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The Last Draw: Cults and Creativity

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“Just Joking” Psychoanalytic Treatment of the Suppression of Creativity in Cults

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Abstract

This paper presents four psychoanalytically based hypotheses to support my thesis that the fundamental psychological impact of cults is dehumanization through the suppression of creativity. My hypotheses assume symbol formation as characteristically human, intrinsic to creativity, and impaired in cultic settings.¹ I explore four basic criteria of creativity: 1) mourning of loss, 2) tolerance of lack/unfilling of gap, 3) tolerance of opposition, and 4) tolerance of uncertainty. I then contrast the fate of these criteria in open versus cultic environments.

Psychoanalysis suggests that suppression of creativity in the individual occurs when there is a stifling of feelings of loss, opposition, and uncertainty and a disallowance of unfilled psychic space essential for symbol formation and creation of subjective meaning. Looking through the lenses of psychoanalyst and painter, and informed by extensive clinical work with former cult members and second-generation adults (SGAs), I regard suppression of creativity as primary among the negative impacts of destructive cults. I propose four hypotheses that build upon Lifton's (1961) thought that in cults "imagination becomes dissociated from actual life experiences" and "may even tend to atrophy from

¹ I apply these hypotheses to clinical work Perlado did with a member of the cult he describes in this issue.

disuse" (p. 430). These four hypotheses contrast the presence or absence of each of four basic criteria of creativity in open versus cultic environments, and suggest a link between their absence and the suppression of creativity in cults.

Further, I suggest that two psychoanalytically defined psychic mechanisms, "trial projective identification" and "total projective identification" (Grotstein, 1994, p. 721), underlie the hypotheses. As applied to cults and creativity, the two mechanisms can briefly be thought of as follows: 1) *trial projective identification* is an unconscious communication in an open environment, and reflects the encouragement of creativity; and 2) *total projective identification* is an unconscious communication that underlies cultic functioning, and it reflects the suppression of creativity. These mechanisms offer an explanation for the "bait and switch" operation characteristic of cult leaders. When a new recruit is baited by the leader, the soon-to-be member often flourishes with a sense of aliveness and creativity based on the charismatic leader's use of "trial projective identification" marked by communication devoid of domination. The switch occurs when the deeply entrenched cult member has accepted full identification with the leader and thus forfeited both a decision-making process and creative living. What at first appeared to the member as authentic and non-dominating communication by the leader and/or disciples insidiously transforms into "total projective identification" dominated by the leader. This process of making a 'bounded choice' (Lalich, 2004) is marked by a sense of increasing deadness in the member.

I present a conceptualization of the parallels between cultic functioning and the psychic mechanism of "*folie a á deux*" as introduced by Perlado in this issue, by drawing on Grotstein's connection of *folie á deux* with the concept of total projective identification (p. 711). *Folie á deux*, as defined by Gralnick (in Perlado, this issue) is "the preponderance of induced psychotic disorders in persons who live together intimately for a long time," resulting in a dominant/submissive form of relating, and defined by Grotstein as the "mutual illusion (fiction) or delusion that unites two or more people in a pathological relationship" (1994). I suggest that Lifton's description of one effect of cults as an atrophy of imagination in cult members who share the leader's delusion

is found in the *folie* situation, since the submissive partner stops using imagination to create subjective symbols to translate and communicate his/her own experience. This loss of subjectivity by the members is well described in Perlado's paper.

Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, I suggest four criteria of creativity that enable active imagination and a sense of aliveness in subjects using trial projective identification. The function of these criteria will be illustrated in my discussion of a snippet from case material with a young man Perlado helped to exit the music cult described in this issue. My exploration of particular words this former member spoke reflect a postmodern psychoanalytic emphasis on language as an unconscious conveyor of subjectively created meaning. This approach to cult recovery is particularly relevant to understanding the impact of "loaded language" (coerced and repeated use of leader's clichés to promote cult doctrine, as a vehicle to eliminate subjectively created meaning in cults) (Lifton, 1961).

Criteria for Creativity

1. **Mourning of Loss.** Symbolic, and therefore creative, functioning arises out of the need to communicate the experience of absence and the mourning of loss. Freud (1920) first presents this theme with an anecdote about his grandson who throws and then reclaims a spool of thread that belonged to his mother while repeating words approximating in German "fort/da" ("gone/there") suggesting the child's play constitutes a way for him to symbolize, hence tolerate, his mother's absence.

Deri, whose book *Symbolization and Creativity* provides an overview of Freud (1920), Klein (1930), Segal (1952, 1957), Winnicott (1953), Lewin (1936), and others on this theme, states that "symbolization facilitates separation from primary 'objects' by keeping connected with them via symbol-bridges. The symbol is 'the presence of the absence'" (Deri, 1984, p. 47, 62, Lacan, 1966, p. 64, 1996, p.1). One might defend against extreme loss, often in the form of trauma, by denial of absence and of intolerable feelings associated with that absence. If absence is

denied, the need to symbolize is undermined. I suggest that in cults, perhaps through a shared group delusion of the leader's omnipotence as well as a belief that pre-cult relationships and experience are of no value, the deeply entrenched member – i.e., one who experiences ultimate meaning in life through devotion to the leader—denies absence and so the need for mourning of loss. Thus, the member's capacity for symbol formation and the creation of subjective meaning risks impairment.

