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The Role of Shame in Cults, from Recruitment to Recovery[1]

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the traumatizing narcissist's relational system of subjugation is an important aspect of cult recovery work, for both the therapist and the cult survivor. The author describes the role of shame in the psychology of the traumatizing narcissist, and explains how shame is implicated in cult recruitment, in maintaining cult loyalty, and in the challenges of cult recovery. Cult survivors often resist self-referring for psychotherapy for fear they will not be understood. This paper seeks to raise awareness within the psychoanalytic community of the relational dynamics between cult leaders and followers, and of some of the central struggles for those recovering from cult-related trauma.

Introduction

In 1996, as I was completing my MSW degree, I wrote my final essay, which is entitled "Traumatic Abuse in Cults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective" (Shaw, 2003). This was two years after leaving the group I will call Shakti Yoga, the New Age, pseudo-Hindu religious commune I had spent more than a decade living in and working for. Just as I began graduate school in 1994, after struggling with my commitment to Shakti Yoga for several years, I woke up to the realization that what I had dedicated myself to was what I now considered to be a corrupt, abusive cult. In 2014, twenty years after leaving Shakti Yoga, I wrote *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation* (Shaw, 2014; also see Shaw, 2022). In that book I was expanding my original formulation about the relationship between cult leader and cult follower to apply to many different dyads, groups, and, following Erich Fromm's work (1941, 1964, 1973), nationalist movements, where the cultic dynamic has recently been making a roaring comeback. In this paper I will discuss the traumatizing narcissist's relational system of subjugation, returning to a focus on cults, and especially on the ways that shame relates to cult involvement and to cult recovery.

When cult survivors exit their community and try to describe their experience to a therapist, many report that the therapist reacts either with intense amazement and horror or with skepticism and suspicion, so that the survivor, already struggling with shame, ends up feeling like they wish they hadn't brought it up. My own first therapist, a dabbler in New Age spirituality, assumed I meant "tough love" when I first dared to tell him out loud that my guru was cruel. Eventually, I was able to educate him about cults; but for many cult survivors, having to educate their therapist increases shame and feels onerous.

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[1]An earlier version of this paper was presented on February 1st, 2023 to the Shame Discussion Group at the 2023 National Meeting of the American Psychoanalytic Association.

Since becoming a psychotherapist myself, I've been doing what I can to educate other therapists on the subject. At the conferences where I have been invited to speak about traumatic narcissism, the subject of cults usually gets raised, either by me or a participant. When we get to the Q and A, someone invariably asks me to explain, "what is the underlying psychopathology of people who join cults?" I always answer politely, and seriously, but what I'd really like to say is "why don't you tell me about your psychopathology first, and then I'll tell you about mine." I understand why people ask the question, but it's not the right question. We don't ask "what is the underlying psychopathology of rape victims?," for example. Survivors of cult trauma often describe their experience as something like mind rape, or soul rape, or in Shengold's phrase, soul murder (Shengold, 1989). Consent is a meaningless word when one is being subjected to undue influence and coercive control – in other words, when one has been groomed. One does not "consent" to be in a cult, one does not "join" a cult. We do not "consent" to be abused and exploited. Cult survivors, hundreds of thousands of us, contend with a great deal of othering if we are open about our involvement. Many who leave cults try to bury their history rather than have to deal with the feeling of being looked at like an exhibit in a freak show.

Whatever our psychological history might be, our history does not necessarily explain our cult involvement. Upon meeting a cult survivor, many therapists, good ones, will rush to find a straight line between family of origin dynamics and cult participation, making cult participation a special case of traumatic experience where the assumption is that your preexisting pathology explains why you were traumatized. Even if these assumptions eventually turn out to have some validity, this is not the place to start and it is by no means the whole story. We typically get involved in a cult because it appears to be a community offering something valuable, that seems to have a worthwhile purpose, that offers connection with like-minded others and promises meaningful benefits, personal and often societal. Cults turn up in all kinds of group settings, such as synagogues, churches or mosques, yoga classes, 12 Step groups, self-help seminars, multi-level marketing businesses, political groups, investment opportunities, diet, yoga, fitness and wellness programs, and in therapy offices and therapy groups. Cult experts are also familiar with what we call one-on-one cults, a dyadic relationship that involves extreme predatory control of another, sometimes including predatory alienation, which describes how a predatory individual systematically alienates his or her partner from their family and friends and then isolates the partner, controlling all the partner's relationships.[2]

Suffering losses, transitioning from child to adult, experiencing something traumatic, feeling isolated – as millions of people did during the COVID pandemic, for example – being in a difficult relationship or work situation – at such moments, people often seek help and support. They may get suggestions from friends, or from articles or books they read, and what they end up exploring could give them such a powerful experience of hope and possibility, of connection and acceptance, that they may decide to dive in deeper. If the person is very unlucky, the thing they dive into is a cultic group or relationship – one that has shown its most appealing features initially, and only exposed its darkest aspects

[2]Adults who leave cultic situations in which they were born and raised have significantly different needs and challenges when they enter therapy than those who entered cults as adults. This paper is primarily speaking of cult participation for those who entered as adults. For an overview of the attachment experiences of those born and raised in cults, see Kern and Jungbauer (2022).

gradually. If the person who is seeking community is bright, attractive, intelligent, and especially if they are affluent, the predatory cult community, in service to their leader but with fully sincere, zealous enthusiasm, will turn on the charm and get busy with what is called "love bombing:" i.e., showering the potential recruit with seemingly unconditional compassion and acceptance. The person is gradually persuaded that the greatest possible benefit of the group can only be realized by making a much more serious commitment. Months or years later, having deepened their commitment sometimes to the point of eliminating everything and everyone from their life that preceded the new relationship; often after being repeatedly intimidated, belittled and humiliated by the cult's leader; and after in many cases being thoroughly demoralized, terrified, exploited and bankrupted – that person may allow themselves to come to the devastating realization that they have devoted their lives to a cult led by an abuser. Recovery may initially involve getting help for acute PTSD symptoms, including hypervigilance, derealization and depersonalization, panic anxiety and suicidality. Survival in cults requires extraordinary levels of dissociation, and for ex-members who have sought therapeutic help, it often takes considerable time for the automatic tendency to dissociate to diminish. Understanding betrayal trauma and moral injury is usually important for recovery as well – and all this will be in addition to the many practical matters involved with starting one's life over, which for many means having lost everything.

