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## From Self-Help to Self-Harm: Rhetoric in the Self-Help Industry

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From Self-Help to Self-Harm: Rhetoric in the Self-Help Industry

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Author Note

This project is a product of the McGillicuddy Humanities Center Fellowship Program. It is a creative paper that will explore the concepts of weaponized rhetoric in the self-help industry through case discussions and research. It mentions sensitive topics, including sexual assault, human trafficking, and psychological manipulation.

### From Self-Help to Self-Harm: Rhetoric in the Self-Help Industry

It is the year 2009. Somewhere deep in the Sedona desert, a tent has been fabricated out of plastic tarps and thick wooden sticks. The temperature inside reaches over one hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit. The only light available comes from a pile of rocks in the center, so hot that they glow. Over fifty people sit inside, so close together that their sweat mingles on the surface of hot skin, and runs down into the sand below. Some have started to cry. Others have already passed out. A few have surpassed sobbing and are already screaming, with one man switching between a babbling mantra of “I don’t want to die!” and the names of his two children. James Arthur Ray, the host of this sweat lodge activity, stands in front of the tent’s only entrance and watches in silence for a few minutes before responding. His response is simple: “Today is a good day to die.” (Shroud, 2020).

Ray’s profession that day became a prediction. Several rounds later and emergency vehicles would cluster around the sweat lodge tent. Over fifteen individuals were rushed to the hospital for medical care. One passed away a few days later due to heat-related injuries, and two others were pronounced dead upon arrival. (Shroud, 2020).

This is the grand finale of Ray’s infamous Spiritual Warrior retreat, a week-long self-help endeavor that cost the attendees approximately ten thousand dollars each to attend. The case went to trial, an ordeal that was broadcasted nationally throughout its duration (Shroud, 2020). This was one of the events that helped start bringing awareness to the dangerously unregulated aspect of the self-improvement industry, beyond just the financial risks involved. It started to introduce ideas of deadly persuasion to the public and brought to light questions of victim-blaming when it comes to psychological and emotional manipulation.

Ray's case was hardly alone in raising concerns about the self-help industry. The infamous legacy of Keith Raniere and Nancy Salzman also gained national attention through their self-help organization known as NXIVM. NXIVM helped spearhead the self-improvement industry for approximately two decades; by 2018, Raniere had a net worth of approximately two and a half million dollars. This, however, is not the legacy that Raniere is now known for. Rather, he was eventually arrested for multiple crimes threaded throughout the hidden folds of his organization – these include sex trafficking, child pornography, forced labor, and more (Simpson, 2019). All of these offenses were integrated directly into NXIVM's programs; for example, a master/slave system was set up by convincing victims that it was a way to foster female empowerment and independence (Dickson, 2019a). The situation once more prompted conversation on just how people were convinced to voluntarily put themselves in harm's way; especially at such an intense level. "Cultish" is how people have described both the Ray and Raniere cases, and for good reason, but the question remains how these cases are able to escalate and thrive under terms like "improvement" and "self-care."

Now, while similarities to cults act as more familiar and tangible red flags, the invisible, psychological threats must be acknowledged as well. The Isaac Hershkopf case demonstrates these threats, as well as showing how risks can be present even outside of the traditional guru system. In fact, this case took place in the office of a licensed therapist and his patient. Martin Markowitz came to Dr. Isaac Hershkopf on a recommendation and worked with the psychiatrist for approximately thirty years. At the end of those three decades, Hershkopf would end up having control of Markowitz's finances, social life, employment, property, and most importantly, his mental health (Nocera, 2019). While Markowitz's physical well-being may not have undergone the intense traumas of victims in the other two cases, the mental toll of being under

someone's unrelenting influence for twenty-eight years is still worthy of acknowledgment. Authorities eventually agreed as well, as after years of investigation Hershkopf had his license officially revoked by the New York State's health department due to the doctor's unethical behavior (Cohen, 2021).

Markowitz had not even realized he was a victim of undue influence until near the end of his relationship with Hershkopf, and this is too often the case with victims of unethical rhetoric. It is what makes it such a threat. Persuasion naturally has a strong, inescapable nature. Even when people think they have a choice in whether they are influenced or not, they often don't. Today more than ever we are in a world continuously flooded with rhetoric – the constant presence of advertisements and the chaotic information flow of social media is a large part of this. However, this sheer amount of persuasive exposure becomes risky when the dangerous aspects of it are overlooked.

Rhetoric is typically understood in terms of persuasive language, but it actually involves much more. It is embodied in all modes of communication in that almost everything has meaning to it, and meanings can influence people whether that is the intention or not. Rhetoric is ethically ambivalent, neither good nor evil on its own. However, it can still be used in unethical and harmful ways, even when the rhetorician may not intend this. Scholars, from as far back in time as Ancient Greece, were able to acknowledge this deadly aspect of rhetorical influence (Plato, 2010). In modern times, these theories hold true; for example, “weaponized rhetoric” is a term used to describe a “perversion of rhetoric” that some influencers use to gain support or compliance from their listeners (Mercieca, 2020). This is the sort of persuasion that some people are unwittingly being exposed to in the self-help industry, which is an unregulated playing field that relies on people voluntarily giving their minds up for influence. It is the crisis that this

project hopes to shed a light upon, by highlighting the dangers of unethical communication in this industry through three cases that have already been revealed to the public. James Arthur Ray's Spiritual Warrior retreat will showcase the sheer power that communication has, especially when one becomes a "lord" amongst their audience. Keith Raniere is a prime example of weaponized rhetoric and the baffling, harmful consequences that can occur at the hands of a specific type of rhetorician called a demagogue. And finally, the Isaac Hershkopf scandal touches on self-help cases within a more controlled environment, while also introducing another concept known as exhaustive rhetoric.

The self-improvement industry has already undergone scrutiny and skepticism ever since its manifestation. However, many of these concerns seem centered around financial scams or the legitimacy of a guru's aid. This paper will instead bring to light what happens if a guru essentially does their job too well, with the risk of harmful consequences. What happens when people master the art of rhetoric and then use it in questionable ways? When they can convince people to ignore their body's warning signs until death overtakes them? When they're able to completely take over a client's mind? When they build such a large empire on their belief system that they can then run a criminal organization in plain view for decades? This project will use rhetoric to explain how this was all possible, and why such misuses of rhetoric are a threat that needs more acknowledgment – namely, the phenomenon of self-help transforming into self-harm.

### **Performance with a Purpose – The Art of Rhetoric**

The infamous Jim Jones massacre.

“I had a dream.”

A painting of a child going hungry while his country funds the World Cup (Ito, 2014).

“I love you.”

“I hate you.”

This list, a chaotic collection of conversations and artworks and events, all have something in common: they are all pieces of rhetoric. This is one of the most fascinating aspects of rhetoric – it can be laced into everything around us, and be a part of the world as we already know it. Simply put, rhetoric is the presence of persuasion and communication that weaves meaning into everything around us; including our words, our creations, the stories we unfold through our own experiences, etc. It is performance with a purpose, and anything from art to verbal words can conduct this performance as long as it influences an audience. See again the examples listed above. Jim Jones guided nearly a thousand people through a mass suicide as an act of revolution; this was performance with a morbid purpose. Additionally, Martin Luther King Jr. delivered his famous *I Have a Dream* speech as a cry for human rights and a testimony to the civil rights movement of his time; this was performance with a humanistic purpose.

Meanwhile, Paulo Ito (2014) painted a brightly-colored, politically-motivated mural on the street in 2014 to criticize his country for spending funds on the World Cup. His depiction of a malnourished child sobbing at the dinner table with a soccer ball on his plate instead of food brought attention to the fact that government funds should have been dedicated to the families currently starving and struggling financially instead of a sports game (Coza, 2015). His work was indeed performance with a desperate purpose. And of course, rhetoric exists in our everyday lives, threaded deep into even our simplest emotional outputs – our automatic *I love you's* and our adrenaline-fueled *I hate you's*. Our daily behaviors are, in and of themselves, communication with any number of different meanings behind them. And as social beings, we are constantly communicating. Whether we intentionally put meaning behind these actions or not is irrelevant

when it comes to rhetoric; it is always there, no matter what, as long as something is to be perceived.

Keeping in mind this fundamental understanding of rhetoric as pervasive in human interaction, one can then start to see that the self-help industry is unique in that it requires people volunteering to be subjected to influence. They are indeed making a conscious choice to be communicated with in a certain way, often through challenges. However, while people may think they can consciously choose how and when they are persuaded, this is untrue. As mentioned earlier, the perceiving and processing of rhetoric cannot be one's choice fully. Furthermore, one may now start realizing that rhetoric itself is a perfectly neutral, ambivalent instrument. This means it can be used in both productive or harmful ways, even in an industry that promotes enhancing one's wellbeing. It seems ironic, that something so allegedly helpful can be twisted so easily into something dire; however, this is not a rare phenomenon. Rhetoric has been compared to medicine in this way – for the healing properties of drugs and treatments can quite effortlessly be utilized in lethal ways. This mindset sees rhetoric itself as a type of pharmakon (Derrida, 1981) capable of being flipped inside itself to generate contrasting results. This will be demonstrated clearly now in the case examples of James Ray's 2009 tragedy.

### **The “Death Dealer” – James Arthur Ray**

He was born in Honolulu, Hawaii, just in time for the holidays. James Arthur Ray was the son of a charismatic preacher, and as an adult, he recalled one specific sermon he remembered hearing a specific Bible passage while sitting in the pews of his father's church: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.” Ray would consider the way his family couldn't even afford professional haircuts and lived in an extension of the church instead of a proper home. The emotion that this



expanding contemplation would leave him with? Anger (Stroud, 2013). Ray said that it was during this time that he came to a fundamental understanding of how the world worked.

“It was a sin to be poor” (Stroud, 2013, “Who is James Arthur Ray,” para. 2).

James Ray and Associates started out as a consulting firm for training corporate employees, but it didn’t take long to evolve into something more intimate with clients. The peak of Ray’s transition from advisor to self-improvement guru occurred when he took part in a documentary-like video project going over what it takes from within to be successful in life. It was titled *The Secret*, and it won him a spot-on Oprah not long afterward. Without any official education, training, or certification, Ray quickly shot up as a mentoring success (Shroud, 2020).

Oprah was the cornerstone that Ray needed to solidify his rapidly building career. He was a handsome and charismatic individual whose silver tongue allowed him to easily master the art of persuasion – rhetoric. The lesson that Ray learned as a child – “it was a sin to be poor” – is a key component in traditional rhetorical structures: it gave him purpose. And as he grew in popularity, taking the self-help industry by storm, he soon gained the other three elements to create the perfect rhetorical display: an audience (his clients), an author (himself), and a text (something to say) (“Elements of Rhetorical Situations,” 2021).

And James Ray had plenty to say.

