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The power of cults

How Chico State Prof. Janja Lalich went from cult member to author-expert

By [Devanie Angel](#)

Janja Lalich sensed something was "off" about the group she'd joined.

They controlled her income and cut her off from her family. She was ordered to pick a new name, burn her belongings and spy on new members. When her mother was dying and Lalich wanted to spend time with her, she was called to the carpet and criticized for being "selfish." She was expected to work 17- to 18-hour days for "the party," forsaking all other pursuits.

When Lalich felt doubt, she burrowed deeper into the teachings of leader Marlene Dixon--a strange, charismatic woman who ruled by intimidation and insults.

"You weren't allowed to think for yourself at the same time you were told to think for yourself," Lalich said. "It was abusive and controlling."

After a while the bizarre seemed normal.

Before she realized she'd bought into a cult, rather than a progressive social movement, she had spent a decade in the feminist, political organization the Democratic Workers Party. Prominent in San Francisco politics in the 1970s, the DWP was reported on by the mainstream media, which exposed it as a cult even as members dismissed the criticism as part of a mudslinging conspiracy to undermine their goals. "Everyone knew we were a cult except us," Lalich said.

Out of the group since 1985, Lalich knows her experiences--and choices--may sound weird.

But the Chico State University sociology professor has been able to work through them and build a



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career as one of the world's top experts on cults and cultic behavior.

A young-looking 59, Lalich, with her close-cropped hair and stylish-casual dress, appears every bit the progressive college professor.

If there's a preconception about what a former cult member looks like--maybe haunted eyes, or a nervous manner--Lalich immediately puts them to rest.

She's confident and easy-going, talking about her surreal experiences in a cheerily decorated, knickknack- and book-filled living room in a Chico neighborhood that couldn't be more average. Her rambunctious dog barks when the doorbell rings out a melodic tune. It's UPS, dropping off a stack of fliers to promote her latest book, *Bounded Choice*.

In one corner, Lalich has recently framed some of her own artwork from the early 1970s, oil pastels--the only possessions she'd hidden from the cult when ordered to burn "anything that could reveal something" about her.

She said when her former life comes up in professional or social situations, people are surprised, even rude.

"When people get out of these groups, they're often ashamed to talk about their experiences. They think people are going to say, 'Oh, you were stupid enough to do that? How can you be so stupid?' " Lalich said. "That happens all the time; people will say that to me. And I'm like, 'Hello?' There's a lot of stigma attached."

Lalich hopes that, through her work, she can help erase some of that stigma and get people to better understand what leads followers of the likes of Charles Manson, Jim Jones and David Koresh to do things that no one outside a cult can imagine a rational person doing.

Bounded Choice: True Believers and Charismatic Cults was released last week by University of California Press and is poised to become a guide for everyone from frustrated families of cult members to scholars interested in her new theory.

Michael Langone, executive director of the American Family Foundation (AFF), a Florida-based clearing house for information on cults and psychological manipulation, called Lalich "a major figure

in the field" and said her book is eagerly anticipated in cultic-studies circles.



In the book, Lalich hypothesizes that, rather than the long-held, simplistic idea that cult members are "brainwashed" into submission, they actually make conscious choices that seem reasonable in the context of the environment they are in.

"The typical response is that these are crazy, weak people who like to be led around by the nose, people who've got nothing better to do, people who are lost, and that's not the profile at all," Lalich said. "[People say], 'Oh, that could never happen to me. I'm smarter, I'm more savvy, I'm more this, I'm more that.' I've worked with incredibly intelligent people who've gotten involved in these groups. The profile, if there is one, is people from good families, generally with good educations who don't have pre-existing psychological problems. They're idealistic, curious, looking for a way to help make a better world."

BODY OF WORK Janja Lalich, who co-authored several books on cult issues before writing her solo work, *Bounded Choice*, will be reading from her latest at Barnes & Noble in Chico at 4 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 18. Photo By Tom Angel

That's where Lalich was coming from when, at age 30 and a Fulbright scholar just back from four years living in Spain, she moved to San Francisco. Eager to make new friends, with a keen interest in socialist-leaning politics and having just come out as a lesbian, Lalich was in a transition phase of her life and especially vulnerable.

