experience a woman who appeared depleted, emotionally detached, and filled with shame. (At a later stage we explored how members of the cult had viewed Katie as rather arrogant. This perception contrasted sharply with her postcult behavior with me. Katie was able to reflect upon a lifelong tendency toward certainty that had been shaken; this shift, ultimately, led to cult vulnerability and to her sense of smallness now that she had made such a major mistake. Over time, I wished to help Katie see that knowing **nothing** was as unrealistic a point of view as knowing **everything**.)

In our first session, I asked Katie why she had decided to see me. She was troubled and wanted a better understanding about how her morals in the group had contrasted so greatly from those she had held before she joined.

In our initial sessions, Katie related that she had grown up in a religious Catholic home in Connecticut, the oldest of five children. She described her father as a hard-working, successful businessman and her mother as a devoted housewife and mother. Katie attended parochial school, and she believed that she was seen as a good daughter, pleasing both parents and teachers, and serving as a model for her younger siblings. Katie believed that she had a clear sense of right and wrong before her cult involvement.

In reflecting on her adolescence, I noted that she presented a history with little rebellion. This account led me to wonder if that, indeed, was the case, or whether, as a result of her cult experience, her history was a revised version of perfection influenced by years of having

defended against conflicts.³ In addition to possible dissociation from her past self, I wondered about a precult character that failed to show some periodic defiance and reveal the increased independence of thinking that usually emerges in adolescence. In fact, Katie viewed her precult behavior as rather idealistic and perfectionist. She added wistfully, “Perhaps I was naive.” This remark seemed to indicate some self-reflection and self-doubt, as well as possibly a more realistic appraisal of her precult identity. All of this led me to reflect on how Katie’s all too good self possibly might have played into her attraction to a cult.

After college, Katie had desired to put her idealism to good use. Therefore, she took a position as a teacher in an inner-city school on the West Coast. The day-to-day difficulties with both students and the school bureaucracy contrasted sharply with her former fantasies of a perfect life as a devoted teacher. Her perfectionism had never been challenged previously. She reported that this experience was the first time in her life she had difficulty impressing others and achieving her preset goals. Her class was disruptive and she was unable to control the students’ rebellious natures (in contrast to what she probably had done with her own disruptive emotions).

Katie felt lonely in this new city where she was far from family and friends. After she had been away from home nearly a year, Katie’s younger brother, still home in Connecticut, attempted suicide. Katie felt guilty that she hadn’t been there for a brother who had grown up depending on her. These occurrences left her feeling depressed, rootless, and confused about a life that had not met her high expectations and her clearly delineated goals.

Soon after her brother’s suicide attempt, Katie attended an advertised lecture on learning the tools for a more successful life. She found the speaker, who presented himself as a philosopher, to be riveting. When she approached him to thank him for the lecture, he offered her a job

publishing his materials. He invited her to participate in his “enlightened” commune, which offered an alternative lifestyle with a strong foundation in new-age concepts. When Katie visited the commune, she met several other like-minded young people. After feeling so isolated, lonely, uncertain, and depressed, she was relieved and consoled to participate in an idealistic environment where everyone was friendly and there were very clear formulas for a happier existence.

Katie left her job and joined the group; but instead of a job publishing motivational materials, as she had been promised, she found herself working as a nighttime guard in an office building. Most members were assigned to these types of jobs so that they would have time to read the leader’s “philosophy” and photocopy his writings in the nighttime hours while offices were closed. Katie initially felt disappointed, but she rationalized that this was a small price to pay for becoming “enlightened.” Upon hearing this history, I commented that it seemed that instead of expanding her world as promised, her cult leader was restricting it. This comment allowed Katie to begin to consider the cult’s contradictions: Its actions were in contrast to its stated philosophy.

Katie reported to me that the leader slowly induced her to feel negative and paranoid about the outside world, and particularly about her parents, whom she began to see as rigid, cold, and solely responsible for her brother’s suicide attempt. She began to believe that her parents had high standards that her brother was unable to meet. I suggested that, by projecting the blame for the suicide away from herself onto her parents, the leader might have aided Katie in defending against her own depressive reaction—her self-blame for not being there for her brother. Additionally, blaming her parents also might have served her to generate negative feelings toward her parents that would promote emotional distance from them. Finally, believing that her parents had high standards that

³ I have found that cult leaders often influence members to develop revised memories of their precult life in ways that serve the cult leaders’ needs. I considered that Katie, a young woman who was held up as a role model and leader in the group, might have developed a revised or somewhat exaggerated version of her earlier

life. However, my work with former cult members has made me aware that, even with the changes in beliefs that often occur when one is in the cult, many aspects of character remain consistent (Goldberg, 1997; Goldberg, 2006).

were impossible to meet allowed her to displace feelings about the cult leader onto her parents.

