

# **Cults, brainwashing, and propaganda**

Next week:  
The Individual within the Group

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## **Last week: Psychology of war and peace**

- Costs and benefits of war
- Dissent in times of war
- Flawed decision making in war time
- Propaganda and dehumanization
- Psychoanalytic perspectives on war
- Promoting peace
- Terrorism

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## **Cults, brainwashing, & propaganda**

In this week's lecture we're going to discuss:

- Cults: what are they, why do people join, what effects do they have?
- Brainwashing: what is it, how does it work?
- Propaganda (includes research on media bias)

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## **Cults: definitions**

*Definitions range from the emotionally neutral ...*

- “a system of religious worship and ritual”
- “a devoted attachment to, or extravagant admiration for, a person, group, or principle”

*... to the highly judgmental ...*

- “A group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control ... designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders to the actual or possible detriment of members, their families, or the community”

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## **Cults: Academic approaches**

*The literature on cults split between “cult sympathizers” ...*

- Believe cults merely represent alternative culture
- Describe cults as “new religious movements”
- See negativity toward cults as a reflection of prejudice and a symptom of “moral panic”

*... and “cult critics” ...*

- Maintain cults are psychologically harmful
- Argue that cults use unethical “mind control” procedures to influence members for their personal gain

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **“Heaven’s Gate”**

- In 1997, Heaven’s Gate cult leader Marshall Applewhite convinced 39 followers to commit suicide so their souls could ride on a spaceship they thought was hiding behind the comet Hale-Bopp
- Male members were castrated and drank citrus juices to ritually cleanse their bodies of impurities
- Bodies were found covered with purple blankets and wearing brand new Nike sneakers

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **“Aum Supreme Truth”**

- Set up by Shoko Asohara, a blind straw mat maker, who claimed to have visions of the apocalypse (based on Nostradamus) and supernatural powers.
- At its peak had 20 000 followers ... still has 1 000
- Asohara claimed that he'd travelled in time to 2006 and spoken to survivors of WWII.
- Dissenters and traitors suffered extreme punishment, and in one case a family was abducted and murdered
- Aum Supreme Truth began to engage in chemical attacks on symbols of aggression, corruption and materialism, ultimately resulting in the death of 12 Japanese in the sarin subway attacks (5000 injured).

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **Moonies**

- Refers to members of the Unification Church established by Korean minister Sun Myung Moon
- 100s of thousands of members
- Consider Reverend Moon as the “new messiah”
- Moonie marriages personally arranged by Moon who conducted the famous “mass weddings” in the US
- Reputation for high-pressure recruitment and corruption of youth (Moon and wife banned from entry into Germany because of this).
- Strong political influence in the US (own and fund Washington Times; allied with George W. Bush)

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **Solar Temple**

- Secret society based on new age myth of the continuing existence of the Knights Templar
- Founders Joseph di Mambro and Luc Jouret convinced followers that they were members of the 14<sup>th</sup>C Knights Templar in a previous life
- Mission to save the spiritual heritages of Earth and take it to the planet Sirius
- Mass murder-suicides of cult members in Quebec and Switzerland occurred around dates of equinoxes and solstices

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **Branch Davidians**

- Religious group originating from the 7<sup>th</sup> Day Adventist Church
- Apocalyptic beliefs (final divine judgment at hand)
- Leader, David Koresh, openly advocated polygamy for himself and selected cult members
- Branch Davidian compound in Texas burned down following government raids for illegal weapons (around 86 dead, including Koresh).

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **The Family (a.k.a. Children of God)**

- Established by David Berg during the hippie counter-culture of the 60s in California
- David Berg (a.k.a. “Moses Berg”) regarded as the end-time prophet sent by God
- New members encouraged to sever ties with family of origin, donate all possessions to the group, and become fulltime evangelists
- Known for “flirty fishing” (women recruiting new male members via seduction/prostitution) and “sexual sharing” (consensual sex activities among members)

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## **Cults: Examples**

### **People’s Temple**

- Originally a Christian group advocating social justice founded by Reverend Jim Jones in 1953
- Jones established a town in Guyana for over 800 of his followers (Jonestown) to avoid outside intervention
- Deviant members were severely punished (e.g. imprisoned in a small plywood box)
- In 1978, inhabitants committed mass suicide at Jones’ instruction by drinking poisoned soft drink. Those who resisted were shot (914 followers died).

