

Post-Involvement Difficulties Experienced by Former Members of Charismatic Groups

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Published online: 24 April 2009
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Abstract Limited qualitative studies have been conducted with former members of charismatic groups, especially in Australia. The majority of studies with former members have been conducted by psychologists through quantitative methodologies and clinical case studies. Qualitative studies that explore the phenomenon of charismatic group involvement have predominantly been carried out by sociologists, and these focus on current members of such groups. Sociologists and psychologists have drawn seemingly contradictory conclusions from their study. This study aims to narrow the gap by investigating adjustment to life after involvement with a charismatic group as experienced by former members of such groups through the use of qualitative methods. Seven participants from four different groups were recruited via purposive sampling and modified snowball sampling. A qualitative methodology informed by phenomenology was chosen. In-depth interviews were used to explore the participants' accounts of adjusting to life after involvement. The findings of this study suggest that the experiences of former members of charismatic groups may be comparable to others who have experienced extreme transitions and adjustments or relationships where significant power differentials exist.

Keywords New religious movement · Charismatic group · Cult · Former member

Since the late 1960s, various charismatic groups, sometimes called 'new religious movements' (NRMs) or 'cults', have appeared in Western society (Hexham and Poewe 2003, p. 126). This growth partly occurred because of a search for new forms of religious life

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encouraged by the growing mobility of populations and the resultant movement of ideas (Davie 2004). It is now estimated that half a million Australians are directly, or indirectly, affected by charismatic groups (Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs 2000).

The effect on individuals of belonging to charismatic groups is an area of psychological and sociological interest, and is sometimes considered one of the most contentious areas of study within the arena of sociology and mental health (Walsh and Bor 1996). An overview of the available literature indicates little agreement among those researchers who study charismatic groups. Researchers generally join the ranks of one of two opposing camps; those who support ‘brainwashing theories’, and those who do not.

Popular media portrayals and public conceptualization have been largely shaped by the brainwashing thesis (Wright 1991). Those who support the brainwashing theories are predominantly psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers. They argue that involvement in charismatic groups stem from the experience of psychological practices that result in a loss of free will, mostly called ‘brainwashing’. Membership is viewed as psychologically harmful, and this is supported by linking characteristics of the groups to psychological symptoms experienced by former members of these groups (Giambalvo 1993; Hassan 1996, 2000; Singer 1979; West 1993).

On the other hand, a number of sociologists of religion and religious study scholars (for simplicity, both these groups will be referred to as sociologists) predominantly argue that charismatic groups simply represent alternative cultures that have the right to act freely within the constraints of the law (Barker 1984).

The level of disagreement between the two viewpoints is not always constant, and not all the researchers who study charismatic groups fit easily into one group or the other; however, most researchers appear to have aligned themselves with one or other of these positions. It seems possible that the reasons researchers draw different conclusions from their studies is related to the worldview and focus of their respective disciplines. The discipline of sociology is concerned with groups and the patterns used by communities and societies to infuse order in their lives (Davie 2004, p. 325). On the other hand, the discipline of psychology focusses on the individual’s psychological reality (Davie 2004, p. 325).

Another reason why researchers draw different conclusions from their studies may be the different research focus and methodologies used by sociological and psychological studies. Those researchers who support the brainwashing thesis have predominantly focussed on the experience of former members through the use of quantitative studies and, to a lesser extent, clinical case studies of those who have sought their help. On the other hand, sociologists mostly focus on how and why people join charismatic groups, and what effect this has on them (Balch 1980; Barker 1984; Richardson 1989). In these studies, life in a group is predominantly studied through the use of qualitative methods, including participant observation, and this method lends itself to understanding the point of view of current members. These studies find current members to be well adjusted, and this may be why the sociological literature appears to be dismissive of former members’ accounts and underplays claims of harm (Aldridge 2007). Few qualitative sociological studies have been conducted with former members of charismatic groups (Boeri 2002; Rothbaum 1988; Wright 1984).

The Research Problem

An overview of the literature indicates that conclusions drawn by those researchers who study current members (through qualitative methods) vary significantly from those by the

researchers who study former members (through quantitative methods). It appears that the use of different study groups and research methodologies may, at least in part, explain these seemingly contradictory findings.

