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OF CARD TRICKS AND CHARISMATIC LEADERS

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When teaching introductory sociology classes, I try often to employ teaching devices which stimulate the attention of the class without sacrificing the point I am trying to make. Using such devices, however, presents a difficulty: it is very easy to slide from the role of instructor to that of entertainer, particularly in a large lecture hall crammed with students who respond well to humor and light, off-the-cuff remarks. The following lecture shows such a class how cult leaders can manipulate their followers without the followers ever becoming aware of what is being done to them. In preparing it, I tried to capture some of the entertainer's enthusiasm without sacrificing lecture content. If you like the looks of this lecture, I advise you to practice each step carefully before attempting it in your classroom.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

You will need the following materials:

- A deck of cards (a fresh pack is best);
- A large, official-looking envelope from your college or university;
- A sheet of paper placed inside the envelope, with the following words written on it:
SUBJECT: JIM JONES
QUESTION: WHY DID PEOPLE BELIEVE HIM?
METHOD: SURVEY RESEARCH
SAMPLE: PEOPLE WHO JOINED JONES'S CHURCH

Also write on the chalkboard the following lines:

WE HAVE NO MONEY!
YES, HE DID!
YES, HE DID!
YES, THAT'S RIGHT!
OF COURSE WE ARE!
LET'S GO!

Begin the presentation by holding up the envelope and informing the class that you have an announcement which the administration would like you to make, but because you have a great deal to discuss and because the matters covered in the announcement are not pressing, you will read it at the end of class.

Wave the envelope so that everyone can see it and place it on a corner of the desk.

Now introduce the topic of your lecture, the sociology of religion, focusing on the phenomenon of charismatic figures and cult leaders. Proceed with fairly straightforward, standard material concerning the positive functions often attributed to religion, and then begin to discuss some possible dysfunctions of an overreligious society or collection of people. One trait, for example, that most students find unattractive in religion is its more extreme and outspoken members, particularly in light of the Jonestown tragedy.

Ask the students, "Where do cults come from? Why do people join such organizations, and once they join, why do they stay?" One explanation concerns the nature of charismatic authority. It has long been observed that some people are very dynamic speakers who have the ability to captivate audiences. Sometimes they even seem to mesmerize crowds who initially do not think highly of them; for example, compare Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North's standing in public opinion polls just before his testimony at the Congressional hearings on the Iran-Contra affair with his image during the week of his testimony. Certain people have a gift for oratory and charm, cajole, or inspire their listeners. They often speak of having a dream, a vision, or a mission for people to help them realize, and they seek support from any and all who will listen, regardless of their station in life.

THE SETUP

Next say that because good social scientists believe that there are rational explanations for such phenomena as charismatic cult leaders, it would be helpful to piece together collectively a sound sociological study of such a leader. Ask the students how they would go about studying this phenomenon in a systematic manner. First, request the name of someone who fits the image of a persuasive speaker who manipulated people into believing that he had the only legitimate answers to

their problems, and who called upon these people to follow him away from this country into another place where they could build a more perfect life. Make sure you get the answer you want: the Reverend Jim Jones. Students may select his name without any help, in view of what was said previously. If they do not, you can lead them to it by asking, for example, "What cults are you familiar with? Is there any one cult that is better known than others? What was that? Did someone say 'Jim Jones'? Good example; we'll use that." Then write in a conspicuous place on the blackboard, SUBJECT: JIM JONES.

Next ask the class what you will need to find out about this man's effect upon people. Point out that given your sociological perspective, you are really trying to study not Jones himself but his listeners, those people who heard him speak and were moved by his words. What kind of questions would a sociologist want to ask these people? Once again, make sure you get the response you seek, namely the question "Why did they believe him?" Again, if you do not hear this question immediately from your class, there are ways of assuring that it will be asked. Be quick to praise your class when they do pick your desired response with words like, "Good, good, I can see you're beginning to think like social scientists," or "What a brilliant instructor you must have for preparing you so well." At any rate, keep the atmosphere light and positive. After receiving the response, write on the board beneath the first entry, QUESTION: WHY DID PEOPLE BELIEVE HIM?

Now that you have begun to focus the investigation, continue by asking what research technique should be employed to study the subject. If you covered research methods earlier, usually you can be sure that at least one student will suggest survey research. Once it is mentioned, write METHOD: SURVEY RESEARCH on the board below the previous entries.

