

An Investigation into Cult Pseudo- Personality: What Is It and How Does It Form?

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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate some possible explanations for the development of the cult pseudo-personality and how it forms. I investigate whether the cult pseudo-personality is doubling (Lifton, 2000), false self (Winnicott, 1965), simply adaptation, or dissociation. I argue that it is none of these and propose that the concept of introjection is the most satisfying explanation. The paper also briefly addresses some recovery issues in light of the proposed view of pseudo-personality.

Definition of a Cult

As has been discussed within ICSA for many years, giving a helpful definition for groups that cause harm is difficult. For the sake of simplicity, I shall use the term *cult* to describe these groups, following Langone's (1993, p. 5) succinct definition:

A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree,

(a) Exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing,

(b) Uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialize members (i.e., to integrate them into the group's unique

¹ Because of the international nature of this journal, we accommodate the spelling conventions of the author's country.

pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices),

(c) Systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members,

(d) Exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and

(e) Causes psychological harm to members, their families, and the community.

Introduction to My Case Study—Jenny

To illustrate what I am saying, I shall introduce you to Jenny, a composite case study of an ex-member. Whilst I have set her story in a Bible-based cult, these issues are applicable to most other "types" of cults.

Jenny is in her 40s. She came from a relatively prosperous family, was intelligent, did well at school and as a young woman enjoyed both studying and having fun. She had had a few boyfriends and had slept with one, but since then felt she wanted to wait until she was in a long-term, stable relationship before she slept with anyone again. In her 20s she became a teacher, and by the age of 25 she became disillusioned with the system and started to look for more meaning in her life.

She had attended her local church as a child but was disenchanted by the sameness of it all. She heard about a new Christian community that had started up a few miles away; and although she heard it was a bit wacky and knew little about it, she was interested in the group's take on environmental issues and felt there would be no harm in going along and seeing what happened in the community. She was struck by members' passion, their genuineness, their caring, and their apparent desire to see her join. This touched her deeply because she had never come across such people before, and

they were certainly different from those in her local church.

She very quickly became involved with the community and found that they had a leader who was attractive, charismatic, and seemed to think she was rather special. Because Jenny had been struggling with her self-image and with believing she could be attractive to anyone (she had not found a stable, ongoing relationship, and she put this down to some lack in herself), she was excited and enthralled by him.

Jenny visited increasingly often, not seeing anything to put her off. She decided to leave her flat and her job, and to give her life full time to the community. Her friends and family questioned her sense in becoming more involved. However, the community members were teaching her the Bible verses: "Greater love has no-one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command" (John 15:13), and "The man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' Jesus said to him, 'Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God'" (Luke 9: 60). She was told that this meant she should leave her family and old friends and make new friends. She was less and less interested in hearing what her family had to say. Her new friends were pushing her to "lay down her life," to surrender herself for the work of the community (they said she was laying down her life for Christ).

Jenny was thrilled, and excited, at being accepted into this special group of people—it felt like a new beginning. They suggested she change her name to Magdalene to show her commitment to God and the community. She felt honoured to do this and felt more connected to them than ever.

One day she was asked by a fellow member to do the evening meal. She said she could not because she was busy doing something else. Her fellow's whole demeanour changed, becoming cold and hard; and she said in a chilling voice that Magdalene had no right to question such a request, that she should stop what she was doing and go this minute to the kitchen and do as she was told. Jenny/Magdalene was shocked by this sudden change. She put it down to this woman being moody and went to the kitchen. She argued to herself that she had committed her life to the community, so she should be helping out. She felt angry with herself and ashamed for questioning in the first place. She soon learned that, if she complied, she would feel accepted and a part of things, and, if she did not, she would receive similar rebukes and, often, silences.

Sometime later the leader told her to make his breakfast. She let him know by a small huff that she did not want to. He insisted, and so she complied. The community met for their worship meeting later, and Jenny/Magdalene started to share how she felt so full of life and joy at the beautiful day. She was received with a chillingly cold atmosphere, was told God was angry with her for her "bad attitude," and that they wanted to talk to her afterward. She sensed their rage and was filled with dread. Later, they told her God would reject her (she would go to Hell) if she did not change her attitude and become more surrendered to God and the community. They explained that, in order for her to "stay right with God," they would need to punish her by beating her 40 times with a cane. Jenny/Magdalene was deeply shocked by this and was left shaking and frightened. Following the rebukes and beating, Jenny became Magdalene in actuality—she became quiet, serious, and religious, complying fully with the beliefs and

practices of her new group of people, her new "family." She dressed differently, wore her hair differently: She looked and behaved like a different person.

