Lauren Young

It's on the upper floors of McConnell Library where I am captivated by the overwhelming allure of the hundreds of bookshelves loaded with various scientific, philosophical, and psychological novels and encyclopedias left unspoiled by the greasy fingers of college students, awaiting as a perpetual mystery to the impressionable and ever-expanding mind. It wasn't until my research project for CORE-102 that I was nudged to discover the vastness of McConnell Library and the extensive assistance it could lend me in the process of rediscovering the research process and the amount of resources hidden amongst the many floors of the building. For my project in CORE-102 concerning the social influence of the Jonestown cult and its relation to the psychology of conformity, I knew I was descending into a particularly narrow topic that concerned the travesty of this psychological murder, but I decided to submerge myself in the online resources provided by McConnell Library in order to scope out scholarly articles, videos, and historical newspaper articles concerning my specific topic and the scientific matters combined with the occurrence. The formation of my paper led me through a conceptual witch hunt for the eye-opening, mind-altering information I desperately needed for my paper through the McConnell Library, and the sources I found were well worth the intensive search.

Through the academic search complete I was able to locate three scholarly articles I utilized for my research paper. The premise of Patrick Mahaney Clark's *The Cup of the Lord* was to define the Jonestown cult massacre by outlining and detailing specific religious events in history that relate to this occurrence and how they share similar aspects in their ways of isolation, religious brutality, and martyrdom. John R. Hall's *Jonestown in the Twenty-First Century* illuminated the background and prominence of this cult massacre years after its occurrence and its concrete effect on American society. Through the impressive feature of ProQuest, I was able
to locate a 1978 newspaper article from *The Baltimore Sun*, *Jonestown's Lurid Word: Evil is Real in the World* by Malachi Martin, that identified the characteristics of the cult’s mentality in relation to the significance of the power behind cults and modern-day collective thinking. The sources McConnell offered were so enticing and diverse that I found beauty in the way the articles sculpted their words and molded their arguments into abstract concepts I could utilize in the formation of my paper. *Conformity*, a DVD produced by Insight Media that I found on the fourth floor of McConnell, outlined the aspects that defined conformity based upon identifying features such as classic experiments, factors influencing compliance, individual differences in compliance, and groupthink. The library was essential in the research process and aided in strengthening and contributing to the assertions and arguments demonstrated in my argumentative research paper. The two books I used in my paper, Robert Endleman’s *Jonestown and the Manson Family: Race, Sexuality, and Collective Madness* and Hans-Georg Moeller’s *The Moral Fool* provided access details on the mentality of two major cults, the Jonestown cult and Manson family, as well as the morality of mass media and its influence on the general, impressionable public. Upon searching through the vast array of novels situated among the bookracks, I located many amusing sources that suited my topic and genuinely interested me on my own behalf of personal academic infatuations and passions, that being of the science of psychology and philosophy and its relation to modern-day occurrences ranging from manipulative magazines to the Manson family.

The library was an extremely vital aspect in my research process and provided me with many helpful sources that aided in the production and execution of my paper. With the inclusion of interesting sources I located at McConnell, I feel I have improved the overall creditability and exoticness of my paper and have even fulfilled my need for anomalous knowledge following the
colossal amount of various types of scholastic medium maintained by the library. Even after this research project, I will continue to use the library to the fullest extent in order to fulfill my own personal need for more knowledge.
The Social Influence of the Jonestown Cult Massacre and its Psychological Relevance to

Infectious Conformity

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INFLUENCE OF JONESTOWN ON INFECTIOUS CONFORMITY

Abstract
This research project considers the psychological characteristics of the Jonestown cult and identifies these characteristics thus relating them to modern-day society and traditional American popular culture which ultimately embodies conformity and mindless compliance. Behavioral aspects manipulated by the Jonestown cult massacre and cult culture include psychological manipulation, issues of morality, social subordination, subliminal motivation, and deindividuation. The aspect of psychological manipulation is one of the identifying features of the Jonestown cult that describes the recruitment process of members who were essentially dissatisfied with the racism in American society, which resulted in brutal prejudices and injustices. On the topic of morality, Jim Jones redefined the meaning of martyrdom by essentially contrasting religious sacrifice with self-sacrifice. In social subordination, Jim Jones demonstrated the willingness of the members of the Peoples Temple and how they shockingly relate to American society in the social acceptance of degradation and denigration. Following this willingness to be socially degraded, subliminal motivation becomes undermined in American society because the stimulus for the unconscious way of processing information and ideas cannot be seen, however that does not mean it does not exist. Lastly, it is the inevitable process of deindividuation by which the individual loses his or her identity in order to be accepted into the conceptual cult, and the diminishing of self-worth that could result. This deindividuation consequently develops into the mental alternation of the individual human being, their beliefs, and overall mortality in terms of whether or not they will sacrifice their individuality and life for the sake of social acceptance.
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The Social Influence of the Jonestown Cult Massacre and its Psychological Relevance to Infectious Conformity

