
Cults, Extremist Movements, and the Child Custody Evaluation: Pitfalls and Strategies

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The potential for extreme harm in cults¹ is, sadly, well documented. Two-hundred and seventy-eight children perished in Jonestown in 1978; all but three were ruled homicides², almost all killed by their parents or legal guardians. Of the 11 Move members who died in their 1985 confrontation with Philadelphia police, 5 were children. During the siege and subsequent destruction of David Koresh's Branch Davidian cult compound in Waco, Texas, 28 children died. The removal of over 400 children from the Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints (FLDS) compound near Eldorado, Texas, was eventually described as a debacle for the Texas Child Protective Services department (Slevin, 2008; Winslow, 2014); all but a few were eventually returned to their FLDS families. Warren Jeffs, who is serving a life sentence after being convicted of child sexual abuse, is reported to still be leading his cult from his prison cell.

¹ Most specialists eschew the term "cult" in favor of more accurate and descriptive terms such as "high demand group" (HDG), "extremist movement" or, at a minimum, "destructive cult" to distinguish them from benign, harmless and typically loose-knit groups such as the "Elvis cult" or a "surfing cult." However, in an effort to keep this manuscript simple, the author employs the term "cult" to mean an HDG or destructive cult, unless otherwise stated.

² According to the Guyanese court which had jurisdiction in the matter, as reported in The New York Times, 12/12/1978.

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Ironically, part of the motivation behind these confrontations was the local, state or federal government's concern for the welfare of the children in these groups.

Less dramatic but arguably more heinous and "common" are the periodic reports³ of children who die unnecessarily because their parents' group (usually but not limited to fundamentalist Christian sects) is opposed to "secular" medical care under any circumstances (Hall, 2013; Stauth, 2013). In my experience as a cult specialist and psychologist, I have never heard of an adult who died after undergoing "faith healing"; unlike their young charges, these adults are able to and often do clandestinely obtain medical care (Hall, 2013).

In a *New York Times* op-ed column, cult expert and former member Lois Kendall (2013) put it very bluntly when she noted that "...the practices and structure of some sects [and cults] mean that children are growing up in an environment where they may be at risk of medical, physical, emotional or educational neglect, psychological maltreatment, and sometimes abuse in every sense of that word, even death." Importantly, she warns not to overgeneralize, because "every sect is different and the experiences of children in sects differ."

³ Massachusetts Citizens for Children maintains a record of these cases, based on reports from sources including CHILD, Inc. and the American Academy of Pediatrics, as of 4/14/2014 at http://www.masskids.org/index.php?option=com_content&id=161&Itemid=165.

Awareness of a parent's involvement in an extremist or cultic movement needs to be a major factor in a custody evaluation because these groups typically function as closed, often physically isolated, societies which resist outside help or intervention and may often oppose any investigation of possible child abuse. The incidence of child abuse and/or neglect is higher (compared to the general population) in many of these groups. They typically promote an absolutist ideology that may provide a rationalization for child abuse and neglect by dictating harsh physical discipline of children and/or the rejection of medical intervention. Extremist and cultic groups use religious/political/psychological beliefs to justify their ideology and reclusive nature. By limiting interaction with members of mainstream society (e.g., members may not visit doctors or mental health professionals; children may attend group-run schools), they can close off the normal means by which authorities learn about child abuse and neglect. Some religious cults have brazenly invoked the First Amendment to avoid scrutiny or curtail investigative efforts (Hamilton, 2007).

Cults, Extremism, and Extremist Cults: Concepts and Definitions

Defining the Difficult to Define

Ever since they began to command attention and concern (in the late 1960s and early 1970s), there has been significant debate and disagreement over what constitutes a [destructive] "cult" (high-demand group, HDG). The term "cult" has religious, sociological, and social/clinical psychological definitions; some may overlap but none are identical. Sociologists of religion Stark and Bainbridge (1996), define a cult as "a religious or other social group with deviant and novel beliefs and practices" (p. 124). By this definition, in the early 1960s committed Beatles' fans constituted a cult. Rutgers sociologist Benjamin Zablocki highlighted the key elements of cults by defining them as an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

Social psychologist Alexandra Stein (2009) offered the following definition of a destructive/totalistic cult: "A useful definition of a cult builds on the work of Lifton, Singer, Arendt and others and encompasses the following five points:

- The group is led by a charismatic and authoritarian leader
- It has a closed, steeply hierarchical inner structure
- The group adheres to an exclusive or total belief system
- Processes of coercive persuasion (or brainwashing) are used to retain followers
- Followers are exploited"

Louis Jolyon West, a psychiatrist who once worked on the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)-funded programs to study "mind control," defined a (totalistic) cult as "a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing, and employing unethical, manipulative or coercive techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressure, information management, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, suspension of individuality and critical judgment, and so on, designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders, to the possible or actual detriment of members, their families, or the community" (p. 271).

When I am conducting an evaluation, I consider three factors, all of which need to be present, before I determine a group is a cult. These are: Does the group have a *cultic structure*, does it employ *cultic processes*, and does the person I am evaluating demonstrate a *cultic relationship* with the group? (See Fig. 1.) All are necessary conditions before I will label a group a cult, although the presence of any one of these factors may compromise an individual's ability to be a competent parent.

Cultic Structure Cults typically have a rigid hierarchical structure, with an acknowledged leader who has a very unique quality (e.g., unique

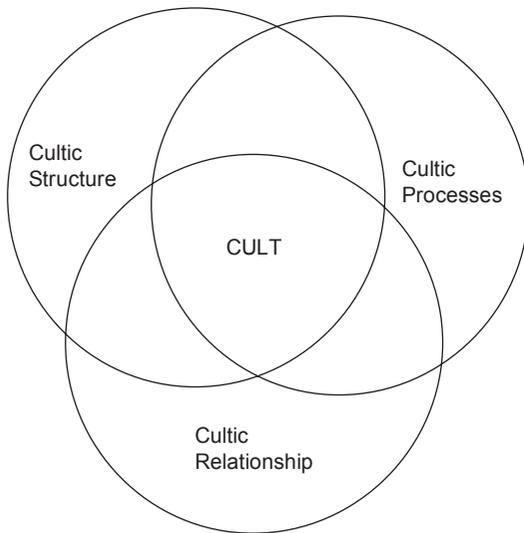


Fig. 1 Three dimensions of cults

spiritual abilities, unique guru or teacher status, special and unique knowledge or skills, actual divinity) and whose knowledge, wisdom, skill and/or leadership is ultimately unquestionable. Typically, cult leaders are male although there have been some female leaders, especially of smaller cults, and/or cults based (albeit often loosely) on Eastern philosophies. Zablocki's definition uses the term "charismatic," and that is almost universally true in my own experience. Some cults also have an "inner circle," a small subgroup of individuals chosen or acknowledged by the leader, which may or may not also include the leader's chosen successor. This inner circle is often privy to knowledge that is withheld from the general or "average" member, and may have power and privileges not enjoyed by the general membership.

