

Amid the current heightened concern about religious extremism and the ways people are enlisted and trapped into extremist groups, we need to remember this is not a new phenomenon: cults of various kinds have been in existence for many years. Many adults today were born and/or grew up in such groups. It is their perspective that this article addresses, and specifically the effects of cultic methods of control on their subsequent relationships.

There is a body of literature on the general topic of working with cult survivors, including articles in *Therapy Today*.^{1,2} Here we extend this to include the particular experience of someone who grew up in a cult. This personal viewpoint is provided by co-author Mary Russell, and is written in italics.

There are various definitions of cults. We use one grounded in the work of psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton³ and Hannah Arendt:⁴

*'A cultic system is formed and controlled by a charismatic authoritarian leader or leadership body. It is a rigidly bounded, steeply hierarchical, isolating social system, supported and represented by a total, exclusive ideology. The leader sets in motion processes of coercive persuasion (also known as "brainwashing"), designed to isolate and control followers.'*⁵

These groups come in a variety of forms, including, but not limited to, spiritual, political, commercial or ostensibly therapeutic. Regardless of size and type of belief system, cultic groups all involve some form of undue psychological control or influence.

Although such groups vary in their beliefs and the extent of this control, we would argue that there is a commonality in the way their members are controlled and in some of the issues encountered by those who grow up in such environments. These commonalities include tight

control of personal relationships, separation from the outside world and lack of autonomy in decision-making.

Attachment perspective

'When I was eight, in 1954, I was left alone in the house every day for three weeks because I was not well enough to attend school. I remember the associated boredom and loneliness and also a sense of abandonment... There were a number of factors in this neglect: my mother was working, economic conditions were harsh, and child-rearing views less thought through than at present. However, it was also cult related in that, as in many groups, the care of children was given a low priority.'

It is predictable that in cults any special attachment to one's own children – indeed, any attachment other than that to the leader – is frowned upon: such attachments interfere with the primary allegiance to the leader or group. This may then lead to neglect and other attachment problems in these families.⁵

Understanding this is vital for therapists working with people who have grown up in cults, or 'high demand' groups (often known as second-generation members). An attachment analysis can help us understand both the emotional and cognitive mechanisms and the effects of these isolating and highly controlling environments.

Attachment theory states that an evolutionary adaptation fundamental to humans is the drive to seek proximity to a safe other (initially as infants to caregivers) in order to gain protection from threat, thus improving chances of survival. A child seeks its parent when ill, tired, frightened or in any other way under threat. The parent then functions as a safe haven – a source of protection and comfort. But, once comforted, the child eventually wishes to explore its world again, and now the parent

functions as a secure base from which the child ventures out and to which they can return when protection and comfort is again needed. Secure attachment is the optimal form of attachment, and is open, flexible and responsive. Similar dynamics occur in adults in their relationships with spouses, partners or very close friends.

But attachment relationships do not always function well. In particular, when the caregiver is not only the source of potential comfort but is also the source of threat, a relationship of disorganised attachment results. Seeking comfort from the source of fear is a failing strategy: it not only brings the individual closer to the source of fear, it also fails to produce comfort, thus impeding the cycle of renewed exploration.

Disorganised attachment has both emotional and cognitive effects. Emotionally it can lead to disorganised or trauma bonding – a powerful, entangled bond – with the caregiver. Cognitively it can lead to dissociation in response to an unbearable situation of 'fright without solution'.⁶

Stein's research⁵ indicates that the closed, fearful world within a cult is designed to promote a relationship of disorganised attachment to the leader or group: a combination of terror and 'love' that is used to emotionally trap and cognitively disable followers. All such groups arouse fear by employing a variety of threats – dangers in the outside world, predictions of apocalyptic events, harsh criticism or the threat of exclusion. Fear can also be aroused through emotional and physical means, such as guilt, exhaustion and physical punishment.

According to Bowlby: 'Most people think of fear as running away from something. But there is another side to it. We run TO someone, usually a person.'⁷ The cult leader makes sure he or she, and the group, is the only attachment, and thus the only source of relief from

Attachment theory and post-cult recovery

Attachment theory provides a key to understanding the emotional damage from growing up in a cult, explain *Alexandra Stein and Mary Russell*
Illustration by Scott Jessop



this fear. Like the infant, cult members develop a disorganised, potentially harmful attachment behaviour.

The disorganised attachment of followers then affects their parenting and other close relationships. In fact, in cults the leader deliberately mediates and controls the relationships of followers with their children. Disorganised attachment also characterises the relationship of the leader to their own children, as in Mary Russell's case. Many studies state that cult leaders fit the profile of narcissistic personality disorder, or of psychopaths/sociopaths.

'My father had an unusual career. For about 40 years he led a small, far left political group. Growing up in London, this was an important part of my environment as a child and young person. I left this group when I was 22 on the grounds that I didn't understand it and wanted to lead my own life... There was control and coercion, and 'comrades' were expected to put 'the party' before everything else, including family and friends. My father played the leading role, and abused some party members, both physically and sexually, although this was not clear to me until later.

'In my case I was lucky to go to an ordinary school and to have a mother who was not fully involved in the group...

'What I did not realise was that this group could be classified as a "cult" and that growing up in a "cult" is likely to have various psychological consequences, in addition to its effects on the family context, on which therapists often focus.

'In my case it was many years before I realised that, even though I had disconnected myself from this group, I had never had a conversation with anyone who had chosen to leave. However, I did have a role as a family member, which I acted out by making occasional appearances at memorial meetings that were held to honour my father.

Having started to think about cults, I was interested in why I had done this and also rather ashamed... I eventually became aware of the particular "bubble" in which I had been living in relation to the now former cult. The way in which I remained enmeshed was through loyalty to my father.'

