Freeing the Authentic Self: Phases of Recovery and Growth from an Abusive Cult Experience

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Acknowledgements

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****

I invite feedback from those who read this. I want to hear from anyone but especially other former members. I want to know what you think, and if and how this represents your voice, your 'truth', and your understanding and experience.

Email: info@hopevalleycounselling.com.

Abstract

This cross disciplinary research study explores former cult members' perspectives on what helped them to recover from an abusive-cult experience. Here the term 'abusive-cult' pre-supposes a psychologically restrictive, traumatic or abusive experience, which may be challenging to 'recover' from. As a psychotherapist and former cult member, the subject is of both professional and personal interest.

Former cult members (former-members) are an under researched population, and therapeutic strategies for recovering from harm caused in an abusive-cult are underrepresented in the clinical literature. Little empirical research has been undertaken in the counselling profession in UK and worldwide, and evidence indicates that counsellors feel ill-prepared to work with former-members, and that accessing appropriate help is a challenge. This study examines the impact that abusive cults can have on their followers, in order to ascertain how survivors can be helped, through counselling and more generally, when recovering from cult abuse.

The study is limited to individuals from UK and USA who self-identified as former-members of an abusive-cult, and who related to the notion of post-cult recovery. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 29 participants, 15 in one-to-one interviews and three focus groups. A qualitative, constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to facilitate inductive emergence. No pre-conceived theoretical framework or literatures were used before the analysis commenced. Nevertheless, the format of the thesis follows PhD conventions, and literatures are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. Some findings are reflected in the literature chapters, and some literatures within the findings chapters, where they illuminate one another.

A theoretical framework was developed based on three key sources: evidence from previous studies, that both 'normal' and 'brainwashing' psychological processes occur in an abusive-cult; Gestalt

psychotherapy theory of self and personality (normal); and Lifton's (1989) thought-reform theory (brainwashing).

The findings indicate that the thought-reform environment-field restricts the individual and inhibits the authentic-self, which transmutes from being in the service of the health of the individual, to being in the service of the cult and the cult leader. 'Freeing the authentic-self' emerged as the 'basic social process' and objective, in answer to the question, 'what helps?' and is achieved through a complex process over time, evidenced to occur over four Phases of Recovery and Growth, identified as:

Freeing the authentic self:

- Phase One: The need to leave Physically & Psychologically
- Phase Two: Cognitive Understanding Aspects of Building a Sense of Self
- Phase Three: Emotional Healing Aspects of Building a Sense of Self and
- Phase Four: The Freed Self & Posttraumatic Growth

As all research participants are survivors of an abusive-cult, ethical concerns are particularly significant and addressed throughout the thesis. A word of warning: this thesis contains traumatic, and in some places, graphic description of physical, psychological, emotional and mental abuse.

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Abbreviations

1-1 cults	One-on-one cults
1G	First Generation – recruited or joined
1G[Issues]	1G with childhood issues
AC	Anti-Cult
ASCs	Altered states of consciousness
BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
BBIS	Brief Biographical Information Sheet
C-PTSD	Complex Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
CAGs	Cult Awareness Groups
CAs	Cult Apologists
CCGs	Counter Cult Groups
CCGA	The Community of the Church of God Almighty (pseudonym)
CDGs	Cult-Defender Groups
CoG	Children of God/The Family
CSA	Child sexual abuse
CWGs	Cult Watch Groups
EMDR	Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing
HDGs	High Demand Groups
HRGs	Human Rights Groups

ICSA	International Cultic Studies Association
INFORM	The Information Network on Religious Movements
LGAT	Large Group Awareness Training
LOGC	LOGCommunity
NRMs	New Religious Movements
PHTU	Paths to Healing through the Universe (pseudonym)
PTG	Posttraumatic growth
PTSD	Posttraumatic Stress Disorder
ROGs	Research Orientated Groups
R/S	Religion/Spirituality
SA	Spiritual Abuse
SGA	Second Generation Adults – born and or raised in
TBF	TBFellowship
UKCP	United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy
Wellspring	Wellspring Retreat and Resource Centre
WTRM	Wellspring Thought-reform Model

Chapter 1 – Introduction and Overview

> *'I must be one of thousands of people who have been damaged by cults and it is important for it to be recognised as a specific area, a specialist area. It is important for people who are struggling to get help, and for it to be okay, [because] these are very damaging, damaging, damaging things that you've been through - well, thank you.'* [Matt]

In this chapter I introduce the research background, cults. I declare my positioning as a reflexive former-member researcher and elucidate how I approached the literatures in this grounded theory study. I introduce the participants, followed by two composite representative life-histories; one a first generation former-member, and one a second generation adult former-member, before giving an overview of the content and structure for this thesis.

1.1 – Research Background

As the sixties-style egalitarian communes folded they gave way to other types of utopian group (Galanter, 2013; Wright, 2007; Kanter, 1972; Appel, 1983), the new religions or cults. Some modern day 'cults', or new religions, are derivatives from the 1960s counterculture movement which resulted in widespread social experimentation (Wright, 2007; Appel, 1983; Kanter, 1972). Changes in immigration law in USA in 1965 resulted in a dramatic increase of Asian immigrants and triggered an explosion of interest among young adults in eastern-based new religious movements (Wright, 2007, p.193) which continues to this day in UK and USA. The 1970s saw a proliferation of diverse movements worldwide, often in the form of communities and communes (Brockway and Rajashekar, 1987, p.xi; Kanter, 1972). The impact of these new religions emerging in the late 20th Century was unprecedented in history. Whilst not a new phenomenon (Kanter, 1972), they became highly prominent and

visible, unlike their predecessors (Galanter, 1989b; Brockway and Rajashekar, 1987). These modern movements did not emerge in a social vacuum as society experienced great upheaval resulting in change occurring on religious, political, economic and international levels (Kanter, 1972). Many new religions provided a more certain and stable ground in this changing, postmodern society, where new experimentation, paradoxically, led to less certainty as it challenged the social mores of the past (Coates, 2014; Pattison and Ness, 1989).

The proliferation of these new religions, referred to as New Religious Movements (NRMs), some of which were cults, led to considerable social and academic interest from sociologists of religion, psychologists and lawyers. They also raised a number of concerns, and those who were most outspoken were:

- Churches, Synagogues and mainstream religion (Barker, 1989; Brockway and Rajashekar, 1987; Barker, 1984; Robbins, 1983)
- Psychologists and clinicians (Hassan, 2013; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993) and
- Families whose members had become involved

These have been referred to as 'players in the cult scene' (Introvigne, 2014; Coates, 2013a; Almendros et al., 2013; Healy, 2010; Barker, 2002b, p.11). These concerns led to a polarisation amongst these 'players', resulting in heated debates for decades up to the present day. The most hotly debated aspects are related to:

- Labelling
- Whether cults adopt 'brainwashing' techniques to recruit and hold their members and
- Whether they cause harm

These contentions are addressed in more depth in the literature Chapters 3 and 4.

Recent empirical research observes that there are striking similarities between terrorist organisations, religious 'cults', racist groups, and criminal youth gangs. Studies on disengagement and deradicalisation from Sociology and other disciplines can be transferred (Harris, 2011; Odén, 2009; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2008). The 'cult' discourse has therefore moved in the direction of terrorism and deradicalisation studies (Stein, 2012; Rodríguez-Carballeira, Á, et. al., 2010; Lifton, 1999). The terrorist threat has impacted society in far-reaching ways (Schmid, 2013). Many terrorist events have occurred whilst I have been writing, including bombings in Paris (BBC, 2015b) and Brussels (BBC, 2016), beheadings and other atrocities. This has implications for this study and whether what helps former cult members recover might apply to the deradicalisation of former terrorists.

Popular myths abound in relation to 'cults' (Martin, 1993) including that they are an American problem and do not operate in the UK. Although there is a lack of empirical data to verify the numbers, it is assumed that the problem is similar pro-rata (Haworth, 2001) and that cults operate in all countries worldwide. Because of the hidden nature of abuse (Herman, 1992) it is virtually impossible to account for how many 'abusive-cults' exist; just as it is virtually impossible to ascertain how many domestic violence relationships exist. Whilst it has been said that there are around 5,000 potentially harmful cultic groups in United States of America (USA) (Matthews and Salazar, 2014); and 800-1,500 NRMs operating in United Kingdom (UK) (Source: INFORM, 12.1.16) some of which are 'abusive-cults', there is little evidence to support these numbers and the extent of the cult problem requires further research. This is in part because defining a cult proves to be an ongoing challenge because:

> 'Some groups harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely to harm people than other groups' (Almendros et al., 2013).

For the purposes of this study an 'abusive-cult' is that which traumatises and restricts the individual whose 'authentic-self' (see Chapter 7) is transmuted from being in the service of their physical and psychological health, to being in the service of the cult and the cult leader. I discuss and define an abusive-cult further in Chapter 3:3.6.

The general discourse on 'cults' and 'cultic dynamics' reaches into all areas of society (Barrett, 2001). Some One-on-One (1-1) relationships can be viewed as a cult and are similar to domestic violence, where one party adopts the role of a 'spiritual leader' or guru (Jenkinson, 2013; Lalich and Tobias, 2006). Figure 1.1 illustrates the reach of cultic dynamics and introduces some of the taxonomies that have been adopted in the attempt to arrive at a definition. I include references where they are not referred to elsewhere:

Figure 1.1: The reach of cultic dynamics

Social Reach	Labels Applied
Religion/Spirituality	NRMs; 'Cults'; 'Sects'; 'Charismatic groups'; Bible-based and pseudo-Christian; minority religions; New Age; New Age/Hindu; New Age/Buddhist; Ritual Abuse (Scott, 2001)
Politics	NRMs; 'Cults'; Terrorism & radicalisation (Harris, 2010; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2008); White extremism and hate violence (Harris, 2010; Oden, 2009); Governments are, or were, broadly speaking, cults - for example Nazi Germany (Taylor, 2004; Barrett, 1996)
Partner & Family Abuse	NRMs; 'Cults'; Psychopath partner abuse (Hare, 1993); Domestic violence (Ward, 2000); 1-1 cultic relationships (Jenkinson, 2013); Parental Alienation Syndrome (Baker and Sauber, 2013); The Troubled Teen Industry (Szalavitz, 2006).
Philosophy	NRMs; 'Cults'; Followers of particular philosophers
Psychotherapy & alternative therapies	NRMs; 'Cults'; Psychotherapy cults (Temerlin and Temerlin, 1982); Large Group Awareness Training (LGATs) (Giambalvo, 1995).
Business	NRMs; 'Cults'; Pyramid selling (Hassan, 2015); Devotion to a brand (Atkin, 2004)

Whilst the dynamics found in cults are human and social phenomena, there are some defining characteristics, which are addressed in the literatures in Chapters 3 and 4, and throughout.

As participants in this study were recruited in the UK and USA I concentrate my thinking in relation to debates relevant to those countries, although twelve participants had lived in other countries, including different cultures, whilst they had been members. This

research study may apply to former-members from most cultures, especially Western cultures, although that requires verification.

Before I locate the literatures in this study and introduce the participants, I declare my positioning as a reflexive researcher.

1.2 – Researcher Positioning

As a former cult member investigating other former-members I am both an insider and outsider in this study, and these identities create a binary which are a challenge to any research and are particularly pertinent to this study (Chryssides, 2014). I cannot declare myself a 'consummate insider or outsider in relation to another individual' (Saldana, 2007). I am similar and different to these former-member participants (Eppley, 2006, p.4). The scientific discourse relates to the researcher's ability to be objective enough to represent participant voices whilst being sensitive enough to understand their life world (Young, 2005; Crotty, 1998; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). I strive to be reflexive, open and authentic in all aspects of my personal life, my psychotherapy practice and my research (Levitt et al., 2015; McVey et al., 2015; Etherington, 2004). Reflexivity is the capacity of the researcher to

> '…acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry' (Etherington, 2004, p.32).

This is applicable to this study as I have worked hard to be aware of, and alert to, my influences and also my 'traumatic triggers' (Wilkinson, 2006; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Ogden et al., 2006), which might result in confluence (Perls et al., 1951) - a merging of life-histories, mirroring the cult experience and resulting in bias. In order to make these aspects transparent, I reflect on my research

antecedents in Chapter 2, and in relation to conducting this study in Chapter 6.

Truly representing the views of the cultures being studied is a challenge (Pelias, 2003; Goffman, 2014). Individual researchers will always, to some extent, be outsiders looking in, even those who share beliefs and experiences with those they are studying (Chryssides, 2014; Eppley, 2006; Barker, 1984). These issues impact on the validity, rigour and verisimilitude of research (Ellis, 2004, p.124; Etherington, 2004). Reflexivity is also an ongoing ethical issue throughout the research process and I attend to these 'ethics in practice' (Young, 2005) throughout. I explore the ethical considerations related to this whole study, and the nature of researching such personal and sensitive areas, in Chapter 6.

My subjectivity both enriches the study (Rennie, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and also poses challenges and it is with these considerations in mind that I proceed. In this next section I demonstrate my strategy in relation to searching the literatures before proceeding to introduce the participants and two vignettes, which are representative of participant life-histories.

1.3 - Locating the Literature

When to search the literatures is the subject of much discussion and some contention in grounded theory (GT) (Thornberg, 2012; Artinian et al., 2009; Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Inductive research logically supports delaying a search of the literature until themes emerge. I adopted this strategy in order to arrive at the topic anew, and to ensure the voices of these participants were paramount. The early design and analysis therefore, involved my 'bracketing' literatures, prior knowledge, and preconceived ideas in order not to inject questions, hypotheses or personal experiences, too early (Sorsa, et. al, 2015; Creswell, 1998,

p.54). This strategy was also, therefore, in order to address the potential for bias (Charmaz, 2014; Dey, 2005). These issues are discussed further in Chapter 5:5.4.2 and Chapter 6.

All literatures addressed herein are, therefore, informed by the categories that emerged from interview data, which in turn directed me where to position this study in the relevant debates, and which literatures to search. Whilst this strategy can have an impact on where the literatures are placed in a dissertation (Artinian et al., 2009), I have, nevertheless, structured the thesis in the normal way, addressing literatures early on, in Chapters 3 and 4. In addition, I adopt an inductive/deductive strategy (Charmaz, 2014) in the later analysis chapters, the Phases of Recovery and Growth, as it becomes apparent that what emerges from the data requires some explanation with the aid of the literatures. The literatures are therefore also discussed in analysis Chapters 10 and 11.

This study was focussed on what helps post-cult and the recovery process, although participants, particularly in the in depth one-to-one interviews, also contextualised the recovery process by telling me about their life-history in relation to their cult experience (for further discussion of sampling and interviews see Chapter 6). That is, they discussed: life pre-cult; why they joined; their life in the cult; how they left; and what helped them recover post-cult. In the early stages of analysis, as these themes that contextualise the cult experience emerged from the interview data, I labelled them: 'Locating the cult experience'. These categories inform various aspects of the structure of parts of this thesis, which are:

- the former-member life-histories (below),
- my autobiography (Chapter 2) and
- the literatures that were searched and the structure for Chapter 4

I set these out for clarity in Figure 1.2 below, and refer back to this table in other sections of this thesis. The aspects that are represented in the 'Phases of Recovery and Growth' relate to the final two categories, 'leaving' and 'post-cult'; the other aspects contextualise and give background to the recovery process. These categories are:

Figure 1.2: Categories: Locating the cult experience

Pre-cult	Contextualising
Joining	Contextualising
Life-in	Contextualising
Leaving	Phases of recovery & growth
Post-cult: What helps	Phases of recovery & growth

In this next section I deliberately introduce participants before introducing myself and my research antecedents in Chapter 2. I also set out two composite representative life-histories of a first generation and a second generation adult former-member, before concluding the chapter with an overview of the thesis.

1.4 – Introducing Participants

This study is based on the lived experience of 29 individuals who were formerly members of an abusive-cult, each of whom shared their experiences in a single interview. Their narratives are threaded throughout this thesis and are important because my supposition is that they are representative of other former-members (Langer, 2009; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). In addition, there are participants who are expert-therapists who have counselled other former-members and so have a broad knowledge of what helps former-members recover. I explicate sampling further in Chapter 6:6.4.

Participants are from two different former-member sample populations:

- First generation who joined or were recruited - 1G
- Second generation adults who were born and/or raised in a cult, including up to fifth or sixth generation (Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Kendall, 2006) - SGAs

These populations have similar and different needs post-cult (Derocher, 2008; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Kendall, 2005; Langone, 1993; Martin, 1993) and it is assumed that the discourses herein are relevant to both, unless explicitly stated. By definition 1G had some level of choice and may have had a reason to join, whereas SGAs, as children, evidently had no choice (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Barker, 1989). In Figure 1.3 below, I set out biographical information gathered from a Brief Biographical Information Sheet (BBIS) which is set out in Appendix 4 and discussed further in Chapter 6:6.3. I introduce the pseudonym of each participant alongside a taxonomy of

- their age when they joined
- how many years they were a member
- the general taxonomy of their group and
- their stated level of abusiveness on a Likert Scale

Figure 1.3: Participants

Pseudonym	Age Joined	Years a member	Taxonomy of group	Abusiveness Likert 1-10 10 [abusive]
Pete	25	1	New Age	10
Cheryl	19	8	New Age	8
Jane	22	17	Hindu/New Age	5
Sean	28	14	Hindu/New Age	6
Gloria	SGA	20	Hindu/New Age	6.5
Dolores	40	6	Hindu/New Age	9.5
Ginny	29	26	Hindu/New Age	7
Raymond	20	24	Hindu/New Age	5.5
Marietta	22	8	Hindu/New Age	8
Harriet	19	1.5	Hindu/New Age	8
Nina	19	13	Hindu/New Age	6
Reginald	27	9	Hindu/New Age	6
Lavinia	23	12	Hindu/New Age	7
Max	22	30	Hindu/New Age	8
Maribel	32	4	Therapy/New Age	7
Fred	32	14	Therapy/New Age	8
Daphne	23	10	Bible based	7.5
Winnie	40	7	Bible based	6
Dillon	18	22	Bible based	6
Emma	SGA	29	Bible based	10
Marjorie	19	14	Bible based	5
Alan	23	2	Bible based	7
Estella	32	4	Bible based	5.5
Lindsey	18	12	Bible based	7.5
Joshua	SGA	50	Bible based	5
Nigel	23	20	Pseudo-Bible based	7
Joe	29	4	Philosophy based	7
Matt	43	4	Therapy based	7
Shannon	SGA	2	Pseudo educational /therapy based	9

Because of the risk of breaking confidentiality, I have chosen not to elaborate on individual participant life-histories nor name their cults; I reflect further on this reasoning in Chapter 6:6.2. The taxonomies of cult applied are therefore purposely broad and vague. The New Age Movement lacks a coherent structure and the taxonomy is applied to those groups that are within the New Age Movement (Watt, 1995)

and that are abusive. New Age and Hindu/New Age groups are those based on New Age ideologies which are more aligned to 'spirituality' than 'Religion' (Barker, 1989). In some cases, they incorporate some 'religious' ideas, imported from the Hindu religion, although some also incorporated Buddhist ideas. The taxonomy 'Bible-based' refers to those abusive-cults whose ideology is based on a Biblical and broadly Christian ideology (Martin, 1993). The therapy based taxonomies relate to groups that broadly purport to have therapeutic aims, and some included counselling, but all were mixed with New Age spiritual ideologies. There are numerous publications that name different controversial groups, some of which are cults, and I therefore do not elaborate further herein (Barrett, 1996; Galanter, 1989a & 1989b).

In order to demonstrate participant experiences whilst avoiding breaking confidentiality, I set out two representative composite biographies or life-histories (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.172), one 1G and one SGA. Neither of these is the actual life story of any one participant, and identifying details and names have been changed. I adopt new pseudonyms and these are based on an interweaving of life-histories shared in interview and that emerge from the data. Similarly, all the cult names within these accounts are pseudonyms and a compilation of various participants' cults. In adopting the strategy of creating representative individuals, I draw on a long tradition (Thomson, 2002) in ethnographic research of collating life-histories in order to

> '…illuminate cultural, historical and social facts rather than individual lives or aspects of personality' [in which a] 'representative individual is selected and made to stand for an entire culture' (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003, p.172).

In this case these life-histories stand for participants in this study and are presumed to be representative of all former-members, although

that would require further verification; I discuss this further in Chapter 6:6.4. I have purposefully used names that can be applied to males or females. The structure is based on the categories 'Locating the cult experience', Figure 1.2 above. I italicise categories that arise from analysis.

1.4.1 – Life-history: 1G - Leslie

Leslie is male and was a member of a therapy cult (Boland and Lindbloom, 1992; Temerlin and Temerlin, 1982) which had a distinct New Age philosophy where the founder and lead therapist evolved from simply a therapist into a guru. I shall call the leader Damian and the cult: 'Paths to Healing through the Universe (PHTU)'. I shall call the public face of the cult 'Healing Paths' (both pseudonyms), which had a website and advertised the therapy service; PHTU was hidden from public view. Outsiders perceived 'Healing Paths' to be a normal therapy practice and did not know about PHTU. They never lacked clients as they were good at marketing themselves on the internet.

Pre-cult: Leslie's parents had divorced when he was in his late teens. They lost contact with him and his siblings for whom he assumed responsibly. He was left feeling grief stricken and that he had no place in the world. In order to cope he decided to care for others and began training as a spiritual healer and therapist.

Joining: By his mid-thirties Leslie had become a successful therapist who loved his work. He had aspirations to make a difference in people's lives and to have impact. When one of his respected colleagues, Damian, invited him to join the new international therapy service he was setting up, Leslie was excited. He could see the potential to help many more people working alongside others, and viewed it as an adventure.

Life-in: At its inception the service was a straightforward therapy practice with a number of self-employed practitioners who attended

external mentoring and guidance for their work. As the service evolved Damian asserted that the therapists needed him to counsel, guide and mentor them. At the time this did not seem an unreasonable request and they all agreed. In reality, this step resulted in the group coalescing around Damian, although it evolved so slowly Leslie barely noticed the changes. This was an important stage in the development of the practice becoming a cult as it eventually evolved into a community where all the practitioners lived in the same vicinity, becoming intensely involved in each other's lives.

Damian gradually insisted on the practitioners following a particular set of spiritual beliefs and practices. These beliefs included the idea that mankind is destroying the natural world and society through selfishness and negativity. The solution offered was to give up your ego, your sense of self, and join the other practitioners in bringing positivity and healing through 'the Universe', a term which described some sort of undefined force or god-like power which was channeled through Damian. The 'ego' was viewed in spiritual terms as a noise created by the mind and self, and the aim was to silence it in order to get to the core inside, an empty place shared with the Universe and all enlightened people. This would ultimately lead to all mankind being healed and becoming one. Leslie was told this could be achieved through his 'practice', which included meditation, chanting and cleaning the cult centre; although this practice regularly changed over the time he was a member, at Damian's whim. These practices were referred to as 'The Path' and became the ultimate aim and spiritual 'work' of all the practitioners, alongside making money.

In the regular mentoring sessions, which were sometimes one-to-one and sometimes as a group, Damian insisted the practitioners reveal deeply personal issues that were hurting them, such as childhood, relationship and sexual problems. This was rationalised as keeping the spiritual channels clean and open and was necessary if PHTU was to successfully achieve its aims.

Damian was an experienced hypnotherapist and would use his skills when Leslie least expected it, for example, in the mentoring sessions. Leslie realises in retrospect that Damian could make his mind go blank – as if his brain was frozen. It was only years later when he visited an ethical hypnotherapist and went through all the strange things that happened, that he understood this was possible. Whilst he came to understand this was post-hypnotic suggestion, at the time he believed Damian had control over his mind and this scared and disempowered him. These practices, and the induction into a trance-like state, simply reinforced the magical guru type relationship that was evolving and resulted in Leslie believing Damian was as powerful as he said he was, and that the experiences were truly supernatural. Because Leslie was disorientated and confused he sometimes forgot what he had told Damian; when these issues were repeated back to him in a way that sounded revelatory, Leslie's belief was confirmed, namely that Damian had special powers and could read his mind.

Instead of treating the mentoring sessions and personal disclosures as confidential, Damian would twist the meaning and publicly reveal information. This resulted in Leslie looking like a bully, or being publicly mocked. This often occurred around the dinner table when the group was gathered together. These sessions evolved into Damian telling Leslie, and the others, that whatever they did, however hard they worked, however much money they earned, they were never good enough.

His spiritual philosophy was that any work was spiritual practice. Leslie was told he had dark and dirty stuff he needed to clear, dark and dirty thoughts that Damian said he was into. Because it was assumed that he was always generating something spiritually negative, he had to suppress himself in order to keep this in check. This kept him in a constant state of underperforming and left him feeling lost. In order to address this 'negativity', Leslie was expected to work long hours, and often had only four hours of sleep. In

addition, he was offering therapeutic work and was constantly exhausted, which made it harder for him to stand up for himself. All this time Leslie was successfully earning money and giving it all to Damian, under the guise of spiritual practice and making the world a better, less negative, place.

The bullying and miserable deprecation therefore left Leslie feeling so bad about himself that he became subservient and dependent, rationalising that PHTU and Damian had the only answers to this negativity, but not recognising that they were causing it. He lost his sense of personal strength, and confidence in his own mind and decisions, believing there were always 150 bad things and they were always worse than last week. The idea of leaving became too hard to contemplate, at this stage, because he believed he still needed to discover all of the things that were bad about himself in order that he could continue to work on them and heal the world. He had been clearly warned of the consequences of not 'practicing' and its global impact.

He continued to feel he must support and help others, including other members when they were being bullied and abused. This eventually led him to challenge many of the premises upon which Damian was doing things and voicing these critical thoughts and doubts would result in Leslie being bullied and abused. Over a period of time he was being told off for up to four hours a day in a room of up to 10 people who would all tell him what a negative and terrible person he was.

In spite of this abuse he believed he could change the community, but eventually realised that his attempts were futile and decided to leave. In order to do so he had to secretly save for over a year because none of his earnings from his client work were allocated to him.

Leaving: There were times when Leslie had wondered what sort of a person Damian was, asking himself if he was a sociopath, a god or a truly great man. In spite of these *doubts* he continued to see Damian as a spiritually empowered leader. This continued until he heard he had also bullied and manipulated (abused) his own children. Leslie was shocked and finally faced the fact that the community and Damian were not what they seemed to be. He began to redefine the spiritual practice as abuse and recognise that Damian was a flawed human being, not a god; he was able to finally *unmask* him and he felt as if he was *waking from a trance that had gone stale*. It was helpful to see Damian as just a person, and it enabled him finally to stand up to him, breaking the hold of fear. He felt that he was *returning to his authentic-self,* the person he had known himself to be before becoming involved. He had begun to *leave psychologically,* although he had been struggling to *leave physically,* because of lack of resources.

Post-cult and what helped: After he left Leslie did not know where to turn. He tentatively approached his family who welcomed him back. He lived with them for a year in order to recuperate because he felt exhausted and depleted, as if the very life had been drained out of him. They did not fully understand what had happened to him but it helped that they viewed his leaving as a strength. He felt guilty and a fool for being duped but they forgave him and reassured him. There was a marked difference between their kindness and life in PHTU. He felt respected and appreciated again after all the years of abuse.

He did not know how to describe PHTU. One day, searching the internet, he was surprised to discover a website that was critical of it, set up by a fellow practitioner who had left sometime before. He saw that they were *calling it a cult*. This fascinated Leslie and he was excited to discover there were words to describe the psychological dynamics and to explain the feelings he was struggling with. This helped him to *critically appraise* and review the experience which led

to him *understanding* that the bullying and abuse had been a way of Damian intentionally programming him to feel bad about himself – he realised that he used a form of *thought-reform*. Leslie recognised that this was in order that he would become subservient to the community, lose his sense of personal strength, and become dependent. It also ensured Damian sustained his grandiosity, and that his emotional and financial wants and needs were met.

Although Leslie had begun to *leave psychologically* whilst still a member, he needed to *leave physically* in order to begin the recovery process. This was because so long as he remained in the cult he was exposed to the abuse and his own distorted negative thinking about himself. Once he had left physically, he was able to *understand* the psychological mechanisms employed by Damian which helped him realise the painful feelings were not evidence of his dark and negative nature. He also had to *face painful feelings that he had suppressed* in the cult. He cried a great deal and allowed himself to *feel the pain* of the experience. He missed the person Damian used to be and was able to *grieve* for his loss and sense of betrayal.

Initially he worked through the cult experience on his own through reading and talking to his family but when he learned of a support group for former-members in the next city, he attended for a year (*self-help*). This helped him to recognise that the dynamics adopted by Damian were common across the other cults represented in the group, and this enhanced his *understanding*. It also helped to talk with others with a shared experience as it *validated* and *normalised* his experience and *built his sense of authentic-self*.

Leslie decided to engage in further education in order to hone his therapeutic skills and this enabled him to become part of an ethical community of practitioners who were very different to those in PHTU. He learned that it is possible to have mentors who are not narcissistic and controlling, and that authority figures do not need to be 'put on

a pedestal'. They expected him to express his own opinions, challenge them, and retain a sense of his authentic-self. These new relationships helped him build his self-esteem and confidence and he realised that on the whole people liked him.

Whilst training he recognised that his wanting to help others resulted in him staying longer than he needed which was a repeat of the earlier trauma when his parents divorced and he assumed responsibility for his siblings. Once he became aware of this he entered into psychotherapy and was able to *grieve* for these *childhood issues,* which resulted in *healing* as he *built his sense of authentic-self* and *recovered*. He recognised that it was important that he had *understood* the dynamics in PHTU, *before addressing these childhood issues* or he could end up blaming himself and his family for his cult experience.

Leslie regards himself to be *recovered* but can still feel the pain when he thinks back to those days, or when someone who has left PHTU approaches him for help. He says of his life now that it has been important to hold on to his sense of purpose because he joined the cult in order to help people and make the world a better place. Damian used this honest desire as a vehicle through which to manipulate him. But Leslie thought about all the things he personally believed; he was doing to make the world a better place, and challenged himself to *continue with the positive aspects*, in a different way and on his own terms. He asked himself: 'what am I going to do to become that person that I wanted to become, and not give up on myself?' He learned to trust that his reasons for joining were genuine, heartfelt and good, and now spends his time building on these attributes. He also wants to remember the good times and not paint the whole experience black.

Leslie is making real progress as opposed to the promised fictitious progress which was actually lack of progress. He had been

disappointed that the promised transformation of himself and society came to nothing but is *using all he learned to build a fulfilling and satisfying life*, and continues to successfully help others – he has found a way to *turn that experience into a positive he can build on*, even on his CV!

1.4.2 - Life-history: SGA – Jessie

Jessie is female and was born and raised in a Bible based-cult called 'The Community Church of God Almighty' (CCGA) (pseudonym). They believed in a fundamentalist form of evangelical Christianity which taught that the Bible is the word of God, to be taken at face value, and which does not require interpretation; this resulted in opposition to theological or ethical debate (Jones, 2016). CCGA was founded by Jessie's great grandparents and was located in a number of different cities in UK. There was a chief Elder and board of Deacons in each location and all members lived in the same locality. It was culturally isolated and took little or no interest in society or the news. In most cases, members would run their own businesses or work for other members. They watched very little television judging it to be an evil influence. They attended Church meetings several times a week and their recreational time was, on the whole, spent together.

Life-in: As a child Jessie accepted the teaching that outsiders were 'of the devil', and should be treated with suspicion. She attended a local school, although she was not allowed to take part in any special occasions, like Christmas, or other children's birthdays. As a result, she felt weird, different, lonely and isolated amongst her peers. She had few friends in the CCGA as there were only two other children her age in her locality and they were both boys.

Her parents did not show her affection, but they did feed and clothe her. They gave most of the attention to her older brother and she grew up knowing boys were more important to God than girls. She

knew that she was not really accepted, although it helped if she was compliant, a 'good girl', quiet and obedient. She understood the adults all had more important issues to attend to than her needs. As a result, she did not feel anyone 'saw' her, either at home or in CCGA, and she felt a like a ghost, lost between worlds, the neglect hidden.

She did exceptionally well at school, which made life a little easier for her although she found anything that challenged the teachings in CCGA deeply confusing - and fascinating. She hid her curiosity and *doubts* from everyone, because she knew it would upset her parents, and other members, and it felt dangerous.

As she grew up she became more aware of the implications of the cruel things that CCGA believed about outsiders. This did not correlate with her understanding of God and the Bible, nor her experience of people at school who, on the whole, seemed nice. In fact, she liked some of the teachers as they gave her attention and encouraged her in a way she was not encouraged at home. She learned she had the potential to attend higher education, but hid this as it was risky to tell her parents who did not believe it was necessary, as the end of the world was assumed to be imminent.

Her parents were extremely worried about her as she matured, assuming the worst of her. As a result, they pushed her into marrying another member of the Church whom she did not know well and who was three years older. She felt torn apart by this decision but did not feel she had the right, or the strength, to say no; she still believed it was God's will to obey. She married Barry when she was 18 and they had three children very quickly as she was unclear about the 'facts of life' as CCGA did not believe in discussing such things. She only learned about contraception after leaving.

In spite of not knowing Barry when they married she found him to be an intelligent and fairly kind man and she began to gain confidence

to voice some of her concerns to him. She discovered, to her surprise, that Barry also had *doubts* which *validated* her. They gradually began to talk about their feelings and thoughts and eventually decided to leave. Jessie was 25 and the mother of three small children.

Leaving: It was extremely difficult for Jessie and Barry to tell their parents they were leaving. Both sets of parents were outraged, extremely emotional, and warned them they were going to go to hell. Their salvation was deemed to only be valid if they were practicing members of CCGA. This terrified Jessie particularly. After being out for a while, she began to *critically appraise* these ideas and realised that God probably wasn't that punitive - and in time began to think about other ways of viewing God.

Post-cult: After leaving Jessie was extremely confused, and felt overwhelmed emotionally a lot of the time. She did not know how to describe her childhood and growing up and did not have the knowledge, awareness, or tools to manage her authentic feelings which had been so suppressed prior to leaving. She felt it would be disloyal to speak about CCGA because it would mean speaking ill of, and possibly betraying, her family. She was confused by the fact that it was a Church, that she loved God, but that it was also so neglectful and cruel. Having children had highlighted to her how lacking in love her childhood had been as she was very different with them; explaining things to them and hugging and reassuring them when they needed it.

For a few years Jessie and Barry felt utterly lost and lonely. They were glad they had each other but they missed their family who had shunned them and cut them off completely. Barry became depressed to the point of feeling suicidal, said he could not cope, and left Jessie with the children. She was grief stricken and at that point decided that the past was the past and she must get on with her life. She cut

off her emotions, as she had learned to do in CCGA, and dissociated from the memory of her earlier life. She decided to reinvent herself.

At this point she realised she had to concentrate on *catching up with the rest of the world* and learning more about society and how people in 'the world' did things because it was such a different culture to that of CCGA. Remembering what her teachers had said, she realised one way of doing this was to enrol on an access course for University. She recognised this would help her learn more about life and might lead her towards a career. She did very well at each stage of her further education including achieving academic acclaim. She *identified a career which interested her*, that she *enjoyed* and this helped her *provide* for herself and the children. An added benefit, that she had not thought of previously, was she began to work out *what sort of things she liked* and *what sort of person she was*. She *made friends and discovered people liked her*, which surprised her as her feeling 'weird' as a child had left a mark on how she viewed herself. She also discovered that some 'worldly' people were fun, kind and generous, often a great deal more generous than those she had grown up with. This helped her *build her sense of authentic-self*, because when she had left the CCGA she felt that she had no self at all and then, when Barry left she felt a failure, inadequate and unlovable.

Over the years she had little contact with Barry and none with her family - it was challenging in every way. She knew she should get help but didn't have the time or the words to describe what had happened to her. She continued to feel she was weird and different, to some extent, and found that people didn't really 'get' what she was saying if she dared tell them anything about her upbringing. It was embarrassing and shameful and it also felt too painful to think about, never mind to talk about.

One day at college she had some spare time and was curious to find out if CCGA had caught up with the modern age and created a

website. They had not, but she discovered others who had left had, and saw that they were *using the term 'cult'* to describe it. She was fascinated, there was something about the word that caught her attention. As she searched she found websites and conversations about other situations, some of which sounded surprisingly similar to her family and CCGA in spite of believing very different things. She realised that this term 'cult' would help her begin to *understand* and *put words to her experience*. It was a momentous day for her and everything began to change after that. Whilst she had *left physically* she had not begun to *leave psychologically* until that day.

