

Sophie Barowsky

Professor Candland

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Scientology: The Art of Cultic Persuasion

Introduction

The Church of Scientology remains one of the most controversial religious groups in the United States. Scientology was founded in 1954 by science fiction writer L. Ron Hubbard (LRH) (Reitman, 2011). After writing *Dianetics*—a book discussing psychoanalytic techniques to purify the mind—L. Ron Hubbard established the Church of Scientology to apply the principles he created. Scientologists regard *Dianetics* as a scripture or holy text of sorts (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins, 2015). Following the death of LRH in 1986 a man named David Miscavige, who grew up in Scientology as a protégé of Hubbard’s, took over as the leader of the Church of Scientology (Lindsey, January 29, 1986; Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins, 2015). One of Miscavige’s biggest accomplishments for the Church was the court win against the IRS providing religious tax exemption (Lewis 2015: 227). With its religious tax exempt status, the Church’s assets amass to billions of dollars, mainly due to their lavish buildings as well as the sheer amount of real estate they own (Reitman, 2011). Although the Church of Scientology was founded in the United States, Scientology has since spread to many other countries like England, Australia, and a number of European countries (Reitman, 2011). Scientology presents itself as “the study of knowledge” and truth-seeking through the use of technology developed by their founder LRH (n.d., *What Is Scientology*). The Church of Scientology is set up in a hierarchical

structure with members working to reach the next level, eventually becoming “clear,” or fully aware and free from the “reactive” mind¹; the highest level one can reach is OT VIII.

This paper will explore the Church of Scientology to accomplish two main goals. First we will determine what defines a “cult” in terms of persuasive techniques and whether the Church of Scientology can be classified as a cult. Then, we will identify the types of rhetorical strategies and persuasive fallacies used to facilitate groupthink and promote unity as a means to gain and maintain group membership.

Methods of analysis

One must consider the question of how the Church of Scientology uses persuasive techniques to effectively gain and maintain members using a multi-faceted approach. First, by examining common themes within cults, a list of characteristics will be compiled to help distinguish between cults and high-demand religious groups. We will then look at the Church of Scientology under this critical lens, comparing it to the list outlining major characteristics of cults. This paper will also examine the language and persuasive methods of the Church from three different perspectives: those of David Miscavige—the current leader of Scientology; current members of the Church; and ex-Scientologists. We will conduct an analysis of David Miscavige’s speech to find the rhetorical devices and persuasive fallacies used to promote unity, increase group morale, and facilitate groupthink. We will also consider the impact of member testimonials on group polarization and the idea of the bandwagon. These testimonials will be compared to interviews of ex-Scientologists to examine differences in thinking between the two groups. As jargon is an important mode of persuasion, the specialized language of Scientology

¹ The reactive—or unconscious—mind is believed to be the source of all psychological illness (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015).

will be analyzed to determine how the Church uses either-or thinking to form an ingroup and an outgroup. This formation of opposing groups is at the core of the persuasive techniques used to gain and maintain members.

Defining a “Cult”

In attempting to define a cult, it is important to remember that there is no clear-cut distinction between a cult and any given religious organization. Determining whether a religious group is a cult is a highly subjective task. Any religious organization can be deemed a “cult” if enough opposition and critical analysis is thrust upon it. It should also be noted that the term “cult” carries dangerous connotations and should not be used lightly. Because the term “cult” is vague and therefore not easily defined, courts are legally unable to treat questionable groups differently if they fall under the protection of religious freedom (Lewis 2015: 230). Nonetheless, by identifying the core characteristics of cults as well as assessing the major differences between cultic and non-cultic groups, we will be able to generate a comprehensive checklist to help classify ambiguous religious groups as “cults.” This checklist will also help to cultivate a clearer understanding of what makes cults different on a persuasive level.