I mentioned therapy groups that become cults, or cult-like. Richard Raubolt edited a book about this, entitled *Power Games* (Raubolt, 2006), which contained a number of examples of destructive therapy cults (also see Siskind, 2003, for a comprehensive exploration of the New York City psychotherapy commune led by Saul Newton known as the Sullivanians, in which she was raised; and Stille, 2023). When I was on staff in the late 1980s at the ashram compound of the group I was part of in upstate New York, I was still a true believer. One of my responsibilities at the ashram was to help organize annual summer retreats for mental health professionals. These retreats were held for three or four summers and each year drew several hundred licensed psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers, and unlicensed healers and coaches from all over the USA and internationally. The "workshops" were designed to turn therapists into recruiters for the cult, and they were very successful. This blend of "spirituality" and therapy is common in many cults. Many therapists associated with certain spiritual groups with a history of abuse and violation are either unaware of, in denial or dissociated about the group's history.[3] If they have heard whispers of documented abuses available to read online or in the print media, they have often determined that it is only disturbed, disgruntled followers that are doing the complaining. A very senior psychoanalyst who has since passed away told me that this was the case within the Sullivanian group; that only the most disturbed, low-functioning participants were complaining about or responsible for unethical behaviors. In fact, Saul Newton, the group's leader, according to many first-hand accounts from survivors (Stille, 2023), was a deeply paranoid predator and pedophile, who closely controlled, directed and exploited

[3]Many therapists practice one of the various forms of Buddhism taught in American schools. I rarely see mention of the long-standing, structural conditions that have led to extensive abuse and boundary violations in many of these communities. See the publications of Stuart Lachs at his website, http://lachs.inter-link.com/. A Buddhist practitioner himself, Lachs has written about the extensive abuse in both Zen and Tibetan Buddhist communities. Also see "The Sunshine Project," written by an adult survivor of childhood sexual abuse in the Shambhala (also Naropa) community at https://andreamwinn.com/offerings/bps-welcome-page/.

followers, routinely demanded sex during sessions from all the people he called his patients, and often encouraged those he trained to do the same. Children in the Sullivanian commune were separated from parents to be raised by others; parents were told their attachments to their children were toxic; and children in the community were routinely exposed to and seduced into adult sexuality (Stille, 2023). This is one of the most common features of cults generally – the isolation of children from parents, the neglect of and the sexualization of children, and the condemnation of any attachments other than to the group and its leaders. It wasn't only disturbed people who were abused or who complained; but as is often the case with cult survivors, many who did complain were not believed and were vilified.

Sexual abuse, whether of children or adults, is a concrete violation, but it is not the only kind of traumatic abuse in cults, though it is the one that gets the most attention. Cult leaders, by their nature, are compelled to inflict psychological torture, repeatedly demanding that members prove their commitment while constantly accusing them, explicitly or implicitly, of insufficient devotion. This is similar to the behavior of domestic violence perpetrators. Cult experts have for decades highlighted Robert J. Lifton's work on thought reform as essential to understanding cults. Lifton based his studies on interviews of American servicemen who had been held captive during the Korean War, and of Chinese expatriates who had fled their homeland after having been subjected to indoctrination in Chinese universities (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Lifton, 1961). The difference between prisoners being brainwashed and members of a religious or self-empowerment cult is that the cult members believe they are submitting themselves to indoctrination and subjugation of their own free will. They dissociatively do not recognize the coercive control being used to manipulate and exploit them.

As much as Freud rejected suggestion as undue influence, I nevertheless hear from analysts all over the world who became part of a group practice and left, because the leader of the practice had turned it into a cult, dominating and controlling the others in the practice while seriously violating professional boundaries. Additionally, I know of many instances of psychotherapists who became cult followers who were then used by their cult's leader to counsel other followers, under the cult leader's supervision, thereby violating and perverting the therapeutic bond. I also hear from patients about analysts who took control of their lives, sometimes for decades, until the patient could no longer tolerate the analyst's demands. Most people would like to believe that they would never be so foolish as to get into a cult, but I am confident to say that no one, no matter how intelligent or well brought up, is immune to the power of charismatics who exercise undue influence over followers. The histories of the psychoanalytic movement, and the bicoastal human potential movement, are replete with examples of both cultic leaders and followers. This history is being repeated in our profession to this day. Add to this the proliferation of online cultic communities around coaches, influencers, self-styled prophets and conspiracy theorists. Cults, like death and taxes, are here to stay.

