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"The role of attachment in cults and radicalization"

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I would like to thank you very much for welcoming me to FECRIS and giving me this time to present my work.

I am an ex-member of a so-called "left-wing" political cult, which I was involved in for 10 years from 1981 to 1991. After I left I wrote my first book – a memoir of that experience – Inside Out.

I went on to earn a PhD as a social psychologist, in 2007, from the University of Minnesota specializing in an attachment-based study of cults and totalitarianism. I now continue to lecture and write on this topic in London.

[SLIDE 2]. In December of this year Routledge published my second book, Terror, Love and Brainwashing, which is an extension and broadening of my PhD work.

This, along with my background, means I have naturally linked the processes of cult recruitment and retention with those of radicalization to extremist groups. Many of us here, of course, see the same methods at work.

As I have a short amount of time, I will just give brief overview of the kernel of the theoretical approach I'm presenting. Then I will finish up with some suggestions for prevention.

Of course in this gathering we understand what a cult is. Here's my definition. I believe that this also applies to many groups that engage in radicalization such as Islamist, Christian fundamentalist and left and right-wing extremist groups

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I think most of you will recognise this:

- Leadership is charismatic and authoritarian
- Structure is isolating, closed, with steep hierarchy
- Ideology is absolute, total, exclusive
- Process consists of techniques of brainwashing/coercive persuasion/thought reform
- Outcome is controllable (deployable), exploited followers

My focus today is on the process – point 4, and to a lesser degree the ideology.

I use attachment theory as a way to understand the lock that keeps people in these systems and that takes control of both their relationships and their thinking – that is, I focus on the indoctrination, rather than the recruitment aspect of the process, and in particular on the manipulation and control of close

relationships as a key element of that.... Let's have a really brief look at this. Please bear with me while I give the basic theoretical background.

Attachment theory was developed by John Bowlby, a child psychiatrist whose work was based in evolutionary theory. Many thousands of studies have been done based on his foundational and groundbreaking work providing a rich evidence base.

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His 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 to explore their world 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.

There is a biochemical aspect to this. When we are exploring our worlds we experience a certain amount of stimulation and excitement – physiologically the levels of cortisol hormone in our bodies rises. But too much stimulation – what can become stress or threat: fatigue, hunger, fear, or any kind of stress – means our levels of cortisol rise beyond a manageable threshold. In persons with more or less secure attachment this is a signal to seek a safe haven (even if symbolically, or internally) to help calm this rise in cortisol. So think about infants and caregivers here: a toddler going to its parent for comfort when upset. The parent is acting as a safe haven. The safe haven helps to calm the stressed individual. In doing so the child or the person's endogenous opiodes rise and the level of excitatory cortisol reduce.

But after a certain amount of calming and recovery, the individual (or child) has enough opiodes in their system – now they are ready for some stimulation, to explore the world again, and for their cortisol levels to increase again. At this point we say that their attachment needs have been terminated, and they can now move away from the attachment figure and explore again. So this is normally a homeostatic system, ebbing and flowing between these two states in a flexible, balanced manner.

But attachment relationships do not always function well.

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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. We might see this in a child's relationship with a frightening parent, or in a violent or abusive adult relationship. The caregiver is the apparent safe haven. So when the

person is stressed or frightened they will attempt to seek comfort from their perceived safe haven. But 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. In attachment terms we can say that the attempt to approach the comfort of the safe haven is in opposition to the need to escape from the threat.

If the person has no other available attachments to turn to (and this is key), then they will stay locked into that relationship trying to approach and get comfort, but never achieving it. Their attachment behaviour is never terminated – they never get enough opiodes in their system to manage the cortisol levels, so they stay in an anxious and fearful state. Thus they attempt to use the perceived attachment figure as a safe haven, but never are able to terminate that to explore their environment again – they are not able to use the attachment figure as a secure base.

If another safe attachment was available they might be able to escape this dynamic.

Disorganised attachment has both emotional and cognitive effects, which I will discuss in a moment.

My research 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 supposed 'love'** that is used to emotionally trap and cognitively disable followers.

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Here we see someone first encountering a cultic or extremist group. They may have their own more or less healthy social connections. They are subject to a recruitment attempt.

I would like to say here, following Ben Zablocki's view, that recruitment and retention – how we keep someone into such a group – are really two different (though related) processes. There are many, varied recruitment pathways: typical cult recruitment which we are familiar with, or being born or brought up in a group, or being kidnapped or press-ganged, and so on. But in this example I'm using the more typical view of an adult being recruited. But the core of what I am discussing, is really more relevant to the next stage, the retention, indoctrination – or brainwashing – aspect of cultic or extremist control.