Ray was one of the individuals who began normalizing ideas of self-improvement into society’s social norms. His form of self-help was unique from many others at the time, as he was not in the medical field nor did he officially practice psychiatry. Instead, he preached the idea that enlightenment and challenging oneself can remedy psychological ailments and lighten the burden of life. He claimed to have certain qualifications in different, psychological techniques, but this was not even true (Shroud, 2020). He was simply a man who had figured out how the

most ancient concepts of rhetoric worked and learned how to gain from it. This does not mean that he attended any classes on rhetoric or even communication; rather, as with most arts, rhetoric is simply something that can be learned and refined over time through experiences (Aristotle, 2007). This is apparent in Ray's case from the way he managed to grow in success and popularity despite his concerning lack of proper qualifications. Also, Aristotle is the one who said that rhetoric was a necessary art that brought communities together, and it did this for Ray by helping him create a strong bond between him and his admiring audience (Aristotle, 2007). With the power of persuasion, he soon had a loyal following of clients turning to him to better their lives.

Aristotle's (2007) opinion on rhetoric can help explain just why the self-help community is so appealing to certain people as well. Ray's seminars specialized in helping people examine and reform their lives, healing spiritually and growing mentally at the same time. However, his success did not depend on his work appealing to a certain type of audience or mindset. On the contrary, the broader the network of people he reached, the better off he was for it -- a concept not common to most markets. This is because rhetoric, Aristotle said, does not and cannot "belong to a single defined genus" as it is capable of being applied to anything and everything (Aristotle, 2007, pg. 36) Ray knew how to word things that would connect with each member of his audience, regardless of what they were currently struggling with, their culture, their background or history, etc. This was one of the key components to his success: his ability to see the potential in every individual he interacted with and preach to them, appealingly applying his concepts each time. Good rhetoric, Aristotle once explained, starts with being able to find and take advantage of the *potential* in every case of interpretation, as do most arts (Aristotle, 2007).

Aristotle used certain language in his discussions on rhetoric, including terms like

“necessary,” that imply he saw value in the art. That word “necessary” also hints that regardless of the harm that can be done with persuasion, the amount of ethical and political good it can do outweighs the risks. Aristotle’s well-known mentor Plato (2010), however, did not share this sentiment. He took a much more critical stance on the idea of rhetoric in general, seeing danger in the art and condemning it. According to Plato, it was one of the worst things to come to fruition in Athens because of its “indifference to the truth” (Plato, 2010). Rhetoricians, he said, were treacherous due to the way they were willing to manipulate the truth in favor of being persuasive; and manipulating it was an understatement. In *Republic*, Plato (1943) mentions that the audience of rhetoricians are powerless to defend against a rhetorical lord’s influence; and in *Gorgias*, he talks about the lack of truth in rhetoric. Both Plato and his contemporary, Gorgias, agreed that verbal rhetoric is one of the most powerful forces discovered by mankind; though Gorgias did not share Plato’s exact ethical and political criticisms of the concept (Gorgias, 1982). But in general, they both believed that those who were persuaded are cast beneath a type of spell and then become “victims,” hypnotized to the point of manipulation.

Speech is a powerful lord, which by means of the finest and most invisible body effects the divinest works: it can stop fear and banish grief and create joy and nurture pity... if she was persuaded by speech she did not do wrong but was unfortunate. (Gorgias, 1982).

So while Plato’s merciless denunciation of rhetoric may be up for debate, the upcoming events in Ray’s case certainly support the ancient scholar’s theories.

Ray would often present himself at speech-based seminars, some free and some costly; however, he eventually began hosting programs that involved different experiences and activities for attendees. These events were made up of more than simple trust falls or meditation hours beneath the sun. Ray began utilizing glass-walking, long periods of fasting, and sleep deprivation

techniques to work with his clients (Cardone, 2011). And then, in 2006, clients were instructed to hold an arrow between their neck and the neck of a partner; they then had to walk toward each other without stopping as a test of courage and faith. For one man, the arrow ended up snapping, sending shards of wood flying (Shroud, 2020). He ended up hospitalized for severe injuries, caused by these shards piercing him right above the eye. From then on, it seems Ray began to be more careful with his rhetoric, using different forms of situational, physical, and emotional conditioning to gain further trust and security through his clients.

Ray suffered no consequence from the arrow incident and continued hosting similar activities that tested clients' physical strength and health. In July 2009, incidents of injury evolved further into Ray's first associated fatality. A female client had attended one of Ray's retreats and towards the end of it, claimed she was once again happy and better than ever (Shroud, 2020). One of the final activities of the event involved everyone dressing up as the homeless and wandering the streets of San Diego alone for hours – it was during this exercise that the woman, Colleen Conaway, climbed to the top of the Horton Plaza mall and jumped to her death in an act of suicide. Because she was pretending to be homeless, Conaway had no identification and was originally registered as a Jane Doe; and it took approximately seven hours for Ray's staff to report Conaway missing altogether. Conaway's family claimed they were in complete and utter shock that she would commit suicide, outwardly expressing that they felt Ray was partially responsible; they also demanded the \$12,000 Conaway paid for the retreat to at least be refunded in the wake of Conaway's death. Ray's organization declined the request (CBS8, 2009).

And then, in 2009, James Ray held what he proclaimed to be the most challenging and rewarding experience that he could offer: a week-long retreat spent in the middle of the Sedona

Desert, Arizona (Shroud, 2020). It was called Spiritual Warrior. Over fifty people attended that year, paying at least \$10,000 each for the experience. Many of them were already loyal supporters of Ray's work, having attended previous events Harmonic Wealth, and experienced what they claimed were wondrous and encouraging improvements in their wellbeing (Goodwin, 2011). All participants were transported by Ray's staff to the retreat's location, a cluster of cabins several miles from the nearest town (Shroud, 2020). This is an important detail to take note of in order to start understanding the mindset of these participants. They were already in a vulnerable state to begin with – thus why they were on a self-help retreat. They had also just invested several thousands of dollars into this event. And now, they had just been relieved of all personal transport and geographic understanding of their location and were entirely dependent on Ray and his staff for conveyance.

Almost immediately after all participants arrived at the cabins they would be staying in, the activities began – and they started off strong. Everyone was seated in a large room and Ray stood before them all on a slightly-elevated platform with a pair of clippers. He asked for everyone to come forward individually and have their hair shaved off (Shroud, 2020). It would be a humbling experience, he stated, and allow for a sort of blank canvas mentality that he could then work with over the next several days. Now, hair is such a huge part of someone's identity, a form of self-expression; and the resulting sea of bald, uniform heads that Ray produced through this activity set a certain tone for the rest of the event.

This single activity took several hours, especially since some were extremely reluctant to go through with it. Simply refusing was not acceptable. Instead, Ray and those who had already been shaved continued to encourage or coerce people both through words and also surrounding the reluctant one until they caved (Shroud, 2020). A central force of power was establishing itself

in the group, that same sort of power that Plato warned about so passionately; it was a tower, and Ray was at the very top. This event also kickstarted the appearance of Ray's mood swings. When one of the participants, Beverly Bunn, voiced her hesitation about shaving her head, Ray responded with aggression:

“I don't give a fuck what you do,” Ray snapped. “Shave your head. Don't shave your head. It doesn't really matter.” Bunn says this retort stunned her and made her even more concerned about what she had come to see as Ray's egotism and arrogance. (Goodwin, 2011, para. 22).

These mood swings would occur throughout the rest of the retreat with Ray switching between encouragement and wisdom to frustration and profanities. This left many people feeling unsettled as one would never know how Ray would react or act at any moment of every day (Shroud, 2020). This inferred that obeying Ray's commands without question was the most guaranteed strategy to remaining in his good graces. While rhetoric can take many forms, and did within his retreats, speech was Ray's most influential and well-used instrument. After all, he was a motivational speaker; people paid substantial amounts of money to hear what he had to say. The intense sway he exercised through his words made itself clear right from the beginning of this retreat and continued to escalate as it went on.

Soon after the shaving, everyone was asked to participate in something known as the Samurai Game (Shroud, 2020). This is a copyrighted psychological exercise originating from Japan and it requires certification to be used. James Ray did not have this permission (Leonard, 1977). Once again, we bring up Plato's (2010) criticism of rhetoricians, whom he deemed as “lords” that held a paradox of power over their listeners through their words. Ray illustrated this idea perfectly, millennia later, during the Samurai Game – because during this activity, Ray

dressed in white robes and a golden belt, and required that all participants call him “God” for the entirety of the game (Shroud, 2020). “God” stood in front of the entire audience and assigned them simple tasks that they then had to complete in utter silence. If anyone spoke at all during the game, Ray would point at them and scream “Die! Die!” until they fell to the ground (Goodwin, 2011).

Remember again that speech, ancient scholars claimed, was and still is one of the most powerful influences over the human mind in existence (Plato, 2010; Aristotle, 2007). Ray tried to embody this potentially godlike power by deeming himself God, and he screamed “Die!” to disobedient players until they threw themselves to the floor.

At one point during the game, one woman attempted to ask Ray a question; even then, his only response was in character: he pointed in her face and continued shouting “Die! Die! Die” until she conceded and lay on the ground (Shroud, 2020). This is an even clearer example of the power dynamics being created in the group than the head-shaving incident. Now, this idea of ‘dying’ and being ‘reborn’ later on is not unique to Ray; it is a phoenix concept utilized quite often in the self-help industry. However, Ray seems to have taken it to an entirely different level by so blatantly setting himself as a ‘lord’ over his audience and with direct usage of the word *die*. Additionally, all ‘dead’ players were to remain laying where they originally fell until the game was over, still in complete silence. This became a problem as time passed on, with the entirety of the Samurai Game lasting approximately five hours. One of the ‘dead,’ a young woman named Kirby Brown, said that she was so desperate to urinate she nearly vomited (Goodwin, 2011). It was day one of the retreat, but people were already willing to endure physiological pain and discomfort simply due to Ray’s commands. Bodies are designed to send out warning signals when in distress, a basic part of evolutionary design and a well-known one; pain is the most

common of these warnings. It's a grave sign of just how strong Ray's influence over his audience was, as they were already starting to ignore these red flags from their own physiologies.

A few days after the Samurai Game, all participants were guided to their next significant activity: meditation in the desert (Shroud, 2020). In the middle of the night, Ray's staff – not Ray himself – led the group of clients out of the cabin area and deeper into the desert. Each person drew a small circle and sat in the middle of it; and they were to sit in that circle, without supplies or shelter or food or water, not only for the rest of the night but for most of the next day as well. They could not leave their circles. They could not seek out any sort of food or water either, as this was not only an extensive round of meditation but fasting as well; despite participants not being given any warning ahead of time. It was not unusual for Ray to be absent during this enduring challenge, for witnesses would later describe that it seemed like the man could appear out of nowhere and was never seen during the more trying events (Shroud, 2020). Whenever he did reappear, he always seemed fresh and well-groomed, always so full of energy. This was a stark contrast to the participants by that point, who were all weak from fasting, fatigued from a lack of comfortable sleep, and worn down from physically and psychologically exhausting activities.

The participants would also later claim that they were fearful all of that night in the desert because of a lack of protection from wild animals (Shroud, 2020). Their discomfort was only agitated further by hunger and thirst. Ray would, however, explain throughout the retreat that this was the desired aesthetic of Spiritual Warrior – for a spiritual warrior was one who “conquered death and therefore has no fear and no enemies in this lifetime or the next, because the greatest fear that you'll ever experience is the fear of what? Death” (“Spiritual warrior,” 2020).