Finally, it is necessary to decide whom to interview, to determine what the sample should be, and to discover just who the true believers were in this case. Make sure somebody says, "people who joined Jones's church." At this point somebody might respond that all Jones's followers killed themselves at Jonestown, so point out that not everyone was killed at Jonestown and that

many people joined his church but left it later, and never went to Jonestown. As a result, although it would be difficult to locate these individuals, nevertheless there exist members of Jim Jones's church from whom you could learn a great deal about the man's appeal. To the list on the board add SAMPLE: PEOPLE WHO JOINED JONES'S CHURCH.

At this point reinforce the selection of Jim Jones, the question to be answered, the technique chosen, and the sample sought by giving a brief summary of Max Weber's comments on charismatic leadership. According to Weber, there are three reasons why people follow charismatic leaders, or three bases of support for charismatic authority: hope, despair, and enthusiasm (Eisenstadt 1968, xvii, xliii). In examining hope and despair, Weber meant that some audiences are more prepared than others to accept charismatic leaders and their messages, such as a man who has lost his job, feels a loss of self esteem, and perhaps is searching subconsciously for someone to set him on a path toward feeling better about himself and his life, or a young woman who has turned away from a rather strict religion for any of a number of reasons and is looking for something to replace the void in her life. (Even social scientists from the left agree that religion serves an important, albeit conservative, function in society.) By "enthusiasm" Weber meant that a residual quality of motivation may exude from the speaker himself or herself; that is, there appears to be no material reason why some people would follow this leader, but they do so.

In the case of a cult leader, point out that skilled practitioners of crowd manipulation can lead their audiences in a variety of ways, often without the crowd realizing it. The result is that the leader seems to provide *the* answer which they *must* follow. They do not recognize that their own hope or despair is the actual cause of their reaction to the figure who appears before them as if by divine intervention.

You can illustrate this effect with an old card trick with which some of the audience might be familiar, in which a volunteer locates a selected card with some unnoticed assistance from the dealer. Ask the class if there is anyone present who is familiar with this trick; expect a few hands to be raised. Then ask who is *not* familiar with this trick. Once again, a number of hands will go up.

Select one of the latter group as a somewhat reluctant volunteer, bring out the cards, and perform the following trick.

THE CARD TRICK

Ask the student to examine the deck to assure the class that it is indeed fresh and unmarked. Although you can perform this trick with the entire deck of cards, it is much quicker and more efficient to take 16 cards at random from the deck and use them instead. Either you or the student can do this; in either case, do not look at the cards.

The student shuffles the cards, selects one, and shows it to the audience. This step allows students seated at the back of the room to follow the proceedings more easily. Ideally, the classroom should have seats arranged in tiers for better visibility, but the trick also works in level rooms as long as students can see that the card initially selected and the card finally revealed are identical. Now distribute the cards face down in four rows of four cards each, as in Figure 1. In some versions of the trick the cards are face up, but the effect is more dramatic if it is clear that you have no idea what any of the cards are.

Next instruct the student to examine each of the cards and to tell you in what column the selected card is located: A, B, C, or D. It is important to remember this information! Now pick up the cards one column at a time and lay them down again in four rows of four, as in Figure 2.

Do not lay down the cards as you did originally. Instead, lay them down from left to right, so that each of the previous columns now runs from left to right instead of from top to bottom. Once again, ask the student to look through all the cards and to tell you in which column the selected card is situated.

You now have all the information you need to locate the selected card. If, for example, the student responds after the first layout and inspection of the cards that the selected card is in Column B, you know that you must keep track of one of the four cards in that column. In the example here, the card is either the four of diamonds, the queen of clubs, the eight of spades, or the five of clubs. By laying down the cards the second time, you can learn precisely which card is the one you want. If the student says that the card is now in Column 3, you know by cross-indexing

precisely which card it is: B-3 (In this case, the eight of spades; see Figure 3).

Now that you have this knowledge, keep track of the card as you perform the second half of the trick. Distribute the cards face down in groups as shown in Figure 4, remembering above all where you put the selected card.