The term "cult" has been crystallized by the media into an abstract monster that devours the souls and individualistic mindsets of its mindless victims, like an emblematic boogeyman hiding under the threshold of American society. While sensationalistic cults become exploited as an archetypal evil in our society, the traditional American culture neglects the embedded ideologies of cult behavior and dangerous conformity in the workings of civil society. The conformity presented in American culture breeds human beings to accept the cult-like behavior through the influential feeding of perpetual poison. The megalomaniac insanity of the tyrant Jim Jones was vital in deceptively producing this mass delusional cult which resulted in the second most deadly non-natural disaster in U.S. history, thus portraying the art of brainwashing in American culture and society subtly, subliminally, and traditionally. The psychological and manipulative murder of over 900 members of Jonestown on November 18, 1978 questioned the motives and mentalities of the Peoples Temples and the provocation of blind acceptance in the status quo that ultimately resulted in severe social isolation and oblivion. The invisible cultural plague known as cult behavior by popular culture, demonstrated by the mass suicide at Jonestown, is a neglected behavioral aspect that rewards conformity and rejects individuality, resulting in extremities of psychological manipulation, the redefinition of morality, social subordination, subliminal motivation, and deindividualization in order to generate a hallucinatory utopian society.

Conceptualized as a determination to escape racial segregation in the 1950s, the establishment of the Peoples Temple by Jim Jones was created with the purpose of acting as a social movement to promote the ideologies of the civil-rights movement, the anti-Vietnam war
movement, and the New Left. Novelist Robert Endleman defines the prominence of Jones' "apostolic equalitarianism," which he identifies as a synonym for Marxist socialism, by relating Jones' movement as a religious revelation to the delineation of him being the second-coming of Jesus Christ while simultaneously embodying the nature of Satan (Endleman, 1993, p.10).

Psychological manipulation is most often accomplished through aggression that is carefully masked in order to avoid being easily detected. Most manipulators exhibit a certain disturbance of character, such as exhibiting apathy and egotism, and the easiest prey are neurotic individuals. One of the identifying features of the Jonestown cult was an attraction from passive members who were dissatisfied with the racism in American society. That passivity resulted in brutal prejudices and injustices, which unequivocally coincides with the idea of psychological manipulative being used to target a particular aspect in human beings that exploits internal weakness, such as self-esteem. It is evident American society becomes exemplified through evidence of this in American society by analyzing the cult culture of materialistic, gossip magazines, such as *In Touch Weekly* and *Ok! Magazine*, in which the magazine companies manipulate the reader into thinking a certain way, thus developing a skewed way of thinking in order to allow their voice to be heard and the reader's to be silenced. This indirectly alludes to the practices of Jim Jones where the reader becomes brainwashed into developing a collective mentality where they swallow the false delusion of what is real and what is imaginary; this is proven by the articles aimed to psychologically manipulate the reader into forming a submissive attitude when fostering their idols' personal doctrines and neglecting their own. Tabloid magazines have the ability to create the delusion that humans must abide by these unsaid mental regulations which promotes caring of the wealthy while depreciating the poor, which ironically
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Jim Jones did with his followers as they looked up to him, a totalitarian man, for uttermost
guidance and omnipotence.

