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DYSFUNCTIONAL DYNAMICS IN HIGH-CONTROL IDEOLOGICAL GROUPS: NXIVM, SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE, THE PEOPLES TEMPLE, AND THE FUNDAMENTALIST CHURCH OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS (FLDS)

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Abstract

High-control ideological groups enforce isolated communities based on shared beliefs and often use coercion and intense emotional manipulation to gain the following of members (Coates, 2012). Whether fueled by religious commitment or other motivations, these groups create power dynamics and abusive interactions that form dysfunctional emotional ties between leaders and followers. When manipulation and coercion infiltrate relationships, emotional ties play a role in establishing unhealthy bonds. This research seeks to understand the psychological mechanisms that underlie “trauma bonding” in individuals exposed to prolonged stress or abuse in these settings. This study provides an interdisciplinary approach to identifying psychological factors that make individuals vulnerable to harmful, manipulative groups. The author analyzes memoirs, articles, survivor accounts, and documentaries to observe how these emotional ties motivate members to join and remain affiliated despite abuse. This study focuses on NXIVM, Sarah Lawrence College, The Peoples Temple, and the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS) to gain knowledge about concerns ranging from sexual abuse to indoctrination. It summarizes evidence of physical, spiritual, psychological, and societal impacts and analyzes psychological tactics that influence power differentials. Understanding these abusive cycles and fear dependency can help mental health practitioners and policymakers develop intervention and prevention strategies for people affected by high-control groups.

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Introduction

How far would one go to obey authority figures, even if their actions directly violate one's own moral compass? In Stanley Milgram's psychological experiment at Yale University in 1960, participants went as far as shocking strangers with 450 volts as an act of obedience to the authority figures. The researchers assigned participants as "teachers" to send progressively more painful electric shocks to the "learners" in a different room when they asked a question and were given the wrong answer (PsychHubUK, 2014). Even though the "teachers" heard cries of pain and audible discomfort from the "learners" being shocked, they continued to increase the intensity according to the instructions of the researchers. These acts of obedience provide direct insight into the power dynamics that begin to form when social pressures arise. This experiment raises the question of how power dynamics and abuse escalate when individuals knowingly and continuously harm others around them.

In similar ways, leaders of high-control ideological groups use perceived authority to engage in harmful obedience, mirroring the dynamics that Milgram exposed. To further explore these concepts, the research question guiding my project was "What psychological mechanisms underlie prolonged stress and abuse in high-control ideological groups?" High-control ideological groups (HCIGs) are enforced isolated communities based on shared beliefs, often using coercion and intense emotional manipulation to gain the following of members. My focus is on the survivors of high-control ideological groups to help amplify their voices and highlight their experiences.

My study includes religious organizations; however, I do not intend to use this research to defame any religion or religious followers. but rather to raise awareness about abuse of vulnerable populations. While religions, cults, and high-ideological groups may have similarities,

there is some gray area between all three. In the past, people used the term “cult” to describe religious groups as well as alternative communities, but it was refused in the scholarship of new religious movements where it was recognized as pejorative and derogatory. More recently, the label of cult for various religious organizations and new religious movements has been resurfacing (Gleig, 2026). For my study, the term and definition of “high-control ideological group” felt the most fitting, as it includes communities with or without a religious background. This also reduces the labeling that often circulates as “cults” are named and demonized.

Within high-control ideological groups, abusive interactions often form dysfunctional emotional ties between leaders and followers. This paper investigates how these unhealthy bonds motivate members to join and remain affiliated despite the abuse. This study provides an interdisciplinary approach to identifying psychological factors that make individuals vulnerable to harmful, manipulative groups. Through an analysis of memoirs and media, I identified patterns of physical, spiritual, psychological, and societal impacts of abuse. It is important to acknowledge that abuse can happen in many different contexts, but the abuse discussed in my research is significant because much of it is kept hidden. HCIGs are unique because isolation of members plays a major role in how the abuse continues to occur and why the members remain in these environments with abusive leaders. In addition, the groups included in my study are distinct because they all follow a patriarchal power structure and involve vulnerable populations, including children. In these case studies, the manipulative male leaders established a high-control ideological group by threatening members and enforcing rules that induce anxiety and isolation. Members stay engaged in these groups out of excessive fear of exclusion from society and guilt from performing maladaptive behaviors.

Considering how not every high-control ideological group functions the same, follows the same practices, or enforces the same dynamics, the consideration of autonomy is important to highlight because the mechanisms by which abuse occurs vary. Over time, members tend to experience a slip in autonomy and free will because the leaders maintained control over them. To satisfy the intense desires of the leaders and avoid further abuse, members followed along as an act of psychological resistance as a defense mechanism. When considering consent and self-agency, especially for adults, many eyebrows are raised at the thought of what it means for one to state that they have been abused. Ideally, individuals have the sovereignty to say that they have been abused, but many do not truly have autonomy over themselves because they are subjected to some sort of authority figure (Gavey, 2019). These power dynamics remain constant because the dominating figure has established a history of control over their subjugated counterpart.

The idea that individuals cannot say that they have been taken advantage of relates to the pattern of women being labeled as property of their male patriarchs. Some people argue that husbands are not able to commit crimes against their own property, hence the thought that marital rape is nonexistent (Sanders, 2017, p. 82). On a global level, Botswana, Cambodia, and Myanmar do not have laws against marital rape or recognize it as a crime (Sanders, 2017, pp. 84-86). To add to that, some individuals believe that if a woman is no longer a virgin, then she does not need to consent to any prospects who make sexual advances (Sanders, 2017, p. 82). Without repercussions and the jump to victim-blame, the perpetrator is able to remove themselves from guilt and find comfort in their position of power. Oftentimes, this displaces shame and guilt onto the people who are survivors of the harm, enabling the dysfunctional power

dynamics to continue to exist. The person in power maintains their position of control, and the subjugated individual remains in a position of vulnerability.

To fully understand how HCIGs create isolated environments of coercive control, it is important to consider both the legal frameworks surrounding the abuse and common psychological tactics. There are a handful of terms that are often used interchangeably, including assault, rape, trafficking, sexual violence, and abuse. Across different countries and even different states, definitions of these criminal behaviors vary. As reported in *The Oxford Handbook of Sex Offences and Sex Offenders* by Karen Terry (2017), sex crimes include sexual acts with contact, non-contact sexual acts, and sexual solicitation or trafficking (p. 5). Sexual acts with contact are defined as sexual intercourse (e.g., rape and penetration with an object) or touching of some kind with individuals who do not consent or who are under the legal age to consent, or for relationships where consent is considered legally impossible. Among others, sexual acts with contact in which consent is not legally possible in 13 states between a therapist and patient, a police officer and offender, and a clergy and congregant (Huh & Yancey, 2025). Non-contact sexual acts are intended for personal pleasure and do not involve physical interaction between individuals (e.g., voyeurism and exposure of genitals without consent). Lastly, sexual solicitation or trafficking is considered to be sexual acts completed for some form of payment or benefit (e.g., solicitation online involving children or adults). Trafficking is highly pertinent to many HCIGs as members may be distributed throughout their community for the sexual gain of leaders or others in power.

When these sexual acts are forced upon individuals in HCIGs, especially in the instance that members are forced to commit these crimes against other members, there is some gray area on who is held accountable. This is due to the fact that some individuals are victims of abuse, but

they may abuse other members as well. With that in mind, apostates of new religious movements in the past have exposed injustices performed by the leader and their primary group of co-leaders. Diving deeper into the case studies, one can identify that the main objective in seeking out justice is bringing into the light the actions of the leaders of the HCIG because they act as the director of operations. By breaking down and convicting the main figure controlling the HCIGs, people hope that the rest of the empire will fall as well. In circumstances involving sexual solicitation and trafficking, it is difficult to break the financial dependence that HCIG members experience as a result of these acts. For instance, in the Sarah Lawrence College HCIG, one of the women created an escort page and gave millions of dollars to the leader as a form of punishment after making an accusation that she poisoned him. This continued a cycle of sexual exploitation and trafficking as well as financial imposition. Members in these situations have limited external choices and they begin to perceive their sexual engagements as a necessity and new norm. In turn, many members who endure these various forms of abuse are more likely to remain in their harmful environment.