She found that the websites had links to *various resources*. She read a number of the recommended books and watched some videos on the internet – she felt she was just sucking up all the information. When she had investigated a bit more she took the risk and talked to her children who were now in their teens and old enough to take part in the conversation. They were also extremely relieved to find words to describe what they had left behind. Even though they had been so young when they left it still affected them because they saw the effect on their mother and were sad because their family was different to their friends' families. The oldest child remembered their grandparents and still grieved for them, although he was also embarrassed about them and they all thought they were 'weird'. Once they all identified CCGA as a cult they *understood better* that their family were caught up in something controlling and abusive, and they came to think of them as being trapped, as victims. This helped them have compassion and they began to make cautious steps towards contacting them.

CCGA had gone through some changes of its own as Jessie's parents' generation were getting older, and they were a little more open. They were obviously missing Jessie and sad not to know the children, and this gave her a small window of opportunity, which she took advantage of, in order that she could build up more of a relationship

with them before they died. She approached them cautiously, because they remained somewhat disapproving and judgemental and it still hurt and caused her to doubt her new sense of self. Gradually her parents adjusted to the new Jessie and even though things were often still tense, they were more accepting than they had ever been, although baffled by Jessie's views.

Jessie had *developed many positive qualities* which she felt she had learned because of the very difficult time she had been through growing up in such an unusual situation. She began to help others who had left CCGA who were feeling as confused as she had been. She felt somewhat guilty that it was her family who were, in part, responsible because they founded the Church. She attended *counselling* to help her with the guilt. Although the counsellor did not know much about cults, she was warm, kind and compassionate and helped Jessie to accept herself and be more realistic, rather than blaming herself for things she had no control over. She *explained* to Jessie about attachment theory (Holmes, 1993); that it is a useful and necessary bond that serves to maintain a close and contactful relationship between caregiver and child for the purpose of the protection of the child (Stein, 2007). She explained that when this works flexibly, and the parent is responsive to the child and their needs, then a 'secure attachment' results, but when the parent does not meet the child's needs then an 'insecure attachment' results (Bowlby, 1973). This helped Jessie *understand* why her parent's neglect and later rejection of her had left her feeling unsure of herself and so full of pain. Her counsellor also *validated her feelings* and explained that these were traumatic things for anyone to go through, which helped *validate* Jessie and enabled her to *face the painful feelings*.

This *understanding* of herself led Jessie to realise the extent of the difficulties others leaving had to face, and sometimes former-members of CCGA lived with her, as they adjusted to society outside

the cult. She helped a lot of people. Through these other former-members, she learned about a *specialist counsellor* who understood about cults and attended counselling for a year. The counsellor explained she needed to *both build her sense of self and deconstruct and understand the dynamics* in CCGA. She finally started to *understand* the brainwashing aspects and normal psychological aspects (Coates, 2012a), because of what she had learned from both counsellors, and realised the emotional pain was not because God was punishing her. This helped her to dare to *face the pain* and go through the *psychological chemotherapy*, as she called it; and as a result she began to *heal*. She felt this was the last piece of the jigsaw and even though she is still affected by the cult, because it was such a fundamental part of her upbringing, she considers herself *recovered.* She feels joyful sometimes when she realises she is no longer cut off from herself, she is integrated, a *whole person*!

By amalgamating participant life-histories I have introduced the reader to the issues that are faced by former-members and provided illustrations of the categories 'locating the cult experience': pre-cult; joining; life-in; leaving; and post-cult. I have also introduced some of the categories that arise from analysis and placed them in the context of the life-history of a representative former-member in order that the reader has a sense of what is to come.

I conclude this chapter by way of a brief overview of the content and structure of the thesis.

1.5 – Overview of Thesis

In *Chapter 2* I position myself within this study and illuminate my research antecedents by way of a personal and professional biography.

In *Chapter 3* I locate and examine the literatures pertaining to the relevant perspectives, controversies, debates and definitions between

'players' in the 'cult scene'. I discuss the controversies around brainwashing, deprogramming and labelling a cult, before defining 'an abusive-cult'.

In *Chapter 4* I discuss the literatures in relation to the categories arising: 'Locating the cult experience' in Figure 1.2 above. In respect of 'pre-cult' and 'joining', I discuss: vulnerability and life transitions; conversion debates and identity change; and explicate participants' experiences. In respect of 'life-in' I explore the literatures related to the cult leader; and cultic abuse. In relation to 'life-in' and 'post-cult', I explore the literatures related to harm and emotional affects, including traumatic grief and loss of the cult; the deleterious effects of cult-abuse; and posttraumatic stress reactions. I discuss the data in some sections. I finalise this chapter with a definition of 'recovery' for the purposes of this study.

In *Chapter 5* I discuss the philosophical underpinnings to this study. I map my epistemological and ontological positioning, theoretical perspective, and introduce my chosen methodology, Constructivist Grounded Theory.

In *Chapter 6* I address the methodological underpinnings for this study in order to illuminate decisions made and evidence how the research was conducted and findings arrived at. This includes ethical considerations; sampling; and interviews as data collection. I also discuss researching sensitive data and reflect on the impact on myself as researcher. I explain how I generated theory and data analysis strategies.

In *Chapter 7* I clarify my theoretical perspective in order to introduce terminology adopted for the analysis. This is based on: participant accounts; literature and sensitising factors; Gestalt psychotherapy theory of self; and Lifton's thought-reform theory. I also evidence the

emergence of the coding for the 'Phases of Recovery and Growth', introduce them textually, and by a diagram for each.

Chapter 8 is the first of the chapters that addresses the research question, 'what helps'. This is Phase One of four Phases and addresses leaving physically and psychologically.

Chapter 9 is Phase Two which addresses the professional & self-help strategies that help and the cognitive understanding aspects of building a sense of self.

Chapter 10 is Phase Three which addresses the emotional healing aspects of building a sense of self which is facing suppressed feelings, emotional pain and grief.

Chapter 11 is Phase Four which evidences that recovery is achievable, and that some achieve posttraumatic growth.

In *Chapter 12* I revisit and reflect on previous discussions and debates and draw conclusions. I highlight my contribution to knowledge and consider some of the limitations of this study. I identify areas in need of further investigation and draw this study to a conclusion.

1.6 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have introduced the study by way of a brief background into the history of 'cults'; reflected on my positioning as a former-member researcher; and located the literature in this study. I introduced the reader to two composite 'life-histories' of a 1G and SGA former-member, based on participant accounts, in order to illuminate and illustrate former-member issues and highlight categories that arise. I concluded the chapter with an overview of the thesis. In Chapter 2 I turn my attention to my personal biography in order to position myself in this study and illuminate my research antecedents.

Chapter 2 – Personal and Professional Biography

2.1 - Rationale

My aim in this chapter is to make apparent the influences and life events which give rise to this research study and to help the reader understand my personal motivation and interest in studying recovery from a cult experience. In order to assist the reader to judge to what extent this thesis is influenced by me, I self-consciously and intentionally identify my personal experiences, and concerns, and illuminate pertinent social and cultural influences (Etherington, 2004, p.19) from which this investigation and resulting themes arise. By valuing subjectivity (Ellis et al., 2011; Reed-Danahay, 1997), self-exposure and reflexivity (Levitt et al., 2015; Etherington, 2004) I align myself with a post-modern paradigm. Within this paradigm tentative, marginalised voices are invited to be heard (Etherington, 2004, p.21; Gilligan, 1993), the dialectic within the 'cult scene' is challenged and the boundaries and links between my voice as researcher, the participants', the text and the environment, are illuminated.

Reflexive accounts and biography have a long history in ethnographic research (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006) but they have been criticised as controversial and 'self-indulgent' (Delamont, 2009; Etherington, 2004, p.31; Crotty, 1998). There is the danger of these becoming 'vanity ethnography' (Maynard, 1993, p.329) where anything goes and the researcher is in danger of narcissism, navel gazing (Etherington, 2004, p.31) and of being accused of taking part in a personal development rather than a research activity (McLeod, 2011, p. 216; Atkinson and Delamont, 2006).

Implicit in the methodology is that I am asking the reader to 'trust' me, to 'believe' me and to believe in my 'authenticity' as far as I have reached it to date; it is hard to judge this by conventional indicators

of validity (McLeod, 2011, p.216). As an ongoing interaction with the phenomenon of being a researcher and a former cult member, the process of raising awareness (Mackewn, 2000), and achieving new levels of self-awareness and clarification, will continue for me, but this is the level of awareness I have reached as I write.

In disclosing my life-history I recognise there is a danger of saying more about myself than the participants, but in order to declare my positioning I take that risk. Another danger is for my abuse to be ranked or compared to participants' abuse. This is not my intention; abuse affects different people in different ways, depending on a number of variables (Turnbull, 2011; Regel and Joseph, 2010) and survivor stories are only comparable in some respects. I ask that the reader keep this in mind.

I reflect briefly on memory and ethics before proceeding with my research antecedents, my autobiography.

2.2 - Memory

There is the potential for memories to be recalled in self-serving and inaccurate ways (Bromley and Melton, 2002; Ofshe and Watters, 1995; Greenwald, 1980); for fabrication, the revision of personal history, and self-deception. Memory is unreliable and can change, and the passage of time results in less accurate recollection (Loftus, 1996). Incidents reported herein are from the perspective of looking back with the understanding I have gained over the years, and are unlikely to be exact or to be the interpretation I would have made at the time.

Whilst holding these challenges in mind, and in order to address the issue of the veracity of my memories (Wall, 2008, p.45; Loftus, 1996), I alternated between writing from memory and checking diaries and the few writings I still have from the 1970s. In addition, I consulted a piece of unpublished research conducted by a fellow

former-member, in approximately 1984, three years after the demise of the cult, which contains an overview and history, including dates.

2.3 - Ethics

In positioning myself, and making my life-history and struggles transparent (Etherington, 2004, p.142), I risk exposing others. In terms of protecting the identities of those who were fellow members, these are not insurmountable as it is unlikely they will be identified because the cult disbanded in 1980 and I have disguised identities. I use an abbreviation of the real name of the cult: TBFellowship (TBF) and LOGCommunity (LOGC) in order not to confuse it with other organisations with a similar name. I judge that only those who already know my story, or were members with me, will be able to identify it from these.

It will almost certainly be more harmful to approach fellow former-members to gain informed consent after all these years and purely for my own aims. Those who were members with me will know to whom I am referring and what was done to others, in the main, but they may not know the impact either on myself or others. I will, to some degree, be telling a shared narrative, or, at least, my version of it, but I am not commenting herein on the impact on others nor in any way interpreting what happened to them in psychological or any other terms. In relation to exposing those mentioned, including my family, I have restricted my reflections to the basic facts, changed names, and concentrated on myself in the main. I hope this will be 'good enough for now' (Ellis, 2001, p.615).

With these prior factors in mind the following is a reflection on life events and critical incidents pertaining to the themes that arise from my abusive-cult experience; what helped me recover; and how that experience has informed my professional development as a counsellor and psychotherapist, and ultimately as a researcher. I finalised this

autobiography after the data analysis had been completed, and in the next section I reflect on key incidents in my life in relation to themes that arise. The apposite literatures are discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. When thinking about my research question 'what helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience?' in relation to my life story I find the need, like many of my participants, to give a context, to explain the back-story of my own cult experience, in order to illuminate what I needed help to recover from. I have therefore structured my life history around the categories: 'Locating the cult experience', set out in Chapter 1: Figure 1.2.

2.4 - Research Antecedents – A Biography

If I had not joined what became a cult I would not have embarked on this research journey and so in some respects it started when I became a 'born again Christian' in 1971 and two years later joined what evolved into an abusive-cult. I illuminate my cult experience and draw out themes that arise and the antecedents that are relevant to my journey, which bring me to today, conducting this research and writing this thesis.

2.5 – Joining

When I first encountered evangelical Christianity in 1970 I had not been seeking certainty - or anything – and I had few ambitions. The message that Jesus loved me and would give me eternal security was seductive and moved me deeply. I was born in Uganda, East Africa in 1952, and my parents had divorced when I was 6. The many life changes, including living with other families and attending boarding school, left me vulnerable to the loving message. Liza, who recruited me into evangelicalism, had to work hard initially to keep my interest, but when I finally capitulated I grasped certainty, self-righteousness, Christian fundamentalism and rigidity wholeheartedly - and did not let go for another 28 years. Even at this early stage following

conversion, my family observed an obvious change in me as I gradually left behind the fun loving, boy seeking, glamorous young woman that I was and became what they described as overly focussed and 'earnest' – and I didn't wear make-up anymore!

As my involvement increased, it became apparent there was more to the message than I first realised. Whilst God did love me he also wanted to 'break' me, that I should 'lay down my life' for others, surrender all. It also became apparent that the Church was more important than my family who needed to be 'saved' as they were 'going to hell'; the implication being that they had nothing of great value to offer me, nor did any outsiders. As a child of the 50's I had learned compliance and respect for authority figures, exacerbated by five years at boarding school. Whilst the Churches I belonged to initially were not cults by my definition (Chapter 4:4.7), I was, even at this early stage, too deeply involved to feel I could challenge the Priests and Pastors, their teachings, and the resulting fear. This laid the foundations for, and ensured I had a rationale for, later abuse.

My conversion therefore resulted in my becoming narrowly focussed on Church and put me on a path that led to my joining TBF in 1973, and placed me geographically far from my family. Within a year TBF evolved from an outward facing and creative charismatic evangelical fellowship, with a desire to model New Testament radical Christianity to the Churches, into a 'world rejecting NRM' (Wallis, 1984) which evolved further into a coercive and abusive live-in community cult, LOGC.

I learned of TBF because the founder, Adam (pseudonym), offered counselling, which was unusual in the Church in the 1970s. I had hit a crisis and was unsure if I was depressed, infested with demons, or if my conversion was spurious. Adam, and occasional member, Roger (pseudonym), counselled me. I learned years later that they only had half a day's counselling training. They told me I wasn't, after all,

genuinely 'born again', apparently answering my previous dilemma. This crisis, and being geographically distant from my family, increased my vulnerability to their suggestion that God wanted me to move to the city and join them. I was flattered and in 1973 moved into No.61, the first of what became a number of community houses, and which became my home for the next seven years.

2.6 – Life-in

I was clearly different to everyone else as I did not speak with the broad local accent, being from a 'posh' family from the south of England. Perhaps they felt my international upbringing brought some kudos – also proving that they had a wide reach. In the early days we enjoyed a shared 'vision', were creative, had camping trips and fun times. Initially I earned money being a temporary secretary and later entered full time employment. All my earnings went into a 'common purse', a decision I believed was Biblical – God would look after me as I did His work. I also worked as an unpaid 'housemother' over a period of two years.

In spite of some counselling being offered, emotional problems were not recognised nor really understood, and displays of emotion or upset were treated either as sin or lack of commitment which were to be repented, or demonic influence which was to be exorcised. This was devastating for me as I increasingly suppressed my childhood issues, depression and grief (which had not been resolved by joining), fearing my feelings and the consequences of expressing them, but often not being able to contain them.

There was no structured leadership initially, although it was assumed Adam, and perhaps half a dozen others who were older and more mature and capable, were the leaders. I was never a leader. The focus under Adam had been to recruit new members and was outward facing. In 1974 Roger appeared to have special insight into a difficult

situation that arose, and as Adam was exhausted from the previous years building LOGC, he began a slow but sure process of taking over. The focus became more pastoral and inward looking. LOGC became more structured under his leadership as we modelled ourselves on other communal communities, including in USA, where members lived together and shared everything (Kanter, 1972). This resulted in two years of fairly intense personal counselling and reshaping of the community's lifestyle, in order that it would look good to outsiders, including working long hours decorating the community houses after work.

Image was of paramount importance to Roger and was tantamount to evidence of our success and blessing from God. Our changed image increased our attractiveness to outsiders and resulted in a good reputation with some Churches and potential members alike. We changed from dowdy evangelicals and, unbeknown to the Churches, were taught that James Bond was an example of an ideal Christian man, as Roger tried to model our life, in some respects, on him! This included drinking Martinis, having baths together, and some men had sex with female members (but not full intercourse as that would be a sin!).

Both Roger and Adam lived off the earnings of the other members, believing their status afforded them special treatment. I accepted this without question, as I was convinced it was God's will that divinely appointed leaders should be afforded special treatment. I believed that Adam and Roger were called specially by God to lead LOGC. Whilst I did not view them as Gods, I believed they were God's representatives. I became terrified of them because of the power they wielded and punitive practices, particularly in the later years. Whilst they both had charisma (Storr, 1996), it was limited; that is, their reach outside LOGC was limited, although they were successful for a long period of time in maintaining control through threats, bullying, manipulation and fear.

In 1976 Adam decided that we needed to increase our level of commitment and he wrote a 'New Covenant' which we read every morning in our prayer time before work - I have retained a copy which I replicate because it evidences the cult mind-set, control and thought-reform (Lifton, 1989):

> 'I, of my own free choice, covenant myself to you my brethren, for today and eternity. I identify myself with the New Covenant between the Lord Jesus and the Father, and trust the Spirit of Jesus to keep me so that I may fulfil it completely. I lay down my life for the Lord Jesus and for each one of you my brethren; this includes giving up my rights, my family, my possessions, my career, my all for you. My goal in life is to be your servant and your friend, so that you may grow and mature in the Lord Jesus so that this community will be truly seen to be the city on a hill. My one desire is to be with you and that together we may obey God's commandments and love one another even as He has loved us.'

Repeating this continued to cement us as a community, reiterating daily that we were committed, dependent, cut off from our families, special - and in it for life. I recognise, looking back, that this 'brainwashing' was effective because the repeated verbal promise ensured that we were more likely to honour that commitment (Cialdini, 2001).

The most terrifying time was between January 1978-April 1978, a surprisingly short period of time when I look back, but which felt like years. The singing group returned from a Church visit and they had clearly let the community image down. Roger and Adam decided that they must be punished by beating, that the current punishments (being 'rebuked' - shouted at and criticised) were clearly not working,

and a time of terror began. The reason for punishment was usually 'sin' which could mean anything whatsoever but particularly letting the image down. I was beaten because Adam, who was the leader of my community household, No.61, had an arthritic pain in his hand; he said it was a sign of sin in the household. In my terror I confessed to resentment which resulted in 40 lashes with a bamboo cane stripped bare to the waist in front of all the members of our household. This was carried out by another member, a muscly strong man, under threat of being beaten himself. The beatings were rarely carried out by Adam or Roger. I was tricked a few times into further beatings, by Adam. He would ask me an outright question quite randomly, and I always seemed to give the wrong answer. I still believed that God wanted to break me, that all suffering was worthwhile, and the punishment was justified because I was evil – it would make me a better person. Roger in particular seemed to relish people being beaten and I learned years later that he would gather all his household members together for a report on who had been beaten that day, and laugh about it.

Over this period, I was dissociated (split off from myself) (Nijenhuis, 2015; Ogden et al., 2006; Herman, 1992) and hoping no one would notice me, but we were criticised daily. We were expected to read 10 Chapters of the Bible a day (or we would be beaten). At one stage Adam read curses from the Bible daily which, in the context of community and conformity, were terrifying as I took them literally and believed they were happening to me. I had no resources within myself to argue against this terrifying logic, believing that my painful feelings were proof of my sin and the reality of these curses, and that God was going to kill me. There was a powerful dissonance between reality and the implied 'sin' and I became increasingly afraid to speak or act.

Roger began to fear news of the beatings would leak out to the press. A few people left at this time and spoke to local Church leaders, a

number of whom questioned Roger. He lied outright, categorically denying the beatings had happened, and we were told that the Blood of Christ wiped away the past, including all evidence of the beatings. We had to pretend to ourselves, and others, that they had not happened. This silencing tactic was extremely effective with me and I did not speak of the beatings to anyone but my husband for many years; my family did not know until relatively recently.

This punishment phase served to increase conformity and dependency, through fear. I believed this fear was a true fear of God ('Fear of the Lord leads to Life' – Proverbs 19:23), and had no way to distinguish the difference. The rationalisation was that I was so sinful and evil that I deserved the punishment. I did not therefore perceive any of this as wrong, nor that it was abuse, and I considered it to be necessary for God's work.

I had no conscious doubts or thoughts of leaving for years, until, in 1979, my father invited me to visit him at his home in Belize, Central America. Roger allowed me to go - I think it fitted with his James Bond, jetsetter, image! The break from relentless fear and pressure, being with my father, and exposure to a normal life, allowed me to begin to think for myself - a bit. I wrote to Roger asking to change households but had a reply by return of post saying how hurt and angry he was that I would betray the household members in such a way and to return as soon as possible. Although I had asked for very little, he exerted his control and the terror returned. I did not tell my father. The Covenant, the fear and the trauma bonding (Stein, 2007; Dutton and Painter, 1993) had done their work, as had the continued rationalisation and belief that God wanted to break me, which had not been challenged. Trauma bonding is 'the notion that strong emotional attachments are formed by intermittent abuse…'. These are seen to develop from 'two specific features of abusive relationships: power imbalance and intermittent good-bad treatment' (Dutton and Painter, 1993, p.105). This can appear to be at odds with classic attachment

theory 'which proposes that attachment increases with consistent positive treatment' (Ibid.). These attachment styles 'are not limited to infant attachment…' (p.106) and have been referred to as a 'paradoxical attachment' (Ibid.). The authors cite former cult members who are 'frequently loyal to malevolent cult leaders' (Ibid, p.106).

2.7 – Leaving - In Stages

From 1979 the grip of control was slowly beginning to loosen: the trip to Belize had helped me, and others were speaking out a little more, although we were still afraid and often threatened. In October 1980, unbeknown to me, the women in Roger's household challenged him, having finally dared to speak to each other about the abuse. This resulted in LOGC splitting into two halves; for and against Roger. After some deep heart searching, panic and fear I joined the against faction, along with Tony, whom. I liked. I had not dared to allow myself to think about him in this way because all potential partners and married couples had been separated, except for Roger and Adam. Tony and I left together and were married the following spring. That part of the nightmare, my time in LOGC, was finally over.

Tony and I joined the local church which offered Pastoral Counselling and an 'emotional healing ministry'. They knew of LOGC and said they understood about cults, they even used the word. Looking back, it is apparent they did not, because they suggested the antidote was evangelising (bringing new people into their church) as this was doing God's work and would heal us (Martin, 1993). The window of opportunity to truly understand what a cult was, and to heal at that stage was lost, and I cried regularly, overwhelmed by pain and emotion, grieving yet another series of losses, and feeling the impact of the trauma and suppression of the past years.

The church members were not abusive, but nor did they understand, and I continued in fear, remaining compliant rather than freeing myself. So whilst I heard the term 'cult' it took me a further 15 years before I finally understood its meaning and was able to describe the dynamics within LOGC. This understanding was the beginning of my recovery journey – and I had finally left church behind by then.

We moved to a new location in 1988, and because we had not explored or understood the cult trauma, the abuse was repeated (Ogden et al., 2006) as we joined a local 'House Church'. The leader believed he was specially called by God and was jealous of his role. Whilst this was not a cult by my definition herein, it was unhealthy in many ways. I had received a good deal of counselling from this untrained leader and he did not understand the cult experience, only exacerbating the effects as I gave him ammunition to use against me. By this time, I was an untrained unsupervised volunteer counsellor leading the counselling 'ministry'. This leader was critical and as he excluded me from the 'leadership team', it felt like history was repeating itself. This was a warning sign to me as memories of LOGC were 'triggering' within me (Ogden et al., 2006). My authentic-self had been gradually emerging and this time I was able to say to myself 'you must never be abused again'. I was, nevertheless, still split because I believed that I HAD to belong to a church, which resulted in my feeling trapped and depressed. As I could see no way out, I wanted to die; not suicidal but this seemed to be one option.

After six years of membership, and in the face of the warnings of the dire consequences of leaving church membership ('falling away from God' and 'eternal damnation'), Tony and I finally took the risk and physically left the House Church in 1995. I made a conscious decision to take the 'hell' option if that was the only way out. The leader's wife met with me a week later and said she feared the devil had finally won!

2.8 – Life Post-Cult and Recovery

Before we left the House Church, because of my depression, my Doctor suggested I meet with her weekly for informal counselling. She was warm, kind and accepting and pointed out my 'all or nothing' thinking. Around that time, I watched a television programme about cults and recognised the same dynamics in LOGC and some of the churches since. This resulted in my calling a Cult Information Centre and Tony and I were referred to an exit-counsellor (definition in Chapter 3:3.4). This was the beginning of us *leaving psychologically* as he explained the dynamics, and helped me put words to the experience – I began to '*call a cult a cult*' which led to '*understanding*'. He explained my personality had been forced, through abuse, fear and manipulation, into a 'pseudo-personality', an identity I had to exhibit in order to be a member. He explained this formed through *thought-reform* (defined in Chapter 3 and 7) and because I had identified so strongly with the cultic churches and their beliefs, resulting in my losing sight of my authentic pre-cult identity (Chapter 4). When I saw Roger eight years after leaving LOGC at a local Christian meeting, the exit-counsellor helped me to see him as a little man, rather than the powerful person I used to believe him to be – I '*unmasked the cult leader'*.

I had stopped counselling others whilst still in the House Church, because I no longer agreed with counselling when untrained - I had observed the resulting damage many times over the years. I had, nevertheless, gained some experience, and had some success, in counselling others. I was afraid I was too wounded to embark on such a career, although people would often share their life-history with me, which encouraged me that I was someone people trusted and wanted to talk to. I observed there was a gap in the counselling profession, because of the lack of trained professionals who supported former-

members - the exit-counsellor was the only one I could find in the UK, at that time.

With my Doctor's encouragement, I embarked on training as a Pastoral Counsellor, in 1995. My ambition was to eventually specialise in helping others who had been through a cult experience. The eclectic course, which introduced us to various counselling modalities with spiritual reflection alongside, was run by Christians. They were unlike any I had met before. They expected me to think for myself; gently challenged some of my ideas; were ethical, kind, respectful, supportive and were an integral part of my beginning to think for myself and recover. I had to rethink and revise so much of what I had believed to be the absolute 'Truth' theologically, and to review what I had learned about counselling practice (we had been taught in LOGC that a counselling session had to be three hours long!). My dissertation was a review of the literatures and was entitled: 'What do Pastoral counsellors need to know about cults and ex-cult members in order to be an effective helper?' I did well academically on the Diploma, and a seed was sown.

Through these different avenues, I began to understand that what had happened wasn't because I was evil, nor was it about God. I read 'Captive Hearts, Captive Minds' which was republished as 'Take Back Your Life: Recovery from cults and abusive relationships' (Lalich and Tobias, 2006) which normalised and explained so many of the cultic dynamics. This reiterated the theory of 'thought-reform' which was the most accurate and powerful explanation of the dynamics in LOGC. Gestalt field theory (referred to as Gestalt from here on), learned later on a Masters course (below), helped me understand that there is a complex web of interrelated forces between the individual and the environment that come together to account for a phenomenon or psychological event (Yontef, 1993, p.294; Lewin, 1952). That is, I began to understand what had happened to me was systemic and complex, and found words to describe that phenomenon and the

psychological events, and I began to *leave psychologically* and *recover*.

When I started training I decided to put the cult experience to one side in order to become a professional, ethical therapist. After the years of exposure to unethical counselling I felt strongly about the need for training in order to practise within a professional structure and of being accountable in supervision (Jenkinson, 2013; Gilbert and Evans, 2000). I also recognised the importance of attending to my *childhood issues* in personal therapy within a safe, ethical structure. I attended Gestalt therapy with a counsellor who was kind, understanding, reliable, careful and who enabled me to 'go there' in relation to: my childhood losses; the terrible abuse and emotional pain resulting from LOGC; and the subsequent years living in fear. Whilst she did not know about cults specifically, I had gained enough of an *understanding* prior to attending to make it effective. It was because of this therapy that I chose to do my Masters in Gestalt Psychotherapy which I completed in 2005. This resulted in accreditation with UKCP; I had been a member of BACP for many years. I was encouraged by achieving a distinction for my phenomenological research study in which I investigated the experience of eight former-members, entitled: 'What helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience?' This resulted in my decision to conduct further research, leading to this doctoral thesis.

I gained experience working clinically with recovery from trauma at a Rape Crisis Centre from 1995-2007 and in private practice to the present day. The Rape Crisis Centres emerged from feminism and the women's movement which made a stand against male domination and sexual violence (Cook, 2012). They were founded in USA in the 70's and soon moved to the UK (Jones, 2004). Because society did not recognise the traumatic after effects of sexual violence, women decided to act. The centres continue to this day, and the monitoring

we conducted at Rape Crisis, and other studies, evidence the difference the Centres make in many women's lives (Westmarland and Alderson, 2013). Part of my motivation for conducting this research emerges out of that experience and the desire to see a similar change, both socially and politically, for former-members. For me, the cult experience happened before the women's movement had great influence, but it began to challenge male dominated discourses and speak about issues with another voice (Gilligan, 1993), a women's voice, about the treatment of the vulnerable and against sexual violence. The denial of abuse was rife in society; the authorities took the side of the perpetrator, and not the victim, a stance which is being challenged even to this present time (Gray and Watt, 2013; Jay, 2014).

In my private clinical practice, I initially gained experience working with a wide variety of clients, but as my experience of working with trauma grew, I began to specialise. From 2000 I started working with former-members and continued to learn a great deal. Each stage of learning built on previous learning, informing my practice at each stage. As there was no training available to help therapists counsel former-members, I attended Wellspring Retreat and Resource Centre in Ohio, USA (Wellspring), as an intern in 1999 and 2008. I also attended International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) conferences for the same purpose and found personal friendships, mentoring and a professional home in both.

When I attended Wellspring as an intern I was able to shadow the clinical counselling sessions and investigate how it operated. Wellspring opened in 1986 and provided services for 25 years as an inpatient mental health and research facility which specialised in working with former cult members and survivors of spiritual abuse. Clients would generally attend for two weeks, live in, and were cared for by a 'Residential Coordinator' who cooked for them and was available to talk at any time. Each Client attended two hours of

counselling every weekday, where they learned about the 'Wellspring Thought-reform Model' (WTRM) based on Lifton's theory of 'thought-reform' (1989), which is discussed and defined in Chapter 7:7.3. Clients attended psycho-educational sessions in the afternoons where they watched movies and DVDs and discussed a number of varied cult related subjects chosen by them in order to help them understand their experience from different perspectives. They also exposed clients to other psychological theories arising from a number of sources including influence theory (Cialdini, 2001) from social psychology, and spiritual and Biblical studies. Meeting with other former-members at Wellspring was also reported to be beneficial, as they could share their similar experiences even though they had been in very different types of cults.

All clients took part in a raft of psychological tests and outcomes were rigorously monitored at entry and on completion of the programme, and at six months, post. These evidenced a high level of effectiveness of the treatment model and provided rich data over many years. After the death of the founder, Dr. Paul Martin, in 2009, they sold the facility and continue to provide counselling services in the local town, Athens, Ohio (Martin, 2012).

Although I had an ambition to set up a therapeutic service modelled on Wellspring in the UK, it became clear that this would not be feasible on a number of levels, not least financially. As a result, I began to develop what I came to call: 'The Post-Cult Counselling and Time Away Model' (PCC). This is based on: the WTRM; my clinical experience of working with former-members; and the outcomes of my Masters research (Jenkinson, 2016; Jenkinson, 2013).

PCC varies for each individual. Former cult member clients who are not local stay in the area in accommodation of their choice (Jenkinson, 2016`). They work with me for varying lengths of time, for example: two days; two weeks; or a few days every few months – whatever

suits them and their financial situation. PCC is usually practised in two hour slots for four hours in a day with a two-hour break. This is because it is vital that clients have time to understand and process information. Because it is not structured in the usual way, that is weekly sessions, it requires supervision with a knowledgeable and safe supervisor. I monitor the outcomes both qualitatively and with a questionnaire filled out at the beginning and end of counselling. The outcomes are positive and former-members report that this model is effective and helpful.

This research study began as a proposal to empirically test PCC. Whilst practitioner research is feasible it is usually within the public sector, evidence-based with testing of outcomes, rather than in an academic field or private practice (McVey et al., 2015; Fox et al., 2007). It therefore became clear that this strategy was impractical and so I redesigned the study. I decided to investigate the same question posed for my Masters research in greater breadth and depth, that is, what former-members say about their experience post-cult and their views of the recovery process. I remain curious about what life is like and what helps post-cult and believe it is vital that former-members speak to the counselling profession, and express their voice as to what helps them (us) recover.

2.9 - Themes Arising

A number of themes arise for me as I reflect on my research antecedents and these are:

- That there is a continuum on which cultic dynamics occur and it is not always easy to see where the tipping point into 'abusive-cult' occurs.
- That I was lost to myself and had no words to describe what I had been through and no way of voicing my confusion and pain and so accessing help was delayed.

- I needed to *'diagnose'* LOGC and *'call a cult a cult'*.
- When others assume they know about cults, when they do not, it can delay *leaving psychologically* even if the individual has *left physically*.
- I needed help from someone knowledgeable about cults in order to *understand* the cult experience before attending psychotherapy.
- My identity was changed by fear, my spiritual beliefs, and the bullying practices, all of which ensured I became dependent and compliant which was a stance already familiar to me, to some extent, because I had attended boarding school.
- A fundamental part of the recovery process was undoing the fear, dependency and compliance through *understanding the cultic dynamics* including *thought-reform*.
- That I needed to *build my sense of self* by understanding what had happened in the cult.
- That I needed to build sense of self by attending to *emotional healing* from the *grief* of leaving and *emotional pain* caused by the experience – I needed to *face the pain*.
- Cult recovery has particular challenges that are different, in some respects, to other client groups and requires a particular understanding on the part of the helper.
- Ethical, supervised counselling practice is paramount and goes some way to ensuring clients are not harmed further because counselling when untrained (in both normal psychological processes and thought-reform) can be harmful.
- The lack of professionals trained to specialise in working with former cult members affords a gap and I decided to train, and ultimately to conduct this research, in order to contribute to filling that gap.
- As a result of my journey I learned many things about the recovery process for myself. I also learned from other former-

members (clients), but I remain curious which leads me to this research study and thesis.

- Through my study of Gestalt, I came to appreciate the humanistic perspective on human growth and in particular the focus on the person in the environment and the interdependence of both which is de-pathologising. That is, it challenges the stance that 'blames the victim', something I have felt keenly at times.
- When I became a 'born again Christian' I had no ambition, and then my ambition became solely on behalf of church. On leaving I turned the experience around, and have used what I learned to help others, I learned to direct my ambition in positive directions.
- I evidence posttraumatic growth (further discussion in Chapter 11 & 12).

2.10 – Conclusion

In this Chapter I have declared my positioning by way of a reflexive, personal and professional biography. I have discussed my life prior to the cult, how I joined, what life was like within the cult, and my process of leaving. I have briefly mapped out my recovery process, and professional development. I have identified key themes arising which illuminate my life-history. My aim has been that this contribute to transparency and rigour, enabling the reader to judge the accuracy of the data analysis in representing former-member participant voices as they get to know me.

I proceed to Chapter 3, the first literature chapter entitled: 'Locating the cult experience: Perspectives, Controversies and Definitions'. This includes positioning the 'players' in the 'cult scene' and explores the controversies related to 'brainwashing', 'deprogramming' and labelling. I conclude the chapter with a definition of 'abusive-cult'.

Chapter 3 – Locating the Literature: Perspectives, Controversies and Definitions

3.1 - Introduction

In this chapter I examine discourses in the literatures related to key debates pertinent to the focus of this study and to categories that emerged from data analysis. I searched the literatures retrospectively in order to remain close to participants' concerns (Artinian, 2009), and they are placed here in order to give context to the findings and define key terms. The literatures in this chapter and Chapter 4 are therefore guided by the categories, 'Locating the cult experience', set out in Chapter 1: Figure 1:2. I evidence participant experiences related to these key debates in the analysis Chapters 7-11.

In order to identify the relevant literatures, I signed on to 'email alerts' with a number journals in 2013, including: Sage Publications; OVID Autoalert in PsychINFO; and Google Scholar. I used the keywords 'cults', 'cultic', 'NRMs', 'sects' and 'grounded theory'. I searched using the University of Nottingham library online search facility. I joined two academic websites that link researchers and give access to publications: ResearchGate and Academia.ad. I was more familiar with Gestalt and other psychotherapy theories, and the 'cultic studies' literature. I was only slightly familiar with the sociology of religion literature and visited the specialist library at INFORM based at the London School of Economics in April 2015 which resulted in clarification of the controversies and different perspectives represented herein. I attended the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) conferences each year and kept up to date with current research in the cultic studies field. Social Psychology theory proved to have relevance and I obtained the training manual for first year Social Psychology BSc at University of Nottingham 2013. I already have an extensive library related to cults. EndNote software

was used to store the references including attaching relevant papers where possible.

