

The Relational System of the Traumatizing Narcissist

Daniel Shaw

**Psychoanalyst, Private Practice
New York City and Nyack, NY;
Faculty and Clinical Supervisor
The National Institute for the Psychotherapies (NIP)**

The stories of former members of high-demand groups don't get told as often as they should. Being swindled, deceived, controlled, or betrayed in a cultic group is an experience that many thousands of people have been through. Unfortunately, the vast majority of such people who identify their experience as abusive do not speak out. As is still the case with rape and domestic violence, in spite of many gains in those areas, victims shrink at the possibility of being dismissed, blamed, or rejected—of being retraumatized when no one will bear witness. They try to put it all behind them; they try to avoid thinking and talking about the experience. In this paper, I present some of the ideas I have been developing about the leaders of cultic groups, people I describe as traumatizing narcissists, and the relational system such people create. I draw from my clinical research, from psychoanalytic theories (especially intersubjectivity theory), and from my personal experience as a former member of a high-demand group for more than ten years.

What Is a Cult?

So, to begin, let's think about what we mean when we say a group is a cult. On the one hand, cult is a term most people think of as describing a group with a charismatic leader or leaders. This group, in the public imagination, has followers who fanatically embrace an ideology dictated by the leader—an ideology that involves rituals of self-purification and a mission to eliminate impurities in the world, and one in which followers adopt ritualized, idiosyncratic modes of speech, dress, and behaviors that are typical of the group as a whole. These ideas about cults are in fact more or less accurate. On the other hand, where the average person's image of a cult goes wrong is that most cults never gain much public attention, and only a very few gain tremendous size and involve bizarre displays such as mass weddings, or horrors such as mass suicides. Additionally, cults exist not only in religious groups, but also in political, therapeutic, business, academic, technological, artistic, and almost any other kind of community.

I will use the word cult here for the sake of expedience, but either authoritarian ideological group, or abusive, exploitative, high-demand group would be a more accurate, albeit clumsier, term. The use of the word cult can also be problematic for former-member whistleblowers, and defenders and counselors of former members: Larger and wealthier groups accused of being cults think nothing of silencing critics with relentless harassment through unending lawsuits.

With these caveats in mind, I define this kind of group, sometimes referred to as a cult,

as follows: any group, of at least one leader and one follower, in which the leader exhorts others to follow him and support his mission, and in which the leader can be identified as a traumatizing narcissist. I'll define that term shortly, and I'll clarify why I use that term, and not the more familiar pathological narcissist. In this kind of group, whatever those in the group say or believe, what is actually happening is that followers are required to suppress their individual subjectivity and attempt to make themselves whatever kind of object the leader wants them to be.

I want to emphasize that I am not saying that charisma and missionary zeal in a group leader 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, the stated, typically grandiose goals of the group—get everyone on earth to meditate so there will be peace, or end world hunger—are not met because the group's energies and resources are constantly directed toward the actual goal of the group, which is the aggrandizement of the leader. The leader's goal is self-aggrandizement, which he achieves through the seduction, and subsequent subjugation and exploitation, of his followers. This is precisely the same goal as that of the person I call the traumatizing narcissist.

Who Is the Traumatizing Narcissist?

So who is this traumatizing narcissist? Sometimes it's a cult leader, sometimes a parent, a boss, a sibling, a teacher, a therapist. For a long time, psychoanalytic writers have used the term pathological narcissist to cover a wide range of behavior and character traits. A thin-skinned, shame-prone, or deflated pathological narcissist is someone with fragile self-esteem, easily wounded or insulted; in therapy, such individuals feel attacked and humiliated by expressions of the analyst's separate subjectivity; they may masochistically seek approval and recognition from idealized, grandiose others.

There is also the overinflated (Bach, 1985), grandiose, overt, or thick-skinned (Rosenfeld) narcissist. Cunning manipulators of others, grandiose, envious, aggressive, exploiting, and controlling, these narcissists are users who can be charismatic, seductive, and intensely attentive. Yet they ultimately prove to be concerned only with their own needs, feelings, and desires. If their significant others (spouses, siblings, children) attempt to assert their needs, this sort of narcissist is skilled at making such efforts out to be shameful, hurtful, and selfish.

In the psychoanalytic view, these two types are complementary—behind the deflated narcissist's self-doubt and over-idealization is hidden grandiosity—he enjoys grandiosity by proxy, or longs to do so; and behind the overinflated narcissist's entitled grandiosity is deep insecurity and the urgent need to ward off destabilization, and often psychosis, by manipulating and controlling others who will idealize him.

