ADULT CHILDREN OF CULTS: THE EXPERIENCES OF INDIVIDUALS BORN AND RAISED IN A CULT AS THEY TRANSITION INTO MAINSTREAM SOCIETY

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Susan L. Latta
Summer 2011
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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Joyce Jordan. Her spiritual leadership gave me the direction and drive that propelled me to make and pursue new goals at this stage in my life. She has supported me throughout my pursuit of this Master's degree. I owe the completion of this degree to her, for without her, I would not have even attempted such an endeavor. Repeatedly her encouragement and unwavering support allowed me to continue on the journey that maintained the momentum to complete this course.
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Finally yet importantly, I thank all my Celebrate Recovery friends who supported me during this growth process when issues of my past came up during this process. They provided a supportive, caring and compassionate venue when I needed it over the past year. I also thank all of my friends and family who supported me during this process.
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This study explores the lived experiences of individuals who were born and/or raised in a cult and the issues they encountered and struggled with as they integrated into mainstream society. Data were drawn from transcripts of 12-recorded interviews; subjects included men and women; all had been in a religious cult. Typically, former cult members, who had joined a group as an adult, feel misunderstood and face many issues when attempting to adjust to and fit into mainstream society. Until now, there has been little research on the experiences of those individuals who were born and/or raised in a cult. The purpose of this study was to examine the specific adjustment issues of adult children of cults once they left the cult and entered into the broader society. The research goal was to offer an understanding that will facilitate efficient mainstreaming. The data.
were analyzed using four categories: state of mind (including depression, anger, and feeling hopeful about the future), state of autonomy (including independence, decision making, and sense of integration), life skills (including finances, work, housing, education, and health issues), and relationships (including sexual identity, marital issues, birth family and friendships). The study also addresses the types of resources that these former members would have found helpful, as identified in the transcripts. This study contributes to a greater understanding of the issues and needs of this particular population, with an aim toward the development of more effective programs for counselors and therapists who may have former cult member clientele.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Children raised in restrictive cults are raised in closed societies. From the day they are born, their world is controlled. Quite regularly, these children are used and manipulated for the purposes of the group and the leader. Many times, children are separated from their parents and raised by strangers or other members of the group. In essence, someone who does not love them plans every minute of their day, and these children receive no nurturance nor do they see any modeling of love and care. When they leave the cult, it is as if they are entering a different world.

These children are taught to fear the outside world; often, they grow up in an atmosphere of terror. They are taught to obey without question and follow the cult's often-bizarre norms; many do not learn social skills, daily living skills, or how to make decisions. Often, adult members perpetuate physical, sexual, and emotional abuse on children. Children in cults also experience a high level of neglect; they may go hungry or lack sleep and proper medical care. Typically, they are overworked and undereducated. When these individuals leave or are driven out, they find themselves in an unrecognizable world, where they encounter a different way of life and even a different language. They enter into mainstream society as lost and unrecognized victims.

As practitioners and professionals, how can that exit process be streamlined with the least amount chaos? Typically, individuals are traumatized already; therefore,
practitioners must be able to support these ex-cult members in their quest to adapt to mainstream society in a manner that helps them integrate with the least amount of distress.

This study began in an effort to understand the effects of growing up in a cult and the specific issues such individuals may have once they leave the cult and the enter the broader society. The primary reason that this subject interested me is that I spent eight years growing up in a cult. It never occurred to me that my parents were in a cult until I sat in a class in my fifties and learned what comprises a cult. This was 37 years after I left the group. I began to look at my own adult life and that of others that I know who also left have left the group. I wondered if some of the problems that we encountered were rooted in the way we were raised. When I tried to research this, I found very few studies on children raised in cults.

I have many happy memories of my childhood; after my parents joined the group, we became closer as a family. However, I realize that many of the skills needed to be successful in mainstream society were missing in my life. I have always considered myself fortunate because I was already 7 when my parents joined, so I had other influences and outside information to fall back on. However, my three sisters were born while my parents were in the group. They have all left the group, but have had many challenges to overcome and are all still struggling 20 and 30 years later. My sisters’ lives were much harsher than mine, as our father left them and my mother in the group when the youngest child was four years old. Even though all three of them left the cult at the age of 16, they continue to struggle trying to find a fit in mainstream society.
In that cult, school was discouraged after the 8th grade, at which time we were taught to take on adult roles and duties. Many of the friends I grew up with married at 17. Children are considered an adult at the age of 16. When I was 15, I was sent away to an uncle's house outside the group, where I was sexually abused. I did not know how to stop it or whom to tell. I finished high school at the age of 15 and am the only one in my family of seven to get a high school diploma or to go to college.

The good part of the group I grew up in is that most of the members are still married; there is a very low divorce rate. The people in the group are protected and do not have to deal with the complexities of modern life. They are totally cut off from the outside world and do not interact with mainstream society. Their lives are simple and uncomplicated; when there is trouble, the community pulls together and is supportive of the members.

On the other hand, the dark side of this group is the elitist ideal that it is the only road to heaven. The group has a special interpretation of how to get to heaven. If you are not part of the group, then you are an outsider, not to be trusted. When a member does not act according to what the elders tell him or her to do, then the wrath of God descends in form of the leaders, who call that individual on the carpet. If the member does not do what the group thinks he should do, or does not say what they want to hear, that member is banned or shunned. If eventually the person's behavior lines up to what the rest of the members agree on, then he or she can come back to the fold. If the person goes his own way, then he is expelled from the group, completely shunned, and not included in everyday life activities. Families go so far as to not sit at the same table with their ostracized relatives. The group ignores them and pretends they no longer exist.
This did not happen with me, as I never joined. However, this did happen too many of the people I grew up with and to other ex-members. Understandably so, they are bitter and hurt, and lack support and coping skills. Most of their families have been in the group for generations, so many of those who left had no outside support. When they leave, they do not understand mainstream society. Many of the things that normal children learn socially, these individuals did not learn because they were a closed and isolated society. Normal coping strategies and social skills are not taught. This leaves ex-members vulnerable, often becoming the target of predators. When ex-members encounter problems in the outside world, all of the dogma they were taught seems to be coming true. Therefore, they are unable to build trust and fully integrate in a healthy way because there is no recognition that they are different.

With all of their relatives still in the group, these former members had no support system for them outside the group. I was fortunate in that I did have friends and relatives outside the group, which made my transition easier; but most who leave are on their own. Many have personal issues, such as depression, anger, drug and alcohol problems, low self-confidence, and lack of education.

Most former members of this group have substance abuse problems or live with someone who does; and many use unhealthy coping methods. There is a general lack of trust in the helping professions, which is part of the indoctrination process since birth. This leaves out counseling or getting help as an option. There is also lack of education on cults and cultic behavior in our society so these individuals do not even realize they need help. They believe they are living in sin and are going to hell and that is
the reason for their problems. Given this, there is a general lack of understanding of how to fit into this current complex society in a healthy and beneficial way.

Despite my own personal background, I have examined the issues that individuals cope with when leaving a cultic group in an objective and unbiased way. In many ways, my own cult experience has provided me with a unique insider's view and, therefore, has strengthened my research. Part of the purpose of this project was to examine ways to educate, target and treat these individuals so they may receive the help they need quickly and efficiently as soon as they enter mainstream society.

Background

Cults have been around since time began. In certain times in our history, cults thrive. When changes occur in society and when individuals feel as though they have no a place to fit in, then that is just the right time for a cult to welcome them in. Cults substitute their own belief systems and offer new and different ways to view the world (Singer & Lalich 1995). There are many different types of cults that range from New Age, political, psychological, social activist to religious. There may be other kinds of cults as well, but for the purposes of this project, the information is based on a study of religious cults.

During the 1960s, the United States was experiencing social and political changes that opened the door for many new cult leaders to appear and gain membership in their cult (Singer & Lalich 1995). Not all the cults survived into the 1970s, but those that did often had children born into them. These children were subjected to the odd beliefs and practices of the group. These groups were often isolated, sometimes poor;
members and children went hungry and were overworked. Often members worked long hours without pay. When the group had money, the money went to the leaders who typically lived an extravagant lifestyle.

Cults use coercive tactics and behavior modification to change their members’ thinking to line up with the cult's ideal and goals. The individual member is usually unaware that the leaders are using these brainwashing methods as a means to control the thoughts and behaviors of their followers. Through this manipulation, attitudes, thinking, and behaviors are altered to coincide with the cult's agenda (Singer & Lalich 1995).

In the book, *Take Back Your Life*, Lalich (2006) included a well-researched section on children born and raised in a cult. Children in cults suffer from health problems and medical neglect. Many cults do not believe in immunizing their children or taking them to the doctor. Many children are the victims of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. There is growing evidence of severe physical abuse, sexual abuse, isolation, and food and sleep deprivation. In extreme cases, cult-related deaths of minors have occurred (Lalich 2006).

**Statement of the Problem**

What happens when a member wants to leave a cult? Cults do not like to lose their members. Many times when a member wants to leave, she loses her family, home, income, friends, and, frequently, her spouse and children. In view of the fact that cults are closed groups and outsiders are suspect, the ex-member has no one to trust on the outside.

This study's intention is to identify specific issues that arise when children grow up in a cult, and then leave the group as an adolescent or adult. Children in cults are
often are abused and isolated and are taught to hate outsiders. It is difficult to leave the group and integrate fully into mainstream society. Many times, a cult member will leave one cult only to be drawn into another similar group or will engage in self-destructive behaviors until some kind of intervention and/or education occurs.

Individuals raised in a cult may look like any other individual who comes in to get social services; however, they often have different needs from a client who was raised in mainstream society. How can practitioners, find out who these individuals are in order to help and support them? What issues should be addressed, and what should a treatment plan look like? How can practitioners target these individuals, and provide positive interventions to help them integrate competently into mainstream society?

What specific issues do individuals who were raised in a cult deal with? What effect does cult membership have on their state of mind? What effect does cult membership have on their sense of autonomy? How does former membership in a cult affect an individual's life skills? Are they able to have and keep relationships, and how did membership in a cult affect their ability to trust others? Furthermore, what do former cult members have to say about what they needed when they left? These are some of the topics this study hoped to address.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and analyze interviews of children raised in a cult, focusing on several different categories, in order to better understand the needs of these individuals once they have left the cult. The first category is state of mind, which includes anger, depression, and being hopeful about the future. In the second
category, I examined *state of autonomy*, looking at the period of time immediately after leaving and currently. Third, I examined *life skills*. The fourth category explored is *relationships*, which include personal relationships, such as with a spouse or significant other, as well as relationships with family members. It also includes friends and support people in the former member's life.

Through this qualitative research, I describe the particular issues that an individual who leaves a cult tends to have to deal with, as well as suggesting a plan of action to address these issues when practitioners work with these individuals. Also, I explored areas of need to determine what further research would be helpful for educational and clinical purposes, allowing those practitioners who work with former cult members to have a better understanding of how to support them in their efforts to become mainstreamed. How can practitioners better assess, treat, and support these individuals, and how can practitioners be better equipped and trained? I addressed those questions, using the study's data as my foundation.

**Definition of Terms**

**Brainwashing**

Subtle and sophisticated use of systems of influence and control, including the uses of methods of indoctrination, manipulation, deception, and exploitative persuasion to induce dependency, compliance, rigid obedience, stunted thinking, and childlike behavior in their members (Lalich 2006).
**Cult**

For the purposes of this study, a cult is a self-contained group that uses thought control, brainwashing and manipulative practices on its members. The group operates for the sole purpose of the leaders at the expense of the group members, and is centered on a central theme or idea.

**Thought Reform**

The deliberate practice of techniques by the leaders of a cult on members to bring about complete indoctrination and absolute obedience, using exploitive persuasion to engender those changes.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter will review the literature relevant to the topic of this study. It will examine sections on general studies on cults, children in cults, personal development, post-cult life experiences, and resilience in life progress, treatment issues, and areas of concern. Additionally, this chapter will review the pertinent literature on the social and psychological effects of individuals who are former cult members. The next section reviews application of this information and common treatment issues, which should be addressed when treating adults who have been raised in a cult. The final section of this chapter will indicate areas of concern as well as gaps in relationship to recovery and adjustment for former members of cults as they enter into mainstream society.

Although not used in this study I dedicated extensive time to read and review; as a result developed a variety of sources for background relative to this study. The list of these readings, which greatly informed my knowledge base, is included in a separate section following the references called additional reading.

General Studies on Cults

Cults have existed in society since time began. There are many kinds of cults, from strict pseudo-religious cults to psychological ones. This section will examine the different ways that cults manipulate and deceive members in order to meet the desires of
a charismatic leader or group. Clinical psychologist and noted cult expert Margaret Singer (1995) outlines three factors pertinent to all cults: the origin of the group and role of the leader, the power structure and the relationship between the leader and the followers, and the use of a coordinated program of persuasion.

Accordingly, to examine the starting point of a cult group, one must recognize the role of the leader. The following three characteristics were identified as common in cult leaders: (1) a charismatic, self-appointed persuasive person who alleges special knowledge or understanding; (2) a single-minded and authoritarian leadership style; and (3) a self-centered individual who expects everyone around him or her to show total devotion (Singer 1995). Cult leaders keep the focus on themselves and tend to do whatever it takes to make that happen (Singer 1995).