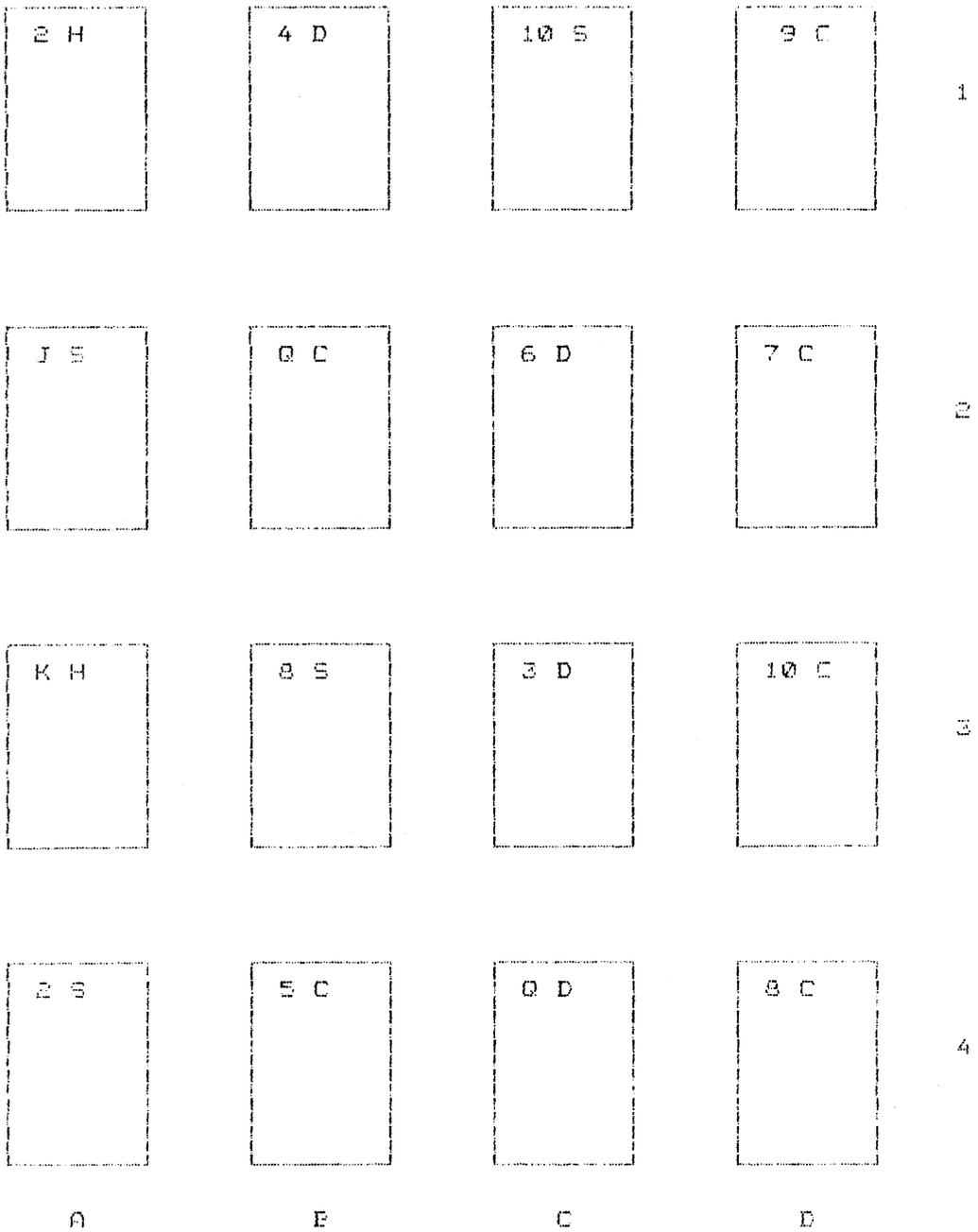
Describe these groups to the student as "flowers" and ask him or her to point to (not to touch) two of them. If the student selects Flowers A and D, A and C, or C and D, remove them; if, however, he selects A and B, B and D, or C and B, remove the unselected flowers. In other words, no matter what pair of flowers is selected, remove the two which do *not* include the selected card. Next ask the student to point to one of the two remaining flowers. If Flower B is selected, remove the other flower; otherwise remove the one indicated by the student. Again, whatever the selection, always remove the flower which does *not* contain the chosen card.