2. **Allowance of Opposition.** Opposition, characterized by difference, implies the presence of separate, unbridged elements that have the potential to be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed into various forms. Symbol in language, particularly metaphor, fulfills a bridging function through its capacity to hold mutually contradictory elements together, and to therefore evoke deep feeling. For instance, the metaphor "sweet death," slang for "orgasm," bridges the contradictory experiences of ecstasy and pain.

Trauma lessens the capacity for the psyche to symbolize and hold complexity of feeling (Klein, 1930; Bion, 1950, 1973; Segal, 1994, 1957; Lacan, 1973; Deri, 1984; Abraham and Torok, 1987; Bromberg, 1998; van der Kolk 1996). I suggest that, in cults, opposition/difference/multidimensional thinking is disallowed unless it is attached to rigid doctrine used to control.

The cult leaders' often contradictory messages may be multidimensional in structure, but their meaning—i.e., you must be devoted to me—is always unidimensional. The messages may present irreconcilable contradiction to the member whose extreme confusion renders compliance a safer option than the abuse that accompanies opposing and questioning the leader.

The demand that members align with what the leader names as "good" or "pure" and hate all that s/he names "bad" or "impure" brings to mind Lifton's "demand for purity" (1961). Although the member might recognize the contradiction between the

leader's demand for purity and the mentally and physically abusive manner in which this demand is imposed, s/he may nevertheless choose compliance because of indoctrination, exhaustion, and fear of rejection.

Social scientist/psychoanalyst Žižek (1989, p. 5) describes far-reaching effects of disallowance of constructive opposition/difference/multidimensionality within the context of totalitarianism, which is also applicable to cults: "...[t]he aspiration to abolish 'radical antagonism' is precisely the source of totalitarian temptation: the greatest mass murders and holocausts have always been perpetrated in the name of man as harmonious being, of a new man without antagonistic tension." By disallowing opposition/difference/multidimensionality except when it is attached to rigid doctrine, cult leaders impinge on healthy 'antagonistic tension' within the cult member's psyche. Such impingement counteracts creativity, including free use of metaphor to express subjective meaning.

3. **Tolerance of Lack/Unfilling of Gap.** This criterion includes two nuanced meanings. "Tolerance of lack" encourages reflection on the value of "not having"; "unfilling of gap" offers an approach to achieving such a tolerance. Deeply entrenched cult involvement can be thought of as a kind of addiction (Perlado, 2004) in which psychic voids become filled with unquestioned solutions to personal and universal problems through cult doctrine. The anxiety that might be soothed by a substance or behavior is in this case seen in the desire for absolute answers and an intolerance of lack. While good mental health acknowledges and tolerates lack with a range of emotions including sadness, anxiety, anger, and acceptance, the cult leader tends to dismiss personal losses (e.g., precult relationships) and to substitute doctrine for tolerance of lack. Fixation on doctrine and devotion to the leader, like any effective addiction, serves to mask the experience of loss with the promise of an eternal high.

Psychic space, or gap, which is the result of lack, is intrinsic to the abstract concepts of opposition/difference/multidimensionality, whereby a gap always exists between “this” that is not “that” (Derrida, 1982, Lacan, 1973). Since difference is minimized in cults, gap is minimized, and without gap (in this case psychic gap), movement, creative sliding, and linking and unlinking among feelings, thoughts, and phantasies (unconscious) are also minimized. I suggest that, in cultic functioning, the member aligns with the leader’s dismissals of precult loss and intolerance of unfilled gap. The denied absence blocks creation of symbol to represent what is missing. Instead, cult members tend to defend against feelings regarding the absence by filling the psychic gap with the leader’s unidimensional loaded language. In one report, a member who had a deep need to attend a parent’s funeral was dissuaded by the cult leader’s words, “we are not our feelings.” This filling by the leader causes a weakening of the member’s capacity to think, feel, symbolize, and therefore create subjective meaning. Creativity is suppressed when lack is denied and devalued and the capacity for psychic fluidity within the unfilled gap is lost (Milner, 1987; Winnicott, 1971; Lacan, 1973).

4. **Tolerance of Uncertainty.** Uncertainty exists at two poles. At the creative end of uncertainty the psychic gap is unfilled and lack is tolerated, thus allowing spontaneous flashes of creativity to be communicated through symbol in the form of humor, metaphor, play, reverie, and so on. At the traumatic end of uncertainty, the gap necessary for spontaneity is overcome by defenses that protect the psyche from experiencing intolerable and unsymbolizable—i.e., traumatic, feelings. *Folie á deux* is one such defense that negates uncertainty via rigid mirroring. Inability to tolerate uncertainty, though not unique to former members, is a common symptom of the former member who first presents in treatment, perhaps reflecting the defensive need to fill the psychic gap rather than engage in symbolic and creative psychic processes (Milner, 1957; Bion, 1962; Winnicott,

1971; Lacan, 1973, Meltzer and Harris Williams, 1988).

