

Introduction

No empirical research has been conducted on what works and does not work for ex-cult members transitioning from a cult back into society. Most narratives on the subject deal with people telling stories of their involvement in a cult and the many challenges they face after leaving a cult(s). A number of experts (e.g., therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists, and ex-cult members) have written about cults (International Cultic Studies Association 2006). I use this wealth of knowledge to help explain what happens to an individual while in a cult and when transitioning out of a cult. Despite the lack of research about ex-cult members transitioning from a cult to society; several sociological theories and related research about newly released prisoners may help to explain the reintegration process. In addition, I interview several ex-cult members to gain a better understanding of what works and does not work when transitioning from a cult back into society. I am interested in this research because I was in a cult several years ago and have experienced the many challenges of transitioning from a cult back into society. I would like to know the challenges that other ex-cult members have had in their transition, in order to discern any commonalities in such a reality breaking experience.

Literature Review

Defining a cult

Cult has many definitions. The Blackwell Dictionary of Sociology describes a cult as a religious institution. "Membership is predominantly lower-class and usually gained through conversion, often during an emotional crisis that

joining a cult is seen to resolve” (Johnson 2000; 69). It is also described as a social structure, “an informal, loose organization formed around a single leader’s charismatic authority” (2000; 69). Cults are also noted to be predominantly short-lived and antagonistic toward major social institutions (2000). Merriam Webster’s Online Dictionary defines a cult as “**1:** formal religious veneration, **2:** a system of religious beliefs and ritual; *also:* its body of adherents, **3:** a religion regarded as unorthodox or spurious; *also:* its body of adherents (2006)”. The Encyclopedia Britannica Online reads, “In the West, the term has come to be used for groups that are perceived to have deviated from normative religions in belief and practice. They typically have a charismatic leader and attract followers who are in some way disenfranchised from the mainstream of society. Cults as thus defined are often viewed as foreign or dangerous (2006)”. The International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) does not give a specific definition for a cult. They argue that cults exist on a continuum: there are shades of gray. Some groups can be on the more extreme (destructive or very controlling) end of the continuum while others are considered more benign. A specific group or church also can change over time, by having more characteristics of a destructive cult or less of those same characteristics (2006). In the book “Captive Hearts, Captive Minds”, Tobias and Lalich point out that it’s “a group or relationship that earns the label “cult” or “cultic” on the basis of its methods and behaviors, not on the basis of its beliefs (1994: 5).”

A cult can be very harmful for an individual, even though the cult may not appear to be as problematic as the Branch Davidian, Heaven’s Gate, or Jonestown

cults (Bohm and Alison 2001; ICSA 2006; Tobias and Lalich 1994). Bohm and Alison concluded in their exploratory study of destructive cults that “there exists a configuration of behaviours, practices, and beliefs that might reliably distinguish the overly destructive cults (2001).” They also concluded that there was no way of predicting a potentially destructive cult (2001). Since there are many definitions and ideas of what a cult is, it is problematic to come to a definitive definition of a cult.

A total institution is used to describe mental and prison systems, by Erving Goffman. He expresses that when a person enters a total institution, he/she is stripped of who he/she was before. A person’s identity is taken from him/her and a new one is stamped in its place. The social support a person once had is no longer available. The individual has to totally rely on the institution to meet his/her needs. Workers, within an institution, enforce rules and regulations upon the individual for swift conformity. The many roles an individual played before entering the institution are mortified and reduced down to one role. This particular role is played out the whole time the person is in the institution (1961). A cult has similar dynamics as a total institution. Conformity is established by the cult leader(s) rules and requirements placed upon the individual. Cult members play out their one cult role until they leave. An individual comes to rely on other cult members for his/her social support, because many times a cult requirement is to cease communication with non-members. Therefore, when using the term cult, it will be considered a total institution as described by Goffman.

Depending on the audience, the term cult can have different meanings. Public opinion, in Nebraska, reacted more negatively towards the word cult than the term New Religious Movement (Olson 2006). Academic scholars will use what they deem appropriate for them (2006). Journalists even disagree with what term to use. Some say the word cult has too many negative connotations and the term New Religious Movement or alternative religion should be used. Yet others have no opinion one way or another (Hill, Hickman, and McLendon 2001). Regardless of these differences, I will use the term cult throughout this paper because I am referring exclusively to any destructive and controlling organization.

Self before the cult

From birth, the socialization process begins. Wrapping a baby in a blue or pink blanket starts defining the role expectations for that of a boy or girl. A baby learns to trust and rely (or not) on significant others in her/his life. The baby interacts with his/her significant others by crying to get his/her needs met. More interactions take place when the baby starts imitating others. Parents, also known as socializing agents, teach children to internalize the world around them (Rousseau 2002: 233). The socializing process is crucial for children to function in any society.

Children learn the language, symbols, beliefs, and values of their culture. These are important in order for children to have close intimate relationships. As children venture out and meet new people, at times, these adventures can be scary for them, but they will have the comfort and security of their intimate relationships. We all have a need to interact with and reach out to others. These

interactions help in the development of our self. We learn to follow the rules, norms, mores, and taboos within our culture. We start to see in us what we think others see. We wake up in the morning, look at ourselves in the mirror and start putting on the roles expected of us that day. If we need to look professional, we dress appropriately; have a confident stance, and even our expressions, gestures, and language fit into the role we have to play. Our costume is ready for the stage called life. All day long, we continually look at ourselves and change our costume to fit the situation (Rousseau 2002).

We are all unique because of the various interactions we have throughout life. The interactions I have with people are not the same as yours. We take from our own experiences to develop our own identity. We are individuals who have creativity, imagination, and critical thinking. We know what we like and dislike. We have the freedom to choose how we will act in each situation. At the same time, our individuality still participates in the “play” and is influenced by the other “actors on stage”. Society has a direct influence on me, while I have a direct influence on society. Cooley calls this teamwork. We have our position to “play” in order for the team to be successful (Rousseau 2002). Mead points out that a normal stable human being will have the different selves “intact” and be able to have them present at all times (1937: 143, 144). We can continue throughout our lives; playing our part on the stage while developing our many selves unless some kind of obstacle comes along and disrupts this process.

The cult self

We may become involved with a group because of a very intense need to belong and be accepted by others. We want to believe and trust that the group is a safe environment. This sense of security can be used against the individual, especially when the person is also seeking the answers to life's problems. The leader(s) of the group convinces an individual that he/she can be a part of the group's seemingly perfect world. The group is portrayed as an escape from an evil world to a utopian society. David Riesman, in his book "Individualism Reconsidered", points out that a "utopia" appears as a rational belief for the individual in a group when in reality it is very irrational. The group sells their "ideology" to the individual. He/she accepts the group's irrational belief system because of his/her own irrational beliefs. "The ideology may contain some elements of truth; these serve to lend plausibility, rather than to open the eyes and increase the awareness of the recipient (1954: 72)". The leader(s) of this group seduces the individual into thinking all his/her problems will be solved if she/he is obedient to the leader(s) every whim. The so called "utopian society" is completely reduced to the ideology of the leader(s).