Now ask the student to point to two of the petals of the remaining flower. If he or she points to two petals that include the selected card, remove the other two; otherwise, remove the petals indicated. Now only two cards remain on the table: the selected card and one other. Ask the student to point to one of these. If the selected card is chosen, ask the student to pick it up and show it to the class; otherwise, remove the indicated card and ask the student to pick up and display the last card on the table, the selected card, the card that the student thinks he picked because he was in charge of all the choices.

When executed successfully, the trick will generate some applause at this point. When it is done quickly with someone who is unfamiliar with the trick, the reaction will be disbelief, because it seems so clear to the student that he or she was the one who chose the card and that you had nothing to do with the selection process. Once you explain how the trick works, you can show them how they were led step by step all along but did not realize it at the time: at the conclusion either they felt responsible for the entire episode or else believed that their instructor really was a magician.

Charismatic leaders can accomplish the same result adroitly by selecting their audience carefully and by couching their questions in ways that require particular answers.

Figure 1



Point out that social scientists make a great effort to avoid biased or loaded questions, but cult leaders often do just the opposite. Now ask the class to imagine that they are poor street people who have learned of an articulate, charismatic figure and have come to hear him speak. You play the part of the charismatic leader and ask the questions; the class supplies the answers as you point to

them, using the responses written previously on the board.

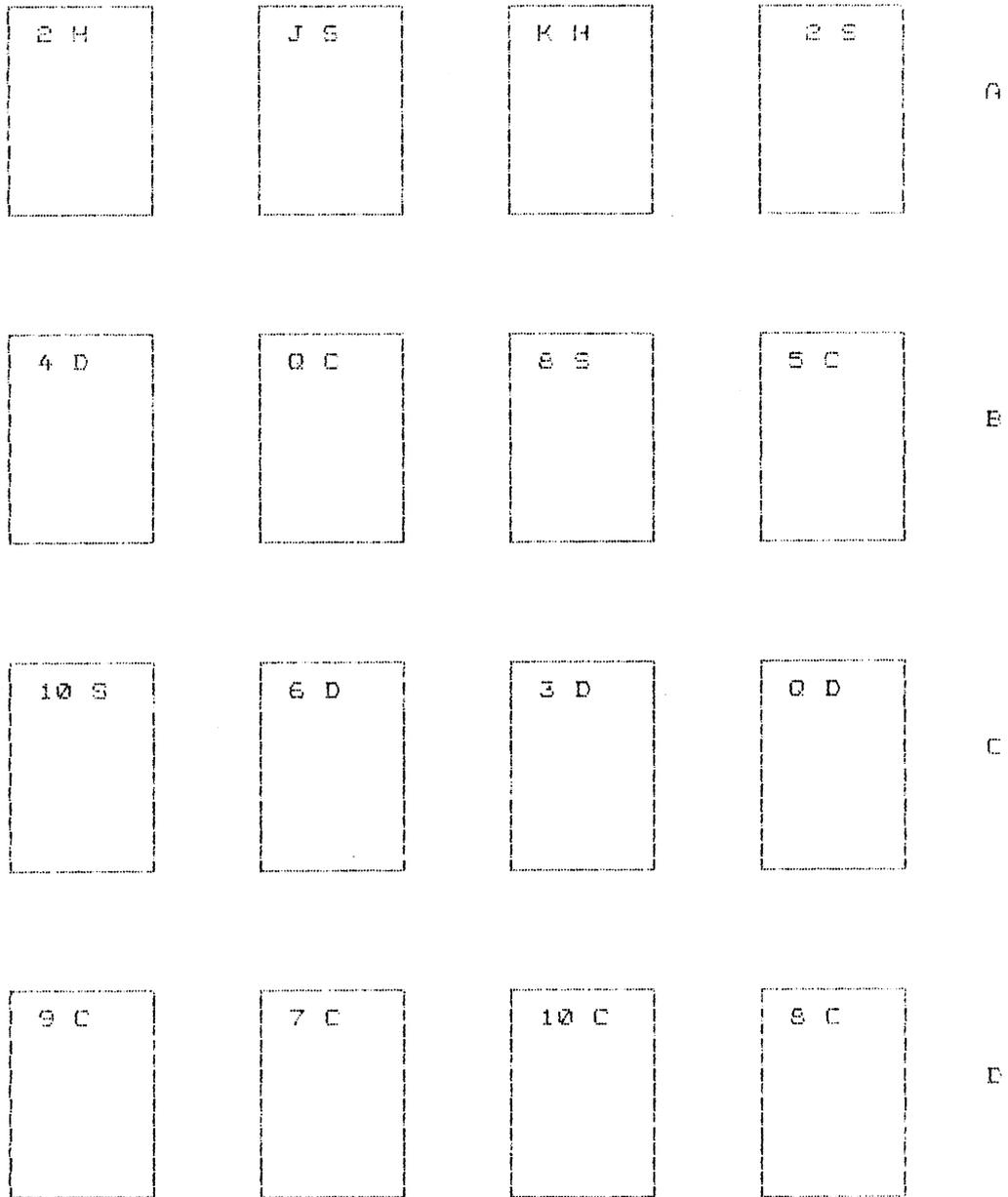
Leader: "What's wrong with your lives?"

