



Former Cult Members: Background and Treatment Implications

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ABSTRACT

Cults have been studied for over two decades since they have become more prevalent in our society. A cult is defined as a religious or other collective or radical political group with socially deviant and novel beliefs and practices. Although not all cults are violent, they can cause serious implications to those who are enticed to join them and can bring serious psychological harm, especially to those that try to escape them. Among all the cults that exist in our society, we can find religious, military, business, satanic and gang cults; some highly interconnected self-improvement groups and other political movements or even terrorist groups also exist, all following distinctive beliefs and attracting different types of individuals.

Keywords: Society; Political group; Terrorist groups; Psychological harm

INTRODUCTION

We can find religious, military, business, satanic and gang cults; some highly interconnected self-improvement groups and other political movements or even terrorist groups also exist, all following distinctive beliefs and attracting different types of individuals. Those, who become involved in a cult, might do things that dismay and rise questions among their friends and family. Braking away from a cult might be impossible and cult members very often sacrifice everything in order to satisfy the superior powers of the group's leaders, who manages to quickly gain control over the cult's members' behaviors. Whereas many find it hard to explain, the reasons behind joining a cult could be understood almost only in terms of psychological principles, which are explained in this paper [1]. Joining and living in a cult is a traumatic experience, however many members do not realize it and do not experience the negative consequences of their cult membership until they escape it. Recent research suggests that there is a great need for a former cultists-concentrated treatment to help these individuals return to society and gain the skills necessary to lead independent lives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Lalich defines cult as a social group or social movement held together through a shared commitment to a charismatic leader

that upholds a transcendent ideology (often but not always religious in nature) and requires a high level of commitment from its members in words and deeds. Cults vary in their beliefs, ideologies, practices, requirements and norms and exist on a continuum of influence, control and level of dangerousness. It is estimated that anywhere from 10 to 20 million people have been in one or more cult groups at some point in recent years. One may ask what is so attractive about cults or how do cult leaders manage to gather so many followers, if we all know about the dangers of joining such groups. Whereas there is a number of reasons for which individuals join and stay in cults, there are three main aspects that should be taken into consideration when discussing cult membership: Recruiting tactics, circumstances of joining cults and a strong power structure [2].

Cults have many various recruiting tactics that they use in order to make their beliefs and teachings attractive to many individuals. It is important to highlight, that individuals who join cults do so due to the benefits that they believe they will gain, not realizing the harm that they might experience. Cults use predatory tactics and target individuals who seem the most vulnerable, those who are lonely, mentally ill or in desperate need of support. Research suggests that cults intentionally search for individuals who might be in a provisional period of their lives: Transitioning into adulthood, going for retirement, losing a significant other or undergoing a traumatic event.

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Catching them in such important transitional points of their lives, cult recruiters know how vulnerable and in need of a support system such individuals are and therefore easy to recruit and manipulate into joining the cult. In order to better understand the circumstances of joining a cult, Matthews and Salazar divided cult membership into two categories: 1) first-generation cult members or those who were recruited into cults at some point of their lives and 2) second-generation cult members. First-generation cult members, individuals who were born into cults. Whereas there is a plethora of research on first-generation cult members, there is not that much information pertaining individuals who were born and raised in cultic groups or the second-generation cultists. These individuals, as opposed to the second-generation cult members, have no previous skills or knowledge of the outside world and therefore many times, upon leaving the cult, they experience lack of education or job skills, lack of decision-making or critical skills and very often, they have been physically and sexually abused while in the cult [3].

A strong power structure constitutes for another aspect that makes cult membership so attractive to many individuals. Lalich suggests that there are four dimensions that make up the framework of the cult's social system and dynamics: Charismatic authority (the emotional bond between the leader and his/her followers), transcendent belief system (the overarching ideology that binds the followers to the group and encourages them to follow the group's norms), systems of control (the overt rules, regulations and procedures that guide and control the members' behavior) and systems of influence (the network of interactions and social influence that teaches members to adapt their thoughts, attitudes and behaviors in relation to their new beliefs). Whereas all of the dimensions of the power structure are recognized as very powerful, the role of the charismatic leader, has been understood as one that has the most influence on the decision to stay in the cult. The reason why cult leaders are so effective in getting people to follow them is because they have a great ability to read a person and attack their weaknesses to influence and manipulate them. They use various manipulating tactics to make sure that their followers listen to everything they say and obey their rules. Cult leaders are authoritarian, show their satisfaction and even award followers who are obedient and loyal and punish critical thinking and independence. Cult leaders are also highly narcissistic, as they have a grandiose idea of who they are and what they can achieve with their cult. Majority of cult leaders are males; therefore, many cults follow patriarchal structure, in which the well-being of the members and especially females and children are ignored and the focus is shifted to the needs of the leader.

