

# THE USE OF PERSUASION IN CULTS: ARE WE FREE TO CHOOSE?

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Persuasion is rampant in our culture—in advertising, politics and education—but many of us are relatively unaware of how pervasive it is, the effect that persuasion has on our lives and how skillfully it is used by those who want to persuade us. One arena in which persuasion plays an integral role is the cult. This paper will examine the role of persuasion in cults, and how its use in cults differs from that in other organizations. What constitutes coercion, mind control or brainwashing, and how are they different from benign persuasion? In addition, it is the author's intention to offer some clarity regarding unhealthy persuasion and how to recognize and avoid succumbing to it.

## **Introduction**

I have several interests which contribute to my desire to research this subject. One is human consciousness and its healthy relationship to spirituality, as well as how, as individuals, we can reach our maximum potential and contribute to each other through organizations which support our spiritual growth. As a counselor, I need to be aware of the effects of cultish persuasion on individuals, how persuasion has been used with them, and how best to help them in regaining their power while accepting that their beliefs are important to them. On a personal level, in my study and practice of religion and spirituality in various forms since the age of 13, I have participated in the past on a long-term basis in two organizations that I now consider to be quasi-cults, in that they had many characteristics of a cult and had an effect on me that in hindsight I realize was very unhealthy. I have also been exposed to one other organization which was more blatantly cult-like. I have recently participated in some groups which I feel are healthy—albeit with a healthy dose of skepticism as a result of my previous experiences—and I am aware that these experiences are very different from my experience in the previous three organizations. Does the difference in these groups come from a difference in the use of persuasion?

I am interested in providing clarity in the distinction between a cult and an organization which simply promotes personal growth or spirituality, a distinction which seldom appears to be crystal clear. In

addition, there are socially accepted groups which are not thought of as cults, but which appear to have some cult-like characteristics, such as Catholicism and Hasidic Judaism. How are these groups similar or different in their use of persuasion?

Please note that it is not my intention to denigrate any of these groups or to prove that they are or are not cults, but to examine how persuasion works in these groups and whether it functions in a healthy or non-healthy manner. In my comparison and discussion, I will focus on several specific groups: Landmark Forum (fka est), Scientology, Siddha Yoga, Soka Gakkai, Jehovah's Witnesses, Catholicism and Hasidic Judaism. I will examine their characteristics and how the use of persuasion in these groups sets them apart.

First, what are the forms that persuasion takes? What is the difference in the persuasion used, for example, in advertising, compared with that used in cults? Is coercion different from benign persuasion, or is it simply a matter of degree?

Second, what are the characteristics of a cult? How can we tell if a group has cult-like characteristics when we choose whether to participate? Is it truly a choice? Can we really be coerced against our will?

Third, if one of the characteristics of a cult is the use of coercion, i.e., unhealthy persuasion, how can we identify this type of persuasion when it is being used to that we can be alert to being coerced? Can we protect ourselves from this type of coercion?

### **Persuasion/Coercion**

The definition of *persuasion* given by *wikipedia* (*Persuasion*) indicates that persuasion is a form of non-forceful influence that is meant to benefit one or more parties; *manipulation*, on the other hand, is influence through thought control for the purpose of guiding someone toward something that is not in their best interest. It may be concluded that whether influence is considered “persuasion” or “manipulation” is determined by whether the goal is to benefit the individual influenced or someone else. The negative forms of persuasion—coercion, brainwashing and mind control—would all fit within this definition in that the benefit goes to the other party. Margaret Singer (2003, p. 54) refers to thought control as a psychological con game, one which can dramatically alter behavior and beliefs, or exploitative

manipulation of one person by another (Singer 2003, p. 53). I believe that this is what cult coercion shares with the manipulation used by sociopaths and narcissists: they see people only as objects to be manipulated to their ends. Cults want control, adulation or money when they use coercive tactics on their members.

Persuasion can sometimes be beneficial, e.g., when used in psychotherapy or AA, or when a parent persuades a child not to eat dirt or cross the street against the light. There are forms of persuasion that might not be in our best interest, however, that would not be considered as being as extreme as mind control or brainwashing, namely, advertising. You might, though, consider them to be coercion; it is a matter of degree and the amount of negativity brought forth on the individual that determines which term is appropriate. The negative form of persuasion which is sometimes used in cults can certainly be described as *mind control*, but it is a matter of interpretation whether it be called mind control or simply coercion. For the purposes of this paper, *persuasion* will be defined as influence with the intention of benefiting the individual influenced, and the negative aspect of persuasion, namely, any influence which is not in the best interest of the person influenced and can cause harm to them, will be referred to as *coercion*.

There are two methods of persuasion: the central route and the peripheral route. The *central route* is simply a convincing argument (Myers 2005, p. 248) and involves our logical thinking. The *peripheral route* takes a more unconscious path and allows someone to persuade us without involving our intellect in considering the argument (Myers 2005, p. 248). The use of images or an appeal to our feelings uses the peripheral route. A beer commercial which shows beautiful, sexy women smiling at men who are drinking a particular brand of beer uses the peripheral route to woo us to their product. The central route, which involves consciously engaging our logic, results in lasting change in our opinions or beliefs, whereas the peripheral route via the unconscious tends to be more illusory (Myers 2005, p. 249).

There are many factors which determine whether a message will be persuasive. In effective persuasion, the credibility of the person delivering the message is important, and is validated by their expertise, trustworthiness, confidence and delivery style; those who are attractive, likable, seem like us in some way, speak fast and look directly into the eyes of the listener are perceived as more persuasive

(Myers 2005, p. 251-4). People are perceived as much more persuasive when the listener believes that they are not trying to persuade them, or when they appear to have nothing to gain by persuading the listener (Myers 2005, p. 252-3). If someone is alerted that they are about to be persuaded, they are more difficult to persuade. Attorneys sometimes use this aspect of persuasion by warning juries about evidence they are about to hear, knowing that telling them in advance will lessen the impact of the evidence (Myers 2005, p. 268).