Dr. Michael Langone, a psychologist who specializes in research on cultic groups, created a list of common characteristics of cults. The major themes outlined in his list include:

- A focus on members’s all-consuming “unquestioning commitment” to an authoritarian leader
- The use of guilt and “mind-numbing techniques [...] to suppress doubts,”
- Total control over the thoughts, actions, and feelings of members

- “The group is elitist, claiming a special, exalted status for itself, its leader(s) and members”
- An “us-versus-them mentality” is cultivated, isolating members from the rest of society—including friends and family outside of the group
- Members “devote inordinate amounts of time to the group”
- “Members are encouraged or required to live and/or socialize only with other group members” (Tobias & Lalich 1994: 276–77).

One can also look at the ways in which past members describe their experiences becoming involved and participating in these cultic groups to help underline common characteristics. Ex-members often describe their initial reactions as “being ‘enthralled’ with an ideal, a group, or a person—usually the leader” (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 11). This honeymoon stage becomes the critical period for indoctrination, as prospective members are pulled deeper into the group.

Cult leaders also carry a distinct set of personality traits. Psychologist and prominent thought reform researcher Dr. Margaret Singer describes cult leaders as being “charismatic, determined, and domineering.” They are narcissistic and center the attention and veneration on themselves (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 13). Cult leaders place themselves upon a pedestal, acting as if they possess all the answers. They also oscillate between two versions of themselves: the godly, charismatic self and the authoritarian, vengeful self. Members both adore and fear their leader. However, the most effective cults are those that are able to “create a situation in which [the leader’s] charisma in some adulterated form persists after the leader’s death,” for charisma is what attracts new members and keeps current members enthralled (Zellner & Petrowsky 1998: viii).

Another common theme is the credit of all good events in one's life to the organization and all bad events to oneself (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 36). Members are taught to think in cognitive distortions—more specifically, filtering and personalization.² Members filter out all the times the organization has not produced positive results and take on the blame for those instances. Another major characteristic of cults is the push towards member dependency on the group and its leader. Various tactics like the use of specialized language are used to promote solidarity and, consequently, a loss of self. This creates a sense of fear to leave after having been so tied to the group (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 12). This fear is exacerbated by the loss of connection to the outside world; members are forced to cut ties with friends and family outside the group, so one's life—and sense of self—gets lost within the group.

Oftentimes, cult members live in horrendous conditions, putting themselves and sometimes their families in harm's way. In some cases members are threatened or punished with physical or emotional abuse; however most members voluntarily give up basic human rights like sleep, good nutrition, and safe shelter (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 12). Members are so tied to the group that they are willing to suffer together for the sake of pleasing the leader or furthering the group's mission.

While not all-encompassing, the characteristics outlined above can help bring to light the dangers unique to cultic groups, as opposed to other religious groups. It is important to note that each cult is different and may not possess every characteristic mentioned. However, every cult does rely heavily on techniques of persuasion and manipulation to maintain a dedicated following.

² Filtering and personalization are two common cognitive distortions outlined by psychologist Aaron Beck. Filtering involves the selective focus on either the good or the bad in a situation, while personalization involves assigning the blame for events to oneself in unwarranted instances (Kulik-Johnson, November 2, 2017).

Is Scientology a Cult?

Now that we have determined the core characteristics that distinguish cults from other high-demand religious groups, we can assess how the Church of Scientology fits this criteria. In many ways, Scientology functions like a business: the flashy presentations, the famous spokespeople, the elitist hierarchy. Members shell out thousands of dollars for books, CDs, auditing sessions³—anything to help them reach the next level on the Bridge.⁴ However, when combined with blind devotion, reverence of L. Ron Hubbard, and isolation from the outside world, the Church of Scientology can be viewed as a cult.