Cultic Processes A great deal has been written about the various psychosocial processes that can be labeled "cultic." Although cult experts vary greatly in their utilization of terms like "brainwashing" or "mind control," most agree that cults engage in some form of what psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton (see Table 1) termed "thought reform" (Lifton, 1961, 1991), psychologist Margaret Singer referred to as "the systematic manipulation of social and psychological influ-

ence" (Singer, 1982; Singer & Lalich, 1996) or what sociologist Janja Lalich later refined in her description of "bounded choice" (Lalich, 2004a; Lalich, 2004b), which expands on both Lifton and Singer. Lalich described bounded choice as the illusion of choice created by a cultic environment that in fact is severely limited as a result of cultic influence. Systems (groups) that utilize bounded choice exhibit common characteristics on four dimensions: Charismatic authority, a transcendent belief system, systems of control and systems of influence (see Table 2).

Cultic Relationship It is an established fact that not all people exposed to cultic processes within a cultic structure will become members of a cult. For a broad range of reasons, a significant number of potential recruits will never join, or will join for a relatively brief amount of time and then leave.⁴ The process of becoming a cult member involves, at some point, an active (if bounded) choice on the part of the recruit and an active engagement in a cultic relationship with the group's membership and leader. Psychologist Michael Langone modified Farber, Harlow and West's (Farber et. al., 1956) description of the "DDD [Debility, Dependency, Dread] Syndrome" in brainwashing; according to Langone, the cultic relationship involves *deception* on the part of the cult hierarchy and the induction of *dependency* and *dread* in members (Langone, 1993). The latter term refers to what sociologists sometimes call "exit costs," the intense fear of personal and/or social doom (e.g., eternal damnation, causing others to suffer) that the member would suffer should he or she leave the group. The FBI's report on "Project Megiddo" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1999) quoted Singer and Lalich: a cultic relationship refers to "one in which a person intentionally induces others to become totally or nearly totally dependent on

⁴ A number of "walk-aways" (people who leave cults on their own, without an intervention or subsequent counseling) will nevertheless continue to manifest some of the beliefs, behaviors and psychological sequelae of people actively involved in a cultic group (sometimes referred to as "floating"). Walk-aways may also be more vulnerable to subsequent cultic influence and even "cult-hopping" (Dubrow-Eichel & Dubrow-Eichel, 1988).

Table 1 Lifton's criteria for totalist groups (e.g., cults)

Thought reform process	Description
Milieu control	This involves the control of information and communication both within the environment and, ultimately, within the individual, resulting in a significant degree of isolation from society at large
Mystical manipulation	There is manipulation of experiences that appear spontaneous but in fact were planned and orchestrated by the group or its leaders in order to demonstrate divine authority or spiritual advancement or some special gift or talent that will then allow the leader to reinterpret events, scripture, and experiences as he or she wishes
Demand for purity	The world is viewed as black and white and the members are constantly exhorted to conform to the ideology of the group and strive for perfection. The induction of guilt and/or shame is a powerful control device used here
Confession	Sins, as defined by the group, are to be confessed either to a personal monitor or publicly to the group. There is no confidentiality; members' "sins," "attitudes," and "faults" are discussed and exploited by the leaders
Sacred science	The group's doctrine or ideology is considered to be the ultimate Truth, beyond all questioning or dispute. Truth is not to be found outside the group. The leader, as the spokesperson for God or for all humanity, is likewise above criticism
Loading the language	The group interprets or uses words and phrases in new ways so that often the outside world does not understand. This jargon consists of thought-terminating clichés, which serve to alter members' thought processes to conform to the group's way of thinking
Doctrine over person	Member's personal experiences are subordinated to the sacred science and any contrary experiences must be denied or reinterpreted to fit the ideology of the group
Dispensing of existence	The group has the prerogative to decide who has the right to exist and who does not. This is usually not literal but means that those in the outside world are not saved, unenlightened, unconscious and they must be converted to the group's ideology. If they do not join the group or are critical of the group, then they must be rejected by the members. Thus, the outside world loses all credibility. In conjunction, should any member leave the group, he or she must be rejected also

Table 2 Lalich's cultic dimensions

Dimension	Description
Charismatic authority	This is the emotional bond between leader and followers. It lends legitimacy to the leader and grants authority to his or her actions while at the same time justifying and reinforcing followers' responses to the leader and/or the leader's ideas and goals. The relational aspect of charisma is the hook that links a devotee to a leader and/or his or her ideas
Transcendent belief system	This is the overarching ideology that binds adherents to the group and keeps them behaving according to the group's rules and norms. It is transcendent because it offers a total explanation of past, present, and future, including a path to salvation. Most important, the leader/group also specifies the exact methodology (or recipe) for the personal transformation necessary to qualify one to travel on that path
Systems of control	This is the network of acknowledged, or visible, regulatory mechanisms that guide the operation of the group. It includes the overt rules, regulations, and procedures that guide and control members' behavior
Systems of influence	This is the network of interactions and social influence residing in the group's social relations. This is the human interaction and group culture from which members learn to adapt their thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors in relation to their new beliefs

him or her for almost all major life decisions, and inculcates in these followers a belief that he or she has some special talent, gift, or knowledge” (Singer & Lalich, 1996, p. 7).

