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Entering the Cult: The Role of Personality and Self-Peer Agreement

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Title: Entering the Cult: The Role of Personality and Self-Peer Agreement

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Abstract. This paper describes a psychological factor which may make it more likely that people voluntarily enter cults. The same factor may be used by cult solicitors and gate keepers to create "voluntary entry."

Theories abound as to why people enter cults. Usual suspects comprise individual characteristics including low self-esteem, high self-deception, spiritual emptiness and longing for fulfillment, high persuasability, high conformity, high dependence, and high need for affiliation. There are still other likely individual characteristics which seem to be the converse of the usual: high self-esteem and narcissism, psychopathy, spiritual richness and a longing to fulfill others, low persuasability, nonconformity and aconformity, high effectence and independence, low need for affiliation, and high need for achievement.

But for virtually all individual characteristics, expression is dependent on phenomena best observed at other levels of analysis--interpersonal, group, organizational, social, and cultural. This paper describes one psychological factor that may be expressed at all these other levels--self-peer agreement on one's personality.

The social psychological hypothesis based on various theoretical and empirical traditions is that validation of at least some of one's self-perceived personality by others--especially those personality aspects which one perceives as desirable--leads one to view the validator as more attractive and credible, more like oneself or more like what one wishes one was like. In turn, one becomes more likely to engage in behavior suggested by the validator. Certainly the psychological consequences of validation will be modified or modulated by the previously mentioned individual characteristics and other nonindividual ones. But the task for the solicitor or gatekeeper of a cult would usually remain how to effect self-peer agreement--given that the cult candidate is deemed "the right stuff." (In cases wherein self-peer agreement might be conversely related to the above effects, the object might be to avoid it for "the right stuff" and encourage it for "the wrong stuff." In other cases "the right stuff" and "the wrong stuff" may experience different psychological effects of self-peer agreement. In still other cases, self-peer agreement might be purposefully denied to achieve cult entry through paradoxical effects.)

Coming back to achieving self-peer agreement in an effort to effect cult entry, one might rely on a general approach typified by what academic psychology has termed the "P.T. Barnum" effect. It's not so much that there is a sucker born every minute but that every minute there are some individual psychological characteristics--often deemed positive by most people--which most people believe are true of themselves. By citing these characteristics as true of the cult candidate, the solicitor or gatekeeper most likely effects self-peer agreement and--through this--increases his/her own attractiveness and credibility. Cult membership looms ever closer.

A more specific approach is to identify and apply the social psychological research on what aspects of the Barnum and other effects and conditions foster self-peer agreement. There are quite a few. Self-peer agreement seems to be facilitated if (a) the personality trait to be judged can easily be exemplified

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by observable behavior; (b) the person being judged and the peer have access to the same information about the personality trait being judged; (c) the personality trait to be judged can be minimally exemplified by thoughts and reactions as opposed to behaviors; (d) the person being judged and the peer have initiated some sort of acquaintanceship; and (e) the personality trait to be judged is less, not more, ambiguous in terms of specific denotations and connotations, as well as cognitive complexity.

With these aspects as guidelines, the cult solicitor or gatekeeper can help induce "voluntary" cult membership for "the right stuff." This seeming voluntariness should be the preferred experience of the new cult member, for it can lead to cognitive dissonance and self-justification phenomena which may increase resistance to leave the cult when inevitable pressures, reversals, and disconfirming events occur. (See Feldmann, T.B., & Johnson, P.W. (1995.) Cult membership as a source of self-cohesion: Forensic implications. *Bulletin of the American Academy of Psychiatry and Law*, 23, 239-248; Hayes, A.F., & Dunning, D. (1997.) Construal processes and trait ambiguity: Implications for self-peer agreement in personality judgment. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 72, 664-677; Singer, M., & Addis, M.E. (1992.) Cults, coercion, and contumely. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 9, 163-189; Walsh, Y., Russell, R.J.H., & Walls, P.A. (1995.) The personality of ex-cult members. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 19, 339-344; Wexler, M.N. (1995.) Expanding the groupthink explanation to the study of contemporary cults. *Cultic Studies Journal*, 12, 49-71.) (Keywords: Control, Cult..)