It seems reasonable to say that one's perspective and discipline influence the method used to gather data, and that the methods used will, in turn, impact on the type of information gathered and the conclusions drawn. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of charismatic group memberships as viewed by former members through the use of qualitative research methods.

Post-Involvement Adjustment Difficulties

Attempts have been made to assess the impact of charismatic group involvement as experienced by former members. The vast majority of this research has focussed on identifying psychopathology in former members through the use of quantitative studies and, to a lesser extent, clinical case studies (Langone et al. 1998; Singer 1979; Singer and Ofshe 1990). It is mostly argued that the concerns experienced by former members are the direct result of the experience of having been 'brainwashed'. Furthermore, some claim the discovery of distinctive syndromes resulting from charismatic group involvement and the consequent experience with 'brainwashing'. These syndromes include 'atypical dissociative disorder' (dissociative states that are viewed as the result of being subjected to 'brainwashing') (Singer 1979), 'pseudo-identity or altered persona' (a dissociative coping response) (West and Martin 1994) and 'information disease' (disturbances in perception, memory and other information processing capacities) (Conway and Siegelman 1982). The vast majority of researchers who have studied the psychological impact of group membership believe that as a result of having been 'brainwashed' some people will remain psychologically scarred for years, if not for the remainder of their lives. By and large, the psychological literature compares the experiences of former members to the experiences of former POWs or concentration camp survivors (Hassan 1996, 2000; Herman 1992; Singer and Ofshe 1990; West and Langone 1986).

Among the psychiatric diagnoses, the most frequently reported symptom is dissociation (i.e. 'floating' or 'altered states'). Other commonly reported psychiatric diagnoses include depression, suicidal and destructive tendencies, anxiety disorders and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) (Conway and Siegelman 1982; Conway et al. 1986; Malinoski et al. 1999; Martin et al. 1992; Singer and Ofshe 1990; Swartling and Swartling 1992; West and Martin 1994). Commonly reported psychological concerns include cognitive deficiencies (including simplistic black-and-white thinking and difficulties in making decisions), relationship problems, feelings of loss, guilt and self-blame, and low self-esteem (Giambalvo 1993; Hassan 1996, 2000; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Moyers 1994; Singer 2003; Walsh and Bor 1996; Whitsett and Kent 2003).

As a dramatic contrast, the small number of sociologists who have conducted qualitative studies with former members conclude that the psychological symptoms experienced by some former members reflect a predictable response of grief or distress resulting from the loss of a social bond. Rather than being a lifelong pathology, the psychological symptoms are viewed as primarily related to leaving a social group and subsequent problems re-adjusting to society (Boeri 2002; Rothbaum 1988; Wright 1984).

The Research Methods

A qualitative methodology informed by phenomenology was used to investigate adjustment to life after involvement in a charismatic group as experienced by former members of such groups. This study reflects the phenomenological belief that studying the specific and individual experiences of former members of charismatic groups reveals knowledge about the experiences, which is not possible to uncover in any other way (Holloway and Wheeler 2002). To date, the majority of sociological studies have studied theories about, and trends of, charismatic group membership rather than the individual experience, and the majority of psychological studies have used quantitative methods that are limited in their ability to shed light on the individual experience. This study is part of a larger study into the experiences of former members of charismatic groups.

Phenomenology is an approach within philosophy that, for purposes of qualitative research, has been adapted and used as the philosophical basis for the interpretive research strategies (that broadly include grounded theory and ethnography) (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Robson 2002). Phenomenology views meaning as subjective and challenges the premise of the natural sciences that scientific methods of measuring behavior ensure objectivity (Morrisey and Higgs 2006). In line with phenomenology, the epistemological assumptions of this study are informed by constructionism which flags that reality is socially constructed (Robson 2002). Constructivist researchers have difficulties with the notion of an objective reality that can be known and consider that the task of the researcher is to understand the multiple social constructions of meaning and knowledge. Hence, they tend to use qualitative research methods which allow them to acquire multiple perspectives (Robson 2002, p. 27). Qualitative studies examine the way in which people's social worlds are constructed, rather than attempting to map a single reality. The phenomenological researcher's primary aim is to understand the lived experiences of an individual, and what it is like to have certain experiences, from the individual's perspective (Crabtree and Miller 1992; Groenewald 2004; Larkin et al. 2006; Morrisey and Higgs 2006).