Katie's early transference was to view me as all knowing. When she continued to relate to me as the expert, I indicated my expectation that, in time, she would be disillusioned with me and begin to see my flaws and limitations. Over time, I helped Katie understand the following: (a) She might be viewing me as the new embodiment of her old, perfectionist conscience and ego ideal; and (b) she might be placing me in the role the cult leader (and possibly a parental figure) previously held—that of an idealized transference figure, albeit one who does not manipulate her. (However, many former cult members whom I have seen have feared that I am ready to manipulate them.) It was crucial for Katie (as it is with all of those who continue the tendency to idealize after having idealized their cult leader) to see me in a more balanced and human way, and not to continue relating to me in such an idealizing manner (Goldberg, 1993). I was unable to give her easy answers. If allowed, the continued idealization eventually would undermine Katie's emerging critical-thinking processes, emerging acceptance of herself as a person with limitations, and emerging sense of responsibility for her own actions. All of these aspects of her personality had been undermined in the cult.

At the same time, Katie viewed me as highly critical of her: I knew so much, and she had foolishly messed up her life. When Katie explored her beliefs of how harshly others would see her cult-related behavior, it became clear that these attitudes were, in part, a projection of her own attitudes. I wished to help her consider that the harshness of her conscience might have set the stage for her to use the cult as an escape from self-reproach both about her brother's death and her difficulties with her students. I addressed the rigidity of a conscience that seemed to be intensified by her years in the cult. After years in a sadomasochistic relationship with her cult leader, it was difficult for Katie to

consider that she could enter into any relationship that offered mutual respect.

Later, we moved on to explore her perceptions of her relationship with each of her parents. It was necessary to begin to sort out her precult, cult-related, and postcult views of them. In looking at precult views, we examined some of the following: Did she see her parents as critical? Did she believe that she became most lovable if she was their good daughter? Did she continue to play that assigned role with me? How did her perceptions conform to her present view? In looking at cult-related views, we considered the question, "How did her leader reframe her attitudes toward her parents?" In discussion about her present views of her parents, I often saw my role as helping this young woman move from the parent-blaming views of the cult leader to a more realistic and complex understanding of the possible meanings of parental behavior. I also encouraged dialogue with her mother and other family members.

Additionally, we examined how the cult experience impacted her personality in a regressive way and allowed her to defend against her depressive reaction by inducing her to move into a paranoid state.⁴ Katie described her precult sense of certainty about her beliefs, and how this certainty had become shaken by the combination of her teaching assignment and her brother's suicide attempt. Her cult leader offered her the security of gaining purity through the group and transferring blame to those on the outside at a time in her life that was filled with uncertainty and disappointment with herself.

In reflecting on how she was able to change dramatically in her group, Katie slowly began to reveal anger at her cult leader as she described how the leader's "poison" (malevolent influence) came in small doses and was always coupled with a "hook"—enthusiastic plans for small but significant altruistic projects: a school for indigent children, a soup kitchen, and the like. She believed that she eventually would be able to prove to nonbelievers that her way was good and just. Instead of continuing to view her

⁴ Based on Klein's theory of early development that focuses on how the schizoid/paranoid position occurs earlier than the depressive position, Kernberg theorizes that moving from a depressive to a

paranoid position has a regressive potential throughout life, and that those who join destructive groups might regress in this way as part of the group process (Kernberg, 2003).

cult leader as a teacher, over time she began to see him as a Christ-like figure—a notion that was fed by his grandiosity and authoritarian nature. In therapy, Katie began to see how the leader's narcissistic sense of omnipotence not only appealed to her own insecurity at the difficult time, but also appealed to her own need for increased self-esteem. His persona allowed her to bask in his reflective glory and regain her equilibrium in her continued need for perfection and importance.

