

Who Joins Cults?

Those who join cults are generally not the children of troubled families, according to Robert E. Schecter, director of education for the American Family Foundation in Weston, Mass., an anti-cult organization.

"The fact that most of the kids who join are from normal, happy families bespeaks the power of the cult," Mr. Schecter says.

Counselors, parents, and others with personal knowledge of cult behavior contend that almost any young person or adult may be susceptible to the "lure" of a cult.

"Recruits are usually lonely and between meaningful attachments," according to Margaret L. Singer, a scholar who became interested in the problems of people involved with cults as a result of her experiences in treating American prisoners of war in Korea who had been "brain-washed."

The majority of the cult members she has dealt with, Ms. Singer said, "were depressed, mildly to moderately, when they joined. They didn't get into the college of their choice or had an abortion or were in-between romances or jobs at a time when they had no other major social affiliation."

Because they have money and the freedom to move, and are usually the products of comfortable surroundings, upper-middle class young people, she said, tend to be the most vulnerable as well as the most desirable targets for recruitment by cults.

"The lower classes have 'street smarts,'" she added. "They know there are no free lunches. When they

are offered a free dinner they know somebody wants something in return. The sales pitches appeal to the idealistic and the fairly wealthy who have parents who trust them to go off for a weekend somewhere."

Major target areas for recruitment, according to Ms. Singer, are on or near college campuses and schools, outside counseling centers, and in airports or railway and bus depots where vacationing young adults may be found.

Another prime location is the suburbs, she noted. "That's why private schools are aware of the problem. Kids in private school haven't been hustled on school grounds by other conniving students. Private-school kids are more susceptible because they know fewer people. There may be 300 students in a private school compared to 3,000 in a public school. There's less a chance of being conned. And the diversity of the students and the wider range of tensions in public schools is educational."

"Kids from fundamentalist religions don't often join cults," she pointed out. "They know the Bible cold and laugh at the cult interpretation. But Jewish and Catholic kids who are not grounded solidly in religion and, at the same time, are seeking some firm base, are highly susceptible. "They often wish," Ms. Singer added, "that they had the same connection to the past that their parents have—to be raised in a closed community of immigrants with all the songs, dances, music, cooking, and stories. Without everything so amalgamated and cosmopolitan."