DISCUSSION

Obstacles to counseling and care

The fact that former cult members might need psychological counseling and help in their process of reintegration into a society is unquestionable. The form of emotional and physical abuse that many of them experience when in cults are of unimaginable destruction.

Many cultists are put through dissociative-producing techniques in order to erase their pre-cult memories or change them into painful and unattractive ones. Some individuals might be persuaded to believe that the outside world is evil and the only ones who can help them are their fellow cult members, while others develop phobias and fears preventing them from leaving the cult. Regardless of the type of the cult or the techniques that are used to control their members, majority of individuals who come out [of a cult], suffer from similar psychological problems, including Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a variety of panic disorders, mood disorders and problems with addictions. However, due to the wide variety of cults and cult-related persuasion tactics there are many obstacles associated with helping former members. Counselors agree that challenges in working with ex-cultists differ based on: Circumstances of joining the cult, circumstances of leaving the cult, adaptation to transition, member's role and gender and a cult type [4].

As mentioned before, the circumstances of joining a cult might very often create challenges for recovery. Taking into consideration whether a person was recruited by a cult or was born into it, might change the way how a person should be treated and addressed to while in therapy. Individuals who were recruited into a cult are usually older, which means that they left behind a family and friends to whom they can always come back to. They are most likely educated and have some work experience and skills that could help them later on, when no longer in a cult. Those individuals had a pre-cult life, therefore something to come back to. They possess personal and professional skills and even though they were most likely exposed to a number of methods of psychological coercion and mental conditioning to fit the cult-followed agenda, reintegrating them into society and working on their psychological and emotional stability might be challenging, but not impossible. Convincing those individuals to leave the cult might be possible or they may even leave it on their own. The chances of realizing that the cult reality is not something that they want for themselves or them re-establishing contact with individuals in the outside world might also be feasible. When it comes to the second-generation cult members, there is little research on their experiences in the cults and the process of resocialization and therapeutic progress after they manage to leave the cult, which they were born into. Those individuals' view point of the outside is almost non-existent or they are convinced that everyone who is a non-cult member is evil and wishes them bad. Since majority of cults punish critical thinking and individualism, second-generation cultists might find it impossible to find themselves in an outside world, where they would be expected to make their own decisions and find their identity. Many second-generation cult members suffer from anomie, a feeling of instability and a lack of purpose, caused by living in a cult where their existence was defined by the group. That feeling of lack of identity, along with the developmental lags in the cult member's social and spiritual lives, that are the outcome of homeschooling provided within the cults, might cause the individual to become very skeptical about their lives in the outside world and even regret leaving the cult.

The process of reintegration into society of second-generation cult members might be very challenging, as they have little or no outside support system and know nothing about the new world, that is supposed to be better for them.

Another obstacle that should be taken into consideration when working with former cultists, are the circumstances under which the individual left the cult. Whereas some of the cultists are able to leave their cults voluntarily and on their own terms, majority of cult members has to find a way out by escaping their group in secret. There are also instances, where individuals are forced to leave involuntarily, with the help of legal services hired by friends and family on the outside. The treatment duration and outcomes will very much depend on the person's understanding of the reasons for which leaving the cult was necessary. The emotional and physical state of all three types of cultists will vary and therefore bring different challenges when receiving counseling. Those, who despite the dissociative-producing techniques used on them upon entering the cult, were able to later on recognize that the cult membership was not what they wanted, might still experience feelings of anxiety associated with going back, shame of joining the cult and fear of judgment from the outsiders, especially family and friends. They might need some time to gain the confidence to face their past and to accept their decisions and learn to live blame-free [5].