Response: WE HAVE NO MONEY!

Leader: "So you're poor. That doesn't mean you should be ashamed of yourselves. Jesus loved the poor, didn't he?"

Response: YES, HE DID!

Figure 2



1

Leader: "And he changed their lives, didn't he?"

Response: YES, HE DID!

Leader: "All he asked in return was that they believe in him, that they recognize that he was, in fact, the son of God. Isn't that right?"

Response: YES, THAT'S RIGHT!

Leader: "I say unto you now that the power of God is not dead, that you can be made whole again. Are you interested?"

Response: OF COURSE WE ARE!

2

3

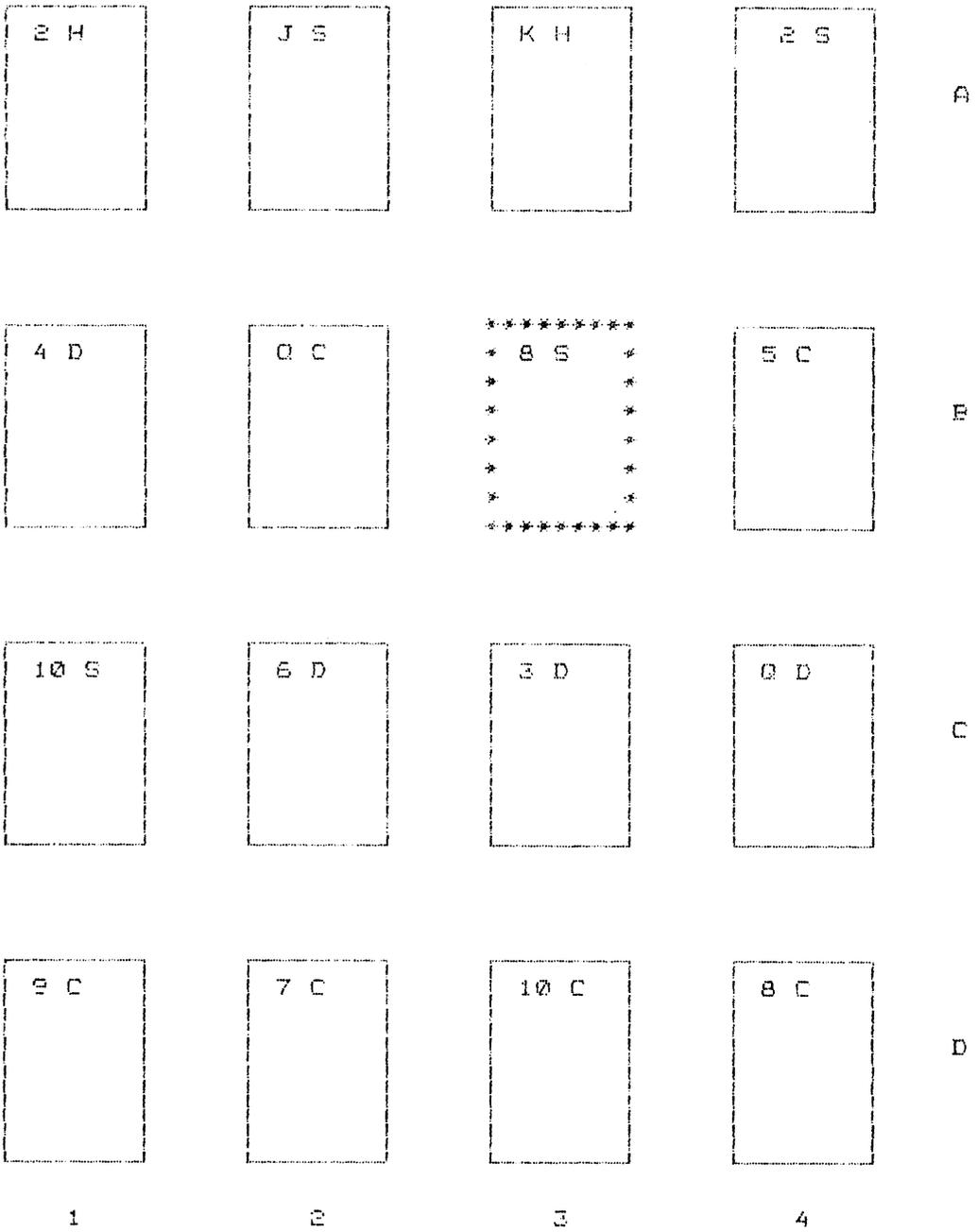
4

Leader: "Then follow me to our promised land. I have shown you that you deserve dignity and you admit that because you are poor you have nothing to lose. Are you ready?"

Response: LET'S GO!

This dialogue shows how the stage is set for cults and for the belief in charismatic leadership, as desperate people meet the eager exploiter.

