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Cults on campus: perspectives from the literature
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In recent years, cults have been given increasing attention in the literature. Authors from many disciplines have studied and commented on the nature of cults, the types of people who join them, the impact they have on college campuses, legal issues related to cults, how people leave cults, and what university administrators should do both proactively and reactively to address cults on our campuses. This article will provide the reader with a review of several pertinent sources concerning these issues.

Background

One of the most important distinctions made in the literature on cults is that they are distinguished from mainstream religious groups by their recruitment and retention techniques, rather than by their ideology. G.S. Blimling ("The involvement of college students in totalistic groups: Causes, concerns, legal issues, and policy considerations." In M. Rudin, Ed. Cults on Campus: Continuing Challenge. New York: American Family Foundation, 1991) defines a cult as "a totalistic religious group which dominates members' attention and rigidly prescribes their conduct in most of their daily activities" (p. 33). He adds that most cults prescribe adherence to the dictates of a charismatic leader, focus considerable effort on fundraising, and use deceptive recruitment and conversion techniques. He notes that over half of new cult members are between the ages of 18 and 24—which suggests that cult recruitment is an issue of particular concern to university administrators.

over half of new cult members are between the ages of 18 and 24—which suggests that cult recruitment is an issue of particular concern to university administrators.

According to Blimling, one difficulty administrators have in confronting cults is that some of them operate under a seemingly innocuous name and achieve recognition as legitimate campus organizations. He draws an interesting distinction between cults and mainstream religious organizations. Religious organizations have a mission of enhancing the spiritual development of the membership. Cults, on the other hand, have self preservation at the forefront of their mission: that which is good for the cult is deemed most appropriate regardless of truth and means to a given end.

Public attitudes favoring the restriction of cult activity have grown at a rapid pace. Research has shown that in 1989, 62% of people living in the United States told Gallup pollsters that they would object to having cult or religious sect members as neighbors, up from 44% and 30% in 1987 and 1981, respectively (Bromley, D. G. & Breschel, E. F. "General population and institutional elite support for social control of new religious movements: Evidence from national survey data." Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 10, 39-52, 1992). In addition, the same article reported that among the general public, 30% support banning the Washington Times due to its control by the Moonies, 63% support restricting the Hare Krishnas in airports, 63% would also allow increased FBI surveillance of cults, and 73% favor a ban on cult recruitment of teenagers.

Studying people who may join, who do join, and who leave cults is a challenging task. M. Ayella ("They must be crazy," American Behavioral Scientist, 33, 562-577, 1990) cautions researchers to question why they have been given access, what kind of access has been granted, and be mindful that the presence of a researcher will affect the nature of interaction among cult members. She notes that gaining access may be easy, but remaining gets more difficult—particularly because members expect to succeed in converting the researcher to be a member of the cult. Despite these challenges, several researchers have studied various aspects of cults.

Precursors to membership

Several individual characteristics have been associated with vulnerability to cult recruitment. These include: (a) generalized ego-weakness and emotional vulnerability; (b) propensities toward dissociative states; (c) tenuous, deteriorated, or nonexistent family relations and social support systems; (d) inadequate means of dealing with the exigencies of survival; (e) history of severe child abuse or neglect; (f) exposure to idiiosyncratic or eccentric family patterns; (g) proclivities toward or abuse of controlled substances; (h) unmanageable and debilitating situations, stress and crises; and (i) intolerable socioeconomic conditions (p. 459) (Curtis, J. M. & Curtis, M. J. "Factors related to susceptibility and recruitment by cults." Psychological Reports, 73, 451-460, 1993).

Two common factors that are apparent from this list are a underdeveloped emotional maturity and a large amount of stress. If this is the case, it seems that university administrators, particularly those who have a high degree of student contact, are in a great position to detect and intervene with students who might be susceptible to cults. Students with several of the characteristics enumerated by Curtis and Curtis should be sought out and connected to support systems on campus such as counseling centers and supportive mentors.