Not long after, she was told that God wanted new members to join the community. And although at one time Jenny would have questioned this whole "going out and dragging people in" thing, and would have absolutely refused, on some level, Magdalene remembered their anger and her shock at being rebuked and beaten, which had happened unpredictably many more times, and so did as she was told. She was unresponsive when she was told that any tactics at all would be okay to bring people in—she was assigned to bring men into the group. She understood the implications, and Jenny was buried deep within. Magdalene identified with her new community of people, truly believing that sleeping with men in order to bring them in and obeying without question were the work of God.

Following investigation by local church leaders, the community was disbanded. Unfortunately, the leaders did not know the full extent of the abuse in the community or understand the impact the experience had had on Jenny/Magdalene. She therefore continued her church involvement, not realising how traumatised and abused she had been, or how compliant she still was. Over time, she learned to question more, although doing this was challenging for her because she was still fearful of punishment. Nevertheless, Jenny began to re-emerge; and at that point, she began to experience real depression and post-traumatic stress. She felt trapped: She HAD to be part of a church; otherwise, God would kill her (so she had been told). But she could not stay part of a church and survive psychologically. Looking back at this time in her life, she saw that Jenny, her "old self" or

pre-cult personality, was re-emerging over a long period of time; and as this happened, life was much more painful than when she was complying with her cult pseudo-personality, Magdalene. As she became more aware, she did not know which side she should be on. Others had noticed this split, and she confused those who thought she was one sort of person and then discovered she actually thought quite differently. For example, other ex-members of the community thought she was serious and judgmental, whereas she was actually quite playful and compassionate.

After she left the group, Jenny said,

Magdalene, was "born" so I could become the person they expected me to be, hating my parents, rejecting all outside the community, and doing things I would never have done before—I was a stranger to myself. Magdalene is still present in me, and her voice is different from mine. I fight her a lot of the time because they told us our parents deserved to die. I am exhausted and mixed up.

Jenny's very self, and her personality, were sharply changed and deeply and utterly affected by the experience of being with this group of people.

To discuss what happened to Jenny/Magdalene, I will briefly explore what is self and what is personality. I will then look at some attempts to define the cult pseudo-personality.

Self, Personality, and Pseudo-Personality

I conceptualise the self as changing moment by moment in response to contact with self, others, and the environment. In thinking about what happened to Jenny/Magdalene, I have found Gestalt psychotherapy theory helpful in its conceptualisation of the self as the being and doing aspects

of an individual. Perls, Hefferline, and Goodman (1951) state:

Let us call "self" the system of contacts at any moment. As such, the self is flexibly various, for it varies with the dominant organic needs and the pressing environmental stimuli; it is the system of responses; it diminishes in sleep when there is less need to respond. The self is the contact-boundary at work... (p. 235)

The self is, therefore, an ever-changing process (Taylor, 2004) in contact with our selves, others, and the environment. This moment-by-moment response to the environment means we are all vulnerable to the impact of environmental stimuli and influence (Cialdini, 2001; Zimbardo, 2007), particularly when the environment is radicalised (as Jenny was responding, the pseudo-personality, Magdalene, was developing). Change and development occur within the organism or individual throughout the life cycle in many circumstances (Wilkinson, 2006; Gerhardt, 2004). Personality can be conceptualised as the more enduring aspects of the organism or individual. Philippson (2001), a Gestalt writer, states that the personality function of self is "the knowable, relatively predictable, verbalizable aspect of the self that can be called up in answer to the questions 'who are you?' or 'what are you like?' or 'how do you do things?'" (p. 38).

Whilst Jenny's self was responding moment by moment, becoming a fully fledged member of the community, her personality (her preferences, her answer to the question "What are you like?") was also changing; and Magdalene, the cult pseudo-personality, formed. New preferences, a new sense of self and how she did things, was created by involvement in and interaction with the community.