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## **Cults: prevalence**

Although numbers are hard to gauge due to definitional problems, it's been estimated that between 2 and 5 million people in the US alone have been involved in cults.

There may be anywhere from 2000 to 5000 cultic groups in the US.

Little Australian research per se – one book (Samways, 1994) identified 100 cults operating in Australia

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## **Cults: Pre-cult characteristics of joiners**

People who join cults are no poorer, stupider or sicker than those who do not.

Although some have postulated that an unsatisfactory family environment causes people to join cults, there's limited evidence that this is the case.

Cult joiners often described as "seekers" ... people seeking meaning but who are disillusioned by traditional religions.

Research difficult to interpret given that accounts of pre-cult life are retrospective.

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## **Cults: Pre-cult characteristics of joiners**

Levine & Salter (1976) interviewed 106 current members of 9 cults who provided information about why they joined.

- 43% reported feelings of loneliness, rejection, sadness
- 41% reported they were drifting / life was meaningless
- 34% mentioned a personal crisis or unpleasant situation
- 30% met someone who actively converted them or became concerned with the person's happiness.

The majority reported "average" to "good" relationships with their parents before joining their groups.

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## **Cults: Effects on current members**

Studies based on anecdotal impressions are mixed: some suggest positive effects, others negative effects.

Majority of studies using standard clinical measures suggest current cult members are psychologically well-adjusted.

But studies difficult to interpret due to possibility of situational demands, response biases, and mistrust of outsiders.

Transparent tests without subtle items may provide a misleading, unduly optimistic clinical profile of current cult members.

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## **Norms to be happy?**

“As much as I looked at beatific faces and witnessed gushes of joy, something has always prevented me from being swept up. Again and again, with hundreds of committed group members, I have felt that theirs is a performance, a case of bad acting in which the actor is himself carried away by the ringing truth of his role yet fails to convince the audience ... They are not brainwashed or weird, but neither are they quite whole. The happy face that joiners wear is uncontagious precisely because it does not accurately represent their inner dynamics”

*Levine (1984) commenting on time spent among Moonies*

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## **Leaving cults**

Martin et al. (1992) reported that of a sample of 110 former members, 23% walked away, 44% received exit counseling, and 25% were “deprogrammed”.

Deprogramming (holding a cult member against their will and submitting them to long lectures about their group) is losing popularity.

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## **Cults: Effects on former members**

Empirical studies on former cult members show that psychopathology is a risk factor associated with cults.

Conway & Siegelman surveyed 400 former cult members and found 7 common symptoms: “floating” or dissociation (52%), nightmares (40%), inability to break mental rhythms of chanting (35%), amnesia, (21%), suicidal or self-destructive tendencies (21%), hallucinations/delusions (14%), and violent outbursts (14%).

Other symptoms found in subsequent studies include high levels of anxiety and guilt, difficulty making decisions, depression, and loss of identity.

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## **Cults: Effects on former members**

A review of the research shows that number of former cult members displaying clinical symptoms ranges from 27% to 95%.

BUT ... results need to be interpreted with caution given potential for response bias (i.e., people exaggerating negativity out of anger with regard to their experiences).

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## **Religious cults: What's the attraction?**

- (1) *Resolution of unresolved psychic needs*: According to Freud, religious belief is based on regression to a state of childhood dependency and transference of feelings on to an ultimate father figure (God or cult leader).
- (2) *Sense of meaning*: Cult membership useful for those who are seeking a meaning in life and a cause
- (3) *Uncertainty reduction*: Cults provide a clear set of guidelines for how we should think and behave
- (4) *Companionship and belonging*

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## **Cults: Recruiting techniques**

### *Invitation to "open your mind"*

Prospective members are asked to open their minds to exciting new identities, to saturate themselves in new meaning and a sense of belonging, and to refrain from being judgmental.

Influence through emotion, not intellect.

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## **Cults: Recruiting techniques**

### *Promise of answers*

Cults frequently “diagnose” your inner unhappiness, and promise easy solutions and quick answers.