Psychoanalysts call both these types pathological narcissists, while the general public tends to think of only the latter, the overinflated type, as the narcissist. So why do I try to define yet another category of narcissist? Because, in my view, what is pathological

about narcissism is not simply that it is a character pathology, or even a neurological pathology, that makes certain people's behavior obnoxious, self-centered, and so on. What is pathological about narcissism is how certain people traumatically subjugate others—their spouses, children, siblings, or followers. By subjugating the other, the narcissist inflates and verifies his delusional grandiosity and omnipotence. To elevate oneself by subjugating another is the essence of what I mean by traumatizing narcissism. The chief means of subjugation is objectification—using the other as one's object to possess, suppressing the subjectivity of the other, exploiting the other. The narcissist establishes and polices the hegemony of his own subjectivity, such that those who wish to stay with him must relinquish their own subjectivity and become the object the narcissist commands and controls.

I'm going to try now to succinctly describe the traumatizing narcissist—how he has become this person, and how he behaves relationally. I am not speaking only of cult leaders here. I am speaking developmentally, of how traumatizing narcissism is instilled from generation to generation. I also want to emphasize that the traumatizing narcissist is delusional; as far as he is concerned, his motives are always pure. When I speak here of what the traumatizing narcissist is doing, keep in mind that it is being done unconsciously.

Intergenerational Trauma

First, the traumatizing narcissist has typically been exposed to cumulative relational trauma throughout the developmental years, in the form of chronic shaming at the hands of parents or other significant care givers who are severely narcissistically disturbed. The traumatizing narcissist parent envies and resents the child's right to dependency and demands, covertly or overtly, that the child recognize the exclusive validity of the parent's needs and wishes. This means, of course, that the child is to be ashamed of her own needs and desires and view them as the parent does, as irrelevant, or as contemptible—i.e., greedy, selfish, weak, morally abhorrent. This parent assumes the posture of viewing dependency in others as contemptible, delusionally imagining himself to have transcended dependency. The traumatized child who has been successfully indoctrinated to view dependency as shamefully contemptible, and who as an adult has denied her own dependency and erected rigid, manic defenses against shame can now become the traumatizing narcissist—and as such, she may or may not be on good terms with the parental narcissist. She may even despise the parental narcissist and still be unconsciously identified with the abuser, going on to perpetuate the legacy of the relational traumatizing of others for yet another generation.

Delusional Infallibility and Entitlement

Second, the adult traumatizing narcissist is obsessed with maintaining a rigid sense of omnipotent superiority and perfection—of infallibility, self-sufficiency and entitlement—to the extent that she establishes an intensely defended conviction of righteousness and justification. In other words, she has adopted the complementary moral defense. The psychotic nature of this delusion of righteousness should not be overlooked or minimized: The traumatizing narcissist is often intelligent, socially adept, and highly

functioning, convinced of her own sanity and skilled at making others feel crazy. For the traumatizing narcissist, maintaining a sense of omnipotent superiority, delusionally believing that she needs nothing that she cannot provide for herself, defends against disavowed insufficiency of any and all varieties. Because the traumatizing narcissist equates insufficiency with mortifying dependency and the ensuing sense of impotence and inferiority, it is crucial for her to keep the destabilizing shame of these repudiated aspects of self from being released into consciousness.

Externalization of Shame

Third, rather than feel self-loathing and the helplessness of unrequited dependency needs, the traumatizing narcissist arranges to keep dependency and its accompanying shame external, assigned and belonging only to others, to protect himself from self-loathing and ultimately from decompensation—literally, mortification, or (psychic) death by shame.

[1] He must continually demonstrate contemptible, shameful dependency/weakness/badness to be “out there,” not “in here.” Bach (1994) has observed this stance as well, stating that “the overinflated narcissist can experience himself as cohesive and alive only at the expense of devitalizing his objects” (p. 32). To achieve this goal of devitalization, the traumatizing narcissist virtually colonizes others, using them as hosts, as it were, in whom to project and control his unwanted and disavowed affects and self-states connected to dependency—especially the shameful sense of neediness and inferiority.