In a cult, one costume fits all, and we wear the same costume in every situation. We are reduced down to a puppet. The script is handed to us and read verbatim. All creativity, imagination, and critical thinking are squelched to the point of becoming extinct. We no longer look in the mirror and see the many selves we once had. We look in the mirror and the reflection we see is that of the cult leader(s) telling us what to wear, what stance we are to take, and what

language and symbols we are to use. The many roles we once played in society are condensed down to one role. Mead claims “If we forget everything involved in one set of activities, obviously we relinquish that part of the self (1937: 143).” In Goffman’s mortification process, people who are in a total institution are stripped of the self they had before entering the institution. Any roles they played before are mortified. Compliance is quickly enforced by the institution’s rituals and routines that are unlike the ones the person had before entering the institution. The relationships they once had are put on hold. Educational achievements and job advancements are no longer pursued due to the restrictions being placed on them. They lose the identity they once had before entering the institution (1961). This mortifying of the self is much like a person who is in a cult. All rights are stripped from the individual. The cult self no longer has the freedom to talk to anyone they wish, question authority, or own possessions that are not associated with the “truth”. The individual’s time is regulated, and certain emotions are denied. The cult I was in expected us to be happy (blessed) all the time. Guilt was not acceptable, but teachings were taught in such a way that a person would feel guilty. Even when a normal response to a situation should have been fear or sadness, these emotions were extinguished. Critical thinking was also extinguished.

Cult leader(s) want a person to forget the activities associated with the pre-cult self. The pre-cult self is not useful for the cult’s agenda. The performance of an individual is the same for everyone he/she comes in contact with. The mask never changes. The cult leader(s) do not want to know a person’s

past bibliography; only the bibliography of the cult self. The cult member will internalize his/her bibliography to fit within the cult. When I was in a cult, my back stage performance was the same as my front stage performance. I acted as though I was always on the front stage appearing before my audience. I went to work, communicated with my family (although rarely), met people on the street, had a few friends (not in the cult) while putting on the same cult mask in each situation.

Robert Jay Lifton in, "Thought Reform and the Psychology of Totalism", points out eight different techniques that the leader(s) uses to control members. One of the techniques used is controlling the information a person can or can not access outside of the cult, also called "milieu control". The person can no longer read books, newspapers, and magazines that do not fit into the cult's ideology. Listening to any type of music, other than the cult's, is prohibited. Cult members have little hesitation to follow the rituals and routines because they believe the cult has all the answers they have been searching for (1989). The group I was in would have us burn anything that was not part of the cult's "truth". A friend of mine burned all of his pictures from Europe because a leader told him they were dark. We were instructed to only read the cult's books and magazines and only listen to their music. The teachings in the totalistic group are the ultimate truth, and there is no room for discussion or questioning. Lifton refers to this as the "Sacred Science" (1989). Leadership has direct communication with God, therefore, a person cannot argue with God.

Another technique is the manipulation of language and symbols. Mead tells us that language and symbols are very important for communicating and fitting into our society. The process of communicating is how we are able to think and make decisions (1937). The cult uses language and symbols to their advantage. They change the meanings of words to suit the group's ideology. Phrases and words are used to stop a person from thinking critically. Lifton calls this "loading the language". He says, "The most far-reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, highly reductive, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorized and easily expressed" (1989: 429). In the cult I was in, if a person was to express something that wasn't from the cult's teachings, we were immediately told, "Put off your old man!" Or "Renew your mind!" By doing this, we were brought back into the cult's teachings and stopped short of any critical thinking or questioning that we might have. Various phrases were used for any circumstance to bring us back to the cult's way of thinking.

"Dispensing of Existence" is similar to Goffman's "Process of Mortification". In a totalistic group, a person may be put to death literally because of non-compliance (1989). This would especially be true for a gang or a destructive cult. The cult I was in, a person could be 'born again of the wrong spirit'; therefore, they could be murdered. There was no chance of saving the person so why not kill them. Before I left the cult in 1987, several people left. Those of us who were still in the group were told that some of the leaders were most likely 'born again of the wrong spirit' because they had strayed from the truth. I heard of some accidents that had killed people when they were going to

confront the leaders or try to get other members out of the cult. I wondered if they had been murdered. We were then told the person no longer was protected by God and anything could happen to him/her. After hearing these stories, I was terrified to leave the group. When I did finally leave, I became involved with a group of ex-cult members. After about 2 years, I discovered this group was just as “cultish” as the one I left.

A very basic thing that happens in a cult is that it changes the ‘me’ that a person had before entering the cult into a new cult ‘me’. Mead claims that the ‘me’ in all of us conforms to society and the ‘I’ that works with the ‘me’ is spontaneous and creative. Both the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ work together, yet separately (1937: 177, 178). In a controlling group, the ‘I’ is squashed and the ‘me’ is brought out so that we conform to the group’s rules and expectations. However, there is still that little part of the ‘I’ that helps a person leave the group.

Self after the cult

Dahrendorf writes, “Before the individual can play his roles, he must know them; like an actor, man as a social being must learn his roles, become familiar with their substance and the sanctions that enforce them (1968: 56).” Before the cult, a person was familiar with the roles that he/she had and society’s expectations of those roles. But then this all changes when a person is involved in a cult, having new roles and expectations. A person becomes very familiar with his/her position within the cult. So what happens to a person who is thrown into a society that already expects him/her to know what his/her role is? It would be the same as if you were thrown into a foreign country where you don’t know the

language, customs, or role expectations. The role expectations, along with the trauma he/she experiences, can prevent a post-cult member from transitioning smoothly back into society.

Another challenge the ex-cult member faces is the variety of emotions he/she should have felt while in the cult. Arlie Hochschild writes about impression management and how we have to put on an act in certain situations. Her example of flight attendants shows how an individual is required to express one emotion – happiness. No matter what the flight attendant is faced with, he/she must perform “the smile” before his/her audience. The feelings essential to perform her/his job are in conflict with his/her real feelings. Every feeling we have serves a function and gives us clues to the external world. When we have to manage those feelings everyday by pretending to be happy, we start to feel numb (Rousseau 2002). In a totalistic group, an individual has to mortify feelings that would signal danger. The feeling of happiness becomes an illusion. This illusion is not recognized by the performer or the audience. When a person leaves the cult, all of the mortified feelings come rushing back. “I should have been afraid during that encounter,” I said. I asked myself, “Why didn’t I cry when he committed suicide?” or “Why didn’t I become angry and fight back when he seduced me?” These feelings can be very terrifying. The former cultist may have been physically, sexually, psychologically, and spiritually abused. Just like a person who has survived a traumatic event (i.e., natural disaster, war), the emotions from re-experiencing the event over and over again can be unbearable

(Tobias 1994). During this overwhelming time, the survivor needs the support of others.

Social support the ex-cult member needs may be much like the support a newly released prisoner needs. Few resources are available to help the recently released prisoner reintegrate back into society. The recidivism of the ex-prisoner is directly influenced by how well he/she is able to reintegrate and adjust to society (Visher & Travis 2003; Belenko 2006). A supportive family is critical during the first 30 days of the ex-prisoners release and the acceptance and encouragement from family members is related to post-release success. Recently released prisoners were most successful in finding employment and abstaining from drugs, and were more optimistic when they had a supportive family (Visher et al. 2003). Crisis intervention and case-management services were provided to recently released prisoners and their families in Manhattan's Lower East Side. After careful evaluation of this program, it was found there was "decreased drug use and fewer physical, mental, and emotional problems among the program participants" (2003). Prisoners and ex-cults members are similar in that they have both been in a very controlling environment. Therefore, from the research that has been done on recently released prisoners, I hypothesize that social support is a key element for ex-cult members who transition back into mainstream society. Additionally, I will look for the ex-cult member's level of involvement in the cult and how controlling the cult was. These two factors may differentiate cult members from prisoners and impact transition.

Unfortunately, research on cults is limited, and all of the peer-reviewed research articles on cults have been included in this paper. There has not been any research conducted that addresses what works and does not work for ex-cult members transitioning from a cult to society. Given this, I do an exploratory study on ex-cult members transitioning from a cult back into mainstream society. I conduct in depth interviews to explore what works and does not work for ex-cult members transitioning from a cult to society.

