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The 'Empty Self' in Relation to Cult Development

Introduction

In the 1960s, there was an upsurge in cult development that quickly became a highly visible phenomenon in the United States (Singer). Since then, the number of cults has proliferated, and it is estimated that 2 to 3 million people have joined these movements. Cults have been comprehensively studied since the 1970s, but they are still highly controversial and generally opposed (Levine). The transformation of society's conception of the bounded, masterful self to the "empty self" that achieves fulfillment through consumption coincides with the expansion of cults in the U.S. In this essay, I will discuss how the rise of the empty self has impacted and contributed to the growth of cult groups. Specifically, I will discuss how cult development, cult leaders, and members are all affected by the empty self, and I hypothesize that this conception of the self has directly impacted cults' ability to gain massive followings.

Overview of Cults

In this section, I will provide a brief overview of cults through explaining charismatic groups, new religious movements, and how these definitions contribute to our understanding of cults. I will also provide some history on cult development in the United States to preface my discussion of how the empty self has impacted the proliferation of cult movements.

To define cults, I will first explain charismatic groups and new religious movements. Charismatic groups typically have a consensual belief system that provides members with a seemingly new system of values, an external focus of attention (usually on the group's

leader); their doctrines are also often based on transcendental and mystical experiences. These groups exhibit high levels of social cohesiveness as their members are strongly influenced by the group's behavioral norms, and they sometimes live communally and think of each other as family. The group leader takes on a grandiose role, often imbued with superhuman and mystical powers (Galanter). Similarly, new religious movements are usually founded by charismatic leaders "thought to have extraordinary powers," offer innovative compensators, or theories and hopes for future success or reward, and allow members to cultivate tight familial bonds (Bainbridge). However, new religious movements sometimes "establish themselves as substitutes" for members' families and friends, and they demand total loyalty and commitment to the group (Rubinstein). The term "new religious movement" is often used as a more neutral pseudonym for cults, but they can differ in that some new religious movements can be considered sects, or branches, of already existing religions. The characteristics of charismatic groups and new religious movements help to contextualize the definition of a cult.

While not all cults are religious, the word usually connotes religious deviancy. Religious cults are essentially a subgroup of charismatic groups and new religious movements, as they are led by powerful, charismatic leaders, provide new or repackaged compensators, and place great value on transcendental and mystical experiences. They also exhibit deeply committed members and view their leader as a higher, essentially perfect or sinless being. Like new religious movements, extreme cult groups often exert control over almost every aspect of their members' lives, acting as a substitute family, friend group and moral compass. Cults are characterized by intensely committed members, non-traditional beliefs and practices, and a powerful leader (Singer). There are three types of cult groups:

audience cults, client cults, and cult movements. Audience cults are low commitment: they have no formal organization, and while members occasionally meet at seminars, they mostly consume cult doctrines through newsletters, magazines, and other forms of media. Client cults function similarly to how therapist-patient or consultant-client relationships work: these cults provide a service of sorts to their members. The leadership is sometimes highly organized, but members are not and often maintain commitments to other religious institutions. Cult movements are much more intense than audience and client cults. In this type of cult, members gather regularly and sever ties with other religious organizations (BLHI). They are much more organized, and leaders of these cults usually "manipulate and exploit members' lives" to maintain control (Levine). Cult movements are generally more well-known than the other types because of their passionate followings. Here, I will briefly describe two examples of cults that have entered the realm of popular knowledge: Scientology and the Unification Church.

Scientology, a cult now spanning over 150 countries, emerged in the 1950s as a result of L. Ron Hubbard's quest for a "science of the mind." Originally, he approached this quest by focusing on the mind and how to overcome "humankind's mental aberrations," but he later transitioned into a more religious viewpoint after a mystical experience. Essentially, the cult is a highly organized group that believes that humans are immortal alien beings trapped on Earth until they realize and reclaim their true selves, which can be accomplished through training and understanding of "ever larger realities, or dynamics." Once this is done, it is thought that they will achieve supernatural abilities that were repressed by their human form. Members are said to experience severe punishments for disobeying the cult's doctrine, and it has been accused of financial fraud and illegal practice of medicine (Melton). Scientology closely fits

the definition of a cult movement as it is very organized, has regular gatherings, and manipulates its members.