Suppression of the Subjectivity of the Other

Fourth, the traumatizing narcissist’s child is, unfortunately, an optimal target for the reception of these projections, especially the projection of shame regarding dependency. The traumatizing-narcissist parent sees only her own needs as valid—and she characterizes the child who tries to express his needs as needy, selfish, and dependent. At the same time, the traumatizing-narcissist parent cannot bear the possibility of being surpassed and not needed by the child, and so must undermine the child’s efforts toward independence. This is of course a perfect double bind (Bateson et al.). Unable to be anything but dependent, yet still attempting independence, the child of the traumatizing-narcissist parent is condemned either way. He comes to associate dependency with shame and humiliation, and independence with rejection and abandonment. Unless he can adopt the counterdependent, shameless stance of the traumatizing narcissist, he lives instead in a post-traumatic state in which his sense of inescapable badness is cemented.

What I want to emphasize in spelling out, in these four organizing principles, the essential dynamics of the traumatizing narcissist’s relational system is that the abused child who is the object of this behavior is not, to say the least, being recognized as a subject in her own right. Her role in the construction of her sense of self is now forcibly taken out of her hands and appropriated by the traumatizing-narcissist parent. Her sense of being the object of, and being defined by, the other is joined with her sense of shameful badness. She is stripped of agency and objectified.

I identify two fates of the adult children of traumatizing narcissists: There are those whose traumatization leads them to struggle again and again to know themselves and be recognized as subject, against the powerfully reflexive pull to identify as the object of the other, as the victim, the one who is “done to.” Unable to truly separate from the abusing parent, they may spend a lifetime trying to persuade themselves that they are not the unlovable, bad persons they were made to feel they were. Taking on this badness, which Fairbairn called the child’s “moral defense” (Fairbairn, 1952), is the children’s best shot at believing the parent is good—it is too horrible to believe that the one they totally depend on is truly bad. Better to take on the burden of the badness, and try and try again to redeem themselves. When the children grow older, and even acknowledge the badness in the parent, the internalized sense of badness is still very difficult to free themselves from. To me, these persons are not merely depressed, or anxious, or deflated—they have lost the battle to develop and assert their own subjectivity; they have been forced to accept objectification; they have had to submit their own subjectivity to the subjectivity of the other.

The other path I can identify that adult children of the traumatizing narcissist can take, as I mentioned earlier, is to do what the traumatizing narcissist has done: Erect manic defenses against any sense of weakness, need, and badness, and project all the shameful affects out of themselves, and into others. The traumatizing narcissist finds others who are likely to take in his projections, and to take on as their own the narcissist’s shame of dependency and sense of inferiority. This is the traumatizing narcissist’s relational system.

Who Is the Follower of the Traumatizing Narcissist?

Now I will switch gears and offer some ideas about the follower of the traumatizing-narcissist cult leader. I think I am qualified to do so, for as the psychoanalyst Erwin Singer once said, “it takes one to know one.”

When I first attended a conference of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), I was only a year or so out of the cult I had joined. It was such a relief to speak with and meet so many others who knew exactly what I had been through—in a way, I’m not sure my analyst ever did. I found a moment to ask a cult expert there if he thought that people who became involved in these groups had some common psychological traits. His answer was a definite “No!,” which surprised me because I was pretty sure that there were commonalities. At least for those who were not born into but joined this kind of group, it seemed obvious to me at this point that the cult leader was like an idealized parental figure, and the group like an idealized family. Affiliating with the group, for me and for many others, was at least in part an attempt to compensate for some sense of lack in our families of origin. But at that time, this understanding was thought of as a form of blaming the victim. The line of thinking then, in 1994, about people who got into cults was that cult followers were the victims of charismatic con artists who used mind-control techniques, as defined by Robert Jay Lifton (1961) and by Singer and Lalich (1995), to entrap and control followers. These techniques were

essentially those Lifton had identified as those used by the Chinese Communists in prison camps. Those who got into cults, according to the thinking at this time, were people who just happened to be unlucky enough to get sucked in and exposed to mind control, also known as thought reform. Although I in fact recognized every one of Lifton's mind-control techniques as integral to the authoritarian culture of the group I had been in, I was convinced that there was more to it than that, more than just accidental exposure to undue influence. I was convinced, as well, that my ex-guru had not studied the thought-reform techniques of the Chinese Communists, but rather that these behaviors came naturally to her, and to others like her, based on certain aspects of character that charismatic, authoritarian leaders shared. And I was sure some common psychological threads connected those who became followers.

I have never met a former cult member who did not admit to entering the group willingly, fighting hard to maintain membership in the group, and upon leaving, doing so with much confusion, fear, and grief. The cult leader is an attachment figure, and followers often invest all their hopes for deep recognition, perhaps deeper than what they had experienced in their own upbringing, in the leader. For years, cults have recruited on college campuses, because this is where they can find intelligent recruits who are likely to be struggling with identity issues, with idealism, with social adjustments—and with separation issues, and all the complicated fears and rebellions that are part of growing up.