These four criteria necessary for creativity all relate to the mechanism of projective identification. Central to that mechanism is the core psychoanalytic concept of *splitting*. Psychoanalytic thinking is based upon the theory that the human psyche operates on more than one level simultaneously. Freud's (1925) concept of negation states that unconscious hidden laws split the subject's psyche fundamentally. One level—the conscious level—allows the subject to experience reality as linear, concrete, rational, situated in time and space, and characterized by certainty and the recognition of difference. "This is not that." "The cult leader is not God." This level allows us to function in the external world since it orders experience. The other level is the unconscious level where symbols formed by condensation or displacement fluidly bridge different components of the unconscious to make meaning out of human experience that may be characterized by binary oppositions such as love-hate, tall-small, black-white, full-empty, animate-inanimate, and that our psyches attempt to negotiate.

Deri notes that "creative symbolization, which connects, is the antidote for splitting," and that "psychoanalysis is directed toward stimulating the symbolizing, order-making capacity of the patient's mind" (1984, p. 291).

It is interesting to note Lifton's (1961) thoughts about psychoanalysis in this regard:

The ethos of psychoanalysis and of its derived psychotherapies is in direct opposition to that of totalism. Indeed, its painstaking and sympathetic investigations of single human minds place it within the direct tradition of those Western intellectual currents which historically have done most to counter totalism: humanism, individualism, and free scientific inquiry. Because of its continuing concern for individual differences and for flexible personal development, it is no surprise that psychoanalytic work has never been permitted under totalitarianism (or political totalism)." (p. 246)

He states further that “[p]sychoanalysis is able to look critically at itself, to experiment, correct, and change” (p. 448).

Turning to other psychoanalysts who address the function of symbol, Milner asks, “Are we not rather driven by the internal necessity for inner organization, pattern, coherence, the basic need to discover identity in difference without which experience becomes chaos?” (1952, p. 181). Segal (1994) notes that “symbol formation captures the capacity to communicate,” while Abraham and Torok (1987) suggest that trauma damages the capacity to symbolize. Deep involvement in oppressive groups such as the music cult Perlado presents might be described as traumatic in part because of the cult members’ decreasing capacity to symbolize musically.

American philosopher Suzanne Langer (1942, p. 26) states,

The great contribution of Freud to the philosophy of mind has been the realization that human behavior is not only a food-getting strategy, but is also a language; that every *move* is at the same time a *gesture*. Symbolization is both an end and an instrument.

She develops Freud’s belief in “the fundamentally symbolic function of the mind” (p. 51) and writes, “the power of using symbol makes [man] lord of the earth” (p. 26).

I suggest that individuals who without conscious knowing are baited into highly coercive cults may be stripped of the right and often the will to symbolically organize their experience through language. Ironically, in this way the switch moves the cult member to a position of slave, far from “lord of the earth.”

Langer distinguishes between two kinds of symbol within language. “Discursive” symbols are part of language proper; are fixed in meaning; allow for definition and translation; and communicate ideas, thoughts, and the like in a sequential and logical manner. “Presentational” symbols express emotions, feelings, and desires that relate to inner life and are often described as “unspeakable” because of the simultaneity of layers of experience. Langer’s major argument is that presentational symbolism, and metaphor in

particular, is the central verbal means of communicating affects (Rycroft, 1968). She states that

“Outside of this domain,” referring to the rational, “is the inexpressible realm of feeling, of formless desires and satisfactions, immediate experience, forever incognito and incommunicado” and this is what therapy seeks to help the patient formulate and/or experience. (Langer, 1942, p. 86)

and

Metaphor is our most striking evidence of *abstractive seeing*, of the power of human minds to use presentational symbols. Every new experience, or new idea about things, evokes first of all some metaphorical expression. As the idea becomes familiar, this expression “fades” to a new literal use of the once metaphorical predicate, a more general use than it had before. (p. 141)

I suggest that loaded language is an example of internalized metaphor faded by rote use, and that cultic environments block the creation and development of personal metaphor and thus the essential means of communicating emotion.

The cult leader’s attempts to diminish use of discursive and presentational symbolic language other than in the form of loaded language highlights the dehumanization of the individual in cults. Unable to symbolize as a means to create subjective meaning, the cult member defensively dissociates to protect against the fear of self-annihilation that often results from being unable to think or feel for him/herself. (Winnicott, 1963). The cost of this defense, however, may be dear. Besides generating humor, dreams, metaphor, play, and so on, the unconscious functions to defend the subject from consciously feeling or thinking about anything psychically uncomfortable (Freud, 1923; Civin, 2003; Newirth, 2003). Dissociation, for example, defends against feelings such as loss, anxiety, guilt, shame, and isolation through the mechanism of splitting, which enables the denial of such feelings. Splitting occurs on a continuum from pathological to normal. At the most defensive end, pathological splitting is reflected in total projective

identification; at the nondefensive end, normal splitting facilitates the exchange of projected split-off feelings, thoughts, and the like that reflect trial projective identifications, hence allowing the subject to get to know something about the other's experience through unconscious communication that leads to empathy, sympathy, exploration, and so on.