Also founded in the 1950s, the Unification Church is a cult that believes its founder, Reverend Sun Myung Moon, is the Messiah. Reverend Moon developed his theology for the Unification Church after having a vision in which he spoke to Jesus. The cult's teachings rely on following his example to create the "ideal family" and "participate in God's plan for restoration." The Unification Church is present in more than 100 countries and is well-known for its mass weddings (Melton). Members went through intense suffering to gain understanding of the Divine Principle, one of their core beliefs, and they often lived communally in the 1970s (Unification). Like Scientology, the Unification Church can also be described as a cult movement because of its intense organization and strict teachings.

To summarize this section, cults have authoritative, charismatic leaders, varying levels of organization and commitment, and have no connection to previously existing religions. The three types of cults – audience, client, and cult movements – differ in the level of organization and intensity of teachings and policies. Since the 1960s, they have grown in popularity and amassed large followings; some popular cults include Scientology and the Unification Church, both of which originated in the early 1950s. In this essay, I focus on religious cults despite there being different types, such as self-help groups.

Religiosity of Cults

Religious cults generally feature intensely committed members, charismatic leaders often imbued with divine powers, and beliefs of reaching enlightenment or realization of truth. After discussing the concept of traditional religion, I will compare cult movements to

traditional, established religions to identify key similarities and differences in how they function to then discuss whether cults can be truly religious in nature.

Traditional religions are religious movements that are established, widely followed, and have scriptures and devotional or contemplative practices. Prayer, meditation, and worship are key aspects of religion, and followers display moral conduct in line with its teachings. Ultimately, it is a way for people to deal with concerns about life, death, and what may come after (Britannica). Established religions, such as Christianity, often expect minimal financial offerings from their members to fund churches, missions, and religious events.

Although most religious cults are opposed by the general public, they are like more traditional religions in many ways. For example, followers of both cults and established religions are usually deeply committed to their doctrine, meet regularly to discuss their beliefs, and expect modest financial support from their members (BLHI). Both Scientology and the Unification Church follow some or all these practices; however, they are much more extreme and intense. Like traditional religions, cult members partake in practices like meditation and prayer and help people deal with personal concerns, problems, and crises (Britannica). However, cults also greatly differ from traditional religions and sects. Firstly, they have no prior connections to established religious bodies (BLHI). They are new, innovative, and often take beliefs and practices from multiple institutions to create their doctrines, whereas established religions generally operate within mainstream culture. Religious institutions also typically have a hierarchy of power that balances out control; cults, on the other hand, typically have only one authoritarian leader. Another major difference between cults and established religions is how the compensators they provide are framed:

cults give “new and exotic compensators” instead of the older, more traditional compensators given by religious institutions (Brower).

Cults are often considered irreligious because of how they manipulate their members. For example, many cults often instill values in their members that “approximate practices they avowedly deride (Galanter). This may include things like the accumulation of wealth. They are also structured differently from major religions, and they prey on vulnerable people to gain followings. Cults are not truly religious because they often have motivations other than the betterment of their followers’ wellbeing, whether they are financial or otherwise.

Impact of the Empty Self on Cult Development

Society’s conception of the self has greatly transformed in the past century, and I argue that the most recent understanding – that of the “empty self” – has contributed to the upsurge in cult formations in the United States. To develop this argument, I will contextualize and define the empty self, describe cult formation, explain the psychopathology of cult leaders, and analyze how the empty self may impact cult development, recruitment, and followings in the following paragraphs.

Western history has seen a shift from the Victorian bourgeois self to a bounded, masterful self. This conception of the self has “specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its own personal ends” (Cushman). In moving toward a more individualistic perception of the self, there came to be a lack of communal beliefs, leading to an “emptier” self – in other words, the increased focus on the individual resulted in decreased attention toward community and tradition. Without these forms of meaning, people had to turn elsewhere to find fulfillment and certainty.