Recruitment and Consent

Seven participants were interviewed for this study. This is typical of qualitative sampling in general, and phenomenology in particular, where studies usually consist of small samples studied in depth (Groenewald 2004; Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Larkin et al. 2006). Although there are no rigid rules, research texts often mention that a range of five to eight participants are sufficient for a study which aims to explore subjective experience (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Shaw 2004). It is argued that a large sample in qualitative research may harm rather than enhance the research, as it may lack the depth of a smaller sample (Holloway and Wheeler 2002). Therefore, seven participants were considered adequate for this study.

Both purposive sampling and modified snowball sampling was used to recruit participants. Purposive sampling recommends that participants should be selected on the basis of their personal knowledge about the phenomenon under study (Babbie 2004; Holloway and Wheeler 2002). Thus, in the first instance, four participants were recruited through an Australian-based 'charismatic group aware', or more often called a "group aware" organization. Using the support of such an organisation is recommended as it is difficult to

identify former members who are not involved with such networks. Former members have shown to be reluctant to participate in studies, and it is viewed that a fear of ridicule from those who lack understanding and a need for closure may motivate this reluctance (Gasde and Block 1998).

With the aim of recruiting a diverse sample (i.e. former members who associate with 'cult aware' organisations and those who do not), a modified snowball sampling strategy was also employed. Snowballing is used to expand a sample by asking one participant to recommend others for interviewing (Crabtree and Miller 1992). It is modified in line with privacy legislation by ensuring that contacts are asked to express an interest in the research and consent to be contacted. The researcher asked those who consented to participate to pass on the invitation to anyone else they knew who fits the criteria, and a further three participants were recruited.

As it is important for the members of a purposive sample to share certain characteristics (Holloway and Wheeler 2002), a number of inclusion and exclusion criteria were identified. Participants had to be adult former members of charismatic groups (>18 years of age) those who had left the group more than 12 months before the commencement of this study. Nine eligible individuals expressed a desire to participate, but only seven interviews took place because of practical difficulties in arranging interviews with the two remaining people.

Seven participants from four different groups were recruited, and will be referred to by pseudonyms. Participants had left their groups between 2 and 22 years before. Two participants (Laura and Thomas) are married and were members of one group, (Group A, a religious group founded in Christianity). They joined the group independently and were married during membership. Alice and Catheline are former members of a second group, (Group B, a self-development and spiritual-healing group). Both joined and left their group at different times under different circumstances. Daniel and Hillary are former members of a third group (Group C, a Pentecostal church) which they also joined and left at different times under different circumstances. Adam is the only representative of a fourth group (Group D, a self-development/drama group).

Sociologists and those psychologists who support the brainwashing theories appear to be studying the same or similar groups. These groups are similar to the ones described by this study's participants. Even though the names of the groups cannot be disclosed, they appear to have similar characteristics as those groups outlined in the literature (i.e. they are the same or similar to what is sometimes called 'cult' and sometimes called 'new religious movements'). It should be pointed out that groups may adopt different practices depending on the location, the leaders at any given time and other variables. Nevertheless, they appear to have enough in common to make a study worthwhile.

Ethical conduct was ensured by, in the first instance, receiving approval to conduct this study from the Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Newcastle. Each participant was over 18 years of age. Every opportunity was given for participants to have sufficient time to digest and discuss their participation with partners and other family members before participation in this study. Participants were encouraged to seek clarification on any aspect of the research if required. Individual consent from participants was required, and the 'informed consent' form was explained to subjects at the beginning of each interview. Participants were also provided with an information statement which clearly outlined the risks and benefits of participating in the research. In addition, interview recordings and transcripts were de-identified immediately, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the respondents' identity.

Data Collection

The research participants participated in in-depth interviews with the aim of drawing out the personal story and meaning of each participant. In order to allow for the data to emerge, as is paramount to phenomenological research (Groenewald 2004), open-ended questions were posed to avoid influencing the participants' answers. The interview questions concentrated on the former member's experiences, feelings and beliefs in relation to their involvement with their charismatic group. As the interviews aimed to focus on the subjective experiences of the participant, the researcher encouraged participants to describe their personal experiences rather than the experiences of fellow members (Groenewald 2004). In order to assist the researcher in gathering rich information without leading the discussion, techniques of active listening and probing were employed (Durocher 1999).

