

Deception, Dependency, and Dread

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Farber, Harlow, & West (1957) coined the term "DDD syndrome" to describe the essence of Korean war thought reform with prisoners of war: debility, dependency, and dread. Lifton (1961), who also studied thought reform employed in Chinese universities, demonstrated that the process did not require physical debilitation. Contemporary cultic groups, which do not have the power of the state at their disposal, have more in common with this brand of thought reform than with the POW variety, in that they rarely employ physical coercion. In order to control targets, they must rely on subterfuge and natural areas of overlap between themselves and prospects. As with all Korean era thought reform programs (those directed at civilians and at prisoners), however, contemporary cultic groups induce dependent states to gain control over recruits and employ psychological (sometimes physical) punishment ("dread") to maintain control. The process, in my view, can be briefly described by a modified "DDD syndrome": *deception, dependency, and dread*.

Although the process here described is complex and varied, the following appears to occur in the prototypical cult conversion:

- A vulnerable prospect encounters a cultic group.
- The group (leader[s]) deceptively presents itself as a benevolent authority that can improve the prospect's well-being.
- The prospect responds positively, experiencing an increase in self-esteem and security, at least some of which is in response to what could be considered "placebo" The prospect can now be considered a "recruit".
- Through the use of "sharing" exercises, "confessions," and skillful individualized probing, the group [leader(s)] assesses the recruit's strengths and weaknesses.
- Through testimonies of group members, the denigration of the group's "competitors" (e.g., other religious groups, other therapists), the tactful accentuation of the recruit's shameful memories and other weaknesses, and the gradual indoctrination of the recruit into a closed, nonfalsifiable belief system, the group's superiority is affirmed as a fundamental assumption.
- Members' testimonies, positive reinforcement of the recruit's expressions of trust in the group, discrete reminders about the recruit's weaknesses, and various forms of group pressure induce the recruit to acknowledge that his/her future well-being depends upon adherence to the group's belief system, more specifically its "change program."
- These same influence techniques are joined by a subtle undermining of the recruit's self-esteem (e.g., by exaggerating the "sinfulness" of experiences the recruit is encouraged to confess"), the suppression or weakening of critical thinking through fatiguing activity, near-total control of the recruit's time, trance-induction exercises (e.g., chanting), and the repetitive message that only disaster results from not following the group's "change program." These manipulations induce the recruit to declare allegiance to the group and to commit to change him/herself as directed by the group. He or she can now be

considered a convert embarking on a path of "purification", "enlightenment", "self-actualization", "higher consciousness," or whatever. The recruit's dependency on the group is established and implicitly, if not explicitly, acknowledged. Moreover, he/she has accepted the group's authority in defining what is true and good, within the convert's heart and mind as well as in the world.

- The convert is next fully subjected to the unrealistically high expectations of the group. The recruit's "potential" is "lovingly" affirmed, while members testify to the great heights they and "heroic" models have scaled. The group's all-important mission, e.g., save the world, justifies its all-consuming expectations.
- Because by definition the group is always right and "negative" thinking is unacceptable, the convert's failures become totally his or her responsibility, while his or her doubts and criticisms are suppressed (often with the aid of trance-inducing exercises such as meditation, speaking in tongues, or chanting) or redefined as personal failures. The convert thus experiences increasing self-alienation. The "pre-cult self" is rejected; doubts about the group are pushed out of consciousness; the sense of failure generated by not measuring up to the group's expectations is bottled up inside. The only possible adaptation is fragmentation and compartmentalization. It is not surprising, then, that many clinicians consider dissociation to lie the heart of cult-related distress and dysfunction (Ash, 1985).
- The convert's self-alienation will tend to demand further psychological, if not physical, alienation from the non-group world (especially family), information from which can threaten to upset whatever dissociative equilibrium the convert establishes in an attempt to adjust to the consuming and conflicting demands of the group. This alienation accentuates the convert's dependency on the group.
- The group supports the convert's dissociative equilibrium by actively encouraging escalating dependency, e.g., by exaggerating the convert's past "sins" and conflicts with family, by denigrating outsiders, by positively reinforcing chanting or other "thought-stopping" activities, and by providing and positively reinforcing ways in which the convert can find a valued role within the group (e.g., work for a group-owned business, sell magazines on the street).
- The group strengthens the convert's growing dependency by threatening or inflicting punishment whenever the convert or an outside force (e.g., a visit by a family member) disturbs the dissociative equilibrium that enables him or her to function in a closed, nonfalsifiable system (the "dread" of DDD). Punishment may sometimes be physical. Usually, however, the punishment is psychological, sometimes even metaphysical. Certain fringe Christian groups, for example, can at the command of the leadership immediately begin shunning someone singled out as being "factious" or possessed of a "rebellious spirit." Many groups also threaten wavering converts with punishments in the hereafter, for example, being "doomed to Hell." It should be remembered that these threats and punishments occur within a context of induced dependency and psychological alienation from the person's former support network. This fact makes them much more potent than the garden-variety admonitions of traditional religious, such as "you will go to hell if you die with mortal sin."

The result of this process, when carried to its consummation, is a person who proclaims great happiness but hides great suffering. I have talked to many former cultists who, when they left their groups and talked to other former members, were surprised to discover that

many of their fellow members were also smilingly unhappy, all thinking they were the only ones who felt miserable inside.

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