Alongside this transformation, the end of World War II brought changes in family dynamics and the rise of industrialization and advertising in the United States, creating the perfect storm for a consumer-oriented self that was vulnerable to the "larger-than-life, glamorous" icons present in advertisements (Cushman). Thus, we see how societal transformations impacted the configuration of the self. Here, I will develop the psychoanalytic context of the empty self and define it.

Kohut's concept of the selfobject clarifies how these factors contributed to the development of the empty self. Changes in family dynamics caused people to grow up without learning "effective self-controls" because their relationships with traditional selfobjects – their parents – were weak or broken. This, in Freudian terms, allowed the id to overcome the ego and superego, giving rise to a more impulsive generation that craved instant pleasure and gratification (Hothersall). Advertisements often promised that their product would bring instantaneous completeness, happiness, or fulfillment of some sort to the consumer, and the consumer-oriented self of this generation was easily compelled to satisfy their "emotional hunger" through these products (Cushman). This configuration of the self was no longer cohesive and thus incomplete, and the previously mentioned icons in advertisements became selfobjects for people to connect to because they were an ideal, complete person to aspire to be like. Thus, people began consuming the products of those advertisements to "take in a new identity" or life (Cushman). The absence of community, shared meaning, and traditional selfobjects that developed from the shift to a consumer-oriented self became integral to the current configuration of society's conception of the self: the empty self. The empty self internalizes these absences as "a lack of personal conviction and worth," leading to a configuration of the self that must be "filled up" with food, consumer

products, and celebrities to feel cohesive (Cushman). The indulgent, empty self thus must constantly find meaning and guidance to feel complete.

In the context of cult development, we see that the empty self manifests in both the cult's leader and its members. When cults form, the leader often has an underlying motivation to feel more complete themselves; this emerges in the tactics they use to maintain their following. Cult members also experience the detriments of the empty self, which pushes them to explore cults and zealous self-help groups. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how cults form, the cult leader's role in development, recruitment, and maintenance of the cult's following, as well as how the empty self makes people vulnerable to cult recruitment.

There are three models of cult formation that explain how cult leaders develop their doctrines: the psychopathology model, entrepreneur model, and subculture-evolution model. In the psychopathology model, cults are a result of "individual psychopathology that finds successful social expression by providing apparent solutions to common intractable human problems" (Bainbridge). Cult leaders form their doctrines during a vision or mystical experience that they deem to be truth, and others going through similar problems that the leader encountered around the time of the experience will find commonality and adopt the doctrine as well. The entrepreneur model functions more like a business venture: the cult founder consciously develops a new religious doctrine in hopes of making profit or obtaining "rewards that followers may shower upon them (Bainbridge). Lastly, in the subculture-evolution model, individuals achieve "radical cultural developments" through multiple steps or rituals. It also includes the expression of novel social systems (Bainbridge). These models are often combined to help people understand how cults form.

Returning to the examples of Scientology and the Unification Church, we see that these models hold true for how the cults form. Scientology, on one hand, formed through mystical experience as in the psychopathology model, and it also uses the subculture-evolution model in that members go through various levels of teaching and training in order to realize their higher selves. Similarly, the Unification Church's doctrine also formed through Reverend Moon's mystical experience and includes a three-step process that is supposed to allow members to "be perfected in love" (Unification). However, Scientology differs from the Unification Church in its use of the entrepreneur model: members must pay for the counseling courses that help them reach enlightenment. Thus, cult movements typically form through their leader's conscious or unconscious, by which I mean through visions and mystical experiences, decision to create new doctrines.