The concept of an “extremist” movement (whether religious, political, psychological or other) is also difficult to define. Most major religions have orthodox, monastic (or in the case of Protestantism, fundamentalist) subgroups; should a monk who has taken a vow of silence and subjects himself to harsh physical conditions be considered an “extremist”? All three Abrahamic faiths celebrate extreme faith and martyrdom. If a parent expresses “personal extremism”—extremist beliefs independent of being involved in a group (or with a controlling individual)—I evaluate that aspect of the parent’s psychological makeup the same way I would evaluate any unusual belief: Does it impact on the individual’s ability to competently parent, and if so, how? A parent who believes in demons is one thing; a parent who interprets child misbehavior as evidence of demonic possession and then subjects his or her child to exorcism is an entirely different matter. These days, political extremism may be almost as common as religious extremism; as with extreme religious beliefs, having radical political views may or may not impact on parenting. Parents who “infect” their children with bizarre political conspiracy theories and thereby inculcate a strongly paranoid view of the world demand close scrutiny (unfortunately at the risk of being labeled part of “the conspiracy”). Again, separating beliefs from overt behaviors from potential behaviors becomes the evaluator’s conundrum. Personal extremism is often (but not always) an indication of broader underlying psychopathology. When extremist views or behaviors are an issue, it becomes important to determine if the extremist parent is following or involved with an authoritarian figure or leader. This is often the case. I evaluated one family in which a parent was involved with an extremist self-proclaimed philosopher who mixed radical libertarian politics with a dubious form of self-help psychology in which his wife (a therapist whose license to practice had been revoked) “counseled” families to separate from each other because “all families

are infected with statist and corporatist ideas and are therefore dysfunctional.” What made this situation unique at the time was the fact that the parent had never had a face-to-face encounter with the “philosopher” or any of his followers; this leader had developed a large following entirely on the internet. In fact, he was an early example of what some have identified as an “internet-based cult leader” (Eichel, Dubrow-Marshall & Dubrow-Marshall, 2011).

While extremist movements and cultic groups run the gamut of belief systems and causes, they typically fall into one of these categories:

- Religious
 - Bible or scripture based
 - Fundamentalist/literalist (Christian, Jewish, Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, etc.)
- Political
 - Radical/revolutionary (left-wing, right-wing, anarchist/libertarian)
 - Christian identity movement (can also be a considered hybrid religious/political)
- Marketing (e.g., multilevel marketing, often incorporates religious or “New Age” beliefs and practices)
- Therapy
- “New Age” (can combine elements of Eastern religion/philosophy, spiritualism, pop psychology, ancient healing arts, Gnosticism; can also be considered hybrid self-help/religious)
- Hybrid
 - self-help/religious
 - political/therapeutic
 - religious/political

In the USA, the most common extremist or cultic movements are those that can be categorized as fundamentalist Christian and/or Bible based.

What the Evaluator Needs to Consider

No custody evaluator is an expert in every possible issue that impacts on parenting. The Association of Family and Conciliation Courts (2006) published custody evaluation guidelines note that “...special issues such as allegations of domestic

violence, substance abuse, alienating behaviors, sexual abuse; relocation requests; and, sexual orientation issues require specialized knowledge and training. Evaluators shall only conduct assessments in areas in which they are competent” (p. 16). I view custody evaluations that involve cult-related issues similarly to those that involve possible neurological impairments in a parent. Evaluators who lack expertise in neuropsychology should involve an expert whenever possible.

As a psychologist with expertise in both custody evaluations and the psychology of cultic movements, I am called periodically to evaluate a family or consult with an evaluator in which, typically, one of the divorced or divorcing spouses has left a cult while the other remains involved. The inevitable questions involve to what degree, if any, does a parent’s involvement in a religious, spiritual, self-help, political, or marketing “cult” have a detrimental impact on the development of children and/or competent parenting by the former spouse who remains involved in the group? Since the vast majority of cultic groups are relatively small, unknown and unstudied, little or no reliable information may be readily available about it, which places the added but unavoidable burden on the evaluator of engaging in what amounts to investigative work. The evaluator’s inquiries into the purported cult may be the first time the group has ever come under any kind of scrutiny.

Over the years, I have developed a general outline of how to conduct a custody evaluation when cultic involvement is suspected. I typically begin with well-recognized and standard procedures, as outlined by both the American Psychological Association’s (2009) “Guidelines for Child Custody Evaluations in Family Law Proceedings” and the Association of Family and Conciliation Courts’ (2006) “Model Standards of Practice for Child Custody Evaluation.” Both documents call for, among other things, clarity about the scope of the evaluation, use of multiple data gathering methods (empirically based whenever possible) and sources, balance in assessment procedures, formal evaluation of the children and the parent–child interaction, and use of collateral information (interviews with others who have

personal knowledge of the parents, children and parent–child interactions).

In extremist/cult-related cases, the custody evaluator needs to be versed in social and group psychology as well as family, child and developmental psychology. Among the issues that will need to be assessed are:

1. The group structure (group boundaries, group/power hierarchy, are there any checks and balances). How rigid are the group’s boundaries? How does power flow (in cults, it is always from top down)? Are there any checks and balances against abuse of power? Is there any mechanism for critical feedback to the leadership, and if so, is that feedback seriously considered and what are the consequences (if any) for the criticizing member? Are members’ personal boundaries violated by those higher up in the group’s hierarchy?
2. Methods utilized by the group to affect changes in beliefs, emotions, behavior and personality. To what extent does the group use deceptive methods (e.g., “bait and hook,” false testimonials, hidden obligations and responsibilities)? Does the group employ group pressure for the purpose of obtaining conformity (“groupthink”)? Does the group over-employ hypnotic, quasi-hypnotic or other “trance-inducing” methods such as guided imagery, initiation rituals, repetitive prayer and/or movement (e.g., trance dancing) or formal hypnosis? Does the group encourage or discourage critical reasoning, and does it allow and even encourage time away from the group so the new recruit can critically consider his/her commitment? Does the group overtly or covertly control the flow of information so as to limit the new recruit’s exposure to knowledge that might question or contradict the group’s beliefs, philosophy, or dogma?
3. Prior to exposure to and involvement in the extremist/cultic group⁵, how different (if at

⁵ Keep in mind that the cult-affected parent may have been born into his/her group (“second generation”), so there may not be a “pre-cult” personality.

