The Blurry Line Between Corporation and Cult: A Retrospective Autoethnographic Study

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Abstract
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Keywords
culture change, corporate cult, indoctrination, totalism, retrospective autoethnography

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The Blurry Line Between Corporation and Cult: A Retrospective Autoethnographic Study

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In popular management literature corporations are sometimes loosely compared to cults. The comparison is a severe allegation as it implies the transgression of subordinate employees’ integrity. This paper explores to what extent such comparisons with cults are warranted as well as the implications this has for the practice of corporate culture management. On grounds of the author’s unique, first-hand experience in both corporate and cultic environments a retrospective autoethnographic (RAE) approach was chosen to further explore the supposed resemblance. The comparison is structured along Lifton’s eight criteria of thought reform and reveals that although akin to cults in all aspects corporations also fundamentally differ due to the infeasibility, at least for now, of controlling the corporate environment in totalist fashion. This might explain why so many attempts to change corporate cultures fail as these initiatives are based on the anachronistic idea that culture change can be “implemented” by somehow “inculcating” employees with “company values.” A sanitized form of brainwashing that fails in the corporate environment.

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Introduction

Although percentages can be disputed – and some healthy skepticism about the accuracy of percentages that hit the 70 mark seems warranted (Hughes, 2011), broad consensus exists that many organizational change initiatives fail (e.g., Burnes, 2004; Hughes, 2011; Palmer et al., 2016; Smith, 2002). It is safe to conclude this is no different for the sub-category of organizational “culture” change (e.g., Martin, 1985: Smith, 2003; Tatton, 2015). At business schools and within management discourse more broadly the notion of culture is commonly used to refer to presumed patterns of underlying assumptions shared within a given group (Schein, 1983). Assumptions here are taken-for-granted ways of seeing and being in the world (Schein, 1985). Culture change is about altering these fundamental assumptions and then becomes something like “the collective programming of the mind” (Hofstede, 1980, p. 25). From a corporate strategy perspective, it may seem sensible to talk about employees in this top-down, propositional manner. From a psychological point of view to use this discursive frame as a template for the design of behavioral change interventions is problematic. It strikes me as a disguised form of brainwashing (Graamans, 2023, 2024; Graamans et al. 2021; Scott-Morgan, 1994). Apparently for good reason modern-day corporations and their so-called “cultures” have been referred to as “corporate cults” (e.g., Arnott, 2000; Kets de Vries, 2019; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). To be fair, the metaphor of washing people’s brains is as cryptic as that of collectively programming people’s minds. I propose it is therefore more fruitful to focus on the actual managerial practices underlying these descriptive metaphors. This paper will further assess whether the mechanistic, cognitivist approach to the idea of corporate or
organizational culture change (Graamans et al., 2021) contributes to culture management practices being perceived as cultic.

Most notably eminent management scholar and thought-leader Manfred Kets de Vries (2019) made the claim in *Harvard Business Review* that some corporate cultures are indeed cultic. He observed the sinister trend of some large corporations trying to exert cultic control over their employees as well as their customers. These corporations aim to become all-encompassing entities. He argues that through the opportunistic use of rituals, slogans and pep talks, and the development of prescribed jargon employees are made to feel part of exclusive, elite groups (see also: Hochman, 1984). By replacing employees’ communal experiences with corporate experiences through over-work and stuffed agendas out-of-the-box thinking is thwarted. Critically questioning leadership too is discouraged (see also: Tourish & Wohlforth, 2000). Charismatic leadership is a key ingredient of cults (Galanter, 1999; Lifton, 1999; Oakes, 1997; Singer & Lalich, 1995). Communication scholar Fred Turner (2018) observed that modern-day corporations too are very much centered around charismatic leadership. He found that in the process of implementing flatter organizational structures modern-day corporations operate under forms of organizing that are characterized by more covert modes of surveillance of which charismatic leadership is intrinsically part. In Turner’s (2006, 2018) analyses these modern-day forms of organizing are traced back to the (failed) communal experiments of the counterculture era. Paradoxically as it may seem, by experimenting with alternatives forms of organizing in the counterculture era as a reaction to what were perceived to be authoritarian forms of control arose a “Bohemian mode of surveillance” (Lusoli & Turner, 2020, p. 240). That mode, so is argued, may have been the inspirational template for the current-day exercise of covert corporate control, masked by the highly problematic notion of corporate culture (Graamans, 2023, 2024; Graamans et al., 2021).

