



Are you using protection? The art of psychological self defense

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How could anyone fall for that old line? How could I have been so stupid? Why do they believe such rubbish? How could we have been conned like that?

There are 'hidden persuaders' all around us in life. When we are young we like to think that we are different, even that we are immune from the psychological pressures that bend, manipulate and condition other people. *We* are not like that, are we? But part of real growing up involves starting to see how you *yourself* are led by the environment, influenced by other people and driven by the needs you have as a person.

People are manipulable precisely because we share innate human characteristics that render us *all* susceptible, to a point. Although – like any 'infection' – some people are naturally more prone to succumb and some have higher levels of natural immunity to the psychological pressures that can make us do things we normally never would think of doing.

But *assuming* that we are already 'immune' is the surest way of catching the 'disease'. Consider this scenario:

Pushing the self-destruct button

It's 1978, in Guyana. There you stand in the middle of 'Jonestown', a loyal member of Jim Jones' cult known as 'The People's Temple'. He commands you to take poison and die. What do you do?

Well, of course you don't do it. Who is *he* to tell you to end it all? You are not an automaton to be ordered about! But an astounding 900 people simply followed his instructions. People who wanted to live and wanted their children, wives and husbands to live. Why did these people do this? Why did men and women allow themselves to be sexually abused by this man? Why did they agree to sell their homes and give all their money to his 'People's Temple'?

Were they of unusually low intelligence? Were they completely crazy? Or was Jim Jones a highly skilled manipulator of human emotionality? Did he instinctively know how to push the human 'buttons' and so string people along even to the extent that they would poison their own children before ending their own lives?

Yeah, but that was 'Jonestown'!

Indeed, but 'Jonestown' has happened many times throughout history – and will happen again. It may go by a different name, but we see the same psychological mechanisms in play. Understanding these mechanisms can help make us immune not just to the grosser psychological manipulations of a cult leader but also to the subtler psychological conditioning that we all take as part and parcel of everyday life.

Jones was a master of appearing to give people what they *needed*. And this is the crucial point to grasp. We all have needs. If your innate and fundamental psychological needs as a human being are not being adequately met in your life then, unless you understand what is happening and respond appropriately, you will latch on to *any* source that appears to satisfy these needs. Your needs include:

- the security of a safe environment in which to develop
- giving and receiving attention
- a sense of autonomy and control
- being emotionally connected to others
- being part of a wider community
- friendship, fun, love, intimacy
- a sense of status within social groupings (which includes feeling important in some sense)
- a sense of competence and achievement
- meaning and purpose arising from being stretched in what we create and think.

If any of these needs are not adequately met you will feel 'strangely attracted' to anything that promises to supply what is lacking. Knowledge that this is happening can save you no end of trouble.

Many of Jones' adherents were drawn from among poor and disaffected people who were not leading satisfying lives or meeting their basic needs in healthy ways. People facing uncertain futures. People with negative self images. Jones held out the promise of certainty, company, (divine) purpose, community, self respect, and feelings of security 'inside' the cult. And there must have been some really great times, because eventually they followed Jones like some modern-day Pied Piper – into oblivion.

Universal susceptibility

It's easy to see that if these needs are *not* being met adequately in a healthy way then, if something comes along that seems to promise the supply of these needs in one 'package', then that can feel pretty irresistible.

On a more mundane level, consider how many people feeling neglected in a marriage have an unsuitable affair with someone – because it was 'so nice to be listened to/flattered/paid attention to' etc. The very same unconscious propulsion towards an affair like that might drive others into the arms of a cult (or even to buy timeshare!)

Rational justifications and wisdom after the event

We *all* need quality attention and strive to meet that need somehow, but our thirst for it can blind us to the potentially unsavory aspects of the person (or thing) that is tempting us. The emotional drive is so powerful that it will enlist the help of the conscious mind to construct compelling logical arguments to *support* what you feel *compelled* to do. Jones' followers too would certainly have developed a belief system around the cult, and believed that they had rational arguments for sticking with it.

It's easy to say afterwards, 'How could I have been so stupid!' But extreme incidents like the Jonestown massacre demonstrate just how over-ridingly powerful the drive to meet these needs is. It can completely overwhelm clear thinking – even as a person dying of thirst in a desert might put a bottle of bleach to their lips, if it was offered to them.

Rules of influence

Famous social psychologist Robert Cialdini made a careful study of how and why people comply (or buy) in business and identified a set of principles which he termed the 'weapons of influence'. He was looking at business interactions, but his principles apply equally well to cults and to unsuitable manipulative relationships of any kind. And if you look closely, it's not hard to see the link between his principles and the basic needs outlined above.

Cialdini's six 'weapons of influence'

Reciprocation – But they've done so much for me! When you feel beholden to someone, then the 'law of reciprocation' is operating upon you. Jim Jones constantly reminded his converts of all he and 'the church' had done for them, how he had 'saved them' and how could they begrudge doing *anything* for the church? If someone constantly reminds you how much they are doing or have done for you, then they are being manipulative. It runs all the way from free samples in advertising to someone doing you an unrequested favor – the aim is to make you feel beholden.

Commitment and Consistency – If people publicly commit, verbally or in writing, to an idea or goal, they are more likely to honor that commitment. We like to appear *consistent* to ourselves and to others (think of the opprobrium heaped upon politicians who 'make a U-turn!'). To suddenly stop following orders or abandon dearly held beliefs can simply feel impossible to many – even in the face of mounting counter evidence (see my cognitive dissonance article). (<http://www.uncommon-knowledge.co.uk/articles/stop-lying.html>)

Social proof – People will do things that they see other people are doing. 'A million people can't be wrong.' If 'everybody' is doing it then it is somehow sanctioned. This is how people get drawn into being 'fashion victims' as well as 'cult victims'. This is not just stupid blindness on our part. For humans to survive in a world of predators we had to form cohesive groups and look to others for behavioral cues. This is useful up to a point but – as with all persuaders – can be used against us and actually harm other people (see my bystander apathy article) (<http://www.uncommon-knowledge.co.uk/articles/bystander-apaty.html>)

Authority – People will tend to obey authority figures, even if they are asked to perform objectionable acts. Authority figures come in many different guises (and Jim Jones was certainly naturally authoritative).

Liking – People are more easily persuaded by other people whom they like. But likable people might not do very likable things and that's the problem. Cialdini demonstrated that people tend to buy from people they like. We also tend to like attractive people. It's no coincidence that cult leaders tend to be charismatic and attractive.

Scarcity – If something seems scarce then demand for it will increase. 'Limited offer' or 'while stocks last' or 'sale ends Friday' are all ways that the scarcity principle is used in marketing. In manipulative relationships it may be used thus: 'You'll never meet anyone who loves you as much as I do!' The implication is that I am rare, and so more valuable to you. Jim Jones formulated it as 'the Peoples' Temple is the only place you can be saved' and all cults will have a similar line.

So to protect yourself from the more excessive manipulations of organizations and individuals you need to:

- Be aware that 'promise of gain' and 'threat of loss' are basic universal tools for manipulating belief and behavior.
- Understand that if your basic emotional and physical needs are not adequately met, you become more vulnerable to anyone willing to exploit this gap. Just understanding this can help inoculate you against falling victim to cults and other manipulations.
- Observe how Cialdini's 'weapons of influence' operate in everyday life (often in benign ways) and how they are linked to the universal needs.
- And lastly – stay calm. A calm mind can perceive the world much more clearly and objectively.

Most people and organizations are not actually out to exploit or manipulate others but, as the unfortunate followers of Jim Jones back in 1978 discovered, when they do, horrible things can happen.