Table 3 “Thought reform” themes in cults

Conditions (Singer, 1982)	Themes (Lifton, 1961)	Stages (Schein, 1961)
1. Keep the person unaware of what is going on and the changes taking place		1. Unfreezing
2. Control the person’s time and, if possible, physical environment	1. Milieu control	
3. Create a sense of powerlessness, covert fear, and dependency	2. Loading the language	
4. Suppress much of the person’s old behavior and attitudes	3. Demand for purity	
	4. Confession	
5. Instill new behavior and attitudes	5. Mystical manipulation	2. Changing
	6. Doctrine over person	
6. Put forth a closed system of logic; allow no real input or criticism	7. Sacred science	3. Refreezing
	8. Dispensing of existence	

all) were the parent’s beliefs, behaviors, and personality (i.e., “pre-cult” personality)? Do people close to the member report sudden, drastic and/or unusual or unexpected changes in the member’s behavior and personal characteristics (even if the changes seem “positive” or “for the better”)? Has the member’s emotional expressiveness changed, either by expanding or contracting significantly?

The evaluator will typically need to engage a range of information sources (in addition to one or both parents), including collateral witnesses, internet information, current and former members, cult experts, and at times public and/or private investigations. Using these information sources, I assess the group in question using the criteria established by Lifton, Singer and Lalich (as delineated in Tables 1 and 2), and consider it in terms of the change process (“thought reform” themes) summarized in Table 3.

Isaac Bonewits (1979, 2001), an amateur yet respected researcher of esoteric religions, developed his “Bonewits Cult Danger Evaluation Frame (BCDEF)”. Using a 1 (Low) to 10 (High) Likert-like rating scale, the BCDEF was utilized to great effect by mathematician/psychologist Elliot Benjamin (2013) in his experiential analysis of dozens of “new religions,” including some that met the criteria for a totalist/extremist cult. Although I have only utilized the BCDEF once, I found it a useful framework for evaluating a

group’s degree of extremism and/or cult-like behavior and have reproduced it in Table 4⁶ below.

Formal testing can occasionally provide hints as to a parent’s possible cult involvement. Studies on “pre-cult” or “in-cult” personality patterns have been poorly designed and were typically conducted by sociologists or social scientists unfamiliar with clinical psychology measures. Some research was carried out under cult-influenced conditions or under cult scrutiny; they rarely utilized standardized comprehensive measures, for example, often opting to use cult-approved or experimental measures that typically do not have adequate validity indices or other ways of accounting for impression-management. Psychologist Paul Martin and his colleagues conducted one of the few formal studies of people who very recently left cultic groups, prior to any rehabilitation. Among other measures, they utilized the first edition of the Millon Multiaxial Clinical Inventory (MCMI), a highly regarded and well-researched personality inventory that is also often used in custody evaluations. They found members scored high (at clinically significant levels) on measure of anxiety, depression, dependency and occasionally dissociation (Martin, Langone, Dole, & Wiltrout, 1992). To my knowledge, these results are the only reported “baseline” profiles

⁶ The Bonewits Cult Danger Evaluation Frame is in the public domain; see the References section for a downloading link.

Table 4 Bonewits cult danger evaluation frame

BDCEF factor	Factor description
Internal control	Amount of internal political and social power exercised by leader(s) over members; lack of clearly defined organizational rights for members
External control	Amount of external political and social influence desired or obtained; emphasis on directing member's external political and social behavior
Wisdom/knowledge claimed by leader(s)	Amount of infallibility declared or implied about decisions or doctrinal/scriptural interpretations; number and degree of unverified and/or unverifiable credentials claimed
Wisdom/knowledge credited to leader(s) by members	Amount of trust in decisions or doctrinal/scriptural interpretations made by leader(s); amount of hostility by members towards internal or external critics and/or towards verification efforts
Dogma	Rigidity of reality concepts taught; amount of doctrinal inflexibility or "fundamentalism;" hostility towards relativism and situationalism
Recruiting	Emphasis put on attracting new members; amount of proselytizing; requirement for all members to bring in new ones
Front groups	Number of subsidiary groups using different names from that of main group, especially when connections are hidden
Wealth	Amount of money and/or property desired or obtained by group; emphasis on member's donations; economic lifestyle of leader(s) compared to ordinary members
Sexual manipulation of members	Amount of control exercised over sexuality of members (by leader or leaders of non-tantric groups) in terms of sexual orientation, behavior, and/or choice of partners
Sexual favoritism	Advancement or preferential treatment dependent upon sexual activity with the leader(s) of non-tantric groups
Censorship	Amount of control over members' access to outside opinions on group, its doctrines or leader(s)
Isolation	Amount of effort to keep members from communicating with nonmembers, including family, friends and lovers
Dropout control	Intensity of efforts directed at preventing or returning dropouts
Violence	Amount of approval when used by or for the group, its doctrines or leader(s)
Paranoia	Amount of fear concerning real or imagined enemies; exaggeration of perceived power of opponents; prevalence of conspiracy theories
Grimness	Amount of disapproval concerning jokes about the group, its doctrines or its leader(s)
Surrender of Will	Amount of emphasis on members not having to be responsible for personal decisions; degree of individual disempowerment created by the group, its doctrines or its leader(s)
Hypocrisy	Amount of approval for actions which the group officially considers immoral or unethical, when done by or for the group, its doctrines or leader(s); willingness to violate the group's declared principles for political, psychological, social, economic, military, or other gain

of cult members.⁷ In my clinical experience, current cult members typically score significantly high on measures of self-righteousness and rigid value systems, such as the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI) "L" Scale. In

over half the cult-related cases with which I have utilized established personality measure (MMPI, MCMI, or Personality Assessment Inventory), the profiles were so skewed by the cult-involved parent's self-righteousness and/or rigidity as to render them invalid.