How the listener *feels* while being persuaded affects whether they are persuaded. One study found that Yale students were more easily persuaded when they were given peanuts and Pepsi (Myers 2005, p. 256). The listener's mood is also an important factor in how easily they can be persuaded. When people are in a happy mood, they make decisions more impulsively, relying on peripheral cues; people who are in an unhappy mood do not react as impulsively, but brood over their decision, so are less easily persuaded (Myers 2005, p. 257). Making the listener fearful can sway their decision-making and render them more easily persuadable. For example, in an experiment, middle-aged women were shown a video about getting mammograms. One group was told that getting a mammogram could save their lives through prevention; the other group was given a fear-invoking message. Many more women in the second group got mammograms after seeing the video (Myers 2005, p. 258).

Repeating something makes it more believable (Myers 2005, p. 264). Also, people are easier to persuade about something they are not very familiar with (Myers 2005, p. 265). If the message is about an issue they know a lot about, persuading them won't be as easy (Myers 2005, p. 265). In addition, using metaphor that relates to something the listener is fond of makes the message much more persuasive (Otatti 1999); for example, if the listener likes the beach, and the metaphor includes a beach, the message will be more likely to persuade the listener.

Personal contact with people is much more persuasive than media communication, something every politician knows (Myers 2005, p. 265). In a study by Samuel Eldersveld and Richard Dodge in 1954, prior to an election in which a vote would be held on whether to revise the city charter, some people who intended not to vote for the revision received four mailings in support of the revision, and others who intended not to vote for the revision received a visit from a person who spoke in support of the issue.

During the vote, 19% of those who had only been exposed to the usual media influence, 45% of those who received the four mailings and 75% of those who received the personal visit voted in support of the revision. So being able to see a person is usually more persuasive than reading something they have written. However, the persuasive message is understood and remembered better when written (p. 266). If you have a complex message, it can be more persuasive when written, but if the message is simple, video is more persuasive (p. 266). According to Myers (2005, p. 269), studies have shown that stimulating thinking makes strong messages more persuasive and, due to counterarguing, weak messages less persuasive.

Most of us believe that we are much less affected by persuasive advertising than are others. In other words, we think we are invulnerable to persuasion. However, it is sometimes this feeling of invulnerability that leads us to be vulnerable to persuasion because we let our guard down. According to Philip Zimbardo, "When you believe 'It can't happen to me,' that's when con artists or cult agents have you at their mercy because then you're not as vigilant to the little situational ploys that can get you to step across the line" (Dittman 2003). In an experiment, Sagarin found that by showing subjects an advertisement with a bogus authority, having them indicate whether they were convinced by the ad, then revealing to them that they had been duped, the subjects were more resistant to persuasion in the future (Sagarin et al. (2002).

According to Singer (2003, p. 60), thought reform programs in cults attack a person's self-concept by undermining reality awareness and defense mechanisms in a "subtle and powerfully psychological process of destabilization and induced dependency." As we will see, both the central and peripheral routes are used toward this end, with the peripheral being more pronounced.

### **What is a cult?**

Myers (2005, p. 272) defines a *cult* as an organization "having distinctive beliefs, isolation from society and a charismatic leader." (Please note that in Europe the word *sect* is used to refer to what we in America think of as a cult, whereas the word "sect" in America is a benign reference to a subdivision of a religious group.) Cults range from productivity and awareness training (LGATs, or Large Group Awareness Trainings) to new religious movements to traditional religious groups. For the purpose of this

paper, *cult* will be used to indicate a group delineated by (1) an authoritarian structure, (2) leadership by a charismatic figure and (3) coercive tactics to control, attract or keep followers. I will use the term *quasi-cult* to refer to groups that have many cult factors but are not clearly cults.

Not surprisingly, many people have very strong feelings about cults and their perception of the effects of cults. That is due in large part to a few sensational events which have been brought about by some very harmful cults. When people think of "cult," the images that come to mind are of dead bodies in Jim Jones' camp, flames and gunfire at the Branch Davidian's compound in Waco, the mass weddings of Sun Yung Moon (the Moonies) and Hare Krishnas chanting in airports. However, those are a few of the groups that represent the most negative of cults; there are many organizations which have "cultish" qualities which are not as sensational, but have negative consequences. And, of course, one man's cult is another man's new religious movement ("NRM") or path to enlightenment. What constitutes a cult is not as clear-cut as might be hoped.

While there are some organizations that most would agree are cults, e.g., the Branch Davidians or the Moonies, having all or nearly all of the characteristics of cults, there are many organizations that possess some of the characteristics of a cult, but have enough characteristics of a non-cult organization that there is not a clear-cut consensus on whether or not they are cults. In other words, it could be debated convincingly on either side. It is these organizations in which I have the most interest, as I feel that their influence, and the potential for coercion of those who are not served by their participation in these groups, is the most insidious, unseen, and therefore the most dangerous. I intend to look at the methods of coercion used in these particular groups, as I believe the understanding and awareness of these techniques renders them ineffective. In other words, if you know that wolves often wear sheep's clothing, you are more apt to look at a sheep with a discerning eye and be on guard against wolf behavior.