Others claim that new cult members are not always needy individuals. After asserting that virtually all college campuses have been visited by cult recruiters, Goldberg (Cults on Campus: How Can You Help? In M. R. Rudin, Ed. Cults on Campus: Continuing Challenge. New York: American Family Foundation, 1991) disputes the contention that students who join cults seek an escape from a troubled reality. Instead, he suggests that most people who join would be considered normal and healthy, with the same types of problems and issues as their fellow students. He urges students to be wary of any organization that will not discuss their mission and beliefs unless the student will attend an off-campus retreat—a common practice designed to begin the indoctrination process.
Cults on campus

So what are the challenges related to making policy addressing cults on campus? D. H. Blunt ("Cults on campus: Awareness is key," AGB Reports, 34, 3133, 1992) reports the existence of 5,000 cults in the United States. She notes that cult recruiters find college students attractive targets due to their desire to be included, to "better the world, to improve themselves, or to feel closer to God" (p. 31). People do not usually seek cults; rather, the cults seek people.

Stressful times of the semester are focused upon by recruiters, given the increased likelihood that students will be alone, disoriented, and susceptible to influence. According to Blunt, "Through deception, cultic groups convince vulnerable recruits that salvation, a better world, self-improvement, or total happiness can be achieved by joining and following the group. Through selective reward and punishment, the systematic denigration of independent critical thinking, separation from family and friends, and other techniques, cults can create a grouping dependency in members. Once a member becomes highly dependent on the group, psychological and sometimes physical threats are used to strengthen the group's hold and ensure obedience" (p. 32).

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Bliming states that private institutions have been given substantial flexibility with how to handle cults on their campuses (Bliming G. S. "The involvement of college students in totalitarian groups: Causes, concerns, legal issues, and policy considerations." In M. Rudin, (Ed.) Cults on campus: Continuing challenge, New York: American Family Foundation, 1991). Public colleges have been given guidance, through several court decisions, about how to cope with cult groups in the context of religious freedom.

In Keegan v. University of Delaware, the Delaware Supreme Court ruled in favor of a Catholic student group that wanted to hold regular religious services in a public area of a residence hall. The court determined that the rule barring such activity was not in conflict with the establishment clause as policy makers had thought. Other cases, such as Chess v. Widman, eventually produced similar rulings protecting the rights of religious organizations to use facilities on public campuses on the grounds that restriction of facility use would constitute an unfair limitation on student First Amendment rights to freedom of expression.

Bliming also notes that courts have upheld the rights of individuals to proselytize, even when such activity annoys others. At the same time, he reports that "universities may reasonably control time, place, and manner of religious proselytizing on campus in areas considered public forums, consistent with its regulation of other groups" (p. 48). Door-to-door evangelism may also be prohibited so long as door-to-door solicitation for other purposes is prohibited. He adds that "universities have yet to demonstrate to the courts compelling reasons of sufficient merit to restrain cults and other totalitarian religious groups from involvement on campus, even where it can be [continued on page 595]

The nature and impact of "cults"

It is difficult to work with college students and not delight in their success and share their joy as they accomplish some of their major life goals in college. Similarly, it is disturbing to see these same young people become the unwitting victims of unprincipled, self-serving cults. It is hard to ignore these groups as they lay siege to the campus. Administrative apathy and ignorance are their friends. They count on the uniformed administrator to allow them the opportunity to prey upon students...

Colleges and universities have a duty to provide students with an environment which fosters freedom of thought and the development of an educated and principled person. Cults with their coercive and unprincipled tactics rob students of the very things colleges and universities have been organized to teach.


Writers who describe harmful and destructive cults report certain common negative characteristics including: a charismatic leader, an exclusivist group separated from or opposing mainstream or traditional values, isolation of cult members from family, friends, school or career, and deviant behavioral norms and life style. Jim Jones in Guyana, Charles Manson in California, and Adolfo Constanzo in Metategro satisfy these criteria but so do Buddha, Socrates, and Jesus. They, too, led small groups that differed from majority beliefs and values.

Gnostic Christians, Hasidic Jews, Sufi Moslems, and Zen Buddhists are cult-like groups that emerged from major traditional religions and survived the test of time and public scrutiny. The ancient Greek cult of Asklepios, a major competitor of Christianity, gave us the Hippocratic Oath. Mormons and Quakers were viewed with suspicion for what seemed cult-like practices but were in time integrated into mainstream society.

Cults have been perceived as "good" or "evil" but there are many variations which make it difficult to objectively differentiate as positive or negative...


To a large extent the fear and attitudes toward cults has been mirrored by similar feelings regarding previous religious movements. It is important to realize, however, that simply because a particular religious movement does not appeal to the masses does not allow persecution of the movement. Indeed, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are perhaps the only weapons that can control the tyranny of the majority against the rights of the minority. Thus by using cults and satanic cults as scapegoats and unnecessarily restricting their liberties, society is engaging in the very activity for which the Bill of Rights was intended to prohibit...