My investigations highlight a number of 'players' in the 'cult scene' (Introvigne, 2014; Coates, 2013a; Almendros et al., 2013; Healy, 2010; Barker, 2002b, p.11). I explore the perspectives between the 'players' under the following categories:

- Perspectives: The players in the 'cult scene'
- Controversies: Brainwashing and thought-reform
- Controversies: Deprogramming & exit-counselling
- Controversies: Labelling controversial groups
- Controversies: Defining Abusive-cult

In this next section I explore perspectives, and position the 'players' in the 'cult scene'.

3.2 - Perspectives: Players in the Cult Scene

This research study is located within a field beset with historical and current controversies, polarised views and positions amongst a number of 'cult watch groups' (Coates, 2014; Almendros et al., 2013; Healy, 2011; Dawson, 2003; Singer, 2003b; Dawson, 2002a; Barker, 2002b; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Langone, 1993; Barker, 1989; Bromley, 1988; Lewis and Bromley, 1987). The relevant debates are, in the main, between:

- psychology, psychiatry, counselling, and (in USA parlance) social work (I refer to this category as clinicians)
- sociology of religion and
- those personally affected by cults, such as former-members or their families

These players can be split further into those who are deemed to be: anti-cult (sometimes referred to as AC); cult-apologists (CA); and

research orientated groups (ROGs) (Barker, 2002b, p.126). Whilst this is an oversimplification, broadly speaking sociologists of religion have been deemed to be cult-apologists; psychologists, clinicians and former-members are deemed to be anti-cult; and there are those from all categories who are research orientated (Barker, 2002b) (see Figure 3:1 below). Historically there has been little agreement between these players or the disciplines represented and this polarisation has been referred to as 'the cult wars' (Introvigne, 2014; Almendros et al., 2013; Barker, 2002b; Pattison and Ness, 1989). Sociologists of religion, and psychologists and clinicians, engaged in a heated debate in the latter part of the 20th Century both in the 'cult scene' and in society (Pilgrim and Rogers, 2005) including the Courts (Richardson and Bellanger, 2014; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Bromley and Richardson, 1984).

The controversies can be envisaged on a continuum on which different players are placed and the 'war' has raged hotly between AC and CA social science researchers (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001). Whilst ROGs strive to be objective

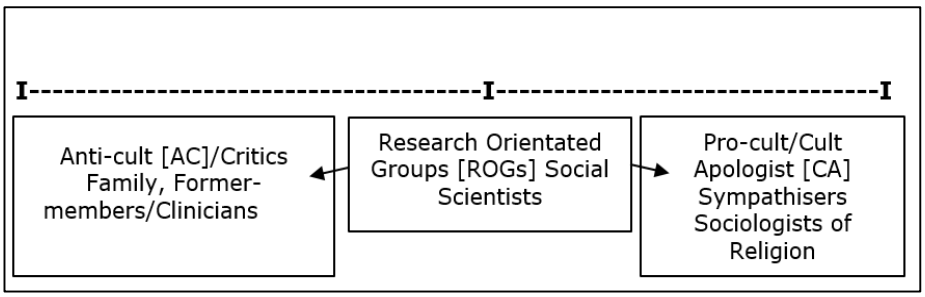
> '…it is not always possible to identify what one's preconceptions are, and it is doubtful whether these can be totally removed in any case' (Chryssides, 2016, p.14).

The complexities of conducting research within the 'cult scene' are many. Research that is 'value-neutral' rather than 'critical' can result in some being accused of being an 'apologist' for a religious movement they are researching; although not becoming a member may be viewed by that movement as taking a stance against them, and so they may also be offended (Chryssides, 2016, p.222).

By way of illustration of 'the players', a continuum is represented in Figure 3.1, although in reality it is far more nuanced and complex.

There are those from either 'side' who are more open than others to dialogue and moderation of their views (Introvigne, 2014; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001) and many of these are placed in the ROG middle ground.

Figure 3.1: Placing the Players



These debates in part gathered around members and former-members and

- whether 'brainwashing' was used to recruit and maintain membership
- whether 'cults' cause 'harm'
- difficulties labelling the new more controversial groups that were flourishing from the 1960's onwards

A number of studies with current cult members, from both psychiatry and sociology, evidenced that they were well adjusted and benefitted from cult membership (Galanter, 1989a; Lewis and Bromley, 1987). It has also been argued that, as victims, current members of cults may be unable to express a different view from that imposed by the abuser (Singer 2003a; Aronoff et al., 2000; Herman, 1992) and that conformity pressures may mask pathology (Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Aronoff et al., 2000). That is, they may be more compliant as a member, suppressing doubts and contrary opinions (Healy, 2010; Jacobs, 1987). There is considerable evidence that victims struggle to recognise abusive acts as abuse, and instead blame themselves (Shaw, 2014; Almendros et al., 2011, p.72; Lalich and Tobias, 2006;

Lalich, 2004; Briere, 2004; Singer, 2003a; Herman, 1992). There have been periods in history where the tendency to blame the victim has strongly influenced the direction of psychological inquiry and has led researchers and clinicians to seek an explanation for the perpetrator's crimes in the character of the victim (Singer, 2003a; Herman 1992). In the case of hostages and prisoners of war, numerous attempts to find supposed personality defects that predisposed captives to 'brainwashing' have yielded few consistent results and the 'conclusion is inescapable that ordinary, psychologically healthy [men] can indeed be coerced in unmanly ways' (Herman, 1992, p.116; Turnbull, 2011). The counter evidence of 'harm' claimed by those who had left a group reported to be beneficial by others, was in many cases, therefore, assumed to be some fault or instability in the former cult member (Jacobs, 2007; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Martin et al., 1998; Langone, 1993).

The battle lines have also, therefore, been drawn around who the victim is (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001). Are disgruntled apostates falsely accusing the cult of harming them and therefore impinging on freedom of religion; or, are the former-members truly victims of abusive group dynamics and brainwashing? I address the issue of harm in more detail in relation to life-in, in Chapters 4 and 7.

Psychologists and clinicians who were cult critics and who saw evidence of 'psychological abuse' put it down, in part, to brainwashing of cult victims (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2013; Martin et al., 1998; West and Martin, 1994; Martin, 1993a; Langone, 1993). They took little convincing that the cults cause harm (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015; Saldaña et al., 2015; Almendros et al., 2011; Henry and Furnari, 2011; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Almendros et al., 2009; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993; Goldberg, 1993) as they were called upon by families whose adult children had taken uncharacteristic steps in their lives, sometimes suddenly leaving education or jobs, breaking contact with family, partners and friends, all of which

evidenced a change in their personality (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Lalich, 2004; West and Martin, 1994; Langone, 1993). This was assumed by some to be over protectiveness on the part of the parents (Dowhower, 1993). The families saw it differently and some resorted to the explanation that their loved one had been manipulated, even 'brainwashed', and raised the intensity of the controversy (Galanter, 1989a, p.314). Out of desperation they sought specialist help, and 'deprogramming', which evolved into 'exit-counselling', was developed to extricate members from their cult (further discussion below).

There has, nevertheless, been a more recent call to dialogue between players, and an appeal to learn from one another (Coates, 2015; Introvigne, 2014; Almendros et al., 2013; Healy, 2010). This incipient rapprochement comes with the acknowledgement from some labelled CAs that the much debated 'thought-reform' or 'coercive persuasion' is practised by some NRMs; and by some ACs that perhaps the scene is not as clear cut (all or nothing) as it was once perceived to be. The main criticism has been against the allegations that cults adopt brainwashing techniques, rather than a blanket denial that these controversial movements adopt mechanisms of social control to ensure their success and increase commitment (Coates, 2012b; Wright, 1991). This raises the issue of semantics, labelling, and definitional difficulties which are addressed below.

These debates have an impact on those who leave cults and seek support, as the bias, from all 'sides', has a significant polarising effect on the general cult scene, rather than 'creating a bridge towards communication and understanding (and even reconciliation)' (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015, p.9). These debates have a bearing on this research study because the different representative perspectives reflect on my positioning as a researcher; that is, how I view the data and how the grounded theory that arises from the data is viewed by other social scientists. Whilst I am, as a former cult member, assumed

to be on the AC side of the continuum, my positioning is more nuanced and my studies and research have resulted in moderating my views, to some degree, and shifting from an AC to a ROG perspective. These issues are related to rigour, bias, impartiality, validity, credibility and transparency which I address further in Chapters 5 and 6.

The terminology adopted by the players in the cult scene, therefore, places the user on the continuum in Figure 3.1, or is likely to do so, and may be an indication of their position. Definitions and words align themselves to a shared understanding of reality not just in order to

> '…transfer ideas from head to head but to negotiate the kind of relationship they wish to have with their conversational partner' (Pinker, 2007, p.3).

The terms 'brainwashing', 'cult', and 'harm', are all concepts that are loaded with meaning and have been hotly contested between the players (Healy, 2010; Barker, 2002b; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001). 'Brainwashing' and 'cult' are examples of words that have taken root in the popular mind; they evoke an idea that the 'ordinary man' and the media understand, or think they understand, although would probably struggle to define (Barrett, 2001). In the next section I clarify the kind of relationship I wish to have with my 'conversational partners' for the purposes of positioning this study. In order to illuminate these debates, and my positioning, I turn my attention to the controversies and discourses related to 'brainwashing' and 'thought-reform' before proceeding to a discussion of deprogramming and exit-counselling.

3.3 - Controversies: Brainwashing

Participants refer to 'thought-reform', 'brainwashing', 'mind control' and 'programming' in interview. These terms are all similar and interpreted by me to refer to 'brainwashing' and 'thought-reform'

(Lalich and Tobias, 2006) herein. I elucidate these concepts in this section.

The term 'brainwashing' originally came to describe how, through intensive personal indoctrination, an individual could be unduly influenced to convert to a political cause in which they previously showed no interest (Taylor, 2004; Lifton, 1989). An example is Prisoners of War (POWs) of Chinese Communism in the late 1940s and 1950s. Psychologists Singer, Lifton, Schein, and Hinkle and Wolff all researched the 'brainwashing' phenomenon in the 1950s/1960s for different institutions (Singer, 2003a; Singer, 2003b; Lifton, 1989; Schein et al., 1961; Hinkle and Wolff, 1956). They developed slightly different but overlapping theories each of which can be seen to account for different stages in the total influence process (Singer, 2003a, p.63; Schein et al., 1961, p. 284).

In the 1960s, a number of psychologists, clinicians and family members recognised that the proliferating 'cults' (Appel, 1983) were exhibiting a particular form of social influence over their members (Hassan, 2015; West and Martin, 1994; Martin, 1993a; Singer, 1979). They argued that this influence resulted in an invisible social adaptation that the individual was not fully aware of and was seen to be a gradual breaking down, transformation and change in personality which occurred slowly but surely (Lalich, 2004; Singer, 2003b, p.150; Zimbardo and Andersen, 1993, p.104; Schein et al., 1961). They were referring to 'brainwashing' resulting in a change in the personality and even the development of a 'pseudo-identity' (Coates, 2012c; Jenkinson, 2008; Singer, 2003a; West and Martin, 1994; Langone, 1993).

The term brainwashing is adopted occasionally in the psychology and clinical literature but other terms that were adopted and applied interchangeably in the clinical setting, were coercive persuasion, thought-reform (Martin et al., 1998; Martin, 1993b; Schein et al.,

1961; Lifton, 1989) and mind-control (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Zimbardo, 2005; Singer, 2003a; Barker, 1984). Others have adopted the legal term 'undue influence' to describe similar processes (Hassan, 2015; Scheflin, 2015; Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). I concentrate on Lifton's thought-reform theory, as opposed to the others cited, because it has been empirically tested in a clinical setting with former-member clients, at Wellspring, and it is the one I am most familiar with.

It has been posited in the heated debates and controversies that it is somewhat far-fetched, if not absurd, that theories developed in relation to Communist China under POW conditions be applied to modern day life in the West (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015; Coates, 2012b; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Robbins, 1981). This may be a result of the fact that some researchers refer to the term 'brainwashing' both in the context of POWs and cults but do not clearly define or clarify its meaning (Coates, 2012a; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001).

Richardson (2003, p.161) questions the ethics of using the term 'brainwashing' in relation to NRMs, stating that it promotes 'powerful social weapons' against minority religions especially when these views limit people's religious freedom and personal growth. He suggests society may suffer as a whole because of these accusations. For others the concept has had great utility (Martin, 2012; Kent, 2008). These theories, when understood on a continuum of influence (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010), and 'within the framework of existing knowledge about man and groups' (Schein et al., 1961, p.283), rather than as exotic and inexplicable, were convincing to many clinicians and former-members (Hassan, 2015; Jenkinson, 2013; Singer, 2003b; Lifton, 1999; Martin et al., 1998; West and Martin, 1994; Langone, 1993).

Brainwashing or thought-reform theory has been applied to other areas such as: teen behaviour modification programs (Szalavitz, 2006); terrorist groups (May, 2015; Bjørgo and Horgan, 2008); dysfunctional corporate culture (Hassan, 2015); and alleged governmental violations (Hassan, 2015; Tourish, 2013; Kent, 2008). It has been successfully adopted in counselling domestic abuse survivors (Ward, 2000) and with substance abusers (Burks, 2014).

Carl Rogers, founder of Person-Centred Psychotherapy, recognised that current knowledge of how personality and behaviour can be changed may be used constructively or destructively, that is, to build or destroy persons (Rogers, 1991, p.376). The constructive relationship within psychotherapy is evidenced to influence and support clients to change both their personality and their behaviour (Cooper, 2011; Rogers, 1991; Frank and Frank, 1991). There are certain positive attitudes, which, when offered by the counsellor, effect this change. These are 'the core conditions': acceptance; empathy; and congruence (Merry, 2002, p.52). The reverse is also within the power of humans

> '…and it is possible to disintegrate a man's personality structure, dissolving his self-confidence, destroying the concept he has of himself, making him dependent on another' (Rogers, 1991, p.375).

Drawing on a study of brainwashing by Hinkle and Wolff (1956), Rogers recognised a 'horrifying reversal of the positive conditions' (1991, p.375). Instead of being offered these 'core conditions', the individual is isolated and rejected, intensifying their need for human relationship which in turn arouses anxiety, guilt and conflict (Stein, 2012; Stein, 2007), being offered acceptance only when they cooperate. This results in them accepting the truths being forced upon them. Rogers notes that those who are 'brainwashed' are

> '…very much demoralised and disintegrated as a person, and largely a puppet of the interrogator' (1991, p.375).

Stein (2007) describes a totalist, thought-reform, environment as a state of 'fright without solution' where the natural attachment seeking behaviour (Bowlby, 1973) and search for alternative safe havens within the environment is barred. As a result, a disorganised attachment ensues. This leads to

> '…a follower who is cognitively disorganised and disoriented, and thus ready to accept opportunistic interpretations of their experience' (Stein, 2007, p.286).

As a result, leaders are in a position to use the members for their own purposes, as they are now hyper-credulous and hyper-loyal deployable agents (Lalich, 2004; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001).

When the individual joins, the cult's practices are embraced, giving new meaning to their life (Lifton, 1999, p.26). It is the subtleties and complexities involved in thought-reform that are obscured from new members and which, on leaving, they need to understand in order to recover (Almendros et al., 2011; Martin, 1993a) (evidenced in Chapter 7). The 'thought-reform-like practices' (Lifton, 1999) are about changing identity, or put another way, within this environment it is inevitable that the individual's identity will change (Lalich, 2004; Singer, 2003a; Rogers, 1991). Conversion, or worldview shift, is about change (Lalich, 2004, p.15; Lofland and Skonovd, 1983) and I address these issues further in Chapter 4. When brainwashing occurs it is 'a result of a series of intense social-psychological influences aimed at behaviour modification' (Lalich, 2004) and is not fool proof, nor does it create a permanent state of mind or being (Lifton, 1989;

Barker, 1984) – it is possible to recover as evidenced by this research and the Wellspring data (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010).

The polarisation of debates has led to the discourse assuming, at times, an all or nothing flavour of its own (Healy, 2010); that is, that brainwashing is the only influence in a cult or that it is not in evidence at all. There is empirical research that supports the argument that both 'brainwashing' or thought-reform, and 'normal' social-psychological processes, occur in cults (Coates, 2012a; Healy, 2010; Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Zimbardo, 2005; Martin et al., 1998; Langone, 1993; Zimbardo and Andersen, 1993; Martin et al., 1992). Whilst not all former-members subscribe to the brainwashing thesis (Coates, 2012c; Healy, 2011, p.4; Durocher, 1999; Wright, 1991) there is evidence that there is value in understanding thought-reform, which should be balanced with other professional strategies (Healy, 2011, p.4). The evidence that both 'normal' and 'brainwashing' are relevant (Coates, 2012a) is important and I apply these to my theoretical framework in Chapter 7, adopting Gestalt theory of self as 'normal' and 'thought-reform' as 'brainwashing'.

Lifton refers to 'thought-reform-like practices' in his definition of a cult (see Section 3.7 below) which moves the discourse from POWs to former-members and mitigates the implication of the extremes of the original application of the term, which implies imprisonment in an internment camp or particular forms of torture (Lifton, 1989). This suggests that 'thought-reform' or 'brainwashing' is more easily applicable to ordinary people, including the former-member participants in this study, and so the discourse can progress. It also acknowledges that these practices are not difficult to achieve if the individual is treated negatively, anti-therapeutically and their personality broken down (Langone, 1993; Martin et al., 1992; Rogers, 1991). The term thought-reform-like-practices therefore encompasses the understanding that for many the level of control is extreme; that the locus of evaluation (Merry, 2002) becomes

externalised, that is, the individual looks to others for their self-concept; and that the individual becomes dependent on the cult and the cult leader (Stein, 2007; Singer, 2003b; Lifton, 1999).

As the debate is also related, in part, to issues surrounding identity and how identity is changed, I allude to this aspect in this chapter but I explore this in more detail in Chapter 4:4.3 in relation to personality change and conversion theories, and draw evidence from the data in Chapters 7-11. I address related debates which are why people join, vulnerability and life transitions in Chapter 4:4.2, which in part also pertains to the brainwashing controversies.

I evidence participants' experience of Lifton's theory of thought-reform-like practices (referred to as 'thought-reform' from here on) in Chapter 7:7.3 as it has utility in explaining the dynamics within an abusive-cult and is applied as a theoretical framework to the data analysis.

In this next section I return to the controversies and discuss deprogramming and exit-counselling.

3.4 - Controversies: Deprogramming & Exit-counselling

In the 1960's the identification of brainwashing by families led to the new and controversial practice of 'deprogramming' which was the forced removal of the cult member, sometimes by abduction (Richardson, 2003, p.160; Robbins, 2001, p.77; Barker, 1984). Whilst not all practised deprogramming forcibly, this aspect contributed to the existing alarm. It came to be deemed unethical, and has been reported to result in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in some cases (Ikemoto and Nakamura, 2004; Lewis and Bromley, 1987). Others argued it was nothing more than information-giving over an intense period (Singer, 2003b). The rationale on the part of the deprogrammers, and the families who employed them, was that the cult member was a victim of brainwashing and therefore

unable to choose whether they wanted to remain a member of the group or not – they were deemed to have lost their free will, were unduly influenced and controlled, in a psychological prison in effect (Lalich, 2004; Dawson, 2003; Singer, 2003a; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; West and Martin, 1994).

'Deprogramming' evolved into 'exit-counselling' with a code of ethics in order to ensure the earlier abuses were not repeated. Exit-counselling can be defined as:

> 'A voluntary, intensive, time-limited, contractual educational process that emphasizes the respectful sharing of information with members of exploitatively manipulative groups, commonly called cults' (Giambalvo, 1995, p.35).

The purpose is to 'promote critical thinking skills especially regarding the use of mind control' and the practice ensures that the client is not unduly influenced in respect to their ideological or spiritual orientation and that their rights to 'self-determination' are not violated (Ibid.). 'Exit-counselling' is sometimes referred to as an 'intervention', and I use these terms interchangeably.

I now proceed to discuss the debates related to labelling controversial groups and conclude this chapter by defining an 'abusive-cult'.

3.5 – Controversies: Labelling Controversial Groups

The labelling of 'cult' groups has led to heated debate between players. Defining the term 'cult' is problematic and complex (Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Pattison and Ness, 1989), and dependent on perspective. One person's religion, spirituality, psychotherapy or political group is another person's harmful cult depending on experience and perspective, and, as previously noted some groups harm some people sometimes, and some groups may be more likely

to harm people than other groups (Almendros et al., 2013). Most cult groups evolve and some may harm their members more at certain stages in their history than others, or in certain locations, or depending on level of commitment (Healy, 2010; Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Lalich, 2001; Ayella, 1990). Adopting the terms 'cult' and 'sect' may be more or less pejorative depending on country and language (Hackett and Grim, 2012; Kropveld, 2007). Historically the term 'cult' came to imply 'brainwashing' techniques which caused 'harm' (Coates, 2015; Langone, 1993) and was characterised as anti-cult (AC).

Sociologists of religion chose the term 'New Religious Movement' in an attempt to neutralise the label (Healy, 2010; Barker, 1989; Brockway and Rajashekar, 1987). That groups labelled cults or NRMs may not have a religious basis, but may be political, scientific, alien-orientated or emphasise personal growth, such as psychotherapeutic and human potential movements, contributes to the complexity (Healy, 2011; Healy, 2010; Barker, 1996) and confusion. Added to this are those that are not 'new' but have been in existence since the early 20th Century or before; and those that formed within already established mainstream churches, such as the Nine O'clock Service in Sheffield (Howard, 1996) – a cult which unusually evolved within a mainstream Church of England Church. NRM is nevertheless defined as a group or movement that 'has taken its rise in the past 150 years and remains extant' (Chryssides, 2016, p.17); is primarily religious; and operates apart from the dominant culture in which it is located. It seeks adherents from the host culture but may originate from another culture. The important point is that it is set apart from the dominant culture at least initially (Healy, 2011, p.3). Psychologists and clinicians have generally avoided the NRM label.

Labelling theory (Gove, 1980) suggests that deviance is created by society and that naming a group pejoratively, as a cult, may result in society viewing it as 'deviant'. It is suggested that this may, in turn,

result in it becoming deviant and violently acting out, (Bromley and Melton, 2002; Barker, 2002b; Marshall, 1998) that is, become harmful. Barker notes that the 'us and them' stance of many new religions may be exacerbated by the label and that it is easier to carry out violent acts if the 'other' is labelled as 'abnormal, and/or not fully human' (Barker, 2002b, p.142). It has been observed therefore that when the group becomes isolated and neither the leader nor the followers are exposed to alternative points of view, for whatever reason, the NRM may be potentially more dangerous (Barker, 2002b, p.142). Whilst NRMs are not necessarily more overtly violent than ordinary society (Dawson, 2003) there have been a number of high profile cases where violence and death has occurred, such as Jonestown, Heaven's Gate and Branch Davidians, Waco, Texas (Bromley and Melton, 2002; Barrett, 2001). It is difficult to ascertain to what degree labelling influenced the withdrawal from society and the causes of such tragedies are more likely to be the result of a complex network of issues and dynamics. I address the issue of harm further in Chapter 4:4.6. I now proceed to discuss the controversies surrounding defining an 'abusive-cult' in order to position myself within the debates.

3.6 - Controversies: Defining 'Abusive-Cult'

By adopting the term 'abusive-cult' I am likely to be placed in a particular position on the continuum of 'players' set out in Figure 3:1. It is to this that I turn my attention in this section. I acknowledge that there is a need for further research in order to try and achieve a level of precision in relation to the term 'cult', and that there is likely to continue to be unavoidable ambiguity amongst the general public, CA's, AC's, and Governments worldwide (Kerry, 2013), because of the complexities involved (Rosedale et al., 2015, p.7). I give a brief overview of the taxonomies adopted in the various literatures which strive to describe this complex phenomenon, and position this

research in those debates. I conclude this section by clarifying my rationale for, and set out, my adopted definition of 'abusive-cult' for the purposes of this study. There have been many attempts at reaching a precise terminology for a 'cult' and some of these are listed in Figure 3.2 below:

Figure 3.2: Taxonomies and Players

Taxonomy	Players by Discipline
Cult (Hassan, 2015; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993; Lalich and Tobias, 2006)	Families and former-members Former-members who are experts in counselling former members
Sect [preferred in Europe] (Almendros et al., 2011a; van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015)	All
Psychologically Manipulative Groups [PMGs] (Almendros et al., 2011b)	Psychology Researchers
Charismatic Group [Includes cult and NRMs] (Galanter, 1989b)	Psychiatry Researchers
NRM World rejecting NRM (Coates, 2012b; Barker, 1989) Controversial NRMs (Wright, 1984)	Sociologist of Religion Researchers
High Demand Group (Dubrow-Eichel, 2001) Extremist Authoritarian Sect (Kendall, 2006) High Intensity Faith Groups (Matthews and Salazar, 2014) Minority Religions (Barker, 2008) Totalist Aberrant Christian Organisation [TACO] (Martin et al., 1998) Totalistic Groups Extremist Organisations (Stein, 2012) Spiritual Abusive Groups (Ward, 2011; Winell, 2006) Religious Abusive Groups (Rauch, 2009)	Psychologists Researchers Counsellors Sociologists of Religion

There is evidence that some former-members and their families prefer the term 'cult' (Hassan, 2015; Hassan, 2013; Coates, 2012c, p.12; Chaytor, 2011; Bardin, 2000; Ross and Langone, 1988); although former-members who had no contact with cult critical literature preferred terms relevant to trauma and abuse, such as 'psychological trauma' or 'psychological abuse' (Almendros et al., 2011). In spite of these definitional attempts, and although some use the terms interchangeably, the meaning or emphasis may differ amongst disciplines. That is, although a term may be indicative, it cannot necessarily be assumed where the terminology places the individual on the continuum (Figure 3:1 above) as the various disciplines tend to use the terminology differently (Coates, 2015; Matthews and Salazar, 2014; Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Walsh and Bor, 1996; Galanter, 1989a). The terms NRM, sect and cult are, nevertheless, the most widely espoused.

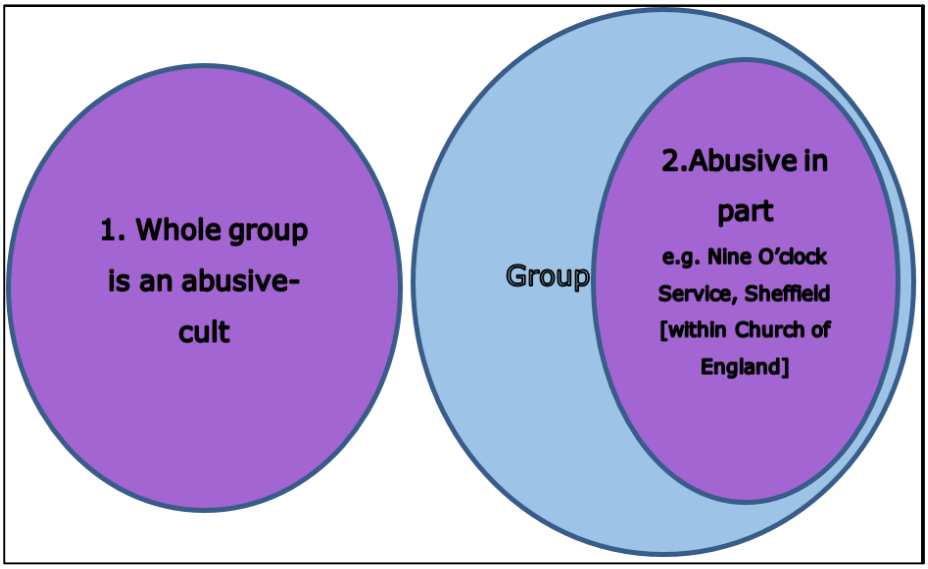
If I adopted the term NRM in my title it may position me as a sociologist of religion or cult apologist, rather than with my preferred conversational partners, those who are research orientated with a leaning towards critic rather than apologist. Knowledgeable participants, or those who know of my positioning from publications, might wonder where I was coming from and why I was using the term (have I gone over to the enemy?). It is possible, therefore, that I would have had trouble accessing participants who may have been suspicious of my motivation for conducting the research, although this has not stopped sociologists accessing former-member participants in the past (Coates, 2015; Healy, 2010; Wright, 1991; Lewis and Bromley, 1987). These issues may account for the different findings amongst researchers, as this may bias the population prepared to participate with particular researchers, and be related to where they are placed on the continuum of 'players'. This is also a possibility in relation to this research. If a particular label is adopted, therefore, some participants might simply not identify the research as being

relevant to them and these dilemmas reflect the complexities of conducting research within the 'cult scene'.

The interview data from this study illuminates the reason for some former-members preferring the term cult, evidencing that it can be powerful in identifying and '*diagnosing*' [Gloria] the group leading to accessing resources that help, evidenced in Chapter 8:8.6. For the purposes of this research I adopt the term 'abusive-cult' in order to delineate from any definition that does *not* imply harm: it pre-supposes a psychologically restrictive, traumatic or abusive experience which may be challenging to 'recover' from. By adopting the term 'abusive' in relation to 'cults' there is a danger that those aspects that are not overtly abusive, such as 'all or nothing thinking' (Lalich, 2006), are overlooked. This is not my intention which is to convey that the thought-reform environment field (see Chapter 7) restricts the individual in many ways, some of which are overtly abusive, and some of which are restrictive, but all of which impact on the authentic-self. The self transmutes from being in the service of the health of the individual to being in the service of the cult and the cult leader, in both traumatic and restrictive ways.

An abusive-cult maybe an entity in itself, that is, where the whole group is abusive, or it may be that the abusive part is a sub-section of a larger group. Figure 3.3 illustrates this:

Figure 3.3: Comparing cults



Before defining a cult for the purposes of this study, I let Fred speak of what a cult is for him, through a compilation of quotes from his interview. He had been a member of a 'Therapy/New Age' cult for over a decade, and had left five years before interview. He had not had any contact with the AC movement and responded to an advertisement about my study in the article I wrote for Therapy Today (Jenkinson, 2013), discussed further in Chapter 6:6.4, and was keen to take part and tell his story:

> *'He [therapist cult leader] got us to reveal all the issues that were affecting us so he was able to very easily manipulate us by bringing up all the things that we had basically told him about our situation. He used those to completely abuse me, he revealed information that I had given to him. [...] Manipulation happens in a cult at an extreme level although they are processes that happen in society as well, such as advertising, but it is more extreme. [...] The cult is the more fundamentalist element of a group where the member falls in love with the idea of the*

potentiality that they are learning about. The cult leader becomes the 'god of gods'. Only he knows the full truth resulting in a person not knowing how to live their own lives. [...] Everything was about money targets. [...] The cult has built a vision of life outside being a very nasty world where all you are going to experience is hardship and difficulty. [...] They were able to really, really, cause you to have doubt about who you are and what, what you are feeling and what's true and what isn't true (sniff). And so that was a very, very, very deeply manipulative, manipulative experience, in that respect. It's important to look at how people are programmed to thinking in a particular way and how people are limited in their day to day experience by that kind of programming.' [Fred]

In order not to add to the plethora of definitions, I set out two existing definitions of a cult that match with the data: Lifton's and Langone's. I adopt Langone's definition, on the whole, but make four changes in order to include:

- an aspect of Lifton's (below) and
- an aspect of Fred's (above),
- the aspect illustrated in Figure 3.3 (above), and
- the definition of 'significant harm' (explored further in 4.6)

I underline the relevant terms and changes to Langone's in my final definition of an abusive-cult.

Lifton acknowledges the controversies and whilst he adopts both terms, NRM and cult, he confines the use of 'cult' to mean:

> 'Groups that display three characteristics: totalistic or thought-reform-like practices; a shift from worship of spiritual principles to worship of the person of the guru or leader; and a combination of spiritual quest from

below and exploitation, usually economic or sexual, from above.' (Lifton, 1999, p.11)

Langone's (1993, p.5) definition is:

'A cult is a group or movement that, to a significant degree:

(a) exhibits great or excessive devotion or dedication to some person, idea, or thing
(b) uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialise members (i.e. to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices)
(c) systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members
(d) exploits members to advance the leadership's goals, and
(e) causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community.'

For the purposes of this study the definition I have adopted is as follows:

An abusive-cult is a group or movement that to a significant degree:

A. Exhibits great or excessive devotion to some person, idea or thing

B. Uses a thought-reform program to persuade, control, and socialise members (i.e. to integrate them into the group's unique pattern of relationships, beliefs, values, and practices)

C. Systematically induces states of psychological dependency in members

D. Displays a combination of quest from below and exploitation, usually economic or sexual, from above in order to advance the leadership's goals

E. Engenders an 'us' and 'them' mentality, fear and rejection of the world outside the group

F. Causes psychological harm to members, their families and the community including children.

G. Ill treatment or impairment of children's health (mental or physical) or development (physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural) attributable to lack of adequate parental care or control. [Section 31, Children's Act 1989] in (Glaser et al., 2004)

H. May be abusive throughout or in a particular geographical location or sub-section of the organisation

3.7 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have given an overview of key perspectives, controversies and definitions pertaining to this study. I have discussed the different 'players' in the 'cult scene' and the controversies and polarised positions. I have explicated the main debates that arise between the players which are related to whether cults recruit and retain new members by 'brainwashing'. I have discussed the impact of these ideas and how they led to the development of the discipline of 'exit-counselling'. I have briefly introduced debates about harm and defined an abusive-cult. I have made transparent my positioning in relation to these debates.

In Chapter 4 I return to the literatures and discuss relevant debates from sociology of religion and clinicians in relation to the categories 'Locating the cult experience'. These include: why people join including a discussion of vulnerability, life transitions, and debates related to conversion and identity change, including the nature of personality and change. I discuss debates related to life-in, and the relevance of the cult leader; what type of abuse is perpetrated in an

'abusive-cult'; and report on literatures pertaining to harm caused; and the traumatic grief on leaving, the deleterious effects, and posttraumatic stress reactions, post-cult. In this latter section I include the data. I conclude with a definition of recovery by also bringing together the literatures and the data.

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Chapter 4 - Literatures: Locating the Cult Experience

4.1 - Introduction

In this chapter I retrospectively examine discourses in the literatures related to categories that emerged from data analysis in order to remain close to and reflect participants' concerns (Artinian et al., 2009). I evidence participant experiences related to these key debates in sections 4.3.1 and 4.6.3 and in the analysis Chapters 7-11. The literatures are guided by the categories, 'Locating the cult experience' set out in Chapter 1: Figure 1.2, and I structure my investigation herein under the following headings:

- Pre-cult and Joining: Vulnerability and Life Transitions
- Pre-cult and Joining: Conversion Debates and Identity Change
- Life-in: The Cult Leader
- Life-in: Cultic-Abuse
- Life-in and Post-cult: Harm and Emotional Affects
- Post-cult: Definition of Recovery

I adopted the same strategies to search the literatures as described in Chapter 3:3.1.

The discourse related to who joins applies to 1G, and potentially to those SGAs, who, after leaving their original cult, seek further group involvement. In this next section I address some of the key discourses related to pre-cult and joining and discuss why people join: vulnerability and life transitions.

4.2 - Pre-cult and Joining: Vulnerability and Life Transitions

Many NRMs and cults promise healing and transformation (Singer, 2003a; Singer and Lalich, 1996; Frank and Frank, 1991) with a powerful leader who purports to have the ability to solve life's

complex problems (Tourish, 2013; Oakes, 2010; Storr, 1996; Frank and Frank, 1991). This message can be attractive to seekers, especially at a vulnerable time in their life (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Singer and Lalich, 1996; Barker, 1989). The vulnerability on the part of the potential recruit is evidenced in the literatures to be potentially related to

- developmental issues
- the challenge of life transitions which are, for some, a life-crisis
- psychological problems
- seeking meaning in their life
- simply believing they are joining a normal organisation

For those who join as young adults, membership may serve a developmental purpose (Levine, 1989). As the individual strives to differentiate themselves from the adults in their life, and their authority (Fowler, 1981, p.154), they have to find their own way, their own likes, dislikes and pathway in life. Those who cannot grant this authority to themselves may give their power over to another, and for some this may be a cult-leader (Sheehy, 1976, p.90). A normal feature of young adulthood is to seek closure and certainty, and the cult or NRM may serve the purpose of providing this stage of development (Neal and Youngelson-Neal, 2015; Coates, 2011, p.198).