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## **Cults: Recruiting techniques**

### *Love-bombing*

People are embraced by members in an enthusiastic display of unconditional love. Oldtimers might constantly serve and “help” a prospective member, thus inducing feelings of guilt and a norm of reciprocation.

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## **Cults: Recruiting techniques**

### *Invoking a sense of similarity*

Cult members might try to reduce the sense of strangeness and difference by invoking commonalities (“I used to be a school teacher too”, “You look so familiar”, “You look like a friend of mine”).

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## **Cults: Recruiting techniques**

### *Encouragement to participate in group activities*

An act in which you participate with the group – particularly a public act – is a way of creating emotional ties with other members (while at the same time creating opportunity for further love bombing!).

Public acts of group-iness can also help shift people’s self-image (“I must be a Moonie because I just behaved like a Moonie”).

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## Tips for resistance

- Practice being a deviant at times; learn to accept rejection
- Don't be afraid to "cut your losses"
- Always avoid taking uncertain actions that the change-agent insists must be made immediately
- Insist on an understandable explanation, without double-speak. Don't let change-agents make you feel stupid; poor explanations are often signs of deception
- Be tuned in to the establishment of a host-guest relationship in which you are made to feel like a guest
- Remember there's no such thing as instant, unconditional love from strangers
- Don't enter "total situations" which are unfamiliar and from which there are no psychological or physical exits
- Engage your mind in critical evaluation
- Tolerate guilt as a part of human nature; don't rush to ease it via paths others lay out for you

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## Brainwashing

I guess the worst part about it  
is what they did to my brain.  
They took my brain  
and along with it my feelings,  
my control, my passion and my love.  
They took my brain and made me something  
other than what I wanted to be  
I lost sight of the meaning  
I sunk into the madness  
I lost my self-control, my self-respect  
my self.

*Poem written by Janja Lalich after leaving a political cult*

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## **Brainwashing: What is it?**

The goal of brainwashing is to “radically change a mind, so that the individual becomes a living puppet, a human robot, without the atrocity being visible on the exterior, the objective being to create a tool in flesh and blood, furnished with new beliefs and new thought processes inserted into a captive body”

(Edward Hunter ... a covert propaganda specialist employed by CIA)

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## **Brainwashing: What is it?**

Term “brainwashing” invented by CIA after examining why a number of US POWs appeared to be converted to Communism during the Korean War.

Term popularized by Condon’s novel *The Manchurian Candidate* (1958).

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## **Brainwashing: CIA perspective**

According to CIA, communists used the following strategy:

- (1) Prisoners were placed in an altered state of consciousness through hypnosis and physical debilitation (e.g., sleep deprivation, beating, starvation)
- (2) In the resulting primitive state of consciousness, prisoners became highly suggestible (i.e., unable to resist suggestions that they change attitudes or behaviour)
- (3) Captors submit them to “conditioning” for which prisoners are punished for maintaining their original attitudes and rewarded for taking on communist propaganda
- (4) Captors assume a new personality that governs their actions and decisions, and persists indefinitely, even when removed from the brainwashing situation.

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## **Evidence for CIA perspective**

In contrast to this perspective, research on Korean POWs and Western civilians in “thought reform” prisons in China did not show evidence of hypnosis or attempts to place captors in a dissociative state.

Much communist thought reform involved severe physical coercion and/or threat of death for noncompliance, and then subjecting them to intense communist propaganda.

This technique appeared effective in the short-term, but once the captors left this environment they reverted back to their original set of attitudes and politics.

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## **Evidence for CIA perspective**

Research by CIA that attempted to develop techniques for converting foreign agents against their wills to American ideology by means of hypnosis and other techniques for creating suggestible states of consciousness was completely unsuccessful.

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## **An alternative explanation for what happened in Korea**

Subsequent research suggests that the most effective strategies for “brainwashing” American POWs into becoming collaborators was the use of gentle strategies to induce mild commitment to the Communist cause, or mild anti-US sentiment. These apparently trivial sentiments would then be committed to paper and elaborated by the captors, in such a way that the “betrayal” becomes increasingly sinister and large-scale.