The appropriateness of Ray to use this term as justification for the pressures put on his



clients is complicated by the fact that it might not have been suitable for Ray to use that label in the first place. Toon van Meijl (2009) discusses how rhetoric can be used to both infiltrate and protect cultural rights from appropriation. Ray infiltrated these rights when he appropriated the Samurai Game, the very name of the retreat, and we will see it now in the activity that cost three people their lives for the sake of spiritual strength: the sweat lodge.

Sweat lodge ceremonies are a sacred part of many Indigenous cultures; it serves many purposes, including self-help intentions like healing from past traumas and substance abuse rehabilitation (Marsh et al., 2018). In Teresa Marsh's (et al., 2018) research on sweat lodges and healing, she found that participants should always be educated on the risks associated with the ceremony. While the event itself is not meant to be inherently dangerous, problems can arise if underlying health issues come to the surface; thus, in the ceremonies she observed, all participants were required to meet with tribal Elders for proper instruction beforehand. They were warned about smoke inhalation, dehydration, and heatstroke, as well as told that there are even further risks if the lodge is not constructed properly. The Elder that Marsh (et al., 2018) observed, known as Elder Julie, stated that a great deal of care had to be put into the construction of the lodge itself – into the style of it, the materials used, and the rocks used to heat the lodge. Elder Julie told all participants to bring towels with them to assist with any physical discomfort they may experience, such as excessive sweating or the urge to spit, and also instructed anyone who felt distressed to leave the ceremony (Marsh et al., 2018). There was an option to sit outside with Elder Frank if being inside the lodge was too much and all the benefits of the ceremony could still be received (Marsh et al., 2018). For all the sweat lodges that Marsh (et al., 2018) took note of, the duration of the ceremony lasted approximately one and a half hours.

James Ray did not bring in any Elders or Indigenous instructors for his sweat lodge

(Shroud, 2020). In fact, it would be revealed later that Ray truly had no expertise in sweat lodge ceremonies or many of his supposed subject fields, despite his professed proficiency (Shroud, 2020). Later, during investigations, it was discovered that Ray had lied about many of his credentials. For example, he was said to be knowledgeable in three independent and traditional shamanic traditions from Peru, which typically take ten years each to complete (Stroud, 2013). In actuality, he had signed up for all three programs at once as one person in a group of visiting civilians, led by a tour guide (Stroud, 2013). He was also caught using a technique known as holotropic breathing that he not only had no training in, but the founder of the technique went so far as to request Ray stop using it since it was copyrighted property (Stroud, 2013). None of Ray's followers were aware that he had falsified or outright stolen so many qualifications and intellectual property.

Ray's staff were the ones that set up the lodge, a massive structure made of wooden sticks for beams and several tarps. It was approximately five feet high but was designed wide enough to fit all Spiritual Warrior attendees within its confines if they sat shoulder to shoulder, knees to back, packed together as Ray envisioned it (O'Neill, 2011). Traditionally, a ceremony should take place with eight to twelve participants (Marsh, 2018). There would be well over fifty in James Ray's (Shroud, 2020).

Despite the concerning lack of qualification, Spiritual Warrior's sweat lodge was to be the climax of the retreat; the grand finale. It would take place the morning after a night in the open Sedona desert, void of any food or drink (Shroud, 2020). Matt Stroud (2013) covered the 2009 incident and described the morning of the sweat lodge like so:

The morning of the sweat lodge, Ray's followers returned to their small cabins at Angel Valley. They'd spent the night fasting, scattered alone in the desert — Ray called it a

“vision quest.” Many had not eaten for days; many had gone overnight without sleep or water. They showered and changed clothes before sitting down to a celebratory breakfast of vegetarian food. Ray explained that vegetarians are “not very grounded” because of a lack of protein. “However,” he said, “I don't want you grounded here. I want you off-balance... I want you out of your traditional patterns.” (Stroud, 2013, “A Fatal Vision,” para. 1).

Ray had now successfully heightened his audience's vulnerability to commands and verbal pressure, whether it was an intentional strategy or not. The people before him were exhausted, tired, and both mentally and physically running on fumes. Unlike during other James Ray seminars, none of them were told about each activity beforehand, left in the dark for as long as possible (Stroud, 2013). This is a common technique used by manipulators so that they can keep targets “off-balance,” just as Ray put it. This is one of the strongest reasons that Plato (2010) said listeners to gifted rhetoricians may be nothing more than victims. After all, the listeners in this case have paid thousands upon thousands of dollars to hear what Ray had to say. They willingly took on the role of ignorant people who needed guidance, lost souls in the dark that needed enlightenment. Aside from the personal vulnerabilities and psychological uncertainties that brought them to Ray's doorstep in the first place, once at Spiritual Warrior, their obliviousness was intentionally exemplified tenfold so that Ray's words and actions would have more weight to them – more power.

Even Socrates, a passionate supporter of rhetoric, was in wonder about the influence educating speakers could have on listeners, especially when the speaker's goal was to invoke a sense of rebirth or encouragement. “That is the beauty of them,” he said, “and they steal away our souls with their embellished words... I stand listening to their words, Menexenus, and

become enchanted by them, and all in that moment I imagine myself to have become a greater and nobler and finer man than I was before” (Plato, 2010).

At this point, though, it seemed like the effect Ray had on this specific group of people was beyond just that of a gifted speaker and rhetorician. The possibility of psychological conditioning now enters the scene, though we can still use an understanding of rhetoric and rhetorical concepts to continue analyzing the situation. There is a strong likelihood Ray’s followers were so physically and psychologically weakened at this point, exhausted, and dependent on Ray’s staff for basic care like food and water, that they were seeing him in the light he had painted himself in that first night of the retreat: as a god. The conditioning began on day one and by the time the sweat lodge rolled around, it had fully set in for some. After all, we’ve already seen through the earlier examples that Ray mercilessly established dominance over his followers through everything he had at his disposal – his attire, his mood swings, etc. We’ve also already seen that people were willing to obey Ray to the point of physical discomfort and/or pain. Now, the sweat lodge was about to prove just how fatally far Ray’s influence had spread.

After everyone’s meal, the first food they’d consumed in over twenty-four hours, Ray announced that the next activity was to be the sweat lodge (Stroud, 2013). Some were hesitant, especially due to the fatigue, but Ray encouraged them with a fervent pep talk. He repeated teachings from Harmonic Wealth and other previous seminars, that pain and discomfort were instruments one could use to craft their destiny (Stroud, 2013). He also told them that they may feel physically ill but they would have to push through that (Shroud, 2020). Ray went so far as to outright say they would feel like they were dying; but it was all a mental game, a psychological hurdle they would have to be able to jump over (Shroud, 2020). To surrender would be to admit defeat. “You will feel as if you’re going to die,” he explained, “but you see the spiritual warrior

has conquered death and therefore has no fear and no enemies in this lifetime or the next, because the greatest fear that you'll ever experience is the fear of what... death. You will have to get to a point where you surrender and it's OK to die..." (Goodwin, 2011, para. 26).

These are the words that several witnesses would testify to later on during Ray's criminal trial (Shroud, 2020). He would repeat them, over and over and over again. "You are not going to die. You might think you are, but you're not going to die" (Stroud, 2013, para. 3). The topic of death came up during the final hour leading up to the sweat lodge than it had the entire duration of the retreat so far. Ray relentlessly pushed the idea of death and overcoming it: "[You need] to surrender to death to survive it" (Stroud, 2013, "A Fatal Vision," para. 6). James Arthur Ray promised every one of his exhausted, starved, desperate followers that they would not die even if their bodies tried to tell them they were.

And every single one of them believed him.

They followed Ray out into the desert to where the sweat lodge was waiting. This particular area of the desert was named Angel Valley (Stroud, 2013). "When I saw the sweat lodge, it concerned me because I thought it was going to be more like a teepee shape with ventilation at the top," [Beverly] Bunn [said], one of the participants, would later describe, "this was a low dome covered with plastic tarps and blankets. I was worried we were going to suffocate, but I thought he must know what he's doing because he's done it before" (Goodwin, 2011, para. 27). This was known because Ray had been bragging to his staff about how this year's sweat lodge was going to be the "hottest" and "longest" one he'd ever hosted, a true test of endurance (Shroud, 2020). Unlike some of the other claims Ray made, this one ended up being true. Ray had hosted other sweat lodge ceremonies before, all in a similar structure and with similar speeches to accompany them (Stroud, 2013). In 2005, a man named Daniel Pfankuch

became “irrational and violent” after four hours in Ray’s sweat lodge; Ray didn’t call 911, another staff member did, and Pfankuch was treated at the hospital for hours afterward (Stroud, 2013, “A Fatal Vision,” para. 16).

“Afterward, he believed he’d had an out-of-body experience from which he’d never fully returned. He went from a six-figure income to being unemployed, unmarried, and homeless” (Stroud, 2013, para. 16). Additionally, in 2008 a man had to be restrained for raving and trying to drag his girlfriend out of the lodge – later on, he wasn’t able to recall the incident. Another woman that year allegedly couldn’t remember her name for the next several hours after emerging from the lodge. And during a third ceremony, staff reported to Ray that it seemed like three people were barely breathing or not breathing at all and requested a cell phone for 911 to be called; the woman in charge of running the sweat lodge, Debbie Mercer, said Ray only shrugged in response (Stroud, 2013).

So yes, James Ray had conducted sweat lodges before. But the occasional deadly consequences of them were completely unknown to the 2009 participants as they followed Ray into four-hundred and fifteen square feet of homemade tent, and let their god close the single door behind them.

Everyone’s position inside the lodge served as nonverbal rhetoric immediately. They had to sit cross-legged in the dirt, shoulder to shoulder, with their knees pressed against each other’s backs so they could all fit. They circled the pit of hot rocks and steaming water in rows, pressed skin to skin as they were instructed to come in wearing as little as possible while maintaining human decency. Meanwhile, Ray remained standing near the tent’s only exit: a small flap in the wall of tarps that he opened only when bringing in more rocks and water at the end of each round (Shroud, 2020). Once again, he was in the ultimate position of power among everyone else

And the ceremony began.

This sweat lodge continued for eight rounds instead of the traditional four (Ortega, 2011). People weren't physically kept from leaving; however, if they mentioned wanting to 'tap out' during one of the breaks where more hot rocks were brought in and the tent flap was opened, Ray warned them they would not gain all the benefits from the experience (Shroud, 2020). "you're better than that," Ray would tell them (Ortega, 2011, "Lacked Training," para. 21). "You can get through this. Its mind over matter. Ignore what your body is telling you" (Goodwin, 2011, para. 30). It was a consistent stream of reminders that everyone needed to trust in Ray and ignore their body's warning signals; and that if they did that, they wouldn't be in danger. Once again, Ray had taken on the role of a god.