Cult leaders, as we can see, play an important role in the formation of cults, and it is important to understand the psychopathology of them to fully comprehend how cults work. Cult founders are charismatic, meaning that they have qualities that "set [them] apart from ordinary men" and are treated as if they are endowed with supernatural or exceptional qualities (Goldberg). However, they often display tendencies of pathological narcissists, such as paranoia and megalomania. Pathological narcissists are often raised under "extreme domination and control" and have repeated experiences of shame and humiliation. This aggression causes the abused person to "despise [their] normative dependency," and they compensate for their inability to trust others by "attaining control over [their] followers." Cult leaders maintain control by making the follower dependent on them through psychological seduction followed by intimidation, shaming, and belittling. They also "compel behavioral conformity" through group cohesiveness, which keeps members engaged in their group,

shared belief, and altered consciousness" (Galanter). However, they are not free of "petty, mundane attachments" as they make their members believe – as Kohut said, cult leaders depend on fanatic worship and adoration from their followers because they need reassurance of their "narcissistic delusion of perfection" (Shaw). In other words, the empty self emerges in cult leaders as a need for worship and idolization. To have a cohesive self, they must feel needed by and perfect in the eyes of their followers; this idealization of the cult leader as a perfect being contributes to the followers' transformations after joining the group.

When people join cult movements, they begin to "experience the leader as a new father figure" they can identify with. Through this identification, the members' superegos can be altered: they are freed of "moral responsibility for their actions… at the behest of the leader" (Goldberg). Thus, Freud's idea of transference shows how members understand the cult leader as their only source of moral guidance and come to believe that their leader has transformed and bettered their lives. We can also return to Kohut's conception of the selfobject to further understand the cult leader's influence over their members: the leader can come to represent a "perfect selfobject parent who banishes powerlessness and loneliness" for their followers, which contributes to them staying in the group as a loyal member (Shaw). The control cult leaders have over their members is possible because of already existing vulnerabilities within the members themselves, which I will discuss next.

There are many psychological issues that make cult members more vulnerable to cult recruitment. Many followers experience varying degrees of alienation, demoralization, low self-esteem, and substance abuse prior to joining a cult. Alongside this significant psychological distress, these people often have limited, less cohesive social ties and crave

stability, support, structure, and purpose – they are searching for a way to reduce their sense of personal incompleteness (Galanter). Cult movements appeal to young people, mainly white college students, with these struggles because they promise "ready-made friendships and decisions about careers, dating, sex, and marriage" (Singer). These promises, along with a powerful, charismatic, all-knowing authoritarian leader they can look to for guidance and identify with, attract those with a damaged or weakened sense of self.

In this analysis of cult followers' existing vulnerabilities, we begin to see many parallels in their problems and issues caused by the empty self. Many struggles that young people vulnerable to cults encounter can be contextualized in terms of the empty self – for example, low self-esteem can be considered "the absence of a sense of personal worth," and substance abuse may be defined as "the compulsion to fill" the empty self with "chemically induced emotional experience" (Shaw). The empty self exhibits itself as an absence of personal meaning and fulfillment, and it can manifest as an emotional hunger for spiritual guidance. This makes people even more vulnerable because cults emphasize that they provide guidance and purpose when recruiting. Cults use many tactics to recruit new members, such as hosting seminars in sophisticated settings with persuasive, well-credentialed speakers. They promise salvation, "answers to social problems," structure, and noble goals to appeal to the empty self (Shaw). A generation with generally damaged or weakened selfobject connections to their parents thus finds cults incredibly appealing. Vulnerable people are then further drawn into cults by these vows and portrayals of the cult leader as an authoritative, perfect being that can substitute the selfobject experience of the parent as we examined previously.