The interviews continued until the topic was exhausted or saturated (Groenewald 2004). Consequently, the duration of interviews varied from one participant to the other, but lasted for a minimum of 1 h, but no longer than 2 h. The number of questions posed also varied between interviews. As is common in qualitative research, the researcher was guided by the participants.

The questions were carefully phrased to evoke memories of the experiences the participants had lived through rather than thoughts about the phenomenon in question (Morrisey and Higgs 2006). Research questions in qualitative studies typically assume one or two broad opening questions, followed by a series of follow-up prompts or sub-questions to frame and focus the interview (Creswell 1994; Miles and Huberman 1984; Morrisey and Higgs 2006). The interviews commenced with a broad opening question such as "What can you tell me about your experiences when leaving the group/since leaving the group?" A few (but minimal) sub-questions were posed to participants when required.

Qualitative Analysis

There is considerable flexibility and variation with regard to the available routes of phenomenological analysis (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Larkin et al. 2006). The qualitative material in this study was managed and analysed with the assistance of NVivo 7, a computer-based qualitative analysis package that was designed specifically for qualitative researchers (QSR International 2008). The ability to organise the transcripts and to build hierarchical trees and model some of the main concepts made NVivo particularly useful for this project. The use of NVivo has been recommended by other researchers who have used a phenomenological frame (Morrisey and Higgs 2006).

Overall, phenomenologists appear reluctant to focus too much on specific steps in research methods. It is suggested that phenomenological analysis should be understood as a stance or perspective from which to approach data analysis, not as a distinct method as such (Larkin et al. 2006). However, as some guidelines are required, the data analysis approach used in this research was adapted from an approach developed by Hycner (1999), and contained the following steps:

1. The interview tapes were transcribed, and those participants who had requested a copy of the transcript were emailed a copy.
2. In order to ensure the data were approached with openness to whatever meaning emerged, and allow for the researcher to enter the worldview of the participants as much as possible, 'bracketing' was used (Hycner 1999). 'Bracketing' is the practice

of examining your presuppositions relevant to the research matter and making them explicit (Holloway and Wheeler 2002; Hycner 1999). Phenomenological bracketing is similar to the practice of reflexivity which is central to qualitative research. Reflexivity refers to the ability to reflect on one's own preconceptions (Robson 2002).

3. In relation to the ability to 'bracket' presuppositions, it should be noted that the researcher is a qualified and experienced counsellor. A significant component of counselling training focusses on the trainee counsellor's ability to 'bracket' their presuppositions in order to understand the worldview of the client as much as possible. Thus, the practice of identifying or becoming aware of preconceptions and, in turn, putting them aside, is a practice in which the researcher has significant experience and training. Nonetheless, the researcher 'bracketed' her suppositions by (a) discussing her views on the phenomenon in question in detail with her supervisor and friends before commencement of this study, and (b) she kept a diary with her thoughts on the subject matter. These thoughts clearly evolved throughout the study as they were shaped by the data collected. Larkin et al. (2006) explain that we can never escape the 'preconceptions' that our world brings with it; but if we are prepared to adjust our ideas and assumptions in response to what our data elucidate, then we are on our way to developing interpretive phenomenology (p. 108). In addition, as the researcher's supervisor is a former member of a charismatic group, 'bracketing' her presuppositions seemed important. Therefore, the supervisor was interviewed by the researcher in the same way as the study's participants. The interview process made the supervisor's feelings and presuppositions explicit. This interview data were not included in the analysis.
4. Each interview tape was listened to, and the transcripts were read a number of times for a sense of the whole. This was to ensure a good understanding of the context of the themes that were later identified (Hycner 1999).
5. General units of meaning were delineated. This involved the very rigorous process of going over every word, phrase, sentence, paragraph and noted nonverbal communication in the transcript in order to elicit the participant's meaning (Hycner 1999, p. 145). The aim was to identify units of general meaning, irrespective of the research question. This stage involved importing the transcriptions into NVivo7, and fragmenting the interview into units of meaning (or 'nodes').
6. Units of meaning relevant to the research question were delineated. The researcher addressed the research question to the units of general meaning to determine whether what the participant had said responded to the research questions. If it appeared so, then it was noted as a unit of relevant meaning.
7. The list of relevant units of meaning were scrutinised and the clearly redundant units eliminated.
8. Units of relevant meaning were clustered together to form themes. Themes common to most or all of the interviews as well as the individual variations were noted. This procedure requires the phenomenological viewpoint of "eliciting essences as well as acknowledgment of existential individual differences" (Hycner 1999, p. 154). Considering that minority voices are important care was taken not to cluster common themes if there appeared to be significant differences (Groenewald 2004, p. 21).
9. After the data were fragmented into units of meaning and themes, a summary of each interview was written. This provided a sense of the whole as well as a context for the emergence of the themes.