To see a cult as all bad would be tempting, but most of them have positive traits, as well, or they would not be able to attract followers. Cults are often formed for the purpose of propagating a teaching that provides a focus, regardless of what its true intent may be, and since people often need a sense of belonging and purpose, this can be very attractive. There are some positive qualities or practices in all of these groups, even the worst of them. Meditation, mantra repetition (focusing the mind intently on one

word or phrase) and chanting are often beneficial, taken on their own, and service is a wonderful thing, too. Being in a group surrounded by people who are committed to a higher purpose is pleasant and uplifting, even when other aspects of the groups are unhealthy. Most of these groups have at least one positive or beneficial practice or characteristic that most people would enjoy or benefit from. What is unhealthy is the aspect of coercion and the authoritarian structure of the groups that ultimately strips the participants of their innate power and stifles their healthy participation in life. Many of the negative characteristics of cults could also be positive characteristics in a different setting. It is the context, i.e., an authoritarian structure in which coercion is present, that makes the groups negative rather than positive and categorizes them as cults. As Singer (2003, p. 97) says, simply having a few traits that are benign does not render these organizations harmless, or non-cults; if they use deception or coercion, and if their purpose is to increase the size and wealth of the organization instead of to benefit the individual, they are still cults and therefore ultimately harmful .

#### **How does the use of coercion differ in cults from other organizations?**

Unfortunately, there is not a clear-cut test for determining whether an organization is a cult. Persuasion is used in many organizations, both religious and secular, which are not considered to be cults. However, it is much easier to determine whether coercion is being used, and the use of coercion is a warning flag that the organization might be a cult. When the persuasion is manipulative with an intention that is not in the individual's best interest, but serves to further the organization, it could be said that that is a strong indication that coercion is being used. In general, a cult has the purpose of recruiting or controlling members in order to increase the power of the leader or serve their narcissistic needs, or in order to perpetuate the group by increasing its revenue or through increasing the number of participants. It might be postulated that if coercion is used by only one means, and there are many aspects of the organization that could be beneficial for the individual, the organization is relatively low on the "cult-factor" scale and could be called a "quasi-cult," while if coercion is used by multiple means and the organization is extremely authoritarian in structure, the organization is a good candidate to be called a "cult." In other words, it is a matter of cumulative factors rather than a definitive "yes" or "no" that determines whether an organization's use of coercion indicates that it is a cult.

There are a number of coercive tactics used by cults and quasi-cults which can be explored. Below is a list which summarizes these tactics as described by Margaret Singer (2003, pp. 64-67), Robert Lifton (1989) and Janja Lalitch and Michael Langone (Lalich & Langone 2006).

1. Keep the person unaware of how or that they are being changed or manipulated. Working via the unconscious renders the person unable to resist with logical thinking.
2. Make the person powerless and dependent.
3. The organization has an authoritarian structure, with a living individual as the focal point (rather than a deity or specific purpose). No discussion or decisions by individuals other than the leader or those directly under the leader is allowed.
4. The world is viewed in absolute terms. This is “right” and that is “wrong.” We are “saved,” “special” or “enlightened” and they are not.
5. Language. The group uses language in a new way, creates new words, uses foreign terms or restructures the language. This actually has an altering effect on thought processes, and also serves to stifle individuality. You must speak the group’s language, or you are not a “good” group member. It also sets you apart from others who are not in the group, and makes it more difficult to communicate with them, making you more dependent on the group.
6. Mind-altering practices. Excessive practice can lead to altered states and less ability for critical thinking; it can also be addictive. Hypnotic states are particularly good for coercion. Singer (2003, p. 151) describes hypnosis as “a form of highly focused mental concentration in which one person allows another to structure the object of the concentration and simultaneously suspends critical judgment and peripheral awareness,” a state in which “[w]e suspend rational analysis, independent judgment, and conscious decision making about what we are hearing or taking in.” In a cult, “the cult leader implants suggestions aimed at his own agenda while the person is in a vulnerable state.”
7. Recruiting. The group is focused quite a lot on bringing in new members. This is so that the group grows, giving the leader more power or giving the group more money.
8. Fear. Fear is a great motivator. Those who are afraid do not question or leave the group.

## Examples

The **Landmark Forum** (fka est) is a Large Group Awareness Training (“LGAT”) that promises to improve the quality of your life through engaging in a group process that lasts three full days. The tactics used which supposedly result in a breakthrough in your understanding and experience of life are sometimes brutal. The video, [Journey to the Land of the New Gurus](#), gives a very brief glance into the type of coercion that is used in the Forum to break down the participants’ sense of self. While this purports to break the ego so that a fuller experience of life is possible, what occurs is nothing short of brainwashing according to most definitions, and is often assaultive and humiliating. Going down the list of coercion tactics in order, the participants are kept unaware of how they are being broken down. They are kept in a windowless room for several days, for very long hours. No watches are allowed, so time is no longer a reference point. They are rendered powerless: they are not allowed to eat or go to the bathroom unless the authorities say that they may do so, and any attempt at true dialogue with the trainer is immediately crushed or stifled as they are ridiculed in front of the group. Hypnotic techniques are used. Having or expressing emotions in the organization itself is denied and ridiculed, which is emotional abuse.

The structure of the organization is authoritarian. Although they claim that it is no longer so, for most of the history of the group, Werner Erhard was viewed as a god and was the focus of the organization. Although his brother is now the head of the company, Werner still appears at some of the Forum’s functions, and it would seem logical that he is still a key figure, although no one has proof of this. He was forced to “retire” to another country due to tax problems with the U.S. government, and due to great ire towards him by the folks in Scientology because he was using some of their techniques (Grigoriadis 2001). I worked as a volunteer for Werner Erhard & Associates during the est years and into the original years of the Forum, and at that time, we were told to “come from Werner as being Source,” which meant that we were to see him as God and ultimate authority. There was no questioning this authority, and if you did, you were said to be “on it,” which meant in their interpretation that you were at the effect of your ego and not engaged in the present. In other words, if you questioned anything in the organization, you were demonstrating your lack of enlightenment. There was a very convoluted language structure that signified your understanding and use of the “technology,” as the work was called, and using the language “incorrectly” showed your lack of understanding. For example, the use of the word “but”

was forbidden. Other words were used with a different meaning than that which is attributed to them in normal English. It was very difficult to communicate with those who had not done the est Training or the Forum, because they used the “old” language. I once read a letter which I had written in the days in which I was involved in that work, and it was almost incomprehensible. It sounded as though a computer had written it, and all originality or individuality was noticeably absent.