According to Sample and Rader (2017) in *The Oxford Handbook of Sex Offences and Sex Offenders*, rape has been recognized as a threatening or violent crime throughout many countries. In a table noting different countries' laws surrounding rape, marital rape, and the age of consent, it is observed that Guyana has rape laws including violence and threat as factors, with an age of sexual consent at 13 years old (p. 85). The United States has laws that consider threats or the use of violence, and domestic sexual assault as a rape case, with an age of consent varying from 16 to 18 years old (p. 87). The contrast in age of consent between Guyana and the U.S. is interesting to observe when connecting back to the four HCIGs featured in this study. In the Peoples Temple, children who moved to Guyana were legally considered old enough to consent to sexual

acts if they were 13. Even by state, age of consent varies in different regions, impacting NXIVM, Sarah Lawrence, and FLDS differently. This is especially relevant for FLDS, as children were forced to marry and have sexual intercourse at ages as young as 12 years old.

Consent connects to grooming and how abusers are patient to ensure the desired outcome of control. To avoid scaring away the person they are aiming to wrap under their control, manipulative individuals form a trusting relationship with their target. Groomers can include tutors, babysitters, teachers, coaches, relatives, neighbors, and religious figures. These relationships built on trust, pleasant memories, and shared interests can spark up cognitive dissonance when the abuse begins. People begin to rationalize their abuser's behavior and choose to believe that the person they love so much would never choose to hurt them. Grooming, indoctrination, and social conditioning are parallel as they often lead to the same or similar outcome. Abusers only become stronger as they blind the weaker individual with positive interactions. According to Wolf and Pruitt (2019), grooming begins with physical and psychological tactics that begin to normalize dysfunctional relationships to lead up to sexual abuse. Specific strategies include gifts, excessive attention, affirmations, and compliments to build trust and a confidential relationship (Wolf & Pruitt, 2019). Certain law enforcement and professionals involved in the justice system refer to "seduction" as synonymous to grooming as both are defined by nonviolent behaviors to obtain intimate control over another individual (Lanning, 2018). This makes it more difficult for survivors to share their stories because many are blamed and assumed to be deserving of the violence committed against them.

These definitions and mechanisms of abuse are fundamental for contextualizing various acts of assault as crimes. In terms of religious, psychological, and legal factors, how women and children feel about the abuse they endured may not hold any weight in the eyes of those higher in

the social hierarchy. When people recognize that they are in positions of power and can manipulate their behaviors to gain desirable responses from others, it is difficult to stop this pattern of maladaptive behavior. Individuals may justify their actions by attaching spiritual meaning to their choices and claiming that they have a religious intent. As a result, victims often remain in abusive conditions and become more susceptible to adverse mental health outcomes.

On account of the fact that high-control ideologies groups rely on isolation to function, evidence emerging from documentaries, films, podcasts, and other visual media provide insight into the daily experiences of abuse that may otherwise be neglected in news reports. With that being said, a plethora of true crime documentaries and films showcasing injustices rely on sensationalism to gain a wider audience. This often desensitizes viewers to make them digest the content as another form or fictional content. Audiences remove themselves from feeling empathy for the victims of these stories, which dehumanizes those who experience trauma in real life. These are not fictional characters featured in a movie for dramatic effect. These are real people with real trauma and real suffering. As viewers, audiences have the privilege of pausing their consumption of media. Victims and survivors do not have the same chance of putting a pause on the abuse.

Research on the injustices that victims and survivors face during involvement with high-control ideological groups can help raise awareness for future reform. It is essential to maintain a level of sensitivity when discussing the various forms of abuse discussed in this paper, especially to avoid retraumatizing survivors and those who have experienced similar maltreatment. My goal with this research is not to contribute to the sensationalism of abuse, but rather provide a resource for those who deserve to feel validated and seen as they deal with trauma. This paper is survivor-centered; therefore, I will not mask the horrors that any of these

survivors experienced. I am emphasizing the perspectives of survivors to help empower them instead of focusing more on the leaders and abusers of HCIGs.

While not in this same context or to the same extent as the survivors highlighted in my research, I am writing this paper to unveil the effects that abuse has on individuals. The necessity to raise awareness about power dynamics and individuals who are more susceptible to developing abusive relationships fueled my research. This paper provides a voice for those who may not feel comfortable speaking on these issues, for those may have never gotten the chance to share their experiences, for those who are still dealing with abuse, and for the little girl in me who is still healing from my own trauma. The course in which survivors take to heal, process, and cope with abuse is not linear or uniform. From this research and analysis, I encourage readers to take what resonates and leave behind what does not.

Methods

Measures

For this study, I examined four high-control ideological groups, including NXIVM, Sarah Lawrence College, the Peoples Temple, and the Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS). NXIVM and Sarah Lawrence were self-improvement groups, whereas the Peoples Temple and FLDS have a religious foundation. I analyzed documentaries, podcasts, memoirs, and other written survivor accounts and categorized them into four sections of abuse, with subsections for each of the groups. The primary documentaries focused on include *Seduced: Inside The NXIVM Cult*,¹ *The Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence*,² *Cult Massacre:*

¹ Peck, C., Lessner, I. B., Oxenberg, I., Voll, D., & Alexandra, M. (Executive Producers). (2020). *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult* [TV Series]. Lionsgate Television.

² Heinzerling, Z., Garbus, L., Cogan, D., Bardin, J., Parris, K., & Goldberg, M. (Executive Producers). (2023). *Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence* [TV Series]. Story Syndicate.

One Day in Jonestown,³ and *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey*.⁴ I also read Sarah Edmondson's memoir *Scarred: The True Story of How I Escaped NXIVM, The Cult That Bound My Life*, Daniel Levin's memoir about Sarah Lawrence *Slonim Woods* 9, and Elissa Wall's memoir *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs*. In addition to the documentaries and memoirs, I studied blog postings from a survivor of The People's Temple, Steve Daniel. I explored a variety of media and literary works to observe numerous survivor accounts and included media that verified information across sources for my formal data set.

The selection process for each documentary ensured that every series specifically utilized survivor-centered stories and interviews. From there, memoirs and podcasts for particular survivors introduced in the documentaries tied in additional details and strengthened their evaluation of the abuse they endured. Focusing on multiple platforms featuring survivors' perspectives allowed me to code these case studies for patterns in the survivors' recollections of their experiences. This not only helps verify the survivor accounts, but also notes similarities in the details of the abuse. This research prioritizes survivor reports over other forms of media that aim to profit from their abuse and provide a dramatized version to entertain audiences.

Within my study, physical abuse included indications of physical aggression and violence, sexual abuse, and isolation of members. Specific to NXIVM, bodily autonomy became an additional subcategory because women lacked the freedom to make choices about their own bodies. Spiritual abuse included indications of religious indoctrination and power dynamics (David & Jeff, 2005). Psychological abuse included defense mechanisms, emotional abuse (e.g.,

³ Glover, D., Raphael, M. (Executive Producers). (2024). *Cult Massacre: One Day in Jonestown* [TV Series]. 72 Films; National Geographic.

⁴ Dammann, A., Dretzin, R., Herrmann, Z., & Kite, M. (Executive Producers). (2022). *Keep Sweet: Pray and Obey* [TV Series]. Ark Media; Participant.

manipulation and brainwashing), repeated phrases (e.g., “keep sweet” in FLDS), blackmail, and coercion (force, threats, and intimidation). Lastly, societal impacts of abuse included monetary gain for leaders, legal actions (arrests, convictions, court proceedings), motivations for members to join an HCIG and remain affiliated, and methods of members’ escape.

Data Analysis

As mentioned above, this research used qualitative analysis to code for four main categories of patterns of physical, spiritual, psychological, and societal impacts of abuse. Using media analysis, this study further highlighted themes of manipulation, abuse, power imbalances, and “trauma bonding.” For each source, I maintained thorough notes and extracted key quotes to identify recurring patterns of manipulation, abuse, and other psychological mechanisms utilized by HCIG leaders. This analysis is important for highlighting abusive relationships within the unique context of HCIGs rather than the more commonly studied abusive dynamics found in family systems or intimate partnerships.

Much of the data that I coded and organized into tables overlapped into more than one category. For example, many quotes from the literature and documentaries fall into both categories of sexual and psychological abuse due to patterns of coercion and forced advances on individuals. This demonstrates that the “messiness” of life cannot be classified into categories of a psychological table, and topics regarding abuse are especially complex and difficult to delineate. Utilizing multiple sources across different forms of media ties in the survivor-centered approach to this research. Cross-referencing across sources demonstrates the severity of their experiences and reveals the immense suffering in silence that many of them faced for years. Despite the fact that much of the data discussed includes harm conducted by leaders, the focus on survivors’ voices outweighs the attention on the leaders themselves.