Michael Langone (1993) noted three distinctive behaviors that distinguish cults from other groups. First, members are extremely fervent and obedient in their commitment to identify with the group. That is to say, they are required to adopt a new set of beliefs consistent with the group. Second, members are manipulated and subjugated. The leaders expect most of the members to give up their former life, including their friends, interests, educational skills, and sometimes even their partners and children. Members may also be required to give their money and time to the group. Third, threat of harm may come to members or their families. This harm comes in different forms, such as poor nutrition, lack of medical care, sleep deprivation, psychological and physical abuse, and coerced participation in criminal activities (Lalich & Tobias 2006).
Lalich expanded on this by pointing out, "Cults may be placed on a continuum of influence and control, the effects range from mildly damaging to extremely harmful and dangerous" (Lalich 2006). A good policy is to judge each group on its own individual practices. The more controlling and intense a group, the more damage it does to its members.

Additionally, Lagone offers this definition:

Cult (totalist type): a group or movement exhibiting a great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea or thing and employing unethically manipulative techniques of persuasion and control (e.g., isolation from former friends and family, debilitation, use of special methods to heighten suggestibility and subservience, powerful group pressures, information management, suspension of individuality or critical judgment, promotion of total dependency on the group and fear of leaving it, designed to advance the goals of the group's leaders to the actual or possible detriment on members, their families or the community. (Langone 1993, p.5)

Finally, Furnari (2005) expanded on this and wrote that various cults are high-demand groups, and use manipulative practices that use deception and mind control to gain power over members.

Children in Cults

Physical and sexual abuse perpetrated on cult children is common and may only become known as ex-members tell of their experiences (see, for example, Buhring, Jones, & Jones 2007; Jeffs 2009; Jessop 2009; Wall 2008). Since totalistic cults do not allow the children to have contact with the outside world, the abuse that occurs within the cult rarely comes to the attention of the outside world. Cult members teach their children to view the world as an evil influence and a threat to their lifestyle and their salvation. Often members are required to change their names to fit in with the cult's ideology.
Further, to complicate matters, members tend to replace family ties with large groups of individuals (i.e., other cult members) (Barker 1989; Burchard & Wald 1988).

Most authoritarian cultic groups tend to harm children physically, sexually, and psychologically. Children are threatened and punished because the cult members live by an absolutist ideology that dictates harsh discipline and/or the rejection of medical intervention, among other dire consequences (Lagone 1984). This leaves children defenseless because they are isolated and have only other cult member to provide role models.

Gaines, Wilson, Redican, and Baffi (1984) surveyed 70 ex-cult members to determine the effects of cult membership on the health status of current and past members, including children. The study revealed that 27% of the respondents said that children were not immunized against common childhood diseases in their groups; 23% said that children did not get at least 8 hours of sleep at night; and 60% said that their group permitted physical punishment of children. Additionally, 13% said that the punishment of children was sometimes life threatening or required a physician's care; and 13% said that children were sometimes physically disabled or hurt to teach them a lesson (Langone 1984).

Swan (1990) examined more than one hundred legal cases in which religious beliefs against medical care had an impact on children. In many of these cases, the cult takes advantage of immunity laws pertaining to health care. Even though they do not have absolute immunity, often cults are protected from official scrutiny (Lagone 1984).

Sexual abuse occurs for both boys and girls (Lattin 2007; Wall 2008). If the leader has pedophilic tendencies, he or she will take advantage of the children in the cult.
The children who grew up in the Children of God, for example, reported many instances of child-adult sex for both girls and boys (Buhring, Jones & Jones 2007).

Cult children rarely come to the attention of teachers or mental health authorities, and do not get the protection afforded by the state. Some children do not exist in state records at all. The cult member gives birth at home, and often the birth is not recorded. Typically, children do not get medical care and do not attend public schools and the only way a child comes to the attention of the State is when an ex-member makes a report (Burchard & Malcarne 1992).

Cult member parents are often deeply indoctrinated by the cult’s use of thought-reform techniques to believe that human feelings for their children are not "spiritual" and are wrong. Feelings for anyone other than the leader are believed to weaken the group's purpose. The parents' confusion, plus the negative labels and the overt and covert messages children receive about their own worth, contribute to traumatic experiences for these children. These early on traumatic experiences interfere with healthy attachment and have a harmful impact on the child's ability to develop in healthy ways (Furnari 2005).

Personal Development

Once a member who grew up in a cult leaves the group, she must decide which parts of her childhood to keep and which parts to discard. Many former cult members have learned to squelch their emotions. Given that safety and trust are the foundation of healthy development, growing up in a cult negates Erickson's (1950) eight stages of personality development. For the purpose of this study, Erikson's first five
stages are most relevant. Moreover, each stage builds on the preceding stage. When a child's needs are not met, she is unable to move to the next stage, compromising her emotional and mental development (Furnari 2005).

Erickson's stages of development include trust versus mistrust; typically, this task is usually completed in infancy. The child learns to trust in his or her environment and caretakers. To the contrary, if the child is neglected or abused, he likely develops mistrust and anxiety (Furnari 2005).

Once, the child completes this first stage, he moves on to learn autonomy. He learns control of his body, and that he is separate from his caretaker. This stage is usually completed in toddlerhood. If separateness is punished, the child learns shame and doubt. This may cause helplessness, anxiety, over compliance, or hyperactivity (Furnari 2005).

The next stage is initiative, usually completed in preschool. If completed properly, the child will have confidence in self to explore and know that his caretaker will be there when needed. Being taught that it is not okay to take risks, take initiative, or make decisions can cause harm, and guilt develops as a result. The negative outcome is role reversal, hypervigilance, guilt, and anxiety (Furnari 2005).

The next stage is competence, usually completed in elementary school. The child learns to feel competent about his abilities in social and intellectual exchanges, with the continued process of healthy separation from one's caretaker. When support and encouragement are lacking, the child develops a sense of inferiority and anxiety. The negative outcomes are anxiety, emotional enmeshment, fluctuations in behavior and mood, extreme acting out or compulsive conformity, and overachievement (Furnari 2005).
The child who grows up in a cult and then leaves has developmental work to do; it is not completed speedily or painlessly. Since cults minimize autonomy and maximize control, the former member must work through many of the aforementioned issues. Healing is a process that may take many years; nevertheless, human beings are resilient. When the ex-member builds a foundation of personal strength and skills, her sense of safety begins to expand and she can build on the foundation to learn autonomy, self-confidence, initiative, and identity (Furnari 2005).

Post-Cult Life and Experiences

Statistics show that ultimately most members leave cultic groups (Barker 1984). In structured interviews of 90 people, Wright (1983) identified four main reasons that members leave. The first is a break in the cult's social structure occurs, making members feel threatened. This could include the leader restructuring the group or dying. Second, if one spouse leaves, often the other spouse will also depart. Third, a member will leave because he or she becomes disillusioned and no longer believes in the group. Fourth, some members leave when immorality was uncovered in the group's leader. Wright also found that 42% leave covertly in the dead of night; 47% made a covert withdrawal without giving the group notice; and only 11% made an announcement upon leaving (Wright 1983).

Many individuals who leave cults do not have anywhere to turn. Part of the cult experience is to denounce or avoid all relationships outside the cult. When an individual is born into a cult, many or most of their relatives may remain in the cult. Interactions with friends and relatives outside of the cult are rigorously forbidden. Most
Cults are a closed system and members are taught that outsiders are to be feared (Wall 2008).

Cult members who are born into a cult never develop a personality outside the environment of the cult. As they integrate into mainstream society, a society of "outsiders," whom they were raised to distrust, these children of cults, even as adults, often have trouble making decisions about their own lives. The cult environment is such that members do not make decisions; in fact, they are often punished harshly for doing so. Every aspect of their cult life was controlled by someone else, and now that they are free to make decisions, they do not know how (Singer 1995).

Someone who is raised in a cult is often deprived of coping skills, which in turn, creates difficulty adjusting to problems that people in the external world find commonplace (Goldberg 1993). Ex-cult members who are raised in a cult have a difficult road ahead of them. They are leaving an extremely controlled environment and thus many tend to act out by sampling sex, drugs, alcohol, fast living, fast cars, rebellion, and rule breaking (Lalich & Tobias 2006). They are at high risk because they also lack education and tend to be naive and, consequently, are often preyed upon by predators (Singer 1995).

Once a cult member leaves, she has to start thinking for herself and learn to trust the choices she makes. Cult survivors face a rude awakening when they realize that the people they thought were their friends have abandoned them. In most cases, once out of the cult, ex-members are denied contact with anyone in the cult, including their own family members. Once out, they realize that that everything they believe is based on a lie. Such a betrayal of a person and his belief system is referred to as "spiritual rape"
(Langone 1993). Leaving a cult produces loss: loss of a belief system, an ideal, death of a dream. Once an individual leaves, he or she is able to have all the feelings that formerly were repressed. The individual then goes through a mourning period of grief and loss.

According to Durocher's (1999) study of ex-members' perceptions, a crucial part of their recovery involved attending a support group with other individuals who had been members of a cult. They felt empowered and supported by other members who had gone through the same or similar experiences. The support group helped members share their feelings in a nonjudgmental, informal setting.

Resilience in Life Progress

Children who are not raised in cults typically experience the modeling of compassion, forgiveness, kindness, or warmth in the people around them. However, children in cults either identify with the leader's power or become passive, dependent, obedient, and often emotionally bankrupt. Since they have not observed adults having a say in their lives, once out of the group context, these children of cults must learn how to make decisions (Lalich 2006). Many childhood issues are addressed for the first time once they are away from the cult environment or influence. Frequently, challenges regarding beliefs about health care and treatment need to be addressed as well.

People infrequently seek healing for cult participation. The recurrent presenting problems noted among former cult members are depression and relationship difficulties. Often, the former member is not aware that these disturbing issues are because of cult their prior involvement (Lalich 2006).
Former members seem to integrate into mainstream society better when they go through exit counseling. Singer notes that those who have been involved in exit counseling make the easiest, best, and quickest return to normal life (Singer 1995). This suggests that information and education provided by exit counselors may be extremely valuable, giving those who leave the necessary instruction so that they can adapt to life in the normal world (Singer 1995).

Cult life is powerful. Adapting to normalcy in everyday life may seem dull and tedious for former members. They must learn to gain a sense of fulfillment from everyday responsibilities and experiences. The former cult member is no longer a member of an elite group that is attempting to "save the world." They must learn to become accustomed to everyday life. Former cult members need to learn how to welcome life's small pleasures and regard them as meaningful (Singer 1995).

Treatment Issues

Once out of a cult, former cult members have to figure out a way to cross the threshold into mainstream society. According to Singer (1995), former cult members have to deal with five major areas of adjustment. One, the former member must address practical issues related to daily living. Two, the former member must face psychological and emotional issues that can cause powerful feelings. Three, the former member needs to deal with missing cognitive learning inefficiencies. Four, the former member must add a new social network and mend old personal relationships, if they have any. However, children who grow up in cults rarely have former personal relationships to repair. Five,
the former members must examine the idealistic and attitudinal content they adopted for
the duration of their cult participation (Singer 1995).

The ex-member must address these aforementioned issues prior to being able
to function in a healthy and valuable way in mainstream society. With careful
preparation, implementation, planning, and support, an ex- cult member can build a solid
foundation and an innovative life integrating into mainstream society.

First, some of the practical issues a former member must figure out are the
following: living arrangements, financial support, medical and dental care, career and
educational goals, how to explain years in the cult, and how to structure daily life (Singer
1995). This is enormously complicated for many former cult members because while in
the cult, members typically do not make decisions about their lives, the leaders planned it
out for them. This is evident in examining the children who were raised and released
from Koresh's Rancho Apocalypse in Waco, Texas to a team of specialists at Baylor
College of Medicine. Dr. Bruce Perry performed a study of 21 of the cult's children. He
concluded that the children's devolvement was far from normal. Their hearts beat 30 to
50 percent faster than the average child. The children referred to Koresh as their father
and their views of family were distorted and underdeveloped. Perry also noted that the
children found it practically impossible to think or perform independently (Lalich 2006).

Second, the former member must adjust psychologically and emotionally.
Most former cult members feel depressed, with feelings of loss, shame, and guilt. Many
exhibit a lack of self-confidence, self-blaming attitudes, and excessive doubts.
Additionally, some have panic attacks and may show signs of terror of the former cult or
the leader. Many ex-members are terrified of mainstream society and are dependent, passive, and impressionable (Singer 1995).

Third, the former member must adjust cognitively. Many ex-cult members experience uncertainty, blurring of mental sharpness, difficulty concentrating and memory loss, a sense of losing time, and floating and slip into altered states. Additionally, ex-cult members may have an undependable sense of judgment and must discontinue using cult language (Singer 1995).

Fourth, the former cult member has personal and social issues. She may experience loneliness and a desire to make new friends, but may also fear committing to another person. He may overextend himself and feel powerless to say no. The ex-cult member may have a persistent sense of separation, may be confused about her sexuality identity and roles, and may be unable to formulate and articulate opinions (Singer 1995).

Fifth, the ex-cult member must examine the philosophical and attitudinal values ingrained by the group. Former cult members may have disapproving attitudes toward others and society may have a condemning attitude toward ordinary human quirks, and may be cruel to self or others. Additionally, ex-cult members may be deficient in satisfaction with humankind and self, may be unable to be kind or compassionate to others, may dread joining any group, and may experience the loss of being among the “elite.” Furthermore, the ex-cult member needs to find his or her own belief system, ideals, and moral code outside the cult (Singer 1995).
Areas of Concern

The main area of concern is the lack of societal understanding and interventions for children who have grown up in a cult. Children continue to be injured and mistreated in the name of religion and other psychological groups. Children are exploited and manipulated for the aims of adults who do not have the children's well-being in mind. Children are still being born into cults where they do not receive appropriate medical care, proper nutrition, or have their most fundamental needs met. Children and parents in cults continue to be separated from each other, denying children the secure bonding they need to develop with their caretakers in order to attain a healthy balance and position in life.