Based upon the list outlined in the previous section, the first criterion by which the Church of Scientology must be judged is “unquestioning commitment” to an authoritarian leader. In this case the leader in question is the founder of Scientology L. Ron Hubbard, who was known to have a strong, domineering presence. A website sponsored by the Church of Scientology describes LRH as being “larger than life, attracted to people, liked by people, dynamic, charismatic and immensely capable in a dozen fields” (“An Introduction to L. Ron Hubbard,” n.d.). The CoS attempts to cultivate a glowing image of the perfect leader. Loyal Scientologists perceive him as “part prophet, part teacher, part savior” (Reitman 2011). Even after his death, LRH continues to claim a loyal following who perceives him as a godly, omnipotent figure. David Miscavige perpetuates this image by constantly quoting LRH in his speeches and requiring members to read books and other texts written by Hubbard (Miscavige, n.d., “Scientology Scripture Recovered”). One Scientologist describes this inundation of LRH materials as an “ongoing conversation with LRH day-by-day-by-day-by-day,” and that “Whether

³ Auditing is an activity in which a trained Scientologist of a certain level guides a member through a psychoanalytic-type procedure with the help of a device called an E-meter, which is said to record electrical activity of the body.

⁴ The “Bridge” or “Bridge to Total Freedom” refers to the path of levels a Scientologist must complete to attain the goal of freedom from the “reactive” mind (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015).

you're reading it or you're listening to a lecture it's just continuous amazing conversation” (Miscavige, n.d., “Scientology Scripture Recovered”). David Miscavige is also able to garner his own support by directly linking himself to L. Ron Hubbard. Miscavige recalls childhood memories of working with LRH as a sort of protégé (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015), claiming authority by association (Withey 2016: 22, 43). Furthermore, Scientologists quite literally buy into this, handing over thousands of dollars to feel a similar connection to their beloved leader. They see David Miscavige as a product of the hard work and dedication of LRH—he is the success story.

As a result of touting David Miscavige as the successful golden child of L. Ron Hubbard and Scientology as a whole, prospective and new members become enthralled with the ideal of becoming enlightened and fully self-aware. Sensationalized terms like “Bridge to Total Freedom” or “clear” further add to this sense of mysticism and wonder. The idea that there is a clear-cut path to eternal happiness and goodness is appealing, especially to those looking for direction or purpose in their lives. This phenomenon can be linked to nearly all cultic groups throughout history; it is the main reason people are drawn to cults. One can see this in Hollywood’s fascination with Scientology, exemplified by actors and Scientology figureheads John Travolta and Tom Cruise. Tom Cruise is very open about the presence of the Church of Scientology in his life, describing this enthrallment with Scientology as: “I just went ‘poof—this is it. This is exactly it’” (Aleteuk January 17, 2008). One ex-Scientologist recounts the recruitment of John Travolta, saying “he got injected with a lot of confidence” by getting involved in Scientology (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). As prospective members

become enthralled with the ideals presented by the group, it becomes more likely they will seek congruence between their real and ideal selves through self-improvement.⁵

Scientologists work to find congruence and feel closer to L. Ron Hubbard by using the self-improvement procedures he created. Their auditing sessions are what Dr. Michael Langone would call “mind-numbing techniques” in his checklist of characteristics of cults, as they often induce a hypnotic state. When conducted in a desired fashion, these auditing sessions produce an out-of-body experience Scientologists label “exteriorization” (“Does Scientology Believe,” n.d.). Auditing sessions are an extremely powerful—and twofold—persuasive tool. In one sense, the Church of Scientology is able to guide the thoughts, actions, and feelings of members much like cults do. However, each auditing session is recorded and filed away in what is called a PC folder, so the Church is able to blackmail members later on if need be (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015).

On the surface this supposed self-improvement would seem to promote individuality and a deeper understanding of self-identity. However, members’s identities are curated by the Church, and people become versions of their past selves distorted beyond recognition. With this curated identity comes the loss of true identity and individuality. This is exemplified by the actress Nazanin Boniadi, who was given a complete physical makeover by the Church and forced to date Tom Cruise (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). However, after accidentally angering David Miscavige, she was forced to break up with Cruise. Boniadi was hurt and confused by the whole ordeal, especially after having been forced into the relationship in the first place (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). While Boniadi did not end up leaving the CoS following the breakup, recovering ex-Scientologists often do experience an

⁵ Psychologist Carl Rogers theorized that the source of human anxiety is incongruence between the real, ideal, or perceived self (Kulik-Johnson, November 9, 2017).

identity crisis following their split from the group. They become confused and frustrated. They are no longer who they once were before Scientology, nor do they align with their formerly constructed Scientologist identity. As we will see in the next section, another way the Church of Scientology creates a loss of self is through groupthink. This can be extremely effective in cultivating a sense of belonging within the group while isolating members from those outside the group.

