Lessons from Jonestown

The mass suicide of People's Temple followers 25 years ago teaches psychologists what happens when social psychology is placed in the wrong hands.

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In the middle of the jungle in Guyana, South America, nearly 1,000 people drank lethal cyanide punch or were shot to death, following the orders of their leader, Jim Jones. Mothers and fathers gave the deadly drink to their children and then drank it themselves. People screamed. Bodies trembled. And within a few minutes on Nov. 18, 1978, 912 people were dead.

Jones' followers originally came to the Guyanese community, known as Jonestown, seeking paradise and an escape from racism and persecution in the United States. Instead, they found something that resembled a concentration camp in which they worked long hours with little food and much abuse, those who escaped Jonestown have reported.

Twenty-five years later, social psychologists continue to examine how Jones came to command such enormous influence over his followers' thoughts and actions. Jonestown, they say, offers important lessons for psychology, such as the power of situational and social influences and the consequences of a leader using such influences to destructively manipulate others' behavior.

Most disturbingly, perhaps, leaders such as Jones appear to have derived some of their techniques from social psychologists' research, raising questions about research ethics and the future direction of cult research, says Philip G. Zimbardo, PhD, APA's past-president and a psychology professor at Stanford University.

In as-yet unpublished research, Zimbardo has found that Jones quite possibly learned his ability to persuade from a famous social thinker: George Orwell.

Through 25 years of research and interviews with Jonestown survivors, Zimbardo has found parallels between the mind control techniques used by Jones at Jonestown--namely sophisticated types of compliance, conformity and obedience training--and those described in Orwell's fictional book "1984." In the book, Orwell provides a model for resistance as his main character, Winston Smith, stands up against an omnipotent party system.

Though "1984" is fiction, Orwell possessed a deep understanding of influence processes from social psychology, and his depictions of mind control have been used systematically and effectively by cult leaders, Zimbardo says.

Others agree with Zimbardo that such findings raise ethical questions for social psychologists, given that the likes of Jones draw from social psychology tenets and

use them for harm, says Robert Cialdini, PhD, who researches influence and is the Regents' Professor of Psychology at Arizona State University.

"Sources of influence can be like dynamite--they can be used for good or used for ill," Cialdini says. "Social scientists need to pay more attention to not just the effectiveness of the strategies we study and uncover but also the ethical ramifications of the use of these principles and practices."

He and Zimbardo also say social psychologists and other cult researchers must forge new research lines on the misapplication of social psychology findings as well as their prosocial uses.

The mastermind

Indeed, Jonestown should serve as a warning to the social psychology community in what can happen when principles of influence are abused by leaders of an organization, Zimbardo says. Jones, who acted as the pastor of the People's Temple, studied Orwell's system of mind control described in "1984" and commissioned a song that his followers were required to sing at Jonestown about the advent of the year 1984, Zimbardo has found.

Some of the mind control techniques Orwell described in "1984" that parallel methods Jones used include:

* "Big brother is watching you." Jones used this idea to gain the loyalty of his followers. He required followers to spy on one another and blasted messages from loudspeakers so that his voice was always present while they worked, slept and ate, Zimbardo says.

* Self-incrimination. Jones instructed followers to give him written statements about their fears and mistakes and then, if they disobeyed him, he used that information to humiliate them or subject them to their worst fears during public meetings. In "1984," the main character's resistance is broken when he is subjected to his worst fear of being covered in rats.

* Suicide drills. Orwell's main character said that "the proper thing was to kill yourself before they get you" in a threat of war. Jones had his followers do practice suicide drills right up to the actual mass suicide event.

* Distorting people's perceptions. Jones blurred the relationship between words and reality, for example, by requiring his followers to give him daily thanks for good food and work--yet the people were starving and working six and a half days a week, Zimbardo says. Similarly, Orwell described such a technique, which he called "newspeak."

By mastering such mind control techniques, Jones was able to gain followers' obedience and loyalty, Zimbardo says. "Jim Jones is probably the most charismatic cult leader in modern times in terms of his personal appeal, oratory, his sexual

appeal, his just sheer dynamism and his total participation in the control of every member of his group," he explains.

Mindless compliance

These mind control techniques--coupled with the creation of a new social environment--provided Jones with a powerful influence over his followers, Zimbardo says.

Quite arguably, Jones, through his natural understanding of social psychology, knew the way to obtain a strong influence over his followers was to move them from their urban American environment to a remote South American jungle, generating uncertainty in their new surroundings, Cialdini says. And when people are uncertain, they look to others for cues on what to do, research has shown. Zimbardo notes that people are particularly vulnerable when they are in new surroundings, feel lonely or disconnected.

"When you believe 'It can't happen to me,' that's when con artists or cult agents have you at their mercy because then you're not as vigilant to the little situational ploys that can get you to step across the line," Zimbardo explains.

Social psychology has shown the "power of the crowd" for decades. For example, in the 1960s, psychologists Stanley Milgram, PhD, Leonard Bickman, PhD, and Lawrence Berkowitz, EdD, demonstrated social influence by having a group of people on a busy New York City sidewalk gaze up at nothing in the sky. When one man looked up at nothing, only 4 percent of passersby joined him. When five people stood on the sidewalk looking up at nothing, 18 percent of passersby joined them. And when a group of 15 gazed upward, 40 percent of passersby then joined, nearly stopping traffic in one minute.

As other cult leaders have done, Jim Jones used this "power of the crowd" influence in controlling others' behavior, intellect, thoughts and emotions, says Steven Hassan, a licensed mental health counselor with the counseling group Freedom of Mind and a former cult member. This includes instituting rigid rules and regulations, withholding or distorting information, using hypnotic trances, and generating guilt and fear among followers.

Building awareness

However, since Jonestown, many social psychologists remain unaware of the psychological impact of the mind control techniques, often elucidated in social psychology research, that cults use to recruit and retain members, Zimbardo says. Many psychologists remain skeptical that behavior is intentionally controlled by these organizations at all, rather believing that people join cults of their own free will, as they do with traditional religious groups.

Those who study cults, on the other hand, maintain that psychologists need to study how cults abuse social psychology research. Psychologists are also needed to develop

effective treatments for cult victims to help them break free from a cult's influence before it's too late, so that, in cases like Jonestown, history does not repeat itself.

"It's shocking to me that so many people today have not even heard of Jonestown," Hassan says. Yet, Hassan observes the lasting psychological effects every day in his work with former cult victims, and he says cults are growing more powerful and more cunning in their deceit--often by using psychological research findings--while the public remains largely unaware of them.

If cults are going to abuse lessons from social psychology, psychologists must study how they are doing this, Cialdini says. More attention to researching and working with cult victims is needed, Hassan adds. For example, psychologists need specific training to work with former cult members, who often suffer from dissociative or panic disorders, he explains.

"There are lots of individuals who are suffering," Hassan says, "and they need our help."

FURTHER READING

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