In this paper a comparison between a (remnant) communal experiment of the counterculture era, on the one hand, and current-day forms of “soft control” under the broader banner of corporate culture, on the other, is made to critically expand upon. But before proceeding, the idea of corporate culture needs to be deconstructed first, as this turns out to be a highly problematic notion that is easily misused (Alvesson, 2013a, 2013b) and often opportunistically abused (Graamans et al., 2021; Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013). The rationale for initiating culture change interventions is not always what it is espoused to be (Graamans et al., 2021). These initiatives can, for example, turn into ritualized happenings, that is, as something simply to be done at regular intervals as part of what is considered “good governance,” for reasons no one can really explain. The idea of culture can also be deployed to opportunistically legitimize pending cost-cutting or other organizational restructuring measures (e.g., Harris & Ogbonna, 2002). An even more sinister take is that under the banner of culture change, the latter unpopular measures can be obfuscated or else can be made to appear far less threatening. However, underlying all these misuses of the idea of culture lies something more fundamental: the managerial jargon deployed to talk about how real people (are supposed to) work together is construed around anachronistic idea of how behavioral patterns are produced to become group-typical and of how these can be changed. As mentioned earlier, in talking about people it is made to seem as if their behavior can be changed through a so-called collective programming of mind. Theoretically, this is a highly problematic proposition as this is pure metaphor and metaphor only (Verheggen, 2005; Verheggen & Baerveldt, 2007). Practically, corporate culture construed as such evokes the dubious organizational practice of trying to inculcate employees with company values that are deemed to be strategically aligned with its mission, vision, strategy and so-called culture in value sessions and workshops (Graamans, 2023; Graamans et al., 2021; Scott-Morgan, 1994). This overly mechanistic, cognitive approach to behavior control – based on metaphor – makes little
Theoretical and practical sense, unless someone, consciously or not, construes corporations as basically operating in the same manner as cults do.

A cult can be succinctly defined as an ephemeral group characterized by totalist control and centered around charismatic leadership (Lifton, 1961; Melton, 1991; Yinger, 1957). The overt and covert control mechanisms used in cults to try and make people embrace cult values and cult ideology are only effective under rather extreme and mostly undesirable conditions (Lifton, 1961). It might not be impossible, however, to transplant cultic practices to modern-day corporate settings and make to work (Schein, 1996). But under what circumstances and at what cost? As organization theorist Scott-Morgan once put it quite strongly, the idea of changing employees’ behavior by leveraging abstract values leads to … “a protracted, tortuous, and expensive war of attrition aimed at changing what is important to people through a sanitized form of brainwashing” (1994, p. 139). Of course, this analogy with a “war of attrition” is an exaggeration, but not coincidentally chosen; “brainwashing” is what totalitarian warlords or unscrupulous cult leaders do to gain and maintain control over their subordinate following (Graamans, 2024).

In sum: In both practice-oriented and more academic management literature the link between corporate cultures and cultic modes of control is explicitly made (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2019; Lusoli & Turner, 2020; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002). However, the notion of corporate culture itself is highly problematic. In trying to understand how people work together or simply go about their business we would fare much better without the use of mystifying notions as culture (Graamans et al., 2021; Verheggen, 2005; Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013). Then again, the way the notion of culture is construed and deployed might reveal why corporations are viewed as cults. In this paper thus, corporate culture is viewed as real only in terms of how it, as a notion, is strategically deployed. Notions as corporation and the broader notion of organization (profit/not-for-profit/governmental/non-governmental), in contrast, are used to refer to identifiable legal entities established to coordinate how people work together to meet organizational objectives. Similarly, cults too refer to identifiable (ephemeral) groups, in this case established around (spirito-religious) ideologies. The comparison between corporations and their hold on people, on the one hand, and cults, on the other, seems reasonable in some respects, but could easily turn into sensationalist exaggeration, and thus should be explored more rigorously. The central question of this paper therefore is: to what extent do corporations operate as cults?

**Theoretical Background**

Earlier, I have termed the misuse of the idea of culture “culture-of-the-gaps” (Graamans, 2020, p. 18) akin to the classic fallacy of the God-of-the-gaps (Bonhoeffer, 1953; Bube, 1971). The notion is used for all those aspects of human behavior we do not fully understand (yet). Once we do understand, the notion becomes superfluous. Also, it is a commonly made epistemological error to label observed regularities in behavior as cultural and then bring forth that label as explanatory (Verheggen, 2005). But worse than lack of understanding or epistemological error is the opportunistic deployment of the notion of culture with the aim of papering over possibly very real underlying issues, such as unfair power imbalances and a utilitarian approach to other human beings.

Considering the problematic surrounding commonly used definitions of corporate culture as described above and pitfalls surrounding its deployment in actual managerial practice, I prefer to use culture “only” as a notion that once uttered – especially by those in positions of power or eminence – calls for a closer, empirical investigation of what happens “in-between” people (Graamans, 2020; Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013). Approaching the notion of culture as such forces one to be more precise in explicating precisely who is doing
what and when, and what it is exactly that keeps people in check. This fits into an “enactivist” or cultural psychological account of how meaning and behavioral patterns are always produced in-between human beings, that is, in the way they continuously attune attention and behavior amongst one another. It is always people that have agency, and never unseen forces ascribed to reified notions as culture, values, ideological frames and so on (Graamans et al., 2021; Maturana & Varela, 1998; Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013).