When it comes to the cultists who left on involuntary basis and were forced out by legal services or *via* family members, such individuals might not understand and trust the reasons for which they had to leave their cults. These would be mostly children or second-generation cultists and mentally ill individuals, who have been successfully conditioned into believing that the counselors and outside family are out there to harm them. They might be very resentful in therapy, will have a difficult time working with counselors and for a long time, remain convinced that everything they say will be used against them and to harm their friends in the cult. Working with those former cultists might be challenging, as they will need a long time to gain the trust and the willingness to cooperate with the therapist, as the only person that they had learned to be obedient to was their cult leader.

Individuals who were able to escape their cult, might present different therapeutic challenges, experiencing feelings of paranoia and fear of being caught and forced back into the torture they just fled. They might not feel safe or comfortable speaking about the beliefs and values practiced by their former cults or mentioning any cult members that were left behind. These behaviors might be associated with the lack of trust caused by their experiences in the cult or out of fear for their friends and family that was left behind in the cult [6].

Adaptation to transition, is yet another factor contributing to the possible barriers when it comes to caring for former cultists. Robinson and Bradley suggest that adaptation to transition might have an impact on counseling challenges. They found that in members who experience an easier transition into the cult, their 'out-of-cult' and into the society transition, might be very hard and vice versa.

Robinson and Bradley examined how adaptation to transition affects cult membership and disaffiliation and discovered that individual who were able to find the beliefs of the cult beneficial and satisfying to their personal needs, had later a harder time transitioning back to the community. Many individuals, especially those who were not successful in their pre-cult lives and who had no friends or no luck in finding a significant other, were looking forward to joining a group, where everyone was on the same level and followed the same orders. Because cults target individuals who are in need of change, they prey on their vulnerability and start with meeting all of that person's expectations, just to later persuade them that the outside world is evil. These individuals, even after experiencing physical and emotional harm, might have a hard time transitioning back to the society, as they might be afraid that go back to the life of always feeling lesser than and being treated worse than everyone else. The feeling of being treated equally bad and abused as everyone else in the cult might sometimes be perceived as a better option from being the only one who is being neglected or oppressed [7].

The gender of the cult member has also a lot to do with the challenges that the counselor might face when working with the former cultists. Since cults are primarily patriarchal in structure, working with males who left cults might be challenging as they may show resistance in following other suggestions or in working with females. When it comes to females, Matthew and Salazar, suggests that working with female cultists is similar to working with victims of domestic violence, as in majority of cults they are mentally and sexually abused and expected to follow the authority of the males or face consequences if they refuse.

Culturally competent counseling techniques

Cult survivors face a variety of psychological and emotional challenges once they decide to leave their group and transition into society. Individuals who were members of cults constitute a group with issues that require special knowledge on the part of the therapist. After working with a number of cult survivors, Morse and Morse suggest that counselors who decide to work with former cultists must be open to cult membership and recognize that cult affiliation is a choice that individuals have the right to make. Counselors should also not only possess a comprehensive understanding of the mind control techniques used in cults, but to be familiar with the history of the particular group to which their client belonged [8].

Whereas there is no one-size-fits-all strategy, professionals agree that there are two major areas that counselors should concentrate on when working with former cultists, which are thought reform and personal unmet needs. Attending to the thought reform might be very challenging and definitely a time consuming. A structured treatment that concentrates on responding to change, reducing emotional distress and developing and using support systems while identifying maladaptive patterns of responding to transition is essential for a successful transition into a new lifestyle.

Whereas there are many clinical interventions that are structured around adjustment, Robinson and Bradley found that, when working with their clients, attending to five specific areas of competencies in coping skills for 1) transition response, 2) understanding of external support systems, 3) developing internal support system, 4) reducing psychological pain and 5) implementing change, showed to be best in approaching cult survivors and their psychological distress [9]. First, counselors should concentrate on the client's manner of perceiving and responding to transition and be ready to assist former cultists with developing autonomy and help them realize that they are no longer powerless and allowed to control their own decisions. Counselors have to keep in mind however, that autonomy building is a long process and therefore they should exhibit patience and understanding. Second, therapists should educate their clients about the mind control that the cult had over them and focus on helping them reunite with their family and friends. It is important here to remember, that family counseling might be necessary, as both the client and his or her family might experience difficulties while communicating and understanding the changes that took place while the client was a member of the cult. Next, counselors should understand that developing and utilizing external systems is necessary in helping the client adjust to the new demands of the 'outside' world and to relearn the value of trust and support. Another, very important step in the transition process is the re-discovery of one's identity and learning to accept and trust all the new ideas and decisions that the client will start making independently. A number of former cult members might experience moments of disassociation and feel like they are either back in the cult or wish that they never left. Many counselors refer to these behaviors as floating anxiety episodes, explaining them as inappropriate or negative responses to certain stimuli following leaving the cult life. Reducing emotional and psychological distress should be a continuous goal of the therapy, therefore counselors are encouraged to use behavior modification techniques or cognitive restructuring and stress management techniques [10].

