

1' INTRODUCTION

- We are both ex-followers, not victims, not naive. We have experienced being followers of a cult, we have then thought about it, worked on it, integrated it and it is from this place that we speak.
- We are part of the Geneva Association of Ethnopsychiatry in Switzerland (AGE) where we work as co-therapists.
- We are the product of an experience that could have completely destroyed us and in the face of which we were forced to develop a line of thought, an area of expertise.
- It is therefore as experts that we are here today to talk to you about our consultation system.

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- Our presentation will consist of 3 parts:
 - **Moving from one world to another: from the intrusion to the experience of transformation**
 - **Methodology of consultation for victims of cults with undue influence**
 - **Recommendations for people supporting those leaving cults**

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2' Isabelle

I lived in a closed, evangelical cult community for 17 years, joining at 18 and leaving at 35. Having lived through them, I am well aware of the many difficulties encountered on leaving. After a brief period of feeling free, I found myself lost, not knowing who I was, what values I could rely on, experiencing great loneliness, a feeling of waste, shame, guilt and periods of great anxiety.

Without any qualifications or profession at the end of my studies, I took several training courses in Geneva. The most significant was a Bachelor's degree in social work. It was ten years since I had left the community, and I chose to study the difficulties encountered by people who had left cults and what happened to them in depth as the subject of my final thesis. Enough time had passed, and I was able to open this page within the framework of my studies.

It is in this context that I had the opportunity to do an internship at the Georges Devereux Centre in Paris. Recognised for its help to migrants, this Centre had at the time, on the basis of a ministerial mandate, opened a specific consultation for people coming out of cults. The immersion in these consultations, the exchanges with the main therapist and the co-therapists, made it a rich work experience that gave me a lot of material to realise my bachelor's thesis. However, the work experience and research work also gave me decisive answers to think about my history and to stand on my own two feet again.

In 2005, the Geneva consultation for victims of cults with undue influence was set up. It was the product of a meeting between Dr Franceline James, psychiatrist, psychotherapist, ethnopsychiatric practitioner for migrants in Geneva, and myself.

This specific consultation was created by combining these two areas of expertise.

In parallel and professionally, after several positions related to my social training, I managed a reception centre for victims of domestic violence for about ten years.

2' Diego

In 1996, at the age of 26, I entered a private training institute offering a method based on body, emotional and psychological work.

After completing my highly committed three-year basic training course, I moved closer to the top of the hierarchy. At the time, I was one of the fifteen or so people who received direct instruction from the founder of the method. I earned my living by teaching the method advocated by the guru, to whom I gave a share of royalties on all my earnings.

I thought I was gaining more and more skills and getting closer to what we had been promised for a long time, namely a development of my real potentialities that would allow me to find inner freedom, and the strength to finally change this world.

I was actually becoming more and more stuck and unable to think, constantly having to account for more and more aspects of my life, professional, private, relational.

In 2009, everything exploded, my wife (who was part of the same movement) and I found ourselves outcast, losing everything overnight: our work, our financial investments, the circle of people we used to hang out with, forced to turn our backs, the goals we thought we were pursuing within this method.

I felt destroyed, totally invaded by anguish and shame, I had the feeling that I had been fooled.

In our reconstruction process, my wife and I were lucky enough to be monitored as patients by the consultation for people who have left cults with undue influence.

We have reconnected with each other, with others, and without diplomas or certifying training we have returned to professional training.

My wife took various training courses that enabled her to find professional stability, and she is doing well now.

I trained as an art therapist and then completed a bachelor's degree in social work. I am currently in charge of a structure welcoming people with psychological suffering and have acted as a co-therapist in the consultation for victims of cults with undue influence since 2018.

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8' PART 1 MOVING FROM ONE WORLD TO ANOTHER: FROM INTRUSION TO THE EXPERIENCE OF TRANSFORMATION

For this presentation, we have chosen to talk only about what it means to be an adult in a cult world.

We will not elaborate on the issue of people who were born into a cult. For these people, the situation is similar to the one we are going to talk about, but many aspects are added, especially related to the difficulty of developing an identity in a system based on lies and manipulation. Moreover, joining the movement was not their “choice”.

The intrusion

- Anyone can go through periods of difficulty and vulnerability at times. In these periods, people are more sensitive to proposals that might come from outside, looking for answers and meaning in what is happening.
 - In this context, the prospective follower cannot identify the intention to capture behind the promises made to them
 - Something from the outside gets into their head and will act through perverse mechanisms.
 - Once inside, this thought will continue to be active without the knowledge of the subject (who becomes an object), even if the person leaves the movement, because of the mechanisms used.