⁷ It is important to note that the majority of Martin's subject pool were members of Bible-based or fundamentalist Christian movements and cults

Case Examples⁸

The Mother, “Jesus,” and the “Apostle”

In early 2012, I was contacted by a New Jersey judge who was given my name by a colleague who was familiar with both my custody work and my familiarity with cultic movements. This was unusual; I am rarely contacted directly by a judge but in this instance the attorneys involved apparently did not know how to proceed and asked for the court’s guidance. The issue involved a divorced couple with one child, a 4-year-old girl. The parents had both shared custody (both legal and physical). Since they lived fairly close to each other, the parents and child enjoyed a fairly conflict-free and logistically easy 50% (every other week) physical custody arrangement. However, the situation changed when the father learned that mom had become involved with a small cult led by a man who proclaimed himself to be the reincarnation of Jesus Christ. Of great concern to the father was that “Jesus” and his followers (apostles and disciples) had purchased a large tract of land on an isolated jungle island in the South Pacific. There, they cleared a large swath of the jungle (in the shape of a cross) and built a compound where “Jesus” and his apostles and disciples lived when they were not traveling throughout the Western world raising money through various workshops and lectures, for which they charged a fee, and direct appeals to new converts for large donations. The father was concerned that (1) mother might kidnap their daughter and move to the compound and/or (2) the daughter would be “brainwashed” into becoming a disciple of “Jesus.”

Prior to the judge contacting me, the father had become aware that his ex-wife had been “chosen” by “Jesus” to marry a New Zealander who was the reincarnation of the apostle Paul;

this man was on his way to New Jersey to meet the mother and spend a week or two with her in her house (while the daughter was also there). The father had filed for and obtained an emergency order in which he had sole custody of his daughter while “Paul” was in the USA.

Because the issues were somewhat circumscribed, and father had no objection to mother having shared legal and physical custody as long as she was not “brainwashed into a cult,” the judge’s order specified that my assessment was limited to the court’s question regarding (1) the nature of mother’s alleged involvement with (the “Jesus” cult) and (2) the nature of any alleged exposure of young (daughter) to any of the teachings associated with this controversial religion, and (3) any recommendations directly indicated by the answers to the first two questions.

As a result, “my evaluation of the parents was limited to their history and personality factors that are directly relevant to the court’s question, and was conducted after consultation... with both parents’ attorneys of record. I first interviewed and tested father [on specific date] for 3 h; I next interviewed and tested mother [on specific date] for 3 h. In addition to completing a number of background forms and questionnaires and participating in a clinical interview, both parents completed two objective personality measures, the Personality Assessment Inventory (PAI) and the Millon Clinical Multiaxial Inventory, third Edition (MCMI-III). I also visited [daughter] at her mother’s home [on specific date] and spent an hour with her, which included about 45 min unsupervised, alone in her room. My choice of meeting in [mother’s] home was deliberate, for reasons that are explained later in this report. Finally, I spoke with [mother’s] therapist...”

Although I was aware of this particular “Jesus” cult, I consulted several lay and professional cult experts with whom I am familiar through my involvement with the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA).⁹ I believe this information

⁸ In the two case examples I present, identifying information (e.g., names, genders, ages and locations) has been changed to safeguard the privacy of individuals involved. Information about the two groups involved has also been disguised to prevent ready identification; in fact, in describing each group I have sometimes combined information from a number of different groups I have investigated as part of a custody evaluation.

⁹ According to its official mission statement, the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), of which I am currently President, “provides information on cults, cultic groups, psychological manipulation, psychological abuse,

is vital to conducting these kinds of evaluations because they allow a familiarity with the group's unique structure, belief systems, "language" and concepts, thereby allowing me to make an educated assessment of a parent's level of involvement and indoctrination.

Formal testing of both parents was unremarkable. Both parents engaged in impression management, which is typical for parents engaged in any custody-related evaluation; neither parent's denial, rigidity or lack of insight rose to the level of threatening the validity of the test results. Neither parent demonstrated significant psychopathology. Mother's post-divorce history was significant. She had pursued several spiritual interests that are generally and roughly classified as "New Age." These included relying on crystals for healing power, involvement in a number of vaguely spiritualistic workshops and programs, and an ongoing relationship with a licensed therapist who was her friend and a "channel" for contacting and communicating with both deceased spirits and past lives. Mother's friend had been her therapist in the past, but no longer saw her in therapy (although she did charge her for "channeling" sessions); she was also the one who introduced mother to the teachings of "Jesus" and with whom she then shared a room when they both traveled to San Diego to spend 5 days in a workshop led by "Jesus" and his "apostles." Mother was enamored enough with "Jesus" to pledge him a significant amount of money, and was consequently excited when another workshop was scheduled for a New Jersey town near her home; this workshop coincided with and was one of the reasons for "Paul's" visit. Offering her home to her declared soul mate would also bring down his travel expenses.

spiritual abuse, brainwashing, mind control, thought reform, abusive churches, high-demand groups, extremism, totalistic groups, new religious movements, alternative and mainstream religions, group dynamics, exit counseling, recovery, and practical suggestions for those affected by or interested in these subjects." The experts I consulted with included one prominent professor of religion and sociology, and one highly experienced lay consultant ("exit counselor") who specializes in Bible-based and neo-Christian cultic groups.

Several important events happened following the initial emergency order. "Paul" declared that he and the mother should get married when he arrived in the USA, as this was the wish of "Jesus." Mother became panicked at this idea, but was spared a confrontation when at the last minute, for reasons not explained, "Paul" backed out of the trip altogether ("So there really was no reason for the emergency order," mother told me). Secondly, mother—who by virtue of her stated commitment and sizable donation of money was now brought into the "inner circle" of the cult—became distraught when she shared meals with "Jesus" and a small contingent of his "apostles." At every meal, "all they talked about was money and how to expand their mission, mostly to get more money." Moreover, she found "Jesus" to be somewhat obnoxious, judgmental and arrogant, and he "used a lot of swear words, which didn't sound like something the real Jesus would do." He was also strongly opposed to gay rights and gay marriage, which bothered her significantly as she was very comfortable with the significant proportion of gay, lesbian and bisexual friends who were drawn to the same "New Age" programs and workshops she attended. By the end of the workshop, mom was no longer believing in "Jesus."

Interviews with collaterals, including mother's therapist, confirmed this story. When I next met with mother and daughter in their home, I looked carefully for any outward signs of continued involvement with "Jesus." There were none. Her own books contained a range of titles, including some familiar "New Age" ones, but there were no books by "Jesus." Mom had given them away. Her daughter's playroom and bedroom were devoid of any spiritual or religious objects or books; I only saw age-appropriate play materials, toys and books. The daughter was clearly bright and very verbal. I spent about 30 min in casual play and conversation with her until it seemed she was reasonably comfortable with me. In my report to the court, I noted:

After it was clear that young [daughter] was comfortable with me, I asked if her mom or dad ever talked to her about God. She replied, "It's not nice to say 'oh my God.'" I asked her who told him that,

and she said “mommy and daddy.” I then asked her if it was permissible to say other things about God, like ‘Thank you, God,’ and young [daughter] said “Yes.” She told me that she goes to church but that neither mom nor dad talk to her about God or Jesus.

