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PhD thesis: "Freeing the Authentic Self – Phases of Recovery and Growth from an Abusive Cult Experience" - 2016

Abstract

This cross disciplinary research study explores former cult members' perspectives on what helped them to recover from an abusive-cult experience. Here the term 'abusive-cult' pre-supposes a psychologically restrictive, traumatic or abusive experience, which may be challenging to 'recover' from. As a psychotherapist and former cult member, the subject is of both professional and personal interest.

Former cult members (former-members) are an under researched population, and therapeutic strategies for recovering from harm caused in an abusive-cult are underrepresented in the clinical literature. Little empirical research has been undertaken in the counselling profession in UK and worldwide, and evidence indicates that counsellors feel ill-prepared to work with former-members, and that accessing appropriate help is a challenge. This study examines the impact that abusive cults can have on their followers, in order to ascertain how survivors can be helped, through counselling and more generally, when recovering from cult abuse.

The study is limited to individuals from UK and USA who self-identified as former-members of an abusive-cult, and who related to the notion of post-cult recovery. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 participants, 15 in one-to-one interviews and three focus groups. A qualitative, constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to facilitate inductive emergence. No pre-conceived theoretical framework or literatures were used before the analysis commenced. Nevertheless, the format of the thesis follows PhD conventions, and literatures are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Some findings are reflected in the literature chapters, and some literatures within the findings chapters, where they illuminate one another.

A theoretical framework was developed based on three key sources: evidence from previous studies, that both 'normal' and 'brainwashing' psychological processes occur in an abusive-cult; Gestalt psychotherapy theory of self and personality (normal); and Lifton's (1989) thought-reform theory (brainwashing).

The findings indicate that the thought-reform environment-field restricts the individual and inhibits the authentic-self, which transmutes from being in the service of the health of the individual, to being in the service of the cult and the cult leader. 'Freeing the authentic-self' emerged as the 'basic social process' and objective, in answer to the question, 'what helps?' and is achieved through a complex process over time, evidenced to occur over four Phases of Recovery and Growth, identified as:

Freeing the authentic self:

- Phase One: The need to leave Physically & Psychologically
- Phase Two: Cognitive Understanding Aspects of Building a Sense of Self
- Phase Three: Emotional Healing Aspects of Building a Sense of Self and
- Phase Four: The Freed Self & Posttraumatic Growth