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The hold

- The intrusion continues by systematically replacing the subject's thoughts with those of the cult
 - The mechanisms involved are perverse and continuous
 - ○ The subject loses their free will and their ability to think.
 - Example of paradoxical messages:
 - “You came to us because you were looking for a way to free yourself from your past, we never told you that this would be done without work, you need patience, as well, in your life, haven't you often suffered from your impetuosity, doesn't that remind you of someone? It's about time you learned to obey without always being suspicious of everything, etc.”
 - Numerous paradoxical messages paralyse the person's own thought process, allowing the hold to progress.
 - Example:
 - “If you keep questioning everything all the time, you'll never learn anything”
 - Example:
 - “You're the best, you're my right-hand man -- but I humiliate you in front of the whole group”.
- It's also a human adventure, the feeling of being chosen and elected, an identification with the group, a feeling of belonging
- But the promises of a better world are never kept
- ○ There is a constant destabilisation of temporal reference points
 - Example:

- “I was supposed to go to Paris for two days, but in the end, I have to go to Barcelona for a week to represent the movement and at the same time I have to be a good mother and not abandon my children...”.

- Under this influence, the maintenance of stress is constant.
- Maximum availability is demanded of the follower for expectations that change all the time.
- The person is systematically cut off from their family, their friends, their previous ties.
- They find themselves in a state of exhaustion, lack of sleep and free time that prevent them from thinking,

In short, being under a hold, under control:

- having lost one's own ability to think and all one's points of reference
- being affected from the inside by the thoughts conveyed by the cult
- being cut off from everything one belongs to

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The exit: Leaving the cult is not enough, you have to get it out of you.

- Surprisingly, leaving a cult is not a liberation, but rather the beginning of great difficulties.
- An outgoing person faces two closely related challenges: one internally and one externally.
- *Internally:*
 - They must first face totally invasive anxieties
 - They must rebuild their identity, but starting from what?
 - After spending so many years following someone else's ideas, they no longer know what they think or who they really are
 - They face a sense of collapse, depressive states, great confusion about what is real and what is not.
 - Upon leaving, the person often feels that they have “lost their life”, that they have “lost themselves” during the time spent in the cult.
 - Everything has to be re-examined, sorted out, taken up again
 - What does a 15 or 17 year “hole” represent? Just a void and a failure? Or: what else?
- *Externally*
 - During the time spent in the cult, the ex-follower has usually broken off all previous social contacts.
 - Some ties may be re-established, others never
 - Socially, there is a taboo concerning cults: Being caught up in a cult is synonymous with weakness and stigmatisation.
 - The outside world has no idea what it means to have been part of a cult.
 - It is common for ex-followers to be subjected to devastating remarks such as: “Yet, talking to you, one feels that you have a good head on your shoulders, what could have made you believe in this nonsense? »
 - Very often professionals don't provide adequate care.
 - There is no collective support for all aspects of reconstruction.
 - Faced with the outside world, it is as if the former follower had lived on another planet.

- But trying to describe it is contagious: people, including professionals, also stop thinking and reduce it to already known categories (the former follower can't think what happened to them).
- Cults are frightening, they scare people.
- How to explain to relatives:
 - A form of absence
 - Financial losses
 - Lack of savings
 - Debt
 - no pension plan
- How to explain and justify to the professional world:
 - A "hole" of several years in a CV?
- How to explain to the social world:
 - Financial and professional difficulties, sometimes dark thoughts despite strength, skills, achievements, without this being understood as a simple misstep in a personal path?

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The passage from one world to another:

A transformation of identity

- When joining a cult, followers are forced to transform their identity, to leave who they were, what they thought, the habits they had before joining.
- A follower is engaged in a transformation process.
- What they don't know is that this is a deliberately unfinished process, and therefore a monumental deception.

Thus, the person never becomes who they were promised they would become, the deception is that this process is never completed.

When leaving a cult, a former follower is thus stuck between an unfinished false identity (that of the cult), and a senseless experience to which they must give meaning. It's not just a life story with ups and downs

The former follower remains suspended in the void, at the mercy of all those who seek to capture the floating beings they have become.

To get out of it, to find himself or herself, the ex-follower must be able to continue the transformation process.

There is no before and after. It is the creation of a new identity of which the metamorphosis is the representation.

It is the passage to an identity of transformation, which includes in itself the constraint of a permanent transformation.

The person can no longer remain unchanged.

In other words, the person is forced to develop a new self that is in constant, permanent transformation, they have no choice, they can't turn the page permanently.

They don't rebuild, they continue to build, to transform themselves. They have become an engine of transformation.

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The important role of the collective

- In such a process, society should play its role, and offer a new identity vessel that allows the ex-follower to "think" the experience from within. This is what happens during the individual psychological development of the child, to whom family, society, culture, offer all kinds of meanings about their identity.
- In the same way, a person who has been metamorphosed by a seriously traumatic experience should be able to find the meanings of their transformation in the social world, in the culture. This is what would allow the experience of metamorphosis to come to an end.
- Unfortunately, in reality, society only sends back to the ex-followers the image of what they have experienced as simply deception and wasted time, for want of other representations.
- By doing so, the socio-cultural world repeats the mechanism of the broken promise:
 - o It does not provide the necessary vessel for the person to go to the end of their transformation path.
 - o This is a lack of collective thinking where it is indispensable.