As Jones said (as cited in Clark, 2009), “We didn’t commit suicide, we committed an act
of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world,” he redefined the
meaning of martyrdom by comparing the extremities of what can be construed as a moral
sacrifice and a psychological murder (p.24). This raises the question of whether or not
martyrdom is considered a religious attribute or a mentally insane justification. This abstract idea
of self-sacrifice, molded into a concrete redefinition of the term relating to the attitudes
concerning self-denial and personal renouncement, may contribute to this deadly dogma of self-
deception and exploitation. In relation to other cult mentalities, the deaths at Jonestown were
symbolized by the idea of self-assertion to represent the collective idea of being symbolized as a
whole in order to renounce the idea of individualism and promote conformity. The poisonous
manipulation that occurs in religion, ranging from the major monotheistic religious like
Christianity to Judaism, incorporates this idea of defining morality and sinfulness with regards to
collective society as opposed to the individual self. Although religiousness and holiness
exemplify virtuous qualities, Jonestown redefined morality by introducing the dark side of
devotedness and theology. Regarding the morality of mass media and religion, Philosopher
Hans-Georg Moeller’s *The Moral Fool* explains “In pre-mass media times our morality[…],was
largely proliferated by the church and, in connection with church teachings” (Moeller, 2009,
p.174). While religion is the main factor in considering the definition of morality, it should not
be the only defining factor considering it is a relatively flexible term, as well as medieval, when
compared to the brutalities and human injustices endured in present day ethics, a concept
Moeller asserts by explaining how “churches tend to affirm that they derive their ethics from
higher and eternal sources...and these do not lend themselves to much flexibility" (Moeller, 2009, p.175). When deriving unchangeable laws from an eternal source, it is difficult to assess the accuracy of its message because "mass media only works as nonfounded, nonunequivocal, and nonstatic morality," or in other words, it is formed based upon the mentalities and input of the American viewers (Moeller, 2009, p.182). This idea relates to criminal trials where the defendant does not understand right from wrong, such as the notorious cases of Ed Gein and John Wayne Gacy, and are given the choice to claim the insanity defense in order to avoid full criminal punishment in the instance of being mentally ill or incompetent. In this case, is it wrong when the perpetrator knows it is wrong, or when the law states it is wrong? This question is examined in many studies examining the human conscience and the ties it has with religious morality in order to correctly identify the meaning of right and wrong and disregard morality as an indefinite axiom. In the case of the Jonestown cult, Jim Jones’ religious policies were not directly characterized as wrong, but the outcome that followed was characterized as socially unconventional through the eyes of the American public. In sacrificing one’s life for religion, the topic of ethics is introduced in order to better identify the idea of universal morality and the act of subordinating oneself for the greater good of their religious affiliation and beliefs. In association to this, the idea of praying symbolically represents the collective mentality of our religious culture.

In relation to the act of praying, human beings indirectly kneel down upon the laws and regulations strained by social norms in order to achieve the socially acceptable way of thinking, behaving, and comparing themselves amongst others with regards to the social comparison theory. Once a higher authority is placed upon a conceptual pedestal, the kneeler, or the subordinated human, feels inclined to look up to this figure for guidance because they feel
mentally weak and unsure of their personal abilities and beliefs. According to Writer Patrick Clark’s *The Cup of the Lord*, the idea that “Christian martyrs willingly sacrifice their lives only because they have first sacrificed their selves” relates to the broad idea of conformity in that once the sense of individuality is gone, the idea of collectivity looms over the virtually thoughtless mind (Clark, 2009, p. 25). The terminable idea of mortality is the most fragile aspect of the human; therefore, a death can have the “potential to be either the highest exemplification of God’s love or an unspeakable utterance of demonic sacrilege” (Clark, 2009, p. 26). Although most ideas of subordination relate to the unwillingness of being degraded and denigrated, there are many activities accepted by society that promote subordination and participate in the act of subordinating themselves in order to feel accepted and wanted, such as the promotion of fraternity and sorority organizations. Incorporating tactics of cult-like behavior, like hazing, these organizations subordinate those involved in the rushing process of these organizations and belittles them in order to heighten the position of the current members, manipulate them to the point where they accept this form of deprecating treatment, and even deem it acceptable in order to be psychologically accepted into a materialistic organization that praises submission, barbarism, and outright conformity. In 2011, six Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity members of Radford University were charged in the hazing death of a student who died of alcohol poisoning. Following this American tradition where racial and gender subordination have been consistent evils thriving as viruses in past and present-day society, many institutions, such as the once-thriving Tau Kappa Epsilon fraternity, inexplicably honor the act of subordinating themselves and interpret it positively by ensuring cheap friendships and materialistic acceptance. In the brutality humans endure in order to be socially accepted, the idea of subliminal motivation and
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brainwashing aid in the explanation of this social phenomenon that was exploited in the deaths of Jonestown and the birth of the infectious influence of the mass media on threshold exposure.

