

# The Role of Attachment in Cults and Radicalization

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# TERROR, LOVE & BRAINWASHING

ATTACHMENT IN CULTS  
AND TOTALITARIAN SYSTEMS

ALEXANDRA STEIN



# Definition of a cultic system

- Leadership: Charismatic and authoritarian
- Structure: Isolating, closed, with steep hierarchy
- Ideology: Absolute, total, exclusive
- Process: Techniques of brainwashing/coercive persuasion/thought reform
- Outcome: Controllable (deployable), exploited followers



**Secure attachment:**  
Open, flexible and responsive



Attachment figure provides **protection:** a **safe haven** from situations of threat

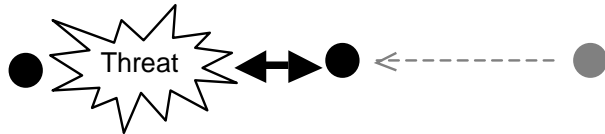


After threat has passed, individual returns to exploration. Attachment figure is used as a **secure base**

## The Attachment bond – Secure Attachment



Individual has attachment to perceived safe haven.

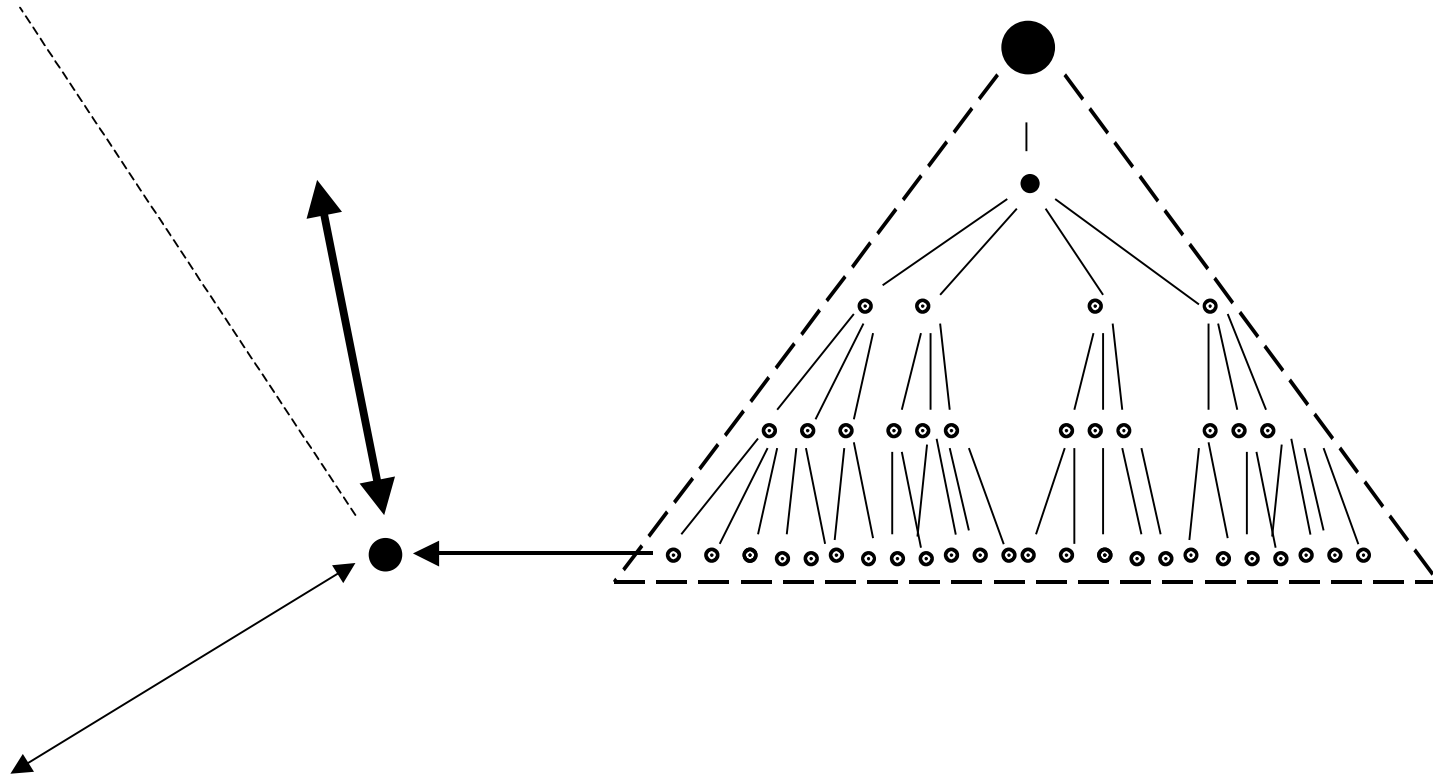


Safe haven (source of comfort) is also the source of threat.