She was taking on typing jobs and working part-time in a lefty bookstore when an acquaintance invited her to a "study group."

It was the middle of 1975, and the political passion of the 1960s was still alive in San Francisco. For an idealistic, college-educated woman raised in a working-class Wisconsin family, the idea of progressive politics leading to mass social change was exciting. That the group was founded and led by women made it seem all the more progressive and thus appealing.

The DWP operated both clandestinely and in the open, hoping for a Marxist-Leninist takeover of the American political system while it simultaneously lobbied for labor rights and sponsored local ballot measures, like one opposing Proposition 13.

Because the true intent of what eventually came to be called the Democratic Workers Party was unveiled to new members gradually, Lalich said, "I never really knew what I was joining."

But within a few years, Lalich was part of the inner circle, trusted to run a successful DWP publishing business and represent it at national trade shows.

At the same time, cult members had few clothes, shared a few beat-up cars and lived as many as could fit in one house. "I'd say we lived at poverty level or lower," Lalich said. All their income above a base level went to support leader Marlene Dixon and party expenses.

Dixon was a domineering, alcoholic former professor who sat around reading spy novels while DWP members--derisively called "petit bourgeois" when they questioned her teachings--cleaned her house, opened her sodas and emptied her ashtrays.

Dixon saw behavioral control as "a positive way to change people." Her hero was Mao Tse-tung, and her teaching was considered so "dangerously persuasive" that the University of Chicago refused to

rehire her, inciting a 16-day student protest and occupation of the administration building there. She installed herself as leader of the DWP in between semesters teaching at McGill University in Canada.

DWP members both idolized and feared her.

"In the early years, I did think she was the new Lenin--the answer to working-class struggles," Lalich said. "Now I can see that she was just spouting out basic sociology."

If Lalich is bitter about Dixon, she doesn't show it. "I think she was insecure, and, if I put it kindly, had an issue with power and wanted to be in control."

When DWP members heard about the mass murders/suicides at Jonestown in 1978, they felt badly for the dead but were supportive of the group's socialist mission and ideals. It didn't sound like a cult to them.

Lalich even ratted out one of her "comrades," her roommate, for calling her by her real first name. Lalich was also one of the people in charge of burning new members' belongings, including diaries, marriage licenses and other memorabilia of their lives before the cult. "We sat there for days and threw this stuff in the fire," she said.

In 1986, one year out of the cult, Lalich wrote a poem:

*I guess the worst part about it
is what they did to my brain
They took my brain
and along with it my feelings
my control
my passion and my love.*

*They took my brain and made me something
other than I wanted to be
I lost sight of the meaning
I sunk into the madness
I lost my self-control
my self-respect
my self.*

*I wanted to make a better world
I was willing to fight for that
willing to sacrifice
But they took my soul
turned it inside out
made me something other than I wanted to be*

*And I guess the worst part about it
is that I did the same thing to others
just like me*



MISSED OPPORTUNITIES During her nearly 11 years in the Democratic Workers Party, Janja Lalich saw her mother just twice. This picture was taken in 1981, after her mother, Helen, was diagnosed with a brain tumor.

Courtesy Of Janja Lalich

"I had plenty of moments of clarity," Lalich said. "After a while you're in so deep in it you don't know how to get out. I was completely isolated in this very closed and guarded community.

"There were times when I should have just said, 'Forget this; this is too extreme,'" she said. The turning

point came when her mother, Helen, was suffering from a brain tumor. Lalich borrowed money and flew to Milwaukee against the DWP's wishes. "They called me every day, twice a day, asking, 'When are you coming back?'" After six weeks, her comrades convinced her to bring her dying mother back to San Francisco. But Lalich was still required to work for the party from 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. "One day I came home and she was dead," she remembered, looking at a treasured picture of the two together.

Lalich was forbidden from attending her mother's funeral but defied the order. The service is a blur; she was too afraid of how the DWP would react when she got back. She felt the same sense of need to see her commitment through as might someone in a bad marriage, Lalich said, and she stayed on another two years, getting progressively more disillusioned.

In the end, her exit was anticlimactic: While Dixon was out of the country, in late 1985, DWP members got together and voted to disband the organization.