Bringing in new recruits, i.e., more income, is everything in this organization. There is much talk within of the number of enrollments and how to get more. This type of organization, i.e., the LGAT, is usually more concerned with bringing in new people rather than keeping old ones. New recruits are “supported” in doing the Forum by dunning phone calls and talks with people who are very skilled at manipulation. I once participated in phone enrollments (which I never thought of as recruiting, as it was given a very positive connotation by the organization), and we were given possible excuses the recruitee might offer and how to counter them verbally. Everything in the recruitment effort and in the Training/Forum is very orchestrated. Fear is certainly a large factor; anyone who has attempted to speak out about the organization or sue them has met with great negative force in the form of harassment and lawsuits. Margaret Singer, one of the premier authorities on cults, was forced to leave information about the Landmark Forum, the major LGAT of our time, out of her main opus on cults, *CULTS IN OUR MIDST*, due to a frivolous lawsuit that was filed by the organization in order to waste her time and money and stifle her voice (2003, p. xxviii). This is the tactic that this organization seems to use on anyone who dares speak out against them.

This organization scores extremely high on most coercive characteristics as listed above and set out in the charts below.

**Scientology** is probably the largest organization at present that is accepted by many to be a cult. It qualifies in all of the coercive measures of the list used above. Recruits are skillfully manipulated into joining without realizing how they are being coerced (Martin 2000). The organization is highly authoritarian; the leader, now dead, is L. Ron Hubbard. “Auditing,” their primary practice toward the purpose of “clearing,” is a two-person process which is mind-altering and hypnotic.

The world is viewed in absolute terms; they believe that people who have not joined the organization are “bad” and must be manipulated. They believe that it is their mission to convert (“clear”) everyone on the planet, and recruitment is extreme. They use their own language to describe “uncleared” people, i.e., people who are not Scientologists. They categorize some other uncleared people as “suppressives,” namely those who attempt to discredit Scientology, who must be handled with the “technology” (see e.g. <http://www.suppressiveperson.org/hate/promo/isn-24-cvr-ad.html> (*Knowing the Tech to Shatter Suppression*)). People who are not Scientologists are objectified and vilified (Kent 1999).

Detractors of the organization have great reason to fear; many of them have been sued and harassed on a large scale. When the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) provided the public large amounts of information about the nefarious deeds of Scientology, Scientology inundated them with as many as 12 lawsuits per week, forced them into bankruptcy, and when CAN's assets were put up for sale, bought the network and ran it. People who write or call the Cult Awareness Network for help are now speaking to Scientology members (*Few Are Aware...*). They also have a declared mission of destroying the psychiatric profession and Interpol (Kent 1999).

In addition, the organization is buying huge amounts of property around the world with its vast financial resources. For example, Scientologists own a substantial portion of Clearwater, Florida, paying \$750,000 a year in property taxes and pouring possibly as much as \$119 million into the Clearwater economy (Green 2006).

Scientology offers “educational training” to many professionals through front companies, e.g., management consulting to chiropractors, who are unaware that Scientology is behind the front company, and that they will be persuaded to become Scientologists and also that the money they pay for the course is benefiting Scientology (Hall 1998). According to Hall, the organization operates in 86 countries and is worth four hundred million dollars. Since their stated mission is to “clear” the world, it would seem wise to watch this organization carefully, lest they gain excessive political power and attempt to bring to bear their stated mission on the rest of us. As Singer (2003, p. 209) says, “By gaining footholds in government, the media and the educational system, cults seek credibility and power and feign acceptance into the mainstream.”

This organization scores extremely high on all cult-like coercive characteristics.

**Siddha Yoga** is a kundalini yoga sect based on the teachings of Kashmir Shaivism, an ancient tantric practice, and Vedanta. Most of the practices are basic Hindu ones, such as meditation, chanting and service. However, it is much more authoritarian in structure than most Hindu practices. The primary focus of the organization and its practices is Swami Chidvilasananda, the guru, known as Gurumayi. The most important feature of Siddha Yoga is the awakening of kundalini through *shaktipat*, which according to Siddha Yoga teachings is the descent of Grace and awakening of the kundalini. The awakening and evolution of the kundalini is thought to be the path to enlightenment. Shaktipat can be bestowed in several ways, but the one certain way, according to Siddha Yoga teachings, is through that given by a Siddha, i.e., someone whose own kundalini is fully awakened and is Self-Realized. Gurumayi, according to this tradition, is a Siddha, and can bestow shaktipat through a look, touch or thought; this does not have to take place in person. Because she is seen as the one sure way to become enlightened, she is revered and most devotees are obsessed with her.

There is much meditation and chanting, which, while often beneficial in themselves, are mood-altering and can be addictive when done for long periods. Since according to Siddha Yoga, Shaktipat is necessary for the awakening of Kundalini, and one way to receive Shaktipat with certainty is through an Intensive in which Gurumayi offers Shaktipat through her will (formerly in person but now only from afar), there is a strong pull to do the Intensives, which cost approximately \$500. Newcomers often go into debt to do Intensives repetitively. There is no overt pressure to register, but the fact that devotees are taught that this is the way to become Self-Realized makes it seem like a necessity. In addition, the high that many people feel during an Intensive, which is designed to produce an altered state, possibly makes it somewhat addictive.

The organization is tightly controlled. It is not acceptable to question anything, and newcomers learn not to ask questions about many things. They are told by “old-timers,” i.e., those who have practiced Siddha Yoga or worked at the ashram for a long time, that “we don’t ask about that.” This is usually said with great disapproval or anxiety, and eventually one stops asking much of anything. There has been a lot of scandal involving sexual misconduct by the former guru, Muktananda, and some other

high officials in the organization, as well as the ousting of Gurumayi's brother, Nityananda, who was once the co-guru of Siddha Yoga. There was also verbal abuse and humiliation of some devotees by Gurumayi, which instilled fear in other devotees lest they displease the guru, upon whom they were very dependent.