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... So here, the individual is pulled away from their current social network – intensification of isolation begins: we are the only group, the only answer. There is now **isolation from prior networks, and engulfment in the new network.**

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Once isolated, the group positions itself as the only safe place, and then *arouses fear*. (This is not a linear process, but more or less like this). A variety of threats –

dangers and enemies in the outside world, predictions of apocalyptic events, harsh criticism, punishment, or the threat of exclusion. Fear can also be aroused through emotional and physical means, such as guilt, exhaustion and physical punishment. But importantly the *source* of fear is actually the cult itself.

According to Bowlby – the originator of attachment theory: ‘Most people think of fear as running away from something. But there is another side to it. We run TO someone, usually a person.’ The cult leader makes sure he or she, and the group, is the only attachment, and thus the only source of relief from this fear. Like the infant, cult members develop a cult-induced disorganised, potentially harmful attachment to the leader or group.

Emotionally it can lead to disorganised or trauma bonding – a powerful, entangled bond – with the cult. As the need for comfort is never fully satisfied, they remain fearful, so they cannot move to the exploration phase. The cult becomes the only perceived safe haven to which the now-fearful person clings.

Now we have a person clinging to the source of threat. If the person has been successfully isolated (again, that is crucial), there is no escape. The only place to turn is the fear-arousing group. This is a situation of chronic trauma, or what attachment researchers call “fright without solution”.

What we know about trauma is that it can lead to cognitive dissociation in response to an unbearable situation of ‘fright without solution’. That is, in a situation of chronic trauma the link between the feeling and thinking parts of the brain fails. You cannot think about the traumatic situation. Where there is no escape – neither fight nor flight are possible, then a freeze response occurs. And this is a cognitive freezing in the brain’s ability to think clearly about the situation of trauma.

I believe this is what happens when a person is subjected to brainwashing processes. Here’s a picture of the brain...

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Alan Schore’s studies of trauma discuss how the orbitofrontal cortex, which is the link – crudely put – between the feeling and the thinking brain, does not function adequately, if at all, when subject to trauma. Normally, if we have space and ability to act under stress or threat – i.e. fright *with* possible solution – we would experience the stress first in the lower part of the brain and our heart rate would increase and so forth, cortisol spike, then we would feel fear or worry or anxiety in the emotion centers of the brain – the mid-brain, and then, our orbitofrontal cortex, - “the master regulator for the organization of the brain’s response to threat” and the “thinking part of the emotional brain”, decides whether further higher order thinking thought is required in prefrontal cortex. If so we would then consider how to act to attempt to resolve the threat.

But we cannot do this if we are locked into this isolating relationship that is causing the fear. The disorganized relationship is one of chronic trauma. And trauma essentially disables the orbitofrontal cortex responsible for this higher

order thinking. (Other practices of the cult reinforce this inability to engage higher order thinking as well: sleep deprivation, lack of time, and other stresses.)

However, this disabling of higher order thinking happens only in terms of the cultic relationship – i.e. the fear-arousing relationship. The person might be able to think perfectly well about other topics. I know for myself during my cult tenure I was a rather highly skilled computer analyst. I could think clearly about my technical work. But I could not think about my relationship to the cult. I literally *could not think* about it. Until the moment I had support – another attachment where I felt safe, an escape hatch attachment – at which point my cognitive thinking about the cult sort of “exploded” into life. A quite extraordinary experience, looking back.

Emotionally locked into the cult, trying to manage the chronic hyperarousal of cortisol by seeking comfort from the group, and with one’s thinking impaired or frozen, the cult can now do the follower’s thinking for them and explain away the cult members feelings of distress and so forth through the cult’s ideology. The cultic ideology can now insert itself into the dissociated vacuum the cult has created – Satan, the khuffar, evil spirits, bad thoughts, your family, heathens, the approaching apocalypse, etc. are threatening you and that’s why you feel bad. Commit further, work harder, confess more, obey, obey, obey and everything will come right.

Of primary importance is the fact that if the follower had another truly safe and trusting attachment relationship to turn to then this disorganizing effect would not work.