Methodology

Sample

I interviewed ex-cult members who were not born into a cult. My sample was 6 participants and was one of convenience. I knew one person who had been in a cult and then I contacted a therapist who knew ex-cult members. The therapist gave those ex-cult members my contact information so they would be the ones to make the initial contact (see appendix C). This was important because there is not a list of ex-cult members and this is a fairly rare and often hidden status.

Measurement of Variables

I conducted an exploratory study by asking open-ended questions of ex-cult members. After the completion of the interviews, I had a better understanding of the variables related to transitioning. I looked at how controlling the cult was for each individual and their level of involvement in the cult. Some other variables were what kind of social support the ex-cult member had after leaving the cult, from family, friends, counselors, and other ex-cult

members. I measured some demographics about the individual such as marital status, age, how long they were in the cult, and how long they had been out of the cult.

Instrument

The interview schedule is in Appendix A. Before the interview, I disclosed that I was in a cult to 5 out of 6 of the participants to help the person feel more comfortable. The first question (along with the 0-10 scale) measures how controlling the participant's cult was.

Several questions required prompts or tag questions. For instance, I asked participants what kind of social support they had before their involvement in the cult (question 6). Social support could include family, friends, church, clubs, groups, and school. The second part of this question, compared social support after they left the cult, with some possible prompts. I asked them what some of the most difficult things were when they left the cult (question 9). I made sure they included in their answer any financial difficulties, job difficulties, leaving behind those who were still in the cult, people not understanding, and fear of the cult. I then asked them the most positive things after leaving the cult (question 10) using prompts to illicit richer responses.

Another question that the participants needed some prompting on is what resources, such as education, employment, friends, family, other ex-cult members, books, articles, professional care, and/or hobbies, were the most helpful to them (question 11). I asked them if they sought out any professional help (question 12) and they needed some prompting for this question, such as a counselor,

psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or other community support. I asked if these resources were helpful and then why or why not.

I wanted to know what their marital status is (question 16) and if they have any children (question 17). Both of these questions led into further questions to better understand the participant's transition out of the cult, such as if their spouse or children helped or hindered their transition.

Procedures

I used a tape recorder during the interview so I could transcribe their words verbatim. This provided me with complete data, and allowed me to look for similarities and uniqueness's across interviews. The sample consent form is in Appendix B. I gave this to each individual to sign before the interview. I also gave the participant a copy of the consent form. In the consent form, I gave them the option to end the interview if it became too stressful and offered specific directions to counseling if they need it.

I used the QSR NVivo qualitative computer program to help with the analysis of the interviews. I was able to make nodes out of each of the questions so I could see each response at the same time. This computer program was also helpful for coding certain variables.

Results

Six former cult members were interviewed. Five of the participants knew I had been in a cult before I started the interview. I only told two of the participants, right before interviewing them, that I had been in a cult because the other three knew I was in a cult prior to our meeting time. The other participant I told I was

in a cult after the interview. Participants 3, 4, 5, and 6 came in contact with me through a therapist contact. Participant 2 stopped the interview during question #18 because she became too tired.

Four of the cults were bible-based. One was a running group that focused on preparing for marathons, having meals at certain times, eating certain foods, and what kind of activities the group would participate in. The other cult was a small eastern based spiritualistic group located in Washington, D.C.

The background of the participants is described in Table 1. Three of the married participants were in the cult with their spouse. All of their spouses refused to be interviewed. When first meeting with participant 4, her husband started to tell me all about the cult they were in, but then stopped when I asked him if I could interview him separately from his wife. Her husband did sit in on some of the interview and interjected a few things every now and then.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Participant	Gender	Age now	Number of years in cult	Number of years out of cult	Marital Status
#1	Female	36	3	2	Married
#2	Female	38	4	4	Single
#3	Female	31	9	1	Married
#4	Female	53	18	18	Married
#5	Male	66	28	8	Married
#6	Female	50	3 ½	18	Single

Five of the participants, while in the cult, were in contact with other cult members on a daily basis. The other participant who did not attend meetings on a daily basis, but weekly, her husband was also in the same cult and she spent a lot of time with her cult girlfriends. Participants 2 and 6 actually lived with other cult members.

Participant 5

“On a daily basis, did you have contact with other cult members?”

“Yeah, because I had, I was in construction and I had guys work for me that were in the cult. And it’s all intertwined like a bunch of vines.” “So it’s, it’s that’s what keeps the thing together is the intermingling of people within the cult. It’s not something when you just go once a week where your, your temporary your, your meetings and you leave. Your life is surrounded by people in that cult and controlled by it.”

Participant 2 – This participant was in the running cult. Boulder, CO is known for being health conscious so this is why she felt drawn to move to Boulder from Denver.

“Then finally I was in a session with ‘Anny’ who was an alternative health practitioner who pretends to be a therapist, muscle practitioner, whatever. And she does muscle testing and said, “Oh, all your body chemistry gets stronger if you move to Boulder and move into a household.” A household is a group of 3 or 4 people, in the cult, who live together. So I did and I lived in a household for 2 years before I got out.”

Control

I asked each participant on a scale from 0-10, 0 being not controlling at all and 10 the most controlling, where do you feel the cult falls on this scale? Four participants said a 10, one said an 8 ½ - 9, and one said a 6. Several of the

questions I asked showed just how controlling the cults were for the participants. There were guidelines set out for them, time commitments, and what activities they would be involved with. These are some of their responses.

Participant 2

“It was very, everything was filled out for us. There were guidelines on dating, guidelines on um, we should, there was a mandatory party once a week. We should play, we should work, everything was filled out clearly, so.”

Participant 3

“And as the years went on, I don’t know if I picked up more or they just changed somehow, but it got very manipulative and very controlling and very legalistic.”
 “There was a definite time commitment. We were not allowed to miss service, if you miss service something must be wrong. You have to let someone know why you’re not there. They have to be legitimate reasons. Um, there was definite pressure for um, certain types of; you have to read your bible everyday, you have to pray everyday a certain amount, you have to; have to fellowship within the church in order to keep your friends. Friendships, outside friendships are not forbidden if they go to other churches, but you need to focus in and fellowship with people that are here kind of thing. A lot of service, a big push for service within the church. You need to be helping out and be locked in somewhere and be doing something to help out the church.”

Participant 6

“I worked full time as a legal secretary which is also hilarious. Then on weekends and nights, we worked as security guards. Um, that was how we kept the money coming in and kept perpetually exhausted.”

“Wow, wow!”

”Yeah, when I left the group I realized when adding up there’s like 175 hours to the week. I was working 120 hours a week. Yeah, 120 hours a week.”

A few of the groups would not allow the cult members to have contact with their family and friends, who were not in the cult, or at least it was implied. This would be another way the cult leader(s) would have control over their members.

Participant 2

“Uh, it wasn’t really directly stated when you first got involved, but I noticed, after getting more involved, that a lot of other members didn’t have a lot of contact with their family and working with “Anny”, the special therapist, whatever, the health practitioner in the group, sure enough, every time, “Oh yeah your muscles get stronger every time you don’t see your family. You should avoid your family for 3 weeks, you should avoid your family for one month, you should avoid your family.” Well, one of my brothers had a wedding and I’m so glad I overruled that and went to the wedding anyway. I would have missed seeing all of that. So, I mean, the long of the short answer is that any friends I had before the cult, any boyfriends, everyone just faded away because the cult was incompatible with anyone else. The meals are at weird times, you can’t eat out, you can’t go out and eat out, all your meals are made at home very specifically. You eat, you run; you don’t have time for anyone else. Your whole world becomes this group of people.”

