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Preliminary Findings on Research on Children of Cults

Please note that these are VERY EARLY preliminary results of my research project, entitled *On Our Own: How Children of Cults Manage to Survive in the "Outside World."* I have just begun to analyze these data. Participant interviews were approximately 2 hours long, and all participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire, the results of which were entered into SPSS (social science analytical software program).

1. This is the first in-depth research of its kind, based on meetings and interviews with individuals who were born and/or raised in a cult. These individuals are sometimes referred to as "second-generation" cult members (SGA), although some of the participants in this research were "third generation." Most don't like the SGA moniker, as they feel they did not choose to be members. They could perhaps be called "adult children of cults," which is what I prefer to use.

2. This research includes data from 65 individuals who lived in 39 different groups and who left the cult on their own either in adolescence or early adulthood. "On their own" means they left without their parents or other family members, and in most cases without any outside assistance.

Interviewees consisted of 50 females, 13 males, 1 transgendered male, and 1 F-T-M transsexual.

The number of years spent in the group ranged from 7 to 41 years.

Their ages at the time of the interview ranged from 21 to 68.

The 39 different groups represented range from Christian fundamentalist to New Age eclectic to political to Eastern meditation to hippie communal.

3. In 34 cases, the mother is still in the cult; in 23 cases, the father is still in the cult. In 2 cases, the mother is now in a different cult; in 3 cases, the father is now in a different cult. More than half of the participants still have siblings in the cult.

Because of the large number of family members still in the cult, one of the most significant findings was that in most cases, for many years these individuals had little or no contact with their parents or siblings, and in about half still have no contact. In most cases, this is because contact is forbidden by the group. This enforced shunning of relatives is clearly detrimental to healthy human and family relationships.

4. While in the group as children, half were either home-schooled, attended group-run schools, or had no schooling whatsoever. The rest attended public or non-group-run private school, but typically they were not allowed to socialize with other children not in the group. For this and other reasons (such as strange dress, obvious devotion to some type of leader, odd language, distant behavior), these cult children were ridiculed (even by teachers at times) and often ostracized by other children.

No matter which type of schooling they had, once out of the cult, these individuals were at a disadvantage in terms of not having educational records, only one or two had education beyond high school, and many had barely an elementary education. Upon leaving the cult, they had no understanding of the American

educational system or know how to go about “catching up. For example, they did not know about the high-school equivalency exam (GED), how to get into college or trade schools, how to apply for financial aid, and so on. In one instance, a young woman spent precious thousands of dollars and three years on a program she later learned was not accredited and was basically worthless.

5. Less than half (27) consider themselves religious or spiritual at this point, which is far less than the national average. Only 26 stated they believe in God or a universal presence. Meanwhile 22 are agnostic or atheist, 15 say they don't know, and 1 doesn't think about it.

Interestingly, 62 (or 95%) say they are politically aware and/or politically active. This is far higher than the average population. This may indicate that this type of experience makes a person far more leery of organized religion or any kind of religion, and far more concerned about political issues and current events (perhaps as a result of having lived such an isolated life at one time).

6. Almost 80% have no current relationship with the group and do not want any. These relationships are described as either hostile, has been declared an enemy by the group, or don't want anything to do with the group. Only 5 individuals said they have a good relationship with the group, and 9 said the relationship is neutral. This is particularly relevant given point #3 above regarding the number of family members still in the group. This intensifies the difficulties of any kind of reconciliation.

7. As for relationships with parents, 37% said they have good relations with their mother and 26% describe that relationship as neutral. The rest have either hostile relations with their mother, don't want anything to do with her, or she doesn't want anything to do with the offspring. (Note: the mother is deceased in 6% of cases.)

As for fathers, 38% have good relations with father and about 28% neutral. The rest are either hostile, don't want anything to do with him, or he doesn't want anything to do with the offspring. (Note: the father is deceased in almost 14% of cases.)

An interesting note is that more women (all of whom are now adults) have a better relationship with their father, whereas more men have a better relationship with their mother.

8. The majority of these individuals were sexually abused as a child/teen while in the cult, and many were physically abused. However, sexual abuse seemed more rampant and not surprisingly more psychologically and emotional harmful. In some cases, the perpetrator was a parent, sibling, or other family member (e.g., an uncle). In most cases, the sexual abuse was kept hidden and was controlled by guilt and fear. In a few cases, it was integral to the philosophy of the group. Physical abuse was more open and often part of the group's teachings.

Some of these individuals do not yet have a healthy understanding of the abuse they were subjected to — either because they cannot face it, do not see it as “big deal” because it was happening to all the children or because it was part of the belief system, because they cannot figure out who to hold responsible, or because still feel guilty and ashamed. Inappropriate affect was common during these parts of the interview.

9. Upon leaving the group, almost to a person, these individuals experienced extreme confusion, depression, a sense of loss, anxiety, and fear, stemming from having defied the cult and from the years of indoctrination that the cult way was the only way. They also experienced extreme culture shock for most of them had been living a very confined

and isolated existence. Nevertheless, a striking note was that many remarked that what surprised them most when they left the cult was how nice everyone was in the “outside world.” This is not what they were expecting, having been ingrained with the idea that everything outside the cult was evil, corrupt, and life-threatening. These brave individuals who struck out on their own found the opposite to be true.

Another important observation is that no matter how bad things got or how much these individuals suffered while trying to build a new life for themselves, every single person (except one) said they would never go back to the cult, and never thought about going back even in their darkest moments. For them, the most painful moments in the outside world were better than life in the cult.

10. The most difficult aspect of entry into mainstream society was the sense of alienation each of these individuals felt. The remark, “I felt like I had just landed from Mars,” came up again and again. They found it very difficult to find any resources to help them with practical matters (money, school, a place to live, work, etc.) and nowhere to go to find help in understanding where they had been or what they had experienced. Many suffered severe post-traumatic stress, which often went undiagnosed for years. Many floundered, moved around a lot, worked odd jobs, and were taken advantage of again because of their social vulnerabilities. Some turned to drugs, prostitution, and life on the streets. The most common source of help was found through ex-member Web sites on the Internet — either sites about their own group or other groups. In most cases, this helped lead them to the road to recovery.

11. Adult children of cults comprise a growing and uniquely vulnerable population. With thousands of cults active in America today and possibly several million people actively involved in a cult at any one time, this is a pressing social issue. The fact that many cults have been in existence now for decades means that second- and third-generation members — those born and/or raised in the group — are also growing in numbers. And as we are learning, these children of cults are leaving in droves. Many groups are battling ferociously to improve the retention rate of the children of their members once the children become teens and young adults. As a society, we need to be more cognizant of this group and their issues, and work toward providing recovery and rehabilitation resources for them.

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