Whereas therapeutic treatment of former cult members is almost always necessary for a healthy and successful reintegration into society, research shows that majority of "walk-always" or individuals who left cults voluntarily, are either too ashamed or too scared to seek psychological help. Additionally, as former cult members experience a loss of trust in others, as well as in themselves and their ability to make sound judgments, they are very often not able to make the decision of engaging into treatment on their own. On the other hand, many former cultists might start treatment, but could find it impossible to continue, due to many various reasons. One of them might be associated with the gender, physical characteristics or skills of the counselor. While working with former cult members, counselors should take into consideration that due to the patriarchal structure of majority of cults, many females and possibly males, might show mistrust of the male therapist as well as man in general. Counselors therefore need to be careful when assessing former cult-members, paying attention to every detail of their story and gather as much information as possible about the cult, which the client was a member of. This will allow the therapist to be sensitive to certain topics based on what was a

cultural norm to the client. The overall goal is to express to the client that they are autonomous beings and have the right to make their own choices.

To note, there are no specific theories regarding treatment for individuals in cults or former cult members. Experts, such as Singer, recommend assessing individuals who have left a cult for PTSD and depression and treating such accordingly. In general, therapy should focus on two main components: Identifying maladaptive patterns of responding to transition, which could be done through individual therapy and working on social re-integration, both in regards to the individual's family as well as the society as a whole, achievable in a group setting. Family therapy is very important as clients will need a strong support system, that will encourage them to stay strong and prevent them from engaging in possible self-destructing behaviors [11]. The main goal of family therapy is to reinstate trust and communication between the client and the family. Since both, the family and the former cultist might experience feelings of anger and hurt from issues that occurred before and during cult membership, it is important for the counselor to assess whether both parties are ready for family counseling. Goldberg and Goldberg proposed four stages of family therapy: 1) information and collaboration with a referred cult expert, 2) processing for family, 3) individual post-exit therapy plan and re-integrated with the family and 4) traditional family therapy focusing on the structure and communication within the family unit. Counselors should attempt to work on reconciling their clients with their families, before introducing them to the idea of getting back into the society. However, it is very important to also keep in mind that family therapy might not be viable, therefore a group therapy to slowly re-integrate individual back into society might be the only option. Group work will allow the clients to discuss their in-cult experiences and involvement in non-judgmental and understanding environment. By participating in a support-group process, former cult members will be able to recognize that their circumstances are not unique and learn the benefits of sharing and trusting, which can smooth the difficult transition into a life in the outside world. Trauma focused group therapy can be provided to both family members to provide psychoeducation regarding the individual with the cult involvement and the individual regarding their experiences [12].

CONCLUSION

People join cults for many different reasons. Some join a group because of the benefits that it seems to offer them, while others do so in order to fill in an existing gap, whether it pertains to family, friends or lack of resources. Whereas anyone could find themselves attracted to cults, their beliefs and teachings, individuals in transitional states of their lives were found to be the most vulnerable. Cults use different psychological techniques to gain control over the identity of the new member, create confusion and a new cult pseudo-personality. Although not all cults are destructive in nature, research shows that majority of individuals who leave such groups, experience psychological challenges associated with integration into society.

Counselors need to educate themselves on the challenges associated with cult membership in order to understand the experiences of former cult members, their concerns and needs and to effectively approach the healing process. Whereas there is no specific counseling approach that has been found the most effective when working with cult survivors, understanding the processes behind the circumstances of joining the cult, circumstances of leaving the cult and adaptation to transition might provide an insight into the changes in mental and emotional states of a cult member and help with developing affective counseling strategies. Concentrating on building the person's personal strengths, assisting with reconciling with family and friends, teaching appropriate decision-making skills and working on cognitive restructuring and stress management techniques should all be integrated into providing effective intervention strategies for former cultists.

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