[He] repeatedly [told] participants that they would feel like they were going to die, that their skin would feel like it was coming off, but that they wouldn't die. Unlike Ray, leaders at traditional sweat lodges, every round, would ask how everybody was doing; and pass water around. Ray, rather than asking people if they were okay, repeatedly encouraged participants to stay inside. "No native spiritual leader would ever say something like that," said Carl Hammerschlag, a psychiatrist at the University of Arizona's College of Medicine who runs his own sweat lodge after, he says, decades of training. "It's not a contest of endurance or strength. It makes a mockery of it." (Ortega, 2011, "Lacked Training," para. 21).

Unfortunately, a majority of the participants listened to Ray and chose to trust him. They remained in the sweat lodge and endured several more rounds; which ended up being eight instead of the traditional four (Ortega, 2011). Participants would later report hearing sobbing and screaming from different areas of the tent; but in the darkness and through the steam, it was hard

to pinpoint where the unearthly sounds were coming from (Shroud, 2020). People were screaming and calling out to Ray during most of the sweat lodge rounds but he did not stop the event nor did he give anyone permission to leave. Those who attempted to leave, even during the short periods where the tent flap was opened, were encouraged to tough it out (Maloney, 2020). Ray did this directly from the doors, standing between everyone and their only exit (Ortega, 2011). Even those who may not have trusted him as much as others felt pressured to obey him in this setting. Beverly Benn would later testify that everyone had learned early on that Ray was never to be questioned or there would be consequences (Lineberger, 2011).

At one point, a man cried out to Ray specifically for help, saying that he thought he was having a heart attack. Ray's voice was calm as he replied, "Today is a good day to die" (Maloney, 2020, para. 2).

The sweat lodge ended after several nonstop hours, and the resulting scene outside the lodge was just as haunting as it had been inside. The desert sun was blinding and disorienting, and people were being laid on tarps and sprayed with hoses. Steam rose off their red, hot bodies. Some of the more lucid participants braved going back into the tent to help drag people out. Three people remained lying on the ground of the tent; but they weren't guided out like the others (Shroud, 2020). Instead, staff checked their vitals, and when two pulses couldn't be found, emergency services were finally called.

When the police arrived on the scene, they admitted that they initially thought they were dealing with some sort of cult; bodies were lying everywhere, and people with shaved heads were wandering around aimlessly beneath the hot desert sun (Shroud, 2020). James Ray stood silently near one of the tents at the beginning of the rescue efforts; it was reported he did not make a move to help any of the conscious or unconscious participants, nor did he even speak to



them (Goodwin, 2011). At some point, he disappeared from the scene entirely; and the members of the retreat would not see him again (Shroud, 2020). He was reported to have gone off to his personal quarters to have dinner near the end of the incident when the last of the injured were being treated or transported off-grounds (Goodwin, 2011).

The final results of the Spiritual Warrior retreat were three deaths and approximately twenty hospitalizations (Goodwin, 2011). Roughly fifty people required medical attention (Crump, 2020). James Arthur Ray was eventually arrested and charged with three counts of manslaughter. He ended up being sentenced to two years imprisonment on the guilty charge of negligent homicide (Shroud, 2020). He served one of those years before being released and is currently embarked on a public return to the self-help industry; he has appeared on talk shows such as *The Morning Show* as well as having published a book titled *The Business of Redemption*. The focus point of his return to the spotlight has been about the hardships of prison and the character growth he developed from that experience, which has inevitably been targeted by heavy criticism by members of the public and victims of the Spiritual Warrior tragedy. The families of the deceased especially have felt cheated by Ray's short sentencing and his attempted comeback, feeling that Ray has not shown genuine repentance or even yet acknowledged the true tragedy of his deadly career. Kirby Brown was one of the fatalities from the sweat lodge activity, and her family ended up receiving a \$5000 check from Ray's organization within two weeks of her death. Considering Brown had initially invested over \$10,000 into the retreat – which doesn't include room, board, and transportation costs – the family felt this was more of an insult than anything else, and possibly an extended olive branch to try and lessen the fallout of the disaster for Ray (Goodwin, 2011).

The Brown family ended up opening up an online organization named Seek Safely, where

self-help gurus could pledge their dedication to safe and well-meaning practices; Ray was invited to pledge as well, but he declined (“Why We Exist,” n.d.). This organization is meant to spread awareness about the dangers lurking in the highly-unregulated self-help industry, with the understanding that self-help programs *can* be useful as long as they are held to a certain standard. It also is a means of bringing attention to the fact that this industry *is* suffering from a severe shortage in terms of the standards gurus, mentors, etc. are held to despite the psychological influence they can hold over a vulnerable audience. Ray’s trial was also live-streamed across the country on national news for the entirety of its duration, which helped to put the industry in the spotlight even further. The media continued picking up the story throughout the years, with CNN Films releasing *Enlighten Us: The Rise and Fall of James Arthur Ray* in 2016 and Wondery garnering attention with their hit podcast *Guru: The Dark Side of Enlightenment* in 2020. However, exactly how Ray was able to get away with so much power over his followers for so long, unnoticed, is not often discussed in such detail as this. Now, this paper works to do that analysis and identify the way rhetoric can harm people when used dangerously, even in circumstances where people are asking to be influenced.

James Ray never admitted to any malicious intent on his part concerning these events, and even his criminal sentencing said the case was of negligence – carelessness instead of malicious intent. However, sometimes dangerous rhetoric is more clearly laid out in a power play. This can be referred to as a demagogue and their weaponized rhetoric, and this seems to be the case with Keith Raniere and his infamous NXIVM cult.

### **The “Grandmaster” – Keith Raniere and NXIVM**

While James Arthur Ray can be considered a landmark case for showing the dangerous side of the self-help industry, it was certainly not the first time that gurus had used their positions

and skill sets to take advantage of people beyond financially. Back in the 1990s, a different self-help guru found himself surging to success in the industry. His business would end up with nearly four thousand loyal followers and he claimed that at his peak, his person and his successes were worth over fifty million in U.S. dollars (just before his kingdom came crashing down upon him). His name was Keith Raniere.

Keith Raniere was born in Brooklyn, New York, and raised in a culture driven by promotion, marketing, and success. Raniere himself has boasted about his intellect and insight having shown itself at a young age; he claimed he could speak full sentences at the age of one and was completing college-level math equations by the age of thirteen (Yakowicz, 2019). These were the types of claims that he carried on into adulthood. He marketed his aptitude and had the rhetorical skills to sell it, even going so far as to say he had one of the highest I.Q. scores worldwide (Hong & Piccoli, 2021). Research would later reveal this to be false – in fact, Raniere’s grade point average was only 2.26 when he eventually graduated from the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (Hong & Piccoli, 2021). However, even if Raniere’s I.Q. was greatly exaggerated, there is no doubt that he was clever and ambitious.

As a boy, he read an Isaac Asimov sci-fi novel about a brilliant scientist who knew his galaxy was in irremediable decline and had reduced all human behavior to elegant mathematical equations. It inspired Raniere later to try to do the same. After graduating from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, N.Y. in 1982, with majors in physics, math and biology, he went to work in computer programming and consulting. (Yakowicz, 2019, “Cult of Personality,” para. 11).

He ended up in the field of consulting after school, and that is when he began exploring philosophy and the foundation of ethical behavior. He began pursuing the theory that the answer

to an ethical world lay in self-interest and self-care, and in 1990, he tried applying these principles through a business known as Consumers' Buyline (Yakowicz, 2019). It was a multi-level marketing system, where people ended up paying approximately twenty dollars a month to get exposure to Raniere's buying advice and discount information. For three years, Raniere continued gaining support and exposure through this company; he boasted by 1993 that he was now worth approximately fifty million dollars. "Yet he appeared to carry no money," said investigators, "Raniere seemed to sleep all day, rolled into his office around 10 p.m. and sometimes held meetings at 1 a.m. Business flagged, debt ballooned and customers complained" (Yakowicz, 2019).

In 1993, the attorney general of New York filed a suit against Consumers' Buyline (Yakowicz, 2019). It had been a pyramid scheme this entire time.

Raniere showcased his shrewdness and rhetorical abilities right out of the gate with Consumers' Buyline, which he eventually shut down after settling the case without admitting guilt. Raniere knew how to utilize rhetoric and audience analysis to sell himself. He was clever, he was charismatic, and he was business savvy; this combined with blazing confidence, allowed him to sell even blatant lies to get the result he wanted until he was eventually cornered by the legal system. These are the same characteristics that we just saw in James Arthur Ray, who was also kickstarting his career that same decade. And just like Ray, Raniere showed incredible determination and resilience in the face of adversity or confrontation. The crash and burn of Consumers' Buyline did not deter him from aiming for success. In 1997, he began to enter the world of health by kickstarting the company National Health Network, specializing in vitamins and health food shops (Yakowicz, 2019). He still believed that self-care was the key to a better world, and hoped this field would allow him to start acting on that philosophy and spreading the

idea to the public.

It did. National Health Network eventually connected Raniere to a nurse and psychologist who conducted research in hypnosis and neurolinguistic programming; areas of study that Raniere himself wanted to look into as well. Her name was Nancy Salzman and she became Raniere's business partner. Now, neurolinguistic programming allows a therapist or specialist to "examine and mimic a person's language and speech patterns to alter behavior" (Yakowicz, 2019). Some have said that neurolinguistic programming (NLP) is simply an evolution of the ancient art of rhetoric, allowing researchers to start looking at rhetoric as a physical, scientific model of communication worthy of different studies (Lawrence-King, 2015). It is based on the idea that "everyone can be taught excellence and hence [can] be an outstanding performer, no matter what walk of life he originates from and what his trade is" (Bashir & Ghani, 2012, "Introduction," p. 4). This is why it integrates itself so well with traditional theories of rhetoric – that idea of communication being a performance that one should strive to perfect. NLP can be seen as an additive to communication to make an interaction more effective and it is based on the theory that excellence has to do with being open-minded and intelligent about how we interact with the world rather than natural talent (Bashir & Ghani, 2012). Over time, we will see how Raniere fully embodied rhetoric from an NLP perspective to be both convincing and deceptive to an audience of thousands and did so successfully for years.

Yakowicz (2019) also reports that within a few years, National Health Network evaporated just as Consumers' Buyline had due to bankruptcy; and so did Raniere's relationship with his then-girlfriend: Toni Natalie. This was largely due to both Raniere becoming Nancy Salzman's personal guru, and Salzman becoming Natalie's therapist. Natalie claims that together, Raniere and Salzman drove her to several mental breakdowns by being told she was on a path

headed for disaster, that she was “careening down a death dream line,” and that police were sent to her mother’s house with threats from Ranieri. Ranieri and Salzman stuck together even after Natalie left the dynamic and together they began transforming their shared ideologies into something concrete – something marketable. It became categorized as “behavior-modification technology” and was patented by Ranieri in 1998 (Yakowicz, 2019).