There is much evidence that many individuals who have been in a cult exhibit a change in their personality (Langone, 1993; Singer 2003; Hassan, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The change in Jenny/Magdalene illustrates Singer's view:

As part of the intense influence and change process in many cults, people take on a new social identity, which may or may not be obvious to an outsider. When groups refer to

this new identity, they speak of members who are transformed, reborn, enlightened, empowered, re-birthed, or cleared [my addition: saved, surrendered]. The group-approved behavior is reinforced and reinterpreted as demonstrating the emergence of "the new person." Members are expected to display this new social identity. (2003, p.77-78)

I suggest that this new social identity is the cult pseudo-personality or pseudo-identity.

West & Martin (1993) note: "Cases of pseudo-identity observed among cult victims are often very clear-cut, classic examples of transformation through deliberately contrived situational forces of a normal individual's personality into that of a 'different person'" (p.274).

This change in Jenny/Magdalene was a gradual process over time, and eventually she barely knew herself. Hassan (2000) states: "Creation and imposition of a new 'identity' is done step by step" (p.58).

You might ask how this change takes place. Martin (1993) suggests that the common goal enables the cult to overrule difference: "Cults typically attack an individual's personality. People differ in their temperaments, interests, talents, and abilities. However, cult groups ignore these differences. Instead, they are focused on a goal or vision to which members must conform..." (p. 122).

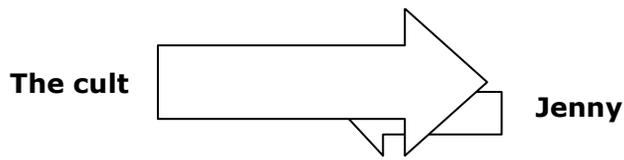
Once Jenny had contact with the community, she was groomed and seduced [sometimes called *love bombed* (Langone, 1993)] into what appeared to be a truly spiritual, loving, exciting, forward-thinking, caring, and trustworthy group of people. But later she came to realise that the community was hiding its true nature. Initially, because she did not have all the information, she idealised them. As Langone (1993, p. 7) states:

Contemporary cults, which operate in open society ... cannot forcibly restrain prospects and run them through a debilitating regimen. Instead they must fool them. They must persuade prospects that the group is beneficial

in some way that appeals to the targeted individual.

Jenny brought her natural vulnerabilities—for example, her sense of not being attractive enough, and her spiritual hunger—but her personality was destabilised by the shock of the sudden and prolonged change in behaviour when the members of the community ended up shouting at, beating, and punishing her. She had to adjust to this in order to remain a part of the community, and over time her personality changed almost beyond recognition, developing as a cult pseudo-personality, created in the interaction between Jenny, the new recruit, and the cult environment.

Diagram 1: The cult encroaching on Jenny/Jenny introjecting the cult



Lifton's eight components of thought reform (Lifton, 1989) are helpful in explaining why the processes that occur in cult members ensure this change in behaviour. For example, the "demand for purity" mixed with the "cult of confession" ensures that cult members believe their former self, which may be understood as their pre-cult personality, is not good enough, whilst the cult of confession maintains the cult personality as the members confess their "sins" or independent thought, ensuring that they continue to be compliant and submissive.

The experience of ex-cult members endorses this view (quotations with permission):

The cult personality is superficial. What I mean is that it does go deep because it has been there a long time (23 years) and it has affected my core, my deep personality. But it is not me; it overlays me. I was forced to be who they wanted me to be.

And "The cult self overlays me; I need to break out."

This leads me to ask the question: What, in psychological terms, is the cult pseudo-personality, and how does it form? To explore this question further, I will look briefly at Lalich's (2004) proposal of "bounded choice."

Bounded Choice

Lalich (2004) suggests that the choices made by cult members make perfect sense within the cult setting and belief system (p. 2). She explains how cult members reach this state of mind, and the process of conversion or worldview shift (p. 15), which she suggests might be responsible for the change of personality. She notes that:

- Belief and coercion are at the heart of the change.
- Conversion requires "charismatic commitment."
- This shift takes root quickly "so that people become easily enmeshed and in some cases trapped, at least psychologically."
- The transformation is deeply felt.
- The transformation is intensely troubling because of the resultant changes in personality, attitudes, and behaviors.
- There is a loss of sense of self.
- The outcome of conversion is a firm believer, a new person.
- Identification and internalization complete the loss of pre-group identity (p. 270) because they have in a sense become the organization (pp. 15-17).