A number of former devotees have come forward in recent years with tales of sexual abuse and coercive tactics which proved harmful to them. At present, the main U.S. ashram in New York is closed to the public for reasons which are shrouded in secrecy and scandal, Gurumayi no longer appears in public, many former long-term devotees have abandoned this practice or come forward to speak out abusive practices, and it is unknown whether Siddha Yoga as an organization will continue to survive. The primary cult-like features of this organization are issues of strong dependency, abuse, addictive practices and a highly authoritarian structure.

**Soka Gakkai** is an organization which purports to practice Nichiren Buddhism, a branch of Mahayana Buddhism. It is very loosely based on Buddhist philosophy and the Lotus Sutra, but the main practice of this group is to chant "Nam-myoho-renge-kyo" (known as *daimoku*) in order to gain whatever is desired, whether it be a new job, a new car or a better relationship—a practice which fits in well with Western materialism. Soka Gakkai has its own political party in Japan and claims 8 million members there, as well as possibly 300,000 in the United States, and is said to have \$100 billion in assets (Magee 1995). Soka Gakkai is seen in Japan "as a very structured, organized, militarist group that wields immense political power," according to Takayoshi Kitagawa, a professor of sociology at Senshu University in Tokyo" (Magee 1995).

Its leader is charismatic and ambitious Japanese politician and businessman, Daisaku Ikeda, who is revered by Soka Gakkai's followers (Dawson 2001). It seems that many of the newer American followers do not know much about Ikeda, simply seeing him as their religious leader, and have no idea of his political aspirations or corruption or the extent to which Soka Gakkai is a puppet of his political machinations. They are very aware of him in Japan, where he is of concern to many citizens because of his outspoken desire to take over the government.

Soka Gakkai is evangelical in the extreme, and “propagating Buddhism” (albeit their brand of Buddhism) is one of their key missions, which is in essence recruitment into their organization. Members are taught that this makes them good Buddhists. “Love-bombing” is a frequently-used tactic in this group. As indicated in the chart below, when group members flatter you, show great interest or respect for you, or shower you with love, you tend to “feel understood or accepted, thereby making the group very enticing” (Myers 2005, p. 275). When people pay attention to us and are kind to us or interested in us, we tend to trust them and want to be part of their group. Soka Gakkai has recruiting drives twice a year and members cater seriously to potential recruits (Pariser 1995). This is a major part of their organization.

There is much fear generated, both by reports of terrible things being done to people who speak out about abuses and corruption (Magee 1995), and as a means of recruitment. As indicated previously in this paper, fear can be used to persuade, and it is used in that manner in Soka Gakkai. When I attended a chanting meeting with a friend, I heard one woman share that she was introduced to Soka Gakkai by someone when she was in a hospital, that the hospital technician told her that she believed that someone bad was going to happen to her health, and that she should start chanting to avoid that. She did start chanting, and nothing bad happened to her, which she then attributed to chanting. This is a good example of making the person feel powerless by attributing something positive in the person’s life to the group or practice when it could have been attributed to the person’s intention or personal power (number 2 on the coercive tactics chart). I attended a few meetings with a friend, and every time I ran into someone else in another setting who was a mutual friend of ours, that other person mysteriously knew all about my visits to other meetings. Obviously, information about new recruits was shared and strategy was discussed. One of them said to me that, pertaining to a recent event in my life, they were afraid something bad was going to happen to me, and that I had better come to meetings and chant to avoid that. Having already heard the story of the other woman, I was wise to the coercive tactic that was being applied to me, but I wonder if I would have been so wise if I hadn’t already heard that. That someone would attempt to put fear into me in order to coerce me was something that I found abusive and distasteful, but I would imagine that it works for some, just as it did for the woman who was coerced by the hospital technician.

This organization scores extremely high on all of the coercive characteristics of a cult.

The **Jehovah's Witnesses** are an extreme Christian sect that holds little in common with other branches of Christianity. The Jehovah's Witnesses ("JWs") use what they term "theocratic language," which some believe is a part of the mind control used in the organization (Reed 1997). Researchers who began to study brainwashing techniques in the 1950s after they were used on prisoners of war in Korea found in many of their studies that language was a key factor in thought reform. Having someone speak in a certain way using certain words can change their mind or opinion extremely effectively (Reed 1997). Conduct is closely monitored in JWs; for example, JWs are instructed that "JW women 'must not express disagreement with judicial decisions of the elders *even by their facial expressions*.'" JWs use only positive words in connection with the organization, e.g. cleaning the church's toilets is a "Kingdom privilege", while extremely negative words are associated with outsiders, such as "evil slaves" or "filthy apostates." There is apparently an extensive pseudo-vocabulary that must be used by those committed to the Church which sets them apart from the rest of society (Reed 1997). Recruitment is a huge part of their practice; you cannot board a subway without seeing a JW offering recruitment pamphlets at the terminal.

The Jehovah's Witnesses use all of the coercive measures listed in the coercive characteristics chart and score extremely high.

**Roman Catholicism** is a socially accepted form of Christianity. The difference between Catholicism and other branches of Christianity is that the Pope in Rome is seen as the head of the Church and is revered in addition to Jesus Christ. Catholicism is therefore much more authoritarian than other branches of Christianity. Catholics must follow the edict of the Pope or risk excommunication from the Church and eternal damnation. In order to go to Heaven when you die, Catholics believe that they must follow the credo of the Church, go to Mass, go to Confession, in which they confess their "sins" to a priest, and obey the Pope. One could say that some recruiting is involved because Catholicism is evangelical in nature, but it is done in an upfront manner. They do missionary work in rural areas and foreign countries. There is no real deception involved, because it is clear that they are missionaries who want you to become Catholic. Catholic organizations do ask for donations, and it is to support the growth of the organization, but they are clear when requesting money that that it will be used for the work of the Church; there is no deception. Although there are some "cult-like" characteristics according to the chart

used in this paper, primarily an authoritarian structure and possible dependency issues, they are minimal compared with other organizations discussed in this paper.