Although the meaning of the term cult has changed over the years, the idea of cult as an ephemeral group centered around charismatic leadership still holds. Yet over time most modern-day cults develop corporate structures, such as boards of directors (Melton, 1991). Thus, over time cults start resembling modern-day corporations. The term cult, however, also specifically connotes a totalist environment (Robbins, 1988; Rosedale & Langone, 2015). Charismatic leadership is not a prerequisite for the maintenance of a totalist environment, but it is, as mentioned, a key ingredient of all cults (Galanter, 1999; Lifton, 1999; Oakes, 1997; Singer & Lalich, 1995). Often cults are experienced as psychologically harmful (McKibben et al., 2002). Several criteria must be met to enable cults to gain and maintain total control over their members, that is, over all their intra- and interpersonal dealings, and to be able to coerce them into (voluntary) compliance (Foucault, 1979; Fromm, 1941; Lifton, 1961; Schein et al., 1961).

The justification for making this comparison between corporations and cults, is found in an early observation made by social psychologist and management scholar Edgar H. Schein:

> On the level of social process, I saw many parallels between what the Chinese Communists were doing and what we do every day in families, in schools, in prisons, and in private and public organizations under the concepts of training, development, and socialization. The goals are different, but the methods are remarkably similar. When we disapprove, we call it a cult and deplore it; when we approve, we call it an effective indoctrination program, such as a boot camp or academy. (1996, p. 234)

Schein belonged to a group of American social scientists who were baffled by the behavior of released prisoners of war during and after the Korean conflict as some of them seemed to have been ‘brainwashed’ into communism (Biderman, 1963; Lifton, 1961; Schein, 1956). Each in their own way these scholars tried to understand and develop a theory on the social processes involved in brainwashing.

This study is a retrospective autoethnographic account narratively structured along psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton’s (1961) eight criteria of thought reform. These criteria, or psychological themes, have been applied in cult psychology (e.g., Hassan, 1988; Hassan & Shah, 2019; Martin, 1993; McKibben et al., 2002). The central question of this study can be answered by assessing any resemblance between corporations and cults relative to these criteria: milieu control (1), mystical manipulation (2), demand for purity (3), confession (4), sacred science (5), loading the language (6), doctrine over person (7) and dispensing of existence (8).

**Motivation for Conducting this Study**

Subscribing to the need to resist covert and overt authoritarian forms of control, in this viewpoint paper I self-reflexively explore my hypothesis that despite some of the sinister trends observed (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2019) the frequent failure of corporate culture change points up something positive. Namely, as much as corporate leaders and the change managers they consult would sometimes maybe like to, they do not seem to fully control what drives
employees in how they work – or not work – together. This would be good news, I contend, because the only environments in which leaders have complete access to and can exert total control over people’s intra- and interpersonal dealings and in which collective programming schemes to change people’s minds are effective is within environments crafted by totalitarian regimes and cults. So, what these failures hint at is that these corporations do not seem to operate as cults.

Despite decades of research on and efforts to change so-called corporate cultures into prescribed straitjackets, the recipients of these change initiatives keep acting in ways that defy the logic on which these (mechanistic, cognitivist) interventionist repertoires are based. People in healthy human social systems have the freedom to rebel against (e.g., Graamans et al., 2020) or rally in favor of change in creative ways (Graamans et al., 2019). That freedom of creative action cannot be stripped away. It is the charm of being a human in communal human life, as opposed to “… those human communities which, because they embody enforced mechanisms of stabilization in all the behavioral dimensions of their members, constitute impaired social systems” (Maturana & Varela, 1998, p. 199), such as cults.

As I value communal life as well as the socio-psychological aspects of organizational work-life this topic is of deep personal interest. I have had first-hand experiences with the beneficial and darker sides of both. For an extended period, I lived in a commune that appeared to have several cultic characteristics. Leaving the cult required years of psychological healing on my part. I have similarly worked in corporate environments in which I felt trapped to the detriment of my psychological and physical well-being. These experiences are not the same, but there is certainly an overlap worth further exploring, and that is of deep personal psychological significance.

Methodology

Retrospective Autoethnography: A First-Person Account

A researcher’s preferred method of inquiry cannot be separated from how that researcher experiences his or her world (Louis, 1991). From my perspective as a behavioral scientist and business scholar, lived experience is always embodied and embedded. Consequently, denying the validity of my lived experience would make my research disembodied and uprooted from the context that informed it. As I study “culture as embodiment” (Graamans et al., 2021; Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013) how could I ever opt for a disembodied approach to the study of cultural phenomena? In that sense I will always be part of the very thing I examine … with mind, body, and soul.

Autoethnography is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 733). The “personal” I interpret as my own lived, and thus embodied and embedded experience. Autoethnography as a scientific method of enquiry allows the researcher to reflexively draw from his or her own experience, past and present, to make sense of all kinds of phenomena that go under the banner of culture (e.g., Bell et al., 2020; Denzin, 2003; Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

This autoethnography is retrospective (RAE) in the sense that I reflexively reexamine previous research projects in which I studied tightly knit, exclusive communities (e.g., Graamans et al., 2019), organizational culture change (Graamans et al., 2021) and resistance to change in elite, hyperspecialized professional groups (Graamans et al., 2020). It is also retrospective in the sense that I merge personal narratives from life phases long before I
embarked on a career in academia. These life experiences, such as living in ashrams\(^1\), have clearly shaped my academic questioning and theorizing. In turn, I can now retrospectively psychologize my past experiences, based on what I have learned in my academic endeavors later.