10. The data as a whole were analysed and interpreted. As an interpretative method, phenomenology does not confine itself to a descriptive or surface analysis of the data but goes beyond the data to develop ideas and theories (Coffey and Atkinson 1996; Holloway and Wheeler 2002).

Rigour in Qualitative Analysis

The customary evaluation criteria of “validity, reliability, generalisability, and objectivity” in quantitative research are not applied to phenomenological studies in the same way as quantitative studies (Morrisey and Higgs 2006, p. 168). Instead, the evaluation criteria adopted in this research were those recommended for qualitative studies, that is credibility, soundness and ethical conduct (Morrisey and Higgs 2006).

Credibility in this research was achieved through attention to bracketing. Every effort was made to stay faithful to participants’ words and descriptions throughout the analysis and development of the models, without changing the meaning or intent of descriptive passages. Soundness was achieved through the clarity of the research process. Ethical issues were addressed as described previously.

Limitations

As a qualitative study, the study is limited in its ability to be generalised (Morrisey and Higgs 2006). Therefore, it is important to note that those interviewed are not necessarily representative of the whole population of former members of charismatic groups. Limitations of working with samples derived from ‘cult-aware’ networks need to be considered. For example, the sample may be tilted towards those who found the experience harmful (as those who did not find the experience harmful may not contact support networks) (Langone 1993; McKibben et al. 2000). However, some participants did not establish contact with the support network out of their own need for support, but as the result of connections established by their family while they were still in the group.

It is also possible that those who have had no support from other former members (often through such networks) may over-emphasize the positives of their experience out of embarrassment of having become involved with a charismatic group (Langone 1993). Modified snowball sampling was also used with the hope of attracting some participants who had no association with ‘cult-aware’ networks, and two participants were recruited who appeared to have had little or no involvement with such networks.

Furthermore, the problems of relying on the retrospective accounts of former members should also be noted as such accounts are interpretive and influenced by the respondents’ present situation (Robbins 1988, p. 15). Despite these reservations, it is the case that very few qualitative studies of former members have been published and it is important for the discussion and theorising of charismatic groups to explore people’s accounts of their experiences.

Post-Involvement Adjustment Difficulties

All the participants reported that leaving the group was difficult. As outlined previously, the majority of those researchers who support the brainwashing theories argue that former

members experience psychological and psychiatric problems that are the result of the experience of membership (i.e. the experience of having been ‘brainwashed’). On the other hand, a few sociological studies with former members conceptualise the problems experienced by former members as the result of the loss of a social bond, and predictable re-adjustment problems to fitting back into mainstream society.

With the exception of a sense of guilt, all the post-involvement difficulties identified by participants can be conceptualised as the result of the losses suffered when leaving the group or predictable ‘readjustment problems’ to re-integration into society. No distinct psychological syndromes resulting from the experience of having been ‘brainwashed’ were identified in these interviews. Despite dissociation being one of the most commonly reported problems in the literature, not one participant made reference to any ‘dissociation-like’ symptoms (Giambalvo 1993; Levine 1980; Lewis and Bromley 1987; Singer 1979; Singer and Ofshe 1990; West and Martin 1994). One participant made reference to having struggled with anxiety (Catheline), another participant described destructive tendencies, i.e. problems with alcohol (Thomas), and a number of participants referred to feelings of depression (Thomas, Catheline, Hillary). Anxiety, depression and alcohol-related problems, however, can all be viewed as resulting from the losses suffered when leaving the group (Worden 2003) rather than being the direct result of having been ‘brainwashed’. Problems with low self-esteem were also reported by some participants (Thomas, Laura, Hillary and Catheline). This can be viewed as related to difficulties ‘fitting in’ and adjusting to mainstream society.