This was the rhetoric that he began utilizing and selling with Salzman as his partner, through the company that became known as NXVIM. Ranieri built a name for himself just like Ray did, and around the same time as well; however, his business’s growth and expansion were far more aggressive and outreaching. He ended up creating stations in several cities both in the United States and Mexico, although his home base remained in Albany, New York (Yakowicz, 2019). Albany was where “recruits” could pay over \$7,500 for approximately 12-hour “intensives” that featured Ranieri’s behavior-modification technology; he ended up naming this technology ESP – executive success program. During these intensives, Renaire was known as “Vanguard” and Salzman titled “Perfect.” Recruits were put through a series of different activities, lectures, religious seminars, and hypnosis sessions all focused on the ideologies of self-help, enlightenment, and self-improvement (Dickson, 2019a). Now while it is particularly James Ray’s Spiritual Warrior program that stands out as one of the biggest red flags throughout his career, Renaire’s most well-known intensives were some of the most extreme. We saw earlier with Ray, through the communal head shaving and similar activities, that there’s something advantageous to stripping away the individual identities of an audience to make them one uniform mob, easier to handle and influence. Ranieri also seemed to recognize this. Intensive programs would all start with the “ESP handclap, akin to using a gavel to open a court hearing” (Yakowicz, 2019, para. 18). After this, there would be a lesson on how this group here in

attendance was growing in value compared to a majority of society. They were different. They were special. “Parasites” were people who created problems out of nothing without wanting any solutions, and “suppressives” were those that could see the good in the world but wanted to tear it down. NXIVM recruits sought to be better than this; and if they saw a problem with the program they were falling toward suppressive behavior (Yakowicz, 2019).

We know now that one of the risks carried by dangerous rhetoricians is when they take on the position of a god or lord over a vulnerable audience. Raniere showcased this in a different way than James Arthur Ray did. He wasn’t as blunt, not at first at least. He also targeted a very specific audience for his most intimate influence: young women.

As recruits made it further and further into NXIVM’s different programs, the idea of humanity and society was picked apart further beyond just parasites and suppressives. Survivors would later testify that certain lessons taught them that child abuse was acceptable and that women actually found sexual assault pleasurable. These classes were a part of a specific intensive known as the Human Experiment. ““As you move up [in Nxivm course work], the rhetoric in the curriculum appears to be more misogynistic and there’s a great deal of sexual overtone,’ FBI special agent Michael Weniger told jurors in Brooklyn federal court” (Saul & Eustachewich, 2019, para. 3). There were courses on titled “Sex, Rape and Orgasm” as well as “Abuse, Rights and Injury” which justified sexual abuse against both females and minors (Saul & Eustachewich, 2019).

There is a certain percentage of women that when they get raped they have orgasms...

There are a few that I’ve spoken to and counseled that say they never had an orgasm in their life until they were raped... Where is the injury if an adult parent has sex with a child and the child enjoys it? An adult and child are having sex, what’s the difference

between the child being tickled and the child being stimulated? (Saul & Eustachewich, 2019, para. 10).

Not only are these beliefs and lessons ethically problematic, but they also encourage behaviors illegal in the United States. It was concerning and curious how Ranieri managed to host these lessons without being held accountable. Well, one of the reasons this was possible was due to the nondisclosure agreement that all NXIVM recruits signed upon acceptance into the program. “Confidentiality is sacrosanct,” they were told, “students must sign a nondisclosure agreement and vow never to talk about what they learn. If they violate it, they are compromising inner honesty and integrity” (Yakowicz, 2019, para. 20). The company wasn’t afraid to act on this either; both people and press had been sued in the past for divulging confidential information or making public witness accounts (Yakowicz, 2019).

Aside from the legality of company confidentiality, Ranieri also utilized rhetoric in a very specific way – ways that have silenced and dehumanized entire demographics in the past internationally. He used the rhetoric that is in slavery.

James Ray used the power of rhetoric to take on the role of God. Keith Ranieri used it to take on a position known as the “grandmaster” in a system that authorities would later deem a “sex cult.” Ranieri was the grandmaster and certain recruits or staff members were then deemed masters; their job involved targeting and recruiting slaves out of NXIVM’s following (Dickson, 2019a). Rhetoric is an infamously deadly and effective weapon in slavery cases. There have been multiple scholarly papers written over the years about how it was used to not only promote slavery in the United States but also eradicate it later on. Nicole Schubert (2003) mentioned that one reason this is possible is because of the significant role rhetoric plays in deciding what is humanistic, and the success of different religions. Those that promote slavery embody



“weaponized rhetoric,” which relies on misinterpretations, manipulation, and what some scholars have called the “perversion of rhetoric” to gain compliance (Mercieca, 2020). Weaponized rhetoric is a strategy that focuses on twisting ideologies and forsakes fact and truth; it is, what some might call, the instrument of the desperate rhetorician. Keith Raniere used weaponized rhetoric to start categorizing humans into lesser beings. He started calling them parasites. Suppressives. Those that should be raped and abused without consequence. Slaves.

Raniere had built himself a near-perfect system for selfish, personal gratification both financially, psychologically, and sexually. A term for people in these positions, who utilize rhetoric to maintain their status, is demagogue: a leader (usually political) who uses rational argument to gain support by appealing to people’s desires and prejudices (Mercieca, 2020). NXIVM recruited those seeking to understand themselves and the world better and confirmed their silence both legally, through company “vows,” and with collateral that certain recruits ended up having to submit if they wanted to enter a specific program named DOS (Yakowicz, 2019; Dickson, 2019b). Those that made it deep enough into the programs were then introduced to problematic, dangerous materials paired with physically taxing routines and schedules. These routines were what began to wear down lingering mental blocks that some recruits might still be holding. They were designed to chip away at people’s psychological resistance, helped along with techniques like neurolinguistic programming and hypnosis.

It is all too intense for some. After sleepless nights and 17-hour days of workshops, a 28-year-old woman from a prominent Mexican family says she began to have hallucinations and had a mental breakdown at her hotel near Albany. She went to a hospital and required psychiatric treatment. Her psychiatrist, Carlos Rueda, says in the last three years he has

treated two others who have taken the class; one had a psychotic episode. (Yakowicz, 2019, para. 21).

And then, slaves were recruited out of this audience. This was the program that was named DOS.

The slaves that Raniere sought after were young, beautiful women, and their primary task was the grandmaster's sexual gratification (Dickson, 2019a). They were to not only intimately be with Raniere at his beck and call but were asked to take naked photos and videos of themselves as well. They were to record themselves when they self-pleasured and were instructed to financial invest in NXIVM's "sex dungeon" by buying BDSM toys and accessories to furnish the main office's basement. All slaves were also kept on a specific low-calorie diet and woke up multiple times a night in what were called "readiness drills." Raniere's slaves were to be loyal to him and him alone. Masters helped keep these recruits in line, overseeing and managing them when Raniere himself could not.

All of these violating, humiliating, and both emotionally and physically taxing tasks given to the slaves were still a part of NXIVM's self-help program. Raniere categorized his slaves into a special group that needed further enlightenment. Enslavement to Keith Raniere was one of the most intense but beneficial ways to better yourself as a vulnerable woman willing to learn and grow. Participants were all taught that these particular programs were all about female empowerment and self-discipline. These claims were backed up by Raniere's masters, many of whom were women themselves. Some were well known. For example, one of Raniere's most loyal followers was actress and *Smallville* celebrity Alison Mack (Dickson, 2019a). NXIVM's workshops were also popular amongst the wealthy and elite, including Hollywood (Hong & Piccoli, 2021). The masters and fans of NXIVM acted as sources that Raniere could use for

alleged credibility with his following, giving the illusion of trustworthiness and reliability regardless of what he was teaching.

The women's enslavement, Raniere told them, was a direct product of enlightenment and love. "Pain is how we know how much we love," he said, "we know the depth of our love through pain. When they feel the pain, they think of that love" (Dickson, 2019a, para. 4). The pain mentioned in these statements includes many things. It could be referring to the psychological stress the NXIVM slave girls endured during their "woman empowerment" programs, or the physical pressures put on their bodies from the diet and sleep schedules. It could mean the fear and terror some felt, being bound to silence and now in the company of NXIVM and NXIVM alone for the most part. It could mean the overall humiliation, fear, and uncertainty that came with Raniere's intensives; which was stacked on top of all the fears and vulnerabilities that had driven recruits to the self-help industry in the first place.

However, the quote above was pulled from a *Rolling Stone* article on the NXIVM case (Dickson, 2019a), referring to a very specific element of Raniere's enslavement program. And that was the branding.

There was a method to the branding. It was supposed to be precisely seven strokes — one line across, and two diagonal lines down to form the sideways K; then four smaller lines to form the sideways R beneath, the little spoon to the big spoon of the K. The women were supposed to be naked. They were supposed to be videotaped. They were supposed to be held down on a table, arms above the head, legs spread, ankles and wrists bound; helpless, vulnerable, exposed. And they were supposed to say the following: "Please brand me. It would be an honor. An honor I want to wear for the rest of my life." (para. 1).

That last aspect of the ritual, the consent, was something Raniere emphasized the importance of.

“They should probably say that before they’re held down, so it doesn’t seem like they were being coerced,” Keith Raniere told actress Allison Mack, his lover, disciple, and slave. “OK,” Mack responded in a soft voice. She already knew most of this, because she had already been branded. (para. 2).

When recruits reached an approved enslavement status in Raniere’s programs, they were branded with a symbol of their loyalty and desire for enlightenment: Raniere’s initials (Dickson, 2019a).

The grandmaster’s rhetoric was no longer imprinted on just the women’s psyches, but it now had a permanent, physical manifestation as well. This was yet another way that he inserted his influence into his recruits’ lives, maintaining as intimate a connection with them as possible to keep his control. Such a profound influence on people is often a requirement of those who weaponize rhetoric because they rely less on factual knowledge and more on their ability to preach a rationale that might not even exist. Over the years, different strategies have been identified that these types of rhetoricians use to captivate and win over their target audiences. Bolstering, for example, is an inflation of a weak or unreasonable idea. It could also refer to the rhetorician connecting themselves to something that their audience already has positive opinions of (Mercieca, 2020). In Raniere’s case, he did this through not only alleged expertise in self-help but also female empowerment.

There is also a term dated all the way back to Ancient Greece known as *logos* – meaning an appeal to rationale (Mercieca, 2020). Raniere had a heavy focus on the scientific, logical aspect of his teachings. He heavily relied on *logos* to gain credibility with his audience, twisting his lessons and implementing them strategically so that they appeared to have more rational weight than they truly did. A branch of NXIVM, JNESS, taught their recruits that there was a

biological difference between men and women; men had more “character and fortitude” while women were prone to manipulation (Dickson, 2019a). His patented behavioral science methods were also a selling point that he relied heavily on, trying to take complicated emotions and the more abstract feelings that often led people to the world of self-help and tackling them with an allegedly scientific approach. In addition to all this, there’s also evidence of Raniere using a dangerous rhetorical strategy known as reification, also known as “thingification” – it involves stripping away the humanity from certain groups of people to transform them into objects to be profited off of, controlled, exchanged, etc. (Mercieca, 2020). We saw him do this continually through his enslavement programs.

NXIVM ran for approximately twenty years before Keith Raniere was arrested in 2018 (McLaughlin & Einbinder, 2021). By then, Raniere had reached out to an estimated twenty thousand people in the United States, Canada, and Mexico, with one couple claiming to have spent around \$300,000 in self-help workshops (Hong & Piccoli, 2021). Tensions had built up during that time, with different news outlets calling the company out for being cultish in nature at various points until an investigation was eventually launched. Raniere was taken into custody in Mexico, after having fled the country when the New York Times finally published a story about the branding ceremonies and sex slave programs (McLaughlin & Einbinder, 2021). He and several of his masters stood trial for a variety of different crimes that included child pornography (one DOS slave was only fifteen-years-old), racketeering, sex trafficking, and more.