Furthermore, another problem in treating ex-cult members who were born or raised in a cultic group is the lack of research and studies specific to this topic. In order to assess these individuals, it is imperative that helping professionals are educated on the subject of what a cult is. It is essential for the person to get as much information about the cult that the individual left. Many ex-cult members do not realize that the group they grew up in is a cult. It does not occur to them to get treatment for former cult participation.

It is also significant to note that treatment does not have to be by a therapist; however, the person supporting the ex-cult member must be aware and knowledgeable in cult issues and be able to make available the right kind of support. Lalich (2006) notes a framework for treatment that might include the following: an educational plan about the mechanisms of influence and control typically used in cults and the influence of these omnipresent efforts. In addition, counseling sessions focusing on adjustment difficulties
in relationships, management of post-traumatic stress, treatment of mental or emotional difficulties, and medication for symptomatic relief or anxiety or depression ought to be addressed as well (Lalich 2006).

Life after leaving a cult includes coming to terms with the realization that one is no longer saving the world; however, there are many ways to do well. Independence is a positive thing, and once a member exits with the accurate education, he or she can enjoy the freedom that leaving a cult offers (Singer 1995).

Conclusion

Based on this literature, and taking into consideration the prevalence of child abuse, and neglect in cults, a greater understanding of developmental processes and adjustment while an individual is raised in a cult is needed. This is hampered in part by a lack of studies that focus on individuals who were born in a cult. Future studies should reflect the specific issues of these individuals. Despite the fact that anyone can be drawn into a cult, children born and/or raised in a cult had no choice in the matter, and have no former personality to draw on once they leave. For the most part, the individual's families are either still in the cult or in struggling with their own issues. The ex-cult member who does have family members outside the cult must connect and build relationships with them, sometimes for the first time.

Throughout the literature, one thing is clear: when a former cult member leaves, mainstream society seems like another world. These former members must gain knowledge of the culture as an adult and oftentimes have to learn or relearn developmental tasks to make a smooth transition and adjustment. Many ex-cult members
do adjust and learn to build on the strengths they developed as they struggled through childhood in a cult. However, without help when they exit, sometimes the process takes years. Nevertheless, more studies of individuals raised in cults are necessary to allow practitioners to tailor programs that help former cult members integrate into mainstream society quickly and efficiently. This study is one more contribution to that effect.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the methodology used in this research. This study is based on manifest content analysis, providing a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of recorded interviews of individuals who were born or raised in a cult. The material was examined, and the information and data are physically present and countable. This chapter includes the overview, rationale for approach, operationalization of key concepts, study design, data collection, data analysis, and limitations.

Overview

The first step was to formulate a plan and a study design. During this phase, I examined many stories and memoirs written by former cult members. As my research expanded, the focus had to be narrowed. I decided to focus on individuals who were raised in a cult and left as either a teen or an adult looking specifically at their adjustment needs upon entering the broader society. I identified salient themes that addressed the issues of interest to this research. These were broken into four categories: state of mind, state of autonomy, life skills, and relationships. The data were sorted into those categories by marking them in the appropriate category. This resulted in labeled categories and themes.
The interviews were then re-examined to segregate significant phrases and patterns. Patterns were identified in light of previous research in relation to theories to establish a small set of generalizations. I used manifest content that was clearly present in either the interview or the background questionnaire. The selection criteria were applied without bias or personal opinions.

Furthermore, Dr. Lalich followed all clearance procedures while obtaining clearance for Human Subjects in Research before transferring the interviews and background information. She is retaining the information with the original research material.

Rationale for Approach

This study is intended to identify specific issues that occur when children grow up in a cult and then leave as an adolescent or adult. Given that children are often abused and isolated in cults, as well as taught to hate outsiders, leaving the group is very difficult and integrating into mainstream society even more so. Sometimes, a cult member will leave only to get involved in another cult or engage in self-destructive behavior, until some kind of intervention from a supportive person takes place. Often, such an intervention comes from another former cult member or an informed helping professional, and is not always easily accessible. This study hopes to answer the question: do we need specific programs and therapies for ex-cult members?

Study Design

This study used a qualitative method, and involved careful designing and planning. The data were examined to look for patterns and answers questions in order to
determine if themes were evident in the majority of the cases. I was granted access to a random sample of interviews of individuals who grew up in a cult. These were provided by Dr. Janja Lalich, sociology professor at California State University of Chico, from her database of 70 interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009. Each subject completed a general Background Information Questionnaire. A set of probes were used during the interviews, which were open-ended. Interviews lasted approximately one and one-half to two hours. The interviews were transcribed then printed out. I used 12 of those interviews and background questionnaires. The interviews were selected randomly.

Operationalization of Key Concepts

This study used operational categories because the data analyzed did not fit into standard testing procedures. Given that the interview questions were open-ended, outcomes were assessed according to certain themes representative of a broader concept. In reviewing the data, a concept was considered only if certain feature were met.

For example, for state of mind, there were several sub-categories, such as depression, anger, and hopeful about the future. Individuals clearly spoke about the issues, using depression and anger as descriptive terms. However, “for hopeful about the future,” themes were represented by the tone an individual used and what she talked about to indicate that she was hopeful about the future.

Individual Outcomes

1. State of mind

   Described being angry, either while in the group or now

   Described being depressed, while in the group or now
Expressed positive feelings about being out of the group and spoke about plans for the future

2. State of autonomy

Statements concerning independent thoughts and choices outside former cult influences

Designed being able to make own decisions and choices after having left the group

Statements regarding integration into mainstream society

3. Life skills

Statements regarding financial issues

Statements regarding work

Statements regarding education

Statements regarding health

4. Relationships

Statements concerning sexual identity

Statements about marital issues

Statements regarding birth family

Statements about friendships

I would argue that it is important to note here that the respondents to the initial Lalich study from which this sample was drawn are already functioning at a higher level that most untreated former cult members. The former members who agreed to participate in the Lalich study would have had to take classes, attended a seminar or conference, searched the internet, or had contact with a cult awareness group or former cult members.
This shows that the former members who were interviewed were already at a higher functioning level, than those former members who did not have access to the aforementioned information.

Data Collection

I received the interviews in July 2010, via electronic transmission from Dr. Lalich. Each questionnaire and interview was then printed out. Each questionnaire was matched to the corresponding interview. The data were then numbered in random order from 1 to 12. At first, I chose to randomly select 10 interviews, which resulted in data from 8 females and 2 males. I concluded that it would be wise to look at 2 more male interviews, as I believe males tend to focus on different issues than do females. In addition, I felt that the study would have deeper significance if more males were represented. Two more males were chosen by random selection. This produced 12 interviews of individuals who grew up in a cult: 8 females and 4 males. I did not set out to focus only on religious groups; however, the interviews, selected randomly, resulted in such data.

The groups represented are as follows: Greater Bethlehem Temple (Holiness Movement), Wesleyan Alliance, Twelve Tribes Messianic Commune, The Children of God (The Family International), The Community of Jesus and Grenville Christian College, Jehovah's Witnesses (Watchtower Society), Ann Haas Group, International Church of Christ, The Living Word Fellowship, Fundamentalist Church of the Latter Day Saints (FDLS), The Work of Jesus Christ, and In Search of the Truth. The Children of God is represented twice.
The length of time that subjects were in the cult varied from 9 to 33 years. With respect to confidentiality, the subjects were numbered from 1 to 12 in random order, and then given pseudonyms in alphabetical order. These are, respectively, Anthony, Berta, Carol, Dena, Ethel, Fanny, Greg, Henry, Iris, Jane, Kate, and Larry. With the exception of one subject, all were born in the United States.

Data Analysis

The first step involved reading each interview. The first reading was meant to obtain basic information readily apparent in the material. Significant passages were marked.

In the second reading, passages were highlighted that related to state of mind, state of autonomy, life skills, and relationships. These four major categories will be addressed in this study. Themes were color-coded red for state of mind, blue for state of autonomy, green for life skills, and yellow for relationships.

On the third reading, the questionnaires were examined to fill in additional pertinent information. A chart was made and coded to each category: state of mind, state of autonomy, life skills, and relationships. Subcategories were also added at this time. States of mind’s sub-categories are depression, anger, and hopeful about the future. States of autonomy’s sub-categories are independence, decision-making, and integration into mainstream society. The life skills category included financial issues, work issues, housing issues, educational issues, and health issues. Relationships included sexual identity, marital issues, birth family, and friendship. This was done to insure the information was correct on each subject and in each category.
Finally, the interviews were read again to identify and mark excerpts that are used as quotations from the subjects in the Findings section.

Limitations of the Study

There are several limitations to this study. For one, it is limited in its scope as only 12 subjects were examined. This is a targeted study suggestive of only several issues former cult members have to deal with. It is by no means exhaustive. A copious amount of information present in the transcripts was not used in this study. Former cult members have many other issues that are not addressed here.

This study is also limited in that all of the data used here come from former members of religious cults. My hope is that more studies will be conducted specifically on individuals who were raised in cults of all kinds. Additionally, it is my hope that affordable programs will be implemented to help former members integrate into society in a beneficial and meaningful way.

State of Mind

For the purposes of this study, state of mind refers to the self-reported feelings that the subjects described about their experiences in the cult. The three salient categories are: depression, anger, and hopeful about the future. This category also includes suicidal thoughts and attempts. Anger includes terror and fear. Hopeful about the future encompasses how subjects feel about their current situation.

Depression

Depression is the absence of pleasure and the inability to feel a sense of power in one's life. Stress is a major component of initiating a depressive episode and cult
members are often in a constant state of instability and change. Cult members find themselves at the whim of the leaders, who often manifest complete control over their followers’ lives. While in the cult, members do not learn normal coping skills, and often do not have any power over large decisions or even, in some cases, everyday choices.

Eleven out of the 12 subjects reported depression. Three former members reported suicide attempts, and another three stated that they either thought about suicide or wanted to die. These statistics show that half, or 50%, either attempted suicide or thought about it.

To compare this statistically, in a study conducted in Finland of successful suicides, 22% of the deceased had discussed suicidal intent with a health care professional in their last office visit (Halgin & Witbourn 2006). This was in the general population.

It is also important to note that the former cult members who successfully committed suicide are no longer here to tell about it. This study also does not address “mass suicides” that leaders perpetuate on their members, such as Jonestown, the Branch Dividians, or Heaven's Gate.

Ethel, who was raised in The Community of Jesus and Grenville Christian College for 17 years, reported that she was unhappy even in elementary school, and her depression increased, as she got older. When she left the cult, she used alcohol for 15 years and was involved in controlling and abusive relationships. She said she lived in survivor mode for many years after she left the group.

Greg who was raised and lived in Greater Bethlehem Temple for 33 years, reported depression both in the group and after he left. He was out of the group for 3
years at the time of the interview and is currently on medication for depression, 
posttraumatic stress, disorder and anxiety. He also reported that he was still living in 
survival mode even though he has been out of the group since 2005.

Carol, the daughter of a cult leader, who was married with two children, and was 
contemplating suicide while in the group said:

And I just could feel it. It just didn't feel right. And I remember, um, also during 
this period of time, having major depression. I didn't know that's what it was, but I 
was very suicidal. And at one point, I remember, um, I actually had a plan and 
everything. I had pills under my counter. I had it all planned out. Exactly when I'd 
do it, when nobody would notice me gone--And I was going to, I was going to take 
a bunch of aspirin and slit my wrists in the bathtub. And I had everything ready.

Carol was still in the cult at that time, and stated that the thought of her 
mother having full access to her children helped her decide not to commit suicide. It was 
soon after that, she left with her husband and children.

During her interview, Berta reported being depressed many times throughout her 
childhood and early teens. At 17, she attempted suicide. Her mother was depressed and 
was institutionalized several times during Berta's childhood. Berta was responsible for 
giving her mother medication when Berta was nine years old and was told that she, Berta, 
was the cause of her mother's mental illness. She could not remember any happy times in 
herself childhood.

Fanny who was in The Living Word Fellowship, who has been out for 16 
years reported depression, fear, and anger. She attempted suicide at 15, after which she 
made a plan to leave the cult. She still struggles, with her sense of self, and who she is 
now, as opposed to who the cult told her she was. She is still struggling to sort out the 
future. Although she knows several people who grew up in the same cult who have also
left, she has connected only with one of them. She spoke of betrayal from everyone, including other members who left the cult when she did.

**Anger**

Nine out of 12 reported anger. Consequently, 75% of the subjects reported anger. Most had anger toward the cult and its leaders, and for the time that they had lost. Others had anger because they did not have freedom while they were growing up in the cult. Some of the anger was directed at the cult, while some was directed at their parents for not standing up to the cult leaders. Andrew, for example, reported that he was angry a lot. He reported that the punishments were inconsistent and unfair, stemming from chaotic expectations from the adults. He said:

> I was a miserable child. I was angry a lot. I was bitter a lot....I don't know if stress is the right word, but certainly confusion. Um, I didn't understand what standards were expected of me. Some uncles or aunts would expect something and another. Someone else who would be with us one or two days a week would expect something else. You never knew what you would do to deserve a punishment or what the punishment would entail. The degree of punishment varied as well. From mild to severe for the same offense committed against a different individual, and for me it was a constant state of trying.

