

# Cults in Our Midst

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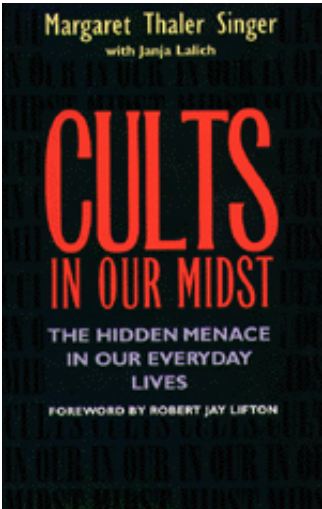
*Cults in Our Midst: The Hidden Menace in Our Everyday Lives* is a nonfiction psychology book on cults, by Margaret Singer and Janja Lalich, Ph.D., with a foreword by Robert Jay Lifton. The book was published by Jossey-Bass in 1996 in hardcover format. In 1997, the book was published in Spanish, as *Las Sectas Entre Nosotros*,<sup>[1]</sup> and in German, as *Sekten: Wie Menschen ihre Freiheit verlieren und wiedergewinnen können* ("Cults: How people lose and can regain their freedom").<sup>[2]</sup>

In this book I will use the term *cult* and *cultic group* to refer to any one of a large number of groups that have sprung up in our society and that are similar in the way that they originate, their power structure, and their governance. Cults range from the relatively benign to those that exercise extraordinary control over members' lives and use thought-reform processes to influence and control members. While the conduct of certain cults causes nonmembers to criticize them, the term cult is not in itself pejorative but simply descriptive. It denotes a group that forms around a person who claims to have a special mission or knowledge, which they will share with those who turn over most of their decision making to that self-appointed leader.<sup>[3]</sup>

A second edition of the book without Lalich as co-author was published in paperback form by John Wiley & Sons, in 2003, with a new title<sup>[4]</sup> shortly before Dr. Singer's death.

## Singer's Six Pre-Conditions for Thought Reform

### Cults in Our Midst



Cults in Our Midst

Author	Margaret Singer Janja Lalich Robert Jay Lifton, Foreword
Country	United States
Language	English
Subject	Cults
Genre	nonfiction psychology cults
Publisher	Jossey-Bass
Publication date	September 1996
Media type	Hardcover
Pages	374
ISBN	0-7879-0266-7
OCLC	35979557 ( <a href="https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/35979557">https://www.worldcat.org/oclc/35979557</a> )
Preceded by	<i>Captive Hearts, Captive Minds</i>
Followed by	<i>Crazy Therapies, Bounded Choice</i>

In *Cults in our Midst*, the authors describe six conditions which they claim would create an atmosphere in which thought reform is possible. They state that these conditions involve no need for physical coercion or violence.

- Keep the person unaware of what is going on and how attempts to psychologically condition him or her are directed in a step-by-step manner.
  - Potential new members are led, step by step, through a behavioral-change program without being aware of the final agenda or full content of the group. The goal may be to make them deployable agents for the leadership, to get them to buy more courses, or get them to make a deeper commitment, depending on the leader's aim and desires.
- Control the person's social and/or physical environment; especially control the person's time.
  - Through various methods, newer members are kept busy and led to think about the group and its content during as much of their waking time as possible.
- Systematically create a sense of powerlessness in the person.
  - This is accomplished by getting members away from their normal social support group for a period of time and into an environment where the majority of people are already group members.
  - The members serve as models of the attitudes and behaviors of the group and speak an in-group language.
  - Strip members of their main occupation (quit jobs, drop out of school) or source of income or have them turn over their income (or the majority of) to the group.
  - Once the target is stripped of their usual support network, their confidence in their own perception erodes.
  - As the target's sense of powerlessness increases, their good judgment and understanding of the world are diminished. (ordinary view of reality is destabilized)
  - As the group attacks the target's previous worldview, it causes the target distress and inner confusion; yet they are not allowed to speak about this confusion or object to it - leadership suppresses questions and counters resistance.
  - This process is sped up if the targeted individual or individuals are kept tired - the cult will take deliberate actions to keep the target constantly busy.
- Manipulate a system of rewards, punishments and experiences in such a way as to inhibit behavior that reflects the person's former social identity.
  - Manipulation of experiences can be accomplished through various methods of trance induction, including leaders using such techniques as paced speaking patterns, guided imagery, chanting, long prayer sessions or lectures, and lengthy meditation sessions.
  - the target's old beliefs and patterns of behavior are defined as irrelevant or evil. Leadership wants these old patterns eliminated, so the member must suppress them.
  - Members get positive feedback for conforming to the group's beliefs and behaviors and negative feedback for old beliefs and behavior.
- The group manipulates a system of rewards, punishments, and experiences in order to promote learning the group's ideology or belief system and group-approved behaviors.
  - Good behavior, demonstrating an understanding and acceptance of the group's beliefs, and compliance are rewarded while questioning, expressing doubts or criticizing are met with disapproval, redress and possible rejection. Anyone who asks a question is made to feel there is something inherently disordered about them to be questioning.
  - The only feedback members get is from the group; they become totally dependent upon the rewards given by those who control the environment.
  - Members must learn varying amounts of new information about the beliefs of the group and the

behaviors expected by the group.

- The more complicated and filled with contradictions the new system is and the more difficult it is to learn, the more effective the conversion process will be.
- Esteem and affection from peers is very important to new recruits. Approval comes from having the new member's behaviors and thought patterns conform to the models (members). Members' relationship with peers is threatened whenever they fail to learn or display new behaviors. Over time, the easy solution to the insecurity generated by the difficulties of learning the new system is to inhibit any display of doubts—new recruits simply acquiesce, affirm and act as if they do understand and accept the new ideology.
- Put forth a closed system of logic and an authoritarian structure that permits no feedback and refuses to be modified except by leadership approval or executive order.
  - The group has a top-down, pyramid structure. The leaders must have verbal ways of never losing.
  - Members are not allowed to question, criticize or complain. If they do, the leaders allege the member is defective, not the organization or the beliefs.
  - The targeted individual is treated as always intellectually incorrect or unjust, while conversely the system, its leaders and its beliefs are always automatically, and by default, considered as absolutely just.
  - Conversion or remolding of the individual member happens in a closed system. As members learn to modify their behavior in order to be accepted in this closed system, they change—begin to speak the language—which serves to further isolate them from their prior beliefs and behaviors.

## References

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