Later theories about unconscious communication, such as the mechanisms of total and trial projective identifications, emanate from Melanie Klein, who built upon Freud in the development of her belief that the internal world of the subject continually transforms and is transformed by the internal world of other subjects through ongoing and fluid projections and introjections (1930). According to Segal (1994), the subject translocates split-off projective identifications into the object; and it is the subject who then re-identifies with these split off parts as a persecutory external object, which contributes to the formation of a harsh superego when internalized as a persecutory internal object (Grotstein, 1994). Bion (1950, 1973) describes the function of the mother/therapist as container of the infant's/patient's split-off feelings, returning them in a synthesized and symbolic manner that carries meaning—i.e., the baby's cry/the patient's despair is returned by the mother/therapist by some form of empathic communication.

Basing therapeutic action in cult-recovery treatment on the therapist's use of trial projective identification suggests that the therapist becomes a part of the field at play, or in Sullivan's terms (1953), a participant-observer. For the therapist to accomplish this task with former cult members, the therapist must remain attuned to the possibility of falling into a *folie à deux* total projective identification with the former member in treatment. With trial projective identification, the therapist, like the mother as container, temporarily identifies with the patient's unconsciously communicated feelings/thoughts and the like, synthesizing and returning them in unthreatening form. By contrast, the destructive cult leader—like the mother who cannot contain her infant's projective identifications—returns the projective identifications back to the member in unsynthesized form. For the member, this process leads to an overwhelmed psyche and increased fusion with the cult leader's psyche, which is reflective of Klein's paranoid-schizoid position and

characteristic of pathological total projective identification. In this mode, the bad mother/cult leader/therapist (the feared persecutory object) and the good mother/cult leader/therapist are split, rather than experienced as a whole-object that would reflect Klein's depressive position and Grotstein's trial projective identification.

Grotstein, building on Bion and Racker, notes that with trial projective identification

The therapist must be able ... to absorb ... the patient's projective identifications, process them, experience them, suffer them, and yet avoid total identification with them. She (he) must avoid falling into the trap ... of collusive '*folie á deux*' ... as real enemy ... or any other form of total victim-counteridentification. The therapist ... must have the capacity for non-retaliatory mercy for his patient ... [to] offer a model for the development of a similar capacity for the patient." (p. 711)

In sum, "*folie á deux*" and cultic functioning relate to this pathological form of total projective identification as defensive mechanism. They are characterized by diminished capacity to think due to splitting and impaired capacity or motivation to symbolize based on limited or no provision of containment. In this mode, the lack of capacity to symbolize reflects Abraham and Torok's statement, "the traumatic is all which counteracts the formation of symbols, and hence of thought ... found in every experience that is impossible psychically to metabolize ... creating wounds in the psychic web..." (Yassa, 2002, p. 2). By contrast, trial projective identification—a nondefensive mechanism that allows for temporary experience of harsh or anxious feelings projected from outside the individual without permanent identification with them—reflects normal unconscious communication and symbolic processes that, as noted above, underlie the capacity for empathy, sympathy, exploration, probing, and so on. This mode reflects

1. *mourning of loss through symbol formation*—i.e., identification of the cult leader's harshness as emanating from the same person experienced as beloved leader, which allows for recognition of the

absence of the illusion of the all-loving other, which can then be symbolized;

2. *allowance of opposition*—i.e., maintenance of multidimensional thinking;
3. *tolerance of lack/un-filling of gap*—i.e., provision of psychic space and fluidity necessary to allow feelings to register in the psyche but not stay fixed; and
4. *tolerance of uncertainty*—i.e., tolerance of projected and identified-with feelings at the same time as fear of the impact of these feelings on the psyche.

Grotstein's discussion of Klein's paranoid-schizoid position describes well the characteristics of total rather than partial projective identifications that might be reflective of the deeply entrenched cult member's experience. These characteristics include

1. the experience of omnipotence by ridding oneself of feelings and needs that are translocated into the phantasized internal object;
2. the experience of emptiness;
3. the experience of confusion and disorientation insofar as parts of him/herself have been fused, therefore *confused* with the object; and
4. experiences of misrecognition as the subject now pretends to be someone else. (p. 734)

In contrast, in what Klein refers to as the depressive position, the subject abandons omnipotence and assumes responsibility for the consequences of his/her own needs, demands, desires, actions, and impact on others. S/he is now able simultaneously to hold together the image of the feared persecutory object—the bad mother/cult leader/therapist—and the good mother/cult leader/therapist—as a whole-object. Anxiety related to the depressive position, as opposed to the persecutory anxiety of the paranoid schizoid position, relates to denial of the loss of the object—the good object, which the subject fears s/he has harmed by feeling rage and desire to consume during paranoid-schizoid functioning.