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7' PART 2: METHODOLOGY OF THE CONSULTATION FOR VICTIMS OF CULTS WITH UNDUE INFLUENCE

Description of the mechanism:

- o Original mechanism in terms of its operation: it is not the methodology that is complex but the problem.
- o It is a mechanism that is intended to respect the complexity and multiplicity of viewpoints, affiliations, etc.
- o It includes
- o A professional or someone close who **supports** the patient and sees them between our sessions (which are themselves several weeks apart).
- o Co-therapists from different backgrounds (theology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, social work), one of whom functions as the **lead therapist** to facilitate the session.
- o A **cultural referent** (ex-follower)
- o The participants are positioned **in a circle, ensuring equal seating.**

- o **Regulated allocation of speaking time** in order to:
- o Avoid the possible **repetition of a psychic** intrusion,

- Ensure the flexibility of the discussion,
- Not miss **significant**, emotionally charged or other moments.

- It's not just a group of people talking

- **The** group functions as a **vessel** for the patient and for all participants.
- It enables the co-existence of several **contradictory thoughts**, without risking the bond.
- The co-therapists do not “know” on the patient’s behalf

- **The co-therapists** question the experience:
 - How is the thought that the patient is describing constructed?
 - What are the extraneous thoughts?
 - What are the person's own thoughts and previous affiliations?

- The group is based on a constructivist theory of psychological functioning:
 - It is itself an active collective that allows a plurality of points of view in order to co-construct a thought.
 - It therefore serves as a temporary psychological envelope for the patient

- The plurality of points of view in the group is welcome and allows the person to get out of a single thought such as that of the cult

- Phenomenological work: the resonances, feelings and thoughts of each person in the group are a contribution to the collective development of a thought together with the patient. Each participant functions in support of the other members of the group to develop thoughts.

- The model underlying this functioning is that of the primary **maternal functioning**, which ensures that the baby's threatening chaotic experience is transformed into thoughts.

- **Role of the cultural referent:**
 - The cultural referent is a collective facilitator
 - Their role is to explain the cult world from which the patient comes to the members of the group.
 - It is to be a living witness for the patient, showing that it is possible to rebuild a life after having lived in a cult

- For the former student, the presence of the cultural referent guarantees that they can talk about any part of their experience without sounding crazy.
- In our therapeutic system, the cultural referent brings this kind of talk to the table, complementing the contributions of the other participants who are not familiar with this experience.
- The cultural referent also holds the co-therapists back when they get on their theoretical “high horse”, in order to bring them back to more pragmatic aspects

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Generalities and keys to understanding:

- Cults practice very powerful rituals to affiliate people whose souls have been “captured”, similar to certain initiation rites, with collective experiences, and intense experiences.
- The purpose of an initiation is to bring a person from one state to another, for example from a child to an adult, so that they can then take their place in society.
- However, the purpose of an uncompleted cult initiation is to keep the person captive in order to obtain a certain advantage.
- By thinking about the trauma of the cult experience from the inside with the ex-follower, the co-therapists resituate the cult experience as an attempt to respond to a search for meaning and affiliation.
- Thinking through the trauma with the ex-followers aims to find origins, identifying broken links, prohibitions, returning to the sources and the driving force that carried them and will carry them forward.
- The group tries to help the person who has left to rediscover the strength, the search for meaning, etc., that led them to join the cult, in order to help them remobilise this part of themselves for the future
- It is also a place where the “spiritual weirdness” experienced in such environments can be expressed without being judged. Instead, they are dissected together.

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Technical aspects and aims ○ **The aim of the consultation is to identify the perverse mechanisms** that seek to keep the person in a state of dependence, i.e. which do not allow them to recover their identity

- The aim is **to identify the thoughts that remain active** inside the person
- The group seeks **to track down and deactivate intentional trauma** practised to dehumanise and cut off the person.
- It is about **rediscovering the affiliations** that the cult wanted to cut the follower off from ○ It is necessary **to recognise** the strength and the inevitably unique destiny of the ex-follower (this person will never be “like everyone else”).
- It is **to reaffiliate them**, by looking for their former family, cultural and ideological attachments
- Thus, the group of co-therapists addresses in particular the collective part of the psyche linked to the person's affiliations to enable them to find the path through which they will be able to demonstrate their skills

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Position and points of reference

- The co-therapists adopt a position in which they consider that cult survivors are first and foremost:
- Trauma victims
- People whose vessels have been destroyed (destruction of identity, family ties, etc.)
- It is about taking the leavers seriously, firmly fighting against the prejudices that see them as “naive, clueless, etc.”
- It is also about taking into account the skills acquired in the movement.