This analysis can help us interpret what are the common themes in cultic and radicalizing ideologies. I deal with this at some length in my book, but in brief here we can see :

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- Messages to discard “attachments” (isolation). For example, Masoud Banisadr reports how the Islamist Iranian Mojahedin’s leader said that one’s husband or wife was a “buffer” in the way of the relationship between followers and himself and reduced the “capacity for struggle”. The account of the child soldier Emmanuel Jal talks about how friendships with other boys were forbidden: “You have no family now” (except the group).
- Messages to give one’s all to the group, only look to the group – loyalty and commitment is only to the group or cause. The group is the only “safe haven”. (engulfment, perceived safe haven). The Iranian Mojahedin’s leader, Rajavi, was the only one with a line to God, and therefore had transcendent ideological qualifications. As a former Jehovah’s Witness said to me, there is no loyalty to family allowed, only to the JWs – the only way to guarantee happiness is to work harder for the cause. Child soldier Emmanuel Jal reported how the commanders said the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army was their mother and father, their family.

- Constant fear-arousing messages to keep fear levels high. Endless examples! Armageddon for many religious groups, your internal weakness – in my group “bourgeois world outlook”, or Satanic influences in other groups... Islamists would have fear of the khuffar – the outsiders.
- Messages that support followers’ cognitive dissociation:
 - Instructions not to think or feel, and certainly not to think about one’s feelings. Alternately, depending on the group, one might be told only to think or only to feel, but whichever angle the group takes the result is to discourage the follower’s own efforts to think about what is happening to them and what they are experiencing in the group. Lyndon LaRouche says “Cognate everything and sense nothing” Spiritual cults often say “Be in your heart centre only, let go of thoughts”.
 - Confusing, boring, or contradictory messages which also support dissociation. Long hours of theological or ideological lectures, etc.

This is quite over-simplified of course!

Remember, that people are COERCED and manipulated into this, **can be of any attachment status** on first encountering the cult.

People growing up in these systems are similarly affected, as their parents are disorganized, and the cult interferes in family relationships in order to prevent any alternate primary attachments, including those to one’s children. And the environment in which they are growing up is supporting all I’ve said above.

In short:

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Cults and controlling extremist groups are fear-driven systems.

A simple formula is: Isolation + engulfment + fear = controllable, exploited followers

I wanted to add a few thoughts on prevention.

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Solomon Asch was a social psychologist who was one of the great scholars who studied group behaviour in order to understand what happened in the Holocaust and how to prevent it. He said:

“The greater man’s ignorance of the principles of his social surroundings, the more subject is he to their control; and the greater his knowledge of their operations and of their necessary consequences, the freer he can become with regard to them.”

There is general agreement among cultic studies scholars that prevention primarily involves EDUCATION. I believe this needs to be education at all levels, from primary to tertiary.

We must teach people not just critical thinking, but knowledge of specific manipulation and control mechanisms. **Prevention requires teaching people, in an ideologically neutral way, specifically about dangerous totalist groups/relationships: the methods, structures and likely outcomes**

In particular what I would like to emphasize is that we teach people the dangers of becoming isolated within an engulfing, exclusive relationship – whether with a group or individual - that controls and monitors all other relationships. Of course there are many other danger signs of cultic or radicalizing relationships, but I think that isolation and control of close relationships perhaps tends not to get enough attention – particularly regarding radicalization when ideological concerns have taken most of the attention, and this leads to very difficult and confusing discussions around beliefs, censorship and so forth. I think some of this can be avoided by focusing on dangerous relationships and the patterns of isolating and controlling behaviours within those relationships.

I think we can learn much from movements such as that against domestic violence. A long struggle of activists and professionals – over 40 years. But certainly in the UK we now we see this much more in the mainstream, with much less blaming of the victims.

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- Educate students about dangerous relationships and how to navigate the array of groups, ideas, relationships they will be faced with.
- Provide resources – who to go to, what to access, where information is, etc.
- Institutions to be aware of predatory groups and how to respond to them.

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- Universities and schools: Induction; undergraduate/graduate courses; required courses; sections of other courses; flyers and posters; invited speakers; film series; peer mentoring
- Communities: Parents, social workers, doctors, police, teachers, etc.
- Critical need: train the trainers

On a concluding note we of course have a problem of capacity – there are not enough people yet who are knowledgeable, skilled in this area, and in positions of influence. So I think the critical step is that of raising awareness and training the trainers – using the rich variety of scholarship that is available. To that end, I would like to see much more effort put in particularly at the university level of training in this area. I would certainly welcome the opportunity to contribute to developing programs in this area.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.