When Lalich left, she wasn't sure she wanted to revisit the experience in either an academic or emotional sense. She found her new freedom both exhilarating and frightening.

It took awhile for her to sort out her true personal and political beliefs and feel confident about her instincts. "I stayed very quiet for a very long time," she said. "I did everything I could to patch myself back together. It took a long time."

Lalich was used to her "cult name," Emma, and would startle when someone said a word that she associated with the "groupspeak" of the DWP. She still hesitates when approached to, say, sign a petition. "I'm so wary--I wonder, who's sponsoring this petition; who's behind it?"

She moved to New York and got a job in publishing, but she treaded lightly in acclimating herself to the outside world.

Everyday indulgences such as watching a football game were magnified. Lalich remembers watching the Oscars and crying because, "It was just this ordinary American event."

As her true personality re-emerged, Lalich decided to move back to California and go to graduate school. She didn't plan on studying cults--there were so many other possibilities that didn't carry the emotional baggage.

"I initially thought I need to get away from this a little bit," she said.

But with the Heaven's Gate suicides in 1997, and how the public reacted to them--considering the followers crazy, even laughable--her decision was made.

"I wanted to better understand what would get people to go that route," Lalich said. Even more so, she wanted readers to understand, even if it meant reopening her old wounds.

Bounded Choice is the latest in a series of well-received works Lalich authored or co-authored, with topics ranging from "crazy" therapies to abusive relationships. She worked closely with the late Margaret Singer, recognized as probably the lead scholar on cultic studies.

She's been consulted and interviewed about cases like that of John Walker Lindh, the "American Taliban," and Elizabeth Smart, the 14-year-old Utah kidnap victim who spent months with a self-styled

"prophet" who sexually abused her.



Langone, of the American Family Foundation, said Lalich "put her finger on a key issue" with her definition of bounded choice.

"In that area, she contributed some clarity to a field that needs more theoretical work," he said, and Lalich did it while maintaining an accessible writing style. "She's obviously intelligent, not crazy, telling a story that is bizarre."

This fall, Lalich will be featured in an AFF panel discussion of her book in Atlanta.

UNDER CONTROL While Janja Lalich was a member of the Democratic Workers Party, the cult took most of her money and dictated what she would wear, whom she could see and where she would go.

Courtesy Of Janja Lalich

The book expands on a dissertation project she completed for her doctorate from the University of California at Santa Barbara. It is structured in such a way as to explain the bounded-choice theory, profile the DWP and the quasi-religious Heaven's Gate cult, 39 of whose members committed mass suicide, and

explore similarities between the two.

Usually, in a cult, there's a charismatic leader pulling the strings, and his or her followers are normal, intelligent citizens drawn in by the ideas espoused by the group. They uphold a "transcendent ideology," Lalich says, that need not be religious, and must commit their lives and submit control to the group or movement, whose belief system will henceforth shape their thoughts and behaviors.

Lalich's theory goes beyond the "brainwashing" buzzword to focus on what drives decisions made by people in cults or cult-like relationships.

"It really was a gradual realization," she said. "I wanted to understand what gets people to do things they normally wouldn't do.

"For me, bounded choice is really looking at what happens in the relationship between this person in this environment," Lalich said. "It's not that their free will has been taken away, but that their choices have been limited by that context."

Their worldview shifts, and they become "true believers," their options constrained by this new perspective.

It's a tough call, Lalich admits, that raises questions of legal ramifications. If cult members aren't passive victims, aren't they then responsible for everything they do?

"The issue of personal responsibility is a very tricky issue," she said. Society is quick to judge people for actions taken while they were cult members, "but I'm not saying that people should necessarily be let off the hook."

Lalich also hopes to bust myths the public may have about cultic situations and gets mad when people say things like, "Elizabeth Smart should have just run away."

She expects her book will appeal to both academics and armchair psychologists who follow with

interest cases like those of Elizabeth Smart and heiress-turned-bank robber Patty Hearst.

Anna Looney, a doctoral candidate who studies the sociology of religion and teaches at Rutgers University in New Jersey, said she expects the book will be especially popular because it is so balanced.

"No one has stepped in to fill the gap like Janja has," Looney said of the bounded-choice theory.