Define "cult"

For the purposes of this discussion, I am using the word cult to describe a group with a charismatic leader, with followers who are systematically and aggressively indoctrinated to fanatically embrace whatever is dictated by the leader. Self-purification is a common theme of all cults, and some version of a mission to eliminate perceived toxic impurities in the self

and in the world is usually present. Followers sometimes but not always adopt ritualized, idiosyncratic modes of speech, dress, and behaviors prescribed by the leader. The follower's life – all their time, energy and money – is taken up with endless work for the leader and the community, and with recruitment of new members. Where the average person's image of a cult goes wrong is that cult members today are not necessarily selling flowers with their heads shaved and wearing orange robes. More often followers look like successful, attractive young people and professionals; sometimes they are celebrities who make wildly popular blockbuster movies; sometimes they are trust fund kids, heirs and heiresses who are the lost adult children of famous, wealthy people. Affluent, attractive, highly educated, successful people are just as vulnerable to cultic influence as are isolated, under-educated, disadvantaged people. In fact, educated, sociable, attractive people are usually specifically targeted for cult recruitment because of the likelihood that they can be trained to be highly effective recruiters.

I will use the word cult here for the sake of expedience; but authoritarian ideological group, or abusive, exploitative, high-demand group are more specifically descriptive. The use of the word cult can be problematic for former-member whistleblowers, and for defenders and counselors of former members: larger and wealthier groups accused of being cults may devote enormous resources to the silencing of critics, with relentless harassment through unending lawsuits. This is how Clare Bronfman, the Seagram's heiress, spent and is still spending a lot of her millions trying to vindicate Keith Raniere of NXIVM, the subject of the very popular HBO documentary "The Vow," even while they are both in prison for multiple felonies.

My own definition of cults includes the following, which I consider essential: a cult can be any group, of at least one leader and one follower, in which the leader exhorts others to follow him and support his mission with absolute obedience, and in which the leader can be identified as a traumatizing narcissist. I will define "traumatizing narcissist" momentarily – and clarify why I specifically coined that term rather than referring to the more familiar pathological narcissist. In this kind of group, whatever the group says it is doing and whatever those in the group think they are doing has nothing to do with what they are actually doing and believing. Enlightenment, success, financial rewards, perfect health, self-purification, the end of world hunger, and so on – these are ostensibly the goals of the group, the leader's mission, what followers are there to accomplish. *But the real and only purpose of the group is to reinforce the leader's delusional belief in his or her omnipotence, absolute infallibility, desirability, superiority and entitlement*. Cult leaders follow the classic advertising strategy of convincing buyers they need something and then selling it to them. Followers are taught that to achieve the leader's stated, sham goals and reach their fullest potential, they must purify themselves by annihilating their individual subjectivity, which is defined as blind, ignorant, impure. Their "fullest potential" is measured by how fully they are willing to subjugate themselves to the leader. In their effort to follow the leader's program and become a better, more worthy person, they attempt to make themselves whatever kind of object the leader demands that they be. Their goals for self-realization become indistinguishable from the goal of being especially loved and valued by the leader, which is what leads many followers to lend themselves to sexual abuse and to criminal behavior. The bait is the stated mission, which in cults always includes some kind of program for personal and societal transformation that requires personal purification; the switch is the leader's undue influence and use of coercive control, by which the leader

psychologically enslaves followers, and persuades them that their enslavement is what they want and what they need in order to fulfill their potential. The leader always defines what that potential is supposed to be, and he is the only person in the group authorized to assess the member's progress. No one in a cult is ever assessed to have made enough progress to be exempt from the leader's (or leaders') control.

I want to emphasize that I am not saying that charisma and missionary zeal in a group leader automatically makes her a traumatizing narcissist. In a group with a mission in which the leader is not a traumatizing narcissist, it is possible for meaningful work toward the group's goals to be accomplished. But in cults, which are diagnostically always led by traumatizing narcissists, the stated, grandiose goals of the group are never met, because the group's energies and resources are constantly being directed toward the actual goal, which is always and only the self-aggrandizement, the constant reinforcement of the delusional grandiosity, of the leader. Cult leaders require this continual reinforcement because without it, they will decompensate to full-on paranoid psychosis. The loss of their delusion of omnipotent control is their worst existential nightmare, which they will fight to the death, sometimes literally, to avoid. Staving off this loss of control is why cult leaders constantly move the goal posts for followers, pushing followers to ever deeper levels of submission so that the leader's delusion can be constantly reinforced. Tragically, even as they do nothing other than support the leader's delusion of omnipotence, followers continue to believe they are attempting to fulfill a meaningful mission, right up to the point of drinking, literally, the infamous Kool-Aid.[4]

The traumatizing narcissist's relational system of subjugation

To briefly summarize my formulation of the psychology of the traumatizing narcissist: In response to developmental trauma, specifically including cumulative experiences of extreme shame and humiliation, from parents and the wider environment, the nascent traumatizing narcissist grows up and finds a solution for his shameful feelings of powerlessness, or impotence: he develops a manic delusion of omnipotence. A central aspect of this delusion is shamelessness – the refusal to acknowledge or recognize as appropriate any form of shame relating to one's being and behavior. He or she views himself or herself as perfectly infallible, and infinitely entitled, and therefore in no need of growth or change. Many patients who present for psychotherapy and suffer from the condition of self-alienation, the term I use based on Dr. Janina Fisher's work (Fisher, 2017) to describe chronic states of shameful self-loathing and harsh self-condemnation, are people who have been subjugated in relationship to a traumatizing narcissist – often a parent but potentially any significant other. The traumatizing narcissist promotes shamefulness in those he seeks to control, as a means of keeping them dependent on himself. The traumatizing narcissist is using manic defenses against his own extreme, disavowed and deeply shameful dependency, and finding ways to evacuate those feelings into others. In his significant relationships he is always inviting the masochistic dependency of others while simultaneously positioning himself, sadistically, as without dependency, and therefore with nothing of which to be

[4]To "drink the Kool-Aid" refers to the followers of cult leader Jim Jones, who in 1978 led more than 900 followers living in a compound in Guyana in a murder-suicide pact, in which they were persuaded to drink a powdered sugar drink laced with a lethal dose of cyanide and other drugs (Guinn, 2017).