Figure 3



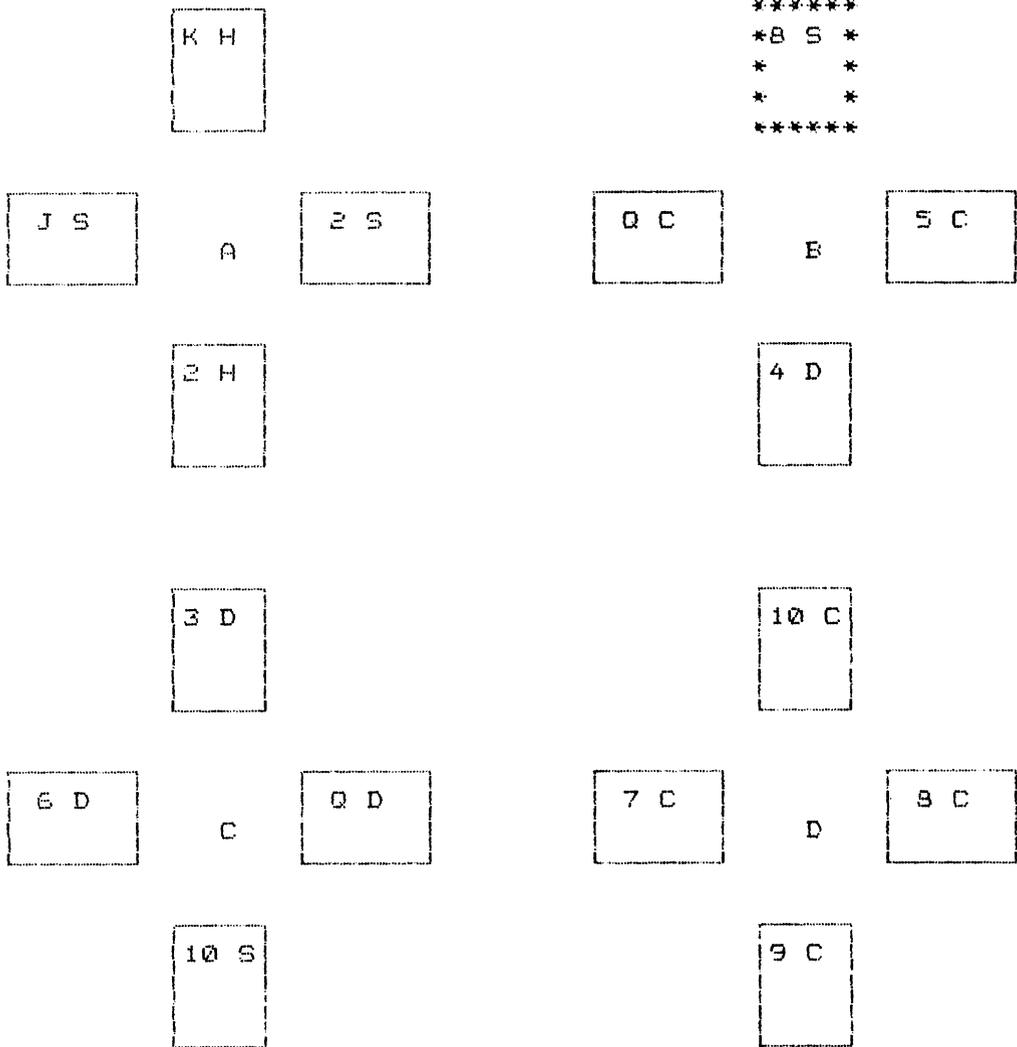
REVEALING THE SECOND TRICK

Say that the people in the scene enacted were much more receptive than most people to leaders who wished to implant ideas in their heads, although they believed they arrived at these ideas independently. Point out that students do not have the same reasons for gathering together as do society's outcasts, whom they have just portrayed. They may be

fulfilling a requirement or just taking a class to fill a vacant time slot; the point is that they are better educated and less receptive to devious leaders than the crowd they have just portrayed. Right?

At this point, hand the closed envelope to someone in the front row and ask him or her to open it and describe the contents; these, of course, match perfectly the responses that the

Figure 4



students thought they had produced earlier with little or no help from you. If someone indicates that you steered the responses in a particular direction, note how people in positions of authority are allowed to define situations as they please, and point out how your praise (“such clever students”) reinforced their decisions. If someone complains that you lied about having an announcement to make at the end of class, ask if that person thinks that professionals and authority figures always tell the truth, as, for example, in the Watergate scandal or the Iran-Contra affair.

These tricks were done by only one person. When the leader plants stooges or confederates in the audience to ensure that the desired responses are given and that the crowd’s attention is focused in the preferred direction,

the effect can be even more overpowering. Jim Jones used this device to increase belief in his “power” among newcomers to his church. In one such hoax, he hired a woman to sit in the audience, to stand up in the middle of one of his sermons, and to claim that he was talking nonsense, his whole message was worthless, and she was leaving. When she spoke out, Jones looked her straight in the eye, and with his voice growing louder and trembling with rage, shouted, “Woman, you are going to DIE!” At that point, the woman fell to the floor, clutching her throat, and was carried out of the silent hall by attendants. Imagine the effect on a crowd of people who tended to be receptive to Jones’s plea even without such proof of his power.