Results

NXIVM

Physical Impact

Sarah Edmondson and India Oxenberg were two members of NXIVM who shared their experiences of physical and sexual abuse. While their experiences were not entirely the same, there were many parallels in their developments of abuse. Sarah was one of the first women in NXIVM who suffered through the branding of her pelvic area. In a different instance, India received the same brand as Sarah, along with over twenty women following behind. The burning of flesh was the most intense form of physical abuse that the women endured, but the torture did not stop there. Sarah and India recounted instances of women being publicly degraded with physical beatings to induce fear and increase compliance. In *Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult*, India mentions a memory of her recording another member getting physically abused by Allison Mack (a supervisor of all members). Not only were women subjected to aggressive punishments in front of large groups of people, but the coaches and leader recorded the abuse as an extra layer of mortification. Much of the abuse was a direct order of the leader Keith Raniere, and he kept his maltreatment more undercover.

Moreover, the women addressed how the coaches instructed them to follow a strict diet that would force them to develop disordered eating habits. Allison Mack instructed India to only eat 500 calories a day because Keith Raniere wanted her to weigh 106 pounds (Lessner et al., 2024). India reported that she rarely ate to the point of hair loss and amenorrhea for over a year. On the contrary, this is where autonomy comes into play for Sarah Edmondson because the main aspect of her life that she maintained full control over was her physical appearance and weight. Sarah did not want to subject herself to counting calories and constantly weighing herself to

please the leaders, so she chose to continue eating according to her desires, regardless of the criticism from leaders. She found this to be one of the ways to stay out of Keith Raniere's gaze and avoid being subjected to direct sexual interactions.

Throughout different events, coaches and members filmed the women naked without their consent or knowledge. One of the main teachings of the leader was that sexual abuse is not abuse until other people use that label. This was an integral message in NXIVM to desensitize members in their own dysfunctional dynamics formed in the HCIG. Under the instruction of the leader, Allison Mack informed India that she should allow him to perform oral sex on her to break her out of her shell (Lessner et al., 2024). India recollected memories of her expressing clear discomfort and crying during these interactions with the leader. Authority figures utilized humiliation tactics to punish those who attempted to avoid sexual advances or openly opposed visual documentation of them naked. Both survivors discussed threats of being hit with a hard object and kept locked in a cage as punishment if they did not follow orders from the leaders. Due to coercion, a plethora of the women complied with demands for nonconsensual acts to avoid further assault.

As a subdivision of NXIVM for women, Dominus Obsequious Sororium (DOS) became considered a sex-trafficking circle because the leader had some type of sexual interaction with each member. The leader had forced all of the women to perform a group sex act to demonstrate their commitment and loyalty to him. After NXIVM got exposed, the FBI discovered evidence of Keith Raniere asking a DOS member to obtain control over another individual to "groom, and use as a tool, to pleasure" (Edmondson, 2019, p. 232). Women are forever reminded of their sexual abuse by the evidence found, but a few women have another trace to the assaults. Keith impregnated three sisters and urged each of them to get an abortion (Lessner et al., 2024).

Impregnation is a rampant issue throughout different HCIGs, with a diversity in intention. Evidently, some leaders hope to increase the population of their community through impregnating members. However, the leader of NXIVM did not intend to expand his community with his offspring, and instead wanted to abort them to hide evidence of his sexual advances. The women experienced all of the physical burden as a result of these interactions, and the leader had none.

Spiritual Impact

Although NXIVM was not a “religious” organization, much of the teachings in NXIVM courses compared to religious practices. Women were to reach their highest potential and rely only on food, water, and shelter to find life satisfaction (Edmondson, 2019, p. 74). Coaches repeatedly told the women to follow the teachings of the male leader and worship him, similar to how one would worship God in the church. Michel Chernitzky, a male member of NXIVM, viewed the leader as a “Godly” figure and claimed that he would have sacrificed himself for Keith (Lessner et al., 2024). The belief system that NXIVM engraves into the minds of its members remains consistent with teachings and doctrines relating to moral values. While this HCIG does not follow a literal religion, members interpreted the structure of the teachings as spiritual enlightenment for those who devote their lives to NXIVM.

The power dynamic includes Keith Raniere as the male leader with female members because he intended to teach women how to be submissive to men. NXIVM created a strict hierarchical structure that modeled a religious organization. More specifically, NXIVM used the Stripe Path criteria for members to work their way up in rank (Edmondson, 2019). The Stripe Path included white sashes for students, yellow for coaches, orange for proctors, green for senior proctors, blue for counselors, purple for senior counselors, and gold only for Nancy Salzman (the

president). Specific to the DOS group of NXIVM, the superior women were labeled as masters, with less experienced members recruited and labeled as slaves.

Psychological Impact

During her time in this HCIG, the higher positions blackmailed Sarah Edmondson into participating in what she believed to be a self-improvement and empowerment group for women. Her own best friend, holding the title of a senior counselor, manipulated her into unquestioning obedience to the teachings or processes of her coaches. As a result of stripping down her instincts, she trusted the coaches' teachings more than herself. This led to her being coerced into getting branding with an image that she later found out to be the initials of the male leader. The blackmail and manipulation from the higher-ups in NXIVM led to many of the women fearing that their stories would be dismissed and construed as intentional defamation of character. Many of the women spoke anonymously, waited years to expose the abuse they endured, or adopted a new identity to leave their membership in NXIVM in the past.

India Oxenberg fell deep into the NXIVM circle in 2011 and later came to recognize how engrossed she was with their teachings in 2018. Throughout the documentary, she expressed how the extensive curriculum rewired her thinking processes and she got indoctrinated without even realizing it (Lessner et al., 2024). Similarly, Sarah addresses how the leader and coaches would gaslight them into believing their natural instincts and emotional responses were incorrect if they did not immediately adhere to their teachings (Edmondson, 2019, p. 10; Sweet, 2019). Sarah compared her vulnerability to that of a child and reiterated how members followed NXIVM's beliefs because they blindly obeyed. When members showed any type of disagreement or disbelief in the teachings, they were considered to have a surplus of personal issues. As a whole,

the leader and coaches taught members to take responsibility over their own lives as placing blame on external forces gives those things or people more power.

Societal Impact

A businessman led NXIVM, and many labeled the HCIG a pyramid scheme. Each new member who joined intended to work their way up the power ladder to eventually start building their own network. For each person Sarah recruited into NXIVM, she earned 20% of the amount that they paid to the leaders to join their chosen course. Many members spent decades in NXIVM, and many members spent tens of thousands of dollars. Some individuals spent over \$10,000 to gain access to just one course. The members called their financial system the “Ethical Business Coalition” as they paid and relied on each other for goods and services (Edmondson, 2019, p. 159). By participating in this self-serving personalized economy, they allowed each other to keep purchasing courses and keep the money flowing internally.

Despite the cost of membership in NXIVM, copious people invested their time and money because they truly believed they would benefit from joining the group. NXIVM began advertising the HCIG as an Executive Success Program to help people grow in their personal and business endeavors. This title alone misinforms vulnerable individuals who are seeking out new opportunities to improve their lives. India Oxenberg was a member from 2011 to 2018, and she was one of the first people to believe that the group had genuine intentions to help guide her to success at a young age. The women thought that they would build a community of strong, feminine, powerful members who were committed to developing their professional careers.

Sarah Edmondson devoted 12 years of her life to NXIVM, and the last straw was the scarred flesh on her body that she hid from her own husband. India Oxenberg’s escape began when her mother expressed concern about how isolated she became from the family. Both

women acknowledged that they were being taken advantage of to an extreme extent. They slowly decreased their involvement with NXIVM, spoke to reporters who would push out their story, and watched their abusers become exposed. As a result of speaking out, the FBI opened an investigation. On June 19th of 2019, Keith Raniere was convicted of racketeering, sex trafficking, forced labor conspiracy, and wire fraud conspiracy (Edmondson, 2019, p. 241). Nancy Salzman, Lauren Salzman, Allison Mack, Clare Bronfman, and Kathy Russell pleaded guilty to the same charges. While Keith Raniere was the leader who fostered the overall dysfunctional dynamics for abuse to occur, he recruited many assistants under his wing to further administer abuse. One may wonder if his accomplices are at fault as much as he is because they were complicit in his maladaptive behavior.

