



On Our Own: How Children of Cults Manage to Survive in the “Outside World”

- First in-depth research of its kind
- 65 individuals from 39 groups who left the cult on their own as an adolescent or young adult
- They left without family members & without any outside assistance
- All participants completed a basic demographic questionnaire
- The following are my preliminary findings
- To be published next year by Routledge



Socio-Demographics

- Gender Breakdown
 - 50 females
 - 13 males
 - 1 transgendered male
 - 1 F-T-M transsexual
- Number of years in group: 7- 41
- Ages at time of interview: 21- 68
- Types of group ranged from fundamentalist Christian to New Age eclectic to Eastern meditation to hippie communal

Family Situation

- In 34 cases, the mother was still in the group
- In 23 cases, the father was still in the group
- More than $\frac{1}{2}$ of the 65 participants still had siblings in the group

Because of the large number of family members still in the group, one of the most significant findings is that, in most cases, participants had little or no contact with their parents or siblings.

In most cases, this is because contact was forbidden by the group.

Thus, enforced shunning of relatives is clearly detrimental to healthy human and family relationships.



Education

- Half were either home-schooled, attended group-run schools, or had no schooling
- Half attended public school or a private school not run by the group ... *but typically they were not allowed to socialize with 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 and often ostracized by other children.

Thus, these study participants were disadvantaged as children, and were ridiculed & ostracized by others as a result of growing up in a cult.



Education: Long-term Effects

- No matter what type of schooling they had, participants were disadvantaged as adults
 - No educational records
 - Only one or two educated beyond high school
 - Many had barely an elementary school education
- They had no understanding of the U.S. educational system or how to “catch up”
 - Never heard of the high school equivalency exam (GED)
 - No understanding of how to get into university, community college, or trade school
 - No knowledge of financial aid or how to evaluate different programs, e.g., accreditation



Politics & Religion

- Less than half consider themselves religious or spiritual at this point
 - Far less than the national average
 - 26 stated they believe in God or a universal presence
 - 22 are agnostic or atheist
 - 15 don't know
 - I doesn't think about it
- 62 participants say they are politically aware and/or politically active
 - Far higher than the national average
- ***This may indicate that a cult experience makes people leery of organized religion & more concerned about political issues and current events.***



Relationship with the Group

- 80% have no relationship with the group
 - These relationships are described as
 - Hostile
 - Have been declared an enemy by the group
 - Do not want anything to do with the group
- 20% describe the relationship as neutral or good
 - 5 said they have a good relationship with the group
 - 9 said the relationship is neutral

This finding is particularly relevant since most participants have family members still in the group



Relationship with Parents

- 37% report good relations with mother
- 38% report good relations with father
- 26% & 28% describe relations as neutral
- Parents are deceased in 6% & 14% of cases

31% of women & 20% of men describe their relationships with parents as

hostile

don't want anything to do with them, or

s/he doesn't want anything to do with me

An interesting note is that women reported a better relationship with their father more frequently, while a greater number of male participants described the relationship with their mother in positive terms.



Sexual Abuse

- The majority reported that sexual abuse occurred while they were children or teenagers
 - Many were also physically abused
 - Not surprisingly, the sexual abuse appeared to be more psychologically and emotionally harmful
- The abuse was kept hidden, and in most cases, was controlled by guilt & fear
 - In a few cases, abuse was integral to the group philosophy

Interesting note: Individuals struggle to deal with the abuse, apparently because they cannot face it, see it as “not a big deal,” do not know whom to blame, or continue to feel guilty and ashamed



Upon Leaving the Group

- Extreme confusion, depression, a sense of loss, anxiety & fear
 - Experienced by almost every participant
 - Explained as arising from having defied the cult & years of indoctrination that the cult way was “the only way”
- Culture shock
 - Most participants had been living a very confined & isolated existence
 - Many reported that what surprised them most was how nice everyone was on the outside
 - Every participant except one reported that no matter how bad things got “outside,” they would never go back



Challenges in New Life

- **Sense of alienation**
 - “I felt like I had just landed on Mars”
 - No resources for practical matters
 - No help to understand their experience
- **Repercussions**
 - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), often undiagnosed for years
 - Floundering, odd jobs, frequent relocations
 - Re-victimization
 - Taking up drugs, prostitution, and/or life on the streets



Sources of Help

- The Internet
 - Most common source of assistance was ex-member websites, either about their own or other groups
 - Contact online led to other resources and put them on the road to recovery
- What Can Be Done?
 - This is a uniquely vulnerable—and growing—population
 - Cultic group demographics suggest that large numbers of 2nd- & 3rd-generation members are leaving the cult

Thus, as a society, we need to work toward providing recovery & rehabilitation services for this population