I began to feel affected by Katie's emotions about her actions while she was in her cult. Katie displayed and expressed sadness and guilt about having cut off ties with her family, and particularly about not having attended her father's funeral. She began to grieve the loss of her father, who had been replaced by her cult leader for so many years. Her father had been the angriest family member about her involvement in the group, and her leader used the angry reaction of her father to demean him as a distant, selfish, and angry man. In therapy, Katie began to focus on how her father might have been reserved, but he was a responsible man who worked hard to support his large family. Furthermore, we discussed his anger about her involvement in the cult and alienation from the family, anger that seemed justified and certainly was not a "distant" reaction. In spending sessions in sadness about the loss of her father, Katie also was able to focus on how she had modeled herself after him. He had a high standard of behavior for himself and for her. However, although her tendency to be the good, perfectionist daughter seemed to be modeled after her father, it also seemed to be based on an ideal self rather than a real sense of self. Katie had established a character that defended against contradictory or uncomfortable emotions and uncertainties. Her defended self was, in part, a self that Winnicott has described as the "false self" (1965). Katie had found a group that would help her defend against pain from the loss of esteem she experienced when she was a new schoolteacher, and against her guilt from her brother's suicide attempt. The cult leader valued Katie's qualities and, by placing her in a position of authority, enabled

her to be rewarded as long as she accepted a new belief system.

Emphasis on Cultic Control and Client's Reaction

Initially, to help her better understand the process that led to the change of her moral code, I also provided Katie with basic information in therapy about how mind control worked in her cult to enhance the leader's charismatic domination. This information appeared to help Katie dramatically, as it helps many who are in a confused, shameful state when they leave cults. Despite her intelligence, Katie's idealism and the rigid quality of her previous defenses and of her sheltered previous life left her unable to spot a malignant narcissist at work. Our full discussion of her leader's use of manipulation, deception, and shaming to induce her to serve his needs, initially and throughout her time in the group, helped her understand that this was an interactive, two-person process.

According to Lalich's concept of "bounded choice," two complex processes are occurring simultaneously in such situations: conversion and commitment. Lalich states, "...there is fusion between the ideal of personal freedom (as promised in the stated goal of the group or its ideology) and the demand for self-renunciation (as prescribed by the rules and norms)" (2004). In other words, the cult leader demands proof of loyalty to his beliefs; and the cult recruit believes that, by renouncing her previously held views (which now become devalued), she is attaining the path to purity.

As demonstrated with Katie, potential recruits usually are going through a transitional stage of life—being separated from loved ones because of travel, college, or employment; losing a family member through death or divorce; or dealing with a natural disaster. A member of the group usually hides the group's true doctrine and approaches these susceptible recruits. For example, the leader told Katie she would work for him publishing motivational materials. However, once she was in the cult, instead of doing the promised work, she became a security guard who also was tasked with photocopying the leader's lectures.

If recruits such as Katie knew in advance the extent of that which would be required of them, they most likely would be reluctant to join. Those who are indoctrinated are unaware of the recruitment process, which subjects them to a range of strategies, such as long periods of lecturing, praying, sermonizing, chanting, or meditation. (In Katie's case, indoctrination occurred through her leader's constant lecturing.) The group employs this bombardment of the senses, plus some degree of isolation from the outside world and restriction of communication within the group, to increase the impact of the message. If successful, it moves recruits into a state of intense anxiety and confusion in which they are induced to abandon previous coping mechanisms; hence, they inevitably enter into a dissociative state, which is reinterpreted as being some form of a "higher state" to promote their veneration of the leader and acceptance of the ideas presented.

Therefore, we can view these situations as traumatic, in which the recruits enter a disoriented and dissociated state (splitting off uncomfortable thoughts and feelings), which is rewarded by their development of hypercredulity (that is, a willingness to believe or trust too readily without adequate evidence). The result of this process is deployability in members of a totalistic group (Singer and Lalich, 1995; Stein, 2007). In fact, Katie recalled feeling overwhelmed and "spacy"; but, based upon the cult leader's redefinition of her experience, she attributed these feelings to being elevated spiritually by her leader's message.

In writing about these groups, Lifton (1961) states that they "demand that character and identity be reshaped, not in accordance with one's special nature or potentialities, but rather to fit the rigid contours of the doctrinal mold" (p. 431). At the beginning of the recruitment process, the group presents the doctrine most acceptable to the recruit. Over time, however, the recruit's traditional values and religion are devalued, and the leader's message becomes more and more extreme. Along with the presentation of new ethical standards, the group devalues and demonizes the recruit's old friends and family members. The cult becomes the recruit's new family, and the cult leader

becomes the recruit's perfect God. Members are induced to believe that they must follow their leader's directives in order to survive and to gain purity. In addition to the techniques previously described to increase receptivity to the leader's message, group pressure, deception, intimidation, and the practices of environmental manipulation and constant positive and negative reinforcement coalesce to develop a new "pseudo-identity" that is formed above the original personality (West and Martin, 1996).