Earlier religious leaders used similar techniques. Wilhelm Keil, founder of two religious communes in the mid-nineteenth century, rallied his followers by brandishing a book of secret oaths, "written in blood by the devil himself" (Nordhoff 1875, p.278). He is supposed to have used various potions on members of his congregation in order to show his powers of healing (Simon 1931, p.4). Shamans of many tribes have long known how to drug small animals to make them appear dead, and how to "bring them back to life" at the appropriate time. Even today, political candidates plant stooges in their audiences at rallies where they are prepared to answer certain apparently spontaneous questions from the crowd.

CONCLUSION

This lecture can be used as an introduction to the techniques employed by cults to ensure proper behavior and attitudes among members (for example, isolation and humiliation), and to show how these techniques are used commonly in other total institutions, such as prisons, boot camps, and mental hospitals. This point in turn can lead to a discussion of cults in our society. How can legal adults be regarded as brainwashed by the Unification Church, which they joined voluntarily, but not by the Army, into which they may have been drafted? Why is it not considered brainwashing to require children to attend church school, because at least a few go

against their will and are subjected occasionally to some of the same control techniques?

I have used different versions of this lecture on several occasions, and responses have been overwhelmingly favorable. Both the card trick and involvement in the hypothetical crowd focus the class's attention squarely on the instructor, while even many of the quietest and most apathetic students are excited by questions concerning the degree to which ordinary people are manipulated every day.

I have found it best to end the class on an upbeat note by pointing out that people are better prepared to deal with manipulation when they are aware that it may be present. It is generally best to question authority, because authority can stand close scrutiny if it is right. If it cannot stand close scrutiny and occasional questioning, it may well be masking ulterior motives.

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