ashamed. In this way, he masks his own insatiable neediness, and contrives to control and exploit others, using them and subjugating them so that they hold in themselves the shameful dependency he cannot tolerate to feel or know about within himself. He intermittently reinforces the durability of these relationships with seductive behavior, so that victims continually renew hope when masochistic subjugation – being subjected to intimidation, belittling and humiliation – becomes unbearable. While it is tempting, I'm sure, to hypothesize that people who get into cults must be especially likely to have preexisting masochistic personality features, this is an overly general and overly simplistic assumption. I will address this issue in more depth later when I discuss shame and cult recovery, but I will say briefly here that traumatizing narcissists are extraordinarily skillful at activating, manipulating and exploiting the human potential for regression to child-like dependency and masochistic relating – it is their stock in trade.

Regarding the use of the term traumatizing narcissist, rather than pathological narcissist: more than formulating a profile of a character pathology, I am describing a relational system where one person is a traumatizing perpetrator of another who is being preyed upon and traumatized; and I am elaborating ways of understanding the perpetrator that can be helpful to their victims. The pathological narcissist is considered to be maintaining an unstable tension between his grandiosity and his insecurity. By contrast, the traumatizing narcissist is fully identified with his grandiosity, assigning insecurity only to the other, and he is controlling his delusion of omnipotence by rendering those he controls impotent. Instead of struggling with oscillating feelings of both superiority and inferiority, the traumatizing narcissist manipulates and contrives to project all the inferiority into those close to him, keeping all the superiority entirely for himself. His active campaign of subjugation is traumatizing; driven by disavowed shame and envy, he is continually assaulting and degrading the subjectivity of the other through his projections. Paradoxically, the reflected glory of the traumatizing narcissist inflates the follower while the follower is simultaneously being deflated, again and again. Followers of a traumatizing narcissist are always in a double bind: the follower becomes dependent on the leader who shames her, to be able to temporarily feel less shameful. This situation is recognizably analogous to addiction, where the substance that elevates the addict is what is simultaneously destroying him; and also, as will be discussed later, to disorganized attachment, the situation for a child who instinctually seeks relief from fear from a parent who is frightening and/or frightened (Liotti, 2011; Stein, 2016).

Erich Fromm, referring to dictators, called the kind of narcissism typical of cult leaders "malignant" (Fromm, 1964). He noted that when such leaders lose control of their followers, and face increasing exposure and humiliation, they lose the ability to control their psychotic delusion of omnipotence, and resort to violent destructiveness, which reflects the hate, fear and rage that suffuses their inner worlds. This is why those such as Dr. Bandy Lee, Dr. Judith Herman, Dr. Robert Jay Lifton and Dr. Mary Trump believed they had a "duty to warn" about Donald J. Trump, and it turns out they were entirely correct. Dr. Lee's efforts were met with censure from the American Psychiatric Association, and her outspoken position about Trump led Alan Dershowitz to persuade the administration at Yale University to have her fired from her medical faculty position (see Shaw, 2022, Chapter 6, "Authoritarianism and the Cultic Dynamic: Traumatic Narcissism in Trump's America").

Shame in cult recruitment

Cult recruitment efforts are aimed at preying on doubts, fears, and all kinds of insecurities that some people may have felt all their lives, but that most people feel at one time or another. Some people may have been struggling with a sense of shame about not living up to expectations, either their own or those of others, in work or love; some may be seeking to end shameful compulsive behaviors and addictions. Some struggle with loneliness; or alienation from family. In these cases, there is a sense of shame related to feelings of inferiority or inadequacy; one feels isolated by the shame; ashamed of the isolation; and afraid there may be no cure. Shame could also be a PTSD symptom from a discrete traumatic event, such as a rape; shame could be experienced as a nagging feeling of dissatisfaction with oneself; or it could appear as immobilizing self-loathing. The intensity of the shame can run the gamut. Cult survivors who were not born and raised in a cultic community, but who enter as adults very often recognize that the point of entry for them took place at a time in their life when they were experiencing a sense of shame, confusion, and disappointment about themselves.

On the other hand, many people enter cultic communities at what seems to be a relatively stable point in their lives. Perhaps things are going along well enough, and they learn through a friend or acquaintance about some kind of training or seminar that sounds like an interesting way to pursue personal growth or professional fulfillment. Maybe it's a meditation class or yoga class, or something they learn about from a therapist; or they might be in couple therapy and a weekend intensive is recommended. People in this group believe they should be able to be more powerful, more successful, and have a more successful and fulfilling life. Shame is not prominently in the picture for this population, at least not in the foreground.

For the first group, those struggling with shame, entering the community will temporarily relieve the shameful feelings. They often feel they were lost, and now they're found. For the second group, their participation in the community will soon lead to awareness of shameful feelings they didn't know they had. They too will come to believe they had been lost, and only in the community they now belong to do they feel found. When they are securely recruited and the initial burst of hope and joy ends, the cult will make a point of showing them just how shamefully wrong they have been about all their prior beliefs. In both cases, the now-indoctrinated recruit has been persuaded that their life was a sad mess and they were a shameful nothing before they saw the light and became a true believer. Cults persuade recruits that they need purification, and that the cult's program of self-purification offered by the leader will be the ideal way to achieve it.