This disturbing mixture of solidarity, dependency, and isolation becomes the perfect breeding ground for an “us-versus-them mentality,” where anyone who disagrees with the Church of Scientology is labeled a Suppressive Person (SP), or an enemy of the Church. An SP is defined by the Church of Scientology as a person who will interfere with “any help [...] to make human beings more powerful or more intelligent” and who is “against what Scientology is about—helping people become more able and improving conditions in society.” However, the Church also groups those who are Suppressive with “Napoleon, Hitler, the unrepentant killer and the drug lord.” Therefore, the Church advises all Scientologists to either “handle” or “disconnect” from Suppressive People, including family members and friends (“What Does ‘Suppressive Person’ Mean?,” n.d.). While the Church claims that disconnection is a “self-determined decision,” in reality members are pressured into isolating themselves from all non-Scientologists and vilifying those who care about them (“Disconnection,” n.d.). This is highlighted by the blatant comparison of loved ones critical of Scientology to Hitler and other people universally regarded as evil; family and friends become evil by association. The Church uses the effective fallacy of ad hominem guilt by association (Withey 2016: 22). A loss of connection to the outside world, cultivated by cutting ties with loved ones outside the Church of

Scientology, is characteristic of cults according to former cult members Madeleine Tobias, M.S., R.N., C.S. and Janja Lalich.

The next criterion by which Scientology must be judged is the presence of elitism, meaning the group places itself on higher moral ground than others because of its supposedly special mission. There exists a hierarchical structure in Scientology that promotes ascendance through the levels on the Bridge to further their mission. The higher the level, the more privileges that are available (e.g. access to top-secret documents, the ability to conduct auditing sessions). In the eyes of the Church, higher-level members are also more important in the process of furthering Scientology's mission. Additionally, members *feel* more special because their high-level status garners respect among the Scientology community. Other lower-status individuals then envy this respect and work harder to try to attain higher status. Lower-status members (i.e. new members) are also taught to attribute the good in their lives to the Church and the misfortunes to themselves (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). This development of an internal locus of control becomes a very powerful persuasive device; the Church of Scientology is able to elicit guilt and reverence simultaneously, which prompts action to seek further aid from the Church through auditing sessions. New members see high-status members as happier and more self-aware and commit the fallacy of affirming the consequent by attributing this success to following the doctrine of Scientology (Withey 2016: 29). These members then attempt to model this behavior by paying for more auditing sessions, classes, and books.⁶ Scientology possesses both an elitist mindset and the incitement of guilt, two aforementioned cultic characteristics.

⁶ This aligns with Bandura's Social Learning Theory, which states that people learn by modeling other people's behavior. Bandura outlined several characteristics of the model and the observer to increase the likelihood that the observed behavior will be reproduced. The model must have a higher status, be relatively similar to the modeler, and be rewarded for their behavior. The modeler must have low self-esteem and low self-confidence (Kulik-Johnson, October 26, 2017). In this case, the older members literally hold a higher status. The more experienced members have been rewarded with their high-status positions by taking auditing sessions, buying books, and remaining dedicated Scientologists. The older and the newer members are similar in the fact that they are Scientologists and

Two other characteristics of cults go hand in hand: members dedicate “inordinate amounts of time to the group” and are encouraged to live with other group members. While some members do not live together nor do they spend an excessive amount of time doing Scientology-related activities, there is one group within the Church of Scientology that differs. The Sea Organization (Sea Org) is a subgroup headed by David Miscavige that is composed of the most dedicated members of Scientology. These members sleep and eat very little, working about 17–20 hours a day performing taxing manual labor for the Church. Most Sea Org members are children of Scientologists and do not question these practices. Sea Org members live in a small communal living space and are not allowed to marry outside the group (“Sea Org,” n.d.).⁷ This promotes a greater sense of unity and elitism within the group, while non-Sea Org members are made to feel left out. Members then must work harder for the Church to try to feel the special bond Sea Org members possess.