The success of this strategy shows

- (a) The power of commitment in gaining compliance
- (b) The need for people to feel that they have *chosen* to change their attitudes

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## **Brainwashing in China**

Lifton (1961) outlined a number of conditions that result in “mind control” in Communist China.

- Milieu control
- Mystical manipulation
- Demand for purity
- Use of confession
- Sacred science
- Loading of language
- Dispensing of existence

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## **Milieu control**

Milieu control involves the limiting of all forms of communication with the outside world.

Difficult to “reality test” when stripped of contact with the outside world.

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## **Mystical manipulation**

The potential convert is convinced that the group is working toward a “higher purpose” and that she/he will be instrumental in the attainment of that goal.

Manipulators cast themselves as agents “chosen” (by history, by God, or by some other supernatural force) to carry out the “mystical imperative”, the pursuit of which is more important than any considerations of decency or of immediate human welfare.

Any thought or action which questions the higher purpose is considered to be stimulated by a lower purpose – to be backward, selfish and petty in the face of the great mission.

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## **The demand for purity**

The world is sharply divided into the pure and the impure; into good and evil.

The philosophical assumption is that absolute purity is attainable, and that anything done to anyone in the name of this purity is ultimately moral.

The manipulator becomes the ultimate judge of good and evil, and use guilt and shame to control the captor.

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## **The use of confession**

In an effort to strive for ultimate purity – and to absolve the self of shame and guilt – people are encouraged to make confessions ... even to crimes they have never committed.

The effect is of establishing a closeness with fellow confessors, and of surrendering the self to the environment.

Private ownership of the mind and its contents is viewed as immoral and unnecessary.

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## **The “sacred science”**

An aura of sacredness is built around the group dogma – it is cast as the ultimate moral vision for humanity.

The sacredness is evident in the prohibition against questioning basic assumptions, and in the reverence demanded for the Word, and the originators of the Word.

This results in the illusion of logic and precision.

Dissent is not only immoral but also “unscientific”.

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## **Loading the language**

Relentless use of the “thought-terminating” cliché.

Language is reduced to “god terms”, representing ultimate good (e.g., progressive, liberation, proletarian standpoints, dialectic of history) and “devil terms”, representing ultimate evil (e.g., capitalist, imperialist, exploiting classes, bourgeois mentality).

Complex human problems are reduced to easily expressed, definitive-sounding phrases.

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## **Dispensing of existence**

A sharp line is drawn between those whose right to existence can be recognized (e.g., the “working class”, the “peasant class”) and those that cannot (e.g., the “reactionaries”, the “imperialists”).

Non-people can become people if they reform.

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## **Propaganda**

Propaganda is information presented to people as an accurate portrait of reality, but is in fact skewed to advance a political cause.

Fear of Communist propaganda during the cold war was the inspiration for the emergence of attitudes and persuasion as a field of research in social psychology.

As people have become increasingly sceptical about “official” versions of events, propaganda has had to become increasingly subtle and well disguised.

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## **Propaganda**

Propaganda can be perpetuated by:

- Presenting only one point of view / Selective presentation of facts
- Presenting two points of view but characterizing one side in a simplistic way (“straw man argument”)
- Screening the publication of images
- Telling lies / failing to present truths

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## Media bias

Related to the notion of propaganda is the notion of media bias; the sense that media do not report events in a balanced way because they are pushing an agenda or trying to please their audience.

In 1998 when the Pew Centre asked Americans to describe the national news media in one word, the most frequent response was “biased.”

A Gallup survey in 2000 showed that people’s belief in the honesty and ethics of reporters was one-fifth of that of nursing, the most trusted profession.

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## Hostile media bias

Vallone et al. (1985) showed pro-Arab and pro-Israeli students extracts from news reports on the Beirut massacre. Although all participants viewed the same material, both groups reported that the footage was biased against their side and produced by people who were hostile to their group’s cause.

**Hostile media bias** (tendency for people to think the news is biased against their side) is a robust effect, having been shown regarding analysis of high-level conflict in Middle East and Serbia, political reporting in Australia, and reports of the abortion issue in the US.