Not everything is to be thrown away, there is a sorting out to be done with the person

- It is a look at the concept of **metamorphosis, as an ongoing process** of transformation into a new identity in itself. It's not about thinking in terms of life's accidents.
- The professional must be able **to talk about themselves and their affiliations**, (not their intimate life) contrary to the attitude of the professionals who do not reveal anything about themselves.
- It is not just a matter of integrating a life experience, but of integrating a transformative force that is now always at work.
- The work of the co-therapists consists in identifying, with the help of the patient, the underlying thoughts and theories of the movement, to decode them in order to finally make a **“life technique”**.

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Signs of therapeutic progress that we observe in the consultation are the following:

The person experiences:

- Decrease in the intensity and frequency of anxiety
- Less depressed mood
- Recovers strength and energy
- Recovers a social life and interests
- They reconnect with their family, with relationships from before
- They begin a professional reintegration

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5' PART 3: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

- Trauma is a permanent transforming force
 - The search for meaning requires a deep reflection on the experience of transformation
- The usual prejudices run counter to reality:
 - They revolve around the idea that
 - The victims are weak people who have experienced something difficult.
 - But no! They have experienced a unique process of metamorphosis
- In reality:
 - Cults are very structured and well organised, and do not target the “lost”, as they are not productive.
 - It is also a monstrous world that advocates a truth that has infiltrated the mind of the follower.
 - It works as a strong and intense collective pseudo-experience
- **Former followers are not enlightened.**
 - The cults are interested in these people because they are researchers, curious, full of dynamism, people interested in changing the world, in improving it.

- Thinking that the cult hold is based on a fragile psychological construction never provides a solution or satisfactory answers, and does not allow the person to recover his or her capacity for thought, his or her vital energy literally siphoned off by the movement.
 - It is essential to listen to them with respect, to take them seriously, to be interested in the cult's proposals, to jointly identify their theories, and where they come from.
 - It is about identifying the intelligence of the cult that remains active in the ex-follower's thinking, even years after leaving.
 - If this work is not done, the person remains suspended between two worlds, the one before and the one of impossible promises that remain active.
- *The social view of those who leave cults perpetuates the trauma of the unsuccessful transformation*
- By trying to reduce the experience of being in a cult to a life event like any other, the metamorphosis is prevented from coming to fruition, from finding a form which gives it meaning.
 - By proceeding in this way, society repeats the trauma of the incomplete transformation, of the initiation left unfinished.

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Positive social support for school leavers should be twofold:

- **On the legal level** ○ There is a lack of legal recognition of this phenomenon which is generally treated as an individual situation
 - However, the phenomenon of cult control is a general social problem, which concerns society as a whole
 - In spite of this, we have noted that lawyers are very receptive to outgoing cult members.
 - They are pragmatic and often less judgemental than many other professionals.
- **On a collective level**
 - Society should be able to propose identity models.
 - It should change its way of thinking so that leavers do not have to manage their exit alone.
 - It is essential to cultivate a supportive collective thinking on the cult phenomenon
 - It is not a matter of helping the poor, or of charity, but of the technical aspects associated with the attack on social links carried out by the cults!
 - Information on the cult phenomenon is sorely lacking at a collective level.

In summary: Collective responsibility at the social and legal level is totally underestimated.

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For effective support from professionals, they should already be informed and trained on the phenomenon. This is society's responsibility.

- Professionals have mostly internalised the above-mentioned prejudices on which they base their practices.
- They need to learn to deconstruct these prejudices in order to have other thoughts ○ Since it is impossible to share this type of experience with patients because it is a "non-human"

experience (like that of serious trauma), it requires a different professional attitude, the opposite of the usual one

- As with those traumatised by human intention, the people we receive have experienced the world's other side, something that no one else will ever know
- Therefore, the therapist's position must necessarily be different from the usual attitude
- It is not the therapist who leads, but the patient. The therapist must follow
- The patient talks about what is happening within the experience of metamorphosis
- The care of a person leaving a cult must be the subject of a specific follow-up including a traumatological approach.

To conclude, it is when we have succeeded, together with the ex-follower, in finding this strength and this inner search, in mobilising it, that they can continue to build themselves, to continue to live.

That is what we have to say about our experience of supporting people who have been out of a cult for 16 years.

Possible questions:

- On the responsibility of society, on the lack of collective representation of the cult phenomenon:
 - Our society is ill-prepared to think about the question of cults because, as a result of secularism, it is not prepared to consider the question of souls
 - Secularism is used to stop thinking about the question of souls and the relationship with the invisible world
 - Secularism is not atheism
 - Religions are there to enable people to reflect on the origins

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