Sarah Lawrence College

Physical Impact

For Daniel Levin, his college experience quickly turned upside down as he spent the majority of it being abused by his friend's father. As manipulation and violence fueled this HCIG, Daniel endured years of psychological and physical torture. The leader broke him down psychologically and conditioned him to take on numerous beatings. These beatings were punishment for Daniel not telling his leader the version of the truth that he wanted to hear. On one occasion, the leader put a clasp on Daniel's tongue and held a mallet against his neck while accusing him of lying (Heinzerling et al., 2023). The *Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence* documentary shows video evidence of the abuse escalating as Larry repeatedly hit Dan in the abdomen with the mallet. To humiliate Daniel even more, Larry made the others watch as he wrapped cellophane and aluminum foil around his genitals (Levin, 2021, p. 236). Other

members including Santos Rosario, Talia Ray, Isabella Pollok, and Claudia Drury did not intervene during these acts of abuse out of fear for their own safety.

Alongside Daniel, some of the other college students were slapped, punched in the stomach, dragged across the floor, choked, and threatened with weapons. Throughout the documentary and Daniel's memoir, Santos was a common target and subject of threats that often turned to violence. In an audio recording of Santos and Larry, the leader is observed threatening him, "'Give me my hammer! I swear to God, I'm gonna pulverize you and throw you out that window. I'll put this through your skull. I'll kill you. I'll break your whole body'" (Heinzerling et al., 2023). This was one of thousands of threats that the leader made to intimidate the students and demonstrate his power over them.

Due to the intense sexual abuse and control, the HCIG at Sarah Lawrence became considered to be a "sex cult." The initial sexual assault involved the leader directing Isabella to perform oral sex on Daniel without his consent because he assumed that Daniel had sexual issues (Levin, 2021, p. 61). After this instance, Larry established a sexual triangle and began teaching Daniel and Isabella to interact sexually. The leader would perform sexual acts on Isabella and instruct Daniel to mirror his behaviors. Daniel would watch Isabella and the leader have sexual relations, then he would have a turn, and the leader would join in. Much later, the sexual coercive control escalated and Claudia became a prostitute to bring in money for the leader. Claudia gave him millions of dollars as a punishment after the leader accused her of poisoning him.

Spiritual Impact

The leader acted as a father figure and adhered to a patriarchal power structure. With his paternal authority, he gained the trust of his daughter and her friends. Ironically, he presented himself as an almighty, all-knowing man, and morally strong man. In reality, he was incredibly

harmful and left permanent damage on each person he interacted with. Talia affirmed that her dad was an amazing and trustworthy person whom they could all turn to for financial, emotional, and physical support. They all began to trust that her dad could provide concrete, effective solutions to their unique problems. Talia's best friend, Isabella, experienced an intense infatuation and continuously showed him loyalty despite the abuse she witnessed. Isabella and Larry considered themselves equals because he saved her, and she devoted herself to him. This is a sign of a dysfunctional emotional bond as they witnessed and enforced abuse, but remained close-knit in supporting each other.

Psychological Impact

Larry's confidence enabled him to be a powerful leader over the vulnerable college students, as he knew how to manipulate them into feeling guilty enough to face the abuse. Giving Larry what he wanted and feeding into his abusive tactics led to a higher status in his eyes and protected them from harm. His main mechanism of control was manipulation and severe emotional abuse. He repeatedly claimed to be a master manipulator, and his background with the Defense Intelligence Agency equipped him with the tools to psychologically manipulate them into following his orders (Levin, 2021, p. 72). To keep his daughter and the rest of the students together, Larry slowly influenced members including Daniel Levin, Claudia Drury, Santos Rosario, Yalitza Rosario, Felicia Rosario, and Isabella Pollok to live in his apartment. Because they were perpetually kept in the tight apartment together, they were fascinated by his stories and developed an obsession with learning more from him. Each of them came to realize that the codependency heightened and strengthened the dysfunctional dynamic.

Larry began breaking each of them down using minuscule amounts of manipulation at first. For instance, he would play various songs and tell each person how to feel about them

(Navigating Narcissism, 2023). Then, he would tell them how to perceive their parents and blame them for any hardships. He would then progress to claiming that Daniel or Santos intentionally damaged his property (e.g., a pan, his oven, his walls) as a form of lashing out from envying Larry's relationship with his daughter. Once it reached this point and he desensitized them to the manipulation and lies that they began to believe, the physical abuse became rampant.

Unfortunately, because the leader was able to force himself into Daniel's mind early on, Daniel was subjected to abuse more often than not. One of his tactics was to keep Daniel awake for extended periods of time to make it easier to get inside his head. This is a common manipulation strategy that allowed the leader to convince them that they were guilty of malicious acts that they had not in fact committed. The leader would deliberately damage his own belongings and then accuse the rest of the students of being responsible. He would then continue influencing them to question their sanity and behaviors by claiming that everything would be in perfect condition if they had not wanted to harm him. This was a never-ending cycle of making them believe they were in the wrong. Furthermore, he manipulated them into believing that they all wanted to commit suicide because they were unstable in their lives and therefore wanted to sabotage him. The constant attacks and baseless statements led these college students to genuinely believe that they were the abusers and Larry was the victim.

Societal Impact

The abuse continued to occur because they were isolated in one apartment in New York. They were not to leave the apartment unless Larry himself instructed them to do so. To isolate them further, he did not allow them to see or speak to their own family members because he did not want them to expose the abuse. Each person grew closer to the leader and came to believe they could no longer rely on anyone but him.

Daniel was the first to escape because he heavily contemplated suicide. He took that as a sign that he needed to find ways to stay out of the apartment for as long as possible. Daniel realized that if he continued to depend on Larry, he would lose his life at the hands of Larry or himself. His only option was to escape and break away from the suicidal ideation in attempts to restore his character and rebuild his life. Eventually, Santos followed in his footsteps and walked out one day because he grew exhausted from experiencing and observing the maltreatment. Slowly, one by one, each of them discovered the strength in themselves to leave and reintegrate themselves into society after years of subjugation.

Old friends from the students' freshman year discovered Claudia's escort page, and they reported to a detective specializing in sex trafficking at Homeland Security. As a result, Larry was arrested in Piscataway, New Jersey. He was convicted of nine counts of sex trafficking, extortion, forced labor, and money laundering (Heinzerling, 2023). In the completion of his trial, he was sentenced to 60 years in federal prison with no option for parole.

Upon Larry's arrest and sentencing, some of the survivors began their healing process. In a podcast with Dr. Ramini (2023), Daniel Levin discussed how he was establishing his life after breaking away from Larry's shackles, emphasizing that he received a Master's in Fine Arts for writing. After obtaining his MFA, he utilized his pain and traumatic experience to share his story through his own lens. He removed the barriers to his repressed memories to craft a memoir and poems that exhibited the strength that it took to overcome the extreme manipulation and coercive control. Daniel shared that he was relearning how to love himself as well as others in intimate relationships (Navigating Narcissism, 2023). Allowing himself to instill trust in his own reality, his own memories, his own interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships, and his own beliefs provide an example of how to rebuild oneself after being broken down.

Similarly, Felicia Rosales began her reintegration into society after being in denial that Larry had done anything wrong. Felicia was one of the last to break away from Larry's grasp because of the amount of control that he had over her mind and body. Being away from him and witnessing the aftermath of his manipulation removed the submissive mindset that she had adopted under Larry's control and brought her back to her community.. After 7 years of cutting out contact with her family, she started reaching out to rebuild those relationships. Parallel to Daniel's healing process, Felicia discovered that being vulnerable in writing and discussing her trauma has helped uncover her identity (Navigating Narcissism, 2023). Simply having the freedom to talk to the public, to her friends and family, and to lawyers about the abuse has given her comfort in knowing that she is safe again. As another step to reclaim her successes and restructure her life, Felicia has returned to practicing medicine to further develop her career as a psychiatrist.

The Peoples Temple

Physical Impact

Family members and other people grew increasingly concerned about the isolation and maltreatment of the Peoples Temple in Guyana. In hopes of bringing people back to the States, Congressman Leo Ryan flew to Guyana. During his time, members of the Peoples Temple grabbed him and threatened to end his life while holding a knife up to his throat (Glover and Raphael, 2024). When Congressman Ryan attempted to load members onto a plane and fly them back to the U.S., gunmen from the Peoples Temple shot him. As a result of this altercation, Congressman Leo Ryan, Bob Brown (NBC cameraman), Don Harris (NBC correspondent), Patricia Parks (a defector), and Greg Robinson (photographer) died. In addition, the gunmen wounded approximately twelve people, including Jackie Speier (lawyer and politician) and Tim

Reiterman (*San Francisco Examiner*). This is a clear example of how difficult it is for members to leave HCIGs and how quickly people who attempt to help are put in danger.