Participant 6

“In the beginning, no I’d say in the beginning. I’d say the first two years. I kind of had it worked down to a system where I maybe had contact with my parents once a month. And because they were 2,000 miles away, and I was only contacting them once a month, I thought that would sort of keep everybody happy. And it did for a while but then of course. And then you get to that point where you have to write that exit letter which was really painful. You know, you have to cut them out of your life and then the curtain falls and then the curtain falls. Don’t you even think about contacting them ever again. Yeah, if they did all this to you up front, you’d bawk thinking this is weird and then walk away, but then when you get so insinuated into the mind set and you know there are people in the group that don’t talk

to their family and they're way up. You know what's expected of you. You want to be saved or whatever so you feel like you don't have a choice."

"How did this impact you?"

"I felt horrible, I felt so guilty. I really felt, I really felt like I was splitting down the middle. I felt like I was standing in a river. Here was the group on one side and my family on the other, and you have to choose forever. I was horribly torn."

Social Support before the Cult

Two of the participants had just moved into town. They had not yet established any social support until they became involved with the cult.

Participant 2

"Um, it wasn't very good when I think about it. My self esteem was kind of low, and I often would have a boyfriend, but when the relationship was over, I would be on my own again. And, uh, I had a few girlfriends, but nothing really real or substantial. And my relationship with my family was somewhat distanced. So it wasn't super good, really."

Participant 3

"We had just moved here. We had no one. My husband was at the military station at Fort Carson. We moved out here and didn't know a soul. And, um, the military is not real great for support. And there was somebody from the church that offered me to come along with them to have our kids play. So not knowing anyone that was great. So socially, it really, it really filled that need because we didn't know anybody. And then we walked in and it was a big church and then all of a sudden we had lots of friends. So that was a big draw for us."

The participants became so involved with their groups that, for the most part, the other cult members were the participant's only social support. Even

though participant 5's wife was not in the cult, he came to solely rely on the people within the group.

Question

“Describe how your relationships with your family changed from before you entered the cult in comparison to while you were in the cult (pause), and then right after leaving the cult (pause).”

Participant 5

“Well, before I was in the cult, it's hard for me to make a statement about my wife's relationship, my relationship with her because I was in the cult when I met her. But she felt during the times, years, I was in the cult, I would sometimes come home, and I would be distant. I wouldn't be warm and affection, I would be like, I would be distant. I would be cold. She said my eyes would be starry, like I'd be almost like I was in a trance. Of course now it's totally changed, I mean I don't go to those meetings. I don't go to that type of a situation so I'm out of that. And I think she'd tell you my eyes are ok now. (Laughing) You know, it was the same thing with my family. I was very, uh, my mom use to tell me that she, she didn't care for the group I was in, and I would uh take the offensive against her. So there were times when I would kind of tell her off. You don't know what you're talking about, this and that, and this and that. So yeah there was a lack of kindness and love for my part on anyone who would attack the group. So you come back, and you attack that person. Don't attack my group. Don't attack my friends. You know, so that's the difference, and as I've come out of it now I don't have that. I'm able to, to talk to my mom and my family about some of the things, you know, where I was basically deceived. And so I don't have that hardness and that coldness like I had when I was in that group. So yeah, there is a big difference.”

Table 2
Social Support after the Cult

Participants	Family	Ex-cult members	Friends	Counselors
#1	Yes	Yes	Not really	No
#2	Yes	No	No	Yes
#3	Yes	Yes	No	Somewhat
#4	Yes	Yes	Yes	Somewhat
#5	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
#6	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Family

Family was very important to all the participants after leaving the cult, some more than others (see Table 2). They had either spouses, parents, or other family members to help them through a lot of their pain. All six participants said their relationships with their family improved after leaving the cult.

Participant 2

“How does this (social support) compare to when you left the cult? You said you were kind of distanced from your family before, but how was it after you left?”

“Oh, the only thing I had after the cult was my family. Yeah, all of my friends, whatever, nobody was there except my mom mostly, my dad and my brothers couldn’t be there with me and all the pain. I don’t think they could be there.”

I don't think they have a lot of capacities, but my father he was ok sending money for some months to help with my care before I was able to qualify for disability. I don't think he had the emotional stability or whatever, to be there for someone 'cause he had PTSD himself being in the war."

Participant 6 said her family helped her a lot, but she also had some problems with them not understanding what she was going through. She was actually kicked out of the cult she was in. The cult leader bought her a one way bus ticket from Washington D.C. to Colorado so she could be with her family. Shortly after she arrived in Colorado, she found out that a friend of hers, who had recently left the same group, threatened the cult leader that she would go public with information she had on him unless he let this particular person (this participant) return home.

"For a few months I was staying with my sister and then my parents. That was kind of awkward because I was going back and forth. No one wants to live with someone who's just come out of a cult. (Laughing) Just a little different, you know. You're depressed and that's the way it's supposed to be. You know you don't have to be, but if you're able to get in touch with those feelings sooner it's actually so much better, because you're processing exactly what you're going through; grief, separation, and loss. Families can't stand to see that, they can't stand to watch that. It's like; well you're back with us now why aren't you happy. You know that was a bad place so why aren't you just tickled to death to be out of there. You know like it was just a bad summer camp experience. Aren't you glad to be home in your own bed? They don't understand the moodiness which is totally normal. You have your good days and bad days. How do you come out of a cult and not be manic? I had an exit counselor, I had an ex-cult member, I had Wellspring. I was really lucky. When I came back to Colorado, I had the Refocus group. I was just really lucky. "

Wellspring is located in Albany, Ohio, and is a retreat center for people to stay after coming out of a cult. This is a way for people to be taken care of while getting the education and counseling they need. Refocus is now referred to as the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). They have a lot of educational material to help ex-cult members and their families. ICSA has two conferences every year. One is for only ex-cult members and is always held in Colorado. The other conference is for professionals, ex-cult members, and other interested persons and is held in different places around the world. Both of these organizations are non-profit, and both have websites (see Appendix D).

Two of the other participants mentioned that their family was very helpful, but at the same time, families hindered the former cult member's transition.

Participant 2

“Unconditional love is how they helped, but what didn't help were the judgments, like my sister-in-law, she's come a long way, but her and her family have been somewhat judgmental of me, trying to hold me back to where I was 4 years ago and some of the weird things I did then. That's not helpful. You got to let people be fluid and change and grow and not hold them to old ideas.”

Participant 3

“Um, my family has been great. They've been very encouraging, very supportive. They did get to a point, right before, and this was part of the reason I sought out professional help. I was kind of getting the impression they were tired of hearing about it. And I wasn't ready to stop talking and processing through stuff. So, that was kind of the down side because they didn't want to hear about it every week, forever.”

Friends

Two of the participants said friends were very helpful after leaving the cult. The other participants did not have any friends, or at least very few, outside the cult. A few of the participants mentioned having support from other members who had also left the group. I separated the ex-cult members from the friends in the above table to clarify the difference between friends outside the cult and then friends within the cult.

Question

“How did this compare to when you left the cult? Social support”

Participant 3

“I had a few outside friends, but those relationships were so strained and so spotty. There was a couple of friends that we had that were our neighbors when we lived in Fort Carson and she would call me once a year. So, I had her and I haven’t even called her yet. And, um we just stayed so busy with our friends there that we didn’t really make any other friends. So when we left, we had no one again. Uh, yeah, so as time has gone by all the other people who have left the cult, that’s now our new support group. Our new network of friends.”

Participant 1

“I guess I lost a lot of my friends through it, um, held on to 2 of the friendships, 2 of the family friendships. One on the peripheral – they left the church and we kind of talked to them. I’m only friends with one of the couples – we’re close friends now. The couple that ended up leaving after two years after we left, after they got enough courage to leave the church. We’re still close to them, but other than that.”