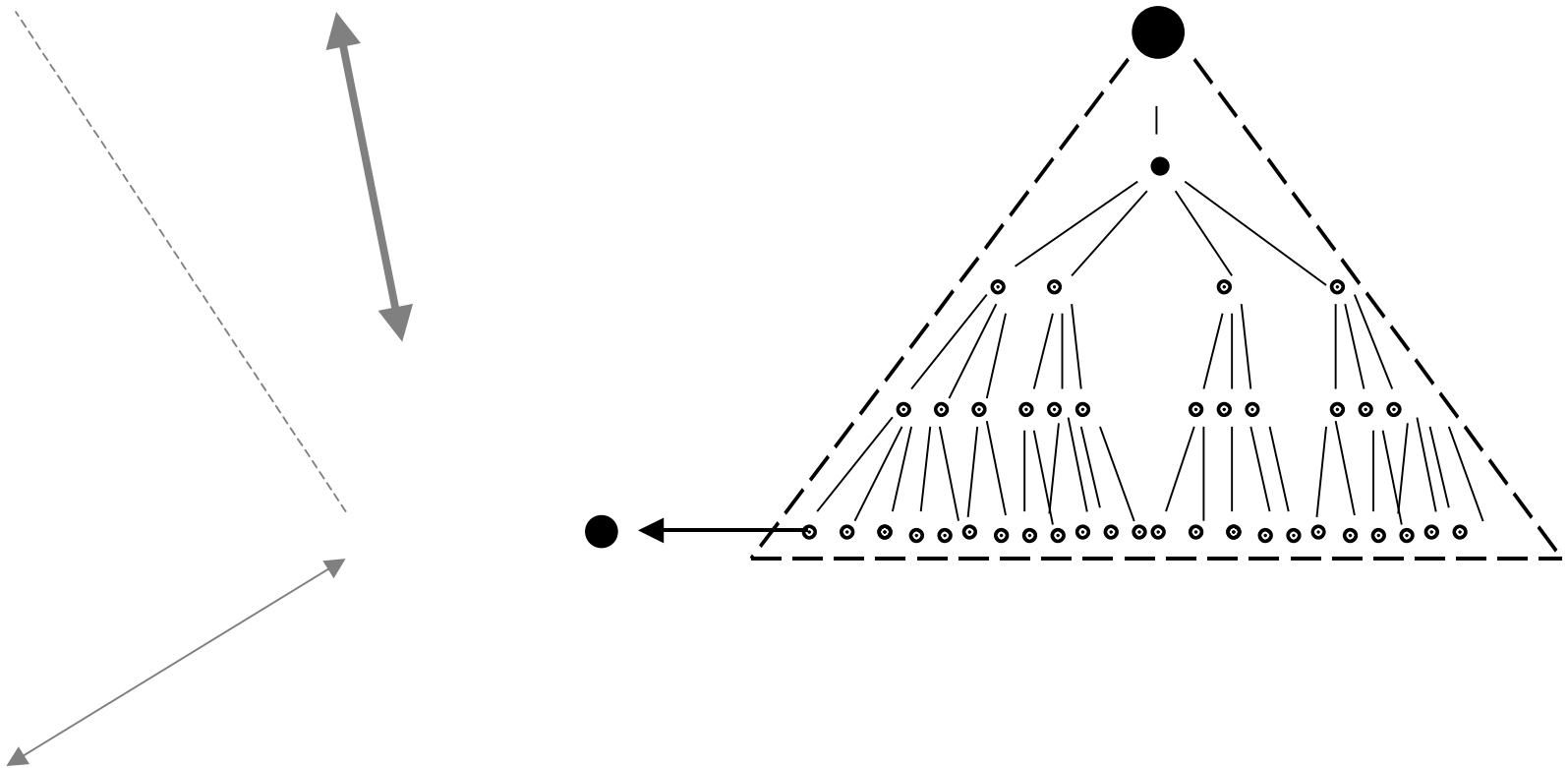


Attachment bond is strengthened. Individual is disoriented, confused, may dissociate. Exploration phase is impaired due to continued presence of threat. Alternation of leniency and assault.

