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Psycho-manipulative influence as a form of abuse in cults: theory and research

Synopsis

The topic of psycho-manipulative influence is unquestionably one of the biggest problems experienced by people who have been abused by cultic groups. People can join cultic groups for various reasons. In some cases their decision is based on free choice, but in others it may be a result of a group manipulative influence which applies psychological persuasion. Analyzing psycho-manipulation in the context of cultic groups, many authors point out that psycho-manipulative processes are at the centre of cults' activities leading to abuse and mental harm (Abgrall, 2005; Gardiner, 2009; Krok, 2007). The awareness of these processes and ability to defend ourselves against manipulative techniques appear to be very important in contemporary world.

The aim of the paper is to present psycho-manipulative influence as a form of abuse in cults on a basis of theory and empirical results. Firstly, three main persuasion categories used by cults were identified and described: (1) personal proofs, (2) logical proofs, and (3) emotional proofs. In terms of power, people give more credence to those whom they regard as competent and credible. For that reason, cultic group leaders can use respect for authority figures and trustworthiness as a strategy to make members adopt certain values and behaviour. Cultic groups' leaders often tailor their messages to their recipients so as to obtain the most favourable attitude response from the message receivers. Emotional appeals are considered to be effective in persuasive influence, because they play a significant role in attitude change processes (Taute, Huhmann, Thakur, 2010). In order to manipulate people cults present messages that induce fear, e.g., by making predictions about the end of the world and declaring that the only way to save one's life is a total dedication to the group's teachings. Another example of emotional proofs is using scarcity. A cultic group may deceive someone by saying that there is a limited number of individuals who gain access to paradise and that only those who accept truth promoted by the leader will be admitted.

The second part of this paper demonstrates results of research carried out on manipulative strategies (existential, cultural-religious, protective) characteristic of cultic groups in the presence or absence of forewarning which is understood as revealing the group's true identity. The findings showed that the most negative effects were found under the protective strategy, and the least negative effects occurred when the existential strategy was presented. Forewarning used in the form of revealing the group's identity caused more negative cognitive processes and attitudes towards the message and speaker (Krok, 2009).

The conclusions drawn on a basis of presented findings have significant implications for helping victims. Because the process of psychological abuse is done to victims, they should come to understand the psychological techniques that enabled the victimizer to abuse the victims' mind, autonomy, and identity. Practitioners working in the field of cultic abuse will receive practical tools that enable them work more effectively with people affected by cultic groups' manipulation.

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