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### What Role Does Prior Religious Beliefs Play in Cult Susceptibility: A Descriptive Study

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What Role Does Prior Religious Beliefs Play in Cult Susceptibility: A Descriptive Study

Yasmin Ali

John Jay College of Criminal Justice

### Abstract

Research on cults has explored susceptibility related to seeking membership, but not the role of an individual's prior religious beliefs in cult involvement (Almendros et al., 2007). This study aims to understand the role of prior religious beliefs to cult susceptibility—specifically, joining and remaining in a cult. This study explored participants' prior and subsequent religious affiliations and spirituality. In addition, it investigated the relationship between prior religion type and the cult type joined, including age of induction, time involved, and gender differences.

Former cult members (N=103) of a variety of Christian and non-Christian groups were interviewed using a semi-structured interview guide. Data was analyzed within a theoretical framework of coercive control using grounded theory. The sample consisted of a surprisingly large proportion of second-generation adults (SGAs) and others raised in cultic groups (N=42) and therefore, they were omitted from analysis. Results indicate that majority of participants (N=51) endorsed prior religious participation before they joined a cultic group. Additionally, about half the participants reported joining a cult that was related to their religion of origin and typically joined younger and stayed longer. These findings suggest both that cults are powerful and that there is a strong relationship between prior religious beliefs and cult affiliation.

**Keywords:** cults, high demand groups, new religious movements, spiritual abuse, spiritual trauma, religious trauma, cult susceptibility, cult induction factors, religious beliefs

### What Role Does Prior Religious Beliefs Play in Cult Susceptibility: A Descriptive Study

The past two decades have seen an increased recognition of the proliferation of cults in North America but also their potential for abuse (Hexham & Poewe, 2003). While the media has paid most attention to large dramatic acts of violence and destruction, exemplified by the mass suicide at Jonestown, Guyana in 1978 and the tragic siege in Waco, Texas in 1993, or even more recently NXIUM, many cults operate under the radar of law enforcement, while simultaneously engaging in abusive behavior towards their members. Such cults are largely invisible—in part—because the tactics they use are difficult to detect without careful attention.

According to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), a cult is defined as an ideological organization consisting of charismatic relationships that necessitate high levels of commitment and often involves psychological manipulation and abuse (ICSA, 2004). ICSA identifies 15 characteristics consistent across cultic groups, including “zealous and unquestioning commitment to its leader,” “a polarized us-versus-them mentality,” the use of “mind-altering practices,” and a primary preoccupation with “bringing in new members” and “making money” (Langone, 2015). These groups typically promote a doctrine that strongly deviates from mainstream beliefs (Holoyda et al., 2016) while simultaneously preaching a message that resonates with individuals from different backgrounds.

To gain new members, cult leaders employ a plethora of manipulative strategies targeting potential members who are most likely to join and commit to cult ideals (Singer, 2003; Coates, 2011). Although there is conflicting evidence in the current literature, some research indicates that factors such as familial dysfunctional patterns (Almendros et al., 2007), preexisting psychological difficulties and maladjustment, and seekership—that is, motivation to join due to life dissatisfaction and difficulty coping (Levine & Salter, 1976), have been associated with cult

susceptibility. This study aims to analyze the relationship between a little researched factor—that of prior religious devotion and cult membership.

While little research exists on such a relationship, I will explore how prior religious exposure may increase one's vulnerability to cult recruitment through familiarity with such structures. Because familiarity provides a sense of safety and comfort, individuals may not recognize warning signs of regulatory structures that indicate abuse, increasing their susceptibility to cult involvement. In the next few sections, I will first discuss common characteristics of cults and cult types. I will then explore the parallels between religions and cults, including structure and practice. Then, I will discuss my primary research goals of exploring susceptibility via religious familiarity.

### **Common Types and Characteristics of Cults**

While cults are typically associated with religious beliefs, cults can be based on any subject matter including meditation, self-improvement techniques, politics, psychology, outer-space phenomena, etc. (Singer, 1995). According to Margaret Singer (1995), there are at least ten major types of cults in the United States alone including: Neo-Christian religious, Hindu and Eastern religious, occult, witchcraft, and satanist, spiritualist, Zen and other Sino-Japanese philosophical- mystical orientation, racial, flying saucer and other outer-space phenomena, psychology or psychotherapeutic, political, and self-help, self-improvement, and life-style systems. For this study's classification, we condensed the aforementioned cult types into five major groups: Neo-Christian religious, Hindu, Zen, and Eastern religious, psychological and self-help related, other world phenomena, and other, which includes political, cultural, and miscellaneous groups.