**Data and Data-Analysis**

For this project I retrospectively analyzed diary reports and photobooks I kept during three years of discontinuous living in several ashrams during the mid-1990s. These extensive diary reports were unstructured, and contained spiritual learnings, (self)realizations, and encounters and happenings that stood out for me at the time. These also contained reflections on cultural differences and cult-dynamics that I observed and noted out of an intrinsic interest. The diary reports were written-up in layman’s, non-academic jargon. To retrospectively reflect on the different jobs I held, careers pursued, and corporations worked for over the decades that followed I analyzed documentation that includes a diary with work-life anecdotes that I keep, performance reports and unstructured notes I kept for self-development purposes. I also drew from years of experience working on documented assignments for a consultancy firm that advises medium to large, profit and not-for-profit organizations on strategy, leadership, and culture change at board level. As mentioned in the previous paragraph, in academia I conducted several empirical and theoretical studies on related themes that informed this study (Graamans, 2024; Graamans et al., 2019, 2020, 2021). Lifton’s (1961) eight criteria of thought reform provided the a priori psychological themes for data-analysis (King & Brooks, 2017). Relevant notes and passages were labeled as related to these themes and will be expanded upon in more detail in the next chapter. In the process of analyzing the data more stories came up from memory never written up in any diary. If relevant, these too were used, albeit sparsely.

To increase the rigor and trustworthiness of this project, in 2022 and 2023 I revisited several of the ashrams I stayed in in India after not having been there for almost 30 years. The purpose of undertaking these journeys more specifically was to self-examine how these typical communal arrangements affect me now after having somewhat ripened as a man, and thus whether the analysis conducted from my home desk based on decades old notes still resonate with me. Several informal, on-site, in-depth conversations with other (former) cult members were part of this validation process. I found my findings were still valid and are thus worth paying attention to (Golafshani, 2003).

**Ethics**

The retrospective, personal nature of this self-reflexive study and the fact that it was never part of any formal, planned research project exempts it from ethical review: “Because it [retrospective autoethnography] is not considered human subjects research, the standards for confidentiality in reporting are different from those for many other types of studies” (Nowakowski, 2016, p. 1617). Dynamics and happenstances are described in general terms, and I refrain from mentioning any individual’s particulars that are not from historical or otherwise public figures. Pertaining to myself, being aware that the topic under investigation can easily digest into caricature and sensationalist storytelling, only those personal life events will be narrated with direct relevance to the research question. Furthermore, to structure this retrospective autoethnography, keep it succinct enough for a paper, and not digress into the

\(^1\) Traditionally the term *ashram* is used for a monastery or secluded place for meditation. The term can also be used to designate the location of a spiritual community or retreat.
superfluous, overly detailed description, I chose to narrate it along Lifton’s (1961) psychological themes.

My Lived Experience: Joining a Cult and Working for Contemporary Organizations

Personal History

Although I did not consider myself a traumatized youngster, I developed clear escapist tendencies by the time I entered early adolescence that can be traced back to my (Western) upbringing (Fromm, 1941; Maté, 2022; Welwood, 2000). At the time I envisioned a future of consumerism and having to partake in a rat race that did not appeal to me. I was one of those stereotypical high-school dropouts that flew to India on a one-way ticket. I had arranged myself a visa for a continuous five-year stay but intended never to return to my native country of the Netherlands. In India I stayed at several ashrams, where I did simple chores, attended temple rituals, and spend time reading books on Vedanta\(^2\). Even now I consider most of these ashrams relatively benign environments because the basic tenets preached are love, happiness, and non-violence. However, in retrospect, I also consider some of them cultic in several senses of the word dependent on the location, leadership structure, constellation of members, varied interpretations of the espoused ideology and its application (Tourish & Irving, 1995). In this paper though I will lump these ashrams together as they belong to the same sub-sect or religious offshoot of Hinduism\(^3\). It is also important for the reader to know that I still, to this day, maintain friendships with several (former) members of – what I will call from now on – “the cult”\(^4\).

Disenchanted by some of the cultic dynamics enacted in the cult as well as having difficulty adjusting to the austere lifestyle of a celibate monk, I eventually returned to my native country to work as a security officer, bouncer, bodyguard, flight attendant, receptionist, personal trainer, warehouse worker, florist, international fashion model and consultant. Basically, I worked as a “Jack of all trades, master of none” enabling me to observe the inner organizational dynamics in a variety of industries. In my early thirties I began to pursue an academic career. Being a high-school dropout who held no relevant diplomas or academic degrees, I had to start from scratch.