The compulsive passion reflected in total projective identification and the splitting characteristic of the paranoid

schizoid position in the “authoritarian, transcendent, closed” world of the cult (Lalich, 2004) is reminiscent of the compulsive play of traumatized children (Winnicott, 1958). I suggest that learning to differentiate between this compulsive passion and total projective identification versus the sense of aliveness reflected in trial projective treatment is central to cult recovery. The therapist’s attunement to the identified criteria of creativity and to the unconscious interplay of trial and total projective identification between therapist and patient is critical given the former member’s/SGA’s vulnerability to experiences of domination and loss of subjectively created voice.

I believe the presence or absence of creativity in a former member who presents for treatment may be assessed by observing use of self-generated metaphoric and other forms of what Langer calls “presentational” symbolism. This assessment can indicate the degree to which his/her creativity has been suppressed and therefore the degree to which the creation of subjective meaning is indicated as a central goal of treatment.

Case Illustration: Discussion of Trial/Total Projective Identification

(Dialogue and references are drawn from personal communication with Perlado about his clinical work with the former member he discusses in this issue, referred to as Alex.)

Winston Marsalis’ (and Stewart, 1994) insightful writing about his challenge as a band leader to provide both musical freedom and structure for the members of his jazz band cogently contrasts with our knowledge of the relationship between the oppressive music cult leader and his musician followers as Perlado presents them in this issue. Marsalis states that

The leader of a jazz band has to exert the control of non control. Each musician in the band has to feel free to be creative and reach for unusual corners in their personalities. I try to provide a context for every man to develop his potential, and feel as relaxed and expressive as possible. The musical directions we pursue come directly out of the collective

experience of the band. The hardest part of leading is understanding how to make the expression of differing viewpoints sound harmonious. (p. 20)

We might see this thinking in the comments made by Alex, the first young man who left the music group, who said that when the music group was first formed the intent was for musical experimentation and "merger of novel rhythms." This reasonable premise at the initial stages of the group brings Marsalis to mind. I suggest that, at best, verbal and nonverbal communication among Marsalis' band members and with him represents a flow characteristic of trial projective identification, while that among the cult members and with the cult leader in time comes to represent the fixed process of total projective identification. The first consciously and unconsciously allows for the dynamic tension between opposing experiences, while the latter consciously and unconsciously demands rigid mirroring.

We can assume that a variety of individual differences and circumstances might lead a member to develop relationships with the music teacher/leader that are characterized by total projective identification. I draw upon Lalich, who suggests (2004) that four dimensions interact within an "authoritarian, transcendent, closed group" to lead a person to make a "bounded choice" to be a devoted member. The social system and structure of such groups, she states, are characterized by "charismatic authority, a transcendent belief system, systems of control, and systems of influence." The case of the music cult, which Perlado provides to illuminate the suppression of creativity in cults, reflects Lalich's idea that

Living within the bounded reality of the cultic social system, the cult member encounters no meaningful reality checks and becomes more and more enmeshed with and invested in the closed world of the group. For some, this may lead to a state of 'personal closure,' or the individualized version of the self-sealing system. The member's life and choices are constrained not only by the system but also, and perhaps even more powerfully, by the close-mindedness of the individual him- or

herself who is functioning in alliance with that system. Now the dedicated adherent has entered a social-psychological state of being that I am calling bounded choice: in essence, life outside the cult has become impossible to imagine. (p. 228)

We see in Perlado's paper that the members' joining with the leader's transcendent belief that only he holds the key to the members' achievement of "musical communion" deepened over a period of time. The initial free musical exchange reminiscent of Marsalis' words reflect the reciprocal flow of projective identifications characteristic of creative living and activity. This becomes replaced by the increasing demand for self-renunciation and commitment to what Lalich terms the leader's transcendent belief system (2004), and I add reflective of total projective identification and the paranoid schizoid position, whereby splitting, polarization, and black-and-white thinking defines all.

Alex states to Perlado,

I guess I have become suspicious ... I wasn't that way before. Something happened. I don't feel like playing. It's been months since I played. What if I can't play again? I don't know what's going on lately. I left because I couldn't handle the pressure... I remember he said once, about the ones that had left, that they will end up like musical failures.

Besides associations with Lifton's concept of "dispensing of existence," which refers to "thriving and survival as possible only within the cult," the teacher's words "you need a system... my system ... musical communion" are useful to explore in terms of "loaded language." It is particularly salient to view loaded language within the context of post-modernism's interest in language as a means of control. Foucault (1980), for instance, teaches us

that power is transferred through language and dialogue ... knowledge does not necessarily have to be true, but it only needs to be passed on as true for the statement to have an effect on the speakers in the discourse.

Within this post-modern understanding of language, I suggest that loaded language clearly illustrates control of communication via total projective identification. This interchange between Alex and Perlado highlights the importance of exit counseling and post-cult treatment as venues for one to reflect upon the persistence of deeply internalized loaded language even after leaving the cult.