Lalich states:

This process ... of transformation involves a reorganization of the person's inner identity or sense of self. Typically it occurs through a mixture of emotional appeals, rituals, instruction, self-examination, confession, and rejection, all in a context that deftly combines stress and harmony. Most often guilt, shame, and anxiety are integral to this process. Responding to the demands can be exhausting and stressful, for it requires repeated acts of

self-renunciation; at the same time, the person experiences relief at having “found the answer,” which is associated with a kind of personal freedom. (p. 16)

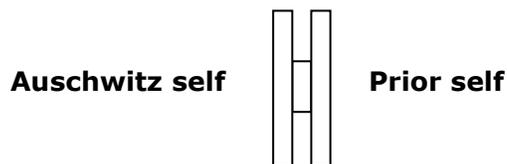
This change in personality, attitude, and behaviour is illustrated by Jenny/Magdalene’s experience; Magdalene had been willing to do anything they asked her, and she had lost Jenny’s pre-cult individuality. At least four possible explanations of the cult pseudo-personality have been put forward: doubling, false self, adaptation, or dissociation.

Doubling

Lifton (2000), in his research into the mentality of the Nazi doctors working in concentration camps, interviewed some of the surviving Nazi doctors who had had the power of life and death over prisoners and also continued to live a “normal” life outside of the camps. He suggests that *doubling* is the psychological vehicle used to describe this phenomenon, which explains how they could live with themselves *and* commit such atrocities.

Lifton notes that, unlike in dissociation and Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID) (in which parts split off from each other— see below), in doubling there is both autonomy and connection between the Auschwitz (concentration camp) self and the prior self. He states that there is a dialogue between the two selves. The Nazi doctor needed his Auschwitz self to function psychologically in an environment so antithetical to his previous ethical standards, and he needed his prior self in order to continue to see himself as a humane physician, husband, and father. The Auschwitz self, therefore, had to be both autonomous and connected to the Prior self that gave rise to it. I visualise the split in doubling as a vertical split with a connection:

**Diagram 2: Illustration of Nazi doctor’s
Auschwitz self and prior self**



I do not think the cult-pseudo personality is doubling, nor is it what we are seeing with Jenny/Magdalene. Although it is commonly held that the Nazis were a cult, I believe this dialogue between the Auschwitz self and the prior self allowed the prior self to be more or less untouched and allowed the Nazi doctor to continue normally. The cult-pseudo personality is different because if the cult member internally challenges the pseudo-personality, or leaves the cult, the control begins to break down, and the pre-cult personality may begin to break through the layer of cult pseudo-personality (see my thoughts later in "The Machine" subsection about the tarmac or asphalt). The cult member will feel okay so long as he or she is compliant and there is no dialogue between, for example, Jenny and Magdalene. But, to reiterate, once a dialogue is set up between the two parts (Jenny and Magdalene), then guilt and confusion might well ensue, even to the point of mental illness because the cult control will be challenged internally. Singer (2003) notes that it is the cult environment itself that produces and keeps the cult-pseudo personality in place.

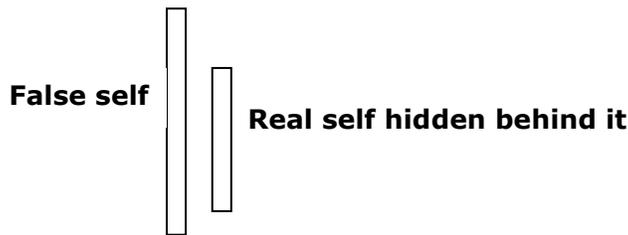
False Self

The "false self" is a term coined by Donald Winnicott (1965) and refers to that structure formed in response to frustration of the "real self." The false self presents itself to the world in order to get needs met but withholds its natural spontaneous self (Johnson, 1985).

I believe Magdalene is more than a false self. I suggest that Jenny adapted to the onslaught of the cult machine that enforced Magdalene, the pseudo-personality, from the outside, and that she took it in. Magdalene is not a structure formed within her to present to a world that was not meeting her natural spontaneous self, so it is more than a false self in this sense.

I visualise the false self as a vertical split.

