Centre students explore the psychology behind high-control groups

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In Assistant Professor of Psychology Morgan Cope's Psychology of Cults course, students are learning that the psychological mechanisms behind cults are far more common — and closer to home — than they might think.

It's a look inside a phenomenon that extends well beyond high-profile charismatic leaders orchestrating bizarre rituals or extremist compounds.

"Ultimately, the class is about social influence and high-control groups," Cope said. "I'm trying to help people understand that cultiness, and this idea that we have interdependence with one another, affects not just extremist groups or behaviors but also individual ideologies and things like close relationships.

"It's both the mundane and the extreme."

Rather than focusing solely on the most extreme cases, the course investigates how human psychology creates vulnerability to personal, relational and group influence across a spectrum of contexts.

Students research and present on case studies ranging from historical groups like Jonestown to the modern Tradwife movement.



To help students break down how these groups work, Cope developed a metric she dubbed "CORE of the Cult." It covers four areas: Composition (who's in the group), Operations (how the group runs), Risk Range (how risky it is), and Extractions (what people gain from being part of it). Using this approach, students can look past their gut reactions and really understand the structural elements that define these groups.

"As psychologists, we wonder, 'How does this happen?' We look at people with dignity, prioritizing their humanity because that's our job," she said. "We need to understand that these individuals have human needs, motivations and fundamental goals."

Aaliyah Spoonamore, a class of 2026 Psychology major, appreciates the intensive CentreTerm format that allows students to focus entirely on this complex subject.

"The most interesting part is being able to really look at why some people decide to join these high-control groups," Spoonamore said. "It's so interesting to examine how these groups keep going and why it was also so hard for individuals to leave."

Emelia Martin, a class of 2027 Psychology major with minors in Film Studies and Theatre, came into the class as a self-described true crime junkie. However, the course has offered her something that documentaries and podcasts cannot.

“Not all cults are criminal, but sometimes criminals are in cults,” Martin said. “Being able to look at it and objectively analyze what's going on is really helpful and really applicable for your day-to-day life when you're interacting with people who are different and think differently from you.”

Martin's observation reflects a key challenge in the course. This approach requires students to sit with discomfort as they examine harmful behaviors without dismissing the perpetrators as simply evil or abnormal.

The class goes beyond theory, digging into modern examples such as the bonds people feel with celebrities and consumers’ intense loyalty to certain brands. Through these discussions, it becomes clear that the traits we usually associate with cults often appear throughout our culture today.

"These days, social influence is everywhere, and it's getting more and more complicated," Cope explained. "When we talk about the psychology of cults, we're not just talking about spotting extremist groups. It's really about understanding the vulnerabilities we all have as humans and figuring out how to move through our social worlds with a bit more wisdom and compassion."