Milieu Control

Through this milieu control the totalist environment seeks to establish domain over not only the individual’s communication with the outside (all that he sees and hears, reads, and writes, experiences, and expresses), but also – in its penetration of his inner life – of what we may speak of as his communication with himself. (Lifton, 1961, p. 420)

In the cult that I joined, everything read, written, listened to, and talked or sang about was related to the cult’s mission. Prescribed reading materials were books almost exclusively written by cult leaders. The more classical, traditional works were provided with commentaries by contemporary cult leaders. Personal interpretation was deemed “speculation,” and therefore “not bona fide.” Discussing topics unrelated to the cult’s mission was considered “gossip” and

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\(^2\) Vedanta are interpretations of the ancient Vedas, a body of Sanskrit texts originating from India.

\(^3\) Not all Hindus would consider this sub-sect as representative of Hinduism. Not all cult-members necessarily identify as Hindu, some even explicitly reject it. This dynamic though is typical for many religious offshoots.

\(^4\) The cult-members did not see themselves as being part of a cult. Just the opposite, some rejected society as one giant cult ruled and inhabited by materialistic “demons,” that way confirming their own cultic worldview.
was thus actively discouraged. Cult members were expected to attend most if not all daily ceremonies, particularly the lengthy routines in the early morning – a few hours before sunrise – which consisted of several hours of chanting mantras, singing songs, and prostrating oneself before the altar. As an initiated member one was not allowed to eat food cooked by non-members, thus further delimiting the cult environment. Eating non-prescribed foods increases, so is argued, the risk of a fall, in cult jargon called “blooping.” Blooping can mean losing faith in the cult ideology or else further transgressing the “regulative principles of freedom,” which ultimately means having to leave the cult. Some monks hesitatingly complained about feeling overworked or “stressed-out” due to the demanding nature of the cult’s prescribed schedule and mandatory routines.

In the corporate organizations I worked for similar processes are at play. Interestingly, as one ascends the hierarchical ladder and becomes part of corporate elites, the bandwidth of acceptable ideas and expressions becomes narrower. Evidently, at all levels there are codes of conduct and prescribed tasks formalized in job descriptions one must abide by, especially when “under contract.” However, one also needs to master – or develop a feel for – sets of unwritten rules, particularly if one aspires to become part of the upper echelons. One must learn what it means to act in a “professional,” “politically correct,” or “evidence-based” fashion, and then master these styles to embody them authentically. Once mastered it becomes increasingly difficult to leave the fold and think or feel “out of the box,” because now it has become normative behavior that literally and figuratively runs over the spine. Furthermore, absurd workloads, stuffed agendas and lengthy meetings can make it increasingly difficult to have communal experiences beyond those dictated by the corporation. As mentioned earlier, here I emphasize the “embodied” (in-corp-oration) as well as the “embedded” (within a particular cultivated corporate arrangement) nature of thought reform. The career dynamics described here threaten personal autonomy, overtly and covertly, in a way that resembles the cult. Especially during working hours, and sometimes beyond, many corporate environments are highly controlled, if not totalistic.

**Mystical Manipulation**

The cult member is asked to accept anything, however bizarre, based on trust; to mindlessly submit oneself to the cult ideology (see also: Welwood, 2000). If healthy feelings of doubt arise the cult member, to survive in the cult, develops the “psychology of the pawn” as he:

... becomes sensitive to all kinds of cues, expert at anticipating environmental pressures, and skillful in riding them in such a way that his psychological energies merge with the tide rather than turn painfully against himself. This requires that he participates actively in the manipulation of others, … (Lifton, 1961, p. 423)

In the cult I was asked to reject the moon landing and evolution theory, for example, and accept a literal interpretation of scripture, simply because the main cult leader said so. Some cult leaders acted like god-men and were venerated as superhuman. However, they frequently turned out to be more than fallible, to say the least, evident by the many scandals of mistreatment or abuse that occurred under their supervision. These scandals led some to leave the cult altogether, and for them functioned as a wake-up call. However, for others it led to cognitive dissonance and a cognitive reappraisal of these events to “merge with the tide” (see also Festinger et al., 1956).
In the corporate organizations I worked for employees are asked to execute their tasks and accept organizational values, norms, and other statements based on trust. However, trust in these cases is supposed to be more strongly related to abilities that can be objectively assessed (Mayer et al., 1995), and less so to blind faith evoked by “mystically manipulated” happenings. Since many corporate governance structures are based on agency theory assumptions of human behavior (Eisenhardt, 1989), that is, that humans are in their core motivated by self-interest, and upper echelons theory assumptions (Hambrick, 2007), that is, that humans are fallible and rationally bounded, corporations put checks-and-balances in place to monitor executives and hold them to account. Although these mechanisms fail at times as charismatic leadership here too can obscure their necessity, there is a general awareness that corporate executives are fallible human beings, and thus need monitoring.