Diagram 3: Illustration of false self and real self



Adaptation

Adaptation is, in social psychology and sociology, "a shift in sociological or cultural disposition. Thus one is said to 'adapt' to a new environment" (Reber & Reber, 2001, p. 11).

It could be said that joining a cult is simply an adaptation: Individuals are choosing to be the way the cult wants them to be, and they want to change. This suggests that the individual has a choice, and free will. Even though there probably is an adaptation occurring in the individual when he or she first joins the group, there is, in many cases, a more fundamental, enforced change (my conceptualisation of the machine in the next section), which I suggest is therefore not just adaptation. The pseudo-personality is much more than adaptation. An adapting personality is not split into a Jenny and a Magdalene, for example; it maintains inner coherence while exhibiting external change. The pseudo personality of cult joiners, on the other hand, is changed centrally, rather than peripherally (Ofshe & Singer, 1986), as in adaptation.

Dissociation

The idea that parts of a single personality can be divided, or dissociated, is not a new one. Van der Hart, Nijenhuis, and Steele (2006) state, in relation to patients with PTSD and other trauma-related disorders (p.28-29), that "...dissociation is a division among 'systems of ideas and functions that constitute the personality,'" that these parts

are self-conscious, and that each part involves its own separate sense of self.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM IV) states that "The essential feature of the Dissociative Disorders is a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, or perception. The disturbance may be sudden or gradual, transient or chronic."

The *Dictionary of Psychology* states that the term *dissociation* is

Used generally to characterize the process (or its result) whereby a coordinated set of activities, thoughts, attitudes, or emotions becomes separated from the rest of the person's personality and functions independently. Mild forms are seen in compartmentalization ... more extreme forms are observed in the dissociative disorders. (Reber & Reber, 2001)

Dissociation therefore occurs on a continuum, and we all dissociate to some degree (West & Martin, 1994). At one end of the continuum, we may experience the sensation, for example, of driving a familiar route and not recalling the journey. At the other end is complete memory loss, and there is much in between. At the more serious end of the continuum, Van der Hart et al. (2006) propose the following conceptualisation of dissociative disorders. The simplest division of the personality in traumatised individuals is primary structural dissociation, wherein there is a single split—one apparently normal part (ANP) and one emotional part (EP) of the personality [see diagram 4 following], also sometimes referred to as alter personalities (Putnam, 1989). Secondary structural dissociation, as a result of prolonged and repeated traumatisation, has a wide range of complexity and involves one ANP and a number of EPs. Tertiary structural dissociation is characteristic of Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), previously known as Multiple-Personality Disorder (MPD), in which there are multiple ANP and EP parts of the personality.

Jenny/Magdalene's experience supports Langone's assertion that many members end up "proclaim[ing] great happiness

yet hide great suffering." He states that this is a "state of dissociation in which members are 'split' but not 'multiple.'" (1993, p. 9). They do not exhibit an alter, as in structural dissociation.

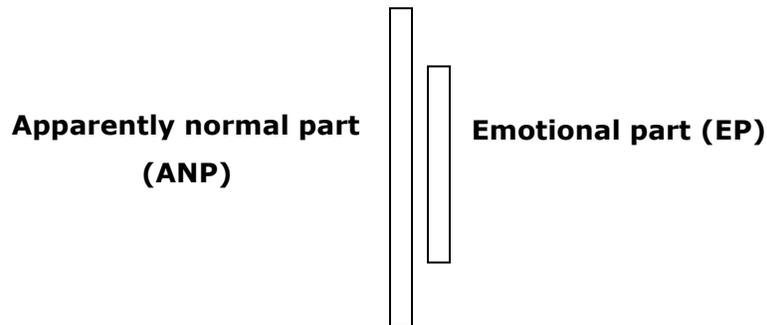
Hassan (2000) says, "Cult mind control dissociates a person from his authentic identity, and makes his new cult identity dependent on the group. From a mental-health perspective cult mind control splits elements of an individual's psyche into another distinct personality" (p. 55).

This raises the question: Is the cult-pseudo personality a dissociative phenomenon or even DID? I agree with Langone that it is not DID ("multiple personality"), and this view is backed by West & Martin (1993, pp. 273-4). They note the following differences between DID and the pseudo-personality: DID is more likely to be related to early childhood trauma (also Van der Hart et al., 2006); DID patients may have more than one "alter" or part; and DID is notoriously hard to treat.