The Experience of Loss

“They’ve taken everything. What more could they take from me. They’ve taken my life, they’ve taken the man that I loved, my marriage, my kids and my grandchildren, there is nothing else that they can take from me” (Hillary)

A number of studies have identified feelings of loss as commonly reported by former members (Boeri 2002; Conway et al. 1986; Durocher 1999; Giambalvo 1993; Wright 1984, 1991). In the same way, the most significant after-effect identified by participants was the experience of loss, with most participants describing a multitude of losses suffered when leaving the group. For example, Hillary explained “I’d left my home; they’d changed the locks the next day. After 29 years of marriage, I had no home, no marriage, lost 2 of my children and grand-children and very little money”. As explained by Rothbaum (1988) when leaving a group, former members lose that which has structured their lives and identity, from mundane routine to the meaning of life.

The most significant short-term loss reported by participants was the loss of housing. Researchers have noted that exiting a group is especially difficult for members of communal groups who upon leaving the group must also leave their home (Durocher 1999; Robbins 1988). Here, the dependency on the group is both structural and psychological (Robbins 1988). All the participants in this study experienced the loss of housing when leaving the group. Participants had to leave the group commune or were kicked out of their home by their partners who remained in the group. Laura who was pregnant, Thomas and their five children were kicked out onto the streets in India with no money and nowhere to go.

In relation to long-term losses, a very significant loss reported by all the participants was ‘a loss of meaning’, and a corresponding sense of emptiness. A number of researchers have identified the loss of meaning and purpose as a main concern experienced by former

members (Durocher 1999; Giambalvo 1993; Singer 1979; Singer and Ofshe 1990). In a similar vein, Laura described how having to re-evaluate and re-identify her values was a major aspect of her 'recovery'. Alice identified 'spiritual issues' as the one problem related to her involvement that is not yet resolved, she explained "I feel robbed of my spirituality... .. I can't see anything that I want to be a part of".

A loss of 'an intimacy of relating' also appeared significant to some participants. Studies have found that many former members expressed a sustained appreciation for the close, interpersonal relationships they experienced within the group, and those researchers have concluded that when individuals leave charismatic groups, they often find it extremely difficult to re-create similar intimate relationships in the larger society (Boeri 2002; Goski 1994; Singer 1979; Singer 2003; Whitsett and Kent 2003; Wright 1984). In the same way, Catheline and Thomas expressed the loss of intimate friendships as their most significant post-involvement struggle. As explained by Thomas: "Coming out of the group I found most friendships and relationships very shallow. And there was a longing for that heart connection with people again. And I don't think I've really gotten over that after 20 years. To a point there is still a longing to have a real close connection with people ... Meeting people and in the first meeting expecting to know their thoughts and dreams and heart aches, and telling people your thoughts and dreams and heart aches, and wanting to connect at that very personal level just doesn't happen in secular society. But in a cult it does".

Closely related to a loss of intimacy is the loss of a community of friends and loved ones. As groups often try to prevent former members from communicating with their former friends in the movement (Aldridge 2007) many former members had to leave behind family, intimate relationships and/or friends whom they dearly loved (Durocher 1999; Robbins 1988). All the participants explained how they lost their entire community of friends, overnight. Like others, Thomas described: "And all of these people that we'd known for all these years, most didn't even come out to say goodbye ... From that day on we were not allowed to be in touch with anyone else in the group".

When leaving the group, Hillary, Daniel, Catheline and Adam lost either their partners or spouse and children who remained in the group. The loss of a spouse and/or children has not often been identified by researchers as a potential loss suffered by former members. Some researchers have found that most marriages leave a group intact, and that when faced with the choice between losing a spouse or the group the vast majority choose the dyad (Wright 1986). This, however, is not in line with the findings of this study where two out of four of the married participants lost their spouse when leaving the group. As described by Hillary: "By this stage we had been married [for almost 30] years, so I was on the verge of losing a lifetime long relationship with my husband, I knew [my husband] since I was [very young]. We went to [a mainstream] church, he was my childhood friend, my lover, my sweetheart, my soul mate, my husband, the father of my children, we'd spent a lifetime together".