Counselors

Counseling was extremely important for three of the participants. They were very depressed after leaving the cult and were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Two of them mentioned they were extremely suicidal after they left. Two of the participants, I describe as somewhat for counselors (Table 2) because they never went to see a counselor regularly, and they just came in contact with Rosanne Henry or Hal Mansfield. Five of these participants came in contact with Rosanne Henry and/or Hal Mansfield. Rosanne Henry lives in Littleton, CO and counsels ex-cult members. Hal Mansfield has an M.A. in counseling and is the Executive Director of the Rocky Mountain Resource Center. The Rocky Mountain Resource Center is a resource for people who have been in cults, gangs, and hate groups. Appendix D has Rosanne Henry's and the Rocky Mountain Resource Center's website.

Participant 2

“Oh, I have a great support system now. I mean, everything from meeting people at the conferences like in Estes Park [there is an ex-cult member conference there]. Like, Rosanne Henry, she saved my life. Boy, one day she did some exit counseling with me, when I lived in Arkansas, over the phone and one day I was getting ready to step in the bathtub with a blow dryer, literally, I mean I had 2 or 3 different scenarios and she talked me out of it. Even, bless her heart she wrote me a poem. There are a lot of helpers for me, getting me out of the darkness, a lot of helpers. I think that's why I really feel called out to help other people get out of the darkness, too, you know. So I hope that I can do that in my own humble ways.”

Participant 5

“Yeah, like I said I had Rosanne which I went to meetings with her for at least 2, couple of years. And then there was

another fellow that was in a cult ministry. I worked with him and then my wife and her family and my family. Yeah, you can put all of it together. You know what I mean?"

Three of the participants did receive exit counseling shortly after they left the cult. Participant 6 had exit counselors waiting for her when she returned to Colorado from Washington, D.C. The counselors spent three days educating her about cults.

Education

Education was a very helpful resource for all the participants. Participant 1 said that going back to college helped her the most. The other five participants said that becoming educated about cults was very beneficial for them.

Participant 3

"I did a ton of reading right after I left. And when the light bulb clicked and figured out this is a cult. I did tons and tons of reading. Reading on the internet. Um, I bought some books on cults and spiritual abuse. I looked at a lot of the cult websites which is how I found Rosanne Henry. And, um, that was super helpful for me. Really, really helpful to look at it and say I'm not the only one. The Rick Ross website has a bunch of personal stories from people who have been through cult experiences, all different kinds of cults, and the ones that were Christian based I could totally relate to some of the things they were describing in there. I could totally put my name at the bottom of this and it would be me. So, that was really good. I think that was one of the most encouraging things to me to know that I am not the only one who has gone through this. There's a lot of other people out there who have experienced the same thing, and told the same things, and they made it. So, I can do this. (Laughing) I can do this!"

Rick Ross has a website called the Rick A. Ross Institute of New Jersey and is a database of information about cults, destructive cults, controversial

groups and movements. This includes personal testimonies, court documents, news articles, and much more.

Participant 4

“Hal helped me a lot. He’s a resource, I think of him as a resource because I can put, oh he would say this “Bill” sounded just like Jim Jones because he played a tape for me when I met him. Um, that’s one resource and that made me feel like, oh I’m not nuts.”

Participant 6

“When I started reading Lifton’s criteria I felt I was reading a how to manual on how they did this to me, and I was blown away.”

This participant is referring to Lifton’s eight techniques used by totalistic groups as mentioned in my literature review.

Most Difficult

The participants had many difficult things they were faced with after leaving the cult. Three of the participants said that losing friendships was very difficult.

Participant 3

“I think the hardest part for me was losing the friendships that were there because the two good, good friends that I had, we spent everyday together. Our kids grew up together; they’re all the same ages. When all that got severed, it was almost like a death. I just did not expect that, I didn’t see that coming. So I was blind-sided by that and really surprised. It took me a good while to be ok with the fact that it wasn’t really personal towards me. It’s just the rule they have to follow and now so I lose out. So, that was really hard. “

Participant 4

“We still miss the good people that we did like. Those people, I can name the day, I would love to run into them.

You know, I mean they would have to have gone through what “Tim” did for them to leave. “Bill” would just throw them out so they could get their reality tested and then run into them. I miss those people. I liked those people.”

Most of the participants mentioned they were having problems financially. They had all given a lot of their money to support the cult leaders. For a couple of them, they were no longer struggling financially so this turned out to be a positive aspect after leaving the cult. Participant 5 was kicked out of the cult because his wife would not sign over her half of the rental property to be given to the cult leader and some of the members.

Participant 3 was and still is somewhat afraid to go out in public places for fear of running into cult members.

“Going out in public and risking running into them or risking running into anyone else from the cult was my biggest hurdle. I didn’t want to go. I didn’t know how I was going to be treated. It varied from situation to situation. And I just got to a point where I couldn’t take the risk and I’m still not totally over that. (Nervous laughter) That’s been my hardest thing, just going out. Even going grocery shopping. I usually take my husband with me or I go somewhere where it’s not very likely I’m going to run into anybody. That’s been my hardest, hardest thing.”

Participant 2 had a difficult time with people, especially doctors, not understanding what she had been through.

“Oh yeah, we went to a lot of doctors. I had one doctor laugh at me ‘cause I was so scared. I had a hat on and I was afraid to look around, and he’d laugh, and he thought I was just the craziest thing he’d ever seen. And my mom, at one point, was so afraid for my life because I was very suicidal for a while. She committed me to a mental hospital. I was actually committed twice. Once for a couple of days and then once for 2 1/2 weeks. And those were extremely traumatic experiences, extremely traumatic because people in Arkansas, at least in this particular town,

in this particular behavioral health hospital, they don't have really specialized PTSD training or, um, understanding like the trauma response. Some people just withdraw and that's what I did. 'Cause I was so tapped and maxed out by "Shawn" dying and everything else. I just withdrew into myself to hold onto that last shard of what I was and what I had."

Most Positive

The participants gave very unique responses to what the most positive things were for them after leaving the cult.

Participant 1

"It's freeing for me. It was really freeing for me because I didn't have that. I always had that, well, we were only in it for three years. It was just a way for me – I felt like I don't have anymore commitments, like for a few months we didn't have to be somewhere every night, no planning, no more out-of-pocket expenses because if you had a ministry everything came out of your own pocket even though the pastor was paid with our tithes. Every single ministry was paid out of people's pocket. And so it was freeing money-wise and time-wise, so I'd say it was really good. (Chuckle) It felt really great! (Laughter from both of us)"

Participant 3

"The financial situation, we can finally do the things we've been dreaming of doing, forever. Work on finishing up the house the way we wanted it, spend the money and take the time with our kids. Having the time with the kids has been absolutely great. Taking those little moments and going to the park or going to the movies. Taking those opportunities has been awesome. I've also had the time to pursue my career goal and, um, I was allowed to do that in the cult as long as it didn't interfere with church service and serving in the church and that kind of thing. And I was really starting to feel pressure that that was the end and now that I'm out, I've been able to move twice as fast to reaching those goals. So, that's been a great positive thing, something to work towards."

Participant 4

“You know there was a a, I remember my dad telling me, you know, there would come a day when you’ll feel like it’s light again, lighter, you don’t have to be thinking about this, you don’t have to deal with it, and it will be different, and it was, and it is. And it’s not as heavy, I mean I can, it doesn’t mean that you don’t have other things to do in life, but I wouldn’t go back there. It’s just kind of a clump of darkness. If I can put a point of reference on it I learned this, I learned from that and I ain’t going back to that ever. That’s why I became a more discriminating, in certain people’s vocabulary that might sound judgmental, but ok I’ll be judgmental. (Laughing) But yeah, I don’t want chaos in my life. It kind of comes to you naturally, car breaks down whatever. Life’s going to happen anyway who wants a cult on top of it, you know.”