It has been posited by psychologists that developmental and life transitions bring with them some level of life-crisis (Rayner, 1986; Sheehy, 1976). A number of scholars observe that a life-crisis may precede conversion to a NRM or cult and that many join at a transitional time (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993; Galanter, 1989a). Adolescence can be a time of severe demoralisation and confusion, factors which may also characterise the period before conversion (Frank and Frank, 1991). Crisis brings

change and some convert, therefore, to cope with these transitions and life-crises (Coates, 2012c; Sremac, 2008, p.56).

There is some evidence that a sizeable minority of cultists are psychologically troubled before joining (Martin et al., 1992, p.239) exacerbating vulnerability factors (Hassan, 2013; Coates, 2011; Singer, 2003a; Curtis and Curtis, 1993; Lofland and Stark, 1965). Psychologists Buxant, et. al (2007, p.258), evidenced in their mixed method study of the mental health of 20 former cult members, that those who join NRMs are more insecure than a normative population (non-NRM members) and they found evidence that insecure parental attachment during childhood is a contributing factor. God and religion may function in a compensatory role for people with a history of avoidant attachment (Holmes, 1993), that is, God may serve as a substitute parental attachment figure when the individual has not been able to attach to their parents (Buxant et al., 2007; Paloutzian et al., 1999, p.1057; Curtis and Curtis, 1993; Kirkpatrick and Shaver, 1990; Bowlby, 1973). Bonding to the cult leader has also been shown by sociologists and psychologists to be a key factor in determining whether a devotee would be attracted to and remain committed over an extended period of time (Jacobs, 1987, p.295).

Other sociological and psychological studies of religion suggest that people join in order to give meaning to and make sense of their life (Neal and Youngelson-Neal, 2015; Coates, 2012c; Healy, 2010; van Deurzen-Smith, 1997). In a rapidly changing society 'some live isolated lives, some seek counselling, and some join total to semi total institutions' and attempt to resolve issues through NRM membership (Coates, 2013b, p.1075).

Whilst there is evidence for these views there is a danger that they may pathologise a spiritual search, which many view as positive and life enhancing (West, 2010; Cook et al., 2009; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; West, 2004;). It is evolutionary to seek social

connection and joining a group is normal (Rosen, 2014; Lieberman, 2014; Harris et al., 2014; Baumeister and Leary, 1995). It is argued by social psychologists that people join groups for many different reasons, and that this is not evidence of psychopathology (Hogg et al., 2007). A function and reason for joining a group is because it serves to provide an identity and an associated consensual belief system that informs who we are and how we should view and treat others; and how others will view and treat us (Hogg et al., 2007, p.135). Vulnerability factors may, therefore, include 'normal' issues such as: life transition including leaving home for the first time; having suffered a bereavement; and the desire for change and transformation (Coates, 2012c; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Martin, 1993; Langone, 1993). It is suggested by some clinicians and psychologists that no particular type of person joins or is recruited into a cult (Bjørgo, 2011; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Lalich and Tobias, 2006). There is some evidence that people who join NRMs and cultic groups (1G) come from a diversity of social backgrounds (Bjørgo, 2011; Langone, 1993), although it is also suggested that many are middle class, intelligent, and idealistic (Matthews and Salazar, 2014).

The various vulnerability factors may account for some reasons for joining, but they do not account for other aspects, such as the sophisticated and deceitful recruitment techniques reported to be espoused by some groups (Hassan, 2015; Jenkinson, 2008; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Cialdini, 2001; Lifton, 1999), which linked to the 'brainwashing' debates discussed in Chapter 3.3. Joining a cult is, therefore, evidenced to be a two-way process (Jenkinson, 2008; Lalich, 2004), that is, the cult may be seeking new recruits and present an attractive message for a potential new member (Singer, 2003a; Cialdini, 2001). The potential member may be seeking or believe the organisation to be a 'normal' organisation, for example, a regular church (Coates, 2012b) or psychotherapy practice (Temerlin

and Temerlin, 1982) but unbeknown to them it is an abusive-cult (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015; Jenkinson, 2013; Lofland and Stark, 1965). In some cases, there is a planned seduction where love, friendship, and interest towards potential recruits is feigned (De Védrines, 2015; Singer, 2003a, p.114). Gestalt field theory (Clarkson, 1999; Yontef, 1993; Lewin, 1952) demonstrates how the environment-field is a co-construction and it cannot therefore be merely down to the cult or the vulnerability of an individual; both are a part of the resultant dynamics (I discuss these aspects further in Chapter 7). A number of former-members report that the cult disguised its true nature and intention (Hassan, 2015; Lalich and Tobias, 2006), and, for some, it also took advantage of them at a vulnerable time in their life. Whilst lack of resilience, that is the ability to 'bounce back' after a crisis or difficult experience (Joseph, 2011), may be a contributing factor to someone joining, in other cases it may have little to do with it. Some, like myself and two participants in this study, joined a group that evolved into a cult. Individuals may join because they seek parental alternatives (Buxant, et. al, 2007; Frank & Frank, 1991), although why people join and their level of vulnerability is likely to vary considerably between individuals. These are issues further evidenced in Chapters 7-11.

I proceed to discuss the debates related to conversion and identity change.

4.3 – Pre-cult and Joining: Conversion Debates and Identity Change

Conversion may occur by different routes and by definition results in change (Lalich, 2004, p.15; Lofland and Skonovd, 1983). Evidently many convert by thinking through their commitment (Paloutzian et al., 1999, p.1070) and making a cognitive choice (Wright, 2007) and I do not address this issue further herein.

There have been numerous studies in the sociology of religion which address joining, affiliation or conversion to a NRM and the debates and controversies continue to focus, to some extent, on conversion by free choice verses coercion and brainwashing models of joining (Wright, 2007, p.188). Conversion has been defined as the 'transformation of one's identity and worldview' and happens when a person gives up one worldview for another (Wright, 2007). The term 'worldview shift' has been applied (Wright, 2007; Lalich, 2004; Lofland and Stark, 1965, p.862) because conversion has religious connotations and not all NRMs and abusive-cults are religious (Healy, 2010). The psychological definition of conversion focuses on the concept of transformation of self 'imbued with religious meaning' (Paloutzian et al., 1999, p.1053).

In the section below I address related debates, under the headings:

- The peripheral route and brainwashing
- Conversion and the degree of change
- SGAs

The peripheral route and brainwashing

For some conversion occurs without thinking through the commitment and making a full cognitive choice. This has been labelled the 'peripheral route', and is

> '…when something is activated as a result of some simple cue in the persuasion context (e.g. attractive source) that induced change without necessitating scrutiny of the true merits of the information presented' (Paloutzian et al., 1999, p.1070).

Cialdini (2001), in his empirical study of influence evidences that the six principles of influence (reciprocation; consistency; social proof; liking; authority; and scarcity), can result in 'enormous force' in the

hands of a 'compliance professional', be that in marketing or advertising etc. He applies these theories to cults and cult leaders (Ibid., p.25) and notes that these principles of influence can

> '…produce a distinct kind of automatic, mindless compliance from people, that is, a willingness to say yes without thinking first' (Ibid., p.x).

This peripheral route, therefore, aligns itself with the brainwashing thesis which posits that the pressures are so great, and the facts and true nature of the group so obscured, that the individual in effect ends up joining a different group from the one they expected to join (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). This has been referred to as 'deceitful recruitment techniques' (Coates, 2012a; Martin, 1993).

Clinicians and psychologists involved with former-members have tended to view conversion in the light of these theories pertaining to influence (Zimbardo, 2007; Cialdini, 2001; Zimbardo and Andersen, 1993) or undue influence (Scheflin, 2015; Hassan, 2015; Rodriguez-Carballeira et al., 2015). They argue that change in identity or personality is a result of these in-group pressures and practices (Harris, 2012; Singer, 2003a; Paloutzian et al., 1999; West and Martin, 1994; Langone, 1993). That is, conversion, or joining, is seen as a result of lack of choice, as coercive: an enforced change resulting from deceptive and manipulative practices (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015; Martin, 1993b), rather than a well thought through conversion with an informed cognitive choice (Wright, 2007). Coates, in a qualitative study with 32 former cult members explored whether the participants joined because of 'social drift' or 'brainwashing theories' and concluded that both were applicable, depending on the personal stance of the researcher or their discipline (2012a, p.170).

Conversion and the degree of change

When people convert and remain the same it is suggested they are not really on a spiritual path of transformation, as the change needs to be

> '…persistent and important and continuous, and most religious traditions expect and foster change by providing ideology and techniques for the ongoing development and readiness of their members' (Rambo, 1993, p.163).

NRM conversion is often viewed as more intense and substantive than conversion to a mainstream religion, that is, there is a qualitative difference to the transformation (Wright, 2007, p.193). This level of transformation in the NRMs and cults fuelled the 'brainwashing' claims because they often included obvious changes such as: appearance or dress; name; diet; lifestyle; primary group; and belief system (Wright, 2007; Langone, 1993). These, as well as profound personality change (Harris et al., 2014; Dubrow-Marshall, 2010b; Jenkinson, 2008; Singer, 2003a; West and Martin, 1994; Goldberg, 1993), were aspects which alarmed concerned family members, leading to deprogramming and legal cases, discussed in Chapter 3:3.4.

A further discourse in the literatures is related to how fundamental this change in personality is. Sociologists, Paloutzian et al. (1999, p.1070-73), suggest that profound changes happen but only at certain levels within the personality; a relative stability of personality may remain (Ibid., p.1070). As a result of conversion the self may both shrink and expand. It shrinks and loses itself in what it gives up, but paradoxically also expands, encompassing the 'ultimate concern' (Ibid., p.1073).

Another sociological perspective 'yields a different set of expectations' and views affiliation (joining) and disaffiliation (leaving) in terms of role changes rather than personality changes (Lewis and Bromley, 1987). It is proposed that these role changes are 'transitional changes' rather than 'drastic changes' in life, meaning and identity (Paloutzian et al., 1999). Because many former-members 'relinquish these roles' after a brief membership they may belong to this category, but there is evidence from psychological studies, and some sociological studies (e.g. conversion studies), that there is, for some, a more fundamental change because some do 'blindly embrace' membership, as evidenced herein (Lewis and Bromley, 1987). As noted previously, this aspect may be in part because they were not given all the facts or the group evolved into a cult (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003a).

From a social psychological perspective, Harris, who compared four types of radical social group, including a cult, argues that when a social identity becomes salient (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011), that is, when a particular part of the identity comes into play in precedence over other parts of the personality, there is an increase in commitment

> '…leading to that identity's domination over other aspects of the person's life' (Harris, 2011, p.81).

Group norms take precedence over other areas, including employment, social obligations and family (Harris et al., 2014, p.22; Boeri, 2002). The group is more than a mere aggregate of people, but represents a fundamental form of social behaviour that determines life experiences and self-identity (Harris, 2011, p.81). Entitativity speaks to the properties that make a group seem like a coherent, distinct, unitary entity (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011). Harris concludes that groups with high entitativity, and strong ideologies that enmesh with the social identity of their members

> '…demand the assimilation of members into prototypes and group norms [which] lead to strong in-group homogeneity' (2011, p.81).

This is because of the lack of motivational forces existing to distinguish the self from others within the group; thus the process of 'self-categorisation and deindividuation' by a member serves to increase the internal perception of homogeneity and entitativity (Harris, 2011, p.81). Harris notes that members engage in the depersonalisation and deindividuation of the self through lack of recognition of their individuality, and come to think of themselves in terms of group values and expectations (Harris et al., 2014, p.23); what has been referred to elsewhere as a 'totalist identity' (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010).

Similarly, clinicians and psychologists who counselled former-members began to observe patterns consistent with the development of a particular cult identity, which some labelled a 'pseudo-identity'. It has been argued that this pseudo-identity is a dissociated part, superimposed upon the original identity, which is not completely forgotten, but is enveloped within the shell of the pseudo-identity (Jenkinson, 2016; Hassan, 2015; Jenkinson, 2008; Singer, 2003a; West and Martin, 1994). As a result of my Masters research I challenged this view of the pseudo-identity as a dissociated part and suggested it is an introjected personality; that is, it is not a dissociative split, to cope with trauma, but is taken in, introjected, from the environment but not integrated (Jenkinson, 2008). I suggest that it does not therefore become a part of the individual but sits like undigested food in the stomach, as it were (Perls and Wysong, 1992; Perls, et al, 1951). I acknowledge that dissociation may also be present, but argue that these are different processes. I define introjection in Chapter 7:7.2.3.

Clinicians and psychologists suggest that abusive-cults rely on structured group dynamics, environmental manipulation and control, and the presence of a dominant leader (Tourish, 2013), all of which leads to the evolution of this new identity within the pressured group environment (Harris et al., 2014; Stein, 2007; Lalich, 2004; West and Martin, 1994, p.271). They refer to the individual returning to their 'pre-cult personality' or 'authentic-self' after leaving (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Jenkinson, 2008; West and Martin, 1994) implying a stability in the core of the personality. This complies with the Gestalt theory of the self and personality, discussed in Chapter 7:7.2.

SGAs

Matthews and Salazar (2014) in their empirical report of a study of 15 SGAs note that although they are either born in a cult, or raised from an early age, their participants had to fit a 'mould' and most reported having an 'outward cult personality', described as a 'fake person', shaped and formed in the cult and another 'hidden self' that could only emerge during rare instances when they were outside the cult community (Ibid., p.198). The authors report that some left because of the incongruence between the two and did not want to wear a 'mask' any more as they were torn between listening to their inner voice or authentic self, and obeying.

Derocher's (2008) study with seven SGAs from North America, who left their 'sect' voluntarily, identifies what she refers to as a 'utopian identity' in which the individual views themself as 'citizen of the sectarian society'. The sect is the 'place of belonging, his native soil and his whole universe'. 'The world' outside is viewed as evil and dangerous and one they should mistrust as their cult identity is overvalued to the detriment of other angles of their individual identity (Ibid.).

In this section I have discussed pertinent debates related to conversion and identity change. In this next section I evidence participants' experiences from the data in order to illuminate the discussion above.

4.3.1 – Participants' Experience

The motivation for joining differs amongst participants and it appears each joined for a variety of multi-layered reasons. For example, some participants were seeking

- friendship because they were lonely
- a sense of place
- a service (e.g. to bless their forthcoming marriage)
- a solution to emotional problems and to address emotional pain and depression
- spiritual enlightenment
- help from a normal organisation e.g. a local church or therapy practice
- desire to join a genuine church or spiritual centre
- to start a business
- an alternative lifestyle
- an adventure e.g. travel

Whilst some joined in order to address their emotional problems, they nevertheless evidence normal, healthy, reasons for joining and in most cases these are intended to be self-actualising. That is, joining was an attempt to make their life better on a practical, spiritual or psychological level. Participants did not knowingly become a member

of an abusive-cult and none said they were looking for abuse. They believed they were joining an organisation that was trustworthy and accurately representing itself to the public. One participant poignantly explains that she

> *'…never wanted to be a part of...er...er...you know, a group that wasn't doing the right thing* [...] *I was sold a bag of goods that I never received'.* [Daphne]

I provide further evidence of these issues in Chapters 7-11.

I now proceed to discuss 'life-in' - the cult leader, leading on to the literatures related to 'life-in' and 'post-cult'.

4.4 – Life-in - The Cult Leader

In this section I reflect on the literatures and debates related to the leader. There is little dispute that the leader is a key component of a NRM or abusive-cult (Shaw, 2014; Atack, 2013; Tourish, 2013; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Lalich, 2004; Dawson, 2002b; Barker, 2002b; Langone, 1993; Galanter, 1989a). As evidenced in the definition of a cult adopted in Chapter 3:3.6, and in Chapter 8: Phase One, the cult leader is a powerful and important player. A major category that emerges from the data is 'unmasking the cult leader'; that is, the former-member needs to reduce them from the idealised, powerful, charismatic figure they perceived them to be, in order that they see them for the fallible human they are. There is evidence in other studies that the member also needs to sever the socio-emotional bonds to the leader and disengage emotionally in order to leave (Jacobs, 1987, p.294).

The leader is the prototypical cult member and presented as a 'hero' for members to admire (Harris, 2010). For some there is an attachment and love for the leader which maintains membership in spite of abuses perpetrated by them (Atack, 2013; Stein, 2007;

Lalich, 2004; Jacobs, 1987). The member's love usually converges on the leader as the most powerful and dominant force in their life (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006, p.57) and they may therefore regard them as the focus of their life; as a '*god of gods'* [Fred]; or a '*lover of lovers'* [Max]; as the route to God; the chief therapist; or instigator of political change.

In a cultic organisation charismatic leadership is, therefore, an indispensable ingredient (Tourish, 2013, p.31) and the leader is the main decision maker (Matthews and Salazar, 2014). Followers must defend the leader at all costs for they are 'the source', the connection to higher authority – that is, the life of the member depends on the leader in many ways (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Storr, 1996; Langone, 1993; Galanter, 1989a). They may come to believe that their very existence depends on them, and become dependent (Lalich, 2004, p.224; Langone, 1993; Jacobs, 1987).

In this section I discuss different debates and perspectives under the following headings:

- Types of leadership
- Charisma and authority
- Relational dynamics with members

Types of leadership

The Sanskrit word 'guru' means 'heavy' and when applied to people implies they command respect, but not all are venerable (Storr, 1996). Psychiatrist Storr in his study restricts the word to mean:

> 'Teachers who claim special knowledge of the meaning of life, and who therefore feel entitled to tell others how life should be lived' (Ibid., p.xi).

Some gurus therefore have the hubris to claim special gifts and become 'unscrupulous wielders of power who exploit their followers

in a variety of ways' (Ibid.). There is evidence that some cult leaders are masters at displaying exceptional abilities which dupe their followers (Kramer and Alstad, 1993), but which are no more than magic tricks, such as materialising watches or gold dust out of the air (Galanter, 1989a, p.151).

In some NRMs the cult leader is unaccountable (Barker, 1996, p.133) and the source of the abuse. In others a personal mentor or Board of Elders stands in for the leader, ensuring his/her objectives are achieved (Lifton, 1999; Galanter, 1989a). In some cases, the relationship with the cult leader is preserved because there are other levels of membership and the member may project criticism on to the 'middle level' of leadership, thus prolonging membership and preserving the idealisation of the cult leader (Jacobs, 1987, p.298). Members may also make excuses for inconsistencies in the leader's behaviour by blaming themselves or by accusing other members of lying (Ibid.; Travis and Aronson, 2013).

In the case of militant extremist or radical social groups, leaders may expect physical violence and the death of their followers (Harris et al., 2014; Bjørgo, 2011; Banisadr, 2004). There are those who demand celibacy but who freely engage in sexual relationships themselves, both male and female (Edelstein, 2011; Boeri, 2002; Bunting, 1997). A number are alleged to be, or are, child abusers and convicted rapists (BBC, 2015a; Katz QC, 2014; INFORM, 2010).

Many cult leaders have, in spite of their public persona, been exposed to be semi-literate, drug addicts, and/or alcoholics (Tourish, 2013, p.31; Hong, 1998) or to meet the criteria of mental disorders (Whitsett and Kent, 2003a). A number of cult leaders have been found to be paranoid and narcissistic, with disturbed childhoods (Tourish, 2013; Derocher, 2008; Abgrall, 2000; Storr, 1996). It is, therefore, important to understand personality adaptations in order to understand the cult leader (Tourish, 2013; Abgrall, 2000). Many

purport to have had a special calling, a miraculous and mystical conversion experience which then becomes part of the legend surrounding them (Lifton, 1999; Storr, 1996; Galanter, 1989a, p.148). Psychopaths operate in society at large (Hare, 1993) but when one is the head of an abusive-cult there is a particular level of control and abuse that occurs (Lifton, 1999). Zimbardo explored the psychology of evil defining it as

> '...intentionally behaving in ways that harm, abuse, demean, dehumanise, or destroy innocent others – or using one's authority and systemic power to encourage or permit others to do so on your behalf' (2007, p.5).

The leader may create a patriarchy and expect rigid gender roles which can lead to the subjugation of women who are required to submit to men, their husband or the group's rules for women and these roles may be taught to the children (Matthews and Salazar, 2014, p.193; Perry and Szalavitz, 2006; Boeri, 2002).

Charisma and authority

Players that discredit the 'brainwashing' thesis propose that it is necessary to look elsewhere for answers to the question of why people are willing to place their fates so completely in the hands of greedy, lustful and mentally unstable leaders (Dawson, 2002, p.80; Storr, 1996). They suggest that it is important to explore the nature and dynamics of the 'charismatic mode of leadership' which most scholars agree is a hallmark of new religious life (Dawson, 2002). There is some evidence that Max Weber's term 'charisma' (cited in Dawson, 2002) can be applied, and is defined as:

> 'A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at

> least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader'.

Weber identified three modes of authority:

- traditional leaders who are granted authority
- those with legal authority who have a right to rule and
- those whose charismatic authority is rooted in the display of exceptional abilities, which are thought to be divinely (or supernaturally) granted or inspired (Ibid.)

Weber's theory created a conundrum for sociology; purists demanded that charisma either be located as a psychological trait in the leader's individual personality, or as a construction by a social group, but reality is not so clear cut (Oakes, 2010, p.9; Perls, et. al, 1951). Barker (1989, p.13) references Weber's definition and points out that the sociology of religion application of the term differs from others. It implies merely that the leader's followers *believe* that he or she possesses a very special (possibly divine) quality and that followers are, as a consequence, willing to grant him or her a special kind of authority over them.

The debate related to charisma is, therefore, whether the charisma is constructed by and attributed to the leader by the followers, or whether it is intrinsic to and emerging from the leader. As charisma is relational (Lalich, 2004, p.223), it is assumed to be both related to the individual and their view of the leader, as well as to the leader's assumptions about themselves (Lewin, 1952). The balance in terms of which of these are most predominant will vary between individual members, leaders and cults.

Galanter (1989a, p.98) argues that charisma is an unnecessary ingredient in a cult leader and that charismatic groups are in themselves 'charismatic, demanding, proselytising and evangelical, with obsessional members who carry on the work of the group'.

Relational dynamics with members

It is important to examine whether people get hurt around a charismatic leader as so much depends on context (Tourish, 2013; Oakes, 2010, p.317). While the power of the leader is enhanced, that of the followers is diminished (Tourish, 2013, p.20; Lichtenberg, 1990; Jacobs, 1987). Clinician Shaw (2014) notes that the guru in the cult he was a member of operationalised all of Lifton's components of thought-reform but argues that as an explanation this does not go far enough in describing the guru's use of power to intimidate. He proposes a theory of 'traumatic narcissism' to describe the belittling and humiliation of others as the guru used her power to 'intimidate, seduce, and coerce' (Ibid., p.49). Traumatising narcissists are described as those who have a pathological and inflated sense of self, are 'thick skinned' and abusive (Ibid.).

A complex dynamic between leader and followers may be instigated. Gestaltist, Lichtenberg, applies Ferenczi's theory of identification with the aggressor, originally formulated to apply to child abuse victims, to 'stronger adults versus weaker ones' (1990, p.11), that is, where domination occurs. The interpersonal dynamics involve a projection of the weaknesses of the aggressor on to a 'primed vulnerable other', the 'weaker person' in the power dynamic, who then identifies with the aggressor in order to 'get rid of the anxiety' elicited in them (Lichtenberg, 1990, p.19; Galanter, 1989a, p.160). That is, they become actively subordinate to cope with the situation and through introjection feel the guilty feelings of the stronger one resulting in

> '…the abused individual becoming an obedient automaton or defiant but nevertheless bound to the authority figure, whilst actively refusing to hate the dominating, exploiting, individual' (Lichtenberg, 1990).

I conclude this section by listing a taxonomy of participants' cult leaders.

Participants' cult leaders

There are a number of broad taxonomies of cult leader referred to in this study and I list these in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1: Type of Cult Leader

Type of Cult Leader	**Number of Participants**
Pastor/Church Leader	11
Guru	10
Guru/Therapist	2
Mentor/Teacher	4
Do not know	2

I address this category further in analysis Chapter 8: Phase One and Chapter 9: Phase Two.

This research study is related to those who have left an abusive-cult, which by definition assumes victimisation and harm (Chapter 3:3.6). In this next section I introduce the controversies in the literatures related to 'life-in' and abuse (the actions within a relationship that causes harm) followed by the section 'life-in' and 'post-cult'

addressing the resulting harm (the impact of abuse). I evidence participants' experiences of abuse in the cult in analysis Chapters 7-11.

4.5 – Life-in – Cultic-Abuse

All players acknowledge that violence and criminal activity occurs in some groups (Katz QC, 2014; Kent, 2004; Jones et al., 2008; Kendall, 2006; Boeri, 2002); it is the extent of the abuse and whether former-member reports are accurate that is disputed (Casoni, et al., 2015; INFORM, 2015; Katz QC, 2014; Derocher, 2008; Barker, 2002b; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001). Abuse can include violence (Harris et al., 2014; Bjørgo, 2011; Barker, 2002b) as evidenced by some high profile cult cases such as Jonestown and Waco, although such overt and public violence is reported to be rare (Bromley and Melton, 2002; Barrett, 2001; Dawson, 1996).

There are numerous published former-member biographies, both 1G and SGA, in which some level of abuse, neglect, and harm is alleged (De Védrines, 2015; BBC, 2015a; Hassan, 2015; Tormey, 2014; Finch, 2009; Jones et al., 2008; Wall and Pulitzer, 2008; Jessop and Palmer, 2007; Guest, 2004; Stein, 2002; Layton, 1999; Williams, 1998; Hong, 1998; Davis, 1984). Amongst these narratives many describe the more overt abuse, for example physical and sexual abuse (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015, p.78; Matthews and Salazar, 2014; Boeri, 2002), as well as the subtler, unseen psychological and emotional abuse, grooming by the cult leader (De Védrines, 2015), bullying, and mental and emotional manipulation (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2013; Zimbardo, 2007; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993). Former-members report a level of dependency resulting in disorientation and a struggle to adjust on leaving (Finch, 2009; Derocher, 2008; Langone, 1993). There are reports that in Children of God (CoG), female members were expected to prostitute themselves in order to recruit new members (van Eck Duymaer van

Twist, 2015, p.74) and taught that 'acts of paedophilia were okay' (Boeri, 2002). Some cults are alleged to have moved their members abroad and continued the sexual exploitation of their child and adult members (Tormey, 2014; Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Jones et al., 2008; Kent, 2004; Kent, 2001). These allegations have been questioned, and in some cases mooted as little more than 'media hype' (Lewis and Melton, 1994; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001), suggesting that 'apostate' former-members are biased against the group, blaming it for their personal problems.

Feminist perspectives on NRMs focused on gender roles and hierarchies noting that rather than offering an alternative to traditional, male-dominated religious organisations, they were often explicitly women-hating and exploitative. These groups were controlling female behaviour and sexuality, resulting in sexual exploitation and abuse (Jacobs, 2007, p.233; Boeri, 2002). Charismatic social structures that were 'patriarchal in nature' (Jacobs, 2007, p.234) resulted in the abuse of women and children, not only by the leader but by other members.

Feminist researchers in sociology of religion challenged the views that blamed the victim, noting the trivialization of reports (amongst male researchers) of those who have been violated and abused whilst members (Jacobs, 2007, p.234), which includes victimised men (Hassan, 2015; Gilligan, 1993; Langone, 1993). They suggest the definition of 'violence' has tended to be broad and focussed on 'mass suicide' and 'collective murder' (Jacobs, 2007), that is the high profile 'cult' cases reported in the media. Other forms of violation, for example, extreme disciplinary actions or sexually abusive behaviour have, historically, by comparison 'rarely been taken seriously or treated with any importance' (Ibid., p.235). In stressing the positive aspects of NRMs it has been mooted that social scientists avoided engaging with these difficult questions raised by reports of abuse, including gendered abuse (Jacobs, 2007; Zablocki and Robbins,

2001). It is the question of sexual and psychological abuse, the hidden, invisible abuse (Tanielian et al., 2008) and resulting harm, that is questioned and once again the debates returned to whether they are a result of 'brainwashing' or 'normal' practices.

Life can be particularly difficult for SGAs (Kendall, 2005) who, as children, have no choice in the way they are brought up. Parents may mitigate or exacerbate difficulties for their children (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015; Derocher, 2008) and in some cults the children are separated from their parents and brought up by other group members (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015; Mytton, 2015; Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Kendall, 2006). This may have serious emotional, psychological and developmental implications for SGAs because it is difficult for these children to attach to a primary care-giver (Boeri & Boeri, 2009, p.88; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2005; Guest, 2004), evidenced to be necessary for healthy psychological and physical development (Gerhardt, 2004; Ogden et al., 2006; Wilkinson, 2006; Holmes, 1993; Bowlby, 1973). When children are not protected they are not only vulnerable to neglect and sexual and physical abuse but also to the resulting developmental trauma and psychological and emotional difficulties (Derocher, 2008; Ogden, et. al, 2006; Briere, 1992; Johnson, 1987).

In addition, there can be complications with birth certificates and custody rights (Boeri and Boeri, 2009, p.86), particularly where the parenting issues are a result of sexual practices within the group. For example, in CoG, it is reported that some children have been led to believe particular individuals were their father when they were not (Ibid., p.85). SGA former members of CoG report that they were taught to have sexual contact with each other as children, and were often exposed to adult sex (Tormey, 2014; Jones et. al., 2008). There have been reports of sexual abuse perpetrated by women as well as men (Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Elliott, 1993). Corporal punishment of children is reported to occur in some groups, particularly those that

follow the Judeo-Christian tradition, as does solitary confinement and other harsh discipline (Casoni, et. al., 2015; Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Siskind, 2001, p.419).

Historically, different cults have dealt with allegations of child sexual abuse (CSA) in different ways and religious beliefs can encourage, foster, and even justify abusive behaviour, including physical abuse (Casoni et al., 2015; Heimlich, 2011; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2006; BBC 1, 2002; Bottoms et al., 1995, p.86). There are allegations that a number of 'cults' do not report CSA to the authorities and as a result many children go unprotected (Heimlich, 2011; Szalavitz, 2006; Whitsett and Kent, 2003b; BBC 1, 2002; Rodgers, 2002; Siskind, 2001).

For psychologists, psychotherapists and clinicians, whose remit it is to support clients in their recovery process, the definition of 'aggression' and 'harm' is broader than physical violence and includes psychological harm and posttraumatic responses. These can result in long term difficulties in any setting, including post-cult (Carrobles et al., 2013; Jenkinson, 2013; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Whitsett and Kent, 2003b; van der Kolk et al., 1996; Langone, 1993; Herman, 1992). These psychological effects are often disenfranchised and more difficult to recover from. Physical violence is more obvious, is illegal, and it is generally acknowledged that it will cause 'harm', but there is evidence that psychological aspects of abuse are the most devastating (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2015; O'Leary and Maiuro, 2001, p.xii).

Research in social psychology and social sciences has historically tended to concentrate on the study of aggression and violence rather than the resulting psychological impact (O'Leary and Maiuro, 2001p. ix). Studies into domestic violence were originally carried out by sociologists and criminologists and viewed as

> '…behavioral acts, which often constituted a transgression of acceptable cultural norms or a violation of another person's rights in the form of indexed criminal behavior' (Ibid.).

More recent studies have extended into the fields of psychology and clinical psychology and come to include an acknowledgement of both physical abuse and the resulting psychological impact (Rodríguez-Carballeira et al., 2013, p.1; O'Leary and Maiuro, 2001). Questions still remain regarding researchers' ability to assess the severity of the impact of psychological abuse; the assessment is complex and it is hard to define who is psychologically abused and who is not (O'Leary and Maiuro, 2001, p.xiii), as also evidenced by the controversies between the different disciplines. These historical differences may account, to some degree, for the different perspectives between players in the cult scene.

Chambers et al (1994) report that the Group Psychological Abuse Scale (GPAS) was developed from a factor analysis of 308 former cult members' characterizations of their groups. They state that four subscales were derived:

- Compliance
- Exploitation
- Mind Control and
- Anxious Dependency

Reliability and validity findings suggest the GPAS should be 'useful in characterizing the varieties of abuse, and in differentiating cults from innocuous groups' (Ibid.).

In order to predict the damage suffered by victims of abusive behaviours and in order to delimit psychological abuse, Rodriguez-Carballeira et al. (2015, p.31) propose a taxonomy of group psychological abuse (GPA) strategies based on a review of the

scientific literature, using a panel of 31 experts in a Delphi study. The result was a taxonomy comprising 6 categories and 26 subcategories of psychological abuse strategies that can be used in groups. They evidence that the ultimate aim of psychological abuse is the subjugation of the individual through strategies such as: undue influence; personal control; coercion; and abuse, and the most severe effects were emotional. They define GPA as

> '…a process of systematic and continuous application of pressure, control, manipulation, and coercion strategies for the purpose of dominating other people in order to achieve their submission to the group' (Ibid., 2015, p.34).

The authors acknowledge that the definition focusses on the abusive action and does not mention the consequences of psychological abuse.

Rodríguez-Carballeira et al. (2013), as part of their attempt to define psychological violence or abuse (above), previously analysed three different settings: coercive cults; partner violence; and workplace bullying. Their comparative analysis concludes there are important parallels and common characteristics shared between the strategies used, particularly between coercive cults and partner abuse. These authors suggest that in

> '…both contexts, the aim is generally to subdue the person suffering the abuse, either to the group authority, or to the spouse or abuser partner. In both cases, the relationships are also ones in which the establishment of an intimate tie prevails' (Ibid.).

The commonalities between coercive cults, partner violence and workplace bullying are threefold:

- isolating the person
- interfering in their immediate environment and
- the emotional abuse of the person (Ibid., p.8)

Further parallels have been made between cults and domestic violence in the clinical setting (Ward, 2000), and leaving a cult has been likened to leaving a marriage (Wright, 1991; Barker, 1989).

Informed retrospectively by the participants' reports of 'life-in' the cult (evidenced in Chapters 7-11), and the above mentioned studies, I suggest that the definition of domestic violence may aid in defining cultic abuse. Relationships within cults and marriage result in the forming of affectional bonds in an intimate setting (Stein, 2012; Wright, 1991; Barker, 1989). Both populations may suffer psychological and physical, sexual and monetary abuse (Home Office, 2013). The recent change in definition for domestic abuse by the British Government includes:

> 'Controlling or coercive behaviour in an intimate or family relationship' (Home Office, 2013).

Cult relationships are 'intimate'; members are in a cohesive, controlling and coercive group; and many have a relationship with the cult leader or representative that ascribes to them the status of guru, 'hero' (Harris, 2011), or lover, who becomes the centre of their world.

In the next section I explore the issue of harm resulting from cultic abuse, reported in the literatures.

4.6 – Life-in and Post-cult: Harm & Emotional Affects

The debates in relation to abuse and violence challenge and call into question the issue of whether and what type of harm is caused. It is agreed between players that some NRMs abuse and cause harm (Casoni et al., 2015; Robbins, 2003; Barker, 2002a) although, of

course, it is not inevitable (Healy, 2010; Cook et al., 2009; Pargament, et. al, 2006; Barker, 2002b; Barker, 2002a). The dictionary definition of harm is: 'to hurt, damage, cause harm to'. The Child Protection statement 'harmful conduct' includes that which causes

> '…physical or psychological harm, unlawful conduct that adversely affects property, rights or interests, and possessions; conduct that causes self-harm' (The Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010).

In the UK the term 'significant harm' replaced the terms 'child abuse' and 'neglect' and is defined as:

> 'Ill-treatment or the impairment of the child's health (mental or physical) or development (physical, intellectual, emotional, social or behavioural) attributable to a lack of adequate parental care or control' [Section 31, Children Act 1989] in (Glaser et al., 2004).

Defining a vulnerable adult is more complex than for children and is

> '…those people over 18 years who are or may be, for any of a variety of reasons, unable to look after themselves or protect themselves from harm or exploitation' (University of Nottingham, 2013, p.1).

I discuss the ethics of researching vulnerable adult participants in Chapter 6:6.2.

The data and the literatures suggest that some former-members suffer in the following areas and I explore the debates under these headings:

- loss – grief and traumatic loss of the cult/cult withdrawal syndrome (Lewis & Bromley, 1987)
- the deleterious effects of abuse (Aronoff et al., 2000), and
- posttraumatic stress reactions (I merge the discussion with interview data in this section)

Differences between 1G and SGAs are highlighted where pertinent. The consequences for participants are addressed in analysis Chapters 7 and 11.

