charismatic group members “1) have a shared belief system; 2) sustain a high level of social cohesiveness; 3) are strongly influenced by the group’s behavioral norms, and 4) impute charismatic (or sometimes divine) power to the group or its leadership.” Other psychologists have devised additional theories to explain the drawing power of charismatic groups, and some conclude that people who devote themselves to such groups have not yet achieved the developmental stage of individuation. Still other experts, drawing on the field of sociobiology, suggest that the need to be part of a group has biological, evolutionary roots traceable to that period in human history when to be banned from the dominant hunter-gatherer group meant almost certain death.

Whatever the origins of the psychological need to be a part of a defined group, the fact is most people do not fall under the sway of charismatic groups. Typically, such groups find recruits among young people. Usually, such a young person is approached by friendly, outgoing recruiters for the cult who express a deep interest in the person’s life and offer empathy and understanding for the difficulties they may be experiencing. These difficulties may be in relation to a failed romance, an unhappy family life, or an existential crisis. Some are associated with late adolescence in which a young person has no idea how they fit in the world. The recruiters are often trained to provide a “friendly ear” to troubled young people, to validate their experiences as being common, and, finally, to suggest that other people (such as themselves) have found solace in their groups.

During the process of initiation, recruits may experience severe psychological disorders as they at once begin and resist immersion into an entirely new system. Abandoning old allegiances and belief systems can bring about intense guilt before the recruit completely immerses him or herself into the charismatic group. Some psychologists believe that such mental illnesses as dissociative identity disorders, pathologic adjustment reactions, major depressive disorders, and others may be attributed to the agonizing process of joining a charismatic group. Once immersed in the cult, members will often cut all ties with their past lives, ending contact with their families and friends as they join a new social order that seems to give them meaning and purpose. This kind of behavior is obviously less true of charismatic groups such as the military and some types of self-help groups, but these symptoms can nonetheless appear in less extreme forms.

Interviews with former cult members have revealed that in extremist religious cults, there are often tremendous obstacles to leaving. These obstacles can come in the form of peer pressure, where loyal cult members will intervene in the case of a member who has doubts about the cult and longs for his or her old life, or the obstacles may be physical ones for those whose cult lives communally in an isolated area. Often, family members of persons in religious cults hire what are called “deprogrammers” to kidnap their loved ones and take them to some neutral place where they can be reasoned with sensibly without the interference of other cult members espousing the group’s prevailing ideology.

Most psychologists would probably acknowledge that there exists a deep human need to belong to a group. Often, this need leads people to form what might be viewed as unhealthy allegiances to a person or group who, ultimately, does not truly have the person’s interest at heart.

Followers of American-born cult leader Jim Jones left the U.S. to set up the Jonestown commune in the Guyana jungle in South America. After a U.S. Congressman and three journalists investigating the cult were killed, Jones persuaded 911 members of his People’s Temple flock to kill themselves with cyanide-laced potions in a mass suicide on Nov. 18, 1978. David Koresh, leader of the Branch Davidians, a group that originally split from the Seventh Day Adventist Church during the Depression, led 82 people to their death, when he refused to be served with a search and arrest warrant at the Davidian compound in Waco, Texas. Koresh’s followers believed he was the Messiah, despite reports of child abuse and other questionable behaviors. After an initial gunfight that killed four agents and six Davidians, a 51-day stand-off occurred between federal agents and the Davidians holed up in the compound. When agents launched a tear gas attack on April 19, 1993, to end the siege, a fire burned the compound and killed 82 Davidians, probably in a deliberate mass suicide.

Bodies of 39 similarly dressed men and women were found in San Diego on March 26, 1997, after a mass suicide led by Marshall Applewhite, cult leader of Heaven’s Gate. The deaths were triggered by the cult’s belief that a flying saucer traveled behind comet Hale-Bopp to take them home, an evolutionary existence above the human level. Articles have appeared about the use of the Internet to recruit Heaven’s Gate followers.

Further Reading
Culture-fair test

An intelligence test in which performance is not based on experience with or knowledge of a specific culture.

Culture-fair tests, also called culture-free tests, are designed to assess intelligence (or other attributes) without relying on knowledge specific to any individual cultural group. The first culture-fair test, called Army Examination Beta, was developed by the United States military during World War II to screen soldiers of average intelligence who were illiterate or for whom English was a second language. Beginning in the postwar period, culture-fair tests, which rely largely on nonverbal questions, have been used in public schools with Hispanic students and other non-native-English speakers whose lack of familiarity with both English language and American culture have made it impossible to assess their intelligence level using standard IQ tests. Culture-fair tests currently administered include the Learning Potential Assessment Device (DPAD), the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventories, and the Cattell Culture Fair Series consisting of scales one to three for ages four and up. The Cattell scales are intended to assess intelligence independent of cultural experience, verbal ability, or educational level. They are used for special education placement and college and vocational counseling. The tests consist mostly of paper-and-pencil questions involving the relationships between figures and shapes. Parts of scale one, used with the youngest age group, utilize various objects instead of paper and pencil. Activities in scales two and three, for children age eight and up, include completing series, classifying, and filling in incomplete designs.

Culture-fair testing is a timely issue given current debate over bias in intelligence and educational testing as it affects students who can speak and write English, but who are unfamiliar with white middle-class culture. Bias in intelligence testing has a historical precedent in early tests designed to exclude immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe from admission to the United States on grounds of mental inferiority. Critics of current tests claim that they discriminate against ethnic minorities in similar ways by calling for various types of knowledge unavailable to those outside the middle-class cultural mainstream. To dramatize the discriminatory nature of most intelligence testing, Professor Robert L. Williams devised the Black Intelligence Test of Cultural Homogeneity that requires a command of vocabulary items widely known among African Americans but not familiar to most whites (such as “do rag” and “four corners”) and a knowledge of black history and culture (“Who wrote the Negro National Anthem?”). Williams claimed that the difficulties faced by white persons attempting to take this test are comparable to those that confront many blacks taking standardized IQ tests.

Critics of standardized tests claim that minority test takers are also penalized in ways other than their unfamiliarity with specific facts. A pervasive negative attitude toward such tests may give children from minority groups less motivation than whites to perform well on them, further reduced by low levels of trust in and identification with the person administering the test. In addition, students from a minority culture may be more likely to interpret and answer a question in ways that differ from the prescribed answer. (In the field of educational psychology, this phenomenon is referred to as divergent thinking and also tends to penalize gifted children.) Studies have shown that culture-fair tests do reduce differences in performance between whites and members of minority groups. However, they lag behind the standard tests in predicting success in school, suggesting that in their quest for academic success, members of minority groups must overcome cultural barriers that extend beyond those encountered in IQ tests.

Further Reading