Throughout the court proceedings, Raniere’s attorney held firm to the self-help aspect of NXIVM and DOS’s actions. Raniere didn’t double back on his teachings. It was all consensual, it was argued, and the focus was more on the social aspects of the programs than the sexual ones (Dickson, 2019b). There was a reason that the masters were so loyal to Raniere for so long, and it

had nothing to do with collateral – NXIVM’s programs worked to help better its recruits. Ranieri’s attorney brought up a few times that members of NXIVM and DOS *had* received positive results from the experience, bettering themselves as the programs had intended to help them with.

Ranieri founded the group as a way to provide support for [one victim], who had at one point admitted to purposely hurting herself. “He wanted her to make a commitment to the group” that she would no longer engage in self-harm, Agnifilo [the attorney] argued... Agnifilo also said that members of DOS such as Jay — a former slave who testified that she left the group after she was assigned by Mack to seduce Ranieri to heal her from being molested as a child — had “a choice...” [And] Despite [another victim’s] visibly emotional testimony, Agnifilo suggested during closing that for Nicole, “maybe [DOS] worked” to cure her depression, referring to the organization as “strong medicine” when used in “the right circumstances with the right people at the right time.” (Dickson, 2019b, para. 27).

Despite the fight that Ranieri and his defense team put up, they were unsuccessful in the end (Hong and Piccoli, 2021). In the case that the prosecution built up, Ranieri’s weaponized rhetoric and the strategies that he had used to get away with his crimes for so long weren’t enough to defend him and his masters from the onslaught of revelations the trial brought forth. This is one of the pitfalls of relying on presentation and twisted truths instead of fact. Keith Ranieri was sentenced to a hundred and twenty years in prison, with a handful of his masters found guilty and given various sentences as well (Hong and Piccoli, 2021).

One of the constant reactions to the NXIVM case is how the victims of Ranieri had been lured into the trap and *kept* in the circle for so long. The prosecution ended up bringing in a

clinical and forensic psychologist to talk about coercive control situations, with a focus on the sexual abuse aspect of the case (Dickson, 2019b). The courts also emphasized the collateral and legal bindings that NXIVM had to bind recruits to Raniere and the programs. This paper now hopes to shed a spotlight on how Raniere was a deadly rhetorician and was able to use rhetoric in an unregulated industry to maintain control over his target audience.

According to recent reports, Raniere still holds fast to his not-guilty plea (Hong, 2020). He has reached out to different media outlets to plead the case that his life is in danger behind bars and has launched a campaign to try and overturn his conviction (Hong, 2020). This campaign involves a potential podcast about his case in the future and a current contest that offers a \$25,000 cash prize to anyone who can find prosecutorial errors from his trial (Hong, 2020). This attempt at attempting to cultivate a certain image through media attention is yet another proven tactic of weaponized rhetoric users (Mercieca, 2020); but for now, it doesn't look like it has given Raniere any advantages.

He is still behind bars today.

Just how long Raniere was able to maintain control of his victims is shocking to many, but time is an extremely relevant element when considering rhetoric and its effect. The longer exposure is to someone's mind, especially if incessant, the greater influence it may have. This project's third case, on Dr. Isaac Hershkopf and his patient, heavily features a lengthy timeline of almost thirty years; and time becomes a major factor in how Hershkopf's rhetoric was so impactful. It takes weaponized influence one step further in Hershkopf's use of a strategy known as exhaustive rhetoric, which is illustrated over the twenty-seven years that Hershkopf and his patient, Martin Markowitz, maintained their relationship.

### **The “Shrink Next Door” – Dr. Isaach Hershkopf**

The vulnerable, sometimes desperate state of people's minds when they seek out self-help gurus and organizations for help makes them a particularly at-risk group for weaponized rhetoric users. While gurus may not be licensed doctors, and sometimes may not hold any sort of credentials at all, they still have an authoritative power similar to doctors and politicians. What's more, it is the audience who usually seeks out the rhetorician, a factor that already plainly lays out a clear power dynamic.

There is another place aside from the self-help industry where we see similar dynamics; and where regulations and protocols must be put into place to prevent tragedies like the Ray and Ranieri cases. Psychologists and psychiatrists are doctors that require a certain level of qualifications to work with clients, but they too utilize rhetoric in addition to their education and experience to help people psychologically. In some ways, it is even more enlightening to see weaponized rhetoric cases in these fields because there is an emphasis on its power when it manages to defy the safeguards and policies meant to prevent such situations legally. These unfortunate situations are where the power of irresponsible or dangerous rhetoric shine.

Thus was the case of Dr. Isaac Hershkopf and his client: Martin Markowitz.

Unlike the other two cases this paper has explored, Isaac Hershkopf wasn't a former salesman or businessman acting without qualification. Instead, he was a licensed psychiatrist located in New York, rather popular amongst celebrities and the higher class (Nocera, 2019). He prided himself in connections of varying degrees with well-known icons such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Brooke Shields (Rollings, 2021). Proof of these interactions were the first thing that visitors would see when visiting his firm, as photographs would line the walls leading to his office and hang in the grand home he'd later host extravagant parties at (Nocera, 2019). Even if unintentional, these photos acted as a type of visual rhetoric that immediately began building a



sense of reassurance in visiting minds. The environment as a whole did, honestly, which is inevitable given that this was the office of a successful, licensed psychiatrist. So it wasn't as if Martin Markowitz walked in and gave his trust to Hershkopf for no reason that June of 1981. He'd also gone to Hershkopf on the recommendation of his rabbi (Cohen, 2021), who truly believed that this doctor would be able to help Martin through his currently overwhelmed, depressed state. For Markowitz, everything was falling apart around him all at once.

He was a wealthy 39-year-old man at his lowest ebb. His parents had recently died, an uncle was threatening to oust him from the family's lucrative textile company and his fiancée had left him after he had asked her to sign a pre-nuptial agreement. (Das, 2021, para. 12).

Markowitz took the recommendation – and after his first session with the doctor, he would keep Isaac “Ike” Hershkopf as his personal psychiatrist for the next thirty years. This was a voluntary decision, as were the decisions of Ray's and Ranieri's followers when they first came to the gurus. He sought out someone to influence him psychologically: to listen to him and talk him through different thoughts, to offer guidance, to challenge him and help him change, etc. Despite the different atmosphere and situation of this dynamic, Markowitz still reflected the desires of Ray and Reniere's audiences, seeking out self-help in a vulnerable time of his life.

That isn't to say that the doctor/client aspect did not have significant consequences on the situation, for it did. Firstly, Hershkopf's certified license instilled an entirely new degree of trust between him and Markowitz; it put him in an authoritative position and set him up in that “lord” role Plato criticized but with an even deeper level of trust and confidentiality. Markowitz's therapy sessions were also one-on-one (Nocera, 2019). He was entirely alone in his situation, unlike the masses of followers in the Ray and Ranieri cases; and this isolation is an important

factor in Markowitz's vulnerability.

In 2020, Dr. Vivek Murthy came out with an entire book on how loneliness affects people's communication skills and mindset. The 19<sup>th</sup> General of the United States, he (2020) discovered both biological and psychological ramifications for someone dealing with loneliness whether they actually are isolated, or simply feel alone even if they are surrounded by people. Through various research and case studies, Murthy (2020) discovered that loneliness is actually a result of evolutionary design – a red flag sent out from the brain to encourage necessary socialization. When we are alone, we are in danger both physiologically and psychologically. This is something that health care specialists, whether they are in the field of mental health or not, should be aware of. Isolation, after all, has been called a form of torture and cruelty in certain cases for a reason.

So it was alarming to Markowitz's sister, Phyllis Shapiro, when her brother started cutting people out of his life (Nocera, 2019). This included friends and colleagues, and eventually, it started against her as well. Her pay was suddenly decreased by \$5000 – she worked for the family business Markowitz headed – and this happened repeatedly. She was also no longer invited to family gatherings (Trivedi, 2021). This includes Martin's second bar mitzvah (Nocera, 2019), a sacred Jewish celebration that one would traditionally invite their most intimate family and companions to. Shapiro was vocally not a fan of her brother's new therapist because of the way she could see it changing Martin, isolating him. Tensions grew between the siblings until Shapiro eventually withdrew money from their joint account in an attempt to shockingly grab his attention; and in response, Markowitz completely cut her out of his life (Nocera, 2019). Now, two years after Markowitz began seeing Hershkopf, Shapiro was fired from the family company, and her children were contacted by Markowitz himself to let them

know that they were being denounced due to the actions of their mother (Nocera, 2019).

Markowitz would not see his sister and her children again for nearly three decades (Nocera, 2019).

Hershkopf – who was now seeing Markowitz three times a week and often went by the name “Ike” to those who knew his client – reassured Martin that this was for the best (Nocera, 2019). Markowitz had to make sure he was cutting out people who were only interested in taking advantage of him and Ike was willing to help take on that responsibility not only as Martin’s therapist but also as his friend. Ike promised Martin that he didn’t need Shapiro or the others that he instructed Markowitz to discard – because he was willing to take their place (Das, 2021).

If Phyllis left Marty a message or sent him a birthday card, Ike instructed him to show these communications to him, so he could ‘interpret’ their meaning... if Marty was hurting from the estrangement from his family, Ike was on hand to provide the perfect solution. According to Marty, Ike reassured him: “Don’t worry. My family will be your family, my kids like your nieces and nephews and we’re going to make a social life for you.” (Das, 2021, para. 22).

Ike offered to become Markowitz’s family; and not long after, he also became a business associate to the family business, Associated Fabrics Corporation (AFC). He became such a huge part of the company that he convinced Markowitz to officially declare him president of the entire corporation. He went by the name Isaac Stevens on all the business documents, and employees of AFC said the doctor slowly took over most major business decisions; this includes moving locations, how the company was run, the aesthetic of the place and the financial decisions, etc. (Nocera, 2019). Over time, Ike gained access to most of Markowitz’s finances through the business. And then, Herskopf opened a private charity foundation that consisted of mostly

Markowitz's financial contributions named the Yaron Foundation (Nocera, 2019). He now had significant, if not the majority of, control over Markowitz's financial life.

We see a distinct lack of a specific type of danger, physical threat, in the Isaac Hershkopf case as opposed to Ray's or Raniere's. The manipulation that occurred between this therapist and his patient was much quieter and more intimate. Markowitz continued having official sessions with Hershkopf three times a week, every week; however, he interacted with Ike almost constantly outside of the office (Nocera, 2019). Ike had, by a certain point, become Markowitz's only friend. He had isolated him. "I was basically married to this guy," Markowitz himself eventually said, "He was my life... I would sit basically his knee and ask him for directions and what to do and... he was my life. He was my world" (Nocera, 2019, "The Last Straw," 0:25:12).