**Hasidic Judaism** is a socially accepted branch of Judaism which focuses more on the spiritual side of Judaism than other Jewish sects. It is also more authoritarian in structure, with life centered around the guidance of a Rebbe, their spiritual leader. The world is viewed in rather absolute terms, with a strict set of rules governing everyday life which must be followed. The element of fear is present, because those who violate the rules can be expelled from the community, and the individual is dependent on the community perhaps more than the average person. The style of dress and language set them apart, making the sect seem “cultish.” However, nothing is forced on the individual without their knowledge, although some might argue that growing up in this environment renders the individual powerless to rebel against it because of the dependency factor. In general, though, it rates rather low on the “cult-like” characteristics chart and is not generally thought of as a cult.

**How can we identify this type of coercion when it is being used so that we can be alert to, and protect ourselves from, being coerced?**

I believe that education is the key to recognizing and preventing ourselves from succumbing to the coercion of a cult. If we are unaware of how persuasion can be used to affect us negatively, we will likely not recognize it, particularly since the nature of this type of persuasion is to make us unaware of being persuaded. For example, in a more benign example of coercion, marketers do not want us to be aware that the television commercial we are watching is attempting to change our mind through tactics of which we are totally unaware. However, if we study marketing just a little, we can become aware of these tactics so that we recognize them at once, and we are then much less susceptible to the advertising. Myers (2005, p. 282) believes that when we are prepared for an argument, or in this case a coercive tactic, we are better able to defend against it.

The following is a composite constructed by the author of characteristics and coercive methods of cults as described by Margaret Singer (2003, pp. 64-67), Robert Lifton (1989) and Janja Lalitch and Michael Langone (Lalich & Langone 2006), and various ways in which these coercive methods can be put into play. It is not exhaustive, but provides a starting point.

Characteristic	Method
1. Keep the person unaware of how or that they are being changed or manipulated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Control the environment, e.g., time, food, sleep, clothing, lighting.</li> <li>• Double agenda: You think the goal is one thing; the group's real goal is to change you or your behavior.</li> <li>• You are asked to change or do small things, one at a time, so that you are unaware of the big picture ("foot-in-the-door" technique).</li> </ul>
2. Make the person powerless and dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you have a problem with something that the group or members do, YOU have a problem. This is evidence of your ego, your lack of commitment, your impurity, that you are "on it," etc. If you question an inconsistency or express a doubt, YOU are automatically wrong and are demonstrating your lack of progress; the group/guru is always right.</li> <li>• Experiences are created or manipulated so that they appear spontaneous or unearthly, but in actuality are orchestrated in order to demonstrate the power or divinity of the leader or group or its tenets.</li> <li>• Destabilize a person's sense of self.</li> <li>• They often make you believe that something fortunate that happened to you was due to your participation in the group or of doing the group's practices rather than because of your own efforts. This takes away your power and gives it to them. When this is done incrementally over a period of time, you come to feel that you owe everything to the group or its practices and you lose the ability to believe in yourself and your own abilities. This reduces the feeling that you are responsible for anything in your life, and that you owe everything to the group or guru or practices or technology.</li> </ul>
3. Authoritarian structure, a living individual as the focal point (rather than a deity or specific purpose), no discussion or decisions by individuals, only by the leader or those directly under the leader.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The leader is seen as a special being; or the group's purpose or strategy is seen as exalted.</li> <li>• Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.</li> <li>• The leader is not accountable to any authorities of group members. They have unlimited power and control.</li> <li>• The leader's control and unaccountability are not evident to new recruits. Sometimes they are not even aware that there is a leader until much later.</li> </ul>
4. The world is viewed in absolute terms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Us v. them; we're right, they're wrong.</li> <li>• We have the only answer; every other group just hasn't gotten it yet; they aren't as evolved as we are.</li> </ul>
5. Language. The group uses language in a new way, creating new words, using foreign terms, restructuring the language. This actually has an altering effect on thought processes, and also serves to stifle individuality. You "must" speak the group's language, or you are not a "good" group member. It also sets you apart from others who are not in the group, and makes it more difficult to communicate with them, making you more dependent on the group.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Special terms</li> <li>• Existing terms are used with new meaning.</li> <li>• Speaking in the old way is frowned upon.</li> <li>• When required to repeat something verbally, our opinion will eventually change to match what we are asked to repeat (Festinger 1959) in order to reduce cognitive dissonance. Therefore, in the case of chant or scripture repetition, eventually our opinion will be in line with what we are required to repeat.</li> </ul>
6. Mind-altering practices. Excessive practice can lead to altered states, less ability for critical thinking, and is also addictive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Meditation</li> <li>• Chanting</li> <li>• Speaking in tongues</li> <li>• Exhausting work schedules resulting in fatigue</li> <li>• Not enough food or protein</li> <li>• Hypnosis, with or without consent or intent</li> </ul>