The manipulative effects of brainwashing in relation to the cult mentality is a mortality-inducing factor, considering it ended hundreds of lives during the Jonestown massacre, and the subtle methods of this ideology are continually used, and even valued, in American culture. The seemingly demonic deformation of religion produced this skewed thought in theological martyrdom that led to Jonestown being identified as an example of “cultic exploitation of a group of people who were naively utopian, overly credulous, or psychologically vulnerable” that “remains an ever-potent reminder of the dangers of overly-premeditated communitarianism” and “continues to haunt the American psyche” (Clark, 2009, p. 21). A totalistic ingroup-outgroup mentality, an in-group being a social group in which a person feels they can identify with and an out-group being the contrary, is displayed in Sociologist Robert Endleman’s Jonestown and the Manson Family: Race, Sexuality, and Collective Madness by the instance of society being divided “into Us (good, fine, perfect) and Them (all the rest, bad, imperfect, evil)” categories which also translates into a Us vs. the World mentality that results in total paranoia and the reality of conspiracy thinking (Endleman, 1993, p.183). In this method of brain-washing and subliminal motivation, a collective madness lies in which each member “maintains an illusion, an irrational connection to reality” that also relates to victim mentality associated with Stockholm syndrome and Nazi mentality in the Holocaust (Endleman, 1993, p.187). In American society, subliminal motivation is undermined because the stimulus for our unconscious way of processing information and ideas cannot be seen, but that does not mean it does not exist. In this society, to feel mass amounts of grief for others in tragedy is recognized as an innate humanistic feature that needs to be exploited to the point where we are taught to have a heightened sense of
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grief and sadness ingrained in the unconscious mind when humans recognize fear and tragedy, like secondary reinforcement onset by basic human emotions. When mass media subliminally motivates their audience to feel these emotions, they are indirectly neglecting those that do not feel these heightened senses of emotions and are therefore victimized as thoughtless, cruel, and even monstrous. Like the brain-washing Jim Jones induced upon his predisposed followers, news networks such as Fox and MSNBC angle their coverage in a way to evoke a certain sensation from the audience, so the result is usually a wide-spread feeling filtered into the brains of viewers. When the stimulus of violence is portrayed in the media, it is produced in a way to evoke a certain feeling in viewers. If that perception involves emotions relating to sadness and shock, viewers then become accustomed to that type of feeling and therefore whenever an event, such as a school shooting or bombing, is even mentioned or referenced, that same emotion is then produced as an unconscious yet calculated response. When humans are unconsciously fed information via biased mass media, they are forcefully told what to think and how to think indirectly and as a result, it deprives the viewers of individuality in order to produce a collectively thinking audience, or cult, that follows blindly to this godly voice and follows into the act of identifying themselves based upon this collective thinking.

As a response to the aftermath of the Civil War, the barbaric act of lynching arose in the late 19-century as a response from white supremacists displaying mob mentality that resulted in the death of over two thousand black inhabitants. Along with the support of thousands of ordinary German citizens, Hitler carried out the mass murder and genocide of over one million Jews. In all these instances, the act of deindividualization takes place in order to increase groupthink and decrease cognitive dissonance. One feature of the cult was that the leader must remain unquestioned and unconditionally accepted by the cult. Following this abstract principle,
all the members have the collective mentality that their leader is virtually all-knowing and therefore they should listen to his demands of conformity, virtual anonymity, and muteness. In this process of deindividuation comes the inevitability of one losing an identity. If the overall mentality of a group is to be virtually anonymous and diffused of all personal responsibility, the likelihood of stating one’s own personal opinions and beliefs is absurd when the group praises the idea of exclusion. At the height of Jim Jones’ paranoia, “white nights” were developed in order to produce a visible image of the passiveness embodied by the Jonestown members by awakening them in the middle of the night to guard their land or rehearse their deaths through the drinking of unidentified Kool-Aid. After the exhibition of deindividuation displayed from Jonestown that involved committing revolutionary suicide, beatings upon transgression, and fearing a glass of possibly poisoned juice, it was determined that the process of these pseudo human beings affected by social contagions and susceptible to the diminishment of self-worth epitomize of the souls of those who comprise unruly mass riots, medieval acts of bullying, and monstrous occurrences of gang rape. Based upon the monstrosity that occurred in Jonestown, it seems that only in negative situations does society notice the horrible effects of deindividuation that can result in the death of one or many, while the everyday occurrences of this incriminating idea are left manifesting.

To this day, Guyana is still haunted by the memories of a mass psychological suicide that occurred on those tainted grounds over thirty years ago. Since the mind-altering occurrence at Jonestown, the social awareness of the psychological damage and manipulative mind control techniques used by Jim Jones relate to the modern-day occurrences of psychological manipulation, problems defining morality, social subordination, subliminal motivation, and deindividuation that are subtly ingrained in our everyday actions and traditional ideologies.
While it's easy to demonize the psychological manipulation tactics imposed by Jim Jones, it is fundamental for American society to understand the underlying factors of dangerous conformity incorporated in the culture's traditional and conventional mentality. The perpetual boogeyman is no longer a fable in the unconscious threshold of American conformity, it is a reality that can become dangerous, even deadly, when left ignored or underestimated.
References