The former members describe the language in the music cult as very restrictive, and quote the teacher as saying, "My system goes beyond the military. We need to protect ourselves because they will attack us!" Leaders lure cult members with rewards and promise of rewards, and over time change the hidden rules and discourse, at which point dependency on the cult leader, fear of leaving and loss, and a strong alignment with the leader's system of transcendent belief often prevent members from leaving. This process reflects the discussion above that links the bait-and-switch operation to a switch from trial to total projective identification between leader and members, and even among members.

Symbol is intrinsic to communication and therefore language, and, as noted above, according to Freud (1920), Klein (1930), Bion (1950), Segal, (1952, 1957), Deri (1984), Winnicott (1968), Lacan (2002) and others, this capacity arises out of the recognition of absence/loss.

Because it is necessary to represent that which is missing, symbols unconsciously emerge to create a mental image, which bridges split-off, dissociated experiences. Cult leaders notoriously coerce members to cut ties from the past, and to deny loss. In this way the cult member is lured toward unconscious splitting, which yields black-and-white thinking and obstructs symbolic language, resulting in a sense of deadness. Lalich notes that within the bounded-choice theory, fully aligning with the leader's transcendent belief system includes a "total explanation of past, present, and future, including a path to salvation" (2004, p 227). Cults use loaded language to achieve conformity, which results in desubjectivization—i.e., loss of striving to create subjective meaning through the use of self-generated symbolic expression. I suggest that free use of language and emergence of subjective voice are thus signals of recovery from internalized loaded language.

The four criteria of creativity—mourning of loss, allowance of opposition, tolerance of lack/unfilling of gap, and tolerance of uncertainty—are present in open environments, characterized by trial projective identification in which the leader considers him/herself as part of the field of play; they are absent in cultic settings such as the music cult, characterized by total projective identification wherein the leader sees him/herself as outside of the field. Racker's (1968) cogent statement reflects the stance necessary for the therapist to work within the mode of trial projective identification.

The first distortion of truth in the 'myth of the analytic situation' is that analysis is an interaction between a sick person and a healthy one. The truth is that it is an interaction between two personalities ... each personality has its internal and external dependencies, anxieties, and pathological defenses; each is also a child with his internal parents; and each of these whole personalities ... responds to every event of the analytic situation. (p. 132)

This stance is the antithesis of a cult leader's spurning of taking responsibility for his own feelings and thoughts, which leaves the cult member without a container for his/her projective identifications.

Hypotheses

Building on this summary, I present the following four working hypotheses about psychoanalytically informed treatment of the suppression of subjectivity and creativity in cults. The first hypothesis speaks to symbol formation as the result of the mourning of loss.

1. **Mourning of loss.** *There will be a difference in individual creativity between open environments that value the mourning of loss and the subsequent capacity for symbol formation, and in cults, where leaders disallow members to experience and mourn loss.* I believe that cult recovery, as a form of trauma recovery, is itself layered and involves a process of mourning losses. This includes mourning connections that were broken on entering the group, connections

with people and beliefs upon leaving the group, time and dreams lost, as well as precult losses. Such mourning requires recognition of loss and is a prerequisite for symbol formation and therefore creativity. The prohibition against the experience of personal loss can be seen as a special example of the demand for sameness among cult members. This demand is a prohibition against difference, or in other words opposition, which leads me to the second hypothesis.

2. **Allowance of opposition.** *There will be a difference in individual creativity between open environments that allow opposition (difference/multidimensionality), and in cults where leaders disallow opposition.* Trial projective identification represents the holding together of split parts in the depressive position—tolerance of ambivalence—as characterized by the dynamic tension between opposites. In open environments, trial projective identification also represents the simultaneity between the persecutory thinking of the paranoid schizoid position and the tolerance of ambivalence in the depressive position. Thus the creative function of tearing things apart exists in dynamic tension with the striving to integrate parts. Winnicott believes that a sense of aliveness—of subjectivity and creativity—is inherent in creating subjective meaning by experiencing rather than trying to resolve paradox—i.e., opposites (1971). Inherent in the concept of opposition is gap, space between differences, leading to the third hypothesis.

3. **Tolerance of Lack/Unfilling of Gap.** *There will be a difference in individual creativity between open environments where lack is tolerated and unfilled emotional, psychological, physical, and other space is assumed as a given with which the subject is free to create subjective meaning, and in cults where the leader assigns emotional, psychological, and physical experience by claiming s/he is holder of absolute truth and is therefore solely able to fill the member with what is lacking.* With differing emphases, according to Winnicott (1971), Lacan (1973), Evans

(1996), Milner, (1987), Deri (1984) and others, unfilled space is intrinsic to creativity. Milner asks "how truly to trust the unconscious: trust the emptiness, the blankness, trust what seems to be not there." She states further,

The inescapable condition of true expression was the plunge into the abyss, the willingness to recognize the moment of blankness. ... For me, doubt came to mean accepting emptiness, it means a suspicion of what was supposed to fill the gap while at the same time being able to accept the gap, the not knowing, and even becoming able to relate oneself to it."
(p. 9)

Winnicott (1971), Lacan (1973), Searles (Bromberg, 1998), Stern (2003), and others place uncertainty at the core of creativity. Slipping messages—miscommunications—are characteristic of being alive and often form the basis of the highest art and wittiest humor (Lacan, 1973). Cult members often have a dread of uncertainty and a fear of public humiliation by the leader, as well as shunning, depriving of privileges, and demotion of rank for questioning and doubt, which brings me to *the fourth hypothesis*, which addresses spontaneity and tolerance of uncertainty as intrinsic to creativity.

