

Under the Influence: The Psychological Impact of Manipulation and Control Mechanisms on Ex-cult Members

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Abstract. Cultic groups exert a profound and lasting psychological influence through their systematic manipulation and control. This literature review examines how these mechanisms affect the mental health of ex-cult members. The mechanisms are classified into two categories: mental manipulation and physical control. Mental manipulation, which includes brainwashing, fear indoctrination, and the implantation of rigid ideology, often intertwines with physical control which includes social isolation, financial dependency, and physical abuse. Together, these strategies create compliance and dependency and leave long-lasting consequences after members exit the group. Commonly reported mental disorders include anxiety disorders, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder, which complicate reintegration into normal life. Limitations in previous research include reliance on self-report and sampling biases. Developing an understanding of the correlation between cult manipulation and control and mental disorders is crucial for developing targeted interventions to support former cult members.

Keywords: Cult involvement, Manipulation, Control, Mental Disorders

1. Introduction

Cults have long captured public and scholarly attention due to their potential of causing deep psychological harm. Despite occasional notorious cult cases such as mass suicides in modern society, cult-related experiences and outcomes remain a relatively underexplored area of discussion. People may join cults under stressful conditions like life transitions or identity crises, or because they have certain vulnerable traits such as ego weakness and emotional vulnerability. Furthermore, reasons like personal development and life dissatisfaction are also common reasons why people join cults [1]. Once these individuals are under the manipulation and control of the cult, they become susceptible to both physical and psychological harm that affects them long after they leave the cult.

While the structure of cults may vary, a consistent feature across most cultic groups is the deliberate use of manipulation and control. These two categories, mental manipulation, and physical control are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they often function together to reinforce the cult's influence.

When a member is exposed to long-term manipulation and control, the effects extend beyond the period of active involvement. Many ex-cults members report ongoing struggles from mental

disorders, such as anxiety disorder, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder, or the deterioration of mental health, raising the question of the underlying reasons for this psychological impact.

However, few studies have examined the relationship between cult manipulations and ex-cult members' mental health. Thus, this literature review aims to synthesize existing research to explore whether there might be a correlation between cult manipulation and control mechanisms and the development of mental disorders among former cult members. By examining the relationship between these mechanisms and disorders such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, this review seeks to clarify the psychological consequences of cult involvement and highlight implications for intervention and recovery.

This review is organized into four sections: definitions, overview of manipulation and control strategies, discussion of their relationship with specific mental disorders, and finally, consideration of interventions, recovery process, and limitations in current research.

2. Definitions

The concept of a cult is complex. The American Psychological Association defines a cult as “a religious or quasi-religious group characterized by unusual or atypical beliefs, seclusion from the outside world, and an authoritarian structure [2]. Cults tend to be highly cohesive, well organized, secretive, and hostile to nonmembers.” Within such groups, members are often subject to manipulation, defined as “behavior designed to exploit, control, or otherwise influence others to one’s advantage,” and control, defined as the “authority, power, or influence over events, behaviors, situations, or people” [2]. Manipulation includes brainwashing and mind control, defined as an “extreme form of social influence used to indoctrinate an individual in the attitudes and beliefs of a group” [2]. Cult ideologies also reinforces an “us-versus-them” mindset, in which individuals view the social world through rigid ingroup–outgroup distinctions, leading to favoritism toward ingroup members and hostility toward outsiders [2].

The APA defines a mental disorder as “any condition characterized by cognitive and emotional disturbances, abnormal behaviors, impaired functioning, or any combination of these” [3]. Among the most relevant to cult involvement are anxiety disorders, which refers to “the emotional state of fear, worry, or excessive apprehension”, and depression, which refers to “a negative affective state, ranging from unhappiness and discontent to an extreme feeling of sadness, pessimism, and despondency, that interferes with daily life” [2]. In more severe cases, cult-related trauma may manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), defined as “a disorder that may result when an individual lives through or witnesses an event in which they believe that there is a threat to life or physical integrity and safety and experiences fear, terror, or helplessness” [2].

3. Manipulation and control overview

One defining and common feature of cults is their systematic use of manipulation and control to shape members' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors. While manipulation focuses more on the mental aspect, control targets the physical and environmental restrictions. However, both serve as powerful tools cult leaders use to influence and maintain authority.

Mental manipulation includes brainwashing, thought reform, restrictions or distortion of information, and the use of cult ideology to induce fear in members' minds or redefine reality. These mechanisms reshape cognition, and the way members see the world, causing them to become increasingly dependent on the cult for emotional support.