While cultic groups vary enormously in size and belief system, they typically share five common characteristics. One, the leader is central to the group's mission and often claims to be divinely appointed with strong ties to a supernatural being (Singer, 2003). This self-appointed leader is frequently charismatic and declares their ideology, vision, and practices as law (Langone, 2015). Two, an important characteristic and qualification for a cult is that the leader, doctrine, or collective group cause physical or emotional harm to members (Singer, 2003). At first, the leader's central message may appear divinely inspired and appealing to newcomers, as it aims to address and resolve their current issues or stressors. In reality, these messages challenge the established social order and call for action that is frequently harmful to the cult member (Cowan & Bromley, 2015). For instance, in Bible-based cults, this message may focus on salvation in the afterlife and call for rampant recruitment at the cost of personal needs in order to save souls.

Three, a common characteristic of such groups is the presence of a consensual belief system (Holoyda et al., 2016) rooted in the leader's preaching and practices. Members adhere to this belief system due to the recognition and power assigned to the leader as a source of divinity. They also share a strong belief in the group's uniqueness and divine appointment (Levine, 1989). Four, cults tend to have excessive requirements and expectations of membership. Members are expected to devote a majority of their time and effort to the group (Singer, 2003), which in some cases includes daily participation, communal living, and/or significant monetary donations.

Five, each cultic group has a set of rules and regulations designed to control behavior and govern aspects of the members' everyday life (Levine, 1989). The four main areas of control include emotional and psychological control, thought control, behavioral control, and relationship control (Coates, 2012). In most groups, there is an explicit or implicit expectation

for members to isolate from the outside world by ceasing all contact with nonmembers, including friends and family (Singer, 2003).

### **Overlap Between Healthy Religion and Impressive Cult Tactics**

Religion can be defined as a dedication or submission to the principles of particular beliefs, rituals, and texts, which requires personal commitment and faith (Schilerman, 2015). In both historical and cultural contexts, it is associated with bonding and identification, and participation can be seen as an achievement (Schilerman, 2015). While religions differ in beliefs, function, and purpose, most tend to communicate with a supernatural entity and/or create a body of believers (Schilerman, 2015). Similarly, cultic groups are centered around the charismatic, divinely appointed leader who claims to communicate directly with a supernatural being. In addition, both religions and cults offer opportunities to create meaningful bonds as well as a sense of community and purpose. Furthermore, both sets of followers dedicate themselves to the concurrent beliefs and practices of the group through commitment and faith.

Cults and religions have parallels in regards to structure yet there are crucial differences. First, there are differences in doctrine and central beliefs, as well as in the level of transparency of their purpose and intent. Healthy religions tend to fulfill the elements they offer whereas cults usually have a hidden agenda and motives for recruiting member (Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2014). Second, in healthy religions members have opportunities to challenge or use critical thinking, whereas cults promote blind loyalty and prohibit or punish defiance (Rousselet et al., 2017). Third, healthy religion allows believers to choose their level of participation and are free to come and go as they please, with some exceptions and cultural constraints<sup>1</sup>. In cults, leaving the group is perceived as an act of ultimate betrayal often met with disapproval and shunning

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<sup>1</sup>In some cultures, individuals cannot leave easily but the structure of religion itself is standard.

(Coates, 2012). Lastly, studies have shown that participating in a healthy religion may promote increases in both physical and mental health (Townsend et al., 2002) whereas cults have an opposite effect.

In sum, what differentiates a cult and a healthy religion is the ability of the religious member to negotiate their own experience, challenge and vary how they participate in the religion, choose to participate with or without family members, and cultural constraints aside, to leave the religion without external pressure or punitive repercussions. However, the belief structure and even organizational structure of both cults and religious groups are superficially the same—structured beliefs, texts or doctrines, salvation, regular meetings, charitable donations, and a charismatic leader who mediates between earth life and after life of some sort. These structural similarities may serve as a blinder to individuals with prior religious experiences because this familiarity may initially obscure the cult group's potential for abuse. Such members may be drawn to a cult because the message offered by cults is often similar, if not derived from familiar religions. Accordingly, in this study I will explore if individuals with higher levels of prior religious participation are more susceptible to cult affiliation to cults embodying existing religious beliefs. I propose the following research aims:

Research Aim 1: What proportion of individuals who join a cult have a religious background?