West and Martin (1994, p. 274) also assert that the aims of therapy differ between DID and pseudo-personality, further highlighting the differences. With DID, "reconciliation and integration of alters" is the aim, while with pseudo-personality; the aim is "restoration of the original identity." They note that residual PTSD will usually need to be treated.

It is generally held that the split in primary, secondary, and tertiary structural dissociation is a vertical split:

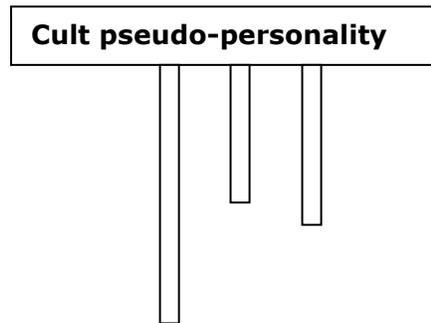
Diagram 4: Illustration of primary structural dissociation



Given the terrible childhood abuse and trauma suffered by those born and raised in a cult (Jones, Jones and Buhring, 2007), it is possible that DID and dissociative disorders resulting from their cult upbringing may be present in this population. Because many members recruited as adults suffer deep trauma within cults, there might also be dissociation that forms as a result of the cult trauma. This trauma can include beatings; sexual abuse; abusive and harsh encounter groups, and shouting and loud commands to change, to hate one's parents, and to hate one's "old self" or "worldly self." There might also be structural dissociation present in individuals before they joined the cult. The cult will nevertheless cause wounds in their life.

I envisage this split both horizontally and vertically:

Diagram 5: Pseudo-personality overlaying dissociated pre-cult personality



I suggest that the individual cult member might dissociate to cope with the trauma, but I believe the formation of the cult pseudo-personality is a different process and is not a dissociated part, alter, or ANP/EP.

What Is the Pseudo-Personality?

I will now discuss how I believe the pseudo-personality forms. I will do this by looking at "the machine" and discussing the concept of *introjection*.

The Machine

"I feel as if my real self was like a little dot, like a seed that was buried in deep soil, and then a layer of tarmac (asphalt) laid over me" (ex-cult member quotation).

I suggest that the cult was, for Jenny/Magdalene, like a relentless machine, like a steam roller on hot tarmac with hooked spikes in it, pressing and pushing its ideology, beliefs, and culture on to her, the unsuspecting individual, hooking into Jenny using her vulnerability and parts of the pre-cult identity to establish itself (Hassan, 2000). She eventually became buried under the tarmac. Jenny/Magdalene was recruited and "love bombed" through deceitful recruitment techniques (Martin, 1993), and what she got was not what she expected.

This process reflects an exchange: The machine relentlessly overlays the individual as the individual welcomes the machine, not realising what she is getting into or what is behind what seems like love. Jenny/Magdalene thought she was "laying down her life" for God; others believe they will become enlightened, see the world become a better place through a worthy political cause, and so on. And they become buried under the tarmac. As Hassan (2000) notes, the cult anchors itself to parts of the cult members' past experiences. For Jenny/Magdalene, the cult of confession ensures that the community knows more about Jenny than she realises and gives them ammunition to control and manipulate her by playing on her "confessed" personal vulnerabilities.

I envision the pseudo-personality overlaying the pre-cult personality like tarmac on a road, a horizontal split:

**Diagram 6: The cult pseudo-personality
overlaying the pre-cult personality**



The tarmac “takes” to one degree or another. For some it sits comfortably, but for others it is uncomfortable from the start; and when the individual leaves the cult, it will begin to break up (Singer, 2003).

I suggest the pseudo-personality mimics dissociation—the machine relentlessly moves forward, overlaying the personality of the new cult members, causing them to adjust to this new world view—it is not them and it is them. I suggest the greater part of the process of forming the pseudo-personality is not doubling, false self, or simply adaptation, not dissociation nor DID, but introjection.

In Gestalt theory, introjection may be thought of as

...material—a way of acting, feeling, evaluating—which you have taken into your system of behavior but which you have not assimilated in such fashion as to make it a genuine part of your organism—your self. (Perls et al., 1951, p. 189)

When the individual takes in from the environment without chewing over what is taken in (as happens in a cult), it is difficult to digest and gain nourishment from it. Perls et al. (1951) state that in introjection the organism “takes in the ‘material’ on the basis of forced acceptance, a forced (and

therefore pseudo) identification,” and that it is a foreign body, but the organism resists it being dislodged. In the case of a cult, there is often little opportunity for the individual to dislodge or digest it without leaving, getting into a great deal of trouble, or becoming psychologically destabilised.