Even assuming that cults do engage in the broad range of activities identified by [our] survey participants, [our] discussion of the legality of those activities demonstrates that: (1) relatively few of the activities are illegal and for those acts that are illegal, there are already laws in place to prohibit the activities...

established that they are psychologically destructive to individuals" (p. 50).

Blimling concludes that universities can assume the following:
1. Public educational facilities may be used by student religious groups;
2. Student religious groups have a right to proselytize on campus except in the private areas of a university residence hall;
3. Religious conduct which does not violate the law or lawful university policies should be permitted;
4. Where the university recognizes student organizations, religious organizations must also be recognized without regard for their espoused religious beliefs;
5. Policies formulated to regulate student behavior on campus may be applied to religious groups in the same manner as other organizations; however, no special policies which may be construed as defining a suspect religious classification may be enacted to control religious groups;
6. Non-student groups have limited rights, which may include distributing free literature, engaging people in conversation on any topic, and speaking at open public forums, but do not necessarily include the right to use university facilities or to conduct fund-raising activities on the campus of a state university" (p. 51).

How far should universities extend their influence to prevent their students from joining cults? In arguing for strict limitation of cult activity, Blimling suggests that in the same way that we impose in loco parentis restrictions for fire safety to ensure students safety, it is also incumbent upon us to "educate students and staff about the practices of cult groups, develop appropriate policies for the recognition of all campus groups, and write policies that address the specific cult behaviors which put our students at risk" (p. 56).

In an earlier article, G. S. Blimling ("Cults, college students, and campus policies." NASPA Journal, 19, 2-11, 1981) identified several challenges that cults on campus thrust onto our campuses. He reports that cults identify college students as one of their main recruiting targets. Recruiters have been known to wander residence halls on weekend evenings searching for lonely students, approach students visiting counseling centers, and/or look for people in libraries reading books that might relate to the ideology of the cult.

Blimling notes that cults appeal to students who find comfort in dualistic thinking because "[t]he group offers all the answers and absolves the student from having to make choices. Students can meld into one of these organizations with its prescriptive set of rights and wrongs and have all their decisions made for them" (page 5). Blimling notes that among cult members who later sought therapy, over half had a mental disorder prior to joining the cults and the remainder joined during a time of stress during their late adolescence.

Blimling reported that as a potential cult member's beliefs are unfrozen in the tradition of brainwashing, access to non-cult members is denied. New members are kept busy listening to speeches, undergo sleep deprivation, are denied a healthy diet, chant or meditate for all but 3 hours a day, and are forced to confess their prior transgressions. A breakdown in beliefs is precipitated by the manipulation of guilt, "sensory deprivation, sensory over stimulating, and physical and emotional exhaustion" (p. 6). At this point, members reach a process termed "snapping" whereby their personality changes dramatically as they enter a trance-like state. During this time, the new member's heightened susceptibility is capitalized on as cult beliefs are indoctrinated.

Blimling recommends that universities develop several policies to discourage cults from operating on campus. As so many cults disguise their name and purpose, he urges us to require campus organizations to disclose their name and all affiliations. Recruiting efforts must include the divulgence of this information. Secondly, he suggests that we prohibit campus organizations from using behavior modification techniques. Third, he urges us to prohibit techniques designed to discourage individual freedom of thought. Fourth, he recommends that educational programs be conducted on the nature of cults, how they recruit, and the effects of joining an organization on its members. Finally, he suggests that campus ministers be involved in the process of giving recognition to campus organizations in order to help prevent cults disguised as legitimate religious groups from becoming recognized.

A legal perspective

Clearly, issues of freedom of expression and first amendment rights have tremendous relevance to a discussion of cults on campus. Some have questioned the actual pervasiveness and severity of cult activities. For example, F. MacHovec ("Cults: Forensic and therapeutic aspects," Behavioral Sciences and the Law, 10, 31-37, 1992) argues that anti-cult activists have overstated the danger of cults to our students. He notes that "many self-styled cult experts, therapists, parents, clergy, and police officers lecture public and professional audiences on the dangers of cults. Content of presentations are usually unchallenged single case studies of self-identified victims of witnessed ritual crimes. References cited are mainly from popular print and TV media and seldom from scientific research in books and professional journals ... What is truth? Are cults dangerous? There is much half-truth, hysteria, and distortion" (p. 31). MacHovec raises the point that cult activity that is not inherently illegal is protected under the First Amendment. An important clarification of this point is offered by M. R. Rudin ("Cults and satanism: Threats to teens," NASSP Bulletin, 74, 46-52, 1990) who states that "I do not make guarantees of freedom of belief, but it does not guarantee freedom of action done in the name of belief" (p. 47).