4.6.1 – Loss

Clinicians observed that former members grieve on a number of different levels, post-cult. These are:

- Loss of the group & guru
- Loss of meaning
- Loss of self-esteem
- Loss of time/years
- Loss of family/friends (Lalich & Tobias, 2006)

Some sociological research also evidenced that former-members were experiencing a traumatic adjustment and loss of the attachments from the group (Coates, 2015; Coates, 2010; Lewis and Bromley, 1987), but they challenged the notion that painful feelings were evidence of 'harm' resulting from brainwashing and abuse within the cult. They proposed that feelings were caused by, or exacerbated by, exit-counselling. The source of difficult feelings experienced on leaving, taken as evidence of harm by psychologists and clinicians, is, therefore, disputed by some (Walsh and Bor, 1996). There is evidence that the source of feelings arises from both coercive, 'brainwashing' (thought-reform) and 'normal' processes; that is, they are the result of harm perpetrated in the group *and* grief at leaving an intense environment (Coates, 2010).

I now proceed to discuss the debates in the literatures in relation to the deleterious effects of membership.

4.6.2 - The Deleterious Effects

A number of studies consistently point to 'the conclusion that psychopathology is a risk factor associated with cultic involvement' (Aronoff et al., 2000; West and Martin, 1994). The purpose of this section is not to prove or disprove pathology, but to reflect on the effects that have been reported. Different studies identify similar lists of psychological problems and feelings reported post-cult by former-members. Some of these outcomes are based on quantitative psychological instruments such as the MCMI, measured at the start, end, and at six months post treatment at Wellspring (Martin et al., 1992). These tests were conducted with clients who attended their two-week recovery programme. Clinicians observe similar problems from a qualitative perspective (Hassan, 2013; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003a; Whitsett and Kent, 2003a; Boeri, 2002; Langone, 1993) and both suggest similar lists of feelings faced by former-members post-cult which are: anxiety, fear, worry; severe anxiety attacks; anger toward leader; low self-confidence; vivid flashbacks; depression; difficulty concentrating; despair, hopelessness, helplessness; guilt about behaviour in the group; 'floating' between different states of mind; feel they live in an unreal world; conflicts with loved ones; fear of physical harm from group; difficulty making decisions; menstrual cessation; serious emotional problems after leaving; loneliness; feelings of humiliation and embarrassment; suicidal tendencies; nightmares; inability to break rhythms of chanting, meditation etc.; sleeplessness; memory loss; sexual dysfunction; weight issues; violent outbursts; bewildering psychic phenomena; hallucinations and delusions; and a few are hospitalised with full psychotic break down (Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Chambers et al., 1994; Martin et al., 1992). Other researchers

report that post-cult problems include: increased dependency and decreased autonomy (Walsh and Bor, 1996; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993); adjustment difficulties (Aronoff et al., 2000); attachment disorders, particularly for SGAs (Matthews and Salazar, 2014, p. 188); and stunted cognitive development resulting from living in a dichotomous setting (Whitsett and Kent, 2003a).

Wright (1991) challenges the suggestion that lists of feelings are proof of harm in a cult noting that those who leave a marriage share a similar long list. In addition, he notes that these two populations experience depression; loneliness; dissociated states; obsessive review of time in the cult or marriage. Coates suggests that one reason that researchers reach different conclusions is their different research focus and methodologies. She argues that psychologists and clinicians who support the 'brainwashing thesis' predominantly focus on experiences of former-members through the use of quantitative studies and to a lesser degree, clinical case studies. Sociologists on the other hand generally focus on how and why people join and what effect this has on them by using qualitative methods (Coates, 2010, p.297).

Kendall (2005) examined the psychological distress of: 47 x 1G, and compared these to 26 x SGAs, and a comparison group of 33. She measured for dissociation; depression; anxiety; anger; family environment; psychological child maltreatment; physical and sexual child victimisation; and PTSD symptoms. She concluded that SGAs suffer more psychological distress than the other populations.

Some report altered states of consciousness (ASC) brought on by drug use (Singer, 2003a, p.255) and/or the practice of meditation and chanting. These may continue post-cult. ASCs render people more vulnerable to social influence because the

> '…customary internal signposts, in which views are rooted, are undermined and make them more vulnerable to influencers resulting in shaping members' attitudes within a charismatic group' (Galanter, 1989b, p.65).

Cults 'assault family units' (Whitsett and Kent, 2003a) and as the 1G matured and had children, the challenges increased in terms of the intergenerational problems of former-member families. Whilst former-members report the resulting emotional pain (Banisadr, 2015) and clinicians address family issues (Goldberg, 2015; Whitsett and Kent, 2003a; Langone, 1993), there have been few empirical studies. One such grounded theory qualitative study was conducted by Boeri and Boeri (2009), former-member mother (1G) and daughter (SGA) who are sociological researchers. They investigated the intergenerational memories of life in CoG, conducted with a sample of 1G and SGAs who had been members. The two generations reported different feelings post-cult. SGAs report: suicide attempts (Derocher, 2008); bitterness, rage and lack of forgiveness of parents (although some did forgive); that it was easier to cut off all contact because reminders of past get in the way. 1G mothers report: shame about sexual practices in the cult; sexual problems; loss of boundaries; depression; and deep guilt about the abuse their children suffered. Both generations struggle and both were controlled and victimised, but by nature of being children, SGAs had no choice and, as evidenced above, Kendall (2006) suggests they will suffer the most deeply as they struggle with pain, anger and, for some, permanent emotional scars (Boeri and Boeri, 2009; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2006).

Where there is abuse there are often posttraumatic stress reactions. In this next section I bring together the data and the literatures in order to evidence posttraumatic stress from participant accounts.

4.6.3 - Posttraumatic Stress

In this section I evidence posttraumatic stress reactions from the data and discuss these in relation to some of the prolific literatures on trauma related issues. I have adopted this strategy in order to limit the discussion as there is a plethora of research and studies in the trauma field. This section also relates to the category 'facing feelings' discussed in Chapter 10: Phase Three.

> *'Being in a cult is traumatising, whether you have what I would call PTSD or not, it's traumatising and there are traumatic events.' [Maribel]*

> *'It was a traumatic experience [...], it impacted us deeply.' [Winnie]*

The term trauma derives from the Greek for 'wound', and can be applied to either physical injury from a direct external force or psychological injury caused by some extreme emotional assault (Reber and Reber, 2001). A psychological definition of trauma is

> '…exposure to a traumatic event and people's reaction to it' (Regel and Joseph, 2010).

An experience can be described as traumatic 'when a person's normal ability to cope has been completely overwhelmed by a terrible event' (Scott and Stradling, 1999, p.4) and this is posttraumatic stress. A good starting point for the recognition of posttraumatic stress reactions is that the 'survivor' will have been exposed to an event 'outside the range of usual human experience' which results in

- persistent re-experiencing of the event in a number of ways
- persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the trauma

- increased arousal including: difficulty falling asleep; irritability; difficulty concentrating; hyper-vigilance; exaggerated startle response (Turnbull, 2011, p.56)

The key feature is that the individual continues to experience fear and danger when 'the original threat has passed' and therefore remains in 'survival mode' (Ogden et al., 2006; Regel and Joseph, 2010), a state of hyper or hypo arousal (Ogden, 2009; Ogden et al., 2006). Marjorie evidences this when she meets with other former-members of her cult which is '*triggering*'. They remind her of the cult days and the sense of threat returns as she remembers the abuse and sense of danger, resulting in a physical reaction in her body (Kepner, 2003; Ogden, 2009). These somatic reactions resulted in her feeling

> '*…physically ill, a very physical reaction, like a child who's been abused when in proximity to the abuser.'* [Marjorie]

This poses a problem, therefore, for some former-members who might benefit from meeting others who have left their cult, but cannot because of these 'triggers'.

These reactions are emotionally painful and distressing, and often overwhelm the ability to cope, leaving the individual feeling powerless (Rothschild, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006; van der Kolk et al., 1996). Cult trauma is complex trauma (I address these issues further below):

> *'I am talking about complex trauma in Judith Herman, and John Briere sense.'* [Lavinia]

Cult membership may entail 'big T' traumas and 'small t' traumas. 'Big T' traumas are those which result from experiencing a life-threatening event, natural disasters, assault, witnessing death, rape etc. and which 'the psychology community recognizes as a cause of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD)' (Shapiro and Silk Forrest, 2004, p.14). 'Small t' traumas occur 'in the innocuous but upsetting

experiences that daily life sends our way' but which can have far reaching consequences as they result in some of the same feelings as 'big T' trauma (ibid.). These can result in

> 'an accumulation of emotional shocks that creates substantial and lasting psychological damage; something that severely jars the mind or emotions' (Ibid., p.15).

In an abusive-cult these 'small t' traumas may be the result of the accumulation of humiliation, fear of guru, letting people down etc. Both are important to address; if they are not, the authentic-self may become stuck, in a fixed-Gestalt, which is discussed further in Chapter 7:7.2. Maribel evidences these aspects:

> *'A big 'T' trauma is seeing someone die, or, you know whatever your traumatic event is. And sometimes it's not big trauma, it's small 't' trauma, you know, being humiliated in the group; being afraid of what the guru thinks of you; you know, letting people down. Those are the smaller 't' traumas that are very important because when you leave a cult, even if you weren't raped or didn't see anyone die [...], you still have a series of smaller traumas that are stuck.'*

I suggest that the big 'T' traumas experienced in an abusive-cult, and the accumulation of little 't' traumas, result in the complex trauma (Shapiro and Silk Forrest, 2004), for some [Maribel and Lavinia above]. Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (C-PTSD), was the diagnosis proposed by Herman (1992), which includes symptoms of long-term trauma applicable to

- those who were victims of concentration camps and POWs
- long-term child physical and sexual abuse
- organised child exploitation and

- long-term domestic violence

Herman speaks of 'coercive methods of control' and 'brainwashing' of victims, noting that society often does not understand the dynamics of the type of abuse which results in C-PTSD (Ibid., p.115). This 'propensity to fault the character of the victim' can be seen in the case of cult hostage Patty Hearst (Herman, 1992, p.115), who when asked about being brainwashed recognised that whilst she could have walked out of the apartment she was held hostage in, 'it simply never occurred to me' (Singer, 2003a, p.62).

Herman (1992, p.116) notes that whilst

> '…healthy people may become entrapped in prolonged abusive situations; it is equally clear that after their escape they are no longer ordinary or healthy.'

Chronic abuse causes 'serious psychological harm' (Ibid., p.116; Turnbull, 2011) and has an effect on the psyche, body, mind, spirit; the whole being of the victim (Ogden et al., 2006; Rothschild, 2000; van der Kolk et al., 1996). Human reactions to trauma are complex and individual (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006). In recent years the study of neuroscience, and how trauma affects the brain, has illuminated these complexities and gone some way to aiding understanding of why humans react in the ways they do (Lanius et al., 2011; Siegel, 2009; Wilkinson, 2010; Cozolino, 2002). In spite of the attempt to define and understand the terms trauma and dissociation, they still remain full of dichotomies, 'the very dichotomies that the wounds themselves cause' (Nijenhuis, 2015, p.10). Recent empirical research has evidenced that some grow from and through their trauma (Joseph and Murphy, 2013a; Joseph, 2011) (see Chapter 11: Phase Four) and that

> '…any understanding of reactions to trauma and adversity must take account of the potential for

> positive as well as negative changes if it is to be considered comprehensive' (Linley and Joseph, 2004).

None of the participants directly stated that they had been diagnosed with C-PTSD or PTSD, although three stated that Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) was helpful in reducing their trauma symptoms. EMDR is a behavioural therapeutic strategy for helping the individual process posttraumatic memories (PTSD) by directing darting eye movements; this enables desensitising of traumatic memories, ideas and thoughts, by moving the focus through the eyes to the right and left cerebral hemispheres of the brain (Turnbull, 2010, p.353). Whilst there has been a good deal of controversy surrounding EMDR, and reports of abuse (Shapiro and Silk Forrest, 2004), there have been many clinical and empirical trials which support its effectiveness with many, including former members, as evidenced herein.

Whilst I am neither trained to, nor would it be my place to attempt to, diagnose participants, a PTSD diagnosis may be applicable to some. PTSD cannot be diagnosed unless the reactions have been both 'intense' and 'persistent' for several weeks (Joseph, 2011, p.45). There are indications from the discourses in interview that point to symptoms which might be indicative of a posttraumatic stress reaction (Wilkinson, 2006; Lalich and Tobias, 2006) such as dissociation, and I evidence this aspect of posttraumatic stress next.

Dissociation

Joseph (2011, p.101) notes that:

> 'The tension between remembering and forgetting is the essence of what it is to live with trauma'.

Participants in this study refer to a type of abuse that might well result in dissociation, and a number describe dissociative symptoms. A dissociative disorder is defined as:

> 'A general cover term for those psychological disorders characterized by a breakdown in the usual integrated functions of consciousness, perception of self and sensory/motor behaviour. Generally included here are depersonalization disorder, Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID), and some forms of amnesia and fugue' (Reber and Reber, 2001, p.209).

Dissociation is not necessarily symptomatic of illness (West and Martin, 1994, p.268) or trauma related, but at the far end of a continuum may be a predictor of PTSD (Nijenhuis, 2015; Ozer et al., 2008). It can be viewed as

> '…the maladaptive persistence of the once adaptive responses that begin as coping mechanisms in response to the event itself' (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006, p.76).

There is some evidence that some former-members suffer high degrees of dissociation post-cult (Kendall, 2006; West and Martin, 1994). Stein (2007) identified dissociative patterns in her former-member sample through discourse analysis of interview transcripts. Coates challenges reports of dissociation in relation to her 1G sample as her participants did not directly report dissociative experiences (Coates, 2010), although, if participants have not been trained in psychological language and understanding of dissociation they may not be in a position to identify its presence. Her concern is that these reports pathologise former-members. Whilst diagnosis may pathologise it is also a route to assistance (Mackewn, 2000) and may

have utility for some, so long as the professional strategies evidenced to be helpful are also taken into account.

Dissociation is

> '*…quite strategic and not happenstance [because] it's part of what keeps the cult memories underground'.* [Emma]

The former-member may attempt to self-regulate their feelings and manage symptoms of emotional overwhelm and hyper-vigilance:

> *'But then we have to realise that the person emerging is going to harbour quite a bit of vigilance, so the PTSD element is really important in treatment.'* [Emma]

Dissociation is '*compartmentalising certain feelings and thoughts*' [Cheryl]. Others describe the resulting dissociation and confusion after a physically and psychologically abusive cult experience:

> *'I was also very dissociative. I would be walking down the street and kind of go 'where am I', and I would get spacey at times, so I really struggled with dissociation for a long time afterwards.' [Harriet]*

Others suffer high levels of anxiety, hyper-vigilance, and the impact that has on their ability to think:

> *'I couldn't think. My prefrontal lobe thinking was stopped because of all the anxiety I had, my thinking was just cut, just stopped.'* [Nina]

It is possible to confuse dissociation with '*thought-stopping*'. Whilst this may be cognitive dissonance (discussed and defined in Chapter 8:8.5), I suggest it is evidence of the suppression of the authentic-self, as the member suppresses the 'unthinkable thought' and this 'thought-stopping' may mimic dissociation (Jenkinson, 2008) (see

Chapter 8: Phase One). In this case it is distinctly different from dissociation and is part of the confluential trace (see Chapters 7 and 8:8.4). It is, therefore, important for this possibility to be held in mind by former-members and counsellors.

SGAs grow up in an at-risk environment (Kendall, 2006, p. 286) and are at risk of higher levels of dissociation than the general population as measured by 'Trauma Symptomatology – WDS' (Mytton, 2015). There are likely, therefore, to be developmental and attachment traumas (Wilkinson, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006; Herman, 1992; Briere, 1992) as well as other cult related traumas which may result in dissociation and other symptoms. This is because big 'T' traumas include developmental and attachment trauma, as well as life threatening incidents (Wilkinson, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006; Herman, 1992). I suggest that the balance is different between the generations; both suffer trauma, some long-term trauma, and most suffer both big T and little t traumas, but for SGAs the balance is weighed against them (Mytton, 2015; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2006) because attachment trauma is a big T trauma, as is physical, psychological and sexual abuse (Ogden et al., 2006; Briere, 1992).

DSM-V includes dissociation as a result of cultic abuse under the category of 'Other Specified Dissociative Disorders'. I include the full quote because this is an important point for former-members and may support the C-PTSD diagnosis for those adults and children subjected to certain types of long-term abuse including brainwashing, thought-reform, and indoctrination while captive.

> 'This category applies to presentations in which symptoms characteristic of a dissociative disorder that cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning predominate but do not meet the full

> criteria of any disorders in the dissociative disorders diagnostic class'.
>
> This section also includes: 'Identity disturbance due to prolonged and intensive coercive persuasion: Individuals who have been subjected to intense coercive persuasion (e.g., brainwashing, thought-reform, indoctrination while captive, torture, long-term political imprisonment, recruitment by sects/cults or by terror organizations) may present with prolonged changes in, or conscious questioning of, their identity' (APA, 2013, p.306).

Another aspect of dissociation which is referred to is depersonalisation. In psychiatric terms this denotes

> '…an emotional disorder in which there is a loss of contact with one's own personal reality, a derealisation accompanied by feelings of strangeness and an unreality of experience' (Reber and Reber, 2001).

Depersonalisation occurs for some former-members:

> *'Well, weirdly someone had put up on the forum about depersonalisation and we were all experiencing that feeling of being disconnected from the world, all of that kind of stuff.'* [Jane]

In this context depersonalisation is not necessarily related to dissociation and trauma but to ASCs, meditation and chanting practices, or as a result of focussing intensely on the guru. I suggest this evidences that in some cults depersonalisation is induced, rather than it being a disorder as such.

Before concluding this chapter, I discuss and define the term recovery for the purposes of this study. I draw together the literatures and the interview data in this section also.

4.7 – Post-cult – Definition of Recovery

I adopted the term 'recovery' in my research focus and question because it is used in relation to recovery from trauma and in the cultic studies literature (Rothschild, 2010; Langone, 1993; Herman, 1992). The term commonly implies 'getting over' or 'healing from' an abusive experience be that child sexual abuse, rape or other traumatic experience. Whilst the term is used liberally in the literature, it is rarely clearly defined and as a result is loaded with different meanings for different disciplines and practitioners. The term 'enhanced recovery' is adopted in relation to physical health (NHS, 2015b). Recovery is a term applied by Royal College of Psychiatrists in relation to recovery from longer term mental health problems (Wolfson et al., 2009). A definition in relation to mental health is:

> 'A deeply personal, unique process of changing one's attitudes, values, feelings, goals, skills, and/or roles. It is a way of living a satisfying, hopeful and contributing life even with the limitations caused by illness. Recovery involves the development of new meaning and purpose in one's life as one grows beyond the catastrophic effects of mental illness' (Anthony, 1993).

Herman (1992) does not specifically define her use of the term 'recovery' but it is implied, in the usual common sense of the word, that is, recovery from or getting over the ravages of trauma. She articulates the issues that trauma survivors struggle with - the powerlessness, disconnection and terror that psychological and physical captivity can bring (Ibid.). She proposes stages that lead to

'recovery' within a supportive relationship but also adopts the term 'healing' (Ibid. p.73). There are other authors, such as Rothschild (2010) and Ainscough and Toon (2000), who address issues of 'recovery' from child sexual abuse (CSA) without defining it and they also use the term 'overcoming the problems'.

Joseph (2011) calls into question the concept of 'recovery'. He notes that, like a tree blown over by the wind, when the person 'recovers' they simply return to their original state - but research has shown that those that 'recover' from trauma do not benefit from their adversity in the same way as those who grow from it – the term 'posttraumatic growth' (PTG) has been coined to describe this growthful process. The tree bends but changes and 'grows around its injuries' and is 'reconfigured in positive ways in the light of their experiences' (Ibid., p.72). I return to PTG in Chapter 11: Phase Four.

Before defining the term recovery for this study I demonstrate some of the discussion that ensued in interview and the resulting terminology suggested by participants. For some the term implies '*growth*' and '*healing'* and one states:

> *'I think recovery is helpful because people are very down on themselves when they've been wrong, SO wrong, and to think of yourself as a wounded person who is in recovery is, it's a very gentle analogy. You come out wounded but you can be healed and this is what recovery is. You could call it a process of healing.'* [Marjorie]

Others did not regard it as a good word but acknowledge that it is the one that is adopted most frequently in the cultic-studies field and in trauma theory. Whilst being descriptive, the term '*healing*' [Lavinia] has spiritual connotations for some people which may mean it is triggering. One expert therapist sometimes asks her clients what term they prefer and suggested that the term '*personal growth*' [Lavinia]

can be descriptive of the 'recovery' process. One participant suggested that: '*being recovered is not being triggered so much*' [Lavinia] and another that *'recovery is uncovering that authentic-self'* [Nigel] and '*living*' [Emma]. Another suggests it is *'moving towards healing from traumatic and difficult experiences'* [Cheryl] and 'r*ecovery means no longer believing they are right*' [Joe].

> *'For me it's overcoming something that is damaging, and has damaged me. I am overcoming that handicap, that impairment, you know, the damage that the cult has done to me.'* [Matt]

For the purposes of this study I retrospectively define 'recovery', that is, at the end of data analysis, and draw on the data and discussion above.

Recovery from an 'abusive-cult' has three aspects which are that the individual:

- heals from the deleterious effects which are the: traumatic loss of the group; the harmful and hurtful consequences of cultic-abuse; and resulting traumatic stress
- reclaims their autonomy and reconnects [1G] or connects [SGAs] with their authentic-self and
- grows through and in spite of the experience

The term recovery describes a deeply personal, unique, and purposeful process driven by the individual at their pace, acknowledging that it takes time to heal or heal enough to live a satisfying life. It implies movement and moving-on which occurs in Phases. Recovery may be evidenced when triggers are no longer as frequent or are gone altogether. It is not an all or nothing experience and the individual judges for themselves which stage or Phase they are at. It may denote that change has occurred which can result in growth given the right circumstances and environment and at the

right time, when the individual is ready. It can result in posttraumatic growth and being recovered. Recovery is about hope and building resilience, which is the ability to bounce back after a difficult experience. It involves the development of a new life and purpose in life. The term recovery is therefore used in the sense of healing, getting over, and integrating the cult experience, moving on from it, and growing from and out of it, in spite of the cultic-abuse. It also denotes returning to the pre-cult or authentic-self and leaving the cult-identity behind and healing that part of the personality. Recovery can be achieved by following the Phases of Recovery and Growth, the findings of this study, and which are explicated in Chapters 8-11.

I now conclude this chapter.

4.8 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have discussed the relevant debates in the literatures from sociology of religion and clinicians in relation to the category 'Locating the cult experience'. These have included: why people join including a discussion of vulnerability, life transitions, and debates related to conversion and identity change, including the nature of personality and change. I have discussed debates related to life-in, and the relevance of the cult leader; what type of abuse is perpetrated in an abusive-cult. I reported on literatures pertaining to harm caused; the traumatic grief on leaving; the deleterious effects; and posttraumatic stress reactions, post-cult, and include the participant accounts in the latter. I concluded with a definition of recovery by discussing participant accounts and the literatures.

In Chapter 5 I turn to the scientific and technical aspects of this study and address the philosophical underpinnings in which I set out my basis for which the claim of the construction of knowledge is made. I explicate the perspectives that inform this study: constructivist epistemology; ontological position, realism; and theoretical

perspective, interpretivism. In addition, I introduce my chosen methodology, constructivist Grounded Theory.

Chapter 5 – Philosophical and Methodological Underpinnings

5.1 – Introduction - Mapping the Research

In this chapter I set out my basis for which the claim to the construction of knowledge is made; that is, the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of this study. This is in order to justify design choices made, address the focus of this study, and illuminate my position. Crotty (1998) sets out five elements within a structure and provides definitions for mapping research which are:

- epistemology and ontology
- theoretical perspective
- methodology and
- methods

It is necessary to be able to track up and down Crotty's structure (1998, p.4, p.10) and to ensure philosophical congruency between each layer (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011). In order to ensure rigour (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), I make explicit these elements and how they shape the research. The methods operationalised within these philosophical assumptions are elucidated in Chapter 6. I have adopted Crotty's (1998) definitions to ensure clarity of design and terminology.

Different research methodologies are shaped by their philosophical views of the world. My chosen methodology Grounded Theory (GT), is inductive, with analytic strategies that allow for theory to be co-constructed from the data; that is, it is not bowing to 'great men theories' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) or testing a hypothesis. This aspect helped me diminish preconceived ideas and bias (Glaser, 1992, p.25) by concentrating on participant accounts. The concept of theoretical sensitivity allowed for prior knowledge and literature to be applied later, once the participants had spoken (Charmaz, 2014;

Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Glaser, 1978). The research focus was chosen, without leading questions, in order to allow theory to emerge (Artinian et al., 2009; Charmaz, 2003; Glaser, 1992). In order to remain true to myself and ensure philosophical congruence, I adopted Charmaz's Constructivist Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2006; Charmaz, 2003) although there are other versions of GT which inform this study. I elucidate my thinking in relation to choices made below.

I proceed to explicate and discuss each of the elements of the 'structure' as they relate to this study and each other. Each theoretical perspective embodies a certain understanding of what it means to know (epistemology) and what is (ontology) (Crotty, 1998). I elucidate 'epistemology' and 'ontology' before proceeding to 'theoretical perspective' and GT 'methodology'.

5.2 - Epistemology – Constructivist & Ontology - Realism

Crotty places epistemology and ontology at the same level in his structure and so I explore them both together in this section. The philosophical concept of epistemology speaks to the theory of knowledge: how we know what we know, how we come to knowledge, whether that knowledge is 'true' and valid (Newby, 2010) or anecdotal (Norcross, 2014). Ontology is the theory of the study of being, the nature of reality, how we are in the world, what we believe.

My position is that humans – my participants, clients and I - make meaning (van Deurzen, 2006; Perls et al., 1951); meaning is not a given, it is individually constructed within the environment-field. Different cultures make meaning in different ways, as do individuals within those cultures (Goffman, 2014; Lago, 2011; van Deurzen, 2006; Mead, 1943). Regardless of behaviour that can be observed on the 'outside' (objectivity), a great deal will be happening on the 'inside' (subjectivity), affecting thoughts and feelings, influencing

behaviour as the individual holistically makes their own individual meaning of their circumstances (Woldt and Toman, 2005; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997; Perls, 1992). A philosophical position that integrates the 'inside' and the 'outside', the holistic totality of the individual, as adopted in this study, is a 'valid creation of knowledge' (Goldstein in Bowman and Nevis, 2005, p.9). This perspective is encapsulated by a constructivist - as opposed to objectivist - epistemology. Meaning is constructed, it is not viewed as an ultimate 'Truth' to be discovered (Crotty, 1998, p.42). Knowledge and meaningful reality are 'developed and transmitted within an essentially social context' and are therefore contingent on human practices 'being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Ibid., p.42). That is, meaning is socially constructed as the individual interacts with the environment.

That humans construct meaning is compatible with realism on the level of ontology (Figure 4.1) – there is a meaningful reality out there from which meaning can be constructed (Ibid., p.10). Charmaz (2003, p.271) states:

> 'We can claim only to have interpreted 'a' reality, as we [understand] both our own experience and our subjects' portrayals of theirs.'

As I construct meaning and knowledge I understand that my interview data is not an ultimate truth but those participants' truths, their realities, 'a' reality, at that particular moment in time (Crocker and Philippson, 2005). They may construct it, or represent it, differently at a different moment in time. This research is, therefore, a 'snapshot' of a phenomenon in a particular moment. This ontological, existential, 'in the now' (Yontef and Fuhr, 2005), aspect is consistent with my theoretical perspective, interpretivism, and theoretical framework, Gestalt psychotherapy, a humanistic theory which I explicate briefly next.

Humanistic psychology is characterised by a positive view of human potential, behaviour and motivation. Maslow (1972) identified fourteen essential values to the 'ideally good society' and how societies and institutions are organised, and what kind of behaviours they elicit in members is a focus of interest and concern (Harris, 2009). However, Maslow argues that even the best people may behave badly under poor social and institutional conditions (Ibid.). In this research study, how institutions and societies are organised, and 'what kind of behaviours they elicit in their members', is therefore a matter of interest and concern (Harris, 2009). In order to address these issues, humanistic psychology contributes a field theoretical approach. A central concern in Gestalt theory is the relationship between the person and their social environment-field. The term 'gestalt' refers to 'the whole configuration taken together as a unity' (Parlett, 2000, p.17). Gestalt therefore encapsulates a 'unitary' perspective of the individual and that they should not be reduced to component parts, that is, all that is present both in the individual and the environment-field are part of the 'indivisible world of phenomenological experience' and these are viewed in a 'holistic' fashion (Crocker and Philippson, 2005). A central preoccupation, and challenge, is maintaining this 'unitary' view and for the individual to maintain a balance between connecting with others whilst also maintaining a separate identity (Ibid., p.44).

Individual needs are perceived as organising the field, and in healthy situations 'there is reciprocity or mutuality about the relationship between individual needs and environmental demands' (Harris, 2009). When the demands of the environment and the needs of the individual conflict, the individual's needs become compromised. Their 'beliefs about self and other, unresolved emotional processes and intense affective states' affect the person's creative capacity to process subsequent experiences and integrate them into a new sense

of self, and self in relationship (Ibid.). These unresolved needs may result in a 'fixed gestalt' (Clarkson, 1999) because:

> "Objectivity cannot arise in a constraint situation; it arises only in a situation of freedom" (Lewin, 1952, p.77).

I return to Gestalt theory and definitional issues in Chapter 7:7.2.

Gestalt Psychotherapy theory draws on various philosophical sources, including existential phenomenological philosophy (Crocker and Philippson, 2005), which are constructionist in nature (Crotty, 1998, p.61). There are two strands: constructivism which is the meaning making focus of the individual mind (an individualistic understanding); and constructionism which is a collective transmission and generation of meaning (social understanding) (Ibid., p.58). I assume these terms interchangeably as together they reflect the field theoretical position discussed above. This is applicable in cults where meaning is constructed both on an individual and group level (Stein, 2012; Hogg and Vaughan, 2011; Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Abgrall, 2000; Clarkson; 1999; Storr, 1996; Perls et al. 1951). Knowledge gained from this philosophical perspective, nevertheless, accentuates participants' voices and must 'be understood from participants' viewpoints' (Aldiabat and Le Navenec, 2011, p.1071).

I now discuss my theoretical perspective, interpretivism, which is philosophically congruent with constructionism and realism.

5.3 – Theoretical Perspective – Interpretivism

As a researcher and counsellor I believe that individuals are the 'expert' on themselves: their construction of truth, that is, how they see things, is of paramount importance (Morrow, 2005; Morrow and Smith, 1995). Humanistic and existential thinkers view humans

holistically, and medical mental health models that label and categorise people as restrictive (Perls et al., 1951). They seek to avoid these by describing unique processes of behaviour rather than a static diagnosis (van Deurzen, 2006; Mackewn, 2000; Perls et al., 1951). In humanistic models of counselling the individual is seen to be the principal driver of therapeutic change (Cooper, 2011, p.162), 'the expert' on themselves (Mearns et al., 2013; Freeth, 2007; Rogers, 1991; Rogers, 1951). I subscribe to this view and to the individual's need to integrate cognition and emotion in order to be truly rational (Damasio, 2006).

Whilst this is a research study, rather than a therapeutic intervention, these perspectives are relevant; social science and philosophy have been embroiled in long-standing debates which have evolved over the centuries (Fatemi, 2015). These debates culminated in the latter half of the last century to present day with challenge to those whose position states that valid science should apply positivist 'orthodoxy' to social sciences. At the core of this discussion is the nature of 'science' (Hughes and Sharrock, 1997). Positivism sought to apply principles related to the natural, 'hard', sciences (including medical science) to social science (and human processes). Positivism's general opinion of the more qualitative, small scale research studies that developed in opposition to its stance, was that they lacked validity because of their subjectivity (lack of objectivity) and that the researcher was too involved; too much of an insider. These positivist procedures were held to be inadequate in understanding human phenomena by other researchers who suggested they left little or no room for the idea that society and history are human creations (Ibid.) and that individuals interpret and make their own meaning. Social science acknowledges that human beings act with purpose and meaning (Ibid., p.96); this is the interpretivist stance which emerged in contrast to positivism and is apposite to this research study in which the participants share

their individually interpreted view (interpretivism) of what life is like, and what helps, post-cult.

Interpretivism sits at the level of theoretical perspective in Crotty's structure and attempts to understand and explain human and social reality. The interpretivist approach 'looks for culturally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world' (Crotty, 1998, p.67). Whilst interpretivism has become acceptable as a research paradigm, it is, nevertheless, necessary for the interpretivist researcher to be able to stand back enough, to be detached enough and empathic enough (McLeod, 2011; Erskine, 1999), in order that they 'hear' and represent their participants' voices (Creswell, 1998). Human beings can strive for objectivity (where it is necessary) but it will only be achieved to a certain extent and somewhere along an imagined continuum - because we are only human (Crotty, 1998). Because of these debates it is possible to get pulled into rejecting one perspective over the other in a similar manner to the controversies in the 'cult scene', but GT brings together both positivist and interpretivist elements (Charmaz, 2008). The researcher interprets the interview data but the systematic analytic techniques have positivistic elements (see below) which speak to rigour and validity (Charmaz, 2014; Artinian et al., 2009; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). I can subscribe to these varied aspects of GT and the complexities of research, as I believe the different paradigms, when integrated, contribute strategies for more rigorous research. Interpretivist theoretical perspective is philosophically congruent with a constructivist epistemology and realism.

I am informed by perspectives drawn from: my life experience; my cult experience; therapeutic training; humanistic theory, including Person Centred psychotherapy, but more particularly Gestalt psychotherapy. Gestalt is a phenomenological, existential humanistic psychotherapy in which meaning is created and received (Sartre,

2003), constructed and interpreted (Mackewn, 2000; Perls et al., 1951) and is

> '…a way of understanding that focuses upon concrete and specific individuals, situations, and events, seen in their environmental contexts, and attempts to understand the nature of change and how things – particularly living things – come to be as they are and to behave as they do' (Crocker and Philippson, 2005, p.66).

I believe that reality and 'truth' are individually and socially constructed, and that individuals and groups influence one another within the environment-field and that all of us are vulnerable to such influence (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011; Zimbardo, 2007; Cialdini, 2001; Lifton, 1989). This in turn affects our worldview, interpretation and meaning making, and in a thought-reform system, stunts our ability to self-actualise and creatively adjust, and that threatens our very freedom, both psychologically and physically. I define and explicate these issues further in relation to my theoretical framework in Chapter 7.

I now return to the structure and discuss the final element, my chosen methodology, Grounded Theory, and my rationale for this choice.