I suggest that Jenny, the unsuspecting new recruit, idealised her new “friends” (and they let her) and their attractive beliefs, and she took them and their cult culture and ideology in—she introjected them—whole. She had little opportunity for critical thinking, or chewing over: Magdalene therefore developed and overlaid Jenny, who became buried.

A number of authors acknowledge the need for ex-cult members to reconnect with their pre-cult personality, and that doing this is a crucial part of the recovery process (West & Martin, 1994; Martin, 1993; Langone, 1993; Singer, 2000; Hassan, 2000). Hassan (2000) states the split-off pseudo-personality needs to be integrated.

I shall discuss how this reconnection with the pre-cult personality occurs, and also look at whether integration, or chewing over and digestion, are required for one to recover.

Recovery: Integration or Chewing Over and Digestion

Reber & Reber (2001) say that integration brings the person “into a harmonious or coordinated whole by rearranging, organizing, and occasionally adding or deleting elements or parts” (p. 360). Van der Hart et al. (2006) note that integration is a bringing together of a split whole.

One of the themes that came out of my unpublished M.A. research, *What Helps Ex-cult Members Recover from an Abusive Cult Experience?*, was “getting rid of the cult pseudo-personality.” When I went back to my research, I was taken aback at how I had worded this. I questioned the “getting rid of” bit; I asked myself whether integration of that part, as one would integrate a dissociated part, was, in fact, more appropriate. However, on reflection, I do not think so. I think “getting rid of” in a nonviolent way is actually what is needed—chewing and digesting the introjected cult pseudo-personality rather than integrating it. So, whilst the above definition would seem to fit the process

of reconnecting to the pre-cult personality, I suggest that it is not enough because the cult pseudo-personality is not a dissociated part, and integrating it would entail keeping parts of the cult experience that need to be eliminated. I will now discuss how to "get rid of" the pseudo-personality.

Gestalt writers Perls et al. (1951) use the analogy between the teeth and developmental stages. The toothless baby takes in pre-digested food; the toddler's milk teeth develop, and he or she eats soft food; the adult teeth develop, and the young child starts asking why, what is that for, and so on. Children want to chew over what is coming in and decide for themselves (they do not want to simply introject what is given to them). In a healthy environment, this behaviour occurs increasingly with age.

Perls et al. (1951, p. 189) state:

Physical food properly digested and assimilated, becomes part of the organism; but food which "rests heavy on the stomach" is an **introject** [emphasis added]. You are aware of it and want to throw it up. If you do so you get it "out of the system." Suppose, instead, you suppress your discomfort, nausea, and tendency to spew it forth. Then you "keep it down" and either succeed, finally, in painfully digesting it or else it poisons you.

I suggest that, with the cult-pseudo personality (Magdalene), the individual is unaware of the poison and discomfort. The discomfort is suppressed within the pre-cult personality (Jenny).

Perls et al. (1951, p. 189) go on to suggest that to

eliminate **introjects** from your personality the problem is **not to accept and integrate dissociated parts of yourself**. Rather, it is to become aware of what is not truly yours, to acquire a selective and critical attitude toward what is offered you, and, above all, to develop the ability to "bite off" and "chew" experience so as to extract its healthy nourishment. [bold added]

And, I would add, to eliminate from the system that which is not nourishing.

To return to the analogy of the tarmac or asphalt, when the road is finally disintegrated, it is possible to dig the tarmac back into the soil and perhaps obtain some benefit from it.

Hassan (2000) states that it is important not to discard the entire cult identity, but to create a new post-cult identity that incorporates the most valuable and healthy parts of the pre-cult, cult, and "authentic" identities (p. 184). My proposal of chewing over and digesting or eliminating introjects supports this view.

To summarise this section, I suggest that the pseudo-personality is not a dissociated part that needs integrating; nor is it doubling, false self, or simply adaptation. Instead, it is an introjected part that needs chewing over and digesting, allowing what is nourishing to remain and eliminating the rest.