It's hard to believe that Markowitz was capable of living like this for so long. Murthy's (2020) research had seen loneliness as a product of *biological evolution*; feelings of loneliness and unrest should have, under that theory, prompted Markowitz to seek company beyond Ike. That's not what happened though. This can be explained mainly by the fact that Ike kept Markowitz busy. He was such a prominent, constant figure in his life at this point that he was capable of giving him tasks to do both in the business that they now shared and personal favors. For example, Markowitz was of typing up dozens of different books Ike had written, transferring them from handwritten papers to versions he hand-typed himself. He would work on typing these documents up for hours upon hours on end, almost daily, whether they were ever published or not (Nocera, 2019). It was mindless, robotic work – the kind that creates what scholars have previously identified as a specific type of communication climate. Certain communication climates put emphasis on stripping people of their independence and critical thinking to prioritize task completion and efficiency (O'Hair et al., 2011). They foster mindlessness in people so that

work gets done instead of attending to their humanistic needs of labor. Hershkopf placed Markowitz in this type of climate repeatedly through monotonous chores, effectively taking from his patient's sense of independence even when they weren't together.

By putting Markowitz into this environment constantly for years on end, Hershkopf successfully continued stripping him of his autonomy whether that was the intention or not. That's the thing about communication and rhetoric in all these cases we're looking at, but especially in this one where someone in the medical field is meant to be dedicated to their patient's wellbeing: it does not always matter what the intention is. The behavior and the actions are what are producing the results. The consequences of rhetoric will exist whether it was a conscious effort or not; and in this case, the communication climate that Hershkopf constructed for his client encouraged and maintained a harmfully isolated environment.

Markowitz is also not the only victim of Hershkopf to speak out against the doctor's practices. Evidence would emerge later on that he tended to isolate and then emotionally infiltrate other patients as well, showing that his parasitic behavior was not a one-time case. One of Hershkopf's former clients would later come out and claim that a scene from one of Hershkopf's published murder mysteries was an exact retelling of a traumatic event she'd told Hershkopf about when he'd been her therapist (Nocera, 2019). There were other instances where Markowitz claims Hershkopf broke patient confidentiality. Along with typing up his manuscripts, he would also sometimes type up correspondences for his doctor or fetch paperwork for him (Nocera, 2019). At one time, he was told to take a personal fax from Courtney Love, at the time his client, and photocopy it. "It was an epic violation," Markowitz admitted (Lewak, 2019, para. 20). It would also come out that he would invite different patients to the elaborate house parties he would host (Nocera, 2019). When you were Ike's patient, it was a

privilege and a win to be invited to one of his parties – it was a level of closeness that many of them wanted to achieve, dependent and attached just as Martin was. Ike took on the rhetorical role of a lord with his clients under the guise of not only their guru but close friend due to the intimacy of the therapist/patient relationship. “Ike was like a celebrity. ‘To be invited to Ike’s party meant you were in the inner circle,’” said one patient, a woman who used the name Judith during investigations (Lewak, 2019).

Judith would speak out about her struggles with isolation and dependency under Hershkopf’s influence after Markowitz’s story was published.

At one of the bashes, she became fast friends with a fellow patient. When the friend fell out with Ike, “he had me write a letter that he basically dictated, basically ending [my] friendship [with the woman], which was a great loss... it was her or him.” Judith also claimed that the doctor urged her to stop speaking to her mother and even convinced her not to attend the woman’s funeral. (Lewak, 2019).

In addition to Judith, another patient with the pseudonym Emily had also ended up adding the Hershkopf family to her will (Lewak, 2019). She had attended weekly sessions with Hershkopf for nearly twenty years herself, with the meetings often taking place at expensive restaurants like the Four Seasons; Emily always picked up the check, every time, even if Hershkopf was the one that suggested they get out of the office and picked the restaurant. It was near the end of their time together that Emily adjusted her will to leave a “substantial amount” of her wealth to Hershkopf’s three daughters; but eventually, Emily realized that what was happening was not alright. “The more in crisis you are, the more vulnerable you are — Ike likes you that way,” Emily claimed; and remaining vulnerable and codependent was not the reason she was seeking help (Lewak, 2019, para. 15). Emily ended up cutting ties with Ike, along with

Judith and a few other patients (Nocera, 2019).

So we can see that Markowitz was not alone in his situation; but he was alone, cut off from family and friends, and closer than he should have ever been professionally acceptable with his therapist. However, Markowitz didn't get a chance to come to a realization by interacting with these other patients, even though they were usually at the same parties. This is because most of Ike's guests didn't know that Martin Markowitz was actually a patient of Hershkopf's. Almost everyone assumed that he was the caretaker of the doctor's property because of how Markowitz would run around attending to guests and keeping the party running smoothly (Nocera, 2019). What they also didn't know was that not only was Markowitz not Hershkopf's caretaker, but he also owned the house that the parties were being thrown in.

The Herschkopfs loved the home so much they allegedly installed a welcome mat with their name on it, hung a "Becky's Kitchen" sign, blanketed the walls with photos of their family and, with Markowitz's permission, had the home phone listed in the White Pages under the doctor's pseudonym Isaac Stevens. According to Markowitz, the couple also took over the master suite while he slept in a guest room. (Lewak, 2019).

None of the neighbors or guests ever knew that it was actually Markowitz's house. They simply thought it belonged to their new friend Isaac Stevens; this was also the name that he was still using to run Markowitz's business. Additionally, by the time Hershkopf was fully settled in his patient's estate, he had also become a joint signatory on Markowitz's bank account (Lewak, 2019). Different sources claim this account held between \$100,000 – \$2.5 million, and Markowitz's therapist now had total access and control over it – just as he did with Associated Fabrics Corporate, the Yaron Foundation, and the estate (Cohen, 2021; Lewak, 2019).

And then, Hershkopf suggested that Markowitz amend his will to leave the estate and

many other personal values to the doctor's wife and daughters should anything happen to him; and Markowitz agreed (Lewak, 2019). He also listed gave the doctor power of attorney (Cohen, 2021).

Hershkopf truly was the only thing that Markowitz had left.

Eventually, after twenty-nine years with Dr. Isaac Hershkopf as his therapist, it became Markowitz's turn to burn bridges. By 2010, Markowitz was in his late sixties and he had dedicated his entire life to his therapist (Nocera, 2019). He still spent his free time doing errands for Ike, continuing to type up his books and help him drafts correspondences. After years of doing this, Markowitz began to feel exhausted – especially because Markowitz was paying Hershkopf for many of these times as if they were a part of his therapy sessions (Nocera, 2019). Bills were adding up, and as research has shown, such isolation *does* take a toll on someone's psyche eventually. It can trap people in their environments, and make them feel stagnant (Murthy, 2020); and Markowitz was effectively stuck with Ike Hershkopf regardless of how parasitic their dynamic seemed to be.

But this lifestyle truly is not sustainable indefinitely.

Markowitz ended up having to go in for hernia surgery in 2010 and he was out of commission during the healing process (Cohen, 2021). In pain and stuck in his old home completely alone, Markowitz was left completely alone to contemplate his situation. No one called. He had cut off his family long ago and he had no friends left except for Ike. He waited, for days to weeks, for Hershkopf to check in on him since he couldn't see him for therapy or "work". However, Hershkopf never reached out; not once. That was what prompted Markowitz, who had met the doctor as a man in his thirties, to analyze his life now that he was near retirement age (Nocera, 2019). "I was devastated (Das, 2021). He knew I had no one else,"



Markowitz said, describing the betrayal he'd felt when time continued stretching on without a word from his beloved therapist, "That was the final straw" (Lewak, 2019, para. 23). He wrote Hershkopf a long letter with the help of some AFC employees, telling Hershkopf that it was like the blinds had been lifted and that he could no longer keep him on as his doctor; he felt the situation was inappropriate and not good for his wellbeing anymore (Gajanan, 2021). "All of these frustrations, all of these issues, all of this anger came bursting out of me" (Gajanan, 2021, "How Markowitz got free..." para. 2). Hershkopf responded in likeness, urging Markowitz to not be irrational and that ending his therapy at this point would be a major mistake. However, at this point, Markowitz was done. He instructed Hershkopf that he was taking back his estate – meaning the doctor would have to move out of the home – and that he was cutting him out of his life (Gajanan, 2021).

And that was that. It's almost surreal to conceptualize – just how swiftly three decades of such intense attachment and relation could end. Hershkopf and his wife did leave the Markowitz estate and didn't return; Markowitz tried to mail back clothing and some other personal items back to the office, but he ended up stuck with many things in his possession. That includes many of the doctor's journals, pictures with celebrities he had met, etc. Many of these objects were still in place when journalist Joe Nocera (2019) began to investigate the case; and when Markowitz decided to finally try and contact his sister again after over two decades. For after just a short time free from the doctor's spell, Markowitz immensely regretted cutting his family off. Phyllis Shapiro answered her estranged brother's call, and she didn't hesitate in her response: "I've been waiting for this call for twenty-seven years" (Das, 2021, para. 38).

Markowitz now seems to fully understand more and more the gravity of the situation he was in. "I had a ring in my nose and he was leading me around," he said, describing how he

would do Hershkopf's every bidding without question (Cohen, 2019, "Pouring Salt into Open Wounds," para. 18). "I felt like I was in a cult" (Rollings, 2021, para. 11). Now that there has been time for calculations and proper analysis, it seems that Markowitz had ended up paying Hershkopf over three million in fees over the past few decades, due to being charged for sessions, the extra errands, and expenses the doctor had put on Markowitz – like the framing of all his celebrity interaction pictures (Cohen, 2019).

In 2010, the year Markowitz broke off his harmful relationship with Hershkopf, Joe Nocera moved onto the same street as the estate the doctor had tried taking over. That was how the journalist stumbled upon the story and chose to publish it in a Wondery podcast (2019), and how the entire situation started gaining national attention. The podcast itself was enough of a success that Apple TV ended up producing a mini-series on Markowitz's story titled *The Shrink Next Door*; with a well-known cast such as Will Ferrel and Paul Rudd taking lead roles, the show helped bring the case to relevancy with the public. With incoming support systems now in place around him, Markowitz eventually filed several complaints against Hershkopf via the New York State Health Department (Cohen, 2019). Unfortunately, progress through these systems was slow. For the next several years, Markowitz would check in with the department to see if there would be any updates – he was always told that the case was merely "under investigation" (Nocera, 2019). Markowitz grew restless. "I want justice to be served and to me, him losing his license is justice. I just don't want him to do this to anyone else" (Rollings, 2021, "'Ike losing his license would be justice'," para. 14).

Eventually, though, progress was made. Investigators began working with Hershkopf's other former client, Emily, amongst others and the case grew beyond just Markowitz. By 2022, Hershkopf's name was taken off the New York Medical School's website. Hershkopf himself

also stepped down and retired from his position in the Fellowship at Auschwitz for the Study of Professional Ethics (Rollings, 2021). And then the state of New York officially revoked Hershkopf's license to practice medicine (Cohen, 2021).

New York State's Department of Health, in its decision, found 16 specifications of professional misconduct – from fraudulence to gross negligence and gross incompetence as well as exercising undue influence and moral unfitness. The decision was based on records and testimony from three of Herschkopf's patients. (Cohen, 2021, para. 13).