I felt troubled by mom’s lack of curiosity regarding how and why she became involved with this “Jesus” cult. In addition, I was concerned about her unquestioned exposure to other New Age-oriented people and processes that tend to violate personal and professional boundaries (e.g., a former therapist who is now a friend and “channeler”) and overvalue subjective experience. When I spoke with her therapist, I was told that they were exploring this issue from what I consider a “standard” psychological point of view that tends to emphasize individual factors, such as unresolved childhood conflicts and longings, over social influence and other more situational factors. Research on cult involvement has not found a particular personality pattern that predisposes people to becoming involved with cults; rather, temporary and situations factors (e.g., being in a life-stage transition period, suffering a major loss) predominate over individual personality factors. Only a few individual factors have been found in studies: recruits tend to have slightly above-average intelligence, to be idealistic, and to be ideas-oriented.

In my Conclusions section, I reported that mother no longer seemed involved with the “Jesus” cult and was not entering into a relationship with “Paul.” I warned that “the ongoing relationship between [mother] and [therapist friend], a licensed professional counselor, at least gives the appearance of crossing professional boundaries and possibly engaging in a dual relationship, which would be an ethical violation...for the purpose of this evaluation, I mention my concern about [this relationship] because—in addition to mother’s tendency toward highly unusual experiences and interpersonal submissiveness—it is additional evidence of a possible vulnerability to potentially harmful New Age-oriented movements and groups that extends beyond the one specific group...”

I did not feel an extension of the emergency order or a change in custody were warranted. I ended my report with a list of both recommendations (in line with traditional court recommendations about custody) as well as suggestions (these went beyond a traditional court order). My recommendations were:

1. For the foreseeable future, young [daughter] should continue to have no contact with [“Jesus”] or anyone associated with this group.
2. Nothing in this evaluation should be construed as suggesting that [mother] otherwise lacks appropriate parenting skills; nothing in this evaluation should be construed as suggesting a need for additional custody-related protective measures, such as limiting visitation or requiring that it be supervised.
3. Research on child development prior to adolescence strongly suggests that children benefit more from exposure to one religion, or in the case of interfaith marriages, two at most; any more runs the risk of introducing unnecessary conflict and confusion. I suggest that young (daughter’s) exposure to religion be limited to one faith. Given the backgrounds of both her parents and extended family, it makes sense for that faith to be Catholicism.

My suggestions were:

1. I suggest that, at this time, the young [daughter] not be exposed to any beliefs or practices that are generally considered “New Age” spiritualities and/or therapies, including use of crystals, so-called energy medicines, Reiki, channeling, past-life regression, tarot, etc., until such time when she is capable of a critical understanding of the potential benefits as well as possible harm in these beliefs and practices.
2. [For mother]: Enrollment in a college-level course (online or otherwise) in a scientific approach to comparative religion. The vast majority of theologians and clergy from all major religious traditions with whom I have spoken over the years clearly state that the exploration

of faith should include rather than exclude a critical, intellectual study of the world's major religions.

3. Consider attending the next annual meeting of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA), which is in [place and date]. I suggest that both father and mother attend parts of this conference as a means of gaining scientific, objective information about cultic practices and structures.¹⁰
4. As an alternative to suggestions 1 and 2, I suggest consulting, for the purpose of gaining information, with a recognized expert in the cultic aspects of some New Age and neo-Christian movements. [Name] is one such recognized expert.
5. It may be useful to allow a follow-up evaluation at the end of 2012 or early 2013 to assess the impact of the above recommendations and suggestions (assuming the court chooses to order them) and to determine the degree of compliance.

Father "Ascending"

In 2006 I was retained by "Jane Smith," mother of a boy Johnny (8) and Betsy (10), to engage the family in a custody evaluation subsequent to her ex-husband's continuing involvement in a group I will refer to as "the ascending circle" (TAC). The couple met and became involved (and later married) while pursuing advanced training in TAC. However, Ms. Smith left the group after her mother died, leaving a sizeable inheritance, and she began to be strongly pressured to donate her inheritance "for the good of TAC and raising planetary consciousness." Leaving TAC was the primary factor for the subsequent dissolution of their marriage. Ms. Smith was convinced TAC was a "brainwashing cult" that was potentially harmful to their two children.

The ascending circle appeared to be one of many thousands estimated spiritualist groups (some of which are cults, others are not) that exist in the USA, largely outside of any media attention. I could find very little information about this group other than a rather primitive website and a few online comments made by former members, which were generally very critical, and were typically followed by dozens of favorable comments, presumably by current members. I spoke with Ms. Smith's attorney and explained that I only perform evaluations that are mutually agreed upon or court-ordered. Ms. Smith's attorney filed a motion to have a court-ordered evaluation performed, and specifically named me as the preferred evaluator given my experience with cultic groups; the father ("Jim Smith") and his attorney did not object.

In extremist/cult-related cases, I make it clear that, depending on the level of a parent's involvement with a suspected cultic group, I may be evaluating the group as well as the parents. My reasoning is similar to the generally accepted proposition that all non-parental significant caretakers or custodians (e.g., grandparents providing ongoing childcare), especially of very young children, be included in a typical custody evaluation. When there is evidence that a parent is deeply involved with, and perhaps obedient to, a group or a group leader, I argue that this third party (the group and/or its leader) in essence functions *in loco parentis* on a consistent basis, and thus can have a profound impact on a child's immediate safety, general well-being and development.

In this matter, in addition to the standard custody evaluation, I felt it was important to get as thorough an understanding of TAC as possible. Both parents were fairly open and forthcoming with material about the group. While on the surface this may seem surprising (especially on father's part), I have found that those who are deeply involved in a cultic group often believe so strongly that they have the absolute truth, that they harbor little or no fear of me finding out anything negative. Some even harbor the fantasy of that by exposing me to as much information as I want, they will convert me. I obtained information about TAC in several ways. As mentioned,

¹⁰ In the interest of full disclosure, I am the current President of the Board of Directors of the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). This is an unpaid position. I have no financial interest in ICSA or any of its meetings, conferences or publications.