The loss of innocence, as also identified by previous researchers (Goski 1994; Singer 1979), was reported by Catheline, Adam, Laura, Thomas and Alice. Initially, as participants felt cynical and struggled with issues relating to trust; they perceived this loss of innocence as negative. Comments such as "I feel cynical. I was so optimistic and overly idealistic when I was younger" (Catheline) were common. In time, however, most participants came to regard this loss of innocence as part of 'growing up' and some, like Daniel and Adam disclosed how they have searched for, and found, 'meaning' or 'spirituality' in a different form.

Grief over the years lost in the group was described by Adam, Catheline, Thomas and Laura. Grief over the years lost in the group and, in turn, regrets over ‘what could have been’ have been commonly observed in former members (Goski 1994; Singer 1979; Wright 1984). Comments such as “I felt that they had stolen the best years of my life” (Laura) were common. Feeling behind their peers in career and other pursuits were also reported. For example, “Trying to put a resume together, what do you put on a resume when you’ve been off the planet for 10 years?” (Laura) was a common concern.

Readjustment Problems

“In the group it was a very male dominated society, women were subservient. That nearly broke us to divorce because I still had the idea that women had to obey the men, even though I was a basket case and my wife was obviously far more switched on than I was. I was quite happy to run us of a cliff as long as I could be in charge. For me to be the boss resulted in total chaos at the time. We really were on the brink of divorce ... We stayed together because we both refused to leave. I’ve seriously adjusted my approach to marriage and see it as a partnership rather than a boss-servant relationship” (Thomas).

The majority of participants described difficulties fitting into society and explained how they felt ‘out of place’ in the period immediately after leaving the group. Most participants explained, like Thomas as “whole catch up period of trying to fit back into society”. Adam and Catheline describe how they struggled “socialising normally”; Laura expressed embarrassment at not knowing “the most basic of things, how political systems were formed, who the prime minister was; how Australia was divided up into states”. These feelings seem to be not the psychological pathology predicted by the brainwashing theory but feelings that could be expected in any major transition. The jump from the life in a charismatic group to the life in mainstream society can certainly be viewed as major transition.

Difficulties with low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence described by participants have also been conceptualised as closely related to the extent of this transition and the subsequent difficulties of ‘fitting’ in. Comments such as “I felt there was something wrong with me” and “I felt like a failure” were reported by most participants. It seems likely that feelings of low self-esteem commonly observed in former members (Giambalvo 1993; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003) are, at least in part, related to feeling out of touch with mainstream society, or as described by Catheline “measuring yourself to what you think society should be”, feeling “different” or “out of place”. Similarly, the sense of confusion described by participants may also be related to difficulties fitting back into society. As explained by Singer and Ofshe (1990), when the person leaves the group and returns to broader society, the person feels like an immigrant who enters a new culture. This, unsurprisingly, may cause some confusion.

In line with previous research findings, relationship difficulties were reported by most participants (Goldberg 2003; Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003; Swartling and Swartling 1992; Whitsett and Kent 2003). Difficulties such as ‘socialising normally’; difficulties re-connecting with family members; marriage and parenting problems were most often reported. For example, Adam expressed difficulties forming new relationships, he explained: “You don’t really learn how to relate or love people, you are only rewarding or punishing in a group like [the group]”. Catheline expressed difficulties relating to her

family: I was finding it very hard at Mum's because they were so many fears about Mum ingrained in me in the group that I didn't really want to be with her."

Self-Blame and Guilt

"There has been a lot of damage done that I have to live with and deal with, and I've been instrumental in hurting people. I've been instrumental in doing damage to my children that I would rather not have done. I've been instrumental in going out and evangelising people and telling them a bucket of lies. I've lied and misrepresented myself, cheated and virtually stolen" (Thomas).