Demand for Purity

“… A demand that one strives permanently and painfully for something which not only does not exist but is in fact alien to the human condition” (Lifton, 1961, p. 424). In the cult, for example, one of the “regulative principles of freedom” referred to above was to live a celibate lifestyle, more precisely: sex only – even within a marital arrangement – for the procreation of children. All other forms of sexual practice were considered sinful, damaging to physical and psychological health, and detrimental to spiritual advancement. One can convincingly argue that setting standards for people’s intimate dealings that are in Lifton’s words “in fact alien to the human condition” is psychologically harmful. By setting people up for failure and that way playing the strings of “guilt” and “shame” the cult can exert totalist control over its members. Continuously feeling guilty and ashamed for not living up to unattainable standards set makes one labile and susceptible to further manipulation by the cult.

In corporations and other organizations too, a strong divide between professionals and amateurs, evidence-based scholars, and pseudo-scientists, politically correct and incorrect, etcetera is made. Unattainable performance metrics that set people up for failure and thus result in work-related health problems are common. The metaphors employed, such as “deadlines” when nobody is dying or “publish-or-perish” when nobody is perishing, contribute to strengthening the divide as well as to burning people out. It is a concern that must be addressed more seriously (Mos, 2021).

Confession

“Confession is carried beyond its ordinary, religious, legal and therapeutic expressions to the point of becoming a cult in itself” (Lifton, 1961, p. 425). As a result of the demand for purity measured against unattainable standards set one cannot but feel “sinful” or at least found wanting. As indicated above, the constant feeling of inadequacy, guilt and shame makes one labile and susceptible to cult manipulation. The private becomes public by confessing in front of a cult audience to transgressions of thought, feeling or act as measured against these unattainable standards. This way the cult gets an even stronger hold on the inner psychology of its members. As Lifton argues and I have also observed and experienced first-hand, the cult of confession is intrinsically performative, and even histrionic. Confessing to not living up to unattainable standards leads to obscuring inner experience for both the individual member, as the inability to self-reflect, as well as for the all-pervading eye of the cult. Members of the cult I was party to would frequently make a show of humility and openly confess to how “low” and “inadequate” they felt. I dare to say that the humility professed was often performative, simply by mirroring this conspicuous humility against the highly derogatory, dismissive talk by the
same people about those who did not belong to the cult or had left the cult. True humility was a rare feat.

In corporations I have witnessed similar cultic confessionary dynamics (during annual appraisals, department meetings, group app chats and so on). In the corporate case these dynamics are sometimes construed as ways to give and receive “feedback.” Feedback in organizations is widely researched, considered necessary and can be done constructively (London, 2015; London et al., 2023). Feedback is intended to help employees grow professionally and live up to corporate standards. The term feedback, therefore, rings somewhat noncommittal and benign. All that said, from a more critical perspective and in less favorable scenarios, feedback can be deployed as a mechanism of control to keep employees in check, by making them leave or submit. Negative feedback, for example, can be taken as psychologically threatening by making people feel inadequate (Berinato, 2018; Green et al., 2017). One coping mechanism to being made feeling inadequate is avoidance, and thus leave. Another coping mechanism is “confessing” to the perceived inadequacy as measured against these unreasonable standards to regain some semblance of corporate approval. In doing so the corporation has gained access to the employee’s inner psychology. The employee is or has now submitted to the (unwritten) corporate ideology.

Sacred Science

“Thus, the ultimate moral vision becomes an ultimate science; and the man who dares to criticize it, or to harbor even unspoken alternative ideas, becomes not only immoral and irreverent, but also ‘unscientific’” (Lifton, 1961, p. 428). The cult ideology – unapologetically referred to as the ‘Absolute Truth’ (in capitals!) – was not to be challenged. Own interpretations or customized application of the ideology to one’s own preferred lifestyle was discouraged. In rarer cases adaptation or loose adherence was tolerated – in the case of big donors or celebrity members, but nonetheless frowned upon. Every morning a list of offences was ritually recited, either in Sanskrit or in English. Examples from that list are the offence of interpreting scripture according to one’s own whim, taking scriptural commands as noncommittal, or the most serious and unforgivable offence of criticizing senior cult members. The latter offence was said to lead to “eternal damnation.”

In more corporate environments it is sometimes similarly difficult to question leadership and hold leaders to account, despite checks and balances put in place as part of espoused “good governance.” Doing so anyway can seriously hamper one’s career progression and in rarer cases can even lead to bullying and exclusion. Challenging established policies and ways of working devised by someone with position power can be challenging. A salient difference compared to the cult though is that neither policies nor the leaders that devise or accord policies are considered “sacred” or “holy” in any literal sense of the word. Even for members party to the broader academic community who are in the business of making strong knowledge claims it is an explicit rule of bona fide scientific practice to always be transparent about and critically question on what it is that these claims are based. It always is – or at least should be – about the approximation of truth in continuous academic debate, and not about establishing some “Absolute Truth” that cannot be questioned.

Loading the Language

Discourses, as networks of meaning and manners of speaking, can be strategically deployed to manage stake (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Discourses can, in turn, delimit what the people that draw upon them can think, feel, and do (Parker, 1992). The way reality is construed in language and the way reality is experienced are closely related (Foucault, 1979; Willig,
2008), and this is especially the case in religious cults (e.g., Flood, 2006). In cults this dynamic takes an extreme form. It makes sense therefore for the cult to want to exert control over text and manners of speaking. According to Lifton (1961) the language of cults is characterized by “thought-terminating cliché” employed to stop further exploration and inner-reflection beyond the cult ideology.