We also can theorize that the recruit's increased anxiety generates the defense of identification with the aggressor. This was a term Ferenczi (1933) coined to describe an automatic survival response to being overwhelmed by a threat. Anna Freud (1936) elaborated on Ferenczi's (1933) concept in addressing how the victims defend themselves by becoming victimizers themselves. However, as in my client's example, even with pressure to move toward this defense, some recruits experience periods of conflict about having taken on the victimizer's role when this role contrasts sharply with previously held beliefs (see below). Additionally, instead of taking on this role in total, recruits choose aspects of it based on the uniqueness of their particular personalities. Therefore, as the recruits take on certain attributes of the cult leader, each identification pattern would have its own distinctive relational dimensions, including a sense of self-with-other, that would be influenced by the particular interactional process and personalities of each of the participants involved.

Katie described how, in the cult, she lost her previously held sense of self. Boundaries were blurred as each member was considered merely a small part of the "body," only there to serve the leader's needs. Lalich (2004) describes how cult members initially experience some sense of relief in the renunciation of self. She notes that finding the answer is experienced as a personal relief (see pp. 14–16).

As Katie reflected upon the processes that had occurred in the cult, she reported that, by the time the greater contradictions began and the stealing and cutting off of all connections with family members or anyone outside the group had

occurred, the members were linked in to a blind trust of the leader. She said that she smothered her concerns with rationalizations that the goal was all-important and anything was justified to accomplish the purpose. The world was so corrupt that drastic measures were needed to effect real change. In the end, in the not-too-distant future, the group would be in a position to lead the way for a healthier and nobler way of life. The leader often repeated that members had to strive for that ideal place; and, therefore, any way to further his goal was a necessary evil to get members through evil times. No one was allowed to criticize or even question his motives or methods. Katie reported that all members felt so inferior, so fearful of rejection of the “noble path,” that the group members never dared to believe that they knew better than the leader.

Clinical Assessment: Cult Induced Antisocial Behavior

After we had worked with Katie, it was clear to me and other mental health professionals who previously evaluated her (related to her trial) prior to her first session with me that her criminal conduct was not caused by an antisocial personality or the more commonly seen motivations of greed or personal benefit. Even though she had considered that the leader was wrong on various matters, she no longer was capable of trusting her own judgment. She had unknowingly lost the ability to live up to her own previously held moral values or ideals. Her overwhelming fear was that, if she separated from the cult’s goals, purposes, values, or ideals, she would not be able to function. Therefore, she usually acquiesced and felt that her own judgment was wrong. Although Katie continued to be somewhat troubled by the antisocial deeds that she perpetuated on other members and the larger society, she had begun to strongly identify with what she viewed as her leader’s noble vision. Katie believed, “We must do everything possible to get our message out to save the world.”

Confluence of Individual Vulnerabilities and All-Encompassing Ideologies

What might be the personality tendencies that would make Katie vulnerable to becoming antisocial in a cult as a result of her

involvement? Instead of viewing the world and human beings in all of their complexity, it seemed that Katie characteristically focused on absolute rules with certainty, and her family life and education did not challenge this tendency. Behaving compliantly probably was gratifying for Katie, and she reported that she felt reinforced for this behavior. She seemed dependent on pleasing authority figures and embracing those absolute rules. (Although I didn’t have an opportunity to fully explore this area in our sessions, it would be helpful for Katie to learn all the underlying meanings of this behavior.) Katie also appeared to lack focus on critical and independent thinking in terms of assessing the moral reactions of authorities. However, we also need to consider the vulnerability factors of Katie’s depression, loneliness, and uncertainty before she joined the cult, coupled with her separation from home and yearning for closeness with parental figures at this stage of life. This yearning played into her receptivity to the leader’s paternal presence. He was able to exploit her need for guidance at a troubling time. Katie was intelligent; but, although her intelligence and conscientiousness led her to be given a leadership role in the cult (she continued to be the older sister), she had responsibility without power. All power resided in her cult leader—the parental figure.