Physical control, on the other hand, involves direct regulation of members' daily lives and social connections, including enforced isolation from family members or friends, restrictions on financial expenses, or mandatory living arrangements that cut members off from the outside world and bond them physically and emotionally to the cult group and leader. Physical abuse is also used to induce fear through conditioning and further reliance. In some groups, drugs or substances are employed to impair critical thinking and increase compliance.

These tactics together create a cohesive system of control in which mental manipulation and physical control intertwine and reinforce each other: mental manipulation justifies physical control, and physical control makes it difficult for members to resist mental manipulation. This system ensures members' tie with the group and often leaves ongoing impacts [3,4].

4. Mental manipulation

Mental manipulation refers to the deliberate alteration of one's cognitive processes and emotional state through various techniques, breaking the individual's autonomy without their awareness [5]. In cults, mental manipulation is designed to increase obedience and members' dependence.

4.1. Brainwashing

One of the most well-known forms of mental manipulation is brainwashing, or mind control, a technique that brings lasting influence on members. Brainwashing involves intensive indoctrination, encouraging members to give up previously established beliefs and accept the doctrines inculcated by the cult [3]. Brainwashing may begin with "love-bombing," in which new members are flooded with attention, affirmation, and care from cult members or leaders. The cult may appear as a family for the new member, even offering "a sense of comfort and answers to life" [6]. However, over time, this emotional support shifts to constant evaluation, causing members to suffer if they do not conform to the cult's ideology or demands.

4.2. Behavior modifiers

Another technique of mental manipulation is behavior modification. For instance, cult leaders may instill an "us-versus-them" mindset [6], causing members to categorize outsiders as enemies and fellow cult members as friends. As a result, a sense of group identity is more easily formed, and members may more readily forgive harmful actions by the leader or group.

4.3. Use of fear

Fear is also a powerful tool of manipulation. Phobia indoctrination causes members to associate catastrophic consequences with disobeying the leader or leaving the group. For example, Jim Jones, leader of the "Peoples Temple," frequently warned members of an approaching nuclear war, or that traumatic events such as car crashes, fires, or cancer would befall them if they disobeyed or left the cult [6].

4.4. Cult ideology

The implementation of cult ideology also serves as a means of mental manipulation. It is not only a set of shared beliefs but also shapes members' perceptions of reality and events around them. In the case of the cult "Heaven's Gate," a UFO religion known for its mass suicides in 1997, members

were manipulated to believe that suicide would transport their souls to a higher level of existence. Members lose the ability to think independently and prepare themselves as vessels for the “Kingdom of Heaven” [7].

5. Physical control

While mental manipulation targets the internal world of thoughts and beliefs, physical control restricts members through the external environment, limiting their freedom and reshaping their lives. Such control aims to cut off support and resources from the outside world, fostering total reliance on the cult.

5.1. Isolation from society

One common tactic is enforced isolation from society. Many ex-cult members reported being prohibited from contacting non-believers, including family and friends. For example, in Peoples Temple, members were instructed to spend holidays like Christmas and Thanksgiving only with other cult members, not with their families [8]. This tactic deprived members of emotional support from the outside world and reinforced the cult’s narrative that outsiders were dangerous.

5.2. Control over life

Another tactic was exerting control over members’ personal lives, such as forcing abortions or regulating sexual activity [8]. Financial restrictions were also common. Members were required to fund the group and donate personal savings, allowing the cult to expand and recruit more followers. In Peoples Temple, Jim Jones sold trinkets such as pieces of his robes, healing oil, temple rings, key chains, and lockets. These practices created economic dependency, ensuring that leaving the cult was not only emotionally but also practically difficult [8].

5.3. Physical abuse

Physical abuse was another form of control used to instill fear through conditioning. For example, members of Peoples Temple were often beaten for minor infractions, such as failing to pay sufficient attention during “family meetings” [9].

6. Mental disorders

While theoretical models and case studies provide insight into how manipulation and control influence mental disorders, empirical data from surveys and interviews offer a quantitative perspective. Surveys have shown that ex-cult members report manipulation as one of the most significant reasons for joining a cult and experience high levels of psychological abuse, with mean GPA-S values, the value from the Group Psychological Abuse Scale – Spanish version, much higher than those of control groups [10]. Ex-cult members have a mean GPA-S values of 103.61 and a standard deviation of 18.16, much higher than the normal value of 81, showing that many of the ex-cult members have gone through mental control and abuse.