The Peoples Temple stands out because the HCIG leader focused more on isolating his members and establishing a new society in Guyana, which led to the ultimate act of abuse in the mass murder-suicide of 912 members. On top of the deaths of non-members, the leader placed followers of the Peoples Temple in a room and injected them with drugs for several weeks at a time. This is a tactic to make members more susceptible to obeying demands and easier to control. Eventually, this random drugging prepared members for the final act of physical abuse. In 1978, 912 people from the Peoples Temple were injected with syringes, or they consumed a drink filled with cyanide. For members who did not want to commit suicide, others placed a syringe in the back of their neck in their spinal cord, causing them to die (Glover and Raphael, 2024). Many of the members, children especially, informed their families and the leader of their hesitation to end their lives. Ultimately, some parents poisoned their children before poisoning themselves. The leader and devoted peers overruled the others, and the brutal act of showing loyalty and commitment to their leader left voids in many families.

Spiritual Impact

The power dynamic in the Peoples Temple is similar to that of the Christian church, as the Christian faith is the religious foundation that brought members of the HCIG together in the first place. Jim Jones was a pastor and authority figure for those in the Peoples Temple. His own son, Stephan Jones, believed that he was originally a good man who intended to teach Christianity to others (Glover and Raphael, 2024). However, people believed that Jim Jones developed a clouded judgment and got lost in power and drugs. While no one confirmed this belief, his overall decline in good character and faith was echoed throughout the documentary.

Psychological Impact

A major form of psychological abuse is manipulation, and Jim Jones utilized several strategies to influence the cognitions and behaviors of his followers. He would hold “white night trials” and instruct people to drink a concoction containing poison. These trials tested commitment, loyalty, and forced compliance, and he punished those who did not consume the drink. Although there was no actual poison in the cups, he induced excessive fear and emotionally toyed with the members to enforce compliance. In episode two of “Cult Massacre: One Day in Jonestown”, the leader went as far as to say, “If we can’t live in peace, then let’s die in peace because we are not committing suicide” (Glover and Raphael, 2024). He was constantly working to convince his followers that they were either happier living in Guyana or willing to die for peace. External threats to the Peoples Temple and Jim Jones grew rampant over time, which led to increased paranoia and conspiracy theories. Under these circumstances, members felt the need and desire to flee to Guyana in which mass suicide appeared as the only option.

The goal of the leader of the Peoples Temple was for his members to obey his orders and follow his beliefs, which he achieved by force, threats, and intimidation. Grace Stoen, a member for six years, recalled a time when the leader told her that he loves her very much but not to fall asleep or he would kill her (Glover and Raphael, 2024). One may ponder what type of love this is. In other instances of coercion and threatening intimidation, Jones would inform the community that if they did not participate in the mass suicide, then others would come and torture them and their children. He did everything in his power to ensure they feared the consequences of disobeying him.

Societal Impact

The Peoples Temple was appealing in the 1970s because people considered it “cool” as it promoted a brotherhood and advocated for racial equality. The group became increasingly attractive as more people discovered the support for the Civil Rights Movement. The church in San Francisco developed into a multiracial and multigenerational church, bringing in those who opposed sexism, ageism, racism, and elitism. Members initially felt pride in the community they were building and empowering. Talks of moving to a secondary location to avoid judgment from outsiders began, in which members uprooted their entire lives and moved with the Peoples Temple. There were promises of homes they did not need to pay for, agricultural production in Guyana to provide a food supply, and medical care. Over time, the leader’s intentions became clear, and people discovered he was forcing them into extreme isolation. Jim Jones would take passports from people so they were not able to leave, and would send gunmen around the area hidden in the jungle to shoot anyone who attempted to escape.

As mentioned above, the ultimate impact on society was the loss of nearly a thousand people from cyanide poisoning. Those who managed to escape by leaving the HCIG, likely before the move to Guyana, created new identities to avoid reliving their participation in the Peoples Temple. On the other hand, those who could not escape died in the mass murder-suicide and could not rebuild their lives in a normal society. Eleven people planned to leave through the jungle and seek out a town 30 miles away from the Peoples Temple, but their plan was not feasible because of the surveillance over them. Jim Jones instilled in them that the only two choices were to kill themselves or die at the hands of another person.

Steve Daniel, a survivor of the Peoples Temple, shared his experience with the loss of his family members in the mass murder-suicide. His first introduction to the HCIG was through his

mother, who encouraged him to attend church and sit in to listen. As time went on, he heard rumors and backlash against Jim Jones, but Jones had already taught his family that the media presents a different narrative than the truth (Daniel, 2019). Although he had a gut feeling that something was wrong, he trusted that his family would protect one another and avoid putting the children in danger. When the time came to move to Guyana, Betty Carter demonstrated her loyalty to the church and relocated her children to the new society. Betty believed the church was under scrutiny from the government and judgment from the general public in the United States, and trusted that she would create a better life for her and her children.

After Steve Daniel's family had fully moved to Guyana, he learned from his relatives that all members had to surrender their passports upon arrival. Those who did not comply could not be permitted into the new society and could no longer remain in the HCIG. In addition, he overheard people discussing how the regular church sermons had transitioned into strategies for defense through drills, practices, punishments, and tests to determine loyalty to Jim Jones (Daniel, 2019). When Steve learned about the mass murder-suicide along with everyone else, his anger manifested into hope that his family was at peace. He chose to believe that the members of the Peoples Temple had dreams of becoming the best versions of themselves, and they wanted to experience true freedom, happiness, and love to contribute to the rest of the world.

In his narrative, Steve discusses his experience of coming to accept his family's passing, and he eventually allowed himself to change his perspective on the catastrophe. He brought himself to believe that his young sons had departed the world as the loving, kind boys who would continue to look after their mother in the afterlife. Touching on the topic of using the words "cult" or "brainwashed", Steve emphasized that these are not words to associate with his family because they were not aware of the injustices being inflicted upon them. They had no ill

intentions or motivations to perform maladaptive behaviors. Steve Daniel wants others to remember his family as kind, good-hearted, loyal people.

Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS)

Physical Impact

In FLDS society, domestic abuse between parents and children, as well as within marital partnerships, was extremely common and overlooked. The youngest survivor that I researched was Elissa Wall, and she began recognizing abusive tendencies in her HCIG as a preteen. Elissa Wall's memoir *Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs* reveals how she witnessed and experienced firsthand abuse at the hands of family members and her husband. Elissa stated that slaps were a common form of punishment for children and wives in FLDS. In more severe cases, Elissa discussed an instance where her father had beaten one of her brothers so intensely that he was limping for days (Wall, 2008, pp. 85-86). While this may not be a universal experience for all FLDS members, it was more common than not. Because many individuals were born into FLDS, their whole lives revolved around their religion, and dysfunctional dynamics were normalized and dismissed under patriarchy as will be discussed in the next section. This heightened vulnerabilities and created a cultural environment in which women and youth suffered countless instances of abuse.

Throughout her recollection of her traumatic experiences as a former FLDS member, Elissa Wall highlighted numerous incidents involving her husband and first cousin, Allen Steed. After being forced into this agreement, Allen expected Elissa to submit herself to him sexually, which she protested from the start. Through excessive force and manipulation of the prophet's teachings, Allen constantly forced himself on Elissa. Allen forcefully took advantage of Elissa

while she was asleep, while she cried out for him to leave her alone, while she actively fought back, and while she lay in pain from previous abusive interactions (Wall, 2008). The more she tried to run from Allen and escape his sexual advances, the more Allen beat her and forced her to comply. Thinking back to the age of consent in Utah, Elissa was only 14. Therefore, not only was she below the legal age to consent to these acts, but she openly and directly expressed her opposition to any sexual relations. If the abuse was not punishment enough, Elissa suffered two miscarriages and had a stillborn baby at the young age of 16. Her husband had conditioned her to believe that she was disgusting, which transpired into her believing that her miscarriages were a result of God punishing her for being unworthy (Wall, 2008, p. 190). Although she was physically penalized for objecting to sexual advances, she was also shamed for accepting them.

In FLDS, a myriad of women and children had experienced sexual assault from the male members, all the way up to Rulon Jeffs (the initial prophet). The girls often questioned why the prophet would touch them in ways that were taught to be wrong and unholy (Dammann et al., 2022). A majority of the girls did not receive education on the conception of babies; therefore, they had a feeling that the behaviors were morally wrong but did not quite understand how to contextualize those concerns. While abuse was mostly inflicted on women and young girls, males were not excluded from molestation and sexual abuse. Warren's nephews and brothers accused him of repeated acts of sexual misconduct against them for years of their lives (Wall, 2008, p. 359). Once they escaped, many of the victims were validated as men and women obtained medical records proving the sexual abuse. Warren Jeffs hid pictures, birth certificates, and recordings of proof that minors had been married off, instructed to take off their clothes, and had unlawful sexual relations.