Carol, whose mother was the cult’s prophet, was angry at her mother's attempts to destroy Carol’s marriage and family, and about the abuse, she experienced from both her mother and brother. She said this about her mother, and leader:

> And she had been saying that soon it would be time for my son to live with my brother. My older brother actually, um was very abusive. And he actually had slugged his own son in the face. And I remember that happening. And I was like, no way my son's ever gonna live with my brother. There's no way. He's, he's abusive. He's, he's physically abusive. There's no way I'm gonna let, let my son live there. And, um...so it was an accumulation of things. It was us going away to school, coming back and being disillusioned with what we actually saw.
Ethel who has anger, that stems from abandonment, and it is directed toward the cult and other members. She said:

There was one girl my age and a couple of boys and the girl and I was so called best friends, but she made friends with some other kids in the school and she seemed to do better integrating earlier on. And, I'm trying to...and so a lot of natural social dynamic played into the whole thing. Her family was well off, so she would have the Cabbage Patch Kid and the nice clothes and stuff like that, and so even though she wore skirts and would, like, by community dress code, she was nicely dressed, whereas my parents were ex-hippies, didn't have much money, so I was wearing hand-me-downs and so like the popular kids in school accepted her and not me and so there came a certain point where she sort of started, and this is just a natural social dynamic, you know, pushing me aside and choosing them over me. Which might have helped fuel my anger towards the community cuz now I was all alone and I didn't like the community anyways, I didn't like that I was different.

Fanny, who was born and raised in the Living Word, said this about her anger towards the group:

And you're born into it or, you know, coming into it and promised certain things and you give your life, it's 100%...I just think the core, the core issue for me is, is just overall that they're toying with people's lives. There is, there is a true sense of motivation for why they control all these people--and I think it's money, I'm pretty sure it's money and the, like, empire, power.

Greg was raised in the Greater Bethlehem Temple group for 33 years, he said that anger was the emotion that he felt most often and it stemmed from what the group is still doing to his parents.

**Hopeful about the Future**

All of the subjects reported feeling hopeful about the future, although they were at different levels of appreciation. Perhaps those ex-members who responded to the call for subjects had been searching for help and healing. In that respect, I would argue that the completion of the questionnaire would cause the subjects to be hopeful about the future.
Iris, who is 45, grew up in the Jehovah Witnesses and has been out for 22 years. She had this to say about where she is now:

That your life can, um, become far more than you ever imagined it could. You can become happier and, um more content with who you are. You can heal. Um, you can survive, you know. I--I think when you first leave it's so easy to think that life will never, will always be that state of confusion that you're in.

Larry spent 29 years in the Holiness Movement. He said:

I have to realize, I mean we have tools available. We have resources and I am so thrilled about that. I aspire to someday contribute some way to helping cults, especially kids born and raised and are starting a new life on the outside. That's one of my dreams to participate some way in some kind of foundation. I don't know how that's all going to work out but that's one of my desires because it's so physical on the outside.

Larry was out for only 3 years when he made these statements. He is using the experience in a positive way and channeling the past to move forward and help others.

Summary

Depression was a prevalent theme throughout most of the interviews. Given that depression relates to a lack of a sense of control and power over one's life, it is not surprising that these former members reported depression. Notable, when a former member was able to take control of his or her life, and was able to make positive changes in his or her situation, the depression lessened. When a former member was able to use what they have been through in a powerful way to improve his own life or the lives of others, then he no longer reported depression. Others are still struggling and are getting treatment through drug and alcohol programs or medication treatment for the depression.

For the 11 who reported on depression only one said there was a family history of mental illness and only one said he is now being treated for depression. These statistics would indicate that depression treatment should be a major component for most individuals
who are raised in a cult. In order to target these individuals, screening questions should be included when they access mainstream social services. Education concerning former cult membership and depression should be included when training occurs for practitioners.

Anger, often, is a symptom for other underlying issues of hopelessness, fear, sadness, abandonment, or hurt as well as other issues. Most of the former cult members seem to be angry about the constant control the cult leaders manifested toward them. Some expressed sadness about the loss of time wasted while they were in the cult. Most were angry about the broken relationships in their families as a direct result of cult membership.

Some of the subjects said that they did not even know that they were in a cult until much later and were not able to get the help they needed when they left. Because of the anger, they used unhealthy coping methods, such as drugs and alcohol use and abuse. Others reported that they lived in survival mode for a long time after they left.

Several of the subjects are using the anger as a positive emotion and are helping others that are still in cults. They have gotten more education and are bringing attention and education to others who are still victims. They are writing memoirs and helping others who are exiting. Several are involved in groups that help members exit and support them through the exit process.

The subjects that used the anger to move on quickly and make choices that benefited them were able to turn the anger toward helping other former members. They seemed to be using the anger toward the cults to move forward by being involved in groups or helping others.

Anger can be a powerful emotion as long as an individual is not stuck there. Most of the unresolved anger that the subjects are struggling with has to do with their
relationships with family members who are still in the cult. Many subjects reported that
the family members still in the cult are not allowed to associate with them.

The members who are the most hopeful about the future are the ones that have
been successful in their lives outside the cult. Being able to make their own choices and
decisions has given them hope about what they will do next.

Themes of hope were exemplified by how the former members were living
when they completed the interviews. Some of them had completed their educations
and/or had plans to further their education. The main theme for hopefulness came from
those who had searched out information about cults in general and specific information
on the cult they had been in.

State of Autonomy

State of autonomy includes the ability to act and think for oneself. This
includes making decisions and having the capacity to be independent. Three states of
being are included in this section: independence, decision-making, and how well the
subjects feel they have integrated into mainstream society at the time of their interview.
Former cult members come from a structured closed system, where someone else plans
every minute of their day for them. When they leave, many times they have never learned
to make decisions or choices and, thus, must learn to do so, as an adult.

Independence

The task of learning independence and autonomy as an adult can be an
overwhelming task, especially when basic needs are not met, such as housing or food. In
such a situation, many former cult members have turned to drugs, alcohol, or abusive
relationships to help them through the transition, some for a short time, but many for long periods. This is prime time for an intervention to occur, immediately after leaving the cult.

Ethel, for example, who was raised in the Community of Jesus, struggled for 15 years after she left. She was indigent and homeless, living in shelters with drug and alcohol problems. Ethel has been clean and sober for two years. She said this about her level of independence:

And it's only been the past two years that I would say, I started to recover, but I think it's almost just because I've never had something to go back to. I started to live like a normal human being. And so when I left the group, I left my family and I didn't for some reason, in looking back, I don't even fully understand it, but it didn't even cross my mind that like family is like, you have other family and you have other resources, like I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know how to reach out to people. I didn't know I was coming out of a cult. I think, honestly, then I was so screwed up and scared and I had no idea what way was coming or going and I was so afraid that anyone that helped me was just gonna try to control me.

All of the subjects struggled right after leaving. Immediately after leaving seems to be where the interventions would have been most effective for these individuals, helping them to create a successful integration. This is the time that all stated that they needed help, and they did not have any. However, at the time of the interviews, all of them reported having reached some level of autonomy.

Decision Making

Because children who are raised in a cult are never taught coping skills or the freedom to make decisions, they often struggle with the smallest of daily decisions. Fanny, who grew up in The Living Word and has been out of the cult for 17 years, said:

It was as if I could do whatever I wanted. I could smoke cigarettes. I could have a beer. I could, you know, I could do whatever I wanted for the first time ever. It was an amazing feeling, just not having somebody telling me what to do or requiring me
to do anything. Um, which feels really, really good and every year I feel stronger and more clear. But, it's amazing how many, how many filters I still have and so many issues I still have and so many things I have to stop and challenge myself on.

Iris, raised in the Jehovah Witnesses, had this to say about making decisions:

Just being able to, you know, to do anything you want to do, watch what you want on TV, or you can read anything you want to without censorship. That is huge.

Andrew reported struggling immediately after leaving the group. He said:

I wanted to be able to get out on my own. I wanted to be done with having my parents and the organization dictate my actions and my beliefs and what I could and couldn't do. And what I could and couldn't watch. What to listen to or what to read. I wanted the freedom to make my own mistakes and deal with my own consequences. But to me being able to accomplish or do what I want to do is my greatest accomplishment.

These former members only represent three of the subjects, however these statements are representative of most of the subjects' statements about decision making.

Integration into Mainstream Society

Subjects who self-rated their inclusion in mainstream society ranged from 10 to a 4 (10 for complete integration and 1 for very little integration). Subjects integrated at different rates. As none of them had had exit counseling, most of them struggled when they left. Berta said this about integrating into mainstream society:

The area that I see the most problems is probably in a social group. I have a small social group, not well, how do I put this? I have one or two close friends and not a large. I'm not one that really goes to parties I'm invited to unless I know a lot of people there. I kind of shy away from stuff like that, getting in a group. It's not because I don't like people or they don't like me. It's just I still don't know that I have a lot to talk about with people, except for Colorado City. That's the topic people want to talk about it with me for people who know where I'm from and I'm like, eh, okay. I'm pretty well read and I keep up on current events and stuff and a lot of it too might be the town that I'm in. It's small and people are more interested in talking about other people. So I just have a small social group, which is probably the biggest thing that I've noticed. I can observe people at these parties and they just all want to talk to everybody and have small talk and that works for them, but it doesn't work for me.
Children who were raised in a cult belonged there from the day they were born. It is extremely hard for them to enter into another society that they have learned to distrust and immediately fit in. The subjects who were out longer were able to integrate better. In addition, the ones who were allowed to go to public school and or had contact with the public outside the cult were also able to integrate sooner.

**Summary**

Autonomy includes personal independence and the capacity to make moral decisions and act on them. These individuals had to start from the beginning. The skills that they should have learned as children had to be learned as adults. The making of independent choices was foreign to them. Whereas formerly they were told what to do and what to think, once out of the cult, they must think for themselves. This is hard to learn as an adult.

Eleven subjects reported that they were free to make decisions, while one said "not yet". Six out of 12 of the subjects reported they were independent at the time of the interviews. The trend seemed to be that the more education a former member had, the more independent he or she was. However, some former members with a 5th or 6th grade education did go to college as adults and gained their independence once they graduated. The range of years out of the cult for these subjects went from 4 to 29 years.

Many internalized messages from the cult were still running in their minds. When making independent choices, most of us use information from former experiences. This makes it difficult for former members to make independent choices. Luckily, life is a process, and these individuals were shown to be resilient and were determined not to go back to the life in which they were raised.
Life Skills

Children who grow up in cult miss learning the life skills needed to survive in mainstream society. Life skills are a set of skills usually acquired through teaching or direct observation. For the purpose of this study, life skills includes financial issues, work, housing, education, healthcare, transportation and legal competency in order to survive independently in mainstream society.

Children who grow up in cults are taught only what they need to know to perpetuate the group's agenda. It is to the cult's advantage to keep the children uninformed about the society around them so that they will not attempt to leave. Most cults indoctrinate their members to fear outsiders and the outside world.

Financial Issues

When Andrew left, he was able to stay with relatives; but he had to get there on his own, pay rent, and get a job right away. His relatives did not provide any financial help. Andrew did not have skills to know how to get a job, budget his money, or interact with others; but he had a high school education and was able speak another language. He said:

I did often think that I wouldn't make it necessarily. I was like...I knew I had no idea how to exist in the real world. I knew that I was going to be like pretty much a 17-year-old immigrant coming to America. Except for the fact, I knew English...I knew I had no idea how to go about building a resume. How to go, you know, how to attend a class. I had never been in a structured class, had homework, or things like that. I did know how to drive. My dad had taught me how to drive, and so I took my test for my license shortly after I had landed. I had borrowed money from my grandparents to buy a car so I could go to and from work and to and from school. I paid them back...I paid them a monthly amount for actually about a year until I got my place.... And I changed jobs a couple of times because I would get bored and didn't like...Or I had an issue with my boss, or whatever.
Furthermore, Andrew he got himself into enormous debt and did not budget his money. He also lost a job after failing a drug test:

Eventually I dropped out of school and just worked full-time for a couple of years and got my head on my shoulders a little bit and, sort of, I grew to learn the ropes. I grew, I should say, about how to be a functioning member of society.

Andrew had more education than most of the subjects. However, he probably would have had a smoother transition if he had specific exit counseling and more support.

**Work**

Larry grew up in the Holiness Movement where he spent 29 years, and left with his wife and child. He had this to say about life skills and work:

I want to get past surviving. I recently got my hands on some stuff. I have some interests; a lot of my worries right now deal with making sure the bills are paid. I have found some tools that I felt like gave me some foundation stones that I never had before. As far as rational thinking about problems, I read about a year ago, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Career wise that really helped me because I've had not only leaving the cult, but that includes a career change for me because I was a minister before this time. So, I guess one of the big things for me was integrating into the workforce. Do I want to be an employee? Do I want to be self-employed? How do I market my skills from the cult? These are areas that I feel like I've made tremendous strides in the past year....The big thing for me is career development. What can I do at 32? Do I need to go back to school? Should I go ahead and just work with what I have and better market my skills and communicate those more effectively and how to apply those? Right now, I'm working for a small company that doesn't demand higher levels of education. I'm an operations manager, I love what I'm doing and it's paying the bills right now. So I don't know; I don't really have time to be, like, so those are some issues that are big for me right now. Everything we left behind. I had less than $100 in my bank account when we decided to leave the cult. I had a credit card with $4,000 credit line on it. So a big issue for us is, like, resolving our debt. We rent right now and we aspire to own our own home. So those things we didn't have, a vehicle, you know, so it's just starting fresh in life as a family.