While the Church of Scientology displays many of the core characteristics of cultic groups, there are some key differences, the first being religious legitimacy. The Church of Scientology was legally granted religious protection in 1993 after years of battling the IRS (Lewis 2015: 227). This was a huge win for Scientologists everywhere, as the Church was no longer legally bound to pay taxes. Scientologists were also able to feel more secure in their choice to remain a part of the Church now that Scientology was recognized as a legitimate religion. Another major difference between the Church of Scientology and cults is the openness to other religions. Members are free to practice other religions in addition to Scientology (Lewis

therefore hold the same core beliefs. However, self-esteem is the main point of variance between the old and new members; new members have low self-esteem due to their low status and guilt that has been induced by the Church. This predisposes them to seek out higher-status members to model their behavior after.

⁷ Members endure these poor living conditions by using rationalization, one of Freud’s defense mechanisms (Kulik-Johnson, September 25, 2017). They justify the horrible conditions by saying they must live a minimalist lifestyle for the good of mankind; they believe they must live this way so they can better help people.

2015: 229). This goes against the phenomenon of cults forcing members into one particular type of spiritual life; in cults, the leader is the only godly figure to be worshipped by the members.

The Church of Scientology possesses many of the same traits as cults—however the Church remains differentiated from cultic groups in key ways. Therefore, we can neither categorize the Church of Scientology as a cult nor as a religion. However, it might not be necessary to classify it as anything but a dangerously persuasive, high-demand group. The words “cult” and “religion” place groups neatly in boxes, whereas in most cases the borders are not so distinct. Every high-demand group has the capability to morph into a religion or revert to a cult. In fact, at one point in time many religions had once been classified as cults. The importance of identifying a group as possessing cultic characteristics lies not in the labels but in the modes of persuasion employed. For example, the Church of Scientology shapes its members using the characteristic cultic method of thought reform, yet it matters not if we label the group a “cult.” This method of thought reform will be explored more in depth in the next section.

Groupthink as a Mode of Persuasion

Effective persuasion is dependent on understanding the human psyche to be able to affect the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others. A major psychological phenomenon used as a persuasive tool is groupthink. Groupthink involves group members forming bonds so close that individuals within the group become lost to conformity. Decisions become group-focused, as personal goals must be sacrificed to preserve the common cause. Often, groupthink facilitates increased polarization in the form of an us-versus-them mentality. Group decisions typically represent more extreme views than most individual group members would normally hold; dissent

is a weak whisper among the shouts of the masses, and often it is safer to hold one's tongue than to risk ostracization.

Inciting groupthink is a powerful method of persuasion because it draws on basic human principles. People have a natural need to belong and seek solidarity with others. Within a group, people need to feel like they fit into a particular role, are supported by others, and share similar interests and/or ideas. When people naturally lack solidarity, they seek groups of individuals who can help fulfill that need. The Church of Scientology provides a group of likeminded individuals who spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually support each other. Staff members or workers within subgroups like the Sea Organization play a particular role within the Church. Auditors feel they are performing a purposeful job as part of a mission greater than themselves. Sea Org members believe they are conducting charity work. When members believe they are acting for a higher purpose, they feel a sense of pride and accomplishment; they feel important and special.

The way in which information is presented to the group is another important factor in facilitating groupthink. In Scientology, generalized ideas are presented as ultimate truths, while conflicting ideas are viewed as obstructions to truth-seeking and knowledge. This method of information distribution inherently employs the persuasive fallacy of either-or thinking (Gula 2007: 141). David Miscavige selectively shares information with the group, omitting conflicting viewpoints. In one speech, Miscavige makes the sweeping claim that “2016 passed like a dream [...] we packed ‘infinity’ into twelve calendar months” (“Bringing Peace,” December 31, 2016). Miscavige later claims in his speech that the beliefs of the Church of Scientology “are *not* subject to political debate” (“Bringing Peace,” December 31, 2016). There can be no dissent because opposing views are absent from the conversation; opposition is not seen as a valid option.