Some have suggested that when new religious movements emerge, they are often labeled as cults and are incorporated later into what is considered mainstream religion. Ogloff and

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Pfeifer ("Cults and the law: A discussion of the legality of alleged cult activities," Behavioral Sciences and the Law,
Leaving cults

So how do cult members typically leave their cults and rejoin the mainstream? In a study of departure from three cults (the Moonies, the Hare Krishnas, and Children of God/Family of Love) S. A. Wright ("Reconceptualizing cult coercion and withdrawal: A comparative analysis of divorce and apostasy," Social Forces, 70, 125-145, 1991) found that decisions to leave cults are often "carefully weighed, rationally calculated, and even negotiated and mutually contracted" (p. 127).

In his research sample, 42% left their cult secretly after carefully planning their departure. Wright cites this as evidence that their rational decision-making abilities have not been relinquished to cult leaders' directives, as suggested by other sources in the literature. An additional 47% left after openly confronting the cult and its leadership. Typically, these members attempted to resolve conflicts with cult policy or practice and were unable to affect any change. An additional 11% left abruptly in a confrontational manner in which angry feelings were vented as they left.

After leaving cults, members in his sample often suffered from lack of societal integration and stabilization. Within two years, 89% had resolved these issues through such means as developing new friends, stronger family ties, involvement in mainstream religion, and college or university attendance. Perhaps this information offers hope that if cult members do leave, they can learn to renegotiate societal demands, though this process may take some time.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to provide the reader with multiple perspectives on the nature, prevalence of, and appropriate responses to cults on campus. While many characteristics of groups termed cults have been mentioned, the following list summarizes those most frequently mentioned in the literature. While an absolute definition of what constitutes a cult has not yet been agreed upon, the more a group can be characterized by the list below, the more likely the group is actually a cult. The distinguishing factors of groups that are cults include:

1. The inordinate emphasis of perpetuating the group through intense proselytizing;
2. Required unswerving obedience to the leadership of the group;
3. Pervasive efforts to separate new members from family and friends who are not cult members;
4. Required relinquishment of a substantial portion of time, possessions, and/or income to the group;
5. Required relocation to cult sponsored housing;
6. Heavy work requirements compounded by pressure to quit school or work to serve the cult;
7. An emphasis on group activities that substantially impede academic pursuits;
8. An intolerance of opposing points of view and dialogue with outsiders who are unwilling to convert;
9. Members are viewed as means to help the cult rather than ends in themselves;
10. A lack of willingness to associate with members outside the group for the purpose of friendship or companionship as an end in itself;
11. The use of deception as to the group's purpose or nature during the recruiting process; and,
12. Focused recruitment of members during particularly stressful times of a semester.

Our obligation as educators

While noting that cult members often lose their abilities to think abstractly, experience a decline in their I.Q., have blunted affect, behave in child-like ways, and may develop pathological symptoms, Blimling ("Cults, college students, and campus policies," NASPA Journal, 19, 2-11, 1981) argues that we have an obligation as educators to inform our students about cults in order to put them in a better position to evaluate a given cult's value. Blimling argues further that the byproducts of cult membership—most notably the decline of the ability to think logically, freely, and develop intellectually, are antithetical to the mission of universities. He concludes that "We cannot help but oppose cults for what they do; not for their doctrines of belief, but for the harms they inflict upon students at a vulnerable stage of their development" (p. 7).

While some difference of opinion exists as to the prevalence of cults and how far administrators should go to restrict their activity, few but the cult members themselves would dispute the fact that cults are a detrimental influence on our students. Cults seem to provide personal affirmation, social support and a sense of truth to wayward students who seek easy answers. Perhaps we should view the degree to which cults thrive on our campuses as indicative of how well we have been able to produce inclusive, supportive, developmental environments on our campuses. As cult influence and pervasiveness increases, the necessity of mounting efforts to both reach out to those who might be susceptible to cults and to provide viable alternatives to cult membership becomes increasingly urgent for the benefit of our students and our institutions.