Former cult members have a difficult time trying to get work. They have to figure out some way to explain the time in the cult. They have to learn how to make a
resume and have to get identification. This creates difficulty if they were born in a cult that may have not registered their birth, or if were born in another country.

**Housing**

Larry is functioning at a high level of life skills. Compare this to Carol, who left with her husband and two children. She was 47 at the time of the interview and has been out of the cult for 25 years. She said this:

I mean, we just got, we got a rental truck and packed the few things that we had and just drove away. So we had nowhere to go. We slept in a hotel while we were finding out if he [her husband] was gonna get this job. And he went for the interview, and I went with him, and they offered me a job at the same time....We rented this house and I didn't know that I had to call some company and have the electricity turned on. I thought there would just be electricity. And I'm, like, well, what, what do we do? How do we get the electricity on? You know? Who do we call? What do we--you know, it was very strange and...Um, I had to put my kids in a public school and yeah, I knew what to do, but I mean, not really. I mean it was very strange, very very weird.

Both Carol and her husband had attended college and yet they still had a hard time when they cut off all ties of the cult.

**Education**

Most of the subjects were not educated properly, although 3 of them were raised to get a college education. Two of the subjects had a college education when they left. However, Larry found that because he was educated through the cult, it was not accredited so he is unable to use the education in mainstream society.

Kate belonged to a group that valued education and attended a mainstream college. She was raised in the group, but left it when she went to college. She had this to say about education:
And I did, and um, then I went to college. And that was hard because, you know, you couldn't cheat. And so, I mean, I got really minimal grades in high school. And, and so I had to learn how to really care, I think, about learning.

Berta, who grew up in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints, and was placed in foster care when she was 14, said:

This was when I was in high school. My senior year in school I was in mainstream school. Everyone was talking about college or job opportunities and deciding what they wanted to do or be and I decided I wanted to move. That's all I wanted to do was move somewhere and being a nanny seemed to be the best option for me.

Berta also reported that she was moved several times during foster care and had difficulty even getting to classes. She had been schooled through a church school until she was placed in foster care. Foster care did allow her to finish high school. In addition, even though she did not to continue her education at that time she did get a high school education.

Health

Oftentimes cults do not care about the health of their members. Consequently, many have had very little health care by the time that they leave. Larry said:

We get in trouble because my wife has some complications during her pregnancy with our son Levi. They do not provide medical service. We are in a foreign country under this organization, we don't have medical insurance, in Belize and most 3rd world countries, and you pay upfront before they do anything for you. So we're in a tough situation. They finally find me, I'm supposed to go on a trip to Guatemala to find out more details about you know, how bad the complications are and that doctor tell us, "You know, if you want to have a kid, you should go ahead and get pregnant." So we do, but we didn't get permission from the leader as we found out later. So we ended up after we decide to try to have a son, we were all excited about it and my wife becomes pregnant, and then we realize there's some problems and then I think she was like four weeks into her pregnancy and she finds out she has these humongous thyroids and is probably going to abort out first baby. So, this is very traumatic. We're in another country. So, we just face a gauntlet of misfortunate things. They won't give us money. I'm begging for support. I have $33,000 in the band of money that was raised for the Belize field. We're the missionaries there and it is like, can we borrow money from this, can we somehow
work out some kind of agreement where we can borrow some money from this so we can have this kid and we can get medical service?

Berta said:

This group that is meeting in San Diego to memorialize the kids who died in cults....Because I did a lot of research on the children, the dead children. When I say a lot, I mean, some in Colorado City and Hillsdale. I actually went out and counted the graves in the baby cemetery and there are actually 153 graves, 48 of them are not marked and that's just in the baby cemetery. This baby cemetery is very real and I have data from it. I counted the graves; I got the ages of the children. A lot of stillborns, a lot of babies living to be one day or two days. The oldest child in the cemetery was four years old, and there are 153 graves I could tell. Some of them were not marked so it was just mounds of dirt, and some of them I just suspected. But I didn't count unless you could tell that that area was the size of a grave. I didn't count it unless I was sure. Then you go to the main cemetery and you drive down the road and I had taken two people there that were almost speechless by the time we finished because almost all of the graves that you drive down this road, on the edges are children.

For the women and children in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints in relating to healthcare; it starts with lack of prenatal care, children dying in childbirth and/or soon thereafter. Berta went on to say that, there were many graves of young adults 20 in the cult graveyard and in the main cemetery.

Summary

It is hard to imagine the many issues that former cult members must face. Most have to live in a survival mode until they are able to get on their feet financially. Some live that way for many years. They have to figure out where to work and then make up resumes figuring out what to put in the missing years that they were in the cult. They must figure out housing. They must deal with the area that they are deficient in, such as education, and must learn about healthcare and how to access doctor's appointments and learn how to be healthy.
Relationships

The category of relationships includes sexual identity, marital issues, birth family, and friendships. Five subjects reported that they are married or have significant relationships. Two reported they were homosexual; one reported being bisexual; and nine said they were heterosexual. Five of the subjects reported they were married, while two reported that they casually date. One subject reported that she was in a new relationship, and three reported that they were not in a relationship or dating.

Eight subjects reported some kind of relationship with their birth family and four reported that they had either no relationship or bad relationships with family that was still in the cult. Nine subjects reported that they have friends, and three did not report on having friends. When family who are still in the cult, have to choose they will often choose the cult over their family members. The family members that had left seemed to have the best relationships with the subjects.

Sexual Identity

This study did not start out to report on sexual identity, but many of the subjects reported on how the cult affected their sexual identity. Berta, who was raised in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints, said this about relationships and her sexual identity:

It's something that's very difficult for me to be in a relationship. I was in heterosexual relationships when I was drinking. I started drinking when I was 21, drinking heavily, and now I've been sober for six years. During that time...until I was 27, I was in heterosexual relationships, but when I wasn't drinking, I couldn't have sex with a man. I skipped that question when I was filling it out. I was torn between it because I don't think that I was born a homosexual. I think that it was created in me because I had a physical reaction to men, but it changes sharply if they get in my personal space, so I just can't.
Henry who is disabled and is homosexual said this about what he feels is the hardest adjustment for him:

I think my identity. I was really struggling with my identity because I lived in the commune and I was already attracted to men in the commune but they're against gays and lesbians and myself, I was against gay and lesbians because I was trained to say that it is wrong, you know, a man with a man or a woman with a woman. I was trained to know that was wrong and I had been sexually abused by a man since I was 12 years old. So anyway, then I also had sex when I was 12 with my best friend and that influenced me to be attracted to men. But, I denied it, I held it in. I repressed those feelings and thought I was intended to marry a woman and then when I got out of the commune, I started to be attracted to men more than women. So I struggled with that and I was afraid of what other people would think about me and my family, and I was afraid my family would find out I was gay. So I really struggled with that and that was probably the most challenging transition for me.

Both of the aforementioned were taught that homosexuality was wrong, yet suffered sexual abuse from the very people who were teaching those values.

Marital Issues

Greg, who is Caucasian and was involved in Greater Bethlehem Temple married an African-American woman against the church's wishes. He left with his wife and children. He reported that marrying her created the discord that would later lead to his leaving the cult. His wife had been married previously and had a child from that marriage. Greg said this about his relationship with his wife:

You know, so I'm going through all these changes and my wife was alone. And when we moved to Chicago, she wasn't working. She stayed home with the kids. And so she was at home by herself and very lonely and depressed and struggling and, you know, we did a lot of praying and, things that we were always taught to do to try to address these situations. And, you know, we tried to contact some people. We actually went back and contacted some people that had left the church years before. Just to try to talk to them, to get some advice, and stuff. And, for the most part, uh, they weren't very helpful. Because, um, they were nice and very pretty much found another church that was pretty much another cult, even though they didn't know that themselves.
Greg and his wife tried several different churches, which was difficult and put a strain on their marriage. He said:

Strain on our marriage. Even though my wife and I still get along very well, um, just, you know, the things we were dealing with individually just really put a lot of pressure on us. Hard to deal with each other going through these feelings and not being able to really explain to each other what we were going through, and struggling with a lot of things.

Although it is hard to be married when leaving the cult, it also provides a good support system. A married cult member who leaves has the support of his or her partner, if the partner leaves as well. While only one third of the subjects were married when they left the cult. They are still married as of the interviews. I would argue that leaving brought them closer as a couple and, thus, serves as the foundation that keeps them married.

Birth Family

Five subjects reported that they have no contact with family. Seven have contact with family, although the relationships vary to degrees. The family members who had also left the cult seemed to have the best relationships with the subjects. The family members who are still in the cult often have to make a choice, and tend to choose the cult.

Henry, who has a disability and is now attending university after leaving the Twelve Tribes cult, said this about his family relationships:

Well, I missed my parents. I missed my brother and my sisters, and the commune wouldn't allow me to see them at all. It was forbidden for me to see them. They didn't want me to have any contact by phone or by writing to my brothers or sisters at all. They cut me off from my family completely and that was really hard for me because I was really close with my brothers and sisters and then to totally disconnect from them was a struggle and that part was difficult. So I thought about...I would have to go back and think about what I want to do with my life. You know, do I want to focus on myself or be with my family? I would go back and forth on this. I would waver. I really did struggle with that. But once I got into
college I never even missed it anymore. I just missed my family, and that part is hard for me. I realized I had made the right decision and I felt good and I didn't think about going back to the commune at all after that. I just missed my family and that part is hard for me. It's hard to let go of family and I'm sorry to accept that and realizing that some of my family will probably leave like me and I just have to be patient until that happens.

Greg reported that even though his dad supported them when they left, his dad no longer supports them. When asked about his relationship with his parents, he said:

Well, up until about a month ago, there really wasn't one, um, after my dad completely turned on me about a couple months after I left, when he realized that if he were to continue, he would lose his wife. Um, after that point, I just didn't talk to them much anymore. I didn't initiate calls, and they never called me. Um, my father actually retired from his position. Uh, he actually retired, uh, last May, almost a year ago. And he had a great big program at his workplace and so on. And the upshot of a long story is that he told me and my younger brother he didn't want us there. And, um, I found out later that it was because the Sunday before his program, the pastor said over the pulpit, "If your sons, if your raggedy sons come to your retirement, then I'm not coming." And, um, so my dad chickened out and told us he didn't want us there.

The family relationships that are severed, is one of the biggest issues for former cult members. The most emotion was expressed in the interviews when they talked about this.

Friendship

Nine subjects reported that they have friends who support them. Iris, who left the Jehovah Witnesses, said at first she did not find anyone to connect with, but later when she got online and found other ex-Witnesses, she felt an instant connection. This is what she said about friends:

I think that was the hindrance in my recovery, is I did not seek out anybody like me. In fact, I had no idea how to even find anybody like me. I didn't think of the Internet as a tool until just literally four years ago, when I started--I got online and looked up, um, a group called Meetup.com. I typed in, I think, a search for Jehovah's Witnesses just out of curiosity one day, and this Meet Up group came and
popped up, and I realized that there were actually support groups out there for former Jehovah's Witnesses. That was my first real experience in realizing that there were even people out there I could talk to.

When asked if she participated further in those online groups, Iris said,

Yeah, actually Meet Up did not have an organizer. The local chapter did not have an organizer at that point, so it was kind of, um, in limbo, and nothing was happening with it, there were no meetings being held. And, I stepped up as organizer because I really wanted to get it off the ground. And, uh, we did. I think we went from just a few people who were interested to over 60 people in a very short time. So, it was, it was very exciting for me to meet my first ex-Jehovah's Witness. I remember we held the first meeting, and only one other person besides me showed up. I think people were, you know, afraid to--to um...take the chance and see what they might encounter. And she showed up, and it was like, oh it's just really weird, it was like finding a long lost sister. It felt, um, connected, immediately. And, it was, it was an incredible experience and I am still involved in it four years later.

Given that many former cult members’ families are still in the cult, and are not allowed to speak to these former members, it is important to have friends who support them. In the cult, friendship was most likely forbidden so most of the subjects must learn how to have friends. Two subjects said that they had trouble relating to those on the outside because they did not have anything in common. They were so isolated growing up that they did not get jokes or references to current affairs. This made it hard for them to relate to others.

Summary

While most of the subjects struggle with interpersonal relationships, those who had family members exit seemed to have the best familial relationships. Those members who did not have family members who exited were not on close terms with family members. The individuals who exited with spouses had someone who could relate
CHAPTER IV

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This study analyzed interviews and background questionnaires of 12 former cult members who grew up in a cult, and who left the group as an adolescent or adult. This project is significant because there is very little research on individuals who were born and/or raised in a cult. The majority of previous research was conducted on the experiences of individuals who made a conscious choice to join a cult as an adult. The subjects here made no such choice.

Their indoctrination into cult beliefs and norms started the day they were born and continued until they made a choice to leave. (Sometimes a cult will ask certain individuals to leave and expel them; however, in this study all of the subjects made a conscious choice to leave). These individuals did not have a pre-cult personality or much, if any exposure to mainstream society. Most of these individuals were isolated from the broader society as children and had little or no contact with the outside world. Consequently, when they entered mainstream society it was if they found themselves in a completely foreign world.