Cults activate the human attachment system, the primordial human longings to be recognized by attachment figures, those needs that for our infant and child selves are about our very survival – the need to feel recognized rather than ashamed of being unrecognized and unwanted, to feel safe and connected rather than alone and afraid.[5] When we speak of love-bombing – the way that a cultic community invites new recruits and sells them on involvement with the group – this is what we are really describing – inducing in the recruit a regressive pull toward an idealized, intensely seductive attachment

[5]Liotti (2016) described the ways that problematic infant attachment experience leads to dissociative tendencies later in life. Stein (2016) explores how cult participation replicates a disorganized attachment experience that engenders dissociative defense strategies.

experience. We are being told, verbally and non-verbally, whether we consciously knew we were seeking it or not, that our basic human need for loving connection and recognition – the sense that we are recognized as valuable, desirable people, and that we can feel safe – is going to be met to an extraordinary degree. It is the opposite experience – of not being recognized, desired, valued – that is the basis of shame (see Benjamin, 1988; Benjamin, 2017, on recognition and unrecognition). Cults don't just promise to improve us, enlighten us, enrich us, and so on. The bait, the allure of cults is that if we follow the leader, we can become like the leader. If we follow the leader, maybe we too can become free of shame, strong and secure, more confident like him. Soon enough, there's a switch, and that formulation devolves to "if we abjectly submit to the leader, and shamefully confess our sins again and again, maybe the leader won't subject us to the ultimate humiliation: maybe we won't be declared unworthy, maybe we won't be banished." In cults, banishment is experienced as total disgrace, the equivalent of total dehumanizing annihilation.

Shame(lessness) in the psychology of the cult leader

Traumatizing narcissists and cult leaders present themselves as and believe themselves, delusionally, to be shameless. The delusion of omnipotence is a bulwark against the shame of traumatic impotence and powerlessness that the leader is always manically disavowing. Robert J. Lifton presented a vivid example of how brittle this carapace of shamelessness is, in his book *Destroying the World to Save It* (Lifton, 1999). Lifton noted that when the Japanese guru, Shoko Asahara, who had controlled many followers who were academics and scientists, was arrested, jailed, and finally put on trial, he collapsed into schizophrenia. Asahara was humiliated and bullied as a child; he was ashamed of various physical weaknesses and his extremely poor vision. He later failed to qualify for medical school and went bankrupt when he was arrested for selling fraudulent Chinese medications. He eventually transformed himself into a guru who could persuade his followers that releasing nerve gas in the Tokyo subway would be a way to begin purifying the world, so that he and his followers could then take control and start over. Asahara is an excellent example of the fetish with purification that cult leaders develop, believing themselves to have been "purified" of various merely human problems, like ego, karma, weakness, or selfishness, and offering this purification to followers, admonishing that the more absolute their submission, the more purification they will achieve. Many cult leaders also believe that their cult is purifying the world. Scientologists believe they are "clearing the planet" from the evil toxic energies left in us by alien beings; followers of Keith Raniere, featured in the HBO documentary "The Vow," believed they were empowering themselves to be ready to influence and become world leaders.

The traumatizing narcissist's use of omnipotence as a defense allows him to recognize no limits to his entitlement, no boundary he is not entitled to violate. Without any of the positive aspects of the sense of shame, that would form the basis for one's moral compass, the cult leader creates his own moral code, which is organized around his boundaryless sense of ultimate entitlement, and the need to control his environment by controlling his relationships. All that I have said above about how I understand the cult leader's psychology, or the traumatizing narcissist's psychology, is information I usually share at some point with a patient who has been victimized in these situations. I consider psychoeducation about the instability and delusionality of traumatizing narcissist abusers to be important in

helping victims recover trust in themselves, and in the restoration and validation of their subjectivity.

Shame as the means of control in cults

Shame performs a central role in keeping cult followers subjugated, and keeping them deployable to be used and exploited in whatever way the leader determines. Let me illustrate this with some vignettes about people I knew when I was in Shakti Yoga. Public programs in my group always included an "experience talk." These were basically talks about how the guru miraculously changed our lives, presented in public programs to help keep current members inspired and committed, and to sell the guru to new recruits. One of the more senior teachers was an attractive man in his late 30s, who had gone to Harvard, which was always mentioned when he spoke publicly (that he never graduated was never mentioned). He did a lot of writing and teaching and public speaking at the ashram. In the experience talk I am remembering, the opening act, so to speak, to one of the regular programs at the ashram where the guru would speak to large gatherings before chanting and meditating, he spoke of how before he met the guru, his life was so aimless. He said he didn't know what food to eat, when to sleep, when to work, what to wear. His point, made in earnest, almost tearful tones, was that the guru gave him everything, showed him the way; and that he was nothing, worthless, a wreck, until he submitted himself completely to the guru. It is painful now to recall the self-abasement that he and so many followers like myself felt necessary to display to the cult leader as we worked so hard to persuade others to become followers.

Cult leaders urgently need people in whom they can induce profound shame and complete submission. That's why this fellow was a featured speaker in public programs – he made abject submission look smart and cool. The guru needs you to think you are nothing without him, so that you will submit to him in whatever way he wants, while at the same time he needs to be able to pretend to himself that he doesn't need you, and that it's only you who need him. In other words, the cult leader arranges the relationship so that the follower will look, act, and feel like the shamefully dependent one – thus bolstering the leader's delusion of omnipotence. If the leader can accomplish this with a prestigious person (e.g., an Ivy League graduate, anyone with celebrity, fame, wealth) the group and new recruits can be sold on the significance and validity of the group. One of the most loyal and most abused followers of Lawrence Ray, who controlled a group of Sarah Lawrence students for about ten years, was a woman, Felicia, who had completed her undergrad degree at Harvard on a full ride, went on to a medical degree at Columbia on a full ride, and was about to become a licensed psychiatrist, just as she fell under Ray's sway and threw it all away, enduring for many years mental torture, physical and sexual abuse. Typically of the traumatizing narcissist, Ray focused his most cruel tortures on those in the group he saw as having higher status. Felicia testified against him at his trial and is continuing to heal and recover. The Hulu documentary, "Stolen Youth," reveals, more explicitly than most cult documentaries, the power and derangement of the traumatizing narcissist cult leader.

