**Understanding Cults Week 1**

**Date:** 2025-05-05

* People started recognizing the existence of “cults” in 1960s/70s even though they have been around forever
* People started noticing in 1970s due to the Peoples Temple. The mass suicide in Jonestown
* What is a Cult?
  + A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to a person, idea, or thing. They use manipulative techniques of control to advance their goals
  + Olson (2006) “cult” is often used in a negative way. He demonstrated the power of the word by asking people how they would feel if their neighbor joined either a cult, new religious movement, and new Christian church. Cult made people the most uncomfortable, NRM made them less uncomfortable, and new Chistian church made them the least uncomfortable
  + A different terminology with less negative connotations was New Religious Movements (NRMs). Cult is still used more
  + Because the term cult is used so differently by different people, it has limited utility
* Popular beliefs vs reality
  + Beliefs are that all cults are religion based and that all the leaders are charismatic
  + Reality: Many cults are religion based, and charisma is not as important as the ability to manipulate and persuade
* Th term cult refers to 3 things
  + The origin of the group and the role of the leader
    - Typically one leader at the top of the structure
    - Leaders are self-appointed, persuasive, and claim to have special mission/knowledge
    - The leaders are determined and domineering, and center worship on themselves rather than an entity
  + The power structure, or relationship between the leaders and followers
    - These groups are authoritarian in nature. What the leader says goes
    - Appear to be innovative and inclusive
    - Have a double set of ethics
  + The use of a coordinated program of persuasion
    - These groups tend to be totalistic or all-encompassing in controlling members behaviour and also ideologically totalistic, exhibiting extremism in worldview
    - These groups tend to require members to undergo a major disruption or change of life-style
  + These groups are not uniform
    - Not all are alike, some are more extreme/influential
    - Some requires their members to live in, some don’t
    - Some are more controlling
    - One group that is labelled as a cult by one researcher may not be labelled as such by another. Many argue that larger, more accepted groups were once “cults”, but became successful and accepted in society
  + 3 Elements these groups are likely to exhibit
    - Members will be excessively zealous and unquestionably committed to the identity and leadership of the group
    - Exploitative manipulation of members
    - Harm or the danger of harm to members, their families, and/or society
  + Cults/NRMs vs Society
    - These groups often come into conflict with general society
    - Some gradually accommodate to society by decreasing their levels of manipulation, exploitation, etc
    - Others “harden their shells” by becoming even more totalistic, elitist, and isolated
  + Cults can come from anywhere
    - Most established groups, have accountability mechanisms that restrain the development of these more extreme cultic subgroups
    - Therefore, “cults” are generally associated with newer, unorthodox groups
  + Difference between cults and new movements
    - The use of manipulative persuasion and control tactics to exploit members is found much more often in groups labelled as “cults” than in other “new movements”
  + Cults tend to have 2 purposes
    - Recruiting new members
    - Fundraising
  + 2 important points
    - The term cult is merely descriptive, not pejorative: Refers to the origin, and power structure of a group
    - Difficult to account for how many people in a society belong to a cult
  + Types of cults
    - Neo-Christian Religious
    - Hindu and Eastern Religious
    - Occult, Witchcraft and Satanist – Church of Satan
    - Spiritualist - Swedenborg
    - Zen and other Sino-Japanese Philosophical-mystical orientation - ALM Shoko
    - Racial – Creativity Movement or KKK
    - Flying Saucer or other related outer-space phenomena – Heavens Gate
    - Psychology or Psychotherapeutic groups – Dr. Tim
    - Political Groups
    - Self-help, self-improvement, and life-style systems
  + All of these groups are a variation of a single theme
    - Doesn’t matter what the belief is as it ends up being a tool to serve the leader
    - To understand these groups we must examine their structure and practices, not their beliefs
  + Contemporary groups labelled as cults are as old as recorded histpry
    - Modern cults come in a variety of forms
    - Common denominator in these modern groups is an emphasis on community and on direct experience of the divine
    - Members find social support/acceptance similar to family
    - Gives a sense of belonging and being “somebody”
    - Modern day youth are becoming more disenchanted with traditional ways of viewing reality