As commonly experienced by former members, all the participants reported feelings of self-blame and guilt (Conway et al. 1986; Giambalvo 1993; Singer 2003; Whitsett and Kent 2003; Wright 1984). Former members who may be especially prone to experiencing guilt are those who have participated in group activities that they now consider unethical or morally reprehensible; for example, they may have hurt their family, recruited friends, or participated in or witnessed abuse (that they did not stop or try to prevent) (Lalich and Tobias 2006; Singer 2003). Thomas and Catheline referred to guilt over pain caused to fellow members, including through recruitment; Alice expressed feelings of guilt over having witnessed abuse without interfering; and Laura and Catheline expressed guilt over the pain caused to their loved ones who were not involved with the group (i.e. parents and siblings). Another reason that former members in general, and the study's participants who raised children in their groups in particular (Alice, Thomas and Laura), struggling with guilt relates to the perceived pain caused to their children while in the group (Goldberg 2003).

Discussion and Conclusion

As discussed previously, the experiences of current and former members of charismatic groups are often compared to the experiences of POWs. The findings of this study clearly indicate that leaving a charismatic group can be a harrowing experience. Participants suffered significant adjustment problems to fitting back into mainstream society, faced a multitude of losses, and experienced feelings of guilt over some of their behavior during membership. However, the psychological concerns reported by the study's participants are clearly different from the post-traumatic stress-related problems and dissociative disorders commonly reported by former POWs (Briere and Scott 2006). Even though some similarities may exist, it is unlikely that the experiences of members of charismatic groups are best compared to the experiences of POWs. The experiences of unequal power relationships are not uniquely experienced by these two groups and other phenomena such as domestic violence or 'bullying' could also inform the discussion on charismatic group involvement. In addition, the experiences of former members of charismatic groups may also be similar to the experiences of others who have faced major life transitions. For example, studies have highlighted similarities between the experience of leaving charismatic groups and the experience of divorce (Wright 1984, 1991) and the experience of leaving a monastery (Mapel 2007). The experiences of former members may also not be dissimilar from those who have left mainstream religion. In addition to the loss and re-adjustment problems, many of those who have left mainstream religious organisations also

report histories of abuse (Pitman 2008, March 15; Schoener 2008, June 20–21). Furthermore, it would not be surprising if the feelings of grief over the loss of a previous ‘culture’ and difficulties ‘fitting into mainstream society’ experienced by former members of charismatic groups are similar to the experience of immigrants. Former prisoners may face similar difficulties as they struggle with re-integration into mainstream society. They may face stigmatisation, while potentially having to come to terms with behavior they engaged in during prison life that they now view as reprehensible.

Some studies suggest that the problems experienced by former members of groups are mostly resolved within two years of leaving the group (Wright 1991). All the participants in this study had left at least 2 years before, and some as many as 22 years before this study was commenced. It is noteworthy that all the participants reported some after-effects that still impact on their lives. These after-effects, however, do not appear to be long-term difficulties primarily resulting from the experience of having been brainwashed as is sometimes suggested.

Three main after-effects that still impact on the current lives were reported. Firstly, feelings related to the loss of “deep” friendships with two participants reporting that they miss “the intensity of relating”. This after-effect is clearly unrelated to the experience of ‘having been brainwashed’ but reflects the loss of one of the ‘direct rewards’ of membership. Secondly, two participants still experience a sense of guilt. However, this emotion needs to be viewed within a wider context as it may not be unreasonable to say that few of us live guilt- or regret-free lives. Thirdly, the pain that results from the loss of loved ones, with those participants who had lost a family member to the group reporting that they still struggle with this loss on a daily basis. Both participants who lost family members to the group had left the group 7 years before.

The extent of post-involvement difficulties depends on many factors, including the former member’s temperament, reasons for joining, group experiences, manner of departure, and available outside support (Rothbaum 1988, p. 207). In relation to the manner of departure, it is suggested that participants who have been ‘kicked out’ suffer more post-involvement negative after-effects (Hassan 2000; Lalach and Tobias 2006). In the same way, those participants who were ‘kicked out’ appear to show slightly more post-involvement difficulties. However, for these participants, the method of leaving does not appear to be as great a factor in the amount of the post-involvement difficulties as the extent of the loss. Those who lost a child and/or spouse to the group reported most post-involvement difficulties, which continue to impact their quality of life.

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