Participant 5

“Oh, just the positive things were when I started getting out of the depression I had. Just being able to get up in the morning and not be in such a depression. Just the, the, the, the leaving the depression and it took years as the depression left. And I also took medication that I was on and I’m still on some. Uh but, but, just to a, just to a start to enjoy the simple things of life. Which when you’re depressed everything, you look like, you feel like you’re in a hole. You can’t see out. You can’t see the sky. You can’t see anything. You’re trapped. When you come out of that trapness and holeness, you see that life is beautiful. Just the simple fact of being able to get up. Sometime I’m just thankful, in the middle of the night, that I don’t have any weird thinking in my head and it’s not all spun out. And I’m not depressed in a state where I’m feeling like this is the end and I; I have no purpose in life. I mean, all those things come to you, and you just become thankful that you’re free from that. Free from all that garbage that would drag you down. So yeah it’s just the simple things of life. You know one of the things I did when I was in such a depression, I would go out. My wife would have all these little signs in the yard about her garden, her little garden and I’d read those little, little signs and things and I’d say, “I can’t feel that way. I can’t appreciate this nice little garden.” This little garden is mine or whatever the saying is. I was so depressed I couldn’t, I couldn’t even these

words couldn't even enter into me and become, become enjoyable to read. Whereas time went on, I can go and look over her yard and enjoy all the things she's got in her yard. That she's, her little gardens and her little tiny baskets and everything else. It's, it's just the simple things, the simple things of life."

The names the participant's used in their interviews are in parenthesis and have been changed.

Conclusion

Analysis

I chose to use Symbolic Interactionism theories because the theories were helpful in my explanation of group (cult) dynamics. The theories were also helpful in explaining what happens to individuals within a cult and to the participants of this study and me.

In particular, I hypothesized that social support, especially family, would be very important for the ex-cult member's transition back into society. Family members did play a key part during their transition. Three of the participant's family members had to step in and actually care for them. Much like the former prisoners reintegrating back into society, the former cult members also needed social support to help them adjust to society once again and become successful. After I left the cult I was in, my family supported me fully. They were very happy I was out. My soon-to-be-husband was also in the cult with me, and we supported each other. Even after our divorce, we still have a bond with one another because of the experience we had. We are able to talk and make some sense out of it.

As human beings, we want to belong and be accepted by others. All the participants, including myself, had instant friendships from other cult members. The cult became our family. I think we were all searching for utopia by belonging to a group where everyone had the same driven purpose in life. After leaving the cult, the people we called friends and family in the cult, would not have anything to do with us anymore. The cult members were told not to speak to the individuals who recently left. This makes it difficult when transitioning back into society because suddenly a person has lost his/her most significant system of social support. One participant said, “When all that got severed, it was almost like a death. I just did not expect that, I didn’t see that coming.” For me, losing my friendships was worse than a death because I knew they were alive, but I could not make contact with them. I still, occasionally, after 20 years, wish I could make contact.

The “utopian society” that was set up in the cults had to be protected. I believe this is why there were so many restrictions on whom, the participants and also myself, were able to communicate with. When people would leave the cult, the cult members were not allowed to communicate with them. Was this because the cult members might find out the cult really is not a “utopian society”? One participant, after she had left, said, “They just don’t speak to you anymore.” This was true for the cult I was in. People who were leaving had information about adultery and sexual abuse that was taking place within the cult. The cult leaders tried to cover this up by kicking out individuals who spoke against the abuse and adultery. Cult members were not to speak to these individuals because those who

had left or were kicked out were possessed and not speaking the 'truth'. Cult leaders then taught that physical adultery was not a sin, but spiritual adultery was. I am sure this seemed very rational for the cult leaders because they did not want their 'perfect world' to be upset.

Goffman writes about the front stage and the back stage. The performance we play is for everyone to see on the front stage, but the back stage is meant to be private and personal. No one needs to know what takes place on someone's back stage. This does not happen for people in a cult. One participant mentioned that if any of the cult members had to miss a service, there better be a good explanation for this. The leaders were monitoring any activities the cult members had outside of the cult. Two of the participants said they lived with other cult members. When living with others, there is very little personal space. I also lived with other cult members. I always had to let someone know what I was doing and where I would be going for the day. There were not any personal boundaries within the cult. If my bedroom door would be closed for too long, someone would be checking up on me. A person's back stage was constantly being invaded.

The self of the participants was being mortified within the cult. There were restrictions placed on them and rules they had to follow. "And as the years went on, I don't know if I picked up more or they just changed somehow, but it got very manipulative and very controlling and very legalistic." This participant said they were told to read their bible and pray everyday, and there were rules about who they could talk to and also how they needed to be doing something for the church all the time. "There was a definite time commitment." Another

participant said, "There were guidelines on dating, guidelines on um, we should, there was a mandatory party once a week. We should play, we should work, everything was filled out clearly." She also said there were guidelines on what to eat, when to eat, and when to run. She did not have any time left for making friends outside the cult. The participants were stripped of who they were before and the cult self, with all of its rules and restrictions, was put in place of the pre-cult self.

Many similarities to Goffman's mortification process when a person enters a mental or prison institution compared to a cult. The cult is different, in that, the person does not know all the rules and restrictions placed on him/her the first meeting he/she goes to. It starts out so 'perfect'. The person has instant friends and the other cult members appear to be the family he/she has always wanted. Two of the participants said they did not have any social support before entering the cult so the cult seemed like the perfect place to have that support. When I went to my first meeting, I was welcomed with open arms. The other cult members became my family. At first, I was not told to not have contact with my biological family, but as time went on, I was specifically told that if I went to visit, my family I would be out of God's 'hedge of protection'. I could get in a car accident or anything disastrous could happen to me. Two other participants were eventually told to totally cut their family off and not to contact them anymore. The cult member becomes isolated, in the sense, that he/she comes to solely rely on the other cult members. Any other support, outside the cult, he/she may have had becomes the enemy as one participant said. In a way, the control

from a cult can be even worse than a prison or mental institution because it is so subtle, and the person does not realize how controlling and manipulative the cult is until he/she leaves.

The one thing Goffman does not write about is the human spirit's willingness to survive despite the circumstances. All of the participants, along with me, chose to survive the manipulation and control of the cults we experienced. Even though we survived, the transition back into society was extremely difficult for many of the participants. Three were diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and two admitted they were suicidal at times. One participant said she stayed in her room for a year after she left. Her mother had to put food outside her door. She said she was so afraid to leave that she urinated in a bucket in her room and would go days without showering. Three other participants said they were so depressed they had a hard time getting up in the morning. I know personally of a few people who did not survive. They chose to take their own lives because the pressure was too difficult for them.

The roles that were played, before the cult, were reduced down to one role within the cult. One participant, who is a mother of four, was in a leadership position over the nursery in the cult. One would think this would be ideal for a mother, but she put so much time into that particular position, she had no time for her own children. Another participant said he became very uncaring and unloving toward his wife and family, because no one else mattered, except his cult family, especially since his wife and family disagreed with the cult's beliefs. I was not allowed to visit my family, even though, for two years, I lived just three hours

away from them. My role as a daughter and a sister were stripped from me, and the new cult role was put in its place.

Two of the participants referred to their involvement in the cult, as the lowest on the totem pole. In this position, they were required to do a lot of menial work within the cult household. This was similar to the cult position I was in. I lived with two leaders and two other cult members. I was basically responsible for the house to be perfectly clean and when higher-up leaders would visit, I was responsible for the perfect meal. Their idea of perfection was that no crumb should be left, even under the stove because there might be a devil spirit attached to that one crumb. The cult leaders wanted to create a “utopian society” any way they could. Not only is a person’s physical environment made to be perfect, but also the whole person. There is a level of perfection, within this so called “utopian society”, that one must try to achieve. It seems plausible (to achieve this perfection) because there is a hint of truth in the irrational belief system (Riesman 1954).

