

We're watching the largest and most dangerous 'cult' in American history: neuroscientist |

By **Seth D. Norrholm**, in *Raw Story* August 5, 2023

Experts explain the 4 main psychological factors that drive Trump's rabid fan base© provided by AlterNet

I was dying...It was just a matter of time. Lying behind the wheel of the airplane, bleeding out of the right side of my devastated body, I waited for the rapid shooting to stop.

—Former Representative Jackie Speier in her memoir *Undaunted: Surviving Jonestown, Summoning Courage, and Fighting Back* recounting her experience after being shot five times during an ambush during her fact-finding visit to Jonestown, Guyana where Jim Jones and his cult, Peoples Temple, had built a compound.

It, combined with everything else that was going on, made it difficult to breathe...Being crushed by the shield and the people behind it ... leaving me defenseless, injured.

—Metropolitan police officer, Daniel Hodges, describing being crushed in a doorway during the January 6, 2021, attack by Trump supporters on the U.S. Capitol

In both of the examples above, the individual speaking was the victim of extreme violence perpetrated by followers of a single person whose influence had spread to hundreds of people (in the January 6th case, thousands of people). In fact, Speier's experience with the Jim Jones followers was part of the single greatest loss of American life (918 people) prior to 9/11/2001. These followings have been given an umbrella name, cult, and have involved what has been traditionally called "brainwashing." The cult leader receives seemingly undying support as the Dear Leader or Savior. However, the term brainwashing suggests that indoctrinated members are robots without free will – behavioral scientists argue that this is not the case. It's an oversimplification.

Rather than being seen as passive victims to an irresistible force, psychiatrist Robert Lifton argues that there is "voluntary self-surrender" in one's entrance into a cult. Further, the decision to give up control as part of the cult process may actually be part of the reason why people join.

Research and experience tell us that those who are “cult vulnerable” may have a sense of confusion or separation from society or seek the same sort of highly controlled environment that was part of their childhood. It has also been suggested that those who are at risk for cult membership feel an enormous lack of control in the face of uncertainty (i.e., economic, occupational, academic, social, familial) and will gravitate more towards a cult as their distress increases. I would argue that many of these factors are at play when we see the ongoing support of Trumpism and MAGA “theology.”

Psychologist Leon Festinger described the phenomenon of cognitive dissonance in which there is a disconnect between one’s feelings, beliefs, and convictions and their observable actions. This dissonance is distressing and, in order to relieve the anxiety, people may become more invested in the cult or belief system that goes against who they are individually. As such, cult members become more “dug-in” and will cling to thoughts and beliefs that contradict available evidence. In other words, they are no longer able to find a middle ground or compromise.

How does this apply to today’s politics?

There was a time when the two major political parties in America could exhibit bipartisanship by moving across the aisle to compromise on the issues on which they were legislating. Tried and true Republicans who favored small government, lower taxes, and national security could find a middle ground with Democrats who pushed for things like universal healthcare, higher minimum wages, and progressive tax reform. The abortion issue in America has been an area of debate between the parties as they debated elements like when life begins, is a heartbeat a heartbeat, and what to do about post-birth abortions (which is murder and not actually a thing). There were largely two sides of the issue and some areas for compromise.

This is no longer possible in today’s sociopolitical climate. Although members of the GOP still refer to themselves as a political party with principled stances, the reality is they have now morphed into a domestic terror organization and to use the umbrella term, a cult – the largest and most dangerous cult in American history.

Cult thinking includes ardent adherence to group thinking such as – clinically speaking, in the face of distorted thinking we ask about one’s strength of conviction by querying, ”Can you think

of other ways of seeing this?” Sadly, what we are seeing publicly is ‘No’ from those who still subscribe to Trumpism/MAGA.

Here are a few examples in today’s socio-political environment in which cultism has contributed to a lack of middle ground.

There is no middle ground on treasonous, conspiratorial, fraudulent behavior – these are crimes and, arguably, the worst crimes one could commit against their own country.

There is no middle ground on slavery.

There is no middle ground on allowing Americans to die through inaction in response to natural disasters and global health crises.

There is no middle ground on gunning down school children or wearing an AR-15 rifle pin and throwing away a pin to remember a Uvalde victim.

There is no middle ground on jeopardizing national security and retaining and sharing classified documents.

There is no middle ground on breaking campaign finance (i.e., hush money schemes) laws.

There should be no middle ground on tolerance of crime, period.

And so many know this. Tim Scott, Jim Jordan, and Marco Rubio (the last two having gone to law school), all know this and are smarter than they are acting – which takes us back to cult dynamics – if you are a dyed-in-the-wool cultist or pretending to be a cultist – but the outcome is the same – harm to the Country and its people – there is no difference. Whether you actually have a personality disorder or are pretending to be a sociopathically or psychopathically disordered person – if the result is the same – harm to your constituents and your country – what’s the difference? As noted in the opening paragraphs, there is a voluntary submission to cultism – Rubio, for example, identified all of the reasons why the 45th President was not

qualified when he himself was running for President in 2016. However, perhaps due to his own intolerance of uncertainties in his life, volunteered for Trumpism.

What can be done?

There are exit strategies for people ensnared in a cult. One factor is accountability or repeatedly seeing the adverse consequences of the group's behavior (e.g., indictment, incarceration, job loss) which we started to see even more of this week.

But until one party and its ardent followers can admit they are in a domestic terrorist cult and as Rep. Eric Swalwell said are “unserious” people, there is no hope of unification on the horizon. The first step is getting through to people who can't or won't see the truth.

About the Author:

Seth D. Norrholm, PhD (Threads: neuropsychophd; X, artist formerly known as Twitter: @SethN12) is a neuropsychologist and independent socio political columnist. Dr. Norrholm has spent 20 years studying trauma-, stressor-, anxiety-, depressive-, and substance use-related disorders and has published over 135 peer-reviewed research articles and book chapters. The primary objective of his work is to develop “bench-to-bedside” clinical research methods to inform therapeutic interventions for fear and anxiety-related disorders and how they relate to human factors such as personality, genetics, and environmental influences. Dr. Norrholm has been featured on NBC, ABC, PBS, CNN, MSNBC's Last Word with Lawrence O'Donnell, Politico.com, The New York Times, The New York Daily News, USA Today, WebMD, The Atlantic, The History Channel, Scientific American, Salon.com, The Huffington