Spiritual Impact

The power structure of FLDS consisted of all male figures at the top and all women below them. Warren referred to the dynamic as a benevolent dictatorship (Dammann, 2022). Whether it was the prophet, the Bishop, a husband, a brother, a male cousin, or another man in FLDS, men were perceived as superior and the closest to God. All women and children were perceived as property and under the ownership of the appointed male head of the house. The patriarchal hierarchy was so prominent in FLDS that women's potential to enter Heaven depended on their husbands. Unless a man had at least three wives, the man and women could not reach eternal salvation or the highest of the levels to Heaven (Wall, 2008, pp. 24-25). FLDS instructed women to "keep sweet" and obey men, who were thought to be guides on Earth for God's teachings. From a young age, all girls and women believed that opposing any of the prophet's teachings or demands would be a direct opposition to God. Devotion and obedience were two main pillars maintaining the FLDS existence, and many people claimed that they would rather cease to exist than defy the prophet.

The most prominent form of abuse and indoctrination discussed in Elissa Wall's memoir was spiritual. Ever since she was a child, Elissa could only attend educational lessons taught by members of FLDS. The lectures in school began with a devotional class led by Warren Jeffs, in which he would rely on excerpts and assignments directly related to the Book of Mormon (Wall, 2008, p. 38). The leader replaced all information regarding evolution, human anatomy, and other scientific focuses with lessons on religious beliefs. As Elissa aged in FLDS, the prophet used their religion to justify much of the other domestic violence and sexual abuse she endured because she had been taught that God said it was her path to eternal salvation. Despite all of the

maladaptive behaviors that occurred in FLDS, all of the members truly believed that they were God's chosen people who gained permission into Heaven.

Psychological Impact

For months, Elissa had denounced the match with her cousin as her husband. She declared to Warren Jeffs, her siblings, her parents, and Allen himself that she did not want to marry him. Elissa had angrily expressed her discontent with the prophet, and he took it upon himself to threaten her mother with condemnation in the church. This would mean that Sharon Wall would no longer attain eternal salvation and would face expulsion from the community if she did not bring Elissa to marry Allen (Wall, 2008, p. 145). The blackmail tactics of intimidating and threatening Elissa via her mother were the final straw that led to her involuntary marriage. Warren Jeffs manipulated the members of FLDS like they were puppets, and violated the women and children's self-agency through asserting patriarchal authority and denying their autonomy.

As mentioned above, the FLDS religion justified that abuse that Elissa endured. In *Stolen Innocence*, Elissa states, "When I resisted Allen's advances, he would condemn me for not obeying the prophet. When I gave in to him, as soon as he was done, he'd tell me that I was wicked for giving in to my mortal desires" (Wall, 2008, pp. 85-86). Allen not only used guilt to coerce Elissa into performing sexual acts, but he also placed shame on her once he completed the non-consensual sex. This is a clear act of coercive control, sexual assault, and dysfunctional dynamics. He took advantage of his role as her husband and an adult and fully adopted the role of her manipulative male owner. To make matters worse and confuse Elissa more, men used to misconstrue the sexual acts before, during, and after they occurred. There appeared to be no way to remove herself from these harmful situations, and she grappled with this treatment for years.

While physical actions and pleas for the abuse to stop did not lead to desired results, Elissa dealt with suicidal ideation. As a defense mechanism, Elissa made various attempts to mentally escape from Allen. At the age of 14, just before the marriage officiated, she seriously considered climbing on top of a nearby building and jumping off (Wall, 2008, p. 141). Evidently, she eventually gave in to marrying Allen that day to avoid her mom's excommunication and threat of becoming an apostate. After Allen raped her during their marriage, Elissa attempted to overdose on Tylenol and Ibuprofen but the dosage was not deadly (Wall, 2008, p. 170). During the sexual assaults, she would put forth her best efforts to distract herself by closing her eyes, imagining she was in a different location or circumstance, or counting as high as possible (Wall, 2008, p. 175). Until her ultimate escape, these were the only ways that she managed to somewhat cope and protect herself.

Societal Impact

Warren Jeffs benefited from controlling FLDS members because he had an extensive, unimaginable amount of power over everyone. The religious foundation of his claims was strong enough to help him build an empire of loyal HCIG members. He was a greedy man and utilized tithing as a source of income during his time (Wall, 2008, p. 371). This entailed thousands of members giving 10% of their earned income to the church, while Warren kept and maintained large sums of money. The money helped him plan his escape when he was hiding from the police in several states. As more members began leaving the land in the middle of the night and exposing the treatment that took place under Warren Jeffs' control, he attempted to avoid any legal repercussions with the help of members who still believed in him. While many members stayed in FLDS because they adored him, others came to realize that the intermittent cycles of abuse and affection created emotional turmoil.

Eventually, no amount of money could save Warren from getting caught by the police. A handful of members found the courage to escape and file lawsuits against him. He was arrested in Nevada in August of 2006, confessed to a number of criminal offenses in January of 2007, and was later convicted of two counts as an accomplice to rape in September. This ties in with the aforementioned idea that certain parties are held accountable for crimes even if they are not the perpetrator because they are aware of the harmful actions performed against others. He became aware of domestic violence and sexual assault that many FLDS members endured, and he either justified those behaviors or turned his attention elsewhere. Even though he fled from the FLDS community, got arrested, went to trial, and got convicted of sex crimes involving minors, he built such a strong following that people trusted he was innocent. Many still believed that FLDS would remain an indestructible community under the guidance of Warren Jeffs. As a result, Warren Jeffs managed to continue his administration of FLDS from prison by relying on external individuals to help support their community. Jeffs provides a concrete example of how conviction and imprisonment do not always provide a solution to abuse, especially in high-control ideological groups.

Discussion

Although each group had different ideological foundations, NXIVM, Sarah Lawrence College, and FLDS all include subcategories: physical aggression and violence, sexual assault, manipulation, blackmail, and isolation. With some variance, the Peoples Temple and FLDS use religious indoctrination as well. Despite the abuse, HCIGs provide a sense of community and promises of personal growth for members. For instance, leaders may promise a networking opportunity for professional development in their chosen career path, financial support, or assistance with finding one's identity and gaining self-confidence. To add to that, members and

leaders often experience traumatic bonding. Traumatic bonding, as defined by Dutton and Painter (1981), is an intense emotional bond formed between an abuser and a subjugated counterpart in which the dominant figure harms and intimidates the other person. These factors contribute to the membership of individuals in these harmful groups.

Patterns - Hetero Patriarchy

All of the HCIGs contained a heteropatriarchal power dynamic, as each powerful male leader had strong female support. A businessman led NXIVM, and he formed an executive team of women. A father and his daughter in college led the Sarah Lawrence College HCIG. A preacher led the Peoples Temple, and he gained immense support from his wives. FLDS includes God, the prophet, husbands, and obedient, submissive wives. In summary, dominant men took advantage of their power over women and vulnerable adolescents.

This aligns with a continuous pattern throughout history in which women have not had nearly as much autonomy over their bodies as men do. Historically, women have been subject to medical abuse, often as far as forced abortions, forced sterilizations, and genital mutilation. Across the four HCIGs, medical abuse contributed to the fear of continuing to take the abuse and motivated them to seek out an escape route. In FLDS, members only had access to medical care and education within their community. In school and church, members taught others that their religion was more than enough to overcome any health issues. Consistent with how women faced barriers to reproductive health in the past, FLDS women were subject to hidden pregnancies, miscarriages likely from distress, and stillborn births. Children, who were not legally considered old enough to consent, made up the majority of the impregnated members in the FLDS.

Similarly, the branding of NXIVM women as instructed by the male leader is a major act of medical malpractice and severe abusive control. The members of NXIVM in the subgroup

Dominus Obsequious Sororium (DOS), translating to “master over the slave women”, received branding marks from an appointed female doctor chosen by the leader (Edmondson, 195). Not only was the doctor performing an unethical and unsafe procedure, but the location of the branding was in one of the coach’s houses, away from medical resources. The women took turns filming each other naked on a table as they held each other down and got branded with the letters “KR” on their pelvic area. This act was a humiliation ritual that left a mental and physical scar on these women.

