



PROCEEDINGS



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J10 Brainwashing in Cults: Sexual Abuse and Delayed Treatment Until It Is Too Late

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the complex and multi-faceted structures of psychological cults and the associated risk of sexual abuse and violence.¹

Impact Statement: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by showing that several sociological characteristics are relevant to the victims to engage in sexual relations. These include: the group members' deep-seated belief in the leader's charisma, who is revered and on whom the victims are dependent; isolation; emotional dependence on him; and the leader's mental and physical control over them.²

A 29-year-old woman began to live in a Meditation center, located in an isolated "cocoon-like" environment tightly controlled through mental and psychological methods, where she personally provided services and money to the group. This system was based on "holistic theory" that people would improve inner evolution and interpersonal relationships by admiring the leader at the top of the social hierarchy. During theoretical-practical seminars, "the Master" instilled energy in the cultists through his own hands to promote their well-being. He imposed "tantric practices," group sexual activities aimed at the pursuit of spiritual healing. Precise indications were provided about the diet, including periods of fasting to purify oneself as well as homeopathic methods suggested for the treatment of headaches.

The adherence to the cult implied the acceptance of rules and beliefs that pervaded all aspects of the woman's life and, through suggestions/manipulation, undermined her integrity and decision-making autonomy, making her completely dependent on the leader's determination. In this context, she was conditioned by the Master, who minimized the danger of a bleeding nevus that he excised with a kitchen knife in the meditation center. The Master led the woman to think that she wanted the pain for herself and caused the bleeding. She therefore showed a reduced ability to criticize her own acts as well as to foresee their consequences. She was induced to undergo pseudo-treatments without any scientific validation and died of undiagnosed metastatic melanoma at the age of 40 after a few months.

The delay in treatment due to the recommendations made by the Master negatively affected the chances of survival of the patient. He was sentenced to three years imprisonment for manslaughter. Emphasizing sociological characteristics of victims, the court maintained that the defendant exploited his lofty spiritual and charismatic status for his personal sexual gain and, accordingly, that the sexual relations practiced were an abuse of the defendant's power.

A multidisciplinary approach is key in understanding the crucial questions pertaining to sexual abuse of consenting adults in informal social settings, such as spiritual relations and cults.³

References:

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3. Grattagliano I, Tangari D. A couple in the sect: between freedom of membership and risks of abuse. *Clin Ter*. 2015;166(5):e335-43.

Cults; Brainwashing; Sexual Abuse