4. **Tolerance of Uncertainty.** *There will be a difference in individual creativity between open environments where predictability and unpredictability of a leader is unrelated to reward and punishment, thus allowing for the spontaneity that is intrinsic to creativity, and in cults characterized by unpredictability of rewards and punishments by the leader resulting in the member's lack of spontaneity.* The member's anxiety related to uncertainty as to whether the leader will approve or abuse limits the member's willingness to take the types of risks that are integral to creativity. When free to embrace uncertainty as part of the joy of creating, the subject's spontaneous symbolic language emerges from the unconscious through

flashes of humor, play, metaphor, and the like to creatively transform the uncertainty of unlinked thoughts and feelings.

Characteristic of the functioning of the human mind originally described by Freud, the member's unconscious has the capacity to form defenses to avoid unacceptable feelings. When paradoxical or ambivalent feelings are overwhelming (such as the simultaneous love and hate of the cult leader), the unconscious defends the psyche by repressing or dissociating one aspect of the ambivalent feelings through the defense of splitting. The type of uncertainty encouraged by the inconsistent reward and punishment system cult leaders use needs to be defended against, while the uncertainty that is possible within an open environment is fundamental to creative expression.

A snippet from an individual session Perlado had with Alex highlights an instance of spontaneous and momentary shift between total and trial projective identification. The in-depth exploration of one of Alex's passing comments represents the type of "listening with the third ear" (Reik, 1948) that the psychoanalytic approach to cult recovery provides. I suggest that Alex's ability in this moment to spontaneously play is significant as a sign of emerging creativity. Says Alex, "...I thought of leaving, but I also felt that something could happen if I left. The leader spoke of somebody from the outside that wanted to harm us...maybe that was me. I am just joking..."

The shift in Alex's stance illustrates the potential of creativity emerging in open environments like that provided by Perlado, as suggested by the four hypotheses. It represents Alex's struggle with the dimensions of loss, opposition, gap/lack, and uncertainty, and illustrates fluidity between total and trial projective identifications. Such fluidity, as discussed by the late Klein (1946) and by Bion (1962), involves "an on-going oscillation between paranoid-schizoid fragmentation—breaking apart—and depressive re-integration as a necessary part of creative living." (Glover, 2009)

Cults often exploit the concept, as Poincare (1914) describes, that both fragmentation and reconstruction are

intrinsic to creativity. Similarly Deri notes that “[the] arrangement of old elements into new gestalts is the essence of all productive, creative thinking.” (Deri, 1984, p. 37) In groups in which theater or music are vehicles for indoctrination and/or proselytizing, such as the Fourth Wall Repertory Theater of the Sullivanians (Siskind, 2003) and the music cult discussed in Perlado’s paper, excessively rigorous rehearsals are characteristic. Relentless demands, for example for doing exercises and rehearsing, are often described by former members as abusive, and the resulting exhaustion contributes to members’ relinquishing their independent thinking. Leaders justify this approach by coercively imposing the idea that “breaking apart” old thinking requires adherence to strict discipline and surrender to enable construction of “true” cult theater or music.

Having initially stated a need for treatment in a previous meeting with Perlado, Alex later denies that need. The decision whether or not to seek treatment may involve Alex consciously or unconsciously addressing his fear of loss of the cult that has become his home and family. This fear is based on indoctrination by the teacher that members cannot survive the outside world and that end-times come nearer with each abandonment of him and his word. Alex, like the others, protects the leader, believing the leader’s self-proclaimed transformation did in fact give him the key to ‘musical communion,’ the promised state attainable only by following the teacher’s method. Based on the assumption of projective identification as a form of communication between Alex and Perlado in his clinical role, I explore the meaning of the tentative and humorous communication by Alex that followed and seems to betray his true feelings. In his comment about harm from the outside, Alex moves from believing that aggression comes from the outside and is directed to the group, to the possibility of his own aggression, which he then withdraws with humor, perhaps out of internalized fear of retribution for expressing opposition.