It is undeniable that men in higher positions of the social hierarchy took advantage of their power and used it for personal benefit. The issue of abusive behavior and consent becomes blurry because many vulnerable people struggle to comprehend the actions performed against them. Individuals who deal with abuse and trauma struggle to contextualize their experiences if they do not have the intellectual understanding or knowledge of specific verbiage. For instance, many of the minors who experienced sexual assault in FLDS did not know the words sex or rape because they were not exposed to this type of language in their community. Without access to external communication, there are obstacles to developing this vocabulary that have only become more prominent. This further leads to difficulty understanding what abuse, choice, consent, free will, violation, and autonomy mean. A lack of external, non-biased healthcare and education allowed for no supervision of the abuse. With no supervision of the criminal behaviors, members could not identify and raise any red flags, and outside professionals could not investigate. As a result, members remain misinformed and trapped inside their HCIG bubble.

Under these patriarchal power dynamics, women are often more susceptible to demands for abuse against others. This is especially true for NXIVM as the executive team of women obeyed the male leader’s orders to stay under his wing and because they trusted that he had the

best intentions to support their community. Allison Mack, the supervisor of all members, established the NXIVM all-women subgroup Dominos Obsequious Sororium under the guidance of Keith Raniere. With the master-slave dynamic for DOS, Allison forced each member to provide her with collateral that she would blackmail them with to keep them in a constant state of fear and paranoia. Moreover, the strong patriarchal power structure in FLDS including God, the prophet, husbands, and all other men, led to a majority of the women blindly following the commands of their superiors. As a result, mothers would groom their own daughters to prepare to marry at a young age, in an incestual relationship, or both. FLDS teachings indoctrinated women of all roles and age groups, which aided in the acts of forcing children to marry the prophet or other man in the community. Overall, women were conditioned to obey their husbands, transferring onto the daughters who were taught to openly obey their fathers.

Traumatic Bonding

The term “trauma bond” has become increasingly popular in modern language, especially throughout social media platforms. However, its application to various types of relationships and its psychological standing are controversial. From a social psychology perspective, Donald Dutton and Susan Lee Painter created the term traumatic bonding to identify dysfunctional dynamics between women and their abusive partners. Dutton and Painter (1981) define the term as the “development and course of strong emotional ties between two persons where one person intermittently harasses, beats, threatens, abuses, or intimidates the other”. The intermittent abuse, combined with fleeting moments of affection, excessive love, and promises of the harm not continuing, allows for the traumatic bond to strengthen over time.

Power imbalances and intermittent abuse establish foundations for traumatic bonds. When a mistreats and dominates a subjugated individual, power balances occur (Dutton &

Painter, 1981). Through excessive time spent together, the subjugated person will adopt perceptions and opinions about themselves that they assume their dominant counterpart to possess. As a result, a cycle of dependency and decreased self-esteem enables the power dynamic to continue. These power dynamics advance in severity because of intermittent abuse. Intermittent abuse involves the subordinate individual as a subject of cycles of callous, negative treatment mixed with alternating periods of pleasant interactions (Dutton & Painter, 1981). In between the callous treatment and positive treatment, the dominant figure supplies their subordinate with excessive love and affection.

The abused individual observes the switch of behaviors in their partner and through the learned helplessness theory, they believe they are unable to change their situation (Dutton & Painter, 1981). Because these cycles are constant, the intermittent abuse is highly effective in establishing patterns that are challenging to break out of. As they learn the vicious cycle of abuse and love, they become conditioned to rely on the other person and believe they cannot survive without them. The removal of unpleasant stimuli and the replacement of positive stimuli strengthens the interpersonal relationship formed between the individuals, reinforcing the dysfunctional power dynamic.

In high-control ideological groups, traumatic bonds influence commitment because the power dynamics formed during the abusive cycle create and strengthen bonds based on shared trauma. This leads to perpetual obstacles when attempting to separate. The first instance of abuse tends to be minimal and coupled with promises that the behavior was a one-time mistake. The excessive affection leads the subjugated individual to trust that the abuse was an isolated incident, and over time, the shock factor of the abuse begins to dissipate. According to Dutton and Painter (1981), cognitive shifts occur in which the subjugated individual begins to believe

that they can evade the abuse by being overly conscious of their behaviors. By choosing to believe that they can behave in ways that keep them tied to their abuser but avoid the abuse itself, they shift their perception of the maladaptive actions. However, this creates other issues because the abused often place blame on themselves as they identify their own behaviors as the cause of adversity. In turn, the cycle repeats itself, and the escape plan ceases to exist.

In other examinations of traumatic bonds, psychologists and sociologists identify the brainwashing theory and specific incentives that motivate people to become members of high-control ideological groups. Coined by Long and Hadden (1983), the brainwashing theory addresses the act of coercing another individual into believing or following a particular ideology about society (Coates, 2012). As attested by Coates (2012), promises of professional development and achievements, social bonds, self-improvement, spiritual advancements, discovery of personal identity, self-esteem, general health, and happiness motivate members to join. Given the extensive list of positive emotional, social, and personal incentives, members of HCIGs adapted to the various forms of harmful practices. The combination of direct rewards and brainwashing control strategies allows leaders to gain control over vulnerable individuals. Alongside dispersions of rewards for compliance, members and leaders justify maltreatment and coercive control. Considering past theories and research approaches, there is a foundation to dive deeper into the rationales for becoming attached to high-control ideological groups.

In the field of religious studies, many scholars highly dispute the brainwashing theory. James Richardson argues that claiming to be “brainwashed” allows apostates to shift blame and accountability onto leaders after realizing they regret their affiliation with the group (Dawson, 2003, pp. 161-162). Richardson further expresses that brainwashing techniques may encourage compliance, but they do not necessarily provide an explanation for why someone may remain in

a high-control ideological group. In the 1980s, Eileen Barker contributed to the discourse surrounding the brainwashing theory by highlighting how individuals in the Unification Church often possess particular qualities that motivate participation in new religious movements (Dawson, 2003, p. 163). Brainwashing theory is thought to reject the possibility that individuals may find high-control ideological groups attractive before they recognize abusive tendencies within the community. A number of psychologists, sociologists, and religious scholars do not believe the notion that people will perform behaviors completely against their will while holding opposing convictions (Dawson, 2003, p. 163). While certain individuals may possess various characteristics that increase susceptibility to participate in high-control ideological groups, brainwashing from leaders is not a likely explanation for long-term membership.

Controversy Behind the Term “Trauma Bond”

In May of 2025, I assisted my faculty mentor, Dr. Amanda Lucia, at her Surviving the Law: Legal Advocacy for Survivors and Scholars Conference for the Religion & Sexual Abuse Project (Lucia, 2025). I introduced my Honors Capstone project to other attendees and identified varying perspectives regarding the term “trauma bond”. One individual explicitly stated that by using the word “bond,” there is an implication that there is a loving relationship between the person being abused and their abuser. Some people believe that social media overuses the term, misusing it to label dynamics that do not involve abuse (Karlis, 2023). While this may be the case for some, love is not the foundation of everyone’s dynamics and does not apply to all circumstances. For other conference attendees, many felt as though the term resonated with them and provided them with language to describe their traumatic experiences. After speaking with several presenters at the conference, I discovered that many attendees interpreted the term differently and it helped them feel seen as a survivor of abuse.

I recognize the discomfort and issues with the phrase “trauma bond” that some may experience. When people experience injustices and their traumatic events remain a sensitive subject to discuss, emotions are likely to surface and incite negative responses. People cope with and experience traumatic events in a plethora of different ways, and it is difficult to discover the correct way to address these types of situations. Trauma is messy, nonlinear, and intense, and the ways in which researchers explore dysfunctional power dynamics are subjective.

Considering these in-person conversations and the definition presented by Dutton and Painter, the term trauma bond and its related terms appear to apply to my research project. As all of the survivors highlighted in this research experienced a power imbalance and intermittent abuse in their high-control ideological groups, it is reasonable to say that trauma and a type of bond emerged between the abuser and the abused individuals. Coercive control in dysfunctional dynamics can impact children, people with psychological disorders, and other vulnerable populations. However, those who are able-bodied and neurotypical are susceptible to trauma bonds as well because a relationship is still being built on trust and loyalty. The main takeaway in using this term is recognizing that taking advantage of one’s power over others is destructive and harmful to the overall well-being of those affected. Whether these behaviors are illegal or not, it is essential for justice to be served once people recognize they have been wronged.