Although it is certainly the case that many people who join cults were raised by narcissistic parents, there are also many people in cults for whom that was not the case. One common thread I have observed is that many who have joined cults come from families in which there had been some form of trauma that had not been acknowledged or worked through. Issues such as the unexpected death of a family member, disability or mental illness of a sibling or parent, depression, alcoholism, incest, rape—there is an infinite variety of problems of living that would in fact lead most of us to grow up with unresolved developmental issues. Everyone has unresolved issues and developmental trauma to some extent. And everyone does not join a cult.

So what is the common denominator—or maybe there isn't one? I think it is safe to say that most people join cults at a point of vulnerability, and that most who join tend to be somewhat idealistic. Many may have had disappointments in their family situations; many may be seeking positive ways of feeling more connected, more in control of their lives, more purposeful. But in the end, this still means people who join cults are very much like many other people who don't join.

So is there a common denominator? People do not seek to join a cult; they are recruited. And recruitment happens when you are especially vulnerable, when you are human and you have unresolved problems, when you are seeking a greater sense of purpose or meaning, and when you happen to encounter people who are recruiting.

Abuse in Cults

Once the follower is successfully recruited or has become a convert, the seductive

excitement of the honeymoon phase soon gives way to the sadomasochism of the traumatizing narcissist's relational system. For those unfamiliar with cults, it can be quite astonishing to learn how exactly similar from group to group the relational dynamics between leader and follower are, regardless of how outwardly different the group, its ideology, or the leaders and followers may be. The following are some of the most common dynamics: The follower's deficiencies are grouped under the umbrella of "the ego," or a similar idea using different words, which is regarded as a harmful appendage or blockage of the true self, and which must therefore be purified by the leader for the follower to reach her potential. Purification in the case of cults typically means being subjected to various forms of sadistic belittling and humiliation, including, in some cases, beatings. Purity may also be judged by one's willingness to give over most of any money one might have, or willingness to be subjected to sexual abuse, or both. Leaders do not have to be grateful for anything they are given or for anything they take from followers—when taking, they are understood to actually be giving. George Orwell (1949) identified this sort of mental gymnastics as "Doublethink" and "Newspeak" in 1984, his vision of a world ruled by Stalin-like leaders.

One's potential is defined in any way the leader chooses; but in one form or another, cult leaders are always demanding perfection in the form of devotion, loyalty, willingness to obey, and willingness and ability to recruit others. By demanding perfection, the leader makes it impossible for the follower to fully succeed at anything, including devotion, and therefore it is impossible for the follower to avoid the leader's abusive criticism. The follower's status can be raised, at least temporarily, when he demonstrates his willingness to act, abusively and criminally if need be, in accordance with the principle that whatever end is specified by the leader always justifies any means. The more successful and powerful a particular cult becomes, the greater the risk of public exposure, and therefore, the more urgent and hysterical the culture becomes. The leadership of the group becomes more shameless and without boundaries, demanding more and more time, money, and energy of the followers; defining enemies of the group to eventually include anyone not in the group; and becoming increasingly punitive of deviance within the ranks. As followers discover that no effort they make is ever good enough to earn the leader's full recognition, or to make them exempt from the leader's destructive attacks, they become more and more desperate to please the leader, becoming willing to let down their own boundaries, and to violate the boundaries of others at the leader's behest. Ultimately, followers act on the belief that only the leader's thoughts and feelings matter and have validity, and the follower must exist only to serve the leader's aims. The follower actively seeks to negate any aspect of his own subjectivity which the leader might disapprove of. To most outside observers, the leader's aims are clearly nothing more than self-aggrandizement. Insiders, however, in spite of little or no evidence on which to base their assertions, cling stubbornly to the belief that the leader is actually pursuing lofty and noble aims. Asked to do anything to enrich the leader, including, in the case of some notorious groups, prostituting themselves, followers obey and find a way to believe that whatever they do is righteous. By remaining loyal to the leader, the followers persuade themselves that their own existence is given meaning and validity by their support of the leader's mission.

We can readily understand a cult, then, as a variant of the traumatizing narcissist's relational system, in which the leader presents herself as the living embodiment and ultimate master of the principles of her own ideology. Her mission and her ideology are formalized in ways that will vary in the details from one group to another. The group's goals frequently shift, are proclaimed to the followers with grandiose pomposity, and are often connected to a demand for payment for the privilege of being granted access to the esoteric wisdom. The unstated actual goal of any group led by a traumatizing narcissist, always disavowed, is for the leader to keep herself in a state of narcissistic hyperinflation; and the actual job of the follower is to do whatever it takes to help the leader to achieve that aim.