In this study, the following interpretive categories were used: state of mind, state of autonomy, life skills, and relationships. In the first section, the category of state of mind is broken down into several subcategories: depression, anger, and hopeful about the future. State of autonomy includes independence and how well the ex-member
feels free to make his or her own decisions, and at what level he or she has integrated into mainstream society. The third section addresses the category of life skills, which includes finances, work, housing, education, and health. The fourth section addresses the category of relationships, which includes sexual identity, marital issues, birth family, and friendship.

Additionally, this thesis discusses which recovery measures the subjects thought were important, and how practitioners can use that information to provide better care and services in order to support former members once they have left the cult. The final section summarizes the results of the aforementioned material and discusses pertinent issues.

State of Mind

For the purposes of this study, state of mind refers to the self-reported feelings that the subjects described about their experiences in the cult. The three salient categories are: depression, anger, and hopeful about the future. This category also includes suicidal thoughts and attempts. Anger includes terror and fear. Hopeful about the future encompasses how subjects feel about their current situation.

Depression

Depression is the absence of pleasure and the inability to feel a sense of power in one's life. Stress is a major component of initiating a depressive episode and cult members are often in a constant state of instability and change. Cult members find themselves at the whim of the leaders, who often manifest complete control over their
followers’ lives. While in the cult, members do not learn normal coping skills, and often do not have any power over large decisions or even, in some cases, everyday choices.

Eleven out of the 12 subjects reported depression. Three former members reported suicide attempts, and another three stated that they either thought about suicide or wanted to die. These statistics show that half, or 50%, either attempted suicide or thought about it.

To compare this statistically, in a study conducted in Finland of successful suicides, 22% of the deceased had discussed suicidal intent with a health care professional in their last office visit (Halgin & Witbourn 2006). This was in the general population.

It is also important to note that the former cult members who successfully committed suicide are no longer here to tell about it. This study also does not address “mass suicides” that leaders perpetuate on their members, such as Jonestown, the Branch Dividians, or Heaven's Gate.

Ethel, who was raised in The Community of Jesus and Grenville Christian College for 17 years, reported that she was unhappy even in elementary school, and her depression increased, as she got older. When she left the cult, she used alcohol for 15 years and was involved in controlling and abusive relationships. She said she lived in survivor mode for many years after she left the group.

Greg who was raised and lived in Greater Bethlehem Temple for 33 years, reported depression both in the group and after he left. He was out of the group for 3 years at the time of the interview and is currently on medication for depression,
posttraumatic stress, disorder and anxiety. He also reported that he was still living in survival mode even though he has been out of the group since 2005.

Carol, the daughter of a cult leader, who was married with two children, and was contemplating suicide while in the group said:

And I just could feel it. It just didn't feel right. And I remember, um, also during this period of time, having major depression. I didn't know that's what it was, but I was very suicidal. And at one point, I remember, um, I actually had a plan and everything. I had pills under my counter. I had it all planned out. Exactly when I'd do it, when nobody would notice me gone--And I was going to, I was going to take a bunch of aspirin and slit my wrists in the bathtub. And I had everything ready. Carol was still in the cult at that time, and stated that the thought of her mother having full access to her children helped her decide not to commit suicide. It was soon after that, she left with her husband and children.

During her interview, Berta reported being depressed many times throughout her childhood and early teens. At 17, she attempted suicide. Her mother was depressed and was institutionalized several times during Berta's childhood. Berta was responsible for giving her mother medication when Berta was nine years old and was told that she, Berta, was the cause of her mother's mental illness. She could not remember any happy times in her childhood.

Fanny who was in The Living Word Fellowship, who has been out for 16 years reported depression, fear, and anger. She attempted suicide at 15, after which she made a plan to leave the cult. She still struggles, with her sense of self, and who she is now, as opposed to who the cult told her she was. She is still struggling to sort out the future. Although she knows several people who grew up in the same cult who have also left, she has connected only with one of them. She spoke of betrayal from everyone, including other members who left the cult when she did.
Anger

Nine out of 12 reported anger. Consequently, 75% of the subjects reported anger. Most had anger toward the cult and its leaders, and for the time that they had lost. Others had anger because they did not have freedom while they were growing up in the cult. Some of the anger was directed at the cult, while some was directed at their parents for not standing up to the cult leaders. Andrew, for example, reported that he was angry a lot. He reported that the punishments were inconsistent and unfair, stemming from chaotic expectations from the adults. He said:

I was a miserable child. I was angry a lot. I was bitter a lot...I don't know if stress is the right word, but certainly confusion. Um, I didn't understand what standards were expected of me. Some uncles or aunts would expect something and another. Someone else who would be with us one or two days a week would expect something else. You never knew what you would do to deserve a punishment or what the punishment would entail. The degree of punishment varied as well. From mild to severe for the same offense committed against a different individual, and for me it was a constant state of trying.

Carol, whose mother was the cult’s prophet, was angry at her mother's attempts to destroy Carol’s marriage and family, and about the abuse, she experienced from both her mother and brother. She said this about her mother, and leader:

And she had been saying that soon it would be time for my son to live with my brother. My older brother actually, um was very abusive. And he actually had slugged his own son in the face. And I remember that happening. And I was like, no way my son's ever gonna live with my brother. There's no way. He's, he's abusive. He's, he's physically abusive. There's no way I'm gonna let, let my son live there. And, um...so it was an accumulation of things. It was us going away to school, coming back and being disillusioned with what we actually saw.

Ethel who has anger, that stems from abandonment, and it is directed toward the cult and other members. She said:

There was one girl my age and a couple of boys and the girl and I was so called best friends, but she made friends with some other kids in the school and she seemed to
do better integrating earlier on. And, I'm trying to...and so a lot of natural social
dynamic played into the whole thing. Her family was well off, so she would have
the Cabbage Patch Kid and the nice clothes and stuff like that, and so even though
she wore skirts and would, like, by community dress code, she was nicely dressed,
whereas my parents were ex-hippies, didn't have much money, so I was wearing
hand- me-downs and so like the popular kids in school accepted her and not me and
so there came a certain point where she sort of started, and this is just a natural
social dynamic, you know, pushing me aside and choosing them over me. Which
might have helped fuel my anger towards the community cuz now I was all alone
and I didn't like the community anyways, I didn't like that I was different.

Fanny, who was born and raised in the Living Word, said this about her anger
towards the group:

And you're born into it or, you know, coming into it and promised certain things
and you give your life, it's 100%...I just think the core, the core issue for me is, is
just overall that they're toying with people's lives. There is, there is a true sense of
motivation for why they control all these people--and I think it's money, I'm pretty
sure it's money and the, like, empire, power.

Greg was raised in the Greater Bethlehem Temple group for 33 years, he said
that anger was the emotion that he felt most often and it stemmed from what the group is
still doing to his parents.

**Hopeful about the Future**

All of the subjects reported feeling hopeful about the future, although they
were at different levels of appreciation. Perhaps those ex-members who responded to the
call for subjects had been searching for help and healing. In that respect, I would argue
that the completion of the questionnaire would cause the subjects to be hopeful about the
future.

Iris, who is 45, grew up in the Jehovah Witnesses and has been out for 22
years. She had this to say about where she is now:

That your life can, um, become far more than you ever imagined it could. You can
become happier and, um more content with who you are. You can heal. Um, you
can survive, you know. I--I think when you first leave it's so easy to think that life will never, will always be that state of confusion that you're in.

Larry spent 29 years in the Holiness Movement. He said:

I have to realize, I mean we have tools available. We have resources and I am so thrilled about that. I aspire to someday contribute some way to helping cults, especially kids born and raised and are starting a new life on the outside. That's one of my dreams to participate some way in some kind of foundation. I don't know how that's all going to work out but that's one of my desires because it's so physical on the outside.

Larry was out for only 3 years when he made these statements. He is using the experience in a positive way and channeling the past to move forward and help others.

Summary

Depression was a prevalent theme throughout most of the interviews. Given that depression relates to a lack of a sense of control and power over one's life, it is not surprising that these former members reported depression. Notable, when a former member was able to take control of his or her life, and was able to make positive changes in his or her situation, the depression lessened. When a former member was able to use what they have been through in a powerful way to improve his own life or the lives of others, then he no longer reported depression. Others are still struggling and are getting treatment through drug and alcohol programs or medication treatment for the depression.

For the 11 who reported on depression only one said there was a family history of mental illness and only one said he is now being treated for depression. These statistics would indicate that depression treatment should be a major component for most individuals who are raised in a cult. In order to target these individuals, screening questions should be included when they access mainstream social services. Education concerning former cult membership and depression should be included when training occurs for practitioners.
Anger, often, is a symptom for other underlying issues of hopelessness, fear, sadness, abandonment, or hurt as well as other issues. Most of the former cult members seem to be angry about the constant control the cult leaders manifested toward them. Some expressed sadness about the loss of time wasted while they were in the cult. Most were angry about the broken relationships in their families as a direct result of cult membership.

Some of the subjects said that they did not even know that they were in a cult until much later and were not able to get the help they needed when they left. Because of the anger, they used unhealthy coping methods, such as drugs and alcohol use and abuse. Others reported that they lived in survival mode for a long time after they left.

Several of the subjects are using the anger as a positive emotion and are helping others that are still in cults. They have gotten more education and are bringing attention and education to others who are still victims. They are writing memoirs and helping others who are exiting. Several are involved in groups that help members exit and support them through the exit process.

The subjects that used the anger to move on quickly and make choices that benefited them were able to turn the anger toward helping other former members. They seemed to be using the anger toward the cults to move forward by being involved in groups or helping others.

Anger can be a powerful emotion as long as an individual is not stuck there. Most of the unresolved anger that the subjects are struggling with has to do with their relationships with family members who are still in the cult. Many subjects reported that the family members still in the cult are not allowed to associate with them.
The members who are the most hopeful about the future are the ones that have been successful in their lives outside the cult. Being able to make their own choices and decisions has given them hope about what they will do next.

Themes of hope were exemplified by how the former members were living when they completed the interviews. Some of them had completed their educations and/or had plans to further their education. The main theme for hopefulness came from those who had searched out information about cults in general and specific information on the cult they had been in.

State of Autonomy

State of autonomy includes the ability to act and think for oneself. This includes making decisions and having the capacity to be independent. Three states of being are included in this section: independence, decision-making, and how well the subjects feel they have integrated into mainstream society at the time of their interview. Former cult members come from a structured closed system, where someone else plans every minute of their day for them. When they leave, many times they have never learned to make decisions or choices and, thus, must learn to do so, as an adult.

Independence

The task of learning independence and autonomy as an adult can be an overwhelming task, especially when basic needs are not met, such as housing or food. In such a situation, many former cult members have turned to drugs, alcohol, or abusive relationships to help them through the transition, some for a short time, but many for long
periods. This is prime time for an intervention to occur, immediately after leaving the cult.

Ethel, for example, who was raised in the Community of Jesus, struggled for 15 years after she left. She was indigent and homeless, living in shelters with drug and alcohol problems. Ethel has been clean and sober for two years. She said this about her level of independence:

And it's only been the past two years that I would say, I started to recover, but I think it's almost just because I've never had something to go back to. I started to live like a normal human being. And so when I left the group, I left my family and I didn't for some reason, in looking back, I don't even fully understand it, but it didn't even cross my mind that like family is like, you have other family and you have other resources, like I didn't know how to do that. I didn't know how to reach out to people. I didn't know I was coming out of a cult. I think, honestly, then I was so screwed up and scared and I had no idea what way was coming or going and I was so afraid that anyone that helped me was just gonna try to control me.

All of the subjects struggled right after leaving. Immediately after leaving seems to be where the interventions would have been most effective for these individuals, helping them to create a successful integration. This is the time that all stated that they needed help, and they did not have any. However, at the time of the interviews, all of them reported having reached some level of autonomy.

Decision Making

Because children who are raised in a cult are never taught coping skills or the freedom to make decisions, they often struggle with the smallest of daily decisions.

Fanny, who grew up in The Living Word and has been out of the cult for 17 years, said:

It was as if I could do whatever I wanted. I could smoke cigarettes. I could have a beer. I could, you know, I could do whatever I wanted for the first time ever. It was an amazing feeling, just not having somebody telling me what to do or requiring me to do anything. Um, which feels really, really good and every year I feel stronger
and more clear. But, it's amazing how many, how many filters I still have and so many issues I still have and so many things I have to stop and challenge myself on.

Iris, raised in the Jehovah Witnesses, had this to say about making decisions:

Just being able to, you know, to do anything you want to do, watch what you want on TV, or you can read anything you want to without censorship. That is huge.

Andrew reported struggling immediately after leaving the group. He said:

I wanted to be able to get out on my own. I wanted to be done with having my parents and the organization dictate my actions and my beliefs and what I could and couldn't do. And what I could and couldn't watch. What to listen to or what to read. I wanted the freedom to make my own mistakes and deal with my own consequences. But to me being able to accomplish or do what I want to do is my greatest accomplishment.

These former members only represent three of the subjects, however these statements are representative of most of the subjects' statements about decision making.