The above was certainly the case in the cult I was party to. The list of offences mentioned earlier under the heading “Sacred science,” reductive statements that only made sense to insiders, and the cultic jargon one needed to understand and master certainly delimited my ability to explore ideas beyond the cult’s acclaimed “Absolute Truth.” This combined with the grandiose, honorific titles used for those at the upper echelons of the cult – a common one translated as “great leader” – made it even more difficult to value my own ideas and experiences as valid by comparison.

In all branches that I work(ed) – from sports to fashion, and from management to academia – I needed to master a particular jargon to be accepted into the fold and to be recognized as a “professional.” I needed to develop a feeling for when to laugh and, more importantly, when not to laugh. I needed to learn when to give my honest opinion and when to hold it to myself, even when asked for. As a mannequin I learned never to give my honest opinion about the aesthetics of the fashion I was asked to show unless it was positive. As a security officer I learned never to go into a discussion of any kind, as orders – mine included – need to be followed without question. In academia I learned to be careful not to talk beyond my expertise, at least not publicly. Furthermore, in business and in academia, as in the cult, titles are employed to convey status and eminence. These honorific titles – lists of acronyms placed before or after someone’s name, are often based on merit, but certainly not always. And yes, thought-terminating cliché is not uncommon either. I wrote a whole dissertation, for example, on the fact that the notion of culture, in the professional environment of business and academia, is too often used as a stopgap explanation that obfuscates actual corporate dynamics and halts a more thorough exploration of what really matters to people and employees (Graamans, 2020). That said, although these dynamics can be observed in different corporate environments and can have a profoundly debilitating impact on one’s psyche, these usually do not take the almost parodic form as observed in the cult.

**Doctrine Over Person and Dispensing of Existence**

“... the demand that character and identity be reshaped, not in accordance with one’s special nature or potentialities, but rather to fit the rigid contours of the doctrinal mold. The human is thus subjugated to the ahuman” (Lifton, 1961, p. 431). With the last two psychological themes the assessment of the proposed resemblance between corporations and cult ends, providing a substantiated, but preliminary answer to the central question. In the cult my individual experience and intuitive sensemaking had to make place for the ideology of the cult. The ideology or “Absolute Truth” was laid out in the scriptures as interpreted by the cult and for the cult. Own interpretations of those scriptures – that are indeed ancient and contain, I still believe, some valuable lessons – were discounted as “mental speculation.” By allowing myself to prioritize my own intuitive sense over cult ideology – in case these were not aligned, I would risk being excluded or excluding myself from the cult. The latter eventually happened.

In corporate environments employees are also guided by ideology, although not framed as such. The way in managerial jargon corporate culture is talked about as something to be implemented, by attempting to make people internalize company values for example, resembles cultic indoctrination. On the other hand, corporations do not seem to be able to reshape employees’ identities as they wish. If corporate leaders stubbornly persist by means of coercion, bullying or unfair dismissals, that is, dispensing of existence, they risk violating...
employee protection laws and thus eventually they will eliminate themselves, at least when the checks and balances put in place are acted upon.

**Discussion**

In attempting to assess the extent to which corporations operate as cults along the lines of Lifton’s (1961) psychological themes and mirrored against my own lived experience in both corporations and a cult, I found that, as suggested by others (Arnott, 2000; Kets de Vries, 2019; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002), corporations indeed deploy cultic tactics aimed at indoctrinating employees into (voluntary) compliance. I also hypothesized that corporations differ fundamentally from cults as they do not seem to have the tools at their disposal to exert the control required to meet all Lifton’s (1961) eight criteria to its full totalist potential. However, in closing this RAE to my surprise I did not find that hypothesis convincingly confirmed. To the contrary, reflecting on my experiences in both corporations and the cult, I found that some of the corporations I worked for deployed cultic tactics just the same, albeit in more covert fashion. This appears more insidious to me as at least in the cult the indoctrination tactics deployed took more parodic and therefore recognizable forms. My findings align with earlier work on the resemblance between “corporate culture” and cult (e.g., Arnott, 2000; Tourish & Pinnington, 2002) and more recent observations that the world’s largest corporations deploy increasingly sophisticated mind-control tactics and demonstrate intent to become intrusive, all-encompassing entities (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2019; Lusoli & Turner, 2020; Turner, 2006; 2018).

As quoted above, Schein (1996) observed similar parallels. He argued it is primarily the framing in accordance with our approval that makes the difference. Framing in accordance with our approval obfuscates the totalist dynamics at play in modern-day public and private organizations. As a thought experiment and illustrated by this RAE, simply replace relatively benign sounding managerial notions with one or several of Lifton’s criteria for thought reform. For example, replace “corporate culture change” with Lifton’s criterion milieu control (1), “charismatic leadership” with mystical manipulation (2), “performance metrics” with demand for purity (3), “feedback and performance appraisal” with confession (4), “mission and vision statement” with sacred science (5), “corporate jargon” with loading the language (6), “internalized values” with doctrine over person (7) and “redundancy” with dispensing of existence (8). Referring to Schein (1996) again, the parallels are remarkable indeed.