Perlado’s avoidance of coercive indoctrination as well as his encouragement of Alex’s psychic gap remaining unfilled allowed Alex to find the inner freedom to spontaneously joke. This joke seems to represent Alex’s recognition in that moment of his own ambivalence about whether the persecutors that cause him great anxiety are external or

internal, as opposed to the black-and-white position he took when he earlier denied needing help. The joke "maybe that was me" seems to have burst through unconscious defenses in a moment of risk-taking and tolerance of uncertainty. Alex first states, "I thought of leaving, but I also felt that something could happen if I left. The leader spoke of somebody from the outside that wanted to harm us." I believe this occurred through Alex's total projective identification with the leader as seen by his transferring his persecutory anxieties onto the leader's fear of persecutory entities. When he then states, "maybe that was me," I believe this new stance may express a trial projective identification as he experiences Perlado's access to his own aggression in using his countertransference to mobilize the families to do an intervention. Alex may be taking partial responsibility for the feeling that perhaps he is the persecutory entity, prompting him to consider himself as another harmful other. That humorous flash, "Maybe that was me. I'm just joking," suggests an unconscious awareness of Alex's own split-off persecutory anxiety and reflects an experience of himself as both a feared entity and a target of feared 'entities,' both internal and external. His joke that perhaps his aggression might cause harm to others and it is he who should be feared reflects his capacity to function, if briefly, within the depressive position, whereby he is able to simultaneously identify with and differentiate from the leader's paranoia and capacity for aggression. The significance of this relates to the third criterion for creativity delineated above—i.e., the allowance of opposition. Alex's joke illustrates the creative process of deconstructing and reconstructing opposing elements. I suggest he deconstructs when he questions the identity of the feared entity and reconstructs when he allows himself to imagine that it may be either himself or an external other.

I believe it is Perlado's willingness to put himself within the field of play in the therapeutic setting, to use trial projective identification to counter the total projective identification/*folie à deux* experience in the cult, and to provide an open environment in which mourning of loss, allowance of opposition, and tolerance of lack/unfilling of gap and of uncertainty are affirmed that prompted him at another point in the session to question Alex about how his experience of Perlado was like and not like his experience of the teacher.

He presents Alex with a nonretaliatory experience when Alex disavows his need for treatment. In addition, with the support of this open environment, Alex's "just joking" was expressed with appropriate affect and made available for discussion between Perlado and Alex. I suggest that Alex's spontaneous comment brought to the forefront his anxiety about his own feelings of aggression. In an oppressive environment, these unacceptable feelings likely would have remained unspoken and split off to remain outside of conscious awareness.

Marsalis (and Stewart, 1994) writes, "the sound of human feeling has a power and intensity of its own. The power in jazz comes from the passionate intelligence of a group of musicians playing together. Musical freedom of speech" (p. 149). I suggest that moments such as Alex's joke within and outside of the therapeutic setting reflect an opening up to his creative use of language, to accessing split-off feelings and to embracing once again his own musical freedom of speech.

Conclusion

Although creativity and an accompanying sense of aliveness are often assumed as human potential, a dehumanizing cult situation is one in which this given is threatened. In this article, I propose two themes of central importance for cultic studies: 1) the suppression of creativity in cultic environments and the subsequent experience of inner deadness; and 2) the emergence of creativity as integral to cult-recovery treatment.

Creativity experienced most purely is beyond analysis. However, when it is the target of suppression and leaves former members and SGAs with some degree of psychic deadness, analysis enables identification and exploration of the criteria necessary for internally derived creativity. I differentiate spontaneous play and creativity from the compulsive passion that I believe characterizes a good deal of the 'creative' work produced within an oppressive setting that promotes the leader's goals.

Drawing on psychoanalytic thinking, I suggest four criteria and related hypotheses that contrast the fate of creativity in open versus authoritative environments in terms of mourning of loss, allowance of opposition, and tolerance of lack/unfilling of gap, and of uncertainty.

I then link the well-known concept of “bait and switch” as used within cultic studies to the psychoanalytic concepts of trial and total projective identification. I propose that the continuous flow between trial and total projective identification found in open environments contrasts with the trial projective identification that is used as bait in the seductive phases of cult involvement and then switched to total projective identification by leaders as one means of leading the member to a “bounded choice” in cultic environments.

By the time the member is drawn into total projective identification via controlled and unidimensional communication from the leader, the member’s dependency, and willingness to self-renounce and to increase devotion to the leader make the cost of leaving the cult too terrifying to consider. At this point—perhaps what Conway and Siegelman (1978) call “the snapping point” and resulting in what Lalich describes as “the bounded choice”—the member’s free-flowing subjective voice, sense of aliveness, and therefore creativity have been relegated to the realm of the suppressed.

To emphasize the importance of emergence of creativity in cult-recovery treatment, I discuss Perlado’s establishment of a safe clinical environment in which play, tolerance of uncertainty, symbolic language, and imagination are evoked in a former member/musician. Through Perlado’s provision of multidirectional communication, the former member allows his subjective feelings to emerge through dark humor followed by defensive and immediate renunciation with the words “just joking.” It is impossible to imagine such an exchange with an oppressive cult leader.

To conclude, and in praise of lack and of gap, I turn to the songwriter and musician Leonard Cohen (1992) who eloquently writes:

Ring the bells that still can ring.

Forget your perfect offering.

There is a crack in everything.

That’s how the light gets in.

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