As easy as it is to hope that this research leaves an impact and induces enough discomfort to incite change, there is not always a clear-cut solution that is satisfactory to all. The controversy and ongoing debate about the use of the term “trauma bonding” exhibits how survivor experiences, perspectives, and coping mechanisms are diverse. By utilizing a survivor-centered approach, former members of high-control ideological groups are given a platform to disclose details on their own account. A major takeaway is that people are deeply

wounded and forever scarred by these events, and there is not always a successful resolution. In highlighting the successes of these survivors and demonstrating people are not defined by their trauma, it is not to cover up the wrongdoings against them. Instead, it humanizes them and emphasizes that they are carrying their trauma with them. There is always hope and desire for reassurance that people improve and get to a better place in life, which also adds another pressure to cater to other people's needs. It can become tedious, overwhelming, and unnecessary to constantly notify others of their healing and coping mechanisms. Sometimes, it is enough to acknowledge that someone has experienced trauma and that they are continuing to deal with it in whatever ways they see fit.

Future Directions

Due to the First Amendment's protection of freedom of religion, the idea of policies and laws addressing high-control ideological groups becomes legally complex. Therefore, increased research on the psychological mechanisms underlying these groups can help mental health practitioners and policymakers develop intervention and prevention strategies that are more effective than the disastrous federal interventions of the past. By identifying patterns of harmful psychological tactics, we can raise awareness of abuse within these environments and highlight common features of trauma bonds. Research can address how abuse in high-control ideological groups is distinct, as the goal is to create bonds between leaders and members to isolate them from their loved ones. Understanding these power dynamics can help explain why people remain affiliated with their HCIG despite their traumatic experiences.

Increased awareness can lead to increased accessibility of mental health resources for those struggling in abusive environments. As isolation is a leading factor in motivating members to remain in their abusive high-control groups, providing support and reminders that these

individuals have community and safe spaces outside of their group is essential. Psychological practices can implement therapy and intervention programs to specifically address trauma for victims of abuse. Beyond therapeutic services, former members of HCIGs can join programs that help them reintegrate into society. There should be safer practices in place that ensure the protection of minors and those who are not able to provide consent to support vulnerable individuals previously involved with high-control ideological groups.

Currently, there is difficulty building rapport and a trusting relationship between children involved in high-control ideological groups and official agencies. Because much of the teachings in HCIGs surround the belief that external forces and individuals should not be trusted, a copious amount of children do not feel safe reporting to the police or Child Protective Services when they are given the opportunity (Bardin, 2009). Even when raids or convictions occur against abusive leaders, high-control ideological groups are not guaranteed to cease to exist following these efforts. In 1993, the Waco siege of Branch Davidians in Texas demonstrated how raids pose an additional threat to children (Wright & Palmer, 2018). The same can be said of the FBI Raid on the FLDS in 2008. Police efforts to terminate HCIGs instead of implementing protective strategies and programs increase the likelihood of fatalities of personnel, criminal members, children, and innocent eyewitnesses. The goal is for fewer people to experience harm and catastrophes, not for HCIG and members of society to be put at risk. By improving accessibility and existence of educational programs, family members outside of HCIGs can develop an understanding of how to best support children as well as help build a bridge between child protective agencies and minors who have been harmed. According to Bardin (2009), CPS may also observe and maintain records of specific characteristics to identify harmful behaviors of

groups. In doing so, more officials can remain informed about particular cases, signs of abuse, and protective practices for minors.

One solution is to create internal child protection offices inside high-control ideological groups. For instance, ISKCON Child Protection aims to provide resources and solutions to individuals impacted by child abuse in high-control ideological groups. ISKCON Child Protection has implemented policies and practices that provide secure and confidential reporting of child abuse for those as young as zero years old until 18 years old (ISKCON Child Protection, 2025). In doing so, the organization puts forth continuous efforts to defend against and prohibit various types of abuse, exploitation, neglect, and harm. As a means to ensure the safety of children and advocates who make reports on behalf of abused children, ISKCON Child Protection offers opportunities to connect with government officials, community members, and other organizations to strengthen moral practices and qualities when dealing with trauma. Furthermore, those who make reports of child abuse are not required to provide proof of the abuse and can remain anonymous to protect their identities.

The Zero Abuse Project is another proactive organization that involves attorneys, forensic interview specialists, and researchers who collaborate to provide informational workshops. The diverse team of scholars and community members use academic research for the general public and potentially former members of high-control ideological groups to understand the severity of child abuse and how to approach harmful situations with evidence-based methods (Zero Abuse Project, 2026). The Zero Abuse Project offers workshops to educate professionals centered around child protection and faith-based institutions. In taking the first step to implement change and enforce safer practices for minors, individuals can learn different ways to discern patterns and act in response to sexual, physical, and emotional harm. On top of that, the Zero Abuse

Project seeks advice from other professionals to guide children and their families in regaining autonomy, acknowledging signs of abuse, and encouraging effective mechanisms for coping with trauma. Organizations such as these establish foundations and tools that bring power back into the hands of impacted youth.

Heightened awareness of physical, spiritual, and psychological abuse of individuals and their societal impacts can help structure preventive measures. Various types of therapy, community support, psychoeducation, and trauma-informed care can enhance survivor bonding to allow people to process their experiences and regain their trust in society. Group therapy can bring former HCIG members together to promote the healthy formation of relationships as they validate each other's experiences and learn new coping skills. The family systems approach is a form of therapy that focuses on the interpersonal relationships between an entire family rather than solely on the individual (Courtois & Ford, 2009). This approach can help individuals rebuild relationships with their loved ones whom they were isolated from during their membership. Bringing the family together to discuss the effects of trauma can help reduce the guilt and shame that both parties may feel as a result of the reconciliation, especially because communication between HCIG members and external family is not permitted during active membership. Trauma-informed care, catered towards the former HCIG member or a larger group (e.g., family or support group), can provide a therapeutic approach specifically to address the needs of each individual. In combination with trauma-informed care, psychoeducation is beneficial for both the former members and for the general population to understand the detrimental effects of high-control ideological groups on the overall well-being of an individual. Survivors of trauma and abuse deserve to feel empowered, advocated for, and have their voices heard to bring awareness of long-lasting harms.

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Appendix A. - Documentaries

	Documentary Name	HCIG Leader	Identified Survivors in the Media
NXIVM	<i>Seduced: Inside the NXIVM Cult</i> (Starz)	- Keith Raniere (corporate authority, leader) - Pam Cafritz (Senior counselor) - Nancy Salzman (co-founder) - Allison Mack (supervisor)	- India Oxenberg (member from 2011-2018) - Sarah Edmondson (had a very public separation from NXIVM)
Sarah Lawrence College	<i>The Stolen Youth: Inside the Cult at Sarah Lawrence</i> (Hulu)	- Larry Ray (leader) - Isabella Pollok (Talía's best friend, Larry's lover) - Talia Ray (Larry's daughter)	- Daniel Levin (Santos' roommate freshman year) - Claudia Drury (friends with Santos and Talia) - Santos Rosario (Talía's boyfriend) - Isabella Pollok (Talía's best friend, Larry's lover) - Yalitza Rosario - Felicia Rosario (Larry's girlfriend)
The Peoples Temple	<i>Cult Massacre One Day in Jonestown</i> (Hulu)	- Jim Jones (reverend, leader)	- Grace Stoen (member for 6 years) - Jackie Speier (lawyer, politician; shot by members)
Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS)	<i>Keep Sweet: Pray & Obey - FLDS Cult</i> (Netflix) <i>Trust Me: The False Prophet</i> (Netflix)⁵	- Rulon Jeffs (the prophet) - Warren Jeffs (son of Rulon, new prophet)	- Rebecca Wall (one of Rulon Jeff's wives) - Alicia Rohbock (Rulon's 23rd wife) - Elissa Wall (married first cousin)

⁵ The *Trust Me: The False Prophet* documentary series was released after I concluded my data collection

Appendix B. - Memoirs

	Memoir Name	Survivor (Author)	HCIG Leader
NXIVM	Scarred: The True Story of How I Escaped NXIVM, the Cult That Bound My Life	Sarah Edmondson	Keith Raniere
Sarah Lawrence College	Slonim Woods 9: A Memoir	Daniel Levin	Larry Ray
The Peoples Temple	Honoring My Duty to My Family	Steve Daniel	Jim Jones
Fundamentalist Church of Latter-Day Saints (FLDS)	Stolen Innocence: My Story of Growing Up in a Polygamous Sect, Becoming a Teenage Bride, and Breaking Free of Warren Jeffs	Elissa Wall	Warren Jeffs