Integration into Mainstream Society

Subjects who self-rated their inclusion in mainstream society ranged from 10 to a 4 (10 for complete integration and 1 for very little integration). Subjects integrated at different rates. As none of them had had exit counseling, most of them struggled when they left. Berta said this about integrating into mainstream society:

The area that I see the most problems is probably in a social group. I have a small social group, not well, how do I put this? I have one or two close friends and not a large. I'm not one that really goes to parties I'm invited to unless I know a lot of people there. I kind of shy away from stuff like that, getting in a group. It's not because I don't like people or they don't like me. It's just I still don't know that I have a lot to talk about with people, except for Colorado City. That's the topic people want to talk about it with me for people who know where I'm from and I'm like, eh, okay. I'm pretty well read and I keep up on current events and stuff and a lot of it too might be the town that I'm in. It's small and people are more interested in talking about other people. So I just have a small social group, which is probably the biggest thing that I've noticed. I can observe people at these parties and they just all want to talk to everybody and have small talk and that works for them, but it doesn't work for me.
Children who were raised in a cult belonged there from the day they were born. It is extremely hard for them to enter into another society that they have learned to distrust and immediately fit in. The subjects who were out longer were able to integrate better. In addition, the ones who were allowed to go to public school and or had contact with the public outside the cult were also able to integrate sooner.

**Summary**

Autonomy includes personal independence and the capacity to make moral decisions and act on them. These individuals had to start from the beginning. The skills that they should have learned as children had to be learned as adults. The making of independent choices was foreign to them. Whereas formerly they were told what to do and what to think, once out of the cult, they must think for themselves. This is hard to learn as an adult.

Eleven subjects reported that they were free to make decisions, while one said "not yet". Six out of 12 of the subjects reported they were independent at the time of the interviews. The trend seemed to be that the more education a former member had, the more independent he or she was. However, some former members with a 5th or 6th grade education did go to college as adults and gained their independence once they graduated. The range of years out of the cult for these subjects went from 4 to 29 years.

Many internalized messages from the cult were still running in their minds. When making independent choices, most of us use information from former experiences. This makes it difficult for former members to make independent choices. Luckily, life is a process, and these individuals were shown to be resilient and were determined not to go back to the life in which they were raised.
Life Skills

Children who grow up in cults miss learning the life skills needed to survive in mainstream society. Life skills are a set of skills usually acquired through teaching or direct observation. For the purpose of this study, life skills includes financial issues, work, housing, education, healthcare, transportation and legal competency in order to survive independently in mainstream society.

Children who grow up in cults are taught only what they need to know to perpetuate the group's agenda. It is to the cult's advantage to keep the children uninformed about the society around them so that they will not attempt to leave. Most cults indoctrinate their members to fear outsiders and the outside world.

Financial Issues

When Andrew left, he was able to stay with relatives; but he had to get there on his own, pay rent, and get a job right away. His relatives did not provide any financial help. Andrew did not have skills to know how to get a job, budget his money, or interact with others; but he had a high school education and was able to speak another language. He said:

I did often think that I wouldn't make it necessarily. I was like...I knew I had no idea how to exist in the real world. I knew that I was going to be like pretty much a 17-year-old immigrant coming to America. Except for the fact, I knew English...I knew I had no idea how to go about building a resume. How to go, you know, how to attend a class. I had never been in a structured class, had homework, or things like that. I did know how to drive. My dad had taught me how to drive, and so I took my test for my license shortly after I had landed. I had borrowed money from my grandparents to buy a car so I could go to and from work and to and from school. I paid them back...I paid them a monthly amount for actually about a year until I got my place.... And I changed jobs a couple of times because I would get bored and didn't like...Or I had an issue with my boss, or whatever.
Furthermore, Andrew he got himself into enormous debt and did not budget his money. He also lost a job after failing a drug test:

Eventually I dropped out of school and just worked full-time for a couple of years and got my head on my shoulders a little bit and, sort of, I grew to learn the ropes. I grew, I should say, about how to be a functioning member of society.

Andrew had more education than most of the subjects. However, he probably would have had a smoother transition if he had specific exit counseling and more support.

Work

Larry grew up in the Holiness Movement where he spent 29 years, and left with his wife and child. He had this to say about life skills and work:

I want to get past surviving. I recently got my hands on some stuff. I have some interests; a lot of my worries right now deal with making sure the bills are paid. I have found some tools that I felt like gave me some foundation stones that I never had before. As far as rational thinking about problems, I read about a year ago, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* Career wise that really helped me because I've had not only leaving the cult, but that includes a career change for me because I was a minister before this time. So, I guess one of the big things for me was integrating into the workforce. Do I want to be an employee? Do I want to be self-employed? How do I market my skills from the cult? These are areas that I feel like I've made tremendous strides in the past year....The big thing for me is career development. What can I do at 32? Do I need to go back to school? Should I go ahead and just work with what I have and better market my skills and communicate those more effectively and how to apply those? Right now, I'm working for a small company that doesn't demand higher levels of education. I'm an operations manager, I love what I'm doing and it's paying the bills right now. So I don't know; I don't really have time to be, like, so those are some issues that are big for me right now. Everything we left behind. I had less than $100 in my bank account when we decided to leave the cult. I had a credit card with $4,000 credit line on it. So a big issue for us is, like, resolving our debt. We rent right now and we aspire to own our own home. So those things we didn't have, a vehicle, you know, so it's just starting fresh in life as a family.

Former cult members have a difficult time trying to get work. They have to figure out some way to explain the time in the cult. They have to learn how to make a
resume and have to get identification. This creates difficulty if they were born in a cult that may have not registered their birth, or if were born in another country.

**Housing**

Larry is functioning at a high level of life skills. Compare this to Carol, who left with her husband and two children. She was 47 at the time of the interview and has been out of the cult for 25 years. She said this:

I mean, we just got, we got a rental truck and packed the few things that we had and just drove away. So we had nowhere to go. We slept in a hotel while we were finding out if he [her husband] was gonna get this job. And he went for the interview, and I went with him, and they offered me a job at the same time....We rented this house and I didn't know that I had to call some company and have the electricity turned on. I thought there would just be electricity. And I'm, like, well, what, what do we do? How do we get the electricity on? You know? Who do we call? What do we--you know, it was very strange and...Um, I had to put my kids in a public school and yeah, I knew what to do, but I mean, not really. I mean it was very strange, very very weird.

Both Carol and her husband had attended college and yet they still had a hard time when they cut off all ties of the cult.

**Education**

Most of the subjects were not educated properly, although 3 of them were raised to get a college education. Two of the subjects had a college education when they left. However, Larry found that because he was educated through the cult, it was not accredited so he is unable to use the education in mainstream society.

Kate belonged to a group that valued education and attended a mainstream college. She was raised in the group, but left it when she went to college. She had this to say about education:
And I did, and um, then I went to college. And that was hard because, you know, you couldn't cheat. And so, I mean, I got really minimal grades in high school. And, and so I had to learn how to really care, I think, about learning.

Berta, who grew up in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints, and was placed in foster care when she was 14, said:

This was when I was in high school. My senior year in school I was in mainstream school. Everyone was talking about college or job opportunities and deciding what they wanted to do or be and I decided I wanted to move. That's all I wanted to do was move somewhere and being a nanny seemed to be the best option for me.

Berta also reported that she was moved several times during foster care and had difficulty even getting to classes. She had been schooled through a church school until she was placed in foster care. Foster care did allow her to finish high school. In addition, even though she did not to continue her education at that time she did get a high school education.

Health

Oftentimes cults do not care about the health of their members. Consequently, many have had very little health care by the time that they leave. Larry said:

We get in trouble because my wife has some complications during her pregnancy with our son Levi. They do not provide medical service. We are in a foreign country under this organization, we don't have medical insurance, in Belize and most 3rd world countries, and you pay upfront before they do anything for you. So we're in a tough situation. They finally find me, I'm supposed to go on a trip to Guatemala to find out more details about you know, how bad the complications are and that doctor tell us, "You know, if you want to have a kid, you should go ahead and get pregnant." So we do, but we didn't get permission from the leader as we found out later. So we ended up after we decide to try to have a son, we were all excited about it and my wife becomes pregnant, and then we realize there's some problems and then I think she was like four weeks into her pregnancy and she finds out she has these humongous thyroids and is probably going to abort out first baby. So, this is very traumatic. We're in another country. So, we just face a gauntlet of misfortunate things. They won't give us money. I'm begging for support. I have $33,000 in the band of money that was raised for the Belize field. We're the missionaries there and it is like, can we borrow money from this, can we somehow
work out some kind of agreement where we can borrow some money from this so we can have this kid and we can get medical service?

Berta said:

This group that is meeting in San Diego to memorialize the kids who died in cults....Because I did a lot of research on the children, the dead children. When I say a lot, I mean, some in Colorado City and Hillsdale. I actually went out and counted the graves in the baby cemetery and there are actually 153 graves, 48 of them are not marked and that's just in the baby cemetery. This baby cemetery is very real and I have data from it. I counted the graves; I got the ages of the children. A lot of stillborns, a lot of babies living to be one day or two days. The oldest child in the cemetery was four years old, and there are 153 graves I could tell. Some of them were not marked so it was just mounds of dirt, and some of them I just suspected. But I didn't count unless you could tell that that area was the size of a grave. I didn't count it unless I was sure. Then you go to the main cemetery and you drive down the road and I had taken two people there that were almost speechless by the time we finished because almost all of the graves that you drive down this road, on the edges are children.

For the women and children in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints in relating to healthcare; it starts with lack of prenatal care, children dying in childbirth and/or soon thereafter. Berta went on to say that, there were many graves of young adults 20 in the cult graveyard and in the main cemetery.

Summary

It is hard to imagine the many issues that former cult members must face. Most have to live in a survival mode until they are able to get on their feet financially. Some live that way for many years. They have to figure out where to work and then make up resumes figuring out what to put in the missing years that they were in the cult. They must figure out housing. They must deal with the area that they are deficient in, such as education, and must learn about healthcare and how to access doctor's appointments and learn how to be healthy.
Relationships

The category of relationships includes sexual identity, marital issues, birth family, and friendships. Five subjects reported that they are married or have significant relationships. Two reported they were homosexual; one reported being bisexual; and nine said they were heterosexual. Five of the subjects reported they were married, while two reported that they casually date. One subject reported that she was in a new relationship, and three reported that they were not in a relationship or dating.

Eight subjects reported some kind of relationship with their birth family and four reported that they had either no relationship or bad relationships with family that was still in the cult. Nine subjects reported that they have friends, and three did not report on having friends. When family who are still in the cult, have to choose they will often choose the cult over their family members. The family members that had left seemed to have the best relationships with the subjects.

Sexual Identity

This study did not start out to report on sexual identity, but many of the subjects reported on how the cult affected their sexual identity. Berta, who was raised in the Fundamental Latter Day Saints, said this about relationships and her sexual identity:

It's something that's very difficult for me to be in a relationship. I was in heterosexual relationships when I was drinking. I started drinking when I was 21, drinking heavily, and now I've been sober for six years. During that time...until I was 27, I was in heterosexual relationships, but when I wasn't drinking, I couldn't have sex with a man. I skipped that question when I was filling it out. I was torn between it because I don't think that I was born a homosexual. I think that it was created in me because I had a physical reaction to men, but it changes sharply if they get in my personal space, so I just can't.
Henry who is disabled and is homosexual said this about what he feels is the hardest adjustment for him:

I think my identity. I was really struggling with my identity because I lived in the commune and I was already attracted to men in the commune but they're against gays and lesbians and myself, I was against gay and lesbians because I was trained to say that it is wrong, you know, a man with a man or a woman with a woman. I was trained to know that was wrong and I had been sexually abused by a man since I was 12 years old. So anyway, then I also had sex when I was 12 with my best friend and that influenced me to be attracted to men. But, I denied it, I held it in. I repressed those feelings and thought I was intended to marry a woman and then when I got out of the commune, I started to be attracted to men more than women. So I struggled with that and I was afraid of what other people would think about me and my family, and I was afraid my family would find out I was gay. So I really struggled with that and that was probably the most challenging transition for me.

Both of the aforementioned were taught that homosexuality was wrong, yet suffered sexual abuse from the very people who were teaching those values.

Marital Issues

Greg, who is Caucasian and was involved in Greater Bethlehem Temple married an African-American woman against the church's wishes. He left with his wife and children. He reported that marrying her created the discord that would later lead to his leaving the cult. His wife had been married previously and had a child from that marriage. Greg said this about his relationship with his wife:

You know, so I'm going through all these changes and my wife was alone. And when we moved to Chicago, she wasn't working. She stayed home with the kids. And so she was at home by herself and very lonely and depressed and struggling and, you know, we did a lot of praying and, things that we were always taught to do to try to address these situations. And, you know, we tried to contact some people. We actually went back and contacted some people that had left the church years before. Just to try to talk to them, to get some advice, and stuff. And, for the most part, uh, they weren't very helpful. Because, um, they were nice and very pretty much found another church that was pretty much another cult, even though they didn't know that themselves.
Greg and his wife tried several different churches, which was difficult and put a strain on their marriage. He said:

Strain on our marriage. Even though my wife and I still get along very well, um, just, you know, the things we were dealing with individually just really put a lot of pressure on us. Hard to deal with each other going through these feelings and not being able to really explain to each other what we were going through, and struggling with a lot of things.

Although it is hard to be married when leaving the cult, it also provides a good support system. A married cult member who leaves has the support of his or her partner, if the partner leaves as well. While only one third of the subjects were married when they left the cult. They are still married as of the interviews. I would argue that leaving brought them closer as a couple, thus, serves as the foundation that keeps them married.