Lalich is already at work on her next book, about people who, as children, were raised in cults. She's also doing research on former Jehovah's Witnesses who are gay or lesbian.

Hired at Chico State as a part-time lecturer in 2001, Lalich is now a tenure-track assistant professor. She's been tapped to teach a special-topics course in the spring: Sociology of Cults, Charisma and Extremist Ideologies.

Sociology Department Chair Clark Davis called Lalich a prolific scholar and passionate teacher whose expertise goes beyond cults to issues of identity and belonging, family structures and socialization.

"Her major goal as a professor is to challenge and teach students to think critically," he said.

"She is recognized internationally for her expertise in the areas of cult and cult behavior and as such is constantly being sought for her expert opinion, which is regularly cited in professional venues, newspapers, articles and other media," Davis said. "We feel honored to have her as a colleague in the Department of Sociology."

It's almost ironic: An experience Lalich wishes she'd never had opened the door for an interesting and fulfilling career.

"Having the personal experience gives me insight and perspective that lends a real genuine quality to what I do," she said. "I certainly learned things. I would much rather have learned them another way.

"It feels good to have taken a not-very-pleasant experience and turned it into something positive," she said.

Looney, the Rutgers instructor, called Lalich an "amazing" person, both for her intellect and her resilience.

"She's able to step outside her experience in a way and become a scholar," Looney said. "One of the things that motivate her is wanting to represent the complexity of the relationship.

"She is compassionate and empathetic to those who have had experiences similar to hers," Looney said. "She has a real desire to use her experience in a way that's beneficial.

"And she has a fabulous sense of humor."

Lalich sometimes wonders what her life would have been like had she not taken the path of the cult.



TOOLS OF THE TRADE The two main pursuits of most cults is recruiting and fund-raising. Janja Lalich saved a variety of items from her days in the Democratic Workers Party, ranging from fliers promoting ballot measures to Mao Tse-tung pins.

"I would like to think that I would have been a writer of novels and fiction," she said, hanging out in literary circles or teaching college English.

During her nearly 11 years with the DWP, Lalich said, "I missed having intimate relationships and real friendships--not forced comradeships."

On a lighter note, she said, "I missed a whole segment of American pop culture. People will talk about *All in the Family*, and I'll say, 'What's that?'" Her partner calls it her "blackout period," and the couple has set out to rent movies from the era. (A copy of *All the President's Men* was waiting to be returned to the video store during our visit.)

Unlike her late colleague and friend Singer, Lalich hasn't often been threatened by angry cults--although she has been sued twice.

"I occasionally get hate mail," she said. "I haven't so much been a target, and I'm hoping to stay that way."

In fact, Lalich is careful to rarely label specific groups as cults, both because she doesn't want to be judgmental and she doesn't want to find herself on the wrong end of a lawsuit. "My goal is not finger-pointing or name-calling. My goal is to help people to understand these patterns."

Instead, she encourages people to do their own research on the organizations, perhaps using her theories and definitions as a guideline. She gets many phone calls and e-mails, including from families of cult members seeking advice or even people wondering if they should get involved in a particular group.

Lalich used to run a research center in Alameda called Community Resources on Information and Control and is still sought after as a consultant. She hopes her book will be received "with curiosity and respect."

"There isn't one way that every person experiences these groups. We can't just use one field or mode of thinking to explain this incredibly complex issue and this incredibly complex process that goes on with people in these groups," she said. "It's not about religion. It's about a power structure and a social system that can be set up around any philosophy or belief."

"I'm just trying to put out another way of looking at these groups and these experiences," she said.

Lalich acknowledges that she still holds some of the same values that drew her to the DWP in the first place: "Politically, I guess I'd say I'm somebody who believes in social justice and equality and free speech and human rights." That doesn't make her a card-carrying Communist, but by the same token, "I didn't want to come out the other end as some kind of right-wing nut."

Now, 18 years out, her experience in the cult seems a lifetime away. "I think, 'God, did I really do that?'" When she's not working on her books, it's pretty much out of her mind.

Lalich still keeps in touch with some of her former comrades, who have formed a Yahoo group. "I'm just glad we all got out and most everyone has gone on to do good things."