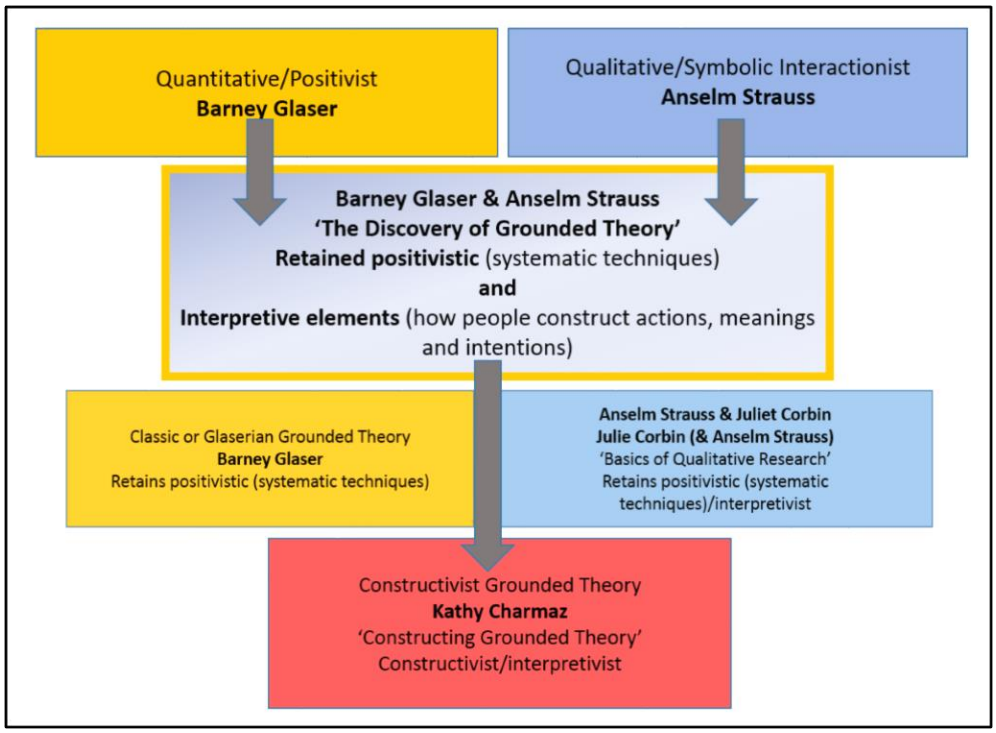
5.4 - Methodology - Grounded Theory

Research and data analysis is 'scientific' when conducted under certain conditions, and produced by a 'technology', a methodology (Glaser and Holton, 2004; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997, p.12), although there is no one 'right way' to conduct research. Although we learn from other research studies and each is unique (Crotty, 1998, p.14), as a novice researcher it made sense to draw on an established methodology. I studied the three main iterations of GT whose authors are: Glaser and Strauss; Strauss and Corbin; and Charmaz and

Bryant. I chose Charmaz's Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2014; Bryant and Charmaz, 2007) because it is philosophically congruent with this study and with me personally. This was not a straightforward decision as these 'versions', or iterations, somewhat complicate the field, and I remain informed by them all as they are interlinked and have evolved from Glaser and Strauss's original findings in 'The Discovery of Grounded Theory' (1967). Glaser came from a quantitative/positivist background and Strauss from a qualitative/Symbolic Interactionist (interpretivist) background and the power of their 'discovery' was that they retained both the positivistic and interpretive elements and created a new paradigm for valid qualitative research (Charmaz, 2014) - classic GT (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Glaser and Strauss eventually split. Strauss joined forces with Corbin and developed a qualitative research paradigm which retained positivistic and systematic analytic techniques, arising from but evolving classic GT. Charmaz joined 'the methodological fray' (Charmaz, 2014, p.xi) proposing a constructivist and interpretivist paradigm which has also been proposed by Bryant (2003). The positivist and interpretivist elements are in all iterations of GT, but the scales tip in the direction of one or the other for the different authors. For example, Glaser tips towards positivistic and Charmaz towards interpretivist and constructionist.

I summarise the history and evolution of GT in a Figure 5.1 (created by me, the author):

Figure 5.1: Summary of History of Grounded Theory [author's]



As I reflected on my positioning, philosophical congruency, and being consistent, I adopted Charmaz's constructivist GT.

I proceed to briefly define and explore the concept of theory from a constructivist and interpretivist GT perspective before proceeding to discuss theoretical sensitivity and rigour, and conclude this chapter.

5.4.1 - What is Theory?

GT has contributed methods for guiding interpretive theoretical practice rather than being a 'blueprint for theoretical products' (Charmaz, 2014, p.233). The definition of 'theory', the product of the research, does not occur in a social vacuum and is influenced by the epistemological underpinnings of the researcher (Ibid., p.228). Charmaz suggests viewing the development of 'theory' on a continuum rather than from either a positivist or interpretivist perspective, in order that the researcher can then clarify where they

stand (Ibid.), and apply the theory flexibly. GT 'theory' therefore contains both positivist and interpretivist elements

> '…because it relies on empirical observations and depends on the researcher's constructions of them' (Ibid.).

Within a positivist epistemology the objective of theory is to explain and predict (Ibid., p.229). Interpretive definitions of theory emphasise interpretation and greater priority is given to abstract understanding than explanation; the researcher's interpretation is the view through which theoretical understanding is gained and 'theory is what makes you remember' (Ibid., p.233). Whilst many avenues of exploration will arise, for pragmatic reasons it is necessary to develop theory around one aspect of the research (Artinian et al., 2009; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this case, the Basic Social Process (BSP), 'freeing the authentic-self' and 'the Phases of Recovery and Growth' from an abusive-cult. The BSP entails

> '…gathering all the data around this basic social process, which is the core category, and emerges from the data; it should not be applied too early or it may 'force the data' (Charmaz, 2006, p.20).

I discuss this further in Chapter 6:6.14-16.

The aim of GT is to generate theory that is grounded in the data. Theory can either be substantive (in a particular discipline or area) or formal (applicable generally) (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This study is substantive in that the area of investigation is a particular population, former cult members. Glaser suggests that substantive theory be developed into a formal theory. Whilst this research will not necessarily develop into a formal theory, further research is recommended to ascertain whether the theory emerging from this

study applies to others who have suffered various similar life events such as:

- domestic violence and psychopathic partner abuse
- psychological imprisonment
- abduction and imprisonment
- human trafficking
- members of right wing gangs and
- former terrorists, amongst others

Whilst generalisability is not a realistic goal of qualitative research, because of the size of the sample, these findings may have applicability to these other similar life events. The success of this outcome is aided by ensuring the sampling is representative of the population being researched (Charmaz, 2006; Newby, 2010) and multiple interviews are required in order to reflect the perspectives of a number of participants; to ensure their concerns are represented (Artinian et al., 2009); and to enhance rigour (Chiovitti and Piran, 2003). These criteria have been met in this study.

Artinian (2009, p.3) articulates the research process from a classic GT perspective:

> 'GT allows the researcher to identify a main concern of a group of subjects and the behaviours they use to resolve their main concern. The researcher then expresses this understanding in a theory named by a carefully chosen word or phrase that captures the subjects' experience. Glaser describes the main concern as the variable that motivates the behaviours that attempt to resolve the main concern.'

I proceed to explore the relevance of prior knowledge and theoretical sensitivity in GT research. I addressed the place of literature in this study in Chapter 1:1.3.

5.4.2 - Theoretical Sensitivity

We all bring our prior knowledge to everything we do, including research. The literature, and therefore 'prior knowledge', can be used as an analytic tool if we are careful to think about it in theoretical terms (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.47); and it can 'sensitise' the researcher to categories arising in data analysis. There is a difference between 'an open mind and an empty head' and the challenge is how we use our existing knowledge and that we do not commit ourselves to a focus prematurely (Dey, 2005, p.63). We need to be aware of our assumptions and be able to 'examine evidence in a new and critical way' (Ibid.). GT is designed to counterbalance this danger. Glaser (1992, p.32) further clarifies this issue of prior knowledge by stating:

> 'When the theory seems sufficiently grounded in a core variable and in an emerging integration of categories and properties, then the researcher may begin to review the literature in the substantive field and relate the literature to his own work in many ways. Thus scholarship in the same area starts after the emerging theory is sufficiently developed so the researcher is firm on his discovery and will not be forced or preconceived by prompting concepts.'

I reflected on the literature from mid-way through data analysis allowing it to contribute to this 'theoretical sensitivity' (Charmaz, 2006) (further discussion Chapters 1:1.3 and 6:6.14). My prior knowledge and experience also contribute because:

> 'The touchstone of one's own experience might be a more valuable indicator of a potentially successful research endeavor than another more abstract source' (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.38).

It is important to maintain a balance between 'objectivity' and 'sensitivity', and in order to make discoveries, both are necessary (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p.42). Objectivity is about a willingness to give voice to the participants, and sensitivity is 'having insight into, and being able to give meaning to, the events and happenings in the data' (Ibid., p.43). Professional experience can also be a source of sensitivity and can enable the researcher to move more quickly because they are familiar with the 'surrounds or events' (Ibid.). It is, nevertheless, important to be objective enough to 'arrive at an impartial and accurate interpretation of events' and sensitive enough to 'perceive the subtle nuances and meanings in the data and to recognize the connections between concepts' (Ibid.).

Strauss and Corbin (Ibid., p.43) developed strategies to help them control the intrusion of bias, which I have remained mindful of throughout. These are to

- think comparatively
- obtain multiple viewpoints of an event
- periodically step back and ask 'what is going on here?'
- maintain an attitude of scepticism and
- follow the research procedures

I am an insider in this respect and know the 'cult scene' well; I have published and spoken at numerous conferences on the subject. As reflected on in Chapter 2, my autobiography, my own process of being a member of and recovering from an abusive-cult has contributed to my knowledge of the field and has allowed me to empathise and establish rapport with my former-member clients - and my participants. As an experienced psychotherapist, I have had to develop sensitivity and empathy within my therapeutic practice, but I have not been complacent nor assumed sensitivity in research is the same; it is a different discipline, and the boundaries are different (McVey et al., 2015; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006). Reflexive bracketing

(Sorsa, et. al., 2015; Ahern, 1999) is an important strategy in ensuring the researcher engages with the participant's reality (Hamill and Sinclair, 2010). I have had to learn to 'bracket' (Creswell, 1998, p.52) myself when I work therapeutically with clients in the service of empathic attunement (Hamill and Sinclair, 2010; Mackewn, 2000). This is in order that I temporarily suspend what I already know (bracketing) and attend to the view and emotion of the other, whilst staying in contact with myself, including my thoughts and feelings (reflexivity) (Etherington, 2004). I developed empathy and sensitivity through training and practice, and have transferred those skills into the study. I do this by listening intently to the participants whilst also holding in mind my own feelings and thoughts. Reflexivity and bracketing are 'fruit from the same tree' (Hamill and Sinclair, 2010) and I have remained committed to both. I discuss these issues further in Chapter 6.

I have, nevertheless, allowed myself to be open minded and challenged by each new situation and new process, learning new skills whilst using whatever skills I have already developed, with awareness. This was a destabilising process, a sort of melting down of myself, and a reforming (Phillips and Pugh, 2000; Sheehy, 1976) which happened many times.

In spite of all these strategies, and my own fears of contamination and 'forcing' the data, Thornberg (2012, p.245) encourages researchers to trust themselves and challenges the notion that we can be truly inductive arguing that it is

> '…unlikely to be a solution to the fear of contamination [...] and [that] forcing is an extreme position that underestimates researchers' ability to reflect upon the links between extant theories and their gathering and data analysis.'

The GT strategies guide the researcher and give them criteria with which to judge their analysis and research study. I discuss these criteria below as I proceed to explore rigour and validity in a GT study, before concluding this chapter.

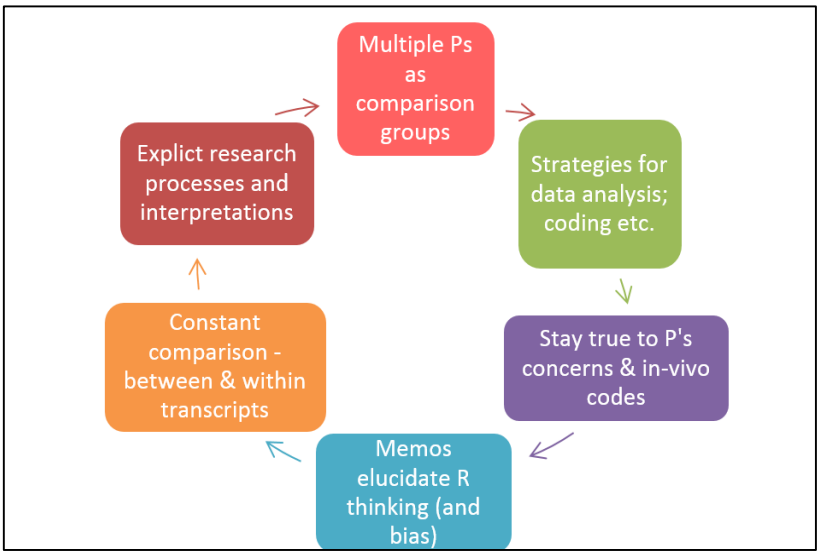
5.4.3 - Rigour in Grounded Theory

Validity is an essential aspect of all research (Newby, 2010) although it is difficult to apply because qualitative research is less easily replicated. I explain how I operationalised this study in Chapter 6 and hope that it is clear enough for it to be replicated, although the resulting interpretation may differ as this study is interpreted through the framework of my sensitising factors and my knowledge of Gestalt and thought-reform.

Rigour is the term used by Glaser and Strauss (1967) to depict validity, and is achieved by following and explicating a systematic approach to the data. Strategies for data analysis (set out in Chapter 6:6.11-16) therefore ensure rigour and validity (Elliott and Jordan, 2010; Chiovitti and Piran, 2003; Glaser, 1992). Charmaz (2014, p.337) speaks of credibility, originality, resonance and usefulness as criteria for evaluating GT. Credibility is a term that relates to 'how vivid and faithful the description of the phenomenon is' (Chiovitti and Piran, 2003) and speaks of the trustworthiness of a study.

I summarise these aspects in Figure 5.2 below; they are adopted from various sources and created by me, the author:

Figure 5.2: Strategies to ensure rigour in analysis [author's]



By way of summary, the quality of the study, and validity, relies on giving voice to participants' perspectives and ensuring that their voices are paramount. This research is inductive, theory is constructed from the data (Glaser, 1978; Glaser and Strauss, 1967), which consists of participant voices. That those voices can be knit together into a higher category and substantive theory will benefit the field and Glaser (2007) notes that the participants' individual voices may disappear into abstract patterns but that the voices of the many are not lost. GT is a praxis approach and I reflect in detail in Chapter 6 on the methods adopted and my learning 'on the job'.

I now conclude this chapter.

5.5 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have made explicit the philosophical underpinnings for this study. I have discussed the basis on which my claim to the construction of knowledge is made. I make clear the perspectives that inform this study: constructivist epistemology; ontological position, realism; and theoretical perspective, interpretivism. In addition, I introduce my chosen methodology, constructivist GT giving a brief

background which leads to a discussion of the concepts of: theory in GT; theoretical sensitivity; and rigour.

In Chapter 6 I address how these philosophical underpinnings were operationalised by setting out the concrete procedures, the methods. I discuss the ethical considerations; sampling and recruitment strategies; and interview style. I reflexively discuss researching sensitive data; researcher positioning; and illuminate the analytic strategies adopted in a reflexive and transparent manner in order that the reader can judge for themselves to what extent I have attended to issues pertaining to rigour and validity.

Chapter 6 – Methods: The Concrete Procedures

> 'Behind the methods sections in research articles is always another story, about the personal struggle, emotions, relationships and moral dilemmas arising in this kind of work' (McLeod, 2011, p.84).

6.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I set out how I operationalised the philosophical and methodological underpinnings outlined in the previous chapter. I make transparent the concrete procedures, the methods employed, to ensure quality and rigour, and illuminate my actions, thinking, and processes. I experienced the 'delayed action learning curve of GT' (Glaser, 1998, p.2) particularly in relation to the enormous amount of data collected. This has meant questioning my decisions, revising my thinking, and revisiting the procedures, data and literatures, in an iterative and reflexive manner - and it is these that I make explicit in this chapter.

The inductive and emergent nature of GT suggested creating an area or focus which drove the design (Newby, 2010; Crotty, 1998, p.2), but precluded creating a list of leading questions early on (Charmaz, 2006). Doing so would be more congruent with a hypothetico-deductive paradigm and could 'force the data' (Artinian et al., 2009; Charmaz, 2006; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The study was narrowed to an original piece of research (Phillips and Pugh, 2000) in an area of professional and personal interest:

> What helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience? An investigation into former-members' experience of recovery post-cult.

My aim was to empirically enquire into what life is like post-cult with a view to creating a substantive theory of facilitative factors that may inform both former-members and therapeutic practice.

In the next section I explore ethical considerations followed by a detailed description of the pilot study in order to illuminate my thinking and learning which in turn impacted on subsequent steps taken. I then proceed to set out sampling and recruitment strategies; and interview as data collection; leading on to practicalities and processes; concluding with a discussion of analytic strategies operationalised.

6.2 - Ethical Considerations

This research was conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham Code of Research Conduct and Ethics (University of Nottingham, 2015 and 2012); BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (BERA, 2011); and psychotherapy profession's Ethical Research Guidelines (UKCP, 2009; Bond, 2006). Ethical approval was granted by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee prior to data collection. I obtained an enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service Check (DBS).

The focus of this study was made clear in the 'Participant Information Sheet' and the 'Participant Consent Form' ('the forms') (Appendix 2 and 3) and I gained informed consent (BERA, 2011; Bond, 2006) before interview. Normal procedures were followed such as storing personal information in accordance with Data Protection Act and adhering to the rules for anonymity, non-traceability and confidentiality (University of Nottingham, 2015). This was achieved by giving all participants a pseudonym and changing or excluding any identifying details. The 'cultic-studies field' is relatively small in both the UK and USA (and worldwide) and I have taken extra care to anonymise participants. I have achieved this by occasionally changing

gender or omitting a pseudonym or identifying details from the full reference, where I judge it has no analytic impact. For example, in some cases rather than including the participant name I have referenced the quote by [P]. Rather than disclosing each former-member's life-history, therefore, I created the two composite life-histories explicated in Chapter 1. I also remained mindful of the danger of exposing the identity of the participant's cult. I have not named any 'cults' because some are litigious and harass (Lalich and Tobias, 2006) and because of the complexities of publicly labelling some groups an 'abusive-cult' as discussed in Chapter 3:3.6 and 7.

A further ethical consideration for this study was that participants are 'survivors of abuse', and classed as 'vulnerable adults' (The Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010), as defined in Chapter 4:4.5. Researching survivor stories is working with 'sensitive data' (University of Nottingham, 2015, p.9) which definition also includes religious opinions - an issue related to all cults represented in this research. I discuss working with sensitive data in more depth in section 6.9 below. Whilst no participant was under the age of 18, it is important, when researching vulnerable adults, that the researcher recognise that participants may experience distress and take the necessary steps to reduce the sense of intrusion, put them at ease or desist from any actions that may cause emotional distress or harm (BERA, 2011). There is, nevertheless, potential for this research to be more helpful than harmful to participants (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006) and even cathartic (Hinsliff-Smith and Spencer, 2016), as I asked their opinions, and gave them opportunity to share their experiences. Some participants verbalised how helpful the interviews had been. Whilst being mindful of both possibilities, the avoidance of harm to participants and myself (Dickson-Swift, et al 2007) was my overriding concern (University of Nottingham, 2015; UKCP, 2009; Bond, 2006). I discuss how I operationalised these aspects in Section 6.9 and 10 below.

I treated participants with respect (BERA, 2011, No. 9) and addressed the inherent power imbalance (University of Nottingham, 2015; UKCP, 2009; Bond, 2006) by offering choices, where possible, evidenced in 6.6 below. Power relations are an ethical concern in relation to data collection in both one-to-one and focus-groups (Wilkinson, 1998, p.112) and I discuss these issues further in section 6.5 below. I adopted an accepting stance in interview (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015; Charmaz, 2014) and thanked each for their generosity in taking part.

The requirement for researcher self-respect (Bond, 2006) is both on the more obvious physical, but also psychological, level. It was important that I ensured I was not harmed by the research process. My study poses particular challenges for me as it is about abuse and I reflect on these in 6.9 and 10 below. In spite of the challenges, and whilst it has not been easy, this research has also proved 'transformational' for me as a researcher (Etherington, 2004, p.15).

In the next section I introduce the pilot study.

6.3 – Pilot Study

My first participant and pilot study, Jane, contacted the charity for former cult members that I coordinate, requesting subsidised counselling. The charity had no funds available and was, therefore, unable to offer Jane a service. I was at the beginning of data collection and was curious to find out what life was like for her as she had recently left and could give an insight into the early stages of life post-cult. She also referred to her experience of seeking counselling post-cult and I was curious to learn more, as former-member clients and the literatures refer to difficulties in relation to accessing counselling. I recognised that her having just left potentially rendered her vulnerable to further manipulation and raised issues in relation to the imbalance of power between us (Wilkinson, 1998). I needed to weigh

up any risks involved (Bond, 2006). Before speaking to Jane about the research I reflected whether recruiting her this way was ethical because she had rung me in need of support. It was imperative that I do no harm nor take advantage (BERA, 2011; Bond, 2006) but neither did I want to be patronising or assume she could not make up her own mind about participating (Etherington, 2004; Stoler, 2002). As this was both a research and clinical ethical dilemma, I consulted with my PhD and clinical supervisors. As a result, I decided to tentatively mention the research, whilst being mindful of the inherent power imbalance (University of Nottingham, 2015; McLeod, 2011; Bond, 2006; Wilkinson, 1998). After speaking in a follow up call, I judged Jane would be able to decline, and cautiously raised the subject. I explained the project and that there was no obligation to take part; that she could withdraw at any time; that declining or withdrawal would have no effect on her approaching the charity or myself in the future; and that if she was agreeable I would conduct the interview at a time and location to suit. She stated she had no problem with taking part and that we could meet at her home (I reflect on safety in section 6.6 below). She said:

> *'I am happy to do anything to raise awareness and put something back.'*

I appreciated this generous spirit, which was encountered in all participants; they had something to contribute and welcomed the opportunity to do so.

In the interview Jane could not remember if she had read the 'Participant Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form' (Appendix 2 and 3), so I read them aloud. I then proceeded with the pilot interview by stating: 'I want to investigate what helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience'. I did not need to elaborate or explain further. This gave me confidence that my focus and question were clear and that I could keep it open and unstructured in

subsequent interviews. I had drafted a list of questions (Charmaz, 2014) in case Jane found it difficult to talk freely but it transpired that the stories 'tumbled out' (Charmaz, 2006, p.29), and, as this was replicated in all interviews, the list was not required.

As a result of the pilot I recognised the need to design a 'Brief Biographical Information Sheet' (BBIS) (Appendix 4) in order to glean some background information about the participants. I requested the following information:

- gender
- age now
- age entered cult
- age left
- name of cult and can it be named in thesis
- in which country they had been a member
- 1G or SGA
- do you regard your cult to be abusive? (with space to say more)
- Likert scale of how abusive the cult was on scale of 1-10 (10 being Jonestown where deaths occurred)

I used a code to identify each participant and stored the BBIS safely and have ensured individuals are not identifiable from this data in the Figures of participants produced herein.

The BBIS was sent out to subsequent participants with the other forms, and not completed until the consent form had been signed. As I was asking participants to entrust me with personal information which might identify them (Data Protection Act, 2016; BERA, 2011) I realised that some may not agree to fill it out. I determined that if anyone raised an issue, I would make it clear that they could refuse without harming our relationship nor their taking part in the research, although none did. The BBIS was important for me to ascertain if they wanted their cult named, should I have decided to do so. Some

wanted their cult named, and others did not and were fearful of disclosure. I weighed up whether the BBIS would influence data collection but judged that it would not; instead, it created a basic data set that gives an overview of participants' profiles. The form did not have any impact on the interviews as far as I can ascertain, and in some cases participants fleshed out life-in the cult. This information was, therefore, used to illuminate some basic facts about participants' backgrounds and contexts, which are set out in Chapter 1: Figure 1.3, and served no other purpose.

I demonstrate further learning from the pilot study throughout this chapter and now turn to sampling and recruitment before proceeding to discuss interview as data collection.

6.4 - Sampling and Recruitment

I did not set out with a particular sample size in mind, although I was guided by a similar qualitative study by Coates (2012b, p.4), whose sample consisted of 23 former NRM members. As it transpired, I did not have any difficulty accessing participants as evidenced below although this aspect of a research study can prove challenging (Affleck, 2005). My primary interest was to hear from former-members who had left a group that they regarded to be an abusive-cult. As previously noted, former-members are generally underrepresented in social science studies (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015; Chryssides and Zeller, 2014; Matthews and Salazar, 2014; Chryssides, 1999; Kendall, 2006) but not all regard their experience to be abusive (Healy, 2010; Dawson, 2003). I was curious to investigate those who did; a sub-set of former-members which narrowed the sample further.

Whilst my theoretical perspective is that participants are the experts on themselves (Fatemi, 2015), they may not be experts on what helps others recover. In order to address this aspect, I invited expert

therapists who were also former-members and who were attending a specialist conference (further information below). The sample is therefore comprised of a mix of expert former-member therapists and non-therapists. It also includes those who had exposure to the anti-cult 'scene' and those who did not. There are 25 x 1G and 4 x SGAs who took part.

The sample was a specialist (closely defined as former-members) (Newby, 2010, p.251), convenience sample of 29, comprised of 18 women and 11 men, who were recruited through a number of avenues:

- I approached 4 participants: Jane (pilot); 2 whom I met at a cultic studies conference; and 1 expert-therapist.

- One offered when I told them about the research study.

- My article in 'Therapy Today Magazine' published by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) (Jenkinson, 2013) included an invitation to take part (Appendix 1). This elicited 3 respondents.

- I visited the USA in November 2013, in order to collect data, and attended a specialist conference in Santa Fe. Attendees were sent an email by the conference organiser (indicated on Figure 6.2 below as 'Conference email') and 10 volunteered. I conducted 2 focus-group interviews, one comprised of 4 and the other 2, and 4 one-to-one interviews.

- Through snowballing (Newby, 2010, p.251): when I was in USA two colleagues in two different locations offered to arrange interviews with their contacts:

    (1) One colleague arranged 1 focus-group interview with 10 participants, of whom 8 have been included. Those excluded are: 1 who took part in the interview but did

not sign their consent form or return it when I later requested a signature; their data was not included; and 1 who took part in the group interview but who withdrew at a later stage and their data was not included. This colleague also arranged 1 one-to-one interview.

(2) One colleague organised 2 one-to-one interviews.

To reiterate, and in order to clarify, I set out those who did not ultimately participate in Figure 6.1 below. Figure 6.2 includes interview style and methods of recruitment.

Figure 6.1: Participants who offered but did not partake

	Recruitment method	Reason for not partaking
1	Therapy Today	Offered too late/completed interviewing
2	Therapy Today	Offered too late/completed interviewing
3	Therapy Today	Offered too late/completed interviewing
4	Potential Client	Offered too late/completed interviewing
5	Ex-Client	R already knew them
6	Colleague	R delayed too long
7	Colleague	No contact details provided
8	Colleague	Withdrew
9	Colleague	Did not sign consent form

Figure 6.2: Methods of Recruitment to Research

	Pseudonym	Interview	Recruitment method	Country
1	Jane	1-1	Approached by R	UK
2	Nigel	1-1	Approached by R	UK
3	Sean	1-1	Approached by R	UK
4	Max	1-1	Approached by R	UK
5	Maribel	1-1	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
6	Gloria	1-1	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
7	Daphne	1-1	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
8	Lavinia	1-1	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
9	Reginald	1-1	Colleague referral	[USA Colorado]
10	Emma	1-1	Colleague referral	[USA Colorado]
11	Matt	1-1	Offered	UK
12	Fred	1-1	Therapy Today	UK
13	Joe	1-1	Therapy Today	UK
14	Marjorie	1-1	Therapy Today	UK
15	Shannon	1-1	Colleague referral	[USA New York]
16	Pete	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
17	Lindsey	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
18	Dolores	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
19	Ginny	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
20	Alan	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
21	Estella	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
22	Raymond	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
23	Joshua	F-G [8]	Colleague/Group Leader	[USA New York]
24	Marietta	F-G [4]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
25	Harriet	F-G [4]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
26	Cheryl	F-G [4]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
27	Nina	F-G [4]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
28	Winnie	F-G [2]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]
29	Dillon	F-G [2]	Conference email	[USA Santa Fe]

In summary, there were 29 individuals: 15 one-to-one and three focus-group interviews comprised of 8, 4 and 2 individuals. When I embarked on this study I did not know how I would access participants (Affleck, 2005) but as it transpired, and is evidenced above, it was not difficult. As I could have interviewed a number more it interests me that so many were prepared to engage. I hypothesise that this bears out what I learned from the analysis - that former-members of an abusive-cult wish to speak out, both about the abuse in cults and what helps post-cult (Coates, 2012b; Dickson-Swift et al., 2006), in part in order to help others.

6.5 – Interview as Data Collection Method

I conducted one interview with each participant, either as a one-to-one or within a focus group. The former were comprised of 15 one-to-one intensive semi-structured interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Charmaz, 2006), similar to the pilot. The length of each varied, the shortest being approximately 50 minutes and the longest approximately 90 minutes. In all the focus-groups the discussion focussed collectively on the research question (Wilkinson, 1998, p.112) and I introduced all by asking the same question: 'what helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience and what is life like post-cult?'. All were aware of this focus because they had received participant forms prior to interview (Appendix 2).

The first focus-group was comprised of 10 members, 5 men and 5 women, of a pre-existing cluster of people (Wilkinson, 1998) in the form of a well-established open support group which had been meeting monthly for many years. This includes those whose data were subsequently excluded as discussed above. The group was scheduled to meet that evening and participants were issued an invitation by the group facilitators to come two hours early if they wanted to contribute to this research study. The purpose of this focus-group, to contribute to my research, was clear and it is unlikely that

it was viewed as part of the ongoing therapeutic work of the group, although it may have been beneficial (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2007). In addition, it was clear that I was not adopting the role of a therapeutic group facilitator, as the facilitators were in the adjoining room, and available for support if necessary.

This focus-group was conducted over 95 minutes and each participant spoke for approximately 10 minutes, although this varied slightly. It transpired that each participant was respectful, and spoke in turn, which sometimes prompted another participant to speak, or to follow on with a particular subject. Focus-groups take many forms (Wilkinson, 1998) and when planning the group, I considered the power dynamics which, if I became overly controlling or directional, could mirror the cult experience, and may result in individuals feeling exploited rather than being given an opportunity to contribute freely to the creation of knowledge. I am referring to the power dynamics that exist in any group (Ibid). In order to ensure I did not repeat this history I decided to allow for the interview process to evolve naturally. This group was well established, which of course meant I was stepping into an already existing group process (Wilkinson, 1998). I recognised that there were certain risks, for example, one participant may have taken over or some may have found it hard to speak up. I was prepared to ensure this did not happen and to be firm if needed, and in some cases I needed to await a natural pause when approximately 10 minutes had passed, thank the participant who was speaking, and invite a new person to speak in order to ensure all participated within the time allotted. This process naturally evolved as I allowed space for the next participant to offer to speak, that is I did not suggest who would speak next, they offered. All were respectful and some nodded in encouragement and at times were verbally encouraging to others. I am experienced at facilitating groups although I remained mindful of these challenges and processes throughout, and experienced no problem with this or subsequent focus-groups.

At the conference in Santa Fe, there was one focus-group of 2 which lasted 54 minutes; the participants were work colleagues and knew each other well. There was also one group of 4 which was comprised of people drawn together specifically for the research (Wilkinson, 1998), who also knew each other in a professional capacity as they were all expert therapists. This lasted 85 minutes and participants mainly took turns, with some discussion. In both these focus-groups the participants respectfully took turns prompting one another as the discussion evolved. The dynamics in these groups were similar to those in the focus group of 10. Individuals shared their own life-histories in a respectful and supportive manner and some conversation and interaction ensued, enriching the data collection. My facilitation was minimal and I did not have to intervene.

In the next sections I make transparent the interview process in relation to: practicalities, and processes. I begin with reflections on practicalities starting with planning and location leading to recording and transcribing. Processes include interview style and questions; I then proceed to explore working with sensitive data and researcher positioning.

6.6 – Practicalities - Planning and Location

Interviews were conducted in the USA and UK. Careful consideration was given to location and power relations in respect to decisions about planning and interview location (Fatemi, 2015; Elwood and Martin, 2010; University of Nottingham, 2015; Wilkinson, 1998). In order to address these, I sought participants' opinions and choice as to interview location. I had no difficulties with arrangements. Each interview was pre-arranged by email. For those participants attending the specialist conference I communicated with them at the conference with regard to venue. As only women offered to partake in one-to-one interviews at this venue I offered them a choice: to conduct the interview in my hotel room or hire a separate meeting room. They

were all comfortable to meet in my hotel room which I made sure was tidy, with all personal effects out of sight. I considered the issue of safety before confirming this strategy (University of Nottingham, 2015 and 2012). I knew of all these participants in a professional capacity, none were clients, all were trusted colleagues, and I could raise no concerns as to their safety or mine. I conducted the two focus-group interviews in the sitting room area of the conference Chair's hotel suite. I was unable to use this room for the other interviews because it was being used for conference business. When I conducted the interviews in the UK these took place in:

- the participant's home (Jane, pilot)
- my consulting room at home and
- in a colleague's consulting room in her home in London

I ensured my husband or colleague was home when conducting the interviews as some participants were unknown to me (University of Nottingham, 2012).

I now proceed to discuss recording and transcribing of interview data.

6.7 – Practicalities - Recording and Transcribing

The interviews were digitally recorded. I copied them onto my laptop which is password protected and encrypted, and a CD, which is stored in a lockable filing cabinet in my home office as stated in the Participant Consent Form (Appendix 3). Because I was travelling whilst conducting interviews I kept the PhD laptop, CDs and the Digital Recorder in my hand luggage with me as much as was practically possible.

I transcribed the whole interview in order to acknowledge the full voice of the participants and in order to respect that each one said what they said for a reason (Kvale, 1996). Accuracy of transcription is necessary for rigour and validity (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). The

recordings were exceptionally clear and I am an experienced audio typist and accurate and speedy touch typist. I transcribed all interviews myself using a transcription foot pedal which saved time and made the process somewhat easier (further reflection in 6.9 below). In addition, I listened to the recordings against the transcript a number of times. Whilst I did my utmost to be accurate to what I was hearing, the transcriptions are nevertheless an 'interpretation' by myself as the transcriber (Ibid.) and some of the original meaning or emotion may be lost. I left in hesitations which I signified by '…' or '…err' or '(silence)' or '(long silence) or '(crying)'.

In addition, I sent the transcripts to the participants to check in order to ensure accuracy and give them an opportunity to change or elaborate. This strategy contributes to rigour (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015). The participant from the group interview who eventually withdrew was the only one with a query, which was about my use of participant codes, such as 'UK.A1', rather than pseudonyms. At their request, I deleted their interview, and the data was not included. I also changed all codes to pseudonyms at that stage as I judged this to be a good idea and would sound more personable.

After checking each transcript, I sent an initial email to the relevant participant with an encryption code. I sent a separate email with the encrypted transcript document attached. One participant requested that I send the encrypted transcript to my colleague who had introduced us, as their cult was particularly threatening. I exercised caution because confidentiality cannot be guaranteed when using email or the internet (BACP, 2005). For the focus-group interview participants, I asked if they wanted me to send the whole interview or just their contribution, and as most requested it be broken down, I complied and sent each section separately.

In the next section I explore processes and discuss interview style, theoretical sampling and saturation.

6.8 – Processes - Interview Style, Theoretical Sampling, Saturation

Each interview was introduced by stating the overall focus of the study. My opening statement gave participants the space to answer in their own words (Newby, 2010, p.298) and allowed for 'unanticipated statements and stories to emerge' (Charmaz, 2014). If the same question is asked, the same or similar answers will occur across interviews. As I wanted to create dense themes from former-members' reports and create an emerging substantive theory, this strategy was effective and resulted in detailed, focussed and full description of the participants' concerns (Charmaz, 2006, p.14 & p.26) and rich, thick description (Newby, 2010, p.340; Denzin and Lincoln, 2003). Thick description contributes to external validity and reveals the contexts and structures of participants' lives alongside their views, feelings, intentions and actions (Charmaz, 2006, p.14; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Geertz, 1973; Ryle, 1949). The interview is the 'raw material' and the quality of the original interview is 'decisive for the quality of the later analysis, verification and reporting of the interview' (Kvale, 1996, p.144).

Whilst I was concerned not to influence the direction of the interviews, I asked additional questions, based on points raised by the participant and when I judged these needed to be clarified. I occasionally 'reflected back' in the interviews; this is an aspect of empathy (Hamill and Sinclair, 2010; Egan, 1990) where I 'translated' my understanding of what was said by the participant in order to clarify I had accurately understood. This allowed the participant to correct me, to clarify and elaborate on their thinking in-interview. My reasons for adopting this strategy were twofold: to ensure my understanding in the moment; and to eliminate the need to approach the participant at a later date, as time restrictions precluded another period of data collection. Subsequent questions were, therefore, based on

categories emerging in-interview or from previous interviews. Because I conducted 8 one-to-one interviews, and the 3 focus-groups, over a period of a month, I was unable to formally analyse the transcripts until later, although I wrote memos and noted categories arising.

In each succeeding interview I asked questions grounded in categories arising from previous interviews, which strategy is based on the GT method of 'theoretical sampling' (Charmaz, 2014, p.28; Glaser, 1978). This allowed me to collect data which in turn informed subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 2014; Bryman, 2012, p.419). Theoretical sampling is when the researcher seeks pertinent data to develop the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014, p.193). The main purpose of theoretical sampling is to elaborate and refine the categories constituting the developing theory, and is conducted in order 'to develop the properties of your categories until no new properties emerge' (Ibid.). Categories are 'saturated' when data gathering no longer 'sparks new theoretical insights', nor reveals 'new properties of these core theoretical categories' (Ibid., p.213), that is, when the data tells us nothing new. Saturation is, therefore, not necessarily reliant on sample size.