Hershkopf denies almost all of the claims leveled against him and continues today trying to appeal the decision to take his license. He says that everything Markowitz did for him was voluntarily done and that any actions taken that might breach a mental health relationship between doctor and patient occurred instead when Markowitz and the patient Emily had become business advice clients (Trivedi, 2021). He also claims that over 90% of the podcast and the story circulating in the media is false, despite Nocera and the podcast staff claiming rigorous fact-checking before publication (Cohen, 2019). As of today, Hershkopf remains without a license and he seems to be avoiding the spotlight ever since the story came out.

This “long-con” type of weaponized rhetoric we see Hershkopf utilizing here falls under a new category that we haven't discussed yet: rhetorical exhaustion. Unlike ordinary weaponized rhetoric, which is distinctly known for its unethical nature, rhetorical exhaustion is primarily seen as a positive and ethical strategy for influencing an audience (Bradshaw, 2020). A “slow and persistent” persuasion strategy, it strives to avoid bombarding and overwhelming an audience into submission; it tries to give them time to process and fosters musing and discussion. However, evidence has shown that when used immorally, rhetorical exhaustion will actually “wear down” the audience and gradually strip them of their independence, perseverance, etc.

(Bradshaw, 2020). It uses time against them – not very different from old battle strategies that involved bombarding a target until they run out of resources and have no choice left but to surrender. “[This] suggests a rhetorical strategy that foregoes direct, situational persuasion in order to more powerfully create it (by hiding it) in the long run... accumulation is ultimately constrained because audiences quickly tire of it. When building intensity, savvy rhetors have to intuit how much is too much, and when they need to relent. Too much of a good thing often becomes wearisome—or, exhausting” (Bradshaw, 2020, “Accumulation and Exhaustion,” para. 1). Just as Plato warned of dangerous rhetoric long ago, so did ancient Roman theorists; and their ideas on rhetorical exhaustion have already recognized in the modern world today (Bradshaw, 2020). “It is remarkable how closely these Roman theories of accumulation map onto 21st century digital practices,” warns Bradshaw (2020, “Accumulation and Exhaustion,” para. 3) who noted both accumulation and amplification of rhetoric can have fatiguing and negative effects on audiences.

We can connect these theories to the Markowitz case. Hershkopf didn’t immediately go in and ask Markowitz for his bank accounts and to be put in his will. Instead, for nearly three decades, he gradually wore down his client’s self-esteem and independence and replaced them with a dependency and attachment to the doctor himself.

“Very quietly, over about an 18-month period, Ike started pouring salt into all of my open wounds,” Markowitz said. “He got my sister and her children and all of my blood relatives and close friends out of my life. A constant mantra from Ike was he’d say ‘you can’t handle the truth. You’re passive-aggressive, you can’t handle confrontation, you’re going to screw up the business and lose customers,’” Markowitz recalled... he eroded what remained of Markowitz’s fragile confidence. (Cohen, 2019, “Pouring Salt Into Open

Wounds,” para. 8).

These constant words from a trusted source reflect the accumulation that Bradshaw (2020) warns us about, and then things escalate – amplify. This combination of rhetorical exhaustion, paired with the biological effects of loneliness on the human brain, allowed Isaac Hershkopf to take a dangerous and dominant position over Martin Markowitz for the duration of their relationship. Regardless of whether that was the doctor’s intention or whether every single detail from the podcasts and TV series are true, the story appears the same and the New York medical board has seemed to agree. Hershkopf is no longer allowed to practice as a licensed therapist.

### **Discussion**

This paper has covered not only what rhetoric is, but how dangerous it can be in the self-help industry. This has been illustrated through three different case examples, where the warnings of ancient scholars from Greece and Rome found their words proven through tragedies involving James Arthur Ray, Keith Raniere, and Isaac Hershkopf. The way that rhetoric is weaponized throughout these cases demonstrate some of the dangerous risks that go unnoticed in the self-help industry. However, this is not the only place we see these sorts of communication practices. By spotting similarities between these discussed cases and other, potentially more-familiar situations, we might be able to understand and protect ourselves further against weaponized communication.

Because we broke down the rhetorical strategies used in this paper, we can successfully identify the same behaviors in other situations – even in more extreme cases. One of the most common minefields for abusive rhetoric to crop up is in the world of politics. Looking at these rhetorical elements in their most abusive, demagogic, and exhaustive states allow us to further

understand the patterns and strategies used by unethical rhetoricians in positions of power. It allows us to comprehend how these practices are common and deadly in extreme rhetorical cases regardless of the situation. Such situations include the problematic campaign and presidency of Donald Trump, who despite immense controversy, won his campaign for presidency in the United States and continues to have a mass following today. How? Using Mercieca's (2020) analysis of Trump's practices, we can see that the answer is in the rhetoric. We see the patterns of weaponized rhetoric, of exhaustive rhetorical campaigns, we see a type of herd mentality being fostered, and we see clearly see how dominating influence all comes into play when we step back and look for the signs.

It is possible to find the strategies discussed earlier in even some of the most extreme cases out there, such as in the campaign of Adolf Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. Hitler's campaign is nowhere near the same scope of alarm or tragedy as the cases analyzed in this project, but looking at these extremes can help us understand just how dangerously high rhetoric can scale. *Mein Kampf* has already undergone a variety of different rhetorical analyses that showcase just how demagogues can reach horrifically impactful points. In the case of Adolf Hitler, there have been several analyses of his work that try and figure out how he was able to so devastatingly change the world as formidably as he did. Keith Burke (1973) is someone who looked at *Mein Kampf* from a rhetorical standpoint, and he was able to locate key rhetorical strategies that Hitler used to seize – and maintain – his leadership role. Almost immediately, Burke (1973) identifies the “slow and persistent” factor that Bradshaw (2020) identified as exhaustive rhetoric in Hitler's campaign. He also sees how creating a sense of belonging and fellowship amongst people, combined with this effect, isolates a group under the sole umbrella of the rhetorician.

For one thing, I believe he has shown, to a very disturbing degree, the power of endless

repetition... The substance of Nazi propaganda was built about these two “complimentary” themes. He describes the power of spectacle; insists that mass meetings are the fundamental way of giving the individual a sense of being protectively surrounded by a movement, the sense of “community.” (Burke, 1973, p. 48).

Burke (1973) points out how Hitler justifies what can be viewed as “bad” actions with the “good” end results. “Did not much of his lure derive, once more, from the *bad* filling a *good* need?” (Burke, 1973). This goes back to the idea that rhetoric does not have to have an immoral goal or intention to *be* immoral and thus, harmful and something to be avoided.

Do any of these concepts sound familiar? They should, for they manifested in different ways throughout the three self-improvement cases we just looked at. For that exhaustive rhetoric element, we look at Isaac Hershkopf; and for the repetitive part especially we can look at Keith Raniere and the strict schedule he had his slaves in for years upon years. We see the two gurus, Raniere and also James Arthur Ray, also forming communities and senses of belonging amongst their clients. Everyone on the retreats and attending these seminars was there for the same reason – to better themselves and their lives. They endured many of the same trials, both physically and mentally. Witnesses from Ray’s sweat lodge explain how the experience brought the people inside together in an almost surreal sense of survival; one survivor describes laying her head on the lap of the woman next to her as they simply breathed together, and fought to stay breathing throughout it all (Shroud, 2020). It is common practice for gurus to bring people together in batches of audiences to speak and work with them, and so we can see that this sense of belonging can end up tethering people to dangerous situations. It fosters blind herd behavior under certain conditions. Both NXIVM and Ray’s sweat lodge retreat were described as “cultish” by survivors and emergency services and for good reason.

One final, important point Burke (1973) mentioned in his rhetorical analysis of Hitler is that “we must make apparent that Hitler appeals by relying upon a bastardization of fundamental religious patterns of thought” (p. 49). We have to be *aware* of the issue to see it early on, create preventative measures, and manage similar situations when they do arise. Otherwise, our minds and thoughts can become stagnant and rooted in specific ways that can then be twisted by influence if we aren’t using critical thinking and evolving over time.

This idea of something good flipping on itself into something negative is not new. It has been identified by some theorists as a phenomenon known as *pharmakon* (Derrida, 1981), and we see it constantly in rhetoric even if we don’t necessarily recognize it’s happening. In our modern world, we are constantly influenced by advertisements, opinionated podcasts, discourse, influencers, social media, and more. Sometimes, these communication channels can be used to take advantage. Rhetorical *pharmakon* has also been seen in infamous cult cases, and in different political situations and extremes as mentioned earlier. And we see it strewn throughout the self-help industry, as explained through this project. However, not enough people are aware of the way self-help can be twisted so drastically into self-harm, and how easily it can happen; thus, the risk threaded throughout the industry remains ripe and invisible still today.

The idea of self-help and self-improvement is stronger in the United States than ever before. The number of Americans seeking therapy or other mental health resources has been steadily climbing with every passing year, with 41.4 million adults receiving treatment as of 2020 (Elflein, 2022). In correlation is the growing value of the self-improvement industry itself, which had an estimated value of 11.6 billion dollars in the year 2019 (LaRosa, 2021). The industry is here and thriving, and so still is the lack of acknowledgment on how people can have the communication they are paying for weaponized against them.



The self-help industry is unique where we *are* asking to be persuaded, and people sacrifice much financially and emotionally to do so. Victim blaming is common. Society as a whole is currently wading in a sea of individualism and self-responsibility. However, the facts in this project argues that the blame for tragedies such as the Spiritual Warrior and NXIVM should fall on the shoulders of dangerous rhetoricians because of their communication practices, instead of the victims. This opens the door for further discussion not only on rhetoric in the modern world but also on how we can navigate a rhetoric-fueled society safely and justly. Justice is mentioned because communication itself is difficult to regulate; especially when people take into account the United State's First Amendment right to free speech. However, there are similar fields to the self-improvement industry such as psychiatry practices in America where people still have communication rights but are held to certain standards and regulations when working to mentally influence and 'treat' other people. The Isaac Hershkopf case took place in a therapist's office well over four decades ago, and the world of psychiatry has evolved immensely since then. It is possible for the world of self-help to also change into something safer, for the sake of the demographic these gurus are working with.

This project seeks not to condemn the self-help industry, but rather to analyze three distinct cases that have ended in tragedy to figure out how rhetoric can play a negative role throughout it. Through my research, I discovered not only rhetoric, but the weaponized rhetoric, demagoguery, and exhaustive rhetoric highlighted in the cases of James Arthur Ray, Keith Raniere, and Issac Hershkopf. We've already seen these strategies play out in other scrutinized situations – like with cults or problematic political leaders – and now it is possible to identify how rhetoric is one of the main, familiar culprits in all these situations. Knowing this, we can start understanding more about the weaponized communication thriving in the world today and

bring awareness to some of the most vulnerable communities in society seeking aid. We now can understand just how something as saving as self-help can be twisted into self-harm right under our noses, and hopefully this course of study will progress further to protect those in this industry from the invisible threat posed by rhetoric in the self-help industry.

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