Followers in cults are traumatized in various ways by the different kinds of abuses they are exposed to as they accept the leader's control over them; these abuses typically include intimidation, belittling, and humiliation, and, more concretely, severe overwork and deprivation of sleep and proper nutrition. The follower's rewards, which are recognition from the leader and the ensuing prestige the followers gain within their group, are bestowed and rescinded at the leader's whim, keeping the follower in a state of instability and fear about displeasing the leader and thereby losing status and favor.

What is often most traumatic for followers who leave cults is the realization that what led them to blind themselves to the sadistic cruelty and the selfishness of the traumatizing narcissist leader was how desperately hungry they became—how willing they became to abandon their own subjectivity and allow themselves to be violated—for any bit of recognition they could get from the leader they idealized. One of the reasons many of the people who leave cultic groups choose not to identify their own experience as abusive is because to do so would mean acknowledging an extraordinary degree of grief over the loss of a deeply cherished, idealized attachment connected to their most cherished hopes about themselves and about life, along with the unleashing of an extraordinary degree of shame about their own self-deception and gullibility, and shame and rage about the amount of abuse they were willing to endure for the sake of maintaining their tie to the leader. Eventually, the realization that their devotion and labor within in the group led to no real personal growth, and to no significant contribution to society, will also become a source of deep shame and regret.

I speak to many people who report not feeling understood, and even feeling doubted or blamed, when they have tried to describe their cult experience to a therapist. It is important to assess the reality testing of a former member whose narrative is particularly "crazy," because some people who have left cults may have a prior history of thought disorder or more serious mental illness such as bipolar disorder or schizophrenia. Even without a prior history, some therapy patients suffering post-cult traumatic stress can experience paranoid ideation or flashes of psychosis that the therapist should explore carefully to determine whether those responses have any basis in reality. It is important for therapists to recognize that the range of behaviors in cultic groups can include bizarre and sometimes criminal activities.

Many people have also reported to me that they were recruited into a cult while they

were in therapy, and that they wondered why the therapist neglected to find out about the group and bring information to their attention. Perhaps most unfortunately, many people have been recruited into cultic groups by their therapists—therapists may have signs on display in their offices of a particular group with which they are affiliated, such as photos of the leader, altars, books, recordings, incense, and other paraphernalia.

My colleagues at the ICSA and I are aware of a tremendous amount of abuse in cultic groups, worldwide, that never makes the headlines and that goes unnoticed, even in the mental-health community, in the same way that the sexual abuse of children, or rape, or the battering of women by violent partners once went unnoticed. In fact, former members very often describe the experience of being abused in a cult as akin to what it must be like to experience incest, rape, or battering. Although we can compare the betrayal and violation that occurs in cults to some aspects of rape and incest, what truly corresponds is the lack of empathetic witnessing many former cultists experience with friends, family, and therapists as they make their way through postcult recovery.

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About the Author

Daniel Shaw, LCSW, is a psychoanalyst in private practice in New York City and Nyack,

New York; Faculty and Clinical Supervisor, The National Institute for the Psychotherapies (NIP), New York, New York; and former cochair, Continuing Education Committee, The International Association for Relational Psychoanalysis and Psychotherapy. Shaw spent 13 years as a staff member in Siddha Yoga (SYDA Foundation). There he wore many hats, including manager of the residential Manhattan facility, educator, spokesperson, public-relations coordinator, community organizer, and writer/director of public programs. Shaw exited Siddha Yoga in 1994, published an Open Letter about Siddha Yoga on the Internet in 1995, and helped create the Leaving Siddha Yoga website, one of the first Internet websites for former cult members. Shaw is the author of "Traumatic Abuse in Cults: A Psychoanalytic Perspective," published in the *Cultic Studies Journal*, and of numerous psychoanalytic papers. Mr. Shaw leads the monthly New York-area ICSA group with Chris Carlson. This group offers support, education, and interaction for all those who have been harmed by, or want to learn about high-demand groups.

[1] For a fascinating depiction of the fate of this character type at its most extreme, see Robert Jay Lifton's (2000) account of the Japanese guru Shoko Asahara, who led his follower group of accomplished professionals in the science fields to release sarin gas in the Tokyo subway system. Forced to appear in court and stand accused, Asahara quickly decompensated to florid schizophrenia.