I'll mention another person I knew when I was part of the Shakti Yoga community. Katie was one of the funniest people I'd ever met. A struggling actress and a very competent helping professional, she had curly red hair, a quick wit, and the ability to leave a room full of people laughing helplessly. I was away from the ashram for a long period of time at one point, traveling internationally as what you might call a missionary for the guru. When I got

back to the main headquarters, I ran into Katie in one of the hallways of the compound. She had ended her professional activities outside the ashram and was now there full-time. The guru had not taken Katie with her on tour, but had left her behind in the remote, lonely winter ashram – which followers always took to mean that they had failed to please the guru sufficiently to be included on her tour. Katie's red hair gone, she was now nearly bald, with a hint of white hair coming in. She looked small, deflated. She told me, with a peculiar combination of shame and pride with which I had become familiar when it came to reacting to receiving special treatment from the guru, that the guru had told her she was hiding behind her hair and should shave it all off. I asked how she was doing, and in a frail, melancholy tone she said, "I'm just missing the guru." Even in my dissociated state, I was saddened, and perhaps without fully realizing it, I identified with her, and was glad I hadn't been put in her position – not that time, anyway. Katie, like so many in cults, was willing to believe that the guru's denigrating characterization of her talents and strengths as "ego" justified having the guru strip her of her dignity. Katie was eventually rewarded for so fully accepting her degradation by being chosen to become one of the guru's favorite spokespersons and enforcers.

What does the guru get out of it? The guru gets to prove to herself and others how powerful she is, how fully she can control others. She gets to prove she is not impotent, not weak, not vulnerable to shame or fear. What is supposed to be understood as purification (cut off your beautiful hair, you are hiding behind it) is really just cruel humiliation, I understood only in retrospect, spurred by the leader's disavowed shame and envy. While followers are taught to devalue their pre-cult selves, their cult self-value depends entirely on their status with the leader and the group. This gives the leader exactly the leverage she needs to take whatever she wants from those she controls.

Dissociation has been referred to as the escape when there is no escape (Putnam, 1992). The deeper one goes into the inner circles of a cult, the more dissociative you must become to be able to continually lose your sense of self, your moral compass, your value system, and adopt full compliance with and submission to the cult leader. When I was a spokesperson in my cult, at public programs meant to rally the followers, I displayed my entertaining self, my devotional self, my warm and loving self. Privately during that time, I was often lonely, scared about my status in the group, feeling trapped, resentful, and depressed. I was able to dissociate these different mental states and keep them separate. It was necessary to do so, to show my happy grateful self, no matter how exhausted and depressed I actually was, if I wanted to maintain my status in the group. Leaving ceases to feel possible, because it could only mean total failure. Alexandra Stein's book *Terror, Love and Brainwashing* (Stein, 2016) offers an illuminating way of thinking about the cult member's experience as one of disorganized attachment – needing to cling for safety to the person who makes you feel the most unsafe – which is a recipe for dissociation (Liotti, 2011, 2016; Stein, 2016). Exploiting the dissociation that has made a cult recruit lose contact with the pre-cult self, cults master the techniques of seductive desensitization to boundary violations, and can successfully make you believe that you need and want to be violated. Moral injury in followers occurs when the leader persuades them that they must be willing to violate others for the greater fulfillment of the leader's mission.

What happened in the group known as NXIVM, as was revealed in the popular HBO documentary "The Vow," offers an especially vivid example of how the traumatizing narcissist cult leader promotes the idea of boundary violation as spiritual growth.

New York prosecutors charged Keith Raniere, the leader of NXIVM, with sex trafficking, among a host of other crimes, and at trial he was found guilty, on all counts, and sentenced to life in prison. According to over a dozen women followers of Raniere, several of whom I spoke with first-hand, and according to police allegations, he demanded of his top female devotees that they declare themselves to be slaves to the female master who recruited them. This was considered an elite group with a vow of absolute secrecy, called DOS, which stood for Dominus Obsequious Sororium. There is general consensus culturally that to be a slave is to be objectified and dehumanized; to be rendered powerless and bent to the will of one who dominates and controls. It is a state of profound humiliation. The women of DOS, on the other hand, had been indoctrinated to believe that their agreement to enslave themselves was going to lead them to an extraordinary, transformative experience of self-empowerment, readying them for playing a major role in purifying the world. Raniere demanded that the top line slaves procure other women to be their slaves, with himself at the top of the pyramid as the ultimate master of them all. In other words, Raniere, who believed himself to be a spiritual equal to the Dalai Lama, was a pimp. In order to qualify as a slave, DOS women had to start out being slim and pretty, and then go on starvation diets to get even skinnier. They had to ask their master for permission to eat, and if they argued or disobeyed in any way, they would be punished by ridicule, or spanked with paddles, and in some cases kept for long periods of time in isolation. They had to seduce Raniere by showing ravenous desire for him. They had to be at the beck and call, night and day, of their masters. And they had to be willing to offer collateral, consisting of naked pictures of themselves, and specifically of their genitals; notarized confessions of shameful things they had done in the past; and notarized confessions of things that weren't true but if revealed would be damaging to themselves and to members of their family – such as a notarized but untrue statement that a relative had sexually abused children. Using blackmail and entrapment, the women were persuaded that they had willingly chosen to enslave themselves as a path toward self-empowerment.