Characteristic	Method
7. Recruiting. The group is focused quite a lot on bringing in new members. This is so the group grows, making the leader more powerful or giving the group more money.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money. The group is preoccupied with making money. Value is placed on enrollments or recruiting.</li> <li>• Service. Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities. Free labor.</li> <li>• “Love-bombing.” This is where the group, or individuals in the group, flatter you, show great interest or respect for you, or shower you with the love. When people pay attention to us and are kind to us, we tend to trust them and want to be part of their group.</li> <li>• Recruiting is part of the group’s creed; i.e., the group is evangelical. Recruiting is seen as “holy” or “spiritual.” The member cannot argue with whether recruiting is positive or ethical, because it is required by the group’s beliefs or authorities.</li> </ul>
8. Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The group pressures the individual for donations or tithing.</li> <li>• Tithing is promoted as a way to attain enlightenment.</li> </ul>
9. Fear – a great motivator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of displeasing the leader. Once you have succumbed to the leader’s total authority in your life, you are dependent upon their approval.</li> <li>• Fear of harm to yourself or relatives if you leave or speak the truth about your experience or knowledge of the group or its leader.</li> <li>• Fear of not being “Self-Realized,” “getting into Heaven,” etc., if you leave the group.</li> </ul>

I propose that one way someone might look at an organization to determine whether the organization has cult-like features and protect themselves against coercive tactics would be to use the above chart, assigning values to each of the characteristics for that particular group and totaling them. I have added each of the seven groups mentioned previously—as well as *Presbyterianism* as a sort of informal “control” or comparative item, since it is doubtful that anyone would consider Presbyterianism to be a cult—to the chart and assigned a value of “1” to “5” for each characteristic, with “1” being little or no evidence of that characteristic, and “5” being a great deal of that characteristic. A total score that is high could indicate that the group has indications of being a cult and should be approached with caution, while a low score might indicate that the group is fairly low in cult-like characteristics. While this is a totally *subjective* approach (and probably few people would rate the organizations exactly in the same way), I believe that, coupled with a review of peer-reviewed research on the particular group and an internet search for current information, it could be a means for the individual to make a decision on how they want to proceed with their participation in a group, thereby offering some protection against being coerced.

The following will likely be useful on an individual basis only. I do not believe that it is prudent for governments or society as a whole to label organizations as cults or non-cults, as this can result in

suppression of religious freedom. Rather, I think it would be beneficial on an individual level to have a basis for critically evaluating your experience of an organization in order not to succumb to cult-like tactics. For example, using the chart below, if you find that other group members extend an unusual amount of interest or love toward you or are flattering to you, you will see that this falls under "Recruiting"; it is possible that they are engaged in recruiting using a technique sometimes called "love-bombing." While you might not want to be overly cautious to the point of being jaded or suspicious, you could use that caution as a clue to what might be happening and explore it critically. Again, the values I have assigned are subjective, and are based partly on personal participation or knowledge, partly on my conclusions based on my research and partly on a priori knowledge. I participated for lengthy periods in two of the organizations and have extensive knowledge of them (Landmark Forum/est and Siddha Yoga); I participated in one organization for a very brief time (Soka Gakkai); I have some personal experience through family members with one organization (Presbyterianism); and I have a priori knowledge of the remaining three organizations, along with substantial research by authorities for this paper.

Characteristic	Method	Landmark Forum/est	ScIENTOlogy	Siddha Yoga	Soka Gakkai	Jehovah's Witnesses	Catholicism	Hasidic Judaism	Presbyterianism
1. Keep the person unaware of how or that they are being changed or manipulated	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Control the environment, e.g., time, food, sleep, clothing, lighting.</li> <li>Double agenda: You think the goal is one thing, the group's real goal is to change you or your behavior.</li> <li>You are asked to change or do small things, one at a time, so that you are unaware of the big picture ("foot-in-the-door" technique).</li> </ul>	5	4	3	5	5	1	3	1
2. Make the person powerless and dependent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>If you have a problem with something that the group or members do, YOU have a problem. This is evidence of your ego, your lack of commitment, your impurity, that you are "on it," etc. If you question an inconsistency or express a doubt, YOU are automatically wrong and are demonstrating your lack of progress; the group/guru is always right.</li> <li>Experiences are created or manipulated so that they appear spontaneous or unearthly, but in actuality are orchestrated in order to demonstrate the power or divinity of the leader or group or its tenets.</li> <li>Destabilize a person's sense of self.</li> <li>They often make you believe that something fortunate that happened to you was due to your participation in the group or of doing the group's practices rather than because of your own efforts. This takes away your power and gives it to them. When this is done incrementally over a period of time, you come to feel that you owe everything to the group or its practices and you lose the ability to believe in yourself and your own abilities. This reduces the feeling that you are responsible for anything in your life, and that you owe everything to the group or guru.</li> </ul>	5	5	4	4	5	1	3	1

Characteristic	Method	Landmark Forum/est	Scientology	Siddha Yoga	Soka Gakkai	Jehovah's Witnesses	Catholicism	Hasidic Judaism	Presbyterianism
3. Authoritarian structure, a living individual as the focal point (rather than a deity or specific purpose), no discussion or decisions by individuals, only by the leader or those directly under the leader.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The leader is seen as a special being; or the group's purpose or strategy is seen as exalted.</li> <li>Questioning, doubt, and dissent are discouraged or even punished.</li> <li>The leader is not accountable to any authorities of group members. They have unlimited power and control.</li> <li>The leader's control and unaccountability are not evident to new recruits. Sometimes they are not even aware that there is a leader until much later.</li> </ul>	5	5	4	5	5	3	5	1
4. The world is viewed in absolute terms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Us v. them; we're right, they're wrong.</li> <li>We have the only answer; every other group just hasn't gotten it yet; they aren't as evolved as we are.</li> </ul>	5	5	3	3	5	3	5	3
5. Language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Special terms</li> <li>Existing terms are used with new meaning</li> <li>Speaking in the old way is frowned upon</li> <li>The group uses language in a new way, creating new words, using foreign terms, restructuring the language. This actually has an altering effect on thought processes, and also serves to stifle individuality. You "must" speak the group's language, or you are not a "good" group member. It also sets you apart from others who are not in the group, and makes it more difficult to communicate with them, making you more dependent on the group.</li> </ul>	5	5	1	2	5	1	1	1
6. Mind-altering practices. Excessive practice can lead to altered states, less ability for critical thinking, and is also addictive.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Meditation</li> <li>Chanting</li> <li>Speaking in tongues</li> <li>Exhausting work schedules resulting in fatigue</li> <li>Not enough food or protein</li> <li>Hypnosis, with or without consent or intent</li> </ul>	3	5	5	5	5	1	2	1

