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Edgar F. Borgatta

Editor-in-Chief

University of Washington, Seattle

Marie L. Borgatta

Managing Editor

University of Washington, Seattle

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CULTS As a sociological term, *cults* has three related but conceptually distinct meanings (Roberts 1984, pp. 241–247). Its oldest meaning developed through attempts to typologize religious groups as churches, denominations, sects, or cults. Howard Becker used the term *cult* to describe a loose association of people who hold eclectic religious views (Becker 1932) and built on Ernst Troeltsch's identification of "mysticism" as a loosely knit association whose participants emphasized the value of "a purely personal and inward experience" (Troeltsch 1911, p. 993; see also Mann 1955). Meredith McGuire refined the typology by distinguishing between organizational characteristics and the religious orientation of members. The organizational characteristics of cults include ideological toleration of other groups despite their own tension with society, and the religious orientation of cult members includes the compartmentalization of religion into particular aspects of life while questing after higher levels of "awareness" (McGuire 1987, pp. 117–125).

The second meaning of the term *cult* specifically depends on whether a new group's theological ideas and related practices have ideational precedent within its culture (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, pp. 26–37). Both sects and cults exist in relatively high tension with society, but sects are schismatic movements that borrow heavily from their parent groups' doctrines and practices, while cults "do not have a prior tie with another established religious body in the society in question" (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 25). Cults,

therefore, are cultural innovations, and as such they appear in three forms, differing in their degrees of organization, especially concerning the manner in which leaders relate to members. "Audience cults" have "virtually no aspects of formal organization" concerning either formal membership or the conveyance of ideology, and leaders disseminate their information in loosely structured situations such as lectures or private readings of occult books. "Client cults" often exhibit considerable organization "among those [leaders] offering the cult service," but the partakers of the message are little organized (as is the case with alternative healing organizations [Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 26]). Finally, cult movements have formal structures in which followers or members operate under leaders' directives, although the degree of members' participation varies from relatively weak to complete immersion (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 29). Moreover, cult movements offer members the widest degree of general supernatural promises about salvation or deliverance, much like major, traditional religions (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, p. 30).

Third, "cult" carries pejorative connotations as an exploitative group that demands unreasonable obligations from group members, usually under the direction of a manipulative charismatic leader and at the expense of members' former family and friends. "Cults" in this sense appear in the fields of religion, politics, psychotherapy and personal development, health, science, and economics, all of them sharing a fundamental characteristic of ideologies. Their adherents are unable publicly to express doubts about the groups' fundamental assumptions (see Feuer 1975, pp. 104-105). Although few sociologists use "cults" in this manner (partly in reaction to its negative tone), the term has entered popular vocabulary with these inferences.

Cults in this third sense have spurred considerable public debate, especially after the Charles Manson murders (1969), the Patti Hearst kidnapping story (1974), and the Jonestown murder/suicides (1978) (Hall 1987). Numerous "anticult" or "countercult" organizations of varying size, complexity, and activity emerged in the United

States during early 1972 (Shupe and Bromley 1980, p. 90; Shupe and Bromley 1984), followed by similar organizations in other Western countries (see Beckford 1985). These oppositional groups, some of which have evolved into organizations that still are active in the 1990s, initially were comprised largely of relatives with family members involved in various alternative religions, along with some clergy and professionals from the mental health field. Countercult organizations served both as support groups for relatives and former members and as vocal critics of many cult activities and practices. Adopting and later modifying a "brainwashing" and "coercive persuasion" model that initially researchers used to explain ideological reversals among captives in various communist indoctrination programs during the 1950s (Lifton 1961; Ofshe and Singer 1986), many relatives argued that family members had to be removed from the groups (by force if necessary) and "deprogrammed" from their "totalistic" views. Consequently, an intense social debate ensued between the "cults" (or as they preferred to call themselves, the "new religions") and their opponents, with each side attempting to damage the public image of their enemies while at the same time presenting themselves in a favorable light (Kent 1990).

(SEE ALSO: *Religious Organizations*)

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STEPHEN A. KENT