In the next section I reflect on researching with sensitive data.

6.9 - Processes - Sensitive Data

All the interviews contained traumatic and difficult material and because of the sensitive nature of the research, I was reluctant to probe too deeply, which is an ethical issue related to do no harm and sensitivity (BERA, 2011; Bond, 2006). Whilst most participants had been out of the cult for some time, this did not mean they were necessarily any less sensitive; a number expressed distress in interview, and one said he was still '*quite raw*' [Joe] a decade after leaving. In order to ensure participants' psychological safety, I was

'myself', that is, natural, relaxed, friendly, and endeavoured to ensure they were not re-traumatised, and were left at the end 'grounded' and at ease (Rothschild, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006; Charmaz, 2006). That is, I adopted a relational interview style (Birch and Miller, 2000). A trustworthy relationship is an antidote to trauma (Herman, 1992) and I speculated that this might mitigate the potentially traumatic and overwhelming nature of the interviews. That is not to say that I was offering 'therapy' in the interview (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006) but the subject matter required my being extremely sensitive to the participant's feelings and overwhelm. This entailed my establishing rapid trust and rapport (Brinkman and Kvale, 2015; Given, 2008) as well as providing psychological 'contact' (Clarkson, 1999). I hypothesise that because some participants had either met me at a previous conference, heard me speak, or read my writings, they may have had a level of trust in me before we met. They also knew my status as a former-member and some said that this shared history helped them to trust I would understand.

> *'[...] I don't think I would have felt comfortable talking to anybody...I wanted to speak to YOU about it because...you would, your empathy would be very advanced, yeah, something about somebody who'd been through it.'* [Matt]

I observed a number of participants feeling overwhelmed, evidenced by tears and silences, and reminded them they could take a break or end the interview (University of Nottingham, 2015; Guillemin and Heggen, 2009; Bond, 2006; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004). None accepted this offer. I remained mindful of balancing these 'ethics in practice' (McLeod, 2011; Guillemin and Gillam, 2004), between respecting the participants' resilience (Etherington, 2004) and 'do no harm', and erred on the side of caution (Bond, 2006). My own life-history did not arise in any interview, all of which remained focussed on participants, although there is a danger of being pulled in to

disclosing too much when researching traumatic and sensitive data (Dickson-Swift, 2007; Herman, 1992).

For some the interview process was revelatory and one participant realised he still kept links with the cult '*because I might need them in the future*' [Matt]. This was highly impactful as he discussed finally breaking the bonds (I did not offer any opinion on this). Fred felt that taking part in the interview was the final stage in his '*cleansing process*' evidencing how partaking in research can be part of recovery and aid reflection. A number of participants expressed that the experience of taking part in this research had been cathartic (Hinsliff-Smith and Spencer, 2015) and in some respects helpful for them (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Birch and Miller, 2000) and one said in a subsequent email:

> '*I can't tell you how good it feels to know that I have been of some help*'. [Jane]

Birch and Miller (2000, p.200) reflect on therapeutic interviewing and adopt the term to represent a process by which the individual comes to understand their experience in a different way. This reflection and increased understanding was reported to occur in the interviews for some, although that was not my intention or motivation.

I offered support by way of debrief following the interview and the offer of further debrief on the telephone later should they have a delayed reaction. I considered offering participants the name and address of another counsellor but did not pursue this as it could result in them having to pay and the need did not arise. If the need had arisen, I would have discussed the options.

In the next section I discuss researcher positioning and emotional impact.

6.10 – Processes - Researcher Positioning

In this section I discuss the interview process from my perspective and the resulting emotional impact. As an interpretivist researcher it is incumbent on me to examine the emotional challenges involved in conducting this study (Kleinman and Copp, 1993). The participants' experiences were challenging to listen to, and some left me feeling literally shaken, both in the interview and after transcription (Coles and Mudaly, 2010; Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). It is easier for me in a therapeutic setting because I am there to support the individual to process their experience whereas in the interview they were reporting to me, without expectation of my therapeutic input or any resolution (Dickson-Swift et al., 2006; Clarkson, 1995). It was difficult to ascertain beforehand the full impact this research would have on me. I knew enough about trauma and working with trauma to know there would be challenges; and whilst I could guess some of the former-member stories that would be reported, a full assessment was difficult because I did not know what exact experiences participants would disclose (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). I was aware it would have an effect and was prepared to take that risk. There was no way of eliminating this aspect if the research was to get done.

There were times when transcribing that I was overwhelmed with emotion and had to stop and cry (Coles and Mudaly, 2010), or rant and rave, about what I was hearing. For example, the impact from Shannon's interview was the most visceral, echoing in my body, and awakening my own body memories (Rothschild, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006) of physical abuse.

> *'[They] used to punish and abuse people, and how [they] would restrain them on the floor [and the resulting] bruises, the cuts, the bleeding and and starvation. [...] And I had my voice completely taken away from me - and punished for it.'*

The identification with Shannon's feelings and experience raised awareness of my own feelings, once again, including how hidden the abusive-cult experience can be, even from myself, at times. It was, therefore, important for me to express somewhere how I felt about the varying degrees of impact and to accept and express when my own history was 'triggered' (Ogden et al., 2006; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). This was in order to determine what feelings were being elicited in me by the participant's traumatic story and could therefore be considered, not (only) as potential bias but analytic information. This is variously referred to as 'traumatic countertransference', 'vicarious traumatisation' or 'secondary trauma' and is concerned with the listener's (whether manager, therapist, researcher etc.) feelings in response to the other's story (Coles and Mudaly, 2010; Dickson-Swift, et al., 2007; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995; Herman, 1992). The rapport and empathy established with the participants is the conduit through which the emotional and mental effects of the trauma are communicated (Wilson and Thomas, 2004; Herman, 1992). As I look back at the process I can see that the impact of the traumatic aspects often expressed itself in overwhelm about the PhD process, lack of confidence, and stress and panic about whether I was 'getting it right', rather than it being obviously and directly related to cult memories (Ogden, et. al, 2006).

I am familiar with monitoring the emotional, physical and psychological impact in the therapeutic encounter. I considered that my own cult history may be (or probably would be) triggered as I know these triggers can occur seemingly randomly at times (Rothschild, 2010; Ogden et al., 2006; Herman, 1992). In the pilot interview I was pleasantly surprised to find that this did not happen and I found the interview enlivening, fascinating and I achieved a strong rapport with Jane. Whilst this was replicated in subsequent interviews, I nevertheless remained open to the impact conducting this research had on me, which varied participant to participant. There

was a cumulative effect as I conducted and transcribed 15 interviews in a short space of time. I hypothesise that experiences that were closest to my own cult experiences had the most emotional impact although Dickson-Swift's (2007) research investigating the challenges qualitative researchers face conducting sensitive research reports that it was not uncommon for the researcher's feelings to parallel those of the participants (which is vicarious trauma discussed above). I have taken account of these aspects, as much as I have been aware, whilst interviewing and analysing the data, in memos and by journaling and through support and reflect below on the strategies I adopted in order to cope.

Qualitative researchers hear mixed messages about emotion in research (Kleinman and Copp, 1993, p.2). In spite of the discourse related to objectivity, it is clear to me that lack of emotional awareness throughout the study would result in my being more influenced by emotion not less, and that 'ignoring the interplay of person and research ultimately has analytic cost' (Ibid., p.1) - and personal cost (Dickson-Swift, et al., 2007). Emotions that are out of awareness may therefore unconsciously affect the analysis. To strive to be emotionless is more redolent of a positivist stance to the data (Etherington, 2004; Kleinman and Copp, 1993). This does not mean that anything goes, but attending to emotions goes some way to counteract the danger of skewing the data and resulting bias. It also ensures that I care for myself, which is an ethical issue related to self-respect (McGarry, 2010). It is natural for me, as a therapist, to explore my feelings, not to suppress and dissociate myself from them, although I acknowledge this is a challenge, that I am only human (Crotty, 1998); I can only achieve this to the best of my ability, particularly given the additional challenge of shared abusive experiences.

Coles and Mudaly (2010), clinicians who undertake research with vulnerable survivors of child sexual abuse, and who are not survivors

themselves, state that 'it is probably inevitable that (the researcher) would be affected by this exposure to the trauma material' and refer to this as 'researcher trauma'. They note that researching violence and abuse is challenging, but essential, as

> '…survivors need to provide critical information on their life-worlds and what they believe is in their best interests' (Ibid., p.57).

Glaser (1978) notes the challenge of conducting research, the depressive process, that self-pacing is a personal, individual journey and that research takes time.

Transcribing was challenging, tedious, long winded and exhausting. The material, whilst fascinating, was overwhelming at times. This was also true with data analysis. I found myself procrastinating and feeling overwhelmed, nauseous, and irritable (Coles and Mudaly, 2010; Herman, 2010; Kleinman and Copp, 1993) as well as moving categories around NVivo10 software (further reflection below), rather than analysing them (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). In order to mitigate these effects of the research I instigated the following strategies:

- pacing myself - I work better earlier in the day
- alternating typing transcripts with household tasks, or other research related tasks
- talking to my husband and clinical supervisor about my feelings
- journaling
- memo writing
- taking an accepting stance to my feelings rather than trying to suppress them
- eating well, attending Pilates and walking daily
- relaxing and reading a novel at bedtime
- seeing friends and family

- temporarily closing my counselling practice in the final months of the study

These strategies have gone some way to mitigating the effects of the traumatic accounts I have been interacting with. For example, whilst writing up I went through a particularly difficult time when I didn't seem to understand the process required and where I felt I was living in a liminal space between the past and the present, the beatings (feeling exposed and I will be punished if I get it 'wrong' and fail) and the data (abuse and trauma). I pressed on and I began to break through the painful feelings I was having to tolerate in order to continue. I am not fully cognisant of how or why this came about, but somehow I was back to myself, Gillie, as I know myself today. I also found that if I turned my attention to theory, methodological issues, the literatures, I could 'ground' myself once more. Once I began to connect again with my confident self I began to enjoy writing up the analysis, although never fully moved away from the fear of getting it 'wrong' or not representing participants' voices.

In the next section I explore analytic strategies operationalised in this study. I explore coding strategies, including utilising computer software, NVivo10, and evidence how the overarching category, the Basic Social Process, emerged before concluding the chapter.

6.11 – Generating Theory – Coding Strategies and Software

In this section I make visible the data analysis procedures operationalised in this research study. As I used computer software, NVivo10, as a data analysis and sorting tool, I explore both coding strategies and the software in this same section.

Charmaz does not specifically address the issue of utilising software in GT studies in her latest book (2014). Strauss and Corbin (2008,

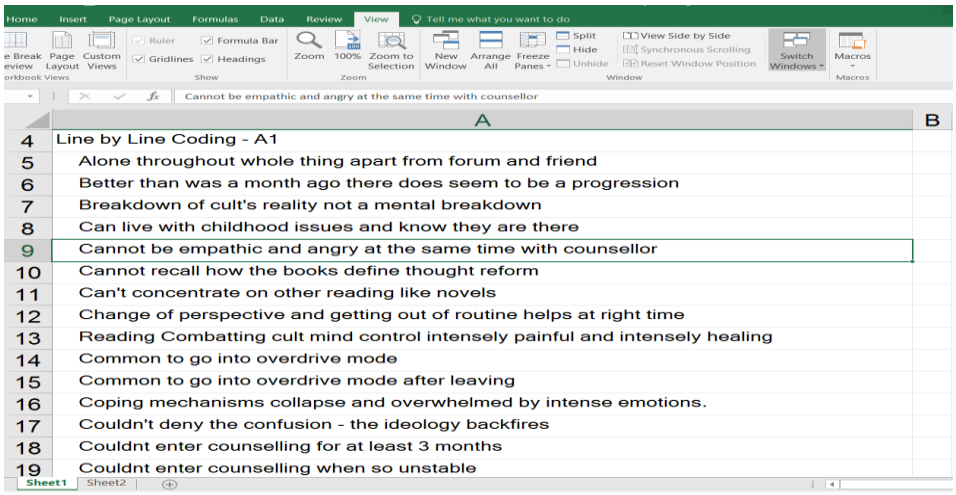
p.314) note the ability of computer programs for qualitative analysis to

> '…augment the human mind by doing a lot of the detailed and tedious work involved in many endeavours, thus freeing up the user to be creative and thoughtful.'

I utilised NVivo10 software to: store the large amount of interview data, the transcripts; and as a flexible tool for data analysis. Specifically, it aided the analytic process because I could file and sort the codes as they became increasingly refined and theoretical (see below). The software is complex and time consuming to learn but worth the effort as it is flexible and versatile (Crowley et al., 2002) and works well within a qualitative inductive paradigm (Richards and Richards, 1994). Codes are referred to as 'nodes' within NVivo10 but I refer to these as codes and categories herein, for clarity.

As I conducted 'initial coding', line-by-line, I created codes adopting the participants' own words ('in vivo coding') in order to ensure accuracy and in the knowledge that these could easily change, move, or be reorganised at any time. I did not, therefore, use pre-existing theories or literature (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser, 1978) at this early stage of data analysis. In the initial coding stage, for example, I analysed the pilot interview with Jane, line-by-line (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) and saved this data in its raw state (a long list of in vivo codes). This strategy was in order to immerse myself in the data and to familiarise and sensitise myself to theoretical ideas and themes emerging (inductive) (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Charmaz, 2014). I illustrate these in Figure 6.2 below, which is a screen print picture taken of the codes from Jane's interview exported from NVivo10 into an Excel file.

Figure 6.3: Line-by-Line analysis



	A	B
4	Line by Line Coding - A1	
5	Alone throughout whole thing apart from forum and friend	
6	Better than was a month ago there does seem to be a progression	
7	Breakdown of cult's reality not a mental breakdown	
8	Can live with childhood issues and know they are there	
9	Cannot be empathic and angry at the same time with counsellor	
10	Cannot recall how the books define thought reform	
11	Can't concentrate on other reading like novels	
12	Change of perspective and getting out of routine helps at right time	
13	Reading Combatting cult mind control intensely painful and intensely healing	
14	Common to go into overdrive mode	
15	Common to go into overdrive mode after leaving	
16	Coping mechanisms collapse and overwhelmed by intense emotions.	
17	Couldn't deny the confusion - the ideology backfires	
18	Couldnt enter counselling for at least 3 months	
19	Couldnt enter counselling when so unstable	

As I transcribed and checked the transcription against the audio of Jane's, and did the same with three further interviews [First: Maribel] [Second: Sean] [Third: Lavinia], I analysed each line-by-line and categories began to emerge across these interviews. I created codes, signifying themes, which were the emerging categories.

Even at an early stage of line-by-line analysis, it became apparent that other themes were arising across transcripts, which, when compared and contrasted (Charmaz, 2014) with other interview data, became some of the core categories that emerged and are represented in the Phases of Recovery, evidenced below and Chapters 7-11. For example, one set was coded 'Locating the cult experience' set out in Chapter 1, and another 'unmasking the cult leader'. This category highlighted one of the main factors that help recovery at the leaving stage, and is evidenced in Chapter 8. I include an early memo written when exploring ideas, in order to illustrate my thinking. I had illustrated it with a picture of Saddam Hussein's statue being pulled down (Rebours, 2010).

Figure 6.4: Early memo for 'Unmasking the cult leader'

First major category: Unmasking the Cult Leader



Picture Reference: [i]

Summary of 'unmasking the cult leader' category
Cult leader's promise much to their followers and view themselves and their group as the source of miracles [Sean], healing, salvation [Nigel], mental health [Maribel] and enlightenment [Lavinia] (amongst other things). These promises apply to the followers, potential followers, and wider society. I will refer to these promises as *'transformations'* [Lavinia]. These promises are often exclusive to members of the group and exclude other sources of *transformation* and other sources of information. The *transformations* offered are unrealistically quick and members move from one state (NON-MEMBER/NON-BELIEVER) to another (MEMBER/BELIEVER) quickly which is one reason individuals may buy into the cult ideology (as opposed to other more mainstream *transformations* where the leaders do not offer such speedy and unrealistic promises of a 'quick fix' *transformation* sought for and assumed to be possible in a 'quick fix' society?). IS THIS CONJECTURE OR FROM THE DATA? The belief that the leader can heal and achieve these transformations in others is powerful as is the allied belief in the leader's miraculous powers. *'Once you see something that's miraculous, you buy into every other thing, very, very easily…It just reinforces the magic and the power, it's a very scary power. You don't want to betray that power, or go against that power because, you know for me he was God like…'* [Maribel].

Cult leaders market and sell [Lavinia, Sean, Maribel] this *quick fit transformation* [Lavinia] to both unsuspecting potential members and to current cult members who strive to emulate and follow the teachings of, and (if possible) to be close to the cult leader where great power is assumed to be located [Sean]. Being in close proximity to the cult leader or adhering to the philosophy of life and teachings is assumed to speed up this *transformation." I thought he was either brilliant and God like…"* [Nigel]. Because of the promise intrinsic within *transformation* of *'getting rid of me, I was going to be a good person, because the old me was just worthless'* [Sean:386] a great deal is invested in the cult and in the leader as the source of this *'transformation'. 'An aim was to get closer and closer to the Guru'.*

[i] http://www.theguardian.com/gall/0,,933922,00.html – accessed 18.7.14 Internet

Following on from the intense line-by-line analysis I moved on to other transcripts. As it was not possible to continue coding at such a detailed initial level (Charmaz, 2014; Richards, 2014), I moved to focussed coding which went much quicker (Charmaz, 2014) as I checked current codes against the new transcripts and changed, added or moved the current codes that arose from line-by-line coding. This process aided the inductive analytic process as I compared the codes against the transcript and other transcripts (Charmaz, 2014), checking to see if I was accurately representing the participant and if

the code was representative of other participants (see below for how the analysis became more analytical).

As I moved to focussed coding I interpreted meanings, initially bracketing (defined in Chapter 1:1.3) my prior knowledge, and at later stages of analysis using my prior knowledge to 'sensitise' me with caution and reflexivity, leading to an inductive/deductive phase (Charmaz, 2014). I found this challenging because I was afraid to bring my prior knowledge in case it contaminated, but it was not until I began truly accepting myself as part of the process (Charmaz, 2014; Creswell, 1998) that analysis really began to progress – and that occurred at quite a late stage of writing up.

At the focussed coding stage, I began naming codes and filing them in with other codes that had similar meaning. As themes become clear across transcripts further 'codes' were then 'filed' alongside other similar 'codes' as sub-codes (or 'child nodes' in NVivo10) or the section of the transcript merged with an existing code, depending on whether it seemed exactly the same as the existing code from another interview or signified a similarity and/or difference. This sometimes led to creating a new category. This way the categories and themes built up, one by one, based on the interview data. This strategy also facilitated constant comparison (Charmaz, 2014) between data within a transcript and between transcripts. I remained conscious of attending to fit and relevance and made myself familiar with the unfamiliar in the data (Charmaz, 2014, p.133). NVivo10 is, therefore, an analytic tool that can ensure validity, accuracy and rigour (Richards, 2014), whilst at the same time allowing for the creativity and sensitivity of the researcher as the one handling the software.

In the later stages of theory development, I moved away from what felt at times like the constraints of the software, and being on the computer, and made annotations on some of the printed transcripts. In addition, I used a 'magic whiteboard' - white sheets that stick to

the wall or a mirror, using static, and can be written on with dry erase markers. This was in order to creatively 'play' with ideas and diagrams. This aided my analytic and creative thinking as I could change the names of categories, rub it clean, or preserve it. I took photos with my mobile phone, to preserve the process at different stages, as illustrated in Figure 6.5.

Figure 6.5: Creative thinking using 'magic whiteboard'

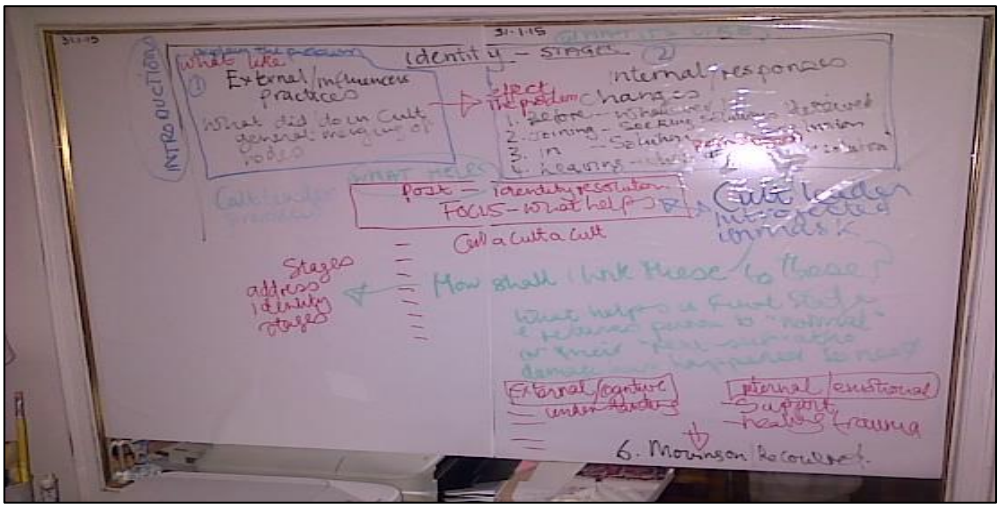
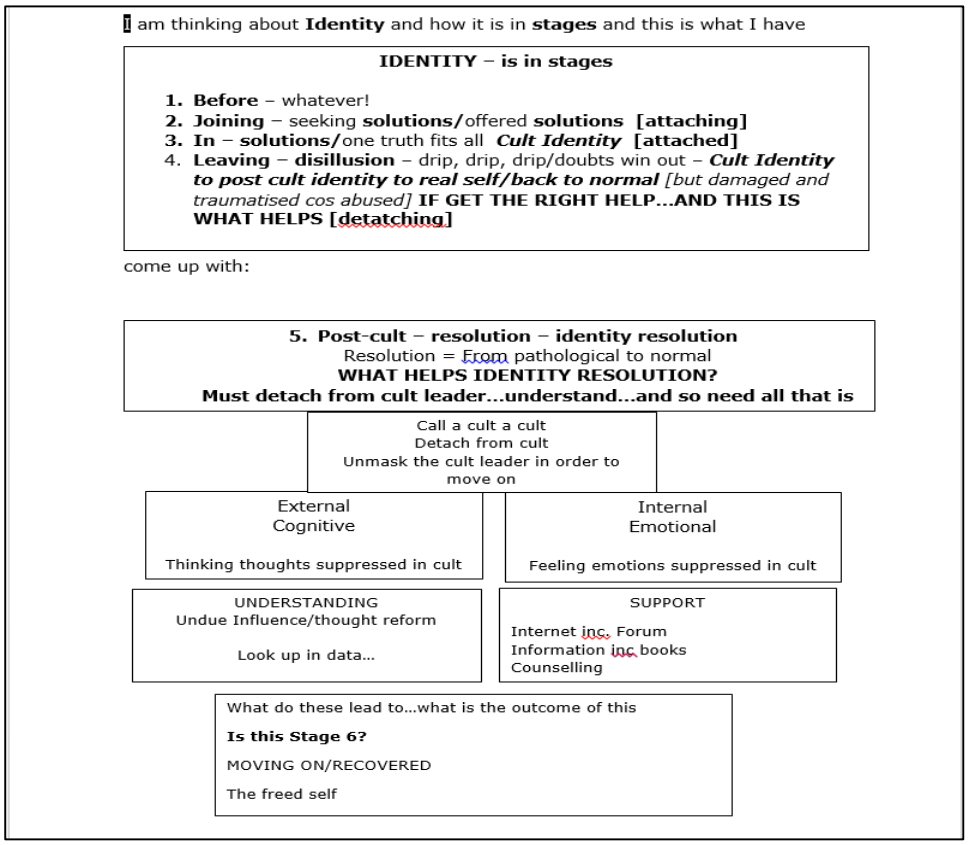


Figure 6.6 is an example of a similar version that I typed up indicating some of my early creative analytic ideas.

Figure 6.6: Whiteboard typed up



I am thinking about **Identity** and how it is in **stages** and this is what I have

IDENTITY – is in stages

1. **Before** – whatever!
2. **Joining** – seeking **solutions/**offered **solutions [attaching]**
3. **In** – **solutions/**one truth fits all ***Cult Identity*** **[attached]**
4. **Leaving** – **disillusion** – drip, drip, drip/doubts win out – ***Cult Identity to post cult identity to real self/back to normal*** *[but damaged and traumatised cos abused]* **IF GET THE RIGHT HELP…AND THIS IS WHAT HELPS [detatching]**

come up with:

5. Post-cult – resolution – identity resolution
Resolution = From pathological to normal
WHAT HELPS IDENTITY RESOLUTION?
Must detach from cult leader…understand…and so need all that is

Call a cult a cult
Detach from cult
Unmask the cult leader in order to move on

External
Cognitive

Thinking thoughts suppressed in cult

Internal
Emotional

Feeling emotions suppressed in cult

UNDERSTANDING
Undue Influence/thought reform

Look up in data…

SUPPORT

Internet inc. Forum
Information inc books
Counselling

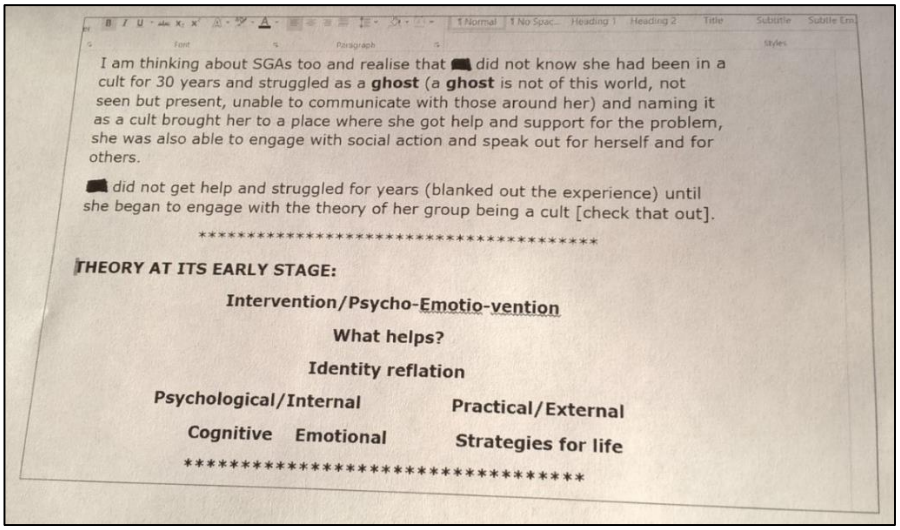
What do these lead to…what is the outcome of this

Is this Stage 6?

MOVING ON/RECOVERED

The freed self

Figure 6.7: Further thinking – early memo and analytic ideas



I am thinking about SGAs too and realise that [redacted] did not know she had been in a cult for 30 years and struggled as a **ghost** *(a* **ghost** *is not of this world, not seen but present, unable to communicate with those around her) and naming it as a cult brought her to a place where she got help and support for the problem, she was also able to engage with social action and speak out for herself and for others.*

[redacted] did not get help and struggled for years (blanked out the experience) until she began to engage with the theory of her group being a cult [check that out].

****

THEORY AT ITS EARLY STAGE:

Intervention/Psycho-Emotio-vention

What helps?

Identity reflation

Psychological/Internal **Practical/External**

Cognitive **Emotional** **Strategies for life**

****

In order to concentrate on the focus of this study and to create relevant theory I had to reduce the data and it is this I explore next.

6.12 - Data Reduction

At the initial coding stage, I did not exclude any part of the transcript or themes arising. Once I had familiarised myself with the initial transcripts I moved to reduce the data (Richards, 2014) and concentrate on 'what helps'. I was able to separate the categories of 'Locating the cult experience', set out in Chapter 1:1.3.

I approached data reduction with caution because I was conscious participants told me what they told me for a reason and I did not want to overlook relevant knowledge embedded in the less obvious statements and sections of transcripts. Nevertheless, in order to complete the analysis, I had to be firm with myself (Richards and Richards, 1994). This process of data reduction became clearer as I became more confident in my categories and in discarding the data that was off-topic (Richards, 2014, p.68). This resulted in my seeing more clearly what was emerging in terms of what life is like and what helps post-cult.

One of the challenges when researching survivor stories is the danger I could be pulled into supporting 'one set of stories over another' or reporting the voices of victims as powerless and incapable of acts of resistance, or as heroic innocents (Etherington, 2004, p.210). This speaks to bias. I addressed this by adopting 'comparative methods', that is comparing interview statements and incidents within the same interview and between different interviews (Charmaz, 2014).

In the next section I discuss my use of memos as data records.

6.13 – Data Records - Memos

Keeping data records through memo writing is another defining property of GT. Memos are researcher notes directly related to an interview or a sequence of events or questions that the researcher records. Charmaz (2014, p.168) gives suggestions as to how to create

memos but stresses these are not prescriptions and at times memos may resemble 'journals' rather than an explication of analytic thought. Memo writing spurs the building of theory as well as theoretical sampling (Ibid., p.199). In the later stages memos are sorted to aid building theory.

Throughout the whole process, and particularly while coding, I wrote memos (see example above) and a personal journal (Ibid., p.133). Memos, and the NVivo10 codes, served to trace the evolution of the development of the theory and are the places where my early analytic ideas and links are recorded (see Figures 6.3 and 6.6 above). Analysis is writing and in GT it is writing memos which are then merged and amended (Ibid.). When I came to writing up I printed all my previous memos which aided my analysis. One illustration of the power of using memos to record ideas is that as I was reflecting on theoretical links to ideas (abduction – see below) and looked back to earlier memos it became clear that the seeds of ideas and categories I have developed were there at the very beginning (e.g. the Phases of Recovery) although I did not recognise their significance at that stage (Ibid.). This was reassuring and built my confidence in the emerging theory.

I now proceed to explore the final stages of analysis including trusting the emerging theory, my experience of writing up, and the development of the basic social process, before concluding the chapter.

6.14 - Trusting in the Emerging Theory

The huge amount of raw data resulted in my often feeling overwhelmed and uncertain as to how to begin, or continue, to tackle the coding task (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). I was reassured, to some extent, by the GT strategies for analysis, for example, line-by-line and focussed coding. These strategies served to familiarise me with the text and helped reassure me when feeling uncertain about

how to proceed. I was challenged by the ambiguity (Charmaz, 2014) of the process and it was a steep learning curve. I was reassured by Charmaz who states that although GT has clear strategies for data analysis they should not be viewed as 'methodological rules, recipes, and requirements' (Ibid.). In retrospect I came to see that slavishly following rules is more aligned to a positivist paradigm and not suited to this project. I have, therefore, had to paddle around in the 'swampy low lands' (Schön, 1992) of research, tolerate ambiguity and grow in confidence, reassured by the knowledge that what I am interpreting and constructing emerges from participants' voices. Charmaz (2014, p.140) is reassuring on this point, noting that:

> 'You are part of your analytic work. You bring your analytic skills and perspectives to bear on the analysis throughout the research process – and that can be a gift.'

As I operationalised inductive exploration, remaining close to the data, I began to move into a deductive process, making connections between other domains of knowledge and the literature. This led to my creatively reflecting on what else might be hidden in the data. This inductive/deductive process led to 'abduction' which entailed me shuttling between 'the domain of observations and the domain of ideas' (Atkinson et al., 2003). Thus, I went beyond the data to the extant literature and my theoretical frameworks, in order to interpret it, using my experience, both as a former-member and a counsellor, to sensitise me to the data. I also used ideas from other domains of knowledge and pre-existing theories as a 'source of scientific creativity' (Thornberg, 2012, p.6). This is exemplified by my mapping Gestalt and thought-reform theories into a theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014, p.310) when finalising analysis and at a late stage of writing up (see below and Chapter 7). I continued to strive to maintain a critical and measured stance to analysis at all times, returning to the data to check out whether my creative ideas were

present therein, and NVivo10 was useful in this process. When approached with care these strategies can lead in unanticipated and exciting directions (Ibid., p.140).

I now illuminate my experience of writing up before addressing the final stage of analysis, developing the basic social process, and concluding this chapter.

6.15 - Writing up

The process of writing up was, at times, exceptionally difficult and messy, especially when I was not articulating and communicating what I saw in the data. This is partly because I was concerned not to contaminate the data and wanted to stick close to participants' statements, not always understanding my part in the analytic process. This was also because I did not want to put a theoretical framework on the data too early, but to allow participants to have a voice, but it was confusing.

Once I was certain that the findings, the Phases, emerged from the data, I was able to go to another layer of analysis, although I realised that, at times, I was still standing on the edge of 'my own stuff', my own experience, and that it was painful to engage with the data and return to the traumatic accounts, yet again, and at a deeper level. I wrote early one morning:

> "I stand on the edge of a dark lake, full of nameless terrors. I have to look, explore, dive in. I am scared, I feel small, what if I'm swallowed up – again? The water is thick, obscured, and full of pain."

I needed to engage with myself again, to memo and journal, seek support, in order that I could support myself to move through the block - in myself.

As I wrote the analysis chapters there came a point where I was less afraid of contaminating the data and it became mine, or ours, and as a result more creative in my hands. I returned to my theoretical framework/s and began to conceptualise the findings in terms of Gestalt theory and Lifton's thought-reform theory which resulted in my mapping these into a framework through which to view the data. Charmaz (Ibid., p.310) articulates this process stating that:

> 'The researcher might balk, then stumble over the theoretical framework. Rather than stumble, use it to provide an anchor for your reader and to demonstrate how your grounded theory refines, extends, challenges or supersedes extant concepts.'

This process resulted in my renaming the categories, to some degree, because I learned in supervision that what I had written was not clear to the reader – I needed to contextualise the data, to elucidate the meanings and tease them out more. This was the last stage of analysis and when I was finally able to complete writing up my thesis. Writing, therefore, became the process by which I refined and distilled the categories.

In the next section I illuminate the final stage of analysis, developing the basic social process before concluding this chapter.

6.16 – Basic Social Process

Recovery from an abusive-cult is evidenced to be a complex, multi-dimensional process over time, necessitating a number of strategies that help; and those strategies vary and are more effective when addressed at certain stages or phases post-cult. My challenge was how to represent this change over time and it became apparent that a GT methodology has a strategy for addressing this, which is the concept of basic social process (BSP) (Charmaz, 2006). A BSP entails gathering all the data around a core category, which in this case is

related to identity and is coded as: 'freeing the authentic-self'. I evidence this category further in Chapter 7.

Whilst all GT has a core category, the BSP accounts for 'two or more clear emergent stages' and integrates the theory. As the relationships between categories increase it renders the theory 'dense and saturated' (Glaser and Holton, 2004). These emergent stages therefore

> '…function as an integrating scheme with which to tie together various sets of conditions, properties, etc. in a manner that allows for a high amount of densification and integration. At the same time, stages allow for conceptual grab and tractability as well as the theoretical tracing of and accounting for change over time' (Ibid.).

Charmaz (2006, p.143) cites a study by Biernacki in which the author

> '…demonstrates the phases in the process and treats them as conceptual categories' [and he arrived at these categories] 'by pulling together processes defined in his codes'.

Biernacki also includes identity transformation within his theory and had to arrive at and explain the core category in order for the 'theory to coalesce' (Ibid., p.143). I have been informed by this strategy and evidence the development of these categories, 'freeing the authentic-self' and the four Phases of Recovery and Growth, within Chapter 7 and the findings, Chapters 8-11.

6.17 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have made transparent the methods adopted for this research study. I have discussed: the ethical considerations;

sampling and recruitment strategies; and interview style adopted. I have discussed researching sensitive data and researcher positioning, and illuminated the analytic strategies adopted, in a reflexive and transparent manner in order that the reader can judge for themselves to what extent I have attended to issues pertaining to rigour and validity.

I proceed to Chapter 7 where I introduce the theoretical framework created for this study, which includes Gestalt theory of self and thought-reform theory. I also introduce the Phases of Recovery and Growth which are then evidenced in Chapters 8-11.