On their own, cults also provide various selfobject experiences, which is part of how they maintain their followings. Oftentimes, these experiences include unconditional love, purpose, and meaning, which help dispel feelings of disconnectedness (Shaw). By providing people with a sense of community and guidance, cults attempt to foster a more cohesive self in their followers. While this is a positive tactic in maintaining their following, cults also use detrimental and coercive methods to keep their members. For example, "social and psychological pressures and practices" that cults use to bolster group cohesiveness and shared belief often amount to "conditioning techniques that constrict attention, limit personal relationships, and devalue reasoning" (Singer). Thus, members are, in a sense, broken in, and they form an intense allegiance to the cult because they become thoroughly convinced by the ideologies repeated to them. Alongside this, rigid routines including "constant exhortation and training" to enter altered spiritual and mental states, hours of prayer or meditation, and long, repetitive lectures further control the cult's members by contributing to their limited attention span and reasoning skills. Cults also restrict sexual behavior, connections with family and friends outside the group, and instilling "rigid moral judgements of the unconverted outside world" into their followers to increase commitment (Singer). Conditioning members into believing that the cult is their only source of companionship and holds perfectly just, moral beliefs is key to maintaining a cult following. While community and guidance offer cohesiveness to those suffering from the empty self, these tactics manipulate cult members and prohibit them from engaging with different perspectives, developing individual interests, and having personal freedom, and they oftentimes leave lasting psychological effects on members.

Cults impact the psychological well-being of its members while they remain in the group and after they leave. Followers often experience positive psychological effects after joining a cult, such as new strength, reduced self-hatred, calmness, and happiness (Galanter). The empty self feels more cohesive and fulfilled because members now have a sense of community and purpose. Other therapeutic effects of cult membership are increased capability for better relationships, remission from substance abuse, changed attitudes towards drugs and alcohol, and feeling united with their community (Galanter). Entering a cult provides followers with a culture emphasizing that they embrace the group's beliefs, allowing them to refocus their interpretation of the world. Group cohesiveness and altered consciousness also play a large role in these positive effects. Mystical and transcendental experiences, for example, can help members create a "new construction of reality" that helps them deal with psychological issues they had when joining the cult (Galanter). By giving members a sense of control over their views on life, cults allow them to move past inner emptiness: they can feel connected to others like themselves, thus helping them deal with personal issues regarding the empty self. However, feelings of fear, guilt, and powerlessness also affect them, especially if they are considering leaving the group (Singer). Social pressures from cult leadership and other members exacerbates these negative emotions, making it much harder for followers to exit the group.

Upon exiting a cult, former members generally have a hard time reentering society. Because cults typically only stabilize their members' psychological states rather than resolving their issues or dependencies, many people suffer from "serious to extreme emotional disturbances" after exiting a group (Levine). They lose their sense of unity with the cult and their increased sense of self-worth, and they often are isolated because they no longer

have the support system provided by the cult. Along with a renewed sense of meaninglessness, ex-followers are often plagued by feelings of regret, fear, and guilt that stem from leaving the cult they belonged to: they regret losing time in the real world, fear the cult for defecting, and feel guilty and shameful when they try to make up for lost time through "binges of dating, drinking, and sexual adventures." Former members sometimes feel that they lost their innocence after joining a cult, causing them to have a lower self-esteem. Ex-members also experience slipping into dissociated states, extreme suggestibility and passivity, and a void resulting from the "loss of a way of life in which everything is planned" (Singer). Having a lack of purpose, stability, and community alongside the negative effects of being conditioned into believing the cult's ideals make it incredibly difficult for former cult followers to readjust to societal norms.

Conclusion

Through this analysis, we see that cult leaders exhibit the dependency and incompleteness that comes with the empty self, and they rely on worship and idolization from their followers to feel cohesive and fulfilled. Cult members are vulnerable to cult recruitment because of how the empty self manifests within them – substance abuse, low self-esteem, and other problems they deal with correlate to a need for consumption to feel whole. Thus, cults use various tactics to target vulnerable people, such as promising guidance, salvation, and an authoritative idol to look up to.

The rise of the empty self has impacted cult development by making people more susceptible to the promises made by cults. Because they must constantly consume to avoid feelings of meaninglessness and emptiness, people are more likely to look into joining cults

that promise them relief from their struggles. They may choose cults over traditional religions because they employ novel ways of presenting compensators to people that seem more promising. In conclusion, the empty self has impacted cult development by making people more vulnerable to manipulation and less able to rely on delayed gratification.

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