NXIVM, of which DOS was one of a number of branches, is routinely called a "sex cult" in the media, but that is much too simplistic. It was a community where the traumatizing narcissist leader was able to normalize boundary violations, normalize sadistic cruelty, normalize domination and submission, and normalize dehumanization – not just normalize these things, but exalt them. It was revealed in his trial that Raniere was in the process of setting up a sexual torture dungeon which was interrupted when his practice of branding his slaves with his initials was exposed. Raniere created a situation in which the women would submit more and more deeply to him; they would submit so deeply that they would be willing to abuse other women. Not to submit further and further would threaten a breach in the walls of dissociation that had been induced in them. What is underneath that dissociation, which would be too unbearable to know, is the state of utter shame that would flood them. They would have to face that the choices they thought they were making willingly were bounded choices, in Janja Lalich's apt phrase (Lalich, 2004); "choices," made under psychological coercion, that are self-erasing submissions, not really choices at all. They would have to face that they had given a cruel, sadistic abuser complete control over themselves because they believed he was an idol worthy of worship. They would have to face the extent to which they had allowed themselves to be violated and degraded, and the extent to which they had been betrayed and exploited; and most painfully, the moral injury stemming from the harm they did to others at the behest of the leader. Leaving a cult means

facing the shame of having been catastrophically wrong about something in which you invested everything you had. That a number of the NXIVM women testified of their abuse before a judge and jury in an open courtroom, that they were believed, and that they were able to see their abuser convicted, is an extraordinary and all too rare instance in cases like these of overcoming shame in the service of justice.

Post-cult shame

This brings us to the question of what to do with our shame, once we have left the cult. When one emerges out of dissociation, and usually for cult members that happens slowly over time, one can feel a lot of things, intensely: joyful liberation; righteous anger or rage; confusion; fear; numbness; panic. But eventually, leaving a cult means facing the shame of having betrayed yourself, having let yourself be betrayed. If you choose not to hide but rather to be open with others about having been in a cult, you are exposed to being perceived as pathologically "other" by everyone who asks you, "Why didn't you just leave?" - one of those shaming, othering questions that cult survivors, like domestic violence survivors, are so frequently asked. Some people leave a cult and try to deny any kind of trauma or any kind of shame. But in the survivor's darkest moments after leaving a cult, she may submit to the fear and shame that was being induced by the cult leader, and believe that she is worthless and contemptible, failed and shameful – in all the ways the cult leader said she was, and in all the ways the cult said she'd always be if she didn't submit, totally and irrevocably, and especially if she ever left.

Most of the people I speak with who have left cults report that they experience panic attacks, for a time, after leaving. I believe the panic is triggered by these feelings of shamefulness, fear and self-loathing as they start to break into consciousness. But there is also something else that seems to be part of these very typical panic attacks, and I think that is rage. Most humans exposed to traumatic helplessness instinctively react to the unbearable loss of control by trying to regain control. This effort often takes the form of fragmentation, in which a part of the self splits off and becomes an enraged condemner, attacking with blame and hate the victim part of the self. The enraged condemner part is taking control of the situation, assigning blame to the victimized self. This internal battle is a terrible, desperate attempt at finding an antidote to traumatic helplessness, by reestablishing control through self-condemnation, so harsh in some cases that it can go as far as self-annihilation. The angry attacking part isn't directing outrage toward the cult leader, which would be appropriate; it's attacking the submitting part of the self. The submitting part of the self cannot bear the anger directed toward the self and the shame that arises. The effort not to know and not to feel what is happening inside is what I think leads to panic. With shame and rage barred from going out toward the abuser and allowed only to be internal, panic is the bursting of the dam.

Perhaps this internalized enactment, punishing one's own badness, happens because it is the nature of all human beings to protect their attachment figures, to idealize them, to be loyal to them – even when they are abusive. So even though one leaves the cult, and rejects the cult leader, shame continues to haunt the former cultist in this dissociated, unconscious way. The bond to the abuser, a trauma bond, remains long after the abuser is nowhere in the victim's life. So much of what must happen for healing and recovering from cult trauma is about breaking up that internal conversation, in which the former cultist is punishing and

shaming himself, submitting as he was trained to do, but now to his own internalized shaming voice.

Cult survivors must find a way to restore their faith in their own worth, their own worthiness of respect and compassion. I pay very close attention to expressions of self-contempt, and explore with them the possibility of dignity and self-compassion. Much of how I currently work with self-compassion and its absence derives from my study of the work of Fisher (2017), and from Internal Family Systems (Schwartz & Sweezy, 2019) concepts. But long before I was exposed to these concepts, I was especially moved by the work of Emanuel Ghent, who made an astute distinction between surrender and submission (Ghent, 1990). In personal communication with Ghent, I became aware of his own youthful experimentation with cults. Reading his surrender/submission paper with this awareness adds a great deal of meaning to the paper for me. Ghent thought of surrender as a letting go of defenses, and an opening to the possibility of something more real, authentic, and alive, internally and interpersonally. Ghent observed that longings for surrender could all too readily lead to vulnerability to the demands of others for submission. Frustrated strivings to be recognized and valued could paradoxically find expression in the enactment of sadomasochistic dynamics, in relationships where the price of recognition would be masochistic submission. When submission is mistaken for surrender, one may attach to someone appearing to offer special love and attention, without realizing that this "love" is given on condition of much greater self-negating submission than was originally bargained for. If the abuser is charismatic and skillful at manipulation, he can convince others that masochistic submission to him is not what it seems at all, but actually its opposite – an esoteric form of self-empowerment that only a special group of privileged adherents can understand.