Birth Family

Five subjects reported that they have no contact with family. Seven have contact with family, although the relationships vary to degrees. The family members who had also left the cult seemed to have the best relationships with the subjects. The family members who are still in the cult often have to make a choice, and tend to choose the cult.

Henry, who has a disability and is now attending university after leaving the Twelve Tribes cult, said this about his family relationships:

Well, I missed my parents. I missed my brother and my sisters, and the commune wouldn't allow me to see them at all. It was forbidden for me to see them. They didn't want me to have any contact by phone or by writing to my brothers or sisters at all. They cut me off from my family completely and that was really hard for me because I was really close with my brothers and sisters and then to totally disconnect from them was a struggle and that part was difficult. So I thought about...I would have to go back and think about what I want to do with my life. You know, do I want to focus on myself or be with my family? I would go back and forth on this. I would waver. I really did struggle with that. But once I got into college I never even missed it anymore. I just missed my family, and that part is hard for me. I realized I had made the right decision and I felt good and I didn't
think about going back to the commune at all after that. I just missed my family and that part is hard for me. It's hard to let go of family and I'm sorry to accept that and realizing that some of my family will probably leave like me and I just have to be patient until that happens.

Greg reported that even though his dad supported them when they left, his dad no longer supports them. When asked about his relationship with his parents, he said:

Well, up until about a month ago, there really wasn't one, um, after my dad completely turned on me about a couple months after I left, when he realized that if he were to continue, he would lose his wife. Um, after that point, I just didn't talk to them much anymore. I didn't initiate calls, and they never called me. Um, my father actually retired from his position. Uh, he actually retired, uh, last May, almost a year ago. And he had a great big program at his workplace and so on. And the upshot of a long story is that he told me and my younger brother he didn't want us there. And, um, I found out later that it was because the Sunday before his program, the pastor said over the pulpit, "If your sons, if your raggedy sons come to your retirement, then I'm not coming." And, um, so my dad chickened out and told us he didn't want us there.

The family relationships that are severed, is one of the biggest issues for former cult members. The most emotion was expressed in the interviews when they talked about this.

**Friendship**

Nine subjects reported that they have friends who support them. Iris, who left the Jehovah Witnesses, said at first she did not find anyone to connect with, but later when she got online and found other ex-Witnesses, she felt an instant connection. This is what she said about friends:

I think that was the hindrance in my recovery, is I did not seek out anybody like me. In fact, I had no idea how to even find anybody like me. I didn't think of the Internet as a tool until just literally four years ago, when I started--I got online and looked up, um, a group called Meetup.com. I typed in, I think, a search for Jehovah’s Witnesses just out of curiosity one day, and this Meet Up group came and popped up, and I realized that there were actually support groups out there for former Jehovah's Witnesses. That was my first real experience in realizing that there were even people out there I could talk to.
When asked if she participated further in those online groups, Iris said,

Yeah, actually Meet Up did not have an organizer. The local chapter did not have an organizer at that point, so it was kind of, um, in limbo, and nothing was happening with it, there were no meetings being held. And, I stepped up as organizer because I really wanted to get it off the ground. And, uh, we did. I think we went from just a few people who were interested to over 60 people in a very short time. So, it was, it was very exciting for me to meet my first ex-Jehovah's Witness. I remember we held the first meeting, and only one other person besides me showed up. I think people were, you know, afraid to—to um...take the chance and see what they might encounter. And she showed up, and it was like, oh it's just really weird, it was like finding a long lost sister. It felt, um, connected, immediately. And, it was, it was an incredible experience and I am still involved in it four years later.

Given that many former cult members’ families are still in the cult, and are not allowed to speak to these former members, it is important to have friends who support them. In the cult, friendship was most likely forbidden so most of the subjects must learn how to have friends. Two subjects said that they had trouble relating to those on the outside because they did not have anything in common. They were so isolated growing up that they did not get jokes or references to current affairs. This made it hard for them to relate to others.

Summary

While most of the subjects struggle with interpersonal relationships, those who had family members exit seemed to have the best familial relationships. Those members who did not have family members who exited were not on close terms with family members. The individuals who exited with spouses had someone who could relate to their struggles, someone who grew up in the same cult, thus, they had better interpersonal relationships.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

The first significant factor that this study reveals is that all the former cult members were struggling with many different issues years after leaving the group they grew up in. Even though most of them are from different cults, they had very similar types of struggles after they left the group. Some of them knew they needed help and could not find it, whereas others were not even aware that they had been in a cult.

To sum up the data, 11 out of 12 former members reported depression. Nine reported anger issues. All 12 reported that they were hopeful about the future at the time of the interview. Six reported a sense of independence, and 11 reported they felt freedom to make their own decisions. Most felt that they had integrated into society at the time of the interview although they were at different stages of integration, ranging on a self-selected scale from 4 to 10.

While 7 subjects reported that they had difficulty integrating into mainstream society right after they left, currently 11 reported now feeling integrated. Five reported no personal relationships at the time of the interview; three reported that they are casually dating; five reported they currently have relationships with family members. Nine reported that they have new friends whom they interact with.
Limitations

While this is by no means a large study, it does replicate findings on issues that have been of concern to cult researchers. These interviews have identified common themes of abandonment as well as sexual, physical, and spiritual abuse. While many of the subjects struggled both during their years in the cult and afterward, these individuals are resilient and are building a life outside of the cult. However, a common theme for all the subjects is that they would have liked a specific program or services that could have helped them exit the cult and enter mainstream society in a gentler fashion.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of individuals who were born into cults and entered society alone. Their post-cult experiences highlight the need for specific interventions and treatments specifically designed programs for individuals who have had a cult involvement. Many of the subjects studied stated that they did not have a choice whether to become a member of a cult as they were born in the cult. Most of them wanted to get out as soon as they were old enough. This study examined those issues that are common to such individuals. These individuals had no previous cult life or former personality. They knew only what they learned and experienced in that environment.

The former cult member is in an impossible situation as she or he struggles to start a new life without the support or recognition from a society. Repeatedly, both in the memoirs and in the interviews, adult children of cults said they would have liked a
support system that could relate to what they had been through, having been raised in a cult.

Many of the subjects also mentioned that it did not occur to them that they were in a cult or that they needed exit counseling. Many of the subjects resorted to using drugs and/or alcohol. Some got involved in another cult before they realized that they were caught up in another unhealthy group. The few who knew they needed help felt that there were no available or accessible resources where they lived.

Furthermore, one reoccurring theme indicated that most of the subjects would have liked specific exit counseling from someone who understood the precise issues of leaving a cult. They expressed that help needed to be affordable or free and readily accessible. A few of the subjects who were able to receive counseling said they would have preferred to talk to someone who had experienced leaving a cult or at least was educated about cults, the consequences for members, and the aftereffects for former members.

Several subjects commented that more education of the public should occur. This may not help the ex-cult members or children currently in cults as most of them did not attend public school, but it would educate others of the specific issues that current and former cult members must deal with.

It is hard to hold cults accountable in the legal system because they tend to hide behind the religious freedom laws and are thus able to perpetuate the abuse heaped on the members and their children. Thus, individuals who break free have little legal recourse. This also makes it hard for child abuse advocates to step in to protect the children.
Recently, television has began to air, reality shows glamorizing fundamentalist Mormons engaging in plural marriage, making it look as though everyone should try it. Yet, it is not so glamorous when an individual leaves and tries to tell her story to the public. Frequently, the court system minimizes the damage done to children. The court system perpetuates this by siding with the cult and the children have no recourse. In the state of Utah, even though plural marriage is illegal, many or most of the law enforcement community is Mormon. They turn a blind eye when the women or children ask for help in the fundamental communities where plural and child marriages occur.

In several cult-related cases, child protective services did try to intervene, but often the judges quickly release the children back to cult members. The individuals who manage to leave cults and survive are the lucky ones. On numerous occasions, children have died from the abuse perpetuated on them. Sometimes children die from overt acts; other times they die from lack of medical treatment because the parents refuse to take them to a doctor or the hospital because of the cults beliefs.

The mothers of the children also suffer from lack of prenatal care, medical care, overwork, and malnutrition. As a result of this poor care, many babies die and are sometimes buried in graves near the cult community. Birth defects are also common in some groups because of inbreeding and incest. The lack of medical care also leaves the children at the mercy of childhood diseases that are easily controlled with immunizations.

The social ramifications are plentiful. Many cult children have no birth records; thus, when they leave the cult, they are faced with having to prove that they were
born in the United States. In addition, he or she will typically encounter a multitude of practical, spiritual and emotional issues.

In the practical realm, they must figure out how to survive financially. Even though they may have worked many hours in a cult, they were not paid and they usually do not have the skills to obtain and maintain a bank account, write a resume and get a job, find a place to live and pay rent and utilities, or own and drive a car.

They must also deal with educational issues. While some cults educate their children, many do not. As society moves toward more technology, it is increasingly important for individuals to be educated. This leaves many individuals who exit cults to play catch up financially, educationally, and technologically. They have the added burden of trying to explain their past to banks, credit card companies, employers and property owners.

In the spiritual realm, they must figure out what they believe. This is difficult because they have learned not to trust and have difficulty knowing which beliefs they want to keep and which to get rid of. If the individual was in a religious cult, the spiritual realm should be addressed with objective, supportive practioners. If former members are not careful, they may end up in a similar group with a different name.

This is one area where well-trained practioners could support an individual who grew up in a cult as he integrates into mainstream society. It is important to note, however, that the ex-member who grew up with every move mapped out for him may be looking for a surrogate leader to tell him what to do. Again, this is where appropriate training comes in. Practioners must find a balance between being supportive without becoming the new authority figure.
In the emotional realm, the main issues are depression, anger and hopelessness. Once out of the group, self-motivation is difficult to achieve. Some individuals said that, once they left, they were going to hell anyway, so it did not matter what they did next. Others reported they did not know what to do with all the free time, as formerly every minute of the day was filled with tasks to do. Once out of the cult, elite position and the intensity that the individual felt while in the cult no longer exists. This creates problems for former members, as everyday tasks seem humdrum and tiresome. These individuals must learn to enjoy ordinary daily responsibilities.

If the depression is situational, medications may be necessary as a treatment for short-term use while an individual works through some of the emotional issues. For others, it may be as simple as getting enough sleep, good food, and becoming relaxed and peaceful in a safe environment. When the depression is a chemical imbalance, it is important that it treated medically. Once a former member can initiate change, she begins to have hope for the future. If she sets goals and finds that she is successful in working toward those goals, the depression may go away.

Anger management issues are a little more complex. While it is important to observe that the individual was a victim and had no say in his life, it is imperative to note that he now has control and is responsible for the choices he makes from now on. Helping these individuals to gain self-awareness and self-confidence through successful choices and decisions will help them address the anger issues in a healthy way. As they are able to tell their story to someone who understands what they have been through, the communication to a caring audience will also diffuse some of the anger.
Anger can be a good thing if not acted out in a destructive way. Anger propels individuals to make both interpersonal and social changes. Former cult members have organized some of the most important changes in education about cults. By making the public aware of the harmful experiences they have been through, they can use their influence to help others. It helps create awareness that, in turn, creates an atmosphere of education and change.

To summarize, the adult child of a cult needs specific therapies and interventions after exiting the cult. Social service assessments should have screening questions that can help identify these individuals. The practitioners whom these individuals interact with should be educated about the specific issues that these individuals face and have cult specific interventions that are proven to work with this population. All of the subjects who exited on their own would have benefited from specific accessible interventions.

Recommendations for Future Research and Practice

Future research is needed for practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of the needs of individuals raised in a cult. Based on the information gained from journal articles, professional writings, memoirs, and the interviews analyzed in this study, the following issues should be addressed and researched:

1) Mental effects on individuals raised in cults:
   
   Adjustment disorders
   
   Drug and alcohol abuse
   
   Anger issues
Depression
Suicide

2) Research that needs to be addressed for individuals immediately after leaving a cult:

  Practical matters
  Work-related issues
  Food
  Housing
  Clothing
  Legal Issues
  Medical Issues

  Education, in general, and specifically about the cult that the individual was raised in

  Once research is completed, specific programs and treatments need to be developed for these individuals. Practitioners must be educated about cults and the after-effects that former members experience. If possible, these issues should be addressed:

  1. Practitioners must identify these individuals when they come in for services.
     Assessments and intake forms need to be developed with screening questions, so that these individuals can be identified.

  2. Educating the former member about their specific cult.

  3. Providing support and specific strategies to help these individuals smoothly transition into mainstream society.
4. Identify and treat practical issues, such as:
   - Financial
   - Housing
   - Work
   - Food
   - Clothing
   - Transportation

5. Identify the individual's level of adjustment and help him or her move to the next level.

6. Identify and teach social skills that may be lacking

7. Identify what information the individual is lacking about mainstream society and help the person gain the needed information.

8. Identify and treat drug and alcohol issues.


10. Address issues of loss and grief.

   It is important for these individuals to have support and learn what they need to know to live a happy and fulfilling life. They need to know that now they have choices, and that every choice they make has a natural consequence. They can then learn from those consequences. They need to know that life is a learning process, a series of learning lessons. Former cult members need support and education, but not a mentor who will tell them what to do or what to think.

   As a final point, what would a short-term facility look like that former members could go to so that they could transition into society in a healthy and gentle way? These
children of cults have a lot to offer society once they heal and are able to become educated. With good exit counseling, either outpatient or inpatient, these former cult members would be able to become flourishing members of society sooner.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
FURTHER READING


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