Characteristic	Method	Landmark Forum/est	ScIENTOlogy	Siddha Yoga	Soka Gakkai	Jehovah's Witnesses	Catholicism	Hasidic Judaism	Presbyterianism
7. Recruiting. The group is focused quite a lot on bringing in new members. This is so the group grows, making the leader more powerful or giving the group more money.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Money. The group is preoccupied with making money. Value is placed on enrollments or recruiting.</li> <li>• Service. Members are expected to devote inordinate amounts of time to the group and group-related activities. Free labor.</li> <li>• "Love-bombing." This is where the group, or individuals in the group, flatter you, show great interest or respect for you, or shower you with the love. When people pay attention to us and are kind to us, we tend to trust them and want to be part of their group.</li> <li>• Recruiting is part of the group's creed; i.e., the group is evangelical. Recruiting is seen as "holy" or "spiritual." The member cannot argue with whether recruiting is positive or ethical, because it is required by the group's beliefs or authorities.</li> </ul>	5	5	1	5	5	3	1	1
8. Money	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The group pressures the individual for donations or tithing or to enroll in expensive courses.</li> <li>• Tithing is promoted as a way to attain enlightenment.</li> </ul>	5	5	1	3	4	1	1	1
9. Fear – a great motivator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fear of displeasing the leader. Once you have succumbed to the leader's total authority in your life, you are dependent upon their approval.</li> <li>• Fear of harm to yourself or relatives if you leave or speak the truth about your experience or knowledge of the group or its leader.</li> <li>• Fear of lawsuits.</li> <li>• Fear of not being "Self-Realized," "getting into Heaven," etc., if you leave the group.</li> </ul>	2	5	3	5	5	2	1	1
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>40</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>11</b>

In addition, I recommend the viewing of two online videos for a better understanding of the coercive tactics used by cults and quasi-cults. One is [Mind Control Made Easy, or How to Become a Cult Leader](#), a short, simplistic parody depicting the coercion tactics used in cults. I think that showing this or

a similar video to high school students, along with a lecture and discussion about these tactics, would contribute to prevention of susceptibility to coercion by cults, both then and later in life. It would not be a bad idea for adults to view this video, either; most adults believe that they are too sophisticated to fall for this type of persuasion, but they fall for it every day. The other is a look inside the Landmark Forum, [\*Journey to the Land of the New Gurus\*](#) (2007), which documents very specific techniques used by the Forum, as well as many other cults or quasi-cults, which allows us to see these techniques objectively so that we will be aware when they are being used on us. In addition, it might be a good idea to read some books on marketing or persuasion, such as Douglas Rushkoff's, *Coercion: Why We Listen to What "They" Say* (Rushkoff 1999). Once you are the active recipient of these techniques, it is very difficult to see and understand what is happening to you, as part of the coercion depends on confusion and ignorance, but if you are already familiar with the techniques, you will likely be much less susceptible.

There are times when we are probably more vulnerable to coercion than others. Being aware of this at those times could help us resist coercion. According to Singer (2003, p. 19) when we are searching for meaning in our lives or are in a "time of transition or loss," we are vulnerable to coercion. She also states that "being depressed or being in between important affiliations" is a vulnerable time (Singer 2003, p. 20). Sometimes people are just looking for a way to benefit humanity (Singer 2003, p. 25). Given these examples, it would seem that those of us who do not have community or family connections in our lives—and that would include many people in our generation—might be especially vulnerable. It is possible that those who have high susceptibility to hypnosis might be more susceptible to persuasion. I think that people who are in a state of questioning or forming their own beliefs—e.g., young people or those going through a mid-life crisis, are more eager to find something to believe in or to give them a feeling of safety or control, and have less grounding, hence are more open to persuasion of any type. In addition, coming from a background of abusive or disturbed parents can set us up to be more susceptible to cults, finding in the abusive, authoritarian culture a new "home" reminiscent of what we grew up with (Crawford 2006). If any of these factors are present in our lives, we might observe more carefully any attempt to persuade us to see if we are being coerced, knowing that we might be more vulnerable at those times.

## Conclusion

Examination of the coercive factors used in cults can be used to determine whether an organization might be a cult or quasi-cult. By analyzing these factors, and by concomitantly researching peer-reviewed literature and current internet information, we can come to a place where we can look at an organization through logical analysis, thereby being less vulnerable to cultic coercive tactics. In addition, by being aware of personal issues that might render us more vulnerable in general to persuasion, we can further protect ourselves from the results of coercion. Education and awareness can, I believe, go a long way in prevention of cult recruitment. With these tools, we do not need to be fearful that we might unknowingly fall into participation in a cult, or that we can be recruited against our will, since we have defenses against the tools that are used to coerce us.

## Helpful Resources:

*Cult News* (the site of Rick Ross, cult expert). [www.rickross.com](http://www.rickross.com)

Cultic Studies Journal. <http://www.csj.org/>

*Ex-Cult Resource Center*, <http://www.ex-cult.org/#general>.

*FACTNet*, <http://www.factnet.org/>

*Freedom of Mind* (the site of Steven Hassan, cult expert). <http://www.freedomofmind.com/>

*Opposing Views*. [http://www.en.webum.org/Society/Religion\\_and\\_Spirituality/Opposing\\_Views/](http://www.en.webum.org/Society/Religion_and_Spirituality/Opposing_Views/)

*reFOCUS: Recovering Former Cultists' Support Network*. <http://www.refocus.org/>

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