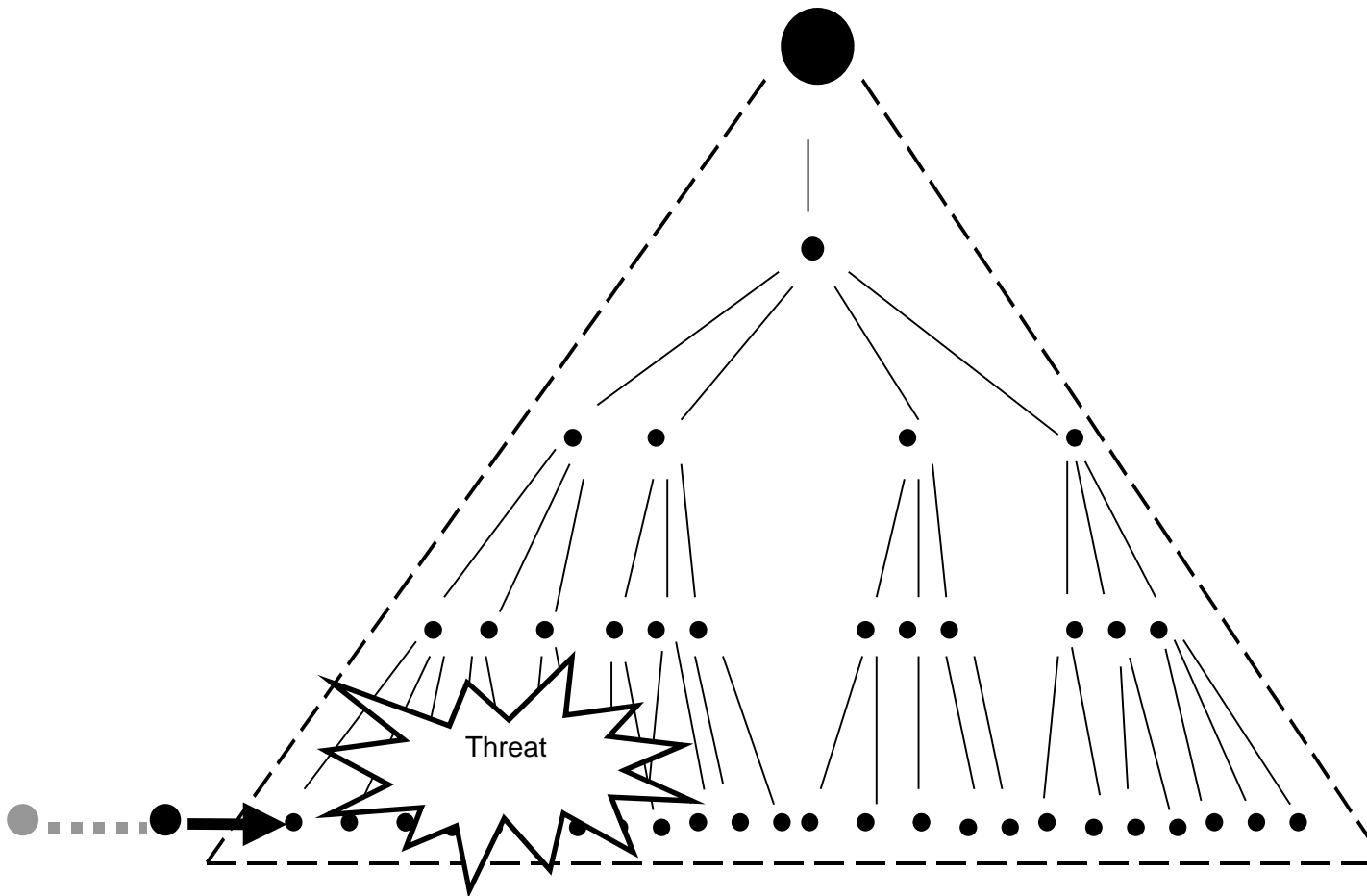
## Disorganized Attachment or the Trauma Bond



Individual in vulnerable network meets totalist organization: Recruitment phase



Detachment of individual from remaining bonds



Threat emanates from the group. Alternate attachments have been stripped away. The group is the only safe haven available. The individual forms a strong, disorganized attachment bond to the group.

Formation of trauma bond, or disorganized attachment, to the totalist group



**FRONT**

Anterior Cingulate  
(motivation)

**MOTOR**

**SENSORY**

**BACK**

**FRONTAL LOBE**  
(planning)

**CORTEX**

**PARIETAL LOBE**  
(movement)

Dorsolateral Prefrontal  
(executive & logical)

Corpus Callosum

**OCCIPITAL LOBE**  
(vision)

Olfactory Bulb

**TEMPORAL LOBE**  
(language)

Lateral Orbitofrontal  
(appropriate social/  
emotional response)

Hypothalamus

**CEREBELLUM**  
(coordinate  
movement)

Amygdala  
(basic emotions)

Entorhinal Cortex  
(memory)

Hippocampus  
(memory)

**BRAIN STEM**  
(body basics)

**LIMBIC SYSTEM**

# The Role of Ideology

## Isolation and Dissociation

- Discard attachment relationships
- Primary loyalty must be to the group
- Keep fear levels high
- Reinforce dissociation

# The Control Process

Isolation + Engulfment + Fear arousal =  
Exploitation and control of follower

# Knowledge is Key to Prevention



“The greater man’s ignorance of the principles of his social surroundings, the more subject is he to their control; and the greater his knowledge of their operations and of their necessary consequences, the freer he can become with regard to them.”

Solomon Asch 1952

# Prevention

Current focus on teaching general “academic” critical thinking skills is insufficient

**Prevention requires teaching people, in an ideologically neutral way, specifically about totalist groups/relationships: the methods, structures and likely outcomes**

# Intervention Opportunities

Create a climate of awareness & knowledge  
in the university and community

- Educate students about dangerous relationships and how to navigate the array of groups, ideas, relationships they will be faced with.
- Provide resources – who to go to, what to access, where information is, etc.
- Institutions to be aware of predatory groups and how to respond to them.

# Where/how to teach?

- Universities and schools: Induction; undergraduate/graduate courses; required courses; sections of other courses; flyers and posters; invited speakers; film series; peer mentoring
- Communities: Parents, social workers, doctors, police, teachers, etc.
- Critical need: train the trainers