Since there isn’t a single definition of cult, the GPA-S scale provides a way of measuring how psychologically abusive a religious environment can be, and whether or not it can be called a cult [11]. Many individuals only recognize the fact that they joined a cult, and the depth and impact of their emotional and cognitive conditioning after leaving the cult’s influence, demonstrating

manipulation's long-lasting impact on mental health. This provides a foundation for examining specific mental disorders in detail.

On a cognitive level, mental manipulation disrupts normal critical thinking. Members internalize cult ideologies about the world and themselves, developing cognitive distortions. On a behavioral level, physical control reinforces dependence on the cult and the leader. For example, exposure to physical abuse may create conditioned fear responses, which can positively correlate with the development of mental disorders after leaving. Together, these cognitive and behavioral influences reflect how cult influence can create long-term psychological harm, preventing ex-cult members from reintegrating into normal life.

6.1. Anxiety disorder

Anxiety disorder is associated with both mental manipulation and physical control. Mental manipulation through phobia indoctrination and fear leads to chronic stress and anxiety. Members may fear cult retaliation or abandonment, depending on whether they chose to leave. Pre-established cult ideologies may also cause anxiety about predicted catastrophes, even after members no longer believe in the teachings. Ex-cult members often lose trust in themselves due to prior dependence on the cult and the formation of a cult-based identity. A sense of meaninglessness usually appears, and the member will have to deal with family and personal issues. Physical control, such as punishments, sleep deprivation, and surveillance, causes hypervigilance even in safe environments, leading to insomnia or conditioned anxiety responses. These factors significantly increase the likelihood of anxiety disorders after leaving the cult [12].

6.2. Depression

Depression is also linked to both mental manipulation and physical control. Mentally, ex-cult members often lose their sense of self-value and life purpose due to identity collapse after leaving. The breakdown of belief systems forces them to see the world in an unfamiliar and often threatening way. Some members also experience guilt and shame for having joined the cult [6]. Physically, isolation from family and friends leaves members without social support, making reintegration into normal life difficult. Facing overwhelming challenges and repeated failures often leads to learned helplessness, a key factor in depression [4].

6.3. Post-traumatic stress disorder

Ex-cult members who suffered traumatic events, such as mass suicides or physical abuse, may develop post-traumatic stress disorder. Public abuse, humiliation, or ritualized confessions [9] often trigger trauma responses even after leaving. Survivors of mass suicide events may suffer from survivor guilt and vicarious trauma due to the fear of reliving such experiences [3].

7. Interventions and recovery

Interference in the mechanism of mental manipulation and physical control is crucial for individuals to disengage from cultic influence before long-term harm. External contact and exposure to outside source of information is important for retaining the ability of critical thinking, and opportunities to reconnect with family members or friends can weaken the cult's information monopoly and prevent members from completely falling for the cult ideologies.

The process of recovery is complex once the individual leave and will usually start with breaking down the system of cult manipulation that shapes the members' thoughts and beliefs in order to restore critical thinking. Many former cult members reported to be suffering from guilt, anxiety, dissociation, depression, and difficulties in interpersonal functioning. Under such condition, social support and professional counseling are crucial for the recovery of the ex-cult member. In Wright's study in 1991, from the participants, 89% of them said they had restabilized and reintegrate into society due to social support [13]. Steve Hassan, a former cult member and a mental health professional specializing in the recovery from destructive cults had also argues for the effectiveness of having access to accurate information, adequate social support, and specialized intervention from former members [6].

However, recovering from a destructive cult is never an easy experience. For example, it is asserted that the public holds a negative view toward cult members. Cult members might be protected from this perception in cult, yet they will still face criticisms after leaving, a situation that will cause more guilt and will lead to worsening mental health [14].

8. Limitations and discussion

Overall, evidence from existing research shows a positive correlation between cult manipulation and control. Prolonged exposure to the combined use of mental manipulation and physical control often results in lasting psychological consequences such as anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and other trauma-related symptoms, making reintegration into normal life challenging. Understanding this relationship is crucial for developing targeted interventions and providing effective support for ex-cult members, as well as raising awareness of the harm caused by highly manipulative groups.

Most studies in this field rely on self-report data, meaning that participants are not randomly sampled but are volunteers willing to share their personal experiences. As a result, sampling bias occurs because in-cult members cannot be easily surveyed or interviewed. Additionally, reliance on surveys and interviews introduces self-report bias, meaning answers may be exaggerated or incomplete.

Confounding variables must also be considered. Some cult members already had mental disorders prior to joining. In some cases, cult membership may temporarily stabilize their condition, making preexisting issues noticeable only after they exit. Without prior documentation, these preexisting conditions may be mistakenly attributed exclusively to cult manipulation.

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