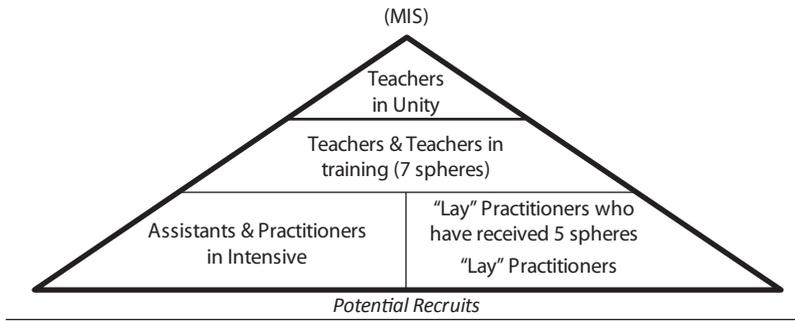


Fig. 2 Hierarchical structure of the ascending circle

both parents spent a total of about 4 h combined telling me about TAC from their different perspectives. Second, there was some information about TAC’s beliefs and philosophy online. Third, both parents gave me a list of people with past (mother’s list) or present (father’s list) involvement in TAC; I spoke with three people from each parent’s list to obtain collateral information. Through my own network, I was able to locate one Philadelphia-based interventionist (“exit counselor”) who had worked with a TAC-affected family and knew a great deal about the organization’s leader, structure and indoctrination processes. Finally, I asked for and received permission to attend one of their workshops (called “Intensives”), so I was able to obtain some first-hand experience with the group, albeit at a very introductory level¹¹.

My custody evaluation report contained a long appendix in which I presented detailed findings about TAC. These included a section on the “promises” of the group, in which I described how and why recruits may be initially attracted to TAC; I then went into a lengthy description of the group’s hierarchy, which ranges from the lowest level (“lay practitioner”) to advanced lay practitioners, to assistant practitioners, to “ascended” teachers and teachers-in-training, to the highest level, “teachers in Unity” (the inner core

of the TAC) and finally, the leader, who had declared himself an “Ascended Master” in direct communication with all prior ascended masters (everyone from Plato to Buddha to Christ). I outlined how a recruit becomes a lay practitioner (through initiation, and a pledge of continuing financial support through attendance at paid lectures and workshops) and then a teacher (this involves living full-time at a TAC-owned property, and contributing all outside earnings to the group as well as paying for “lessons” to become a teacher). Teachers in Unity live on the small, main campus owned by TAC and have ongoing, usually daily contact with Mr. M.I.S., the Ascended Master. Figure 2 depicts the hierarchical structure of TAC.

The practice of “ascending,” which I described in my report as involving “extended meditation that is similar to, and largely copied from, transcendental meditation™.” In addition,

Essentially, the Attitudes are mantras that are silently chanted to oneself, initially for 20 min at a time and later for several hours. Eyes may be open or closed. Ascenders are told there are five Spheres to master (actually there are seven, but the last two can only be learned on campus) and four Attitudes per Sphere. Attitudes are stated to be based on Praise, Gratitude and Love. In Spheres 6 and 7, however, there are more than 4 Attitudes. When Ascending, one “introduces” the Attitude, in a manner that, again, is very similar to the way the TM mantra is “gently introduced” during TM. The goal is to “float to the center of Self.” When the Ascender realizes he/she is drifting or thinking, he/she gently reintroduces the Attitude. “Lay Practitioners” are encouraged to Ascend for 20 min three times per day (total 1 hour). Teachers are expected to Ascend at least 2 hours three times per day (total

¹¹ Some cultic groups recruit new members by having open or quasi-open (by invitation only) public meetings, lectures or workshops. These are usually closely (and deceptively) engineered to provide a very superficial and highly positive view of the group.

6 hours), and are encouraged to Ascend as much as possible (8–16 hours is common)...

When utilized for extended periods of time [TM, ascension] and related forms of meditation can become stupefying. A major study that involved 2000 members of TM found the adverse effects of TM included anxiety, confusion, frustration and depression; moreover, these adverse effects were directly correlated to the length (duration) of meditation, so much so that the researchers concluded that “the data raise serious doubts about the innocuous nature of TM.

All collaterals reported quasi-hypnotic experiences while practicing ascension, which seemed to leave them in highly suggestible states during subsequent lectures and classes; I considered this a form of indoctrination. In addition, I found the induction and manipulation of shame was a primary controlling emotion in TAC. In my report, I wrote:

According to my sources, the single most damaging component in the [TAC] program of thought reform is the inculcation and manipulation of *dread*. “Dread” refers to guilt, shame and fear (and combinations thereof). In sharp contrast to [TAC’s] public statements about being nonjudgmental and unconditional in their love, my sources found Teacher training, and especially the meetings, to be highly judgmental. Trainees were strongly admonished not to bring concerns and problems to individuals, but rather to bring them to the daily meetings for “processing.” There, the concerns or problems became fodder for a group process that often left [member] h in tears. A great deal of the focus was on being detached (from money and from people) and giving [TAC] your complete, undivided and unquestioned devotion. Any problems a trainee encountered were squarely placed on that trainee. Meetings were often extremely humiliating. For example, [member] was criticized at length for inculcating “an attitude of poverty” because she used a tea bag twice. My sources were generally agreed that [TAC] routinely employed fear as a means of controlling trainees, by threatening that they would never achieve enlightenment unless they complied with “the program.”

Through my interviews, I discovered that children were expected to begin to learn “ascension” at ages as young as 3 p.m., and were introduced to TAC doctrine in cult-run pre- and after-school programs. When they were unable to remain still and quiet for extended periods of time, they were removed from the meditation room (and their parents) to a locked “quiet room” where they

might remain for minutes or even hours until they were “tranquil” and “open to ascension.” They were taught to treat non-TAC children as “toxic.” Although they did not condone spanking or other forms of corporal punishment, they encouraged and practiced a highly controversial form of “therapeutic holding” developed by “attachment therapists.” These methods, which involve forcibly restraining children by holding, tickling and even smothering them in an effort to encourage “attachment” to adults have been discredited by most mental health organizations and have led to at least one documented death (Maloney, 2003).