Kernberg (2003) describes the way in which paranoid extreme ideologies can

neutralize individual moral constraints against personal perpetration of suffering, torture, or murder. What is characteristic of paranoid ideologies is that the world is divided between the good and ideal carriers of the ideology, and the bad, dangerous, threatening enemies of the ideology, who must be destroyed in order to prevent them from destroying the true believers. (p. 691)

Kernberg also discusses how paranoid ideologies promote a group spirit that leads to sacrifice of individual autonomy, reasoning, interests, and a restrictive sexual life in the

service of the larger community and a utopian future (see p. 691).⁵

During difficult times and periods of uncertainty, there is a tendency for many to experience relief by identifying with idealized figures (Spruiell, 1979). Cult leaders relieve loneliness, pain, anxieties, and uncertainties with visions of grandeur, certainty, and righteousness. Particularly at a time of crisis, it is common for an individual under the “protective” and reassuring influence of a leader to regress and defend against the more unacceptable or confusing emotions within oneself, and to project those feelings onto the wider world.

Therefore, I believe that to view antisocial behavior in cults simply as a victimized state explained by a new identification does not give the entire story: Cult leaders additionally push and allow members to unleash powerful forces and unconscious wishes that were present in early childhood. According to Freud (1933), the developing superego is the outgrowth of identifications one has made with parental figures to defend against and attempt to control and resolve the sexual and aggressive emotions of the Oedipal stage.⁶ Although the superego is the successor of the parents and their attitudes, the qualities and contents of the superego are more related to the child’s own fantasy life—e.g., his or her sexual and aggressive feelings and fear of retaliation for those feelings. As Freud (1921) pointed out,

For us it would be enough to say that in a group the individual is brought under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The apparently new characteristics which he then displays are in fact the manifestations of this... (p. 74–75)

Freud adds,

In obedience to the new authority he may put his former “conscience” out of action, and so surrender to the attraction

of the increased pleasure that is certainly obtained from the removal of inhibitions. On the whole, therefore, it is not so remarkable that we should see an individual in a group doing or approving things which he would have avoided in the normal conditions of life... (p. 85)

Therefore, in the cult, aggressive and sexual behaviors are unleashed, but they usually remain expressed solely in accord with the leader’s predilections and doctrines. Sometimes this “permission” is not enough to totally encourage those who are engaging in these practices to feel comfortable when the behaviors are not in accord with their own individual desires. For example, although cult members understood the expectation to comply with the cult leader’s directives at the time, some have described how they dissociated during sexual encounters with the leaders and others. Furthermore, cult members are manipulated to turn aggression against the self or other “delegated” followers rather than against the exploitive cult leader. These tendencies often remain after their cult departure. Former cultists often reveal a cult-influenced, rigid (split, black and white) and sadistic superego. Although for some, such as Katie, this harsh conscience exists to some degree prior to their cult involvement, the cult experience greatly intensifies these pre-Oedipal features and leaves former cult members with powerful feelings of shame and guilt that they might not express initially in therapy. These feelings, in part, stem from the cult leader’s attitudes as well as from actions the members have taken in the cult.

In therapy, although the therapist needs to consider with a client how the therapist’s actions might have initiated the client’s feelings toward the therapist, it also is crucial for the therapist to address the client’s harsh superego as it is enacted in transference and countertransference reactions that emerge with the therapist and with others. Many former cultists have lost sight of the need for compassion for others, and for

⁵ Katie’s leader used the cult to play out not only his aggressive, but also his sexual predilections and fantasies. It is not unusual for cult leaders to exploit members sexually, and an aspect of Katie’s therapy dealt with sexual exploitation. By gaining control over

members’ sexual lives, a cult leader is able to further decrease the possibility for true intimacy to be established between members.

⁶ Klein (1933) elaborated on this by describing the sadism of the pre-Oedipal superego.

themselves. The therapist most likely will be pulled into a reenactment of the sadomasochistic cult relationship and, subsequently, will need to initiate the investigation of those powerful impulses just experienced. With all of this, the therapist is operating from the underlying framework of treating former cult members with respect, decency, and compassion. This approach allows both the therapist and the client to appreciate the difficulty of holding onto an ethical, self-reflective, and respectful stance in the face of powerful emotions. However, the ability to reflect on emotionally charged moments is central to the therapeutic process.

It also is crucial for the therapist to utilize the corrective of doubt against the comfort of certainty. The therapist's message in the face of a client's desire for certainty is that certainty is a trap that "sweeps objections aside and makes anything permissible if pursued with an appeal to a higher justification" (Cullen, 2012).

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