I did not ask the participants, specifically, about the language and symbols that were used in the cults, but some of them brought up useful examples. The language and symbols used in a cult are manipulated to control the members. Robert J. Lifton also refers to this as “loading the language”. One participant said she wanted to be part of the ‘inner circle’. She was striving towards this by studying a series of books with other cult members. She would then become a leader in the group and be part of the ‘elite’ group. If members questioned the teachings in her cult, they would be called ‘heathens’. Another cult told it’s

members to 'break ties' with anyone who disagreed with their teachings. When this participant left, no one would have contact with her because it was the rule to 'break ties'. The cult I was in said when people left they left God's 'hedge of protection'. This could be disastrous because it meant you might get in a car accident, have a miscarriage, suffer financially, and much more. It is difficult to leave a cult when you will be called a 'heathen' or people will 'break ties' with you or you will leave God's 'hedge of protection'.

The "I" (creative part of the self) in the participants, was not totally squashed because they were able to leave the cult. Three of the participants questioned what they were being taught. All three of them, were basically asked to leave or conform to the cult's ideology. People who questioned the teachings of the cult I was in were also asked to leave or conform. I left the cult because I had too many questions. I did not want to ask the leaders these questions, since I knew they would only give me answers from the cult's perspective.

All of the participants, including me, were angry after realizing we had been taken advantage of by the cult leader(s). One participant said she went into a rage while writing down all the questions she had concerning the cult leader. We all had our 'utopian' world crushed. We stayed in the cult because we believed the deceit and lies that were being told. Again, if one was to express their anger toward the cult leader(s) and question what was being taught, he/she would be asked to leave or conform. I was not able to express my anger, while in the cult, because my anger did not even surface until after I left.

Another significant piece during their transition was for the participants to be educated about cults; five of the six had this education. And even the other participant found it helpful to go back to college. When a person gains more knowledge, the more critical they will become in their thinking. The spontaneous and creative part of the self can once again flourish since more activities are being introduced back into the self. I was educated about cults, and this was the most beneficial education I could have received to help with my recovery from the cult experience. Returning back to college, after 16 years, was also significant.

The way in which a person's narrative unfolds is a form of storytelling. There are "narrative linkages" and "slippages". The linkages reveal the distinctness amongst each narrative and also the cohesiveness. The slippages reveal each individual's unique story (Gubrium & Holstein 1998). When two of the participants told their stories, it seemed as if they had told their stories many times before. It seemed as if they knew what question I would ask next because many times they would answer a question before I asked. They, also, described in detail specific examples of their experiences in the cult. The linkage the two participants had in their individual narratives was by continually telling their story while answering a question. There was cohesiveness throughout each of the narratives. There is also more to their stories than just the narrative, and this includes me. We have all been out of our cults for more than twenty years. We had all, at some point, attended an annual, ex-cult member conference. One of the participants I briefly spoke with at this ex-cult member conference. We all know Rosanne Henry (a cult therapist) and Hal Mansfield (executive director of The

Rocky Mountain Resource Center). These two participants did not need to explain what the ex-cult member conference was or who Rosanne Henry and Hal Mansfield were. This is how I injected myself into their stories because I already knew this information. Another interesting attribute to their stories was that their interviews were two hours long. The other interviews were forty-five minutes to one hour in length.

I include myself in the storytelling since I was the one who put the questions together and five of the participants knew I also had been in a cult. Gubrium and Holstein argue that the storyteller can not take complete ownership over their story when another person is involved. "Storytelling unfolds in relation to others, who more or less collaborate in giving a story its shape and substance (1998: 179)." There was a difference in the narrative from the participant who did not know I had been in a cult. He would explain to me what a cult is in some of his answers. After explaining about a cult being controlling, he said, "And that's the real danger, is in any of these areas, is they get your mind and then they gotcha." He also went into detail about who Rosanne Henry is. He did not know that I knew Rosanne Henry personally, whereas, other participants mentioned her name but did not go into any detail.

Participant one was nervous throughout much of the interview, because she admitted to me this was her first time to go into any detail about her experience. She paused a lot and had to think about her answers. She was modifying, changing, and correcting her answers. I asked the question, "Did the cult leader allow you have contact with family and friends who were not in the

cult?” She responded, “I was allowed to keep contact, I don’t think he had any say so, but it was very manipulative, but not”. She then continued to elaborate on this and finished by saying, “They just don’t speak to you anymore, and um no confrontation outside that – just not speaking to you”. This is called “narrative editing”. The author of the story is monitoring and making corrections as the story unfolds (Gubrium & Holstein 1998). This participant’s narrative was very much in contrast to the other two participants who had told their stories before.

The participants who had been educated about cults used language and references to this education. The participant who I had briefly met at an ex-cult member conference referred to people and organizations without having to explain who the people were or what the organization was. She said, “When I started reading Lifton’s criteria, I felt I was reading a how-to-manual on how they did this to me, and I was blown away.” She did not need to explain who Lifton is, because Lifton’s criteria are taught at the ex-cult member conference. This particular interview was more like a conversation. Because almost all of the participants knew I had been in a cult, I contributed to their storytelling. This is referred to as “narrative control”. According to Gubrium and Holstein, this is the control within the narrative as it unfolds. “What is formally circumscribed, like what informally unfolds, remains subject to the active composition of narration, which is always controlling in its own right (1998: 173).” I had some control over the participants’ narratives by giving them part of my narrative. Their answers might have been much different if I had not been in a cult.

Participants' Reactions

This was a small sample, but there is such richness in these stories. All of the participants were very appreciative and thankful for the research I am doing. Two of the women I had met for the first time gave me hugs when I entered their homes and again when I left. One woman was so excited for me to be there that she showed me around her house, especially her kitchen and bathroom which her husband had recently remodeled. She was also very excited to show me her art work. Her art work was very important to her for her cult recovery. The other woman wanted me to feed her turtles. She told me her turtles were the one constant in her life, and it was nice because they didn't make any loud noises and talk back.

Despite the horrific experiences the participants shared with me, they were still able to laugh. I asked one participant, at the end of the interview, "Is there anything else you'd like to add?" He said, "Don't join it! They're up in Greeley." We laughed about this. He was the only participant who did not know I had been in a cult. There was other laughter, too. One participant and I laughed when she said, "But yeah, I don't want chaos in my life. It kind of comes to you naturally, car breaks down, whatever. Life's going to happen, anyway, who wants a cult on top of it, you know." Sometimes we had to laugh at some of the ridiculous things that took place in the cults.

Recommendations

The participants were so thankful to see me because they want their stories told and they want others to be educated about cults. One participant said, “People don’t realize that you can have society all around you and live in such an isolated cult within a community. And still become so completely isolated because of where your head’s at and the dynamics.” I recommend that more agencies, schools, and the general public are educated about cults. Within the state of Colorado, the Rocky Mountain Resource Center has a wealth of knowledge about cults, but the center needs people willing to help with funding this small entity so the volunteers can educate more people. Five out of six of the participants were educated about cults, and each found this quite helpful in their transition.

More people also need to know about the support the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) gives. They have an ex-cult member conference once a year located in Colorado. This resource was very helpful for three of the participants who attended. They felt as if they were not alone with the experience they had. It will take a collaborative effort for these main cult agencies to work with community human service agencies and others to best serve the needs of this specific population.