Many authority figures, influencers, and all cult leaders become especially skilled at moving the goal posts of what is supposedly meant to be attained from them again and again, so that only greater dependence is achieved, not self-empowerment. Giving oneself in self-negating submission cannot lead to self-realization, nor to the secure feeling of knowing that you are loved and deeply recognized, as much as that might be the manifest or dissociated hope. The "love" offered by the traumatizing narcissist can feel very much like real love, but it is in fact a travesty of love. Ghent's understanding, free of shaming, has been quite meaningful in helping many I have worked with recover not just from cult trauma, but from many other kinds of relational trauma as well.

In addition to offering Ghent's formulation to survivors, I also offer a way of understanding the function and the protective purposes of the shame they are dealing with. In the theory of structural dissociation developed by Van der Hart, Nijenhuis and Steele (2006), the five instinctual survival strategies in humans as well as animals are identified – fight, flight, freeze, submit (some now use the term "fawn" for this instinct) and attach, or cling. In the animal world, the submit strategy is illustrated by the way that possums and some birds play dead, or act wounded, to fend off predators. Human children, when traumatized by parents, learn to bear the burden of the badness – as was so well described by Fairbairn (Fairbairn, 1952). By taking the burden of shameful badness upon themselves, traumatized children attempt to survive the traumatic conditions set by negating parents by submitting to and identifying with the negation. Shameful submission serves as a survival strategy when one is trapped in a subjugating system – either due to being a dependent child, or to having been seduced

into such a relationship. In their excellent chapter on psychobiology and evolution, Gilbert and McGuire wrote:

> "Shame signals (e.g., head down, gaze avoidance, and hiding) are generally registered as submissive and [appeasing], designed to de-escalate and/or escape from conflicts. Thus, insofar as shame is related to submissiveness and appeasement behavior, it is a damage limitation strategy, adopted when continuing in a shameless, non-submissive way might provoke very serious attacks or rejections." (Gilbert & McGuire, 1998, p. 102)

In other words, when it is unsafe to be assertive, shame enables one to be compliant, preoccupied with trying not to arouse the displeasure of the subjugating one. Helping the cult survivor understand how their shame helped them, protected them, allowed them to "stay out of trouble" and be less likely to be directly attacked, belittled and humiliated by the leader, is an important way to help them to free themselves from the shame.

Shame is the most durable thing survivors take with them when they have left the cult. Healing shame is central to the work of recovery. Shame can and should be *understood*, by therapist and patient together, in complex, meaningful ways, but shame is only *healed* when the therapist is able to help the patient bring self-compassion, rather than contempt, to the patient's traumatized, wounded parts. The therapist's compassion is crucial – but the opening up of the patient's self-compassion is ultimately what will restore and revitalize the patient's self.

Conclusion

Richard Chefetz has proposed that the opposite of shame is dignity (2017). Chefetz refers to the work of Dr. Donna Hicks, an associate at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, who has facilitated dialogue between communities in conflict all over the world and has developed what she calls the "dignity model" (Hicks, 2013). In my reading of Hicks, I see a strong correlation between her model and Benjamin's concept of intersubjective relatedness (Benjamin, 1988; Benjamin, 2017). One of the most destructive ways that narcissists can be traumatizing is in their agenda to systematically dismantle in their prey the capacity for intersubjective relatedness, and instill instead ever-increasing submission – the complementarity of the sadomasochistic binary. This boils down to the promotion of shame and the stripping away of dignity. Hicks' principles that promote dignity, developed in the context of international relations, can and I believe should be principles that are upheld and promoted in any therapeutic context. I mention just a few of Hicks' principles here:

Approaching others as neither inferior nor superior; acceptance of identity; reduction of fear of being negatively judged, fear of humiliation and fear of retribution; promoting a sense of safety that will protect the other from fear of humiliation; and being accountable, taking responsibility for hurtful behavior and working toward meaningful, truly empathetic repair.

Recovering from traumatic abuse in cults is to a great extent a quest for the restoration of dignity, for re-humanization after de-humanization. Hicks writes,

> The human experience of worth and vulnerability is fundamentally emotional. When we sense that our worth is being threatened, we are flooded with dread and shame . . . Some humans who have experienced chronic violations of dignity have even gone to the extreme of taking their

> own lives to bring an end to these intolerable feelings. Others go to the opposite extreme by killing those who caused the injury.

She goes on to say, "when people suffer an injury to their sense of worth, the antidote is time with people who know how to treat them in a dignified way."

The problem of cult trauma is a specific subset of the Complex-PTSD that arises from cumulative relational trauma. I hope it is possible for more of us in the mental health profession to recognize that what cult survivors have in common with all trauma survivors is far less "other" and, echoing Sullivan's words, far more simply human than otherwise (Sullivan, 1953).

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Daniel Shaw, L.C.S.W., is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City and in Nyack, New York. Originally trained as an actor at Northwestern University and with the renowned teacher Uta Hagen in New York City, Shaw later worked as a missionary for an Indian guru. His eventual recognition of cultic aspects of this organization led him to become an outspoken activist in support of individuals and families traumatically abused in cults. Simultaneous with leaving this group in 1994, Shaw began his training in the mental health profession, becoming a faculty member and supervisor at The National Institute for the Psychotherapies in New York. In addition to his numerous published journal articles and book chapters, Shaw's book, *Traumatic Narcissism: Relational Systems of Subjugation*, was published in 2014 for the Relational Perspectives Series by Routledge and is now also available in a Spanish translation by Marie Saba and as an audio book. The book was a runner-up for the distinguished Gradiva Award. In 2018, the International Cultic Studies Association awarded him the Margaret Thaler Singer Award for advancing the understanding of coercive persuasion and undue influence. Shaw's second book, *Traumatic Narcissism and Recovery: Leaving the Prison of Shame and Fear*, was published by Routledge in 2022.

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