Scientology also makes use of jargon to further draw members into the Church. The jargon used permeates every facet of life within Scientology, creating an ingroup and an outgroup. Those who understand and use the jargon comprise the ingroup, while non-Scientologists and new/prospective members who do not have a grasp on the language used comprise the outgroup. New members witness members of the ingroup using this specialized language, establishing an either-or dichotomy between the ingroup and the outgroup—either one is a fully dedicated Scientologist or one is not a true member. New and prospective members want to feel part of the ingroup, so they must learn the associated jargon. Language has been shown to shape thinking, and in this way the jargon used in the Church of Scientology helps to establish polarized thinking (Bear, Connors, & Paradiso 2015: 688). This nomenclature also creates a sense of religious nationalism within the group, as phrases used often include words with strong positive or negative connotations: “Suppressive Person,” “Bridge to Total Freedom,” and “disconnection.”

The Church of Scientology thrives on confusion, both in their language and in their structure. However, this confusion felt by all members is never acknowledged except when referring to the past. This can be seen in Scientologist testimonials, especially those promoting new products or methods created by the Church. After discussing her previous struggles in understanding LRH’s texts, one woman testifies that the newly discovered materials promoted in the video completely change her understanding: “I don’t just know, I know everything” (Miscavige, n.d., “Scientology Scripture Recovered”). Confused and discouraged members identify with the stories presented in the testimonials, making them more susceptible to the messages portrayed in the videos. This phenomenon is clearly described by the appeal to “plain folks” (Gula 2007: 27). These testimonials stand in stark contrast to those given by ex-

Scientologists, who fully acknowledge their confusion and gullibility at the time. Screenwriter and producer Paul Haggis, an ex-Scientologist, reflected on the time he was allowed to see the top-secret OT III materials⁸: “I read it. And...it doesn't make any sense [...] What...the fuck are you talking about?” (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). Hana Eltringham, another former member, recalls a similar experience of self-doubt and confusion: “I could not figure [it] out [...] I was clear. For God's sake, I was clear” (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins 2015). The Church makes use of the bandwagon fallacy, in which members are made to feel alone in their confusion (Gula 2007: 22). Members are made to think everyone else is knowledgeable and in full agreement with the Church. Their need to feel a sense of belonging is too great to question the Church's actions or admit their naïvety; it is easier to pretend. The structure of the Church of Scientology itself is intentionally confusing, as it is composed of levels that are split into subcategories. Depending on the level, people are then granted access to certain materials or privileges. People who meet additional criteria are able to join the Sea Organization, regardless of level. There are countless rules to follow, history to know, courses to attend, and books to read. Even when one reaches OT VIII, the highest level, there is always more to do for the Church; one is never dedicated or knowledgeable enough. Therefore, members feel ignorant and inferior to others, prompting them to spend more time and money on the Church.

Conclusion

While the Church of Scientology represents a niche population, the forms of persuasion the Church utilizes are applicable to all spheres of life. Identifying this type of persuasion can

⁸ When a Scientologist reaches the level OT III, the member is given access to a briefcase with pages of handwritten notes by LRH. These papers describe a creation story involving a dictator named Xenu, an alternate planet, and aliens created by Hydrogen bombs and volcanoes. Members who have read the story must keep it a secret from those who have not, as they are told it can be dangerous to those not adequately prepared (Gibney, Vaurio, Wright, & Nevins).

help further one's understanding of how people are able to fall victim to groupthink and polarization. By recognizing fallacious and persuasive devices in these highly controlled settings, one is able to notice the warning signs and patterns of high-demand groups. This can be further extended to recognizing persuasive techniques in everyday life outside of these specialized circumstances. It is also important to remember that it is impossible to avoid all forms of persuasion and fallacious speech, nor is it desirable. Rhetoric is only effective because we are living, feeling human beings. Humans are social. Humans are emotional. Humans are malleable. Humans are fallible; it is what makes us human.

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