Tourish and Irving (1995) found cultism to move along a continuum: “Organizations and individuals may move back and forth along this continuum” (p. 48). In reflecting on my RAE I did not anticipate the ease with which the organizations I worked for actually move along the cult continuum relative to Lifton’s (1961) eight criteria. In part, my initial blind spot might have been caused by the inherent covertness of corporate indoctrination schemes as well as my strong desire “to be part of the team.” And, as Schein (1996) argued, maybe also by virtue of my implicit approval of corporations’ raison d’être. More alarmingly, I might not really care about being indoctrinated as long as I get paid my salary. That is, until I do.

As indicated, corporations currently do not seem to be as successful in the business of changing “corporate cultures” as they would maybe like to be (e.g., Martin, 1985; Smith, 2003; Tatton, 2015). That said, in line with some worrying projections of these corporate cultures becoming increasingly cultic (e.g., Kets de Vries, 2019; Lusoli & Turner, 2020; Turner, 2006; 2018) and as underscored in this RAE, it may be just a matter of time until they do. The anachronistic idea on which the whole practice of corporate culture management seems to be based might not be a problem after all. At least not in terms of eventually being able to successfully program employees’ minds, as this requires meeting Lifton’s (1961) criteria to which corporations are becoming increasingly capable. It is quite shocking to have to conclude
that corporate environments are opportunely cultivated in line with the underlying assumption that corporations can be managed as cults and are thus slowly moving in that direction.

A first step to breaking this trend is to expose corporations as cults by deconstructing the managerial jargon that obfuscates the cultic tactics covertly deployed. This study adds to extant literature by exposing corporations as cult in a new way, but several factors in weighing its value need to be mentioned, three of which stand out.

Firstly, in this RAE under the term “cult” I have lumped together my own experiences living in different ashrams of the same sub-sect. The experiences in these ashrams provide a suitable benchmark against which to compare corporations with cults. However, although this cult, like many others, has been at the center of several scandals throughout its more recent history, it has deep roots in ancient tradition. Although its reputation has taken a severe hit after these scandals came to light, relative to some other cults this cult is generally still seen as relatively harmless, to the point of some observers calling it a bona fide religion. It is not my objective to make a definite statement on any degree of cultism comparative to other religious sects. Me sharing this is relevant only in the sense that had I used some sort of doomsday cult as a benchmark against which to compare corporations with cult, corporations likely would have come out much more favorably. It is important for my readership to note that in this paper “the cult” refers to a relatively benign entity – at least I experienced it as such – in which one can nonetheless observe harmful dynamics that deem it a cult. I believe this makes the comparison much more valuable as we are dealing with at least somewhat commensurate entities, and not with plain evil in which any comparison would peter out in favor of corporations.

Secondly, I have lumped corporations together as if these were homogenous entities. Obviously, despite recognizable patterns typical to the corporate environment many differences exist that, in this paper, are disregarded at points of comparison with the cult. In terms of generalizability, it is because I have disregarded only those differences that are irrelevant at point of comparison and made disclaimers where these differences might be relevant that I feel confident that my findings have broader applicability.

Lastly, my assessment of the resemblance between corporations and cults in the form of a RAE means having had to relive some experiences of past. Inevitably I had to relive some of the (suppressed) anger, frustration, and sadness of the day. In the process of conducting this RAE I was continuously plagued by feelings of ambivalence. I also felt strong feelings of nostalgia and gratitude. Gratitude for what my experiences within the cult brought me and brought me not. Sometimes these emotions came up even more strongly strengthened by the wisdom of hindsight. I did my best to appreciate these emotions as indicators that something real is at stake and thus took them as teachers (Voestermans & Verheggen, 2013). The chosen methodology of this study allows for these kinds of reflections (e.g., Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I am thankful RAE is gaining recognition among scholars. In reliving these emotions and sharing them with a wider audience, it is important to note that I do not assume Machiavellian intent on the part of the corporate or cult leaders that I had direct contact with. In the corporate environment when ascending to positions of power falling prey to executive hubris is a clear and present risk. However, it is also a risk that can be avoided and healing – in case one has fallen prey – is possible (Petit & Bollaert, 2012). Similarly, this paper is not a case against communal experimentation of any kind, to the contrary (see also: Graamans, 2024). Many of my experiences in the cult were positive and I would not have wanted to miss these for the world. But yes, I also would have done things differently if only I were able at the time to recognize these more harmful cultic dynamics and act upon them more decisively. Many people, myself included, want to belong, be part of something bigger than ourselves and join forces in a way that does not erode our individual feeling of autonomy. To partake we must be
willing to be vulnerable, but also train ourselves to be resilient in the face of manipulation. As this RAE demonstrates, however difficult, it can be done.

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