Two things stand out here. First is that if, after leaving, the former member does not get to discuss and analyse their cultic experience as such, they can remain confused and disoriented in relation to the group, even many years after leaving. Second, the ongoing loyalty to the group or leader (and in this case Russell's own father as leader) is a continuation of the trauma/disorganised bond created in the isolating context of the cult. Until a clear, coherent narrative is developed, this loyalty remains a coercive and confusing influence.

'For me, realising some of the psychological consequences took several stages. In the first place there was initial therapeutic work in my 40s, which was very helpful but failed to address the cult issue directly.

'The second stage was in my 60s, reading articles by Gillie Jenkinson,⁸ where she pointed out that cults could be political, which for me was a lightbulb moment. Jenkinson also used the term "high demand groups", with which I could identify at a point where I was not ready to take on the term "cult". I contacted her, and my work on clarifying this proceeded from there. At that stage the psycho-educational component of our work – that is, learning the specifics of how cults operate and control their members – was particularly important in helping me to understand the coercive and highly controlled nature of the group in which I grew up.'

This psycho-educational work is particularly important for adults who spent their childhoods within cults,

who can then begin to develop a coherent narrative that reflects the reality of their early experience, rather than the dogmatic and 'fictional' narrative of life in the group described by the leader.

'Later it was helpful to work with other ex-members from different groups, particularly in understanding how much groups with very different beliefs and philosophies have in common.

'In the third stage, I have met and talked to "survivors" from "my" particular far left group about how they had come to join and leave this group. The process of applying an understanding of the methods and structures generally used by cults to the particular group I grew up in has taken place over the last three years, and included some personal therapy. One of the most difficult aspects of this was grieving my loss of respect for my father, and also fear that being disloyal would have terrible consequences.

'Given the disorganised bond to the leader – who was also my father in my case – letting go of "respect" for or worship of the leader can feel extremely frightening. Such fear has been instilled over many years. The bond of terror and "love" – as in relationships of controlling domestic violence, or Stockholm syndrome – can be a difficult one to navigate, and all the more so when the perpetrator is one's father. And in the case of one's father there may be an imperative to untangle the good moments, to not dismiss the relationship entirely.

'In terms of abuse, my father was, occasionally, violent towards me, as were and are many other parents towards their children. However, it becomes even more difficult to think about such abuse and name it accurately when an individual's grandiosity is manifested by a leadership position in a group.'

This again reflects the core disorganising dynamic of terror and 'love' within cults: the grandiosity or charismatic element

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muddies the ability of the child to understand the abuse they have suffered.

'Speaking to ex-members of the group my father led, several of them note the ways in which they were abused, and at the same time ways in which my father occasionally showed caring or appreciation, which they have clearly remembered for the last 30 years (as I also experienced). In other words, there was a combination of fear and being appreciated, which helped secure their membership of the group.'

'Similarly, my memories of my father's kindness and warmth towards me, as well as respect and loyalty for him, have made it particularly difficult for me to think about what happened in that group. More general awareness of this phenomenon would be useful for therapists working with adults who grew up in cults.'

This potent combination, the characteristic push/pull of fear and 'love' (which Judith Herman describes as 'the capricious granting of small indulgences'⁹ within an overall environment of control and terror), cements the trauma/disorganised bond between leader and follower, and here also between father and child.

'Being in this group as a child did give me something; unfortunately, it was not what I needed. I believed our group was extremely important, that therefore I also had significance. Although as children we were neglected and our needs not taken into account, at the same time my brother and I experienced a status, because our father was the group leader. This type of specialness went with feeling quite disconnected from the world outside the group and a belief that we had a magic key that might unlock everything.'

This sense of an elite status is, in fact, common to all cult members and serves

to isolate them from the outside world. It also provides an unrealistic ideal standard of behaviour – a standard that can be used as the basis for harsh criticism or punishment when the child (or indeed adult) inevitably fails to live up to it. This is part of the cult's system of maintaining a level of chronic fear, which prevents a sense of inner security and autonomy and feeds into the disorganised dynamic.

After the cult

If the client has broken away from the cult as a young adult, this may happen as part of a necessary teenage/adult rebellion. For many leavers, the damage from the experience need not extend throughout their adult life. A person's attachment status is malleable over time; subsequent 'good enough' relationships can help a person to develop a more secure attachment style later in life.

'I left the organisation after a short period and never strongly identified with it. I followed my mother in trying to ignore my father and the group by disconnecting from those experiences. In other words, some of those experiences were put in the 'too difficult box', largely because of fear and my loyalty to my father. I was fortunate, for various reasons, in being able, with difficulty, to develop earned, secure attachments in most areas of my life as an adult. However, particularly as a young adult, this disconnection had a cost in other areas, including social isolation and a high anxiety level.'

The untangling of various life experiences and relationships is very important for ex-members, and even more so for those who grew up in cults. While the cult experience must not be ignored, the client should not dismiss the time they spent in the negative realm of the cult. Good things have happened

within that framework. People in the closed cultic world have found (often secret) ways to show love and affection. Skills and knowledge they may have acquired in the group are real assets that they can now claim. It is vital for the client to sift out these elements, own them and not feel they are obliged to credit the cult leader for them. In fact, it can be important for ex-members to acknowledge their own resilience and resistance and that of others in having found or created these positive elements within a traumatic environment.

Conclusion

If the therapist knows that a client has grown up in a closed cult, they can offer psycho-education about the isolating, engulfing and fear-arousing control mechanisms used within such groups, and their effect on attachment relations.

What is important is not to focus on the relationships within the family without also addressing the context of the highly controlling, closed group around it. This context has clear implications for the parents – whether they are the leader or followers who have ceded to the leader or group their autonomous relationship to their child, with all its damaging consequences. ■

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