Mr. Smith was clearly on his way to becoming a Teacher in Unity. He countered every criticism of TAC with the well-worn quasi-Gnostic argument used by many cultic groups that “we create our own realities,” so therefore TAC ex-members who complain or criticize are in fact responsible for the creation of their own negative experiences. Objective personality testing was declared invalid because of extreme denial of even common, everyday problems or concerns. The same “fake good” response pattern rendered his score on the Child Abuse Potential Inventory (CAPI) invalid. Projective testing suggested dissociative tendencies and a tenuous connection with consensual reality when confronted with highly emotional stimuli. However, I found his interactions with his children to be highly child-centered and generally positive. Yet, in my private meeting with the children, his daughter, Betsy, reported how she became highly upset because her father insisted that her fear of spiders was an indication that her soul was not evolved; moreover, when she expressed her desire to kill a spider, he explained that such an act constituted murder because all insects are part of the cycle of reincarnation and were or will be unascended human beings. When I confronted Mr. Smith with this report, he did not deny but instead suggested that, not only was he right to teach her “respect for all living things,” but that she was clearly in need of a children’s “ascension intensive” to be held in the primary compound over a period of two weeks in the summer.

In my report, I recommended primary legal custody for Mrs. Smith, so that she could make

decisions regarding the amount of exposure the children would have to TAC. I recommended joint physical custody with the condition that the children not be exposed to any TAC practices, members or events while in the care of father. The judge ultimately accepted my recommendation regarding physical custody but continued their joint legal custody with the condition that mother would have ultimate say in decisions about school, camps, or exposure to religious practices and groups. Much of this was rendered moot, however, when approximately 1 year after the custody hearing MIS, the Ascended Master of TAC, was arrested and jailed for conspiracy to commit murder; he had attempted to hire a “hit man” to eliminate a prominent member (one of the few Teachers in Unity) who had left the group and begun criticizing them in highly visible venues. With their leader gone, the remaining Teachers in Unity began to struggle for control, which then led to lawsuits and the ultimate disintegration of TAC as an organized cult.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to outline a rationale and process for evaluating a less common but nevertheless highly important factor in custody evaluations: the possible involvement of a parent in an extremist and/or cultic group. I have briefly described some of the special expertise that is needed (or ways to obtain expert information) as well as what aspects need to be thoughtfully considered when evaluating a cultic group and/or a cultic relationship. In addition to the usual expectation of expertise in child and family psychology and general psychopathology, the evaluator in these situations needs to be grounded in the social psychology of influence (especially undue influence) and totalistic group dynamics. When investigating specific groups for the possibility of cultic processes, there are several independent and reliable online sources, including:

1. The International Cultic Studies Association (<http://www.icsahome.com/>), which in addi-

tion to its online resources, has a vast library of information specifically organized to assist mental health professionals and forensic examiners in cult-related situations.

2. Steven Hassan’s Freedom of Mind Center website (<https://freedomofmind.com/>): Mr. Hassan is a former cult member who has written several highly-regarded books on cult mind control and how to help extricate members from harmful groups. He is also a licensed clinical mental health counselor who has served as a consultant on cults to a range of people (including Dr. Philip Zimbardo, a past-president of the American Psychological Association and chief investigator in the famous “Stanford Prison Experiment”). Mr. Hassan maintains a large database of groups, not all of which may be considered cults.
3. Rick Ross’s Cult Education Institute, formerly known as the Rick Ross Institute, at <http://www.culteducation.com/>: Like Steven Hassan, Ross maintains an extensive database of groups as well as a collection of cult-related news items.
4. Other noteworthy websites include: F.A.C.T.net at <http://www.factnet.org/>, InfoSect in Canada, at <http://infosect.freeshell.org/infocult/ic-home.html>, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project at <http://www.scp-inc.org/>, the Cult Awareness and Information Library at <http://www.culthelp.info/>, INFORM in the UK, at <http://www.inform.ac/>, and FAIR (also based in the UK) at <http://www.fair-news.org/>.

I will mention Cult Awareness Network (CAN) with a major caveat. CAN was once a prominent and controversial leader of the “anti-cult movement” in the USA. Following a financially devastating and complicated lawsuit, all CAN assets—including its name—were sold to the Church of Scientology, a group that prominent investigators like Pulitzer-Prize winning author Lawrence Wright (2013) have labeled a particularly harmful cultic group. The “new” CAN, owned and operated by the Church of Scientology, maintains its website at <http://www.cultawarenessnetwork.org/>.

Standard techniques and measures utilized in custody evaluations are of limited use in situations that might involve religious (or other) extremism or destructive cults. Although one major study found a high incidence of anxiety, depression, dependency and self-righteousness/denial of fault in cult members seeking help, most experts agree there is no “cult personality” that can be discerned through standardized psychological testing or interviewing. Therefore, a comprehensive custody evaluation will include information on the degree (if any) to which a controversial group demonstrates or induces (1) a cultic structure, (2) cultic processes and (3) a cultic relationship with the accused parent. This information, combined with standard interviews with the children and observations of parent-child interactions, should then be integrated into the overall assessment to answer the most salient questions of (1) to what degree, if any, are the children being impacted by their parent’s involvement in an extremist or cultic movement or group, and (2) to what degree, if any, is that impact harmful?

Often, one of the cardinal characteristics of extremist and cultic groups is a covert (and sometimes very overt) disdain for law. “Man’s law” is inferior to “God’s law” or “divine law” or “the higher spiritual authority,” whatever that might be; in practice, this belief usually places the leader of the group above the law in the minds of followers. When the goal is individual and even global salvation at any and all costs, the ends typically justify the means. For many groups, this may entail less major transgressions, such as deceptive recruitment practices or financial fraud. For some groups, this may mean violence, murder and even acts of mass suicide (Heaven’s Gate, Jonestown), cult-sanctioned abuse against women and children (Warren Jeffs’ Fundamental Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Independent Fundamental Baptist movement) violent and deadly confrontation with authorities (MOVE, Branch Davidians) or mass terrorism (white supremacists/Christian Identity movement, the Hanafi Muslims in Washington, D.C., Aum Shrinkyo in Japan). Based on history, cults that maintain isolated, rural compounds (often with armed guards) are cause for special concern.

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