I stayed at Wellspring for two weeks and have attended many ex-cult member workshops put on by ICSA and the Rocky Mountain Resource Center. Currently, I am the operations manager at the Rocky Mountain Resource Center. Part of my responsibility at the center is to educate the public about cults. I have

seen, first hand, the incredible resources these agencies have to offer. Appendix D offers more detailed information about each of these resources.

Advantages and Limitations

The advantage of doing face-to-face interviews and asking open-ended questions is that it was easier for the interview to go in different directions, depending on the story of individual participants. I was able to have more than just their words; I had the person's tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language. This was helpful in analyzing responses during the interviews. The limitation of doing a sample of convenience is that it is not representative of all ex-cult members. Another limitation was that I was hoping to interview many more participants but was only able to find and get commitments to participate from six.

Future Research

For future research, it would be beneficial to expand the number of interviews. Phone interviews would be helpful in representing more people from different geographical areas. It would also be important to make a comparison of individuals who received cult education to those who have not. This would take a much larger sample. After analyzing the results I realized that it would have been helpful to ask the participants how they felt emotionally while they were in the cult, and not just when they left in order to obtain a better understanding of their later transition experience. In any case the lack of systematic research available on cults suggests more research is necessary and welcome.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Questionnaire

My name is Lisa Monroney and I am conducting research for my master's thesis at the University of Northern Colorado. The questions I will be asking are about your involvement in the cult and what kind of circumstances you were faced with after exiting the cult. If some of the questions are difficult to answer, you do not need to answer them. Feel free to stop the interview at anytime. Do you have any questions for me before we get started? (I will tell the participant I was also in a cult if he/she needs to feel more comfortable during the interview).

- 1) Describe the cult you were in? What was the name of the cult?
On a scale from 0-10, 0 being not controlling at all and 10 the most controlling, where do you feel the cult falls on this scale?
- 2) On a daily basis, did you have contact with other cult members?
- 3) Did you live with other cult members?
- 4) What was your level of involvement in the cult?
Did you have to do activities all day, every day, every week
- 5) How did you exit the cult?
Walked away
Kicked out
Leader died
Cult disbanded
Exit counseled

- 6) Did the cult leader(s) allow you to have contact with family and friends who were not in the cult? How much/often?

How did this impact you?

- 7) Did you have any other family members who were in the cult with you?

Parents, siblings, spouse, children

If so, did they also leave the cult or are they still in it?

- 8) What kind of social support did you have before you were in the cult?

(Tag) From Family, friends, church, clubs, groups, school

- 9) How does this compare to when you left the cult?

(Tag) Was it the same kind of social support from family, friends, or from other sources such as counselors, other ex-cult members

- 10) Describe how your relationships with your **family** changed from before you entered the cult in comparison to while you were in the cult (pause), and then right after leaving the cult (pause).

- 11) Describe how your relationships with your **friends** changed from before you entered the cult in comparison to while you were in the cult (pause), and then how your relationships with your friends changed again after leaving the cult.

- 12) After exiting the cult, what were some of the most difficult things for you?

Leaving behind those who were still in the cult, finding a job, financial difficulties, other people not understanding what you went through, fear of the cult and what they might do after you left

- 13) After exiting the cult, what were some of the most positive things for you?

Relief from being out of the cult, reconnecting with family and friends

14) Out of all the resources you may or may not have had available to you after leaving the cult, what was the most helpful?

Education, employment, friends, family, other ex-cult members, books, articles, hobbies, professional care

15) Did you seek out any professional help?

Counselor, psychiatrist, psychologist, other community support

Was this helpful – why or why not?

16) How has your family (pause), friends (pause), or the community (pause) helped or hindered your transition?

17) Can you describe how the experience you had affected you emotionally (sad, angry, fearful, happy, don't trust people, etc) and/or spiritually (still believe in God or have you changed your beliefs)?

18) Was the cult bible-based? If no, done. If yes, then ask - have you attended church since exiting the cult?

a. Have you changed your views?

b. If yes, how has it helped you or not helped you

c. If no, why?

19) What is your marital status right now? Has this changed before you were in the cult until now? How has your marital status helped or hindered your transition after leaving the cult?

20) Do you have children? Has this changed before you were in the cult until now?

If children before or while in the cult, how has this helped or hindered your transition after leaving the cult?

- 21) At what age did you enter the cult? How long were you in the cult?
- 22) How old are you now?
- 23) What is your occupation?
- 24) How satisfied are you with your life right now? 0 being not at all and 10 being very satisfied where would you fall on this scale?
- 25) Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix B

Informed Consent for Participation in Research



Informed Consent for Participation in Research

University of Northern Colorado

My name is Lisa Monroney and I am a Sociology graduate student at the University of Northern Colorado. You can contact me at 970-330-5524 or my advisor (Mel Moore) at 970-351-2100. I am doing research on what works and what does not work for ex-cult members transitioning from a cult to society. The questions I will be asking may be sensitive in nature so at anytime you feel you need to stop the interview, please do.

If you decide to talk with me, I will keep your identity completely confidential. I will ask you about your involvement in the cult and also questions about adjustments you had to make after leaving the cult. For each question, I will want you to go into as much detail as possible. I will be tape recording our interview, but I won't have you give your name. I will destroy the tape after your interview has been transcribed and the data analyzed. It will take approximately 2 hours to complete the interview.

I anticipate that the interview questions will be non-threatening and the subject matter to be non-problematic, but in the event any stress or negative reaction takes place, please consider contacting North Range Behavioral Health (Greeley, CO) at (970)347-2120. Feel free to ask any questions you have about my research. Note that any representations of child abuse or neglect or threat of imminent physical harm to self or others may be reported to law enforcement or other appropriate authorities.

Participation is voluntary. You may decide not to participate in this study and if you begin participation, you may still decide to stop and withdraw at any time. Your decision will be respected. Having read the above and having had an opportunity to ask any questions, please sign below if you would like to participate in this research. A copy of this form will be given to you to retain for future reference. If you have any concerns about your selection or treatment as a research participant, please contact the Sponsored Programs and Academic Research Center, Kepner Hall, University of Northern Colorado Greeley, CO 80639; 970-351-1907.

Participant Date

Researcher Date

Appendix C

Potential Participant Letter

UNIVERSITY of
NORTHERN COLORADO



Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Lisa Monroney and I am a graduate student at the University of Northern Colorado, working on my thesis for a Master's program. I am interviewing ex-cult members transitioning from a cult back into society. I would like to know if you want to be a part of my research. If you are interested, we would meet once for approximately 2 hours where I would ask some questions about your involvement in the cult and what you experienced after leaving the cult. The interview will be completely confidential. To insure accuracy I will tape the interview, but the tape will be destroyed after it is transcribed. Please contact me at (970) 330-5524 or email me at monr1724@blue.unco.edu if you are interested and we can set up a time to meet.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Lisa Monroney".

Lisa Monroney

Appendix D

Websites

Websites Mentioned in the Methodology and Analysis Sections

International Cultic Studies Association – a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cults, cultic groups, alternative movements, and other cultic environments.

<http://www.icsahome.com/>

Rick A. Ross Institute of New Jersey – A database of information about cults, destructive cults, controversial groups and movements. This includes personal testimonies, court documents, news articles, and much more.

<http://www.rickross.com/>

Rosanne Henry – Ex-Cult Member Therapist

<http://www.cultrecover.com>

Rocky Mountain Resource Center - The Center provides information on destructive cults and hate groups as well as providing services including counseling, legal referrals, an extensive library, conducting workshops, and much more.

<http://lamar.colostate.edu/~ucm/RMRC/rmrc1.htm>

Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center - Helps former cult members transition into mainstream society and come to terms with who they are and what happened to them.

<http://wellspringretreat.org/>