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## **Hostile media bias: Explanations**

(1) **Cognitive explanation:** Partisans selectively attend to and recall items of news that reflect poorly on their own side and selectively ignore or forget items of news that reflect poorly on the opposing side.

Vallone et al. (1985) found that whereas pro-Arab participants who witnessed standardized news footage reported that 42% of references to Israel were favourable, pro-Israeli participants reported that only 16% of references to Israel were favourable.

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## **Hostile media bias: Explanations**

(2) **Prior beliefs explanation:** Prior beliefs about bias might operate as a heuristic people use when exposed to media reports. If people believe that the media is generally biased against their side, then they need not closely scrutinize the footage they are exposed to for bias; they simply assume it must be there.

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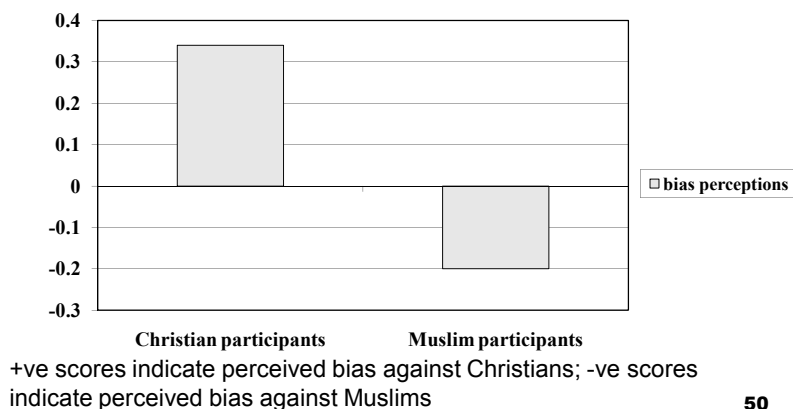
## Hostile media bias: Explanations

(3) ***Different standards explanation***: People carry around with them a host of biased perceptions regarding their own groups' values and behaviours. Thus, when partisans are presented with an objective and balanced view of events, they feel aggrieved because the media coverage does not converge with their own biased perception of their group's superiority.

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## Hostile media bias

Ariyanto et al. (2007) showed Muslims and Christians in Indonesia a passage from a newspaper describing religious conflict.



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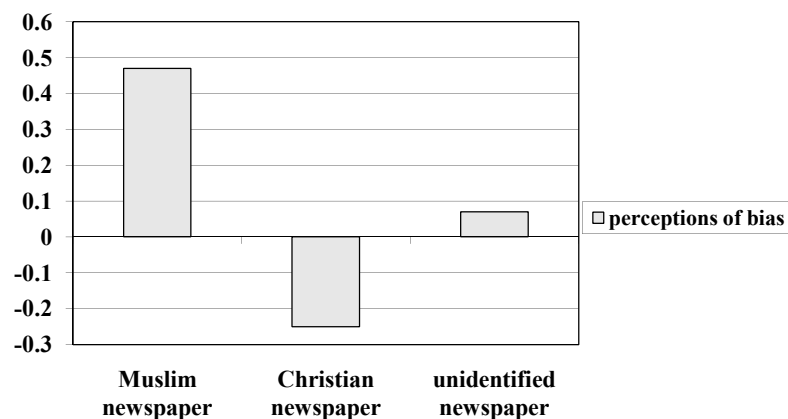
## Hostile media bias

One factor that might shape people's prior beliefs about bias is the group allegiances of the media.

In a follow-up study, Ariyanto et al. (2006) showed Muslims and Christians in Indonesia a passage from a newspaper describing religious conflict. Participants were either told the passage appeared in a Muslim newspaper, a Christian newspaper, or the newspaper was left unidentified.

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## Ariyanto et al. (2007)



+ve scores indicate perceived bias against Christians

-ve scores indicate perceived bias against Muslims

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## Summary

- Cults:
  - what are they, why do people join, what effects do they have?
  - What are the characteristics of cults (vs 'normal' religions)?
- Brainwashing:
  - what is it, how does it work?
- Propaganda (includes research on media bias):
  - What is it / how does it work?

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- Next week:

The individual within the group
- In the Tutes this week:
  - Debriefing on Assignment 1 + career & study tips

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