Treatment Implications

How both ex-cult members and their helpers or therapists conceptualise the problem of recovery is vitally important. I suggest that the concepts of introjection, chewing over, and digestion might be more helpful than dissociation and integration.

I now will give four case examples of what I mean by chewing over, digesting, and eliminating the cult pseudo-personality, and one example of integrating dissociation and then chewing over, digesting, and eliminating the cult-pseudo personality:

1. Jenny became judgmental, religious, serious, and compliant as she introjected the cult personality, Magdalene. As Jenny/Magdalene moved away from the cult, and chewed over the beliefs of the cult and what she had become, she returned to her pre-cult personality, exhibiting humour, playfulness, assertiveness, and compassion. She decided that this way of being was more consistent with her own view of Christianity as opposed to the cult's view. And so she chose to take a nonjudgmental stance rather than the judgmental stance she had learned in the cult.

2. Magdalene had to sleep with men—i.e., prostitute herself—for the sake of fulfilling the aims of the cult. Jenny did not need to integrate the part of Magdalene that did these things, but she needed to be compassionate with herself, to see these actions as part of the “bounded choice” (Lalich, 2004) that made sense within the cult, and to make her own decision about her actions in the future regarding sleeping with men (chewing over and digestion). She also needed a good deal of support in order to recover from the trauma of it all, including the resulting post-traumatic stress and her negative self-image.
3. A male heterosexual client in his 30s joined a Buddhist cult and discovered the leader was homosexual and expected all the men to be the same. The client complied with this because, as it was explained to him, doing so was more spiritual—his “bounded choice” (Lalich 2004). When he left the cult, he thought through carefully (chewed over), with my support, whether he was actually homosexual, and he realised that he had known since he was a teenager that he was not. Hence, he reverted to being heterosexual. He did not integrate this homosexual part but rather chewed over and challenged the cult’s view. In digesting his experience and deciding what he wanted to be in the future, he “eliminated” the cult’s view and reverted to his pre-cult stance on his sexuality.
4. A woman in her 40s had been told by the cult that her father had sexually abused her, and this affected her deeply, causing her terrible trauma and resulting in a severe split within the family. When she came to me for therapy, we explored this possibility. As she chewed the issue over, she realised she had no memories at all of being abused by her father. She checked the claim out with him and her mother, and they confirmed that he had not abused her. She did not need to integrate this belief; she needed to chew it over, digest it, eliminate it, and return to her pre-cult view of her parents and reconnect with them.

5. When Jenny/Magdalene was beaten for "sin," she believed she deserved it because the cult leader told her she was "sinful" and bad. As she was beaten, she dissociated and felt as if she was sitting outside the room looking in at them beating her. As a result of doing this, Jenny could feel nothing in respect to the beatings. As she allowed herself to integrate this dissociated part, and her feelings began to be "in her body" instead of outside of the room, she became deeply upset. But she had more of herself available to continue the healing journey as she chewed over and digested the introjected belief that "God" required her to be beaten because she had been so "sinful." She came to see that the beating was another way of the cult exerting control over her and had nothing to do with sin or her actually being bad.

Conclusion

I have investigated the question: "What is the cult pseudo-personality, and how does it form?" I have concluded that the cult pseudo-personality is not doubling, a false self, simply adaptation, or dissociation. While mimicking a dissociated part, it is actually an introjected foreign part that needs chewing over in order to discern which bits are nourishing and should be kept and which bits need digesting and eliminating.

The cult pseudo-personality develops as the **whole person** introjects the cult's culture, beliefs, and behaviours.

I acknowledge that dissociation may also occur in the cult, but I believe that the dissociated part is not the cult pseudo-personality; it is a response to trauma.

I propose that it is important to be clear about how the cult pseudo-personality is conceptualised because this conceptualisation will affect how ex-cult members are approached in terms of their recovery process. If the cult pseudo-personality is seen as dissociation, individuals will be encouraged to integrate their cult pseudo-personality. I propose, instead, that their cult pseudo-personality needs chewing over. Then a decision regarding what needs

digesting and eliminating and what needs to be kept can be made. Through this process, the ex-members can then “get rid of” the cult pseudo-personality, and return to their pre-cult personality, while taking what is positive with them as they move on in life.

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About the Author

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