Chapter 7 – Theoretical Framework & Overview of Phases of Recovery and Growth

7.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I move away from the methodological issues and elucidate and apply a theoretical framework through which to view the findings, the Phases of Recovery and Growth (referred to as 'the Phases'), which I introduce by way of an overview at the end of the chapter. Charmaz suggests that the researcher allow their theoretical framework to inform analysis but that it should not, initially, be based upon it (2014, p.310). These concepts should

> '…remain in the background until they become relevant for immediate analytic problems' (Ibid., p.311).

I therefore delayed applying these perspectives until analysis was at a final stage and developed it after I had searched the literatures and whilst writing up; see Chapter 6:6.14-16 for further discussion.

The framework applied emerges from: participant accounts; the literatures; and my own sensitising factors (Ibid.). I apply: Gestalt psychotherapy theory (referred to as Gestalt), because it is congruent with my professional clinical experience and philosophical positioning, as discussed in Chapter 5; and thought-reform theory, which was adopted and integrated, after analysis had begun, and as a result of that which emerged from participant accounts. The rationale for applying and integrating these two paradigms is influenced by Coates's empirical study, which evidences that both 'normal' and 'brainwashing' theories are applicable to former-members:

> 'The findings of this study are in line with both aspects of the brainwashing theories and sociological theories (i.e. 'normal' group dynamics)' (2012a, p.180).

The balance of whether social scientists view the cult issue in terms of 'normal' or 'brainwashing' (thought-reform) theories is evidenced to depend on theoretical perspective and discipline (Ibid.). Sociology veers towards normal (Healy, 2010) and clinical towards both brainwashing and normal as previously evidenced in Chapters 3 and 4. Thought-reform, as defined and applied in this study, is a powerful tool of social influence and is applicable to an abusive-cult (Jenkinson, 2013; Coates, 2012a; Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Zimbardo, 2005; Cialdini, 2001; Martin, 1993a) as evidenced by participant accounts herein, and the empirical data published by Wellspring (Martin et al., 1992). It therefore has utility as a theory through which to understand and view the cult experience (Jenkinson, 2013; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Jenkinson, 2008; Kent, 2008).

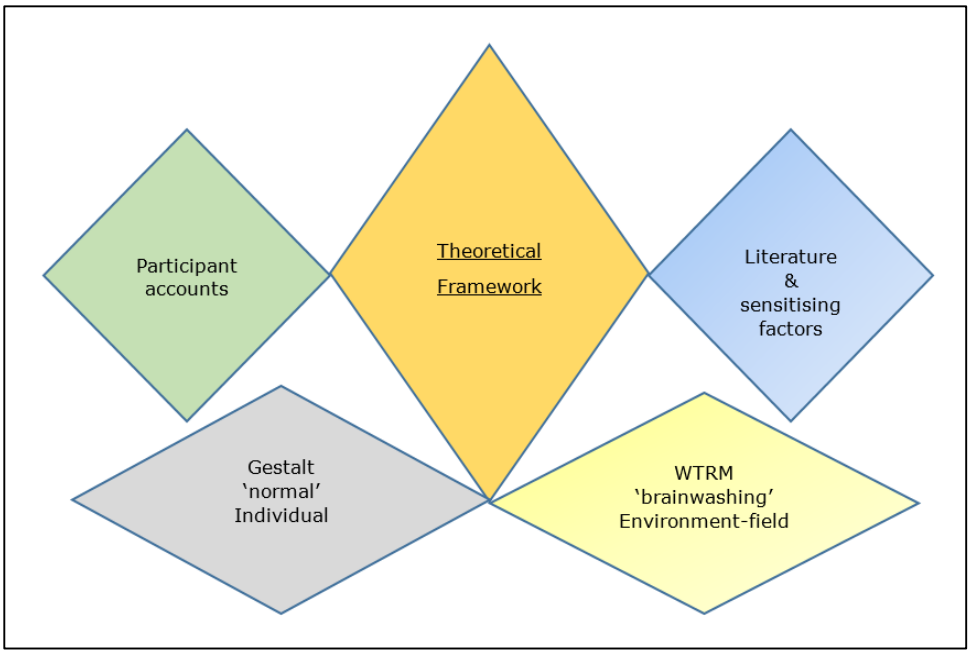
I combine these two paradigms: Gestalt (normal) and thought-reform (brainwashing), and apply both perspectives in this chapter. That is, a 'normal' theory of self, and the psychological mechanisms which, in a free setting, support the individual to live a healthy, self-actualising and growthful life; and a 'brainwashing' model that explains the dynamics of how individuals and groups can influence, control and abuse resulting in conformity, dependency, and a loss of sense of authentic-self (thought-reform).

In addition to thought-reform theory I am informed by:

- Carl Rogers' acknowledgement that in a brainwashing milieu it is possible to reverse the core conditions and disintegrate an individual's personality structure, dissolve their self-confidence and self-concept, and make them dependent on another (Rogers, 1991, p.375) (further discussion in Chapter 3:3).
- Cialdini's findings that influence in the hands of a 'compliance professional' can produce a distinct kind of automatic, mindless compliance that results in the individual saying yes without thinking first (2001, p.x).

I illustrate the sources for my theoretical framework, in Figure 7.1, created by me, the author.

Figure 7.1: Sources for Theoretical Framework



In order to address the brainwashing aspects, I adopt the Wellspring Thought-Reform Model (WTRM) and explore my reasoning further in section 7.3. I conclude this chapter by mapping together these perspectives into a diagram.

In this chapter I therefore make explicit Gestalt and thought-reform theories, in order to illuminate the theoretical framework, contextualise the findings, and define key terms. I apply this theoretical framework to the data analysis in Chapters 8-11.

In the next section I discuss the definition, philosophy and application of Gestalt theory of self.

7.2 – Gestalt Theory of Self and Personality

Gestalt is extremely versatile, and can be adapted to most people in many settings (Mackewn, 2000, p.10). I previously published a

discussion of introjection as an explanation of how the cult pseudo-personality forms (Jenkinson, 2008), based on data that emerged from my Masters research, but it has not been directly applied to cult related recovery issues by other authors, as far as I could ascertain.

In this next section I explore Gestalt theory and apply it to the dynamics in an abusive-cult, drawing on the sources in Figure 7.1 above. I begin this section by giving a brief overview of the Gestalt theory of self and personality as this has an impact on understanding the data. I highlight key terms in bold.

Gestalt conceptualises the individual as comprising of both

- the 'personality function', which is the more stable aspects (personality)
- the 'self', which is an ever changing process (self)

The '**personality**' is the relatively knowable, verbalisable aspect of the individual which can be called up in answer to the question 'who are you?' or 'what are you like?' (Philippson, 2001, p.38). It has values; is autonomous and responsible; and makes commitments and relationships with others. It is assumed, therefore, that there is a core which is characterised by stability and independence (Philippson, 2001, p.2). This is important as participants refer to returning to their '*pre-cult personality*' [Lavinia, Nigel], and Gestalt supports the idea that there is a personality to return to, build on, and grow from post-cult. The related literatures were discussed in Chapter 4:4.3. This concept is also reflected in my definition of 'recovery' in Chapter 4:4.7.

The ever changing '**self**' aspect is not a static entity, but is a 'function of contacting the actual transient present' (Perls, et al., 1951, p.37) and exists 'right now' in the moment (Ibid., p.32), in the here-and-now. The 'authentic-self' is evident when the individual is creatively adjusting in the service of their psychological health and not twisted

against themselves in the service of the cult and the cult leader (a pseudo-personality). I explore these aspects further in relation to the contact cycle below.

'**Contact**' is the term that describes when something is 'taken (literally or metaphorically) across the self's boundary and rendered usable' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.55). For example, when an individual is encouraged by another, if they make 'contact' with this encouragement, and 'take it in', it renders the encouragement 'useful' to them and creates the self at the **contact boundary** between the individual and the environment-field (Philippson, 2001). Ideally, contact is a movement towards that which is healthy, fresh and new (Ibid.).

An important aspect of contact is that it involves a sense of oneself and the other, and is therefore an **acknowledgement of difference** (Perls, 1948) at the contact boundary. Contact is, in an ideal situation, self-regulating and self-protective. The individual protects themself by being aware of and rejecting that which is unhealthy or potentially harmful (Perls et al., 1951, p.276; Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993). Some of the healthy aspects of contact are

- The maintenance of the difference of the person from the environment
- The rejection of danger and toxicity
- Overcoming obstacles that might prevent contact and
- The selection and appropriation of new experiences, such as food, love, learning, intellectual stimulus (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.55).

Within an abusive-cult which is a thought-reform system, it is difficult, if not impossible, to maintain a sense of difference and to reject that which is dangerous and toxic without serious consequences or leaving. I explore this further in the 'confluence' and thought-reform

sections below. In a healthy, free, setting the individual is active and creative in maintaining difference and in deciding what is healthy and this is referred to as 'organismic self-regulation' (Perls, et.al, 1951, p.281); the individual is in touch with what I will refer to as their authentic-self.

This contact, and the ever changing function of the self, is known as '**creative adjustment**' (Ibid.) and is the means by which people grow and change (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.55). Creative adjustment is, therefore, the ability of the healthy, free, individual to creatively meet situations with a willingness to be fluidly responsive to the demands of the situation and be changed by it. After a contactful experience a person has a new, fresh configuration containing aspects of the person they were before making 'contact', and that which they have taken in from the environment, and has, therefore, an enlarged or different sense of themself, to some degree (Ibid.). Creative adjustment is also a recognition that healthy people will do their utmost to adapt to challenging circumstances and survive which fits with the theory of posttraumatic growth demonstrated further in Chapter 11: Phase Four.

7.2.1 - Field theory

Nothing occurs that is exclusively down to either the individual or the environment, and life cannot be lived one without the other. Field theory is a general theoretical outlook which denotes a way of viewing and investigating the interconnected and interactive nature of how humans relate, within the 'entire situation and all that goes on within it' (Parlett and Lee, 2005, p.47; Lewin, 1952). This is referred to as the '**field**' of which the individual is a 'significant component part' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.9). Motivation to change does not, therefore, only occur from 'inside' the individual but 'the whole field determines change, or stasis' (Yontef and Fuhr, 2005, p.84). This is important because the debates in the 'cult wars' have polarised at

times, inferring that the problem is all down to the cult, or all down to the individual. Gestalt theory suggests it is more complex, that it is a result of dynamics within the whole environment-field (Kanter, 1972, p.71). Thought-reform theory supports this thesis; the environment restricts and abuses, providing a rationale for confluence and compliance resulting in the individual eventually betraying themself (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Lalich, 2004; Lifton, 1989).

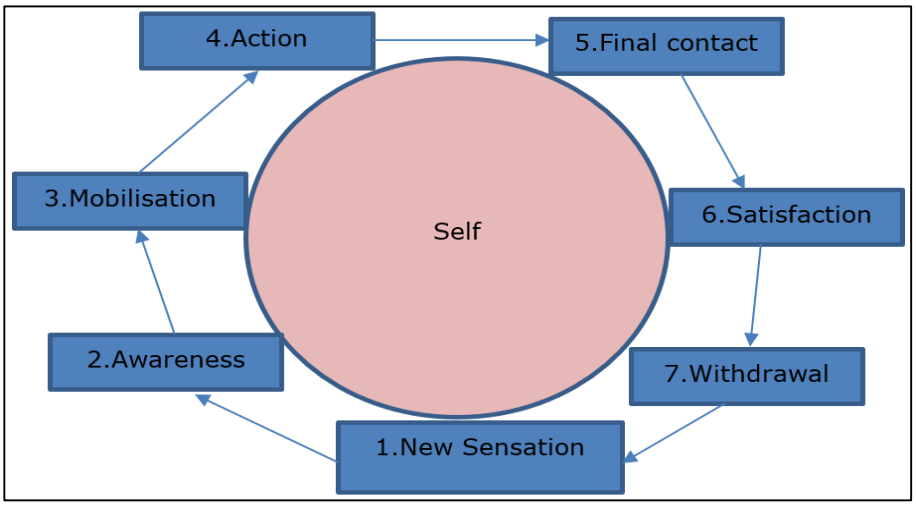
7.2.2 – The Gestalt Contact Cycle

The Gestalt contact cycle is a model that illustrates the **creative adjustments**, that is, the changing flow of contacts between the self and environment-field. This is illustrated by stages of contact and withdrawal in a cycle which are:

1. New sensation
2. Awareness
3. Mobilisation
4. Action
5. Final contact
6. Satisfaction
7. Withdrawal

Figure 7:2 sets out Clarkson's diagram of the healthy Gestalt cycle of 'formation and destruction' (1999, p.33). The whole cycle is completed as the dominant '**figure**' emerges (sensation), claims attention (awareness) and moves round the cycle until it fades into the background, referred to as '**ground**', allowing, in a healthy free setting, for a new 'figure' to emerge from the 'ground' (Ibid., p.31), moment by moment.

Figure 7.2: The cycle of Gestalt formation and destruction



If the cycle is not completed and there is a constant flow of 'unfinished business' (Ibid., p.48), that is, if the individual cannot fully creatively adjust to the circumstances, they become stuck at a point on the cycle (see Figure 3:3 below), in an incomplete or '**fixed-gestalt**' (Ibid., p.49).

> 'The psychological energy of the person becomes bound or repressed out of awareness. This repression then drains away resources available for experiencing life, in its richness in the here-and-now with full psychological and physiological responsiveness.' (Ibid., p.49)

When the individual moves away from fulfilling their natural needs, their ability to self-regulate and self-actualise, and moves to pleasing others, they develop a 'social character' (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007, p.170). That is, they have transformed their basic natural existence into what appears to be genuinely social but is actually a '**pseudosocial** existence' (Ibid.), that is, they are not genuinely being who they are, their authentic-self (Mackewn, 2000, p.27). For example, one participant illustrates how her personality became fixed as she was restricted and squeezed by the thought-reform milieu:

> *'I was pretty squished, kind of like a squeezy ball, when you squeeze it, it's real tight.'* [Daphne]

She is referring to the tight restriction she felt to her sense of self; she was unable to **self-regulate** or creatively adjust. This '*squeezing*' and restriction is evidenced by all participants, to one degree or another, and these aspects are discussed further in Chapter 8 – Phase One: Leaving. This restriction of the member is supported by thought-reform theory explicated below and illustrated in Figure 7.3 below.

The former-member is, therefore, stuck in a '**fixed-gestalt**', in one part of their personality, no longer creatively adjusting, the psychological energy belonging to the authentic-self tied up (Clarkson, 1999, p.49). This leaves room for a pseudo identification (Perls, et.al, 1951), which is not **genuine contact**, and results in the development of a cult-personality, which is a pseudo-personality. The pseudo-personality is that part that has developed in response to the constraints of a thought-reform environment; it superimposes (West and Martin, 1994) or overlays the pre-cult self (Jenkinson, 2008; Singer, 2003a).

> 'Cases of pseudo-identity observed among cult victims are often very clear-cut, classic examples of transformation through deliberately contrived situational forces of a normal individual's personality into that of a different person' (West and Martin, 1994, p.274).

> 'As part of the intense influence and change process in many cults, people take on a new social identity, which may or may not be obvious to an outsider. [...] The group approved behavior is reinforced and reinterpreted as demonstrating the emergence of the

> new person. Members are expected to display this new social identity' (Singer, 2003, p.77).

This then takes precedence over the authentic-self. Lindsey likened her introjected cult-personality (Jenkinson, 2008) to a tumour splitting her personality and blocking contact with her authentic-self, evidenced below under 'introjection'. As the authentic, or pre-cult (1G), self is restricted, it shrinks and the cult-personality expands (Paloutzian et al., 1999; West and Martin, 1994). I suggest these processes are not dissimilar for SGAs who grow up in an environment where the authentic-self, to one degree or another, is stifled by the thought-reform environment-field (Matthews and Salazar, 2014; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2006).

In this next section I return to Gestalt theory and explore the interruptions to contact and how they apply.

7.2.3 - Interruptions to Contact

There are a number of strategies by which individuals **moderate contact** between the self and the environment-field, referred to as '**interruptions to contact**' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993). These are relevant to all humans and each individual develops those that are most prevalent and useful to them and their life experience. These can be operationalised for healthy self-regulation and enhance (when it is safe to do so) or block (when it is not) genuine contact. They also operationalise as 'defences' when the individual perceives danger or toxicity, when there is none. For example, they think someone is angry with them when they are not, and interrupt contact. I discuss this further below.

In a coercive, thought-reform, environment-field, these not only serve to interrupt contact in the normal way, but **transmute from being in the service of the individual**, into strategies which result in the individual acquiescing to the abuse. They therefore become the

means, the mechanisms, by which the individual becomes an interactive part of, and in, the thought-reform environment-field, as the cult draws on and utilises the individual's own psychological functioning. This aligns with Rogers' (1991, p.375) recognition that brainwashing is the 'horrifying reversal' of the normal healthy conditions for transforming individuals, discussed in Chapter 3:3.3.

I list these 'interruptions to contact' and briefly define them all, and illuminate the most pertinent to the interpretation of the data. The interruptions are:

1. Confluence
2. Introjection
3. Projection
4. Retroflection
5. Desensitisation
6. Deflection
7. Egotism

1. Confluence

is a merged state and is a natural by-product of being part of a relationship or group, for example marriage or having a shared goal, such as a singing group (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1999, p.75). It only becomes unhealthy when the individual does not withdraw from the merged state. It occurs, therefore, when two people, or parts of the environment-field, have no boundaries, or **weak boundaries** that flow together. Confluence is an interruption to contact when the individual resists withdrawal and thus avoids or prevents contact.

> 'The chronically confluent person does not know where he ends and others begin' (Ibid.).

Highly confluent people demand likeness and refuse to tolerate differences (Ibid.). This is relevant in a thought-reform environment,

where the individual, to one degree or another, becomes separated from and rejects that which is not relevant to their life in the cult. It is as if two circles are merged, or merged to one degree or another. The individual is not in contact with their authentic-self, and is not allowing themself to contact the sensation and move through to awareness, mobilisation etc., in Figure 7.2 above, and is therefore in a fixed state, a **fixed-gestalt**. Their sensation, instead, arises predominantly from the environment-field, and contact is at the service of the cult, and turned against the authentic-self. I elaborate further below.

In many cases, the cult leader and other members appear loving and apparently accepting, when a potential recruit meets the cult (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Singer, 2003a). In these situations, when there appears to be full, loving contact with strangers, which is established quickly and has the appearance of 'contact', it can be seductive, a form of grooming, seducing the individual into what I will call an '**idealising contact'** (author's own term). It harnesses the individual's idealism, their desire to make the world a better place, and this may be taken advantage of as the individual becomes more deeply involved in the cult. That is, it is a form of contact which is not '**genuine contact**' (author's own term), but based on the potential member's idealised views, including of the cult and leader. For some this may simply be their belief the cult is representing itself in a truthful and honest fashion. This idealising contact results in a loss of boundaries, and interrupts genuine contact, without the individual necessarily being aware of it. This can lead to and result in confluence, which, if they join, they may not fully withdraw from until they leave psychologically, as evidenced in Chapter 8 and discussed below. Idealising contact is, therefore, not contact but a fixed-gestalt resulting in confluence which allows introjects to flow in (Hamilton, 2014).

For a number of participants, the apparent acceptance does not last long and once they become a member, a different set of expectations is imposed, and thought-reform and cultic-abuse ensues. For 1G, as the idealising contact meets the situational forces in the form of thought-reform, and authoritarian, coercive and forceful messages from the cult leader and other members, they begin to restrict the individual systemically, that is the whole system, the whole environment-field, rallies to restrict them. A heavy induction to introjection and confluence ensues (Polster, 1993, p.42), resulting in the individual becoming regressed and dependent (Langone, 1993) (evidenced in Chapter 8). The boundaries between the member and the cult are no longer differentiated and begin to 'flow together' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.74). In addition, abusive trauma 'is by definition an assault on the boundaries – physical, emotional, personal – of the self' (Kepner, 2003, p.65).

Whilst the degree of confluence varied at different times in the participants' membership and varies amongst different participants, in all cases there was an expectation from the cult that membership would be a total commitment, that is, they could not be a member and have divided loyalties. Participants gave their time, resources and selves to the cult – it was a totalist environment (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Taylor, 2004; Lifton, 1989). For some, there was total confluence, with little or no thought of leaving or internal criticism of the group or leader. For others it was partial as they retained some sense of their authentic-self which is evidenced by doubts or an inner dialogue that was critical of the group, evidenced in Chapter 8. Some were able to withhold something of their authentic-self evidenced by making their own choices. For example, Harriet hid a musical instrument, the one small link to her life before and her authentic-self, although she describes how in all other aspects she was confluent. Others gradually became confluent as the expectation of total commitment evolved and was then enforced. For others the

authentic-self begins to re-emerge whilst still a member, to some degree, for example, Leslie (Chapter 1:1.4.1) began to plan his exit over a year.

2. Introjection

consists of the individual taking into their system aspects of the environment-field without assimilating them, that is, these aspects do not become a part of them. Food and chewing is a metaphor for developmental stages, for example, the toothless baby takes in pre-digested food but as they develop they begin to chew over the food, to decide what they like and what they do not (Jenkinson, 2008; Perls et al., 1951). Continuing the analogy, when food is properly chewed, digested and assimilated it becomes part of the individual (Perls, et. al, 1951, p.189). In order to reach this assimilation, food needs to be 'de-structured' and 'restructured' in order for the individual to grow (Perls and Wysong, 1992, p.5). When it sits undigested in the stomach it is usual to want to 'throw it up' and get it out of one's system. But if the individual suppresses that desire and they 'keep it down', it either poisons or ends up in being painfully digested (Ibid.). When what one is taught, such as an ideology, is 'swallowed whole without comprehension', and 'on authority', such as a cult leader's, but used by the individual 'as if it were their own', it is an **introject** (Ibid.). Introjects are therefore taken in on the basis 'of a forced acceptance' and the identification with what is taken in is a 'pseudo-identification' (Ibid.); it is not truly integrated or part of the authentic-self and is not therefore rendered 'useful' to the individual – the self is not created.

Typically, the person who introjects is:

- not in contact with their self
- identifies with the values of the social group
- is easily swayed by authority figures and

- is overwhelmed by environmental forces (Clarkson & Mackewn, 1999, p.72-73)

As the member introjects the negative influences from the thought-reform environment-field, believing themself to be bad, sinful or impure (evidenced below), they **project** their positive aspects on to the cult leader or higher spiritual being which in turn sets up an interdependent relationship (Lifton, 1999; Lichtenberg, 1990). As the confluence opens up the channels for introjection, the facility to 'chew over' what is flowing in becomes weakened and is, in some cases, virtually non-existent. This is '**introjective confluence**' (Perls, et al., 1951, p.191), and is self-perpetuating whilst the leader remains in power and the member remains compliant, suppressing their critical thoughts (Jacobs, 1987). This exacerbates the fixed-gestalt and the psychological restriction of the member and maintains the cult pseudo-personality. I add 'coercive' to Perls's term to indicate the presence of cultic-abuse and thought-reform and refer to this as '**introjective coercive confluence**' (author's own term), evidenced in Chapter 8.

The idealisation of the cult leader is crucial to the evolving introjective coercive confluence, and results in a loss of boundaries as the individual turns their focus in their direction as a god, the answer to their problems etc. (evidenced in Chapter 4:4.4). As the individual introjects the claims made, they merge with the environment (confluence). The introjective coercive confluence is then reinforced by the abusive practices which usually start sometime after they have joined, because the leader would be foolish to reveal this aspect on entry as the member would be more likely to leave.

Perls states that

> '…interpersonal confluence is an instance of trance or hypnosis' (Perls, et al, 1951, p.122).

Hypnosis can be defined as:

> 'A state of consciousness involving focused attention and reduced peripheral awareness characterized by an enhanced capacity for response to suggestion' (APA Division 30 in Eichel, 2016).

The most compelling feature of a hypnotic trance is

> 'the high suggestibility of the subject, who tends to give up control over his or her actions' (Reber and Reber, 2001).

Whilst these issues are complex and there is a good deal of research and disagreement related to the practice of hypnosis (Aguado, 2015; Eichel, 2016), I do not directly refer here to hypnotism as such, but to the trance state induced in confluence. For the purposes of this section, I adopt the simple notion that confluence is a state of trance, and therefore results in the individual becoming highly suggestible which results in them giving up control because the customary internal signposts are undermined (Galanter, 1989b, p.65).

As the individual becomes confluent and loses their boundary they are no longer in touch with their authentic-self, in a trance, they cannot think for themselves, they are in an **altered state**. I suggest the trance state is brought on by the 'introjective coercive confluence' and I refer to this as a '**confluential trance**' (author's own term). In addition, for some, the spiritual practice (such as repetitive singing, meditation, chanting, and drugs in some cases) results in ASCs, which are intensified by the confluential trance state. This exacerbates the loss of contact boundary, as do the introjected beliefs in the cult leader/guru's claims of supernatural power (see thought-reform below). A number of participants experienced ASCs and some suggest they experienced hypnotic induction from the cult leader, evidenced further in Chapter 8:8.7.

Introjection therefore prevents the individual developing their own authentic-self and evolving their own values – they become like a stomach full of undigested food or a house full of someone else's possessions (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993, p.73). Confluence undermines the individual's ability to complete a healthy gestalt cycle. They are split internally between their own authentic desire and the introject (Ibid.). Situations that are conducive to high suggestibility are those where there are high levels of dissociation (split) and low levels of critical thinking (Aguado, 2015, p.51).

The personality, of which there are normally many aspects and facets, many sub-personalities (Rowan, 1990), is, therefore, restricted and reduced to one aspect. As the member cuts off contact with all they have known such as family, friends, career or educational pursuits, and dedicates themself to the cult, their life becomes restricted. This allows for the cult-personality to become predominant and in these circumstances

> *'All those different aspects of oneself are shut down and then the cult personality/identity, which keeps giving oneself the negative messages and that feeds that [...] neural network, is the one that becomes predominant, that's the one that's being fed day in and day out.'* [Lavinia]

> *'I've also thought about the cult identity as a brain tumour requiring very special surgery to remove without hurting my brain [...] You need a proper surgeon or medicine to remove without hurting the host.'* [Lindsey]

Fluidity of relating, change and life transitions are not easily accomplished within the restrictive, coercive and controlling environment of an abusive-cult (Langone, 1993). There is little opportunity for the individual to dislodge or digest the introjects

without leaving; being punished; or becoming psychologically destabilised (Jenkinson, 2008). The challenge is to dislodge and digest these introjects – that is, to free the restricted self and recover, and it is these processes that this study addresses - freeing the authentic-self.

In order to remove introjects the individual does not integrate them, but chews them over and eliminates them, and it is necessary to

> '…become aware of what is not truly yours, to acquire a selective and critical attitude toward what is offered you, and above all, to develop the ability to "bite off" and "chew" experience so as to extract its healthy nourishment' (Perls et al., 1951, p.190).

3. Projection

> '…is a quality, feeling or behaviour which belongs to me but which I don't experience as such, I attribute them to other people or institutions around me' (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1999, p.73).

If the individual makes a choice to project, it may be a normal healthy assumption based on observation or prior experience and as such is a necessary part of human relating (Ibid.). Unhealthy projection results in the individual disowning aspects of their personality that they find difficult or offensive or unattractive (Perls, 1976, p.37), or they are forced to deny because those aspects of the self are viewed as negative or sinful. For example, they may be angry but cannot admit the anger and so project it on to the other, perceiving them to be angry. Projection may therefore diminish assertiveness, as they disown what is theirs (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1999, p.74). The natural disgust that is felt when one ingests or introjects something disgusting, inedible or indigestible gets projected out of the group on to outsiders (Greenfield, 2008; Taylor, 2004; Perls and Wysong,

1992). It no longer acts as a defence against the toxic introjects, abuse and maltreatment – the individual does not 'throw it up' because they are confluent. Disgust and anger may also be projected on to those members who are being targeted for punishment by the cult leader; those who are non-compliant; or those who leave.

The potential or new member may project their strengths on to the cult leader, weakening them as they perceive the leader to be strong and authoritative (Lichtenberg, 1990). Some cult leaders claim to be a 'Father' or a '*lover of lovers'* [Max] and create the conditions for a projection that contains the assumption that the leader can meet the individual's psychological and emotional needs (Storr, 1996). These aspects are evidenced in Chapters 8 and 9.

4. Retroflection

is when the individual does to themselves what they originally wanted to do to others (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1999, p.75). For example, they block their natural reactions and feelings and turn them against themself, in anticipation of someone else doing it to them (Perls, 1948, p.84). They may feel angry with another, but rather than contacting the anger, they turn it back towards themself (Ibid., p.76). In a thought-reform environment this is likely to be because the individual both suppresses their authentic feelings, and because it is unsafe. They are therefore unable to express their authentic feelings, and any independent or critical thoughts, or doubts, are treated as sinful or negative and turned back against the self, evidenced by participants having been judgemental and harsh towards the self as evidenced in Chapter 8.

5. Desensitisation

is when the individual minimises sensation as they anaesthetise and deaden themself and disregard, dilute or neglect their sensations and feelings (Clarkson, 1999, p.57). This may be necessary in some

circumstances but is unhealthy when the neglect comes at a high cost, for example, to their health. This happens in a thought-reform environment as the beliefs become more important than the individual's needs or mental health. The individual no longer prioritises their self-care but serves the cult to their detriment. It is also applicable in relation to the confluential trance and ASCs which desensitise the individual to awareness and their authentic-self, as evidenced in Chapter 8.

6. Deflection

is when the individual avoids sensation or meaningful impact which results in them turning aside from direct contact with another person or the environment-field (Ibid.). This occurs within an abusive-cult, as the individual turns aside from facing their critical thoughts and doubts; challenges from family; and the true implications of membership.

7. Egotism

is when the individual is too much in control, watching themself and not letting go, which results in blocking contact with themself and the environment-field. It entails too much introspection (Perls et al, 1951, p.456). As the member is fearful of putting a foot wrong, it is likely that they live in this state of watching themselves, and fearing that God, the leader or the other members are also watching them – which, in a thought-reform environment-field they probably are, which will exacerbate egotism. At the extreme, egotism may result in Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1999, p.61). It has been evidenced that cult leaders may have NPD (Abgrall, 2000; Storr, 1996) and that while the cult leader grows narcissistically, former members become depleted (Lichtenberg, 1990; Martin, et. al., 1992) in the process of projection and introjection described above.

In the next section I evidence participant accounts related to thought-reform and then explicate the Wellspring Thought-Reform Model as per Figure 7.1 above.

7.3 – Thought Reform

Participants refer to 'brainwashing', 'mind-control', 'thought-reform' and 'programming', terms which are used interchangeably in various interviews. As all encapsulate the meaning of thought-reform (Lalich and Tobias, 2006), they are deemed to refer to thought-reform. In this next section I evidence these concepts from participant accounts.

When the individual has lived in an environment-field where there is introjective coercive confluence, they have been controlled and told what to do. This results in dependency, and looking to others for help and advice, rather than being free to draw on their own internal resources.

> *'Mind control is an external locus.'* [Emma]

> *'[With] mind control [...] you still have this outward focus that these people are going to help you and the key is to learn how to control your own mind, and that you have the resources inside of you [...].'* [Lindsey]

Brainwashing is '*programmed behaviour*' [Fred], that is, planned and purposeful with the intention to control and manipulate behaviour. For Matt it was '*quite clearly brainwashing that's taking place*' but it was '*done in such a pleasant and encouraging way'*. He illustrates this, sardonically:

> *'…you are wearing a pink cardigan because you are an addict, but that is actually okay because that makes you better than the rest of them, and you've found salvation, redemption and you are going to be okay. But this addiction*

was what defined who I was and what I was, the cult led me to believe that this was IT. I am an addict, full stop'. [Matt]

Thought-reform can be a slow process. One participant evidences this as she attended Bible Study virtually every night of the week and this constant, regular, exposure to the beliefs changed her mind:

'At first I thought, "I don't believe what these people believe but I like them". And then I started believing, because you are in the environment all the time. I mean you hear the teaching over and over again and just by sheer repetition you start to believe.' [Winnie]

I evidence other aspects of thought-reform in this next section in which I set out the Wellspring Thought Reform Model and apply it as the 'brainwashing' aspect of my theoretical framework.

7.3.1 - Wellspring Thought-Reform Model

Dr Paul Martin, the founder Director of Wellspring, modified Lifton's work and devised an accessible tool, the 'Wellspring Thought-reform Model' (WTRM) (Burks, 2014; Martin, 2012). I introduced Wellspring in Chapter 2.8. The WTRM is a 'systems model of thought-reform' (Martin et al., 1992), the presentation of which was empirically evidenced to be of utility in helping former-member clients recover (Martin, 2012; Martin, 1993a). It entails discussing a modified version of Lifton's eight components, and each is set out on a separate sheet of paper with space to write (Jenkinson, 2016). The client can then identify that which is applicable and that which is not. The aim is to assist them to identify the relevant dynamics in their cult in order to make sense of their lives and events (Burks, 2014; Kent, 2008; Martin et al., 1998; Martin, 1993a). The presentation of this model was based on former-members' need

> '…for a conceptual framework that can adequately attach meaning to their experiences because, typically, awareness of what happened to them is restricted' (Martin et al, 1992).

I have adopted the model in my clinical counselling practice which has been reported by former-member clients to be beneficial (Jenkinson, 2016; Jenkinson, 2013; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009). Other clinicians have adopted a similar model in their clinical work as evidenced in literatures Chapter 3:3.3.

There are eight psychological 'patterns' or components to Lifton's theory. These are set out below. It is not necessary for all of the eight components to be operationalised (Durocher, 1999, p.593) to reverse the positive conditions required for healthy contact and self-actualisation (Merry, 2002; Clarkson & Mackewn, 1993; Rogers, 1991). On first reading these may seem extreme when applied to non-violent cults but they should be viewed as on a continuum. It has been evidenced from other empirical studies that it is important that these are approached in dialogue with former-members, are not over-emphasised, and are presented with other 'normal' sources of understanding what helps (Coates, 2012a; Healy, 2010; Durocher, 1999; Wright, 1991; Rothbaum, 1988). These eight components are

> '…a set of criteria against which any environment may be judged – a basis for answering the ever recurring question: "Isn't it just like 'brainwashing?"' (Lifton, 1989, p.420)

Thought-reform is an extremist meeting ground between people and ideas and

> '…where totalism exists, a religion, a political movement, or even a scientific organisation becomes little more than an exclusive cult' (Ibid., p.419).

Thought-reform theory therefore provides an explanation of the abusive dynamics within an abusive-cult (Hassan, 2015; Jenkinson, 2013; Martin, 2012; Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Jenkinson, 2008; Lalich, 2004; Martin et al., 1998; Langone, 1993).

In this next section I define and discuss the eight components of thought-reform which are:

1. Milieu control
2. Mystical manipulation
3. Demand for purity
4. Confession
5. Sacred science
6. Loading the language
7. Doctrine over person
8. Dispensing of existence

The following definitions are in part extrapolated from the WTRM and used with permission (Martin and Martin, 2016). They were originally sourced from Lifton (Lifton, 1989) and Andres and Lane (1988). In each section I label other components that are applicable, in brackets, in order to link aspects to each other. I also apply Gestalt theory within this section.

1. Milieu control

is the 'psychological current' upon which all else in the thought-reform environment depends (Lifton, 1989, p.420). It is the purposeful limitation and control of

- the individual's environment and physical energy

- communication with the outside world
- communication within the individual leading to self-suppression

The individual's energy is expended in the service of the cult which restricts time, work and social life. Over-work, sleep deprivation, and change of diet may lead to physical depletion and exhaustion (Hassan, 2015; Singer, 2003a; Langone, 1993). This is evidenced in Leslie's case, described in Chapter 1:1.4.1, and exacerbates self-suppression.

Group members negatively label outsiders concluding that they have nothing worthwhile to teach them, and so are unlikely to look outside for information, especially spiritual information. This control over who one can see and talk to results in a significant degree of isolation from surrounding society. The restriction of disconfirming or new information curtails the member's ability to make critical, rational judgements about what they are being taught, intensified by overwork, busyness, multiple lengthy meetings, etc.

Participants evidence how communication and contact with their family and outsiders changed, was curtailed, and in some cases severed. In Daphne's case the cult moved her around the country and hid her. In both her and Harriet's case the family had to intervene by way of exit-counselling, in order for them to leave, evidenced in Chapter 8. In other cases, the member had some contact with their family, but the cult attempted to destroy their relationship.

> *'One of the things the community tried to do was destroy the sense of family, and vilify your family. So your family somehow were against you, they didn't love you.'* [Fred]

This had the effect of reversing reality and unreality.

> *'He (Pastor) helped set us the right side up. From being upside down, I, I