Research Aim 2: What proportion of individuals join a cult that endorses the same religion they once adhered to or were exposed to as children?

Research Aim 2a: Does joining a cult that endorses the same religion they once adhered to affect the age of induction compared to those who joined non-matching cults?

Research Aim 2b: Does joining a cult that endorses the same religion they once adhered to affect the amount of time involved compared to those who joined non-matching cults?

Research Aim 3: Does gender play a role in cult affiliation such that men and women show similar or different patterns in the types of cults they join?

Research Aim 4: What proportion of individuals identified as religious (self-defined) or spiritual (self-defined) after leaving their cult?

## **Methods**

### **Procedure and Participants**

Participants were recruited through the use of broadcast emails sent to online cult recovery/support groups, as well as the utilization of snowball sampling. Data was obtained from eligible participants who met inclusion criteria through a telephone screening. Participants received compensation in the form of a \$10 Amazon gift card, which was disbursed upon completion of the interview. Oral informed consent was obtained and all personal participant information was anonymized due to the vulnerable nature of the participants. The interviews were semi-structured and were conducted for 1.5-3 hours via a phone call. Participants were interviewed via telephone as many preferred to have no face-to-face contact because they feared retaliation from cult leaders or members. Interviewers transcribed the participants' answers onto a Microsoft Word document during the phone call; no audio was recorded due to the confidentiality agreement. All interview data was coded by two different researchers, with a third researcher functioning as a tie breaker to maintain inter-rater reliability.

Participants in this study included 103 former cult members from 6 different continents. Participants included 75 (72.8%) females, 26 (25.2%) males, and 2 (1.9%)<sup>2</sup> non-binary

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<sup>2</sup> Rounding error

individuals between the ages of 18-68 ( $M = 42.31$ ,  $SD = 11.88$ ). The participants were predominately White (80.6%), while others identified as Black (6.8%), Asian (1.9%), Latinx (3.9%), and Mixed (6.8%). The mean number of years involved in the cult was 19.58 years ( $M = 19.58$ ,  $SD = 12.49$ ) and the mean years since leaving the cult was 6.7 years. Criteria for participation included: 18 years of age or older, participated in a cult for a minimum of one year, no longer affiliated, and left the group within the last 15 years.

### **Interview Questionnaire**

The interview questionnaire was based on a measure of coercive control and trauma bonding in sex trafficking and adapted for the cult context (Doychak & Raghavan, 2018). The semi-structured interview questionnaire utilized both open-ended questions, as well as self-report, to allow for both qualitative and quantitative data. Participants were asked open-ended questions regarding their introduction to the group, indoctrination, coercive controlling experiences as a member, relationship dynamics, spirituality, apostasy, and the aftermath of their membership. Self-reported data was collected on participant demographics, distress levels when joining, recruitment, group structure, roles, level of indoctrination, time involved, time since membership ceased, fearfulness after leaving (frequency and duration, if present), and number of coercers. Only questions pertinent to this study will be discussed.

### **Coding and Analysis**

I examined participants' brief responses and longer narratives to the following 8 questions. A: Can you tell me which group you left? B: If any, what was your religious background growing up? C: Can you tell me about how you were introduced to [the group]? Did you seek it out or did someone approach you? D: How old were you? E: How long were you involved in [the group]? F: Would you consider yourself religious now? G: Do you consider

yourself affiliated with any organized religion now? H: Would you consider yourself spiritual, even if you no longer affiliate with a formal religion/organized group? We used the software program SPSS to identify frequencies and themes in the data. Data was coded by three trained raters including the first author.

### **Results**

As described in Research Aim 1, I wished to explore existing religious backgrounds of participants. Unexpectedly, of the 103 participants, about forty percent (n=42, 40.8%) indicated that they were second-generation adults (SGAs), meaning they were either born or raised in a cult and had not selected or joined volitionally as adults. Of the remaining 61 participants ((58.2% of the total sample), the majority (n=51, 83.6%) identified having a religious background growing up. The overwhelming majority (n=45, 73.77%) identified Christianity, which includes Catholicism, as their initial religious affiliation. Others (n=10; 16.39%) identified as atheists and a few (n=4; 6.56%) identified Judaism. One participant (1.64%) identified Sikhism and one (1.64%) participant identified being born into one cult and joining a different cult as an adult.

Next, as proposed in Research Aim 2, I wished to explore if participants were attracted to cults that corresponded to their original religious beliefs. As a first step, I examined cult types of the 61 participants. Findings indicated that Neo-Christian Religious cults were most popular at 37.7% with psychological/self-help related being the second most popular at 19.7% (see Table 1). Next, I analyzed which cultic groups the 51 participants who identified having a religious background joined to see if they joined a cult that endorsed the same beliefs as their religious

#### **Table 1**

*Participants (non-SGAs) by cult type*

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Cult Type	Frequency	Percentage
Neo-Christian Religious	23	37.7%
Psychological and Self-Help Related	12	19.7%
Hindu, Zen, and Eastern Religious	10	16.4%
Other World Phenomena	8	13.1%
Other	8	13.1%

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background. Of the 51 participants who endorsed a religious background, 43.1% (n=22) selected a cult of similar background whereas 56.9% (n=29) explored and chose a different group. In all cases, the matches were from a Christian background to a Christian-based cult. To explore further as listed in Research Aim 3, I examined if men and women differed in cult selection<sup>3</sup>. As indicated in Table 2, of the 43 women, nearly three fourths joined a cult that was not Christian although these women indicated a Christian background. In contrast, of the 16 men, more than half joined Christian cults corresponding to their Christian backgrounds.

Next, I examined the 45 participants who indicated early Christian roots. Less than half (46.7% (n=21) later joined a Christian group and 53.3% (n=24) left their initial beliefs and joined a different group entirely. For the 10 participants that identified as atheists or having no religious

**Table 2**

*Participants (non-SGAs) and religion/cult type match status, by gender*

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<sup>3</sup> Two participants identified as transgender female and therefore were excluded from analysis.

Gender	Christian to Christian Match		Non-Matched	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Male	9	56.25%	7	43.75%
Female	12	27.91%	31	2.09%

*Note.* n=2 were excluded due to missing information.

experiences in childhood, most (n=7; 70%) joined a cult that had no base religious beliefs such as psychology and self-help related and political cults.

As indicated in Research Aim 2a and 2b, we examined whether the mean age joined and mean years of time involved in a cult differed by whether participants selected a cult that matched their previous religious background or differed completely. The participants in the match group joined on average at 21.95 years old and stayed for an average of 16.9 years (n=1 excluded for missing information). The non-matched group joined on average at 25.67 years old (n=4 excluded for missing information) and stayed for an average of 12.36 years. For our participants' post religious affiliation (n=101, n=2 excluded for missing information), 27.7% (n=28) stated they consider themselves religious with 20.8% (n=21) stating they consider themselves affiliated with organized religion. Of the 101 participants, 71.3% (n=72) stated they consider themselves spiritual. Of the 101 participants, very few endorsed being secular or atheist.

### Discussion

In the current study, we sought to understand the role of prior religious views on susceptibility to cult affiliation. As a start, we examined the number of participants that came from a religious background prior to joining a cultic group. Unexpectedly, a significant minority identified as being born into and/or raised in a cult. This suggests that intergenerational

transmission is common within cultic communities. Overall, Neo-Christian religious groups were by far the most commonly transmitted group. Participants indicated lengthy engagement and in one case, membership reached up to seven generations. The longevity of membership in groups that are exploitative is not well understood. For example, are SGAs able to reenter civil society without significant hardship? What kinds of identity and psychological damage might exploitative cults create when someone is raised in a cult? These results suggest that future research should specifically examine SGAs and cults' ability to continually entrap and exploit its members and families.

Next, we examined the 61 participants who were non-SGAs and found that nearly everyone had a religious background, supporting our hypothesis that prior religious beliefs play a role in cult affiliation. However, of this group, we found that just less than half stayed within their religion of origin; the other half explored different groups including psychological and self-help related and other world phenomena. The second most popular cult type after Christian-based cults was psychological and self-help related. While the overall numbers were still quite low (13/103), it is important to note this trend is possibly due to prevalence of psychology in the media, school, and everyday life and the importance of psychology as a tool of self-actualization in modern life. While the numbers are relatively modest, it is worth noting that these self-help groups operate by masquerading as credible forms of psychology. In reality, these groups actively abuse psychology, as it is being misused to lure individuals who are searching for meaning in their life.

As might be expected, individuals who matched (Christian to Christian) joined younger than those who explored a different group. In addition, those who matched tended to stay longer

when compared to those who did not match. This supports our hypothesis that familiarity plays a role in cult affiliation.

While we wished to explore potential gender differences, our non-SGA sample comprised 43 women and 16 men, precluding analyses. Instead, we share observations about interesting patterns. First, women were far more likely to explore than men, as more than half the men that came from Christianity joined a Christian group whereas only about 25% of women did. This may stem from organized religions such as Christianity having patriarchial roots that are not attractive to women. In contrast, newer cultic groups may be promising a more gender equal experience. For example, many female participants were casually introduced to the group with promises of making supportive friends, joining an instant community, and finding purpose, but ultimately these groups are exploitative and entrapping. In addition, even in the 42 participants who identified as SGAs, only a third were men. Such that overall, in our sample of 103, 75 were women, 26 men, and 2 transgender individuals. This disparity was an interesting observation that has several possible explanations. First off, it is possible that men did not want to participate in this study, thus skewing the sample. Another possible explanation is that although cult leaders are primarily men, most cults consist of more female members. While speculative, perhaps cults are another form of gender-based violence, where male authority exploits and abuses women. If so, more attention should be paid to the power dynamics and how gender is exploited via cult membership.

Finally, although almost all our sample identified a formal organized religion before cult affiliation, not surprisingly, most participants changed their identification following cult exit. That is, most participants did not identify as being religious or affiliated with organized religion. However, rather unexpectedly, most participants identified as being spiritual. These changing

labels may reflect that cult survivors may have lost their appetite for organized religion but may remain connected to the idea of a life beyond Earth through spirituality.

This is one of the first studies to explicitly examine how religion may be linked to susceptibility to cult membership. Nonetheless several limitations should be noted. Participants were self-selected, therefore likely do not represent the bigger pool of cult survivors. Specifically, our sample may reflect only those who were able to discuss their experiences or felt safe enough to do so. It is likely that our sample did not represent survivors who experienced severe trauma, etc. In addition, the participants came from very diverse backgrounds, making any kind of generalization impossible. It should be noted that despite such differences, participants' stories were often eerily similar suggesting some universality of experience. Due to the surprisingly high number of SGAs, in combination with the different cult types and prior religions, our sample size for each group type was rather small, which served as a limitation.

These findings indicate many different future paths. First, what about religion draws men and women to cults? The next step would be to further understand the role of familiarity and structure in order to identify the underlying reasons why religion is undeniably so intertwined with cults. By understanding how religion is being misused by these charismatic groups, preventative measures can be implemented such as educating the public on cult characteristics. As noted earlier, how gender factors in exploitative cult groups should be seriously examined. If indeed cults are a form of violence against women, civil and legal authorities need to consider remedies that address gender more frontally. A second interesting finding that warrants more research is on SGAs and the potential damage of being raised in a cult. For example, several SGAs in this study identified living on a commune and being deprived of attending school. They noted that their parents lied to the state by stating the students were home schooled when in

reality, they were not schooled at all. This lack of education inevitably led to obstacles and limitations in their adult life that were undeserved and preventable. These preliminary findings suggest that more state interference is warranted due to the use of religious beliefs to justify abuse in cultic communities. Cultic groups that exploit natural desires inherent to the human condition (i.e. purpose, spirituality, community) by masquerading as a religious group epitomizes the need for the reevaluation of our religious freedom exemptions that not only allow but promote the continuation of these human rights violations.

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**Appendix**

Interview Guide

**Before you start: Obtain Oral-Informed Consent**

*As previously stated, the purpose of the study is to better understand the relationship dynamics within cults. You will be asked questions about joining, experiencing, and leaving your group. Additionally, you will be asked questions about how you responded to and coped with your experiences. Your answers are confidential and you can choose to cease participation at any time.*

**Introduction**

*“We are going to start with some basic questions regarding information about your identity and background before beginning the interview.”*

- Can you tell me which group you left? **(Establish participant language)**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Demographics**

1. How old you are? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Where were you born? \_\_\_\_\_
3. What is your race and/or ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_
4. What is your sex: Male \_\_\_ Female \_\_\_ Other \_\_\_
5. What is your sexual orientation? \_\_\_\_\_
6. Are you currently employed? If so, what do you do for work?

\_\_\_\_\_

7. What is the highest level of schooling, which you completed?

University Level or higher \_\_\_

High School or equivalent \_\_\_

Middle School or equivalent \_\_\_

Elementary School or equivalent \_\_\_

No schooling \_\_\_

Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

8. What was your living arrangement growing up? Who did you live with?

Parents \_\_\_

Single parent (mother) \_\_\_

Single parent (father) \_\_\_

Siblings \_\_\_

Other family; please specify \_\_\_

No parent household; specify level of responsibility \_\_\_

Shelter/Displaced \_\_\_

Social Services \_\_\_

Other, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

9. If any, what was your religious background growing up?

Christianity \_\_\_

Buddhism \_\_\_

Judaism \_\_\_

Islam \_\_\_

Hinduism \_\_\_

None/Nonreligious \_\_\_

Other, please specify \_\_\_\_\_

9a. If involved in a particular sect or denomination, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

**Interview Guide**

*“Thank you. I am now going to ask you some questions about your experience with [the group] in your own words. There may be times when I redirect you. This is not because I am not interested in what you have to say, but I understand your time is valuable and I do not want to take too much of it.”*

1. Can you tell me about how you were introduced to [the group]? Did you seek it out or did someone approach you?

2. What was going on in your life at that time that you joined [the group]? Was there any stressful event that occurred in your life shortly before joining? {Proximal} **(Mark when coding, based on answer)**

*Interpersonal – Family (i.e. divorce, breakup) \_\_\_\_\_*

*Interpersonal – Friends (i.e. arguments with peers) \_\_\_\_\_*

*Death/Illness (i.e. father sick, mother passed, personally ill) \_\_\_\_\_*

*Abuse (i.e. physical, sexual, psychological) \_\_\_\_\_*

*Financial (i.e. unemployed, impoverished) \_\_\_\_\_*

*None \_\_\_*

To what extent did these difficulties cause distress to your life? Very Somewhat Not at All

2a. Were there any other long-term stressors or difficulties you experienced that you felt [the group] addressed or helped you through? Anything missing in your life that may have influenced your decision in joining? {Distal}

*Loneliness/Isolation \_\_\_\_\_*

*A Sense of Purpose \_\_\_\_\_*

To what extent did these difficulties cause distress to your life? Very Somewhat Not at All

3. *If applicable*, who recruited you? Was it one person or several people?

3a. What did the recruiter(s) do or say to influence your decision?

3b. *If there is reference to multiple recruiters, ask participant to answer the interview questions based on the person to whom they felt closest.* Who is the person you felt closest to?

3c. How did you meet?

3d. How old were you?

3e. How old was he/she?

3f. How long did your relationship with your recruiter last?

4. How long were you involved in [the group]?

5. What was the hierarchy within [the group]? Was there only one branch? On the local level?

5a. Who was in charge [leader/ruling body]? Did they make all of the decisions?

5b. Who did members go to for approval or advice? Did the [leader/ruling body] have to approve everything?

6. What were the typical weekly [activities/meetings/services]? **(Establish participant language)**

6a. How frequently did you attend?

6b. What happened during these [activities/meetings/services]?

6c. Where did you typically meet?

6d. How many group members did you see at each meeting?

7. What was your role in the group, if any?

*If applicable...*

7a. Did it need to be approved?

7b. Was it appointed to you by someone?

7c. How much was the role influenced by your own choice? Did you have control over how you

carried out your work?

7d. What happened if you did not fulfill your role?

8. Were you ever asked to recruit others?

8a. Did you participate?

8b. How were you treated if you successfully recruited someone? If you didn't?

9. How did you feel about being a part of [the group] at the time?

9a. What made it special?

9b. How did you feel when you attended [activities/meetings/services]?

10. What was the message of [the group]?

11. Did it have a mission or ultimate goal? If so, what was it?

Coercive Control

*“Thank you for answering those questions for me. Now, we are going to switch topics a bit. I am going to ask you to think about your relationship with your primary influence; the group member you had the most contact with and/or who made the most demands of you. These questions will focus on the time you were with him/her. I will explain a range of behaviors and if they were present in your relationship, I’ll ask you for an example that feels most typical. Please note, if you cannot think of a primary influence, answer the following questions for the collective group, rather than one particular person.”*

1. Did he/she ever follow you or have others keep track of you or your whereabouts?

For example, was he/she insistent on knowing your every move (text messages, phone calls)? {Surveillance}

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

1a. *If the primary influence is not the leader...* Did he/she ever report on your behavior?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

1b. Did you ever report on anyone else’s behavior?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

1c. What would happen if you did report? If you did not?

2. Did he/she control aspects of your everyday life, daily tasks, and/or daily functioning?

For example, did he/she tell you how to dress, what to eat, how to spend money, or assign you chores? Prohibit you from reading certain books, listening to genres of music, or participating in mainstream activities? Anything else that he/she controlled? {Microregulation}

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

3. *Think back to your earnings at the time.* How much money do you think you spent on your group in contributions in comparison to your earnings? {Economic Exploitation}

3a. Did he/she take the money? If not, who took the money?

3b. Were you ever pressured by him/her to give money to [the group]? What would happen if you did? You didn't?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

3c. Did you have much free time outside of work and group activities?

4. Did he/she ever lie to you to get you to do something he/she wanted you to do, or did you ever feel manipulated? Were there specific things that he/she lied about? {Manipulation/Exploitation}

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

5. Did he/she keep you from seeing or speaking to family, friends, or other people outside of [the group]? {Isolation}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
6. Did you ever receive special treatment or favor for doing things for him/her? Move up in status or position within the group? {Reward}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 6a. Were you ever guaranteed honors/acknowledgement in the unforeseeable future (**Use mission language**) by him/her?
7. Did he/she ever threaten you? Engage in behaviors to make you afraid? Why? Make you comply with his/her demands? {Intimidation}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 7a. Did he/she ever imply you were risking something by not complying? For example, yours or someone else's [salvation], etc.? (**Use mission language**)
8. Did he/she ever use degrading language in private? Name calling? Cursing? {Degradation}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 8a. Did he/she ever use degrading language in public? Name calling? Cursing?  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 8b. Did you ever receive any other forms of punishment from him/her, such as public shaming (e.g. having to sit in the front during meetings)?  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 8c. Were you ever shunned by a fellow group member if you did something perceived as wrong? Was the shunning directed by him/her?  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 8d. Did you ever witness anyone else being degraded? By who? What happened? How did you react? Rationalize it?
- 8e. Did you participate in shunning or degrading another group member? Were you encourage to do so by him/her?
9. Did you ever receive physical punishment by him/her? Can you give me an example that feels most typical? Most extreme? {Physical Abuse}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
10. Did he/she ever force you to have sex or engage in sexual behaviors you did not want to participate in? How did he/she do that? (e.g., cried, physically forced/restrained, used the relationship against me, etc.)? {Sexual abuse/repression}  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 10a. Did he/she you ever force you to have sexual relations w/ a group member or as part of a group activity? Did you want to participate?  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 10b. *What about the opposite?* Were you told to refrain from sexual contact by him/her?  
 Would you say this happened:  
 (All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)
- 10c. Were you ever told/advised by him/her on who you could date or marry?

10d. Do you know if he/she ever did any of the aforementioned to another group member? How did you react? Rationalize it?

11. Did he/she ever deny you basic necessities? For example, did you always have food, water, shelter, medication, healthcare, etc.? {Deprivation}

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

12. Did you ever say no or defy him/her? Fight back?

12a. *If applicable and not already clear...* How did he/she respond?

13. Did he/she ever make you feel like the [abuse/shaming/punishment] was because of your actions?

13a. Did he/she ever make you feel like if you hadn't acted a certain way, the [abuse/shaming/punishment] wouldn't have happened?

13b. Did you believe the negative things he/she said about you?

13c. Did you believe the negative things he/she said would happen to you would actually come to pass?

14. Did he/she ever make you question yourself or doubt what you believed to be true? Did he/she ever make you question your understanding of the [abuse/shaming/punishment]? Did you ever feel like you were going "crazy"; did he/she tell you were "crazy" or confused, or that you did not understand what was going on, etc.? {Gaslighting}

14a. *If yes...* What happened? How did he/she do it?

15. Did he/she ever ask you to do anything illegal or anything that could get you into trouble (e.g., lie to law enforcement, etc.)?

16. Did he/she ever harm, or threaten to harm, another person? If so, how did you know about it?

16a. Did you ever witness him/her excommunicate another group member?

16b. *If yes...* How did you respond?

### Trauma-Coerced Attachment

*"Thank you for answering those questions. I know that can be difficult to talk about, so I appreciate you sharing that information with me. Next, I am going to ask some questions about who and/or what kept you involved in [the group]. Some of these questions may or may not apply. If they do not, just let me know and we can move on."* **Note:** Probes are subject to change depending on participant reply.

1. To what extent did you think that all actions of the group were correct? To what extent did you believe everything that they said? {Brainwashing}

1a. What made you feel most committed to or involved in the group?

2. Did you feel there was one person who was more unique and special than others, and who you idolized in [the group]? Did you feel devoted to him/her [trauma figure]? It may or may not be the person we previously discussed. {Trauma bonding with one figure}

*If yes...*

2a. What was the nature of your relationship (i.e. platonic, romantic, sexual, disciple, etc.) (**Establish understanding of bond and level of intimacy**)

*I would like you to think about the time that you felt the most love for/closest to [trauma figure].*

2b. What made you feel close or committed to [trauma figure]?

2c. To what extent did he/she represent the group for you? Were they central to the mission or message of the group?

2d. Would you have stayed in the group if you did not have a relationship with [trauma figure]?

2e. How did your relationship with [trauma figure] develop? At what point in the relationship did you feel close or committed to them? What was going on in the relationship at the time? How long did it last?

2f. Did [trauma figure] ever do things that you didn't like? How did you explain it to yourself? Did he/she ever talk to you about it? Did you ever confront him/her?

2g. Did he/she ever give you special attention, give you gifts, or promise you rewards, such as

fulfillment, redemption, salvation, etc.? What did they give you or reward you with? (**Reward**)

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

2h. Was he/she ever affectionate and/or intimate toward you one-on-one? For example, did he/she ever call you pet names, give you special treatment, or shows signs of appreciation for you?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

2i. Did he/she ever make you feel special or attractive in the time that you were with him/her?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

2j. What did he/she do that meant the most to you? *If not clear* [...] Did he/she ever promise you something you wanted?

2k. Did you feel this relationship was unique? More special than others? If so, how?

2l. How did you feel when [trauma figure] treated you well?

2m. How would you describe the way you felt about him/her during the relationship?

*If not clear* [...] Was there a time you thought you loved him/her? How did that feel for you?

2n. Did you think about [trauma figure] when you were not with him/her? Miss him/her?

2o. *If applicable*... Did you feel important because you were his/her follower? How so?

2p. Did you feel special because [trauma figure] wanted to be with you? How so?

2q. Did you find him/her more attractive than others? More talented, powerful, pure? Etc.

2r. Did you have a sexual relationship with him/her?

2s. *If yes to sex with [trauma figure]*... Did you enjoy sex with him? Was it special? Routine?

2t. Were you [trauma figure]'s only partner? If not, how did you feel about that?

2u. Do you think you could love someone else the way you loved him/her? Why or why not?

2v. Did you ever feel [trauma figure] was better than you? Wiser than you?

2w. What was your main priority within the relationship? (e.g., pleasing him/her, making him/her happy, avoiding conflict, to get closer to God, reach higher level of salvation)

2x. Was there a time you felt angry with [trauma figure], or a time when you felt the things he/she did were unfair? If so, how often were you angry with him/her? How long did it last? Did it ever change how much you loved [trauma figure]? Did you feel angry at the time, or after you'd left [the group]?

### Closing Questions

*"Thank you for answering those questions. I'd like to ask some closing questions about why you decided to leave the group, and what leaving was like."*

1. What do you think kept you in [the group]?

1a. In addition to these things, what other practical or emotional factors influenced your decision or made it harder for you to leave the situation?

*Practical issues (housing, education, employment/money, transportation, etc.)*

*Emotional issues (concerns about social support, ties with family/friends, child custody, etc.)*

1b. Can you tell me more about that? (**Establish sense of responsibility vs. peer pressure**)

2. When did you decide to leave?

2a. Was leaving abrupt or gradual?

2b. How long did it take?

3. How do you feel about [the group] now?

3a. How do you feel about your involvement in [the group] now?

4. How often did you find yourself feeling afraid after leaving?

Would you say this happened:

(All the Time) (Frequently) (Frequently During a Period of Time) (Rarely) (Never Happened)

4a. How long did those feelings last?

- 4b. What would you say you were most afraid of?
5. What has been the biggest obstacle in your life since you left?
6. Did you have any support when you left?
7. Having left [the group], do you feel you miss it?
8. Do you feel like anything is missing in your life as a result of having left the group?
9. Would you consider yourself religious now?
  - 9a. Do you consider yourself affiliated with any organized religion now?
  - 9b. Would you consider yourself spiritual, even if you no longer affiliate with a formal religion/organized group?

**We have reached the end of the interview. Thank you very much for your participation. As previously stated, you will receive a \$10 Amazon eGift card in appreciation of your time. Do you have any questions, or anything else to add?**

**Please do not hesitate to contact me if you need therapeutic support. I can provide you with contact information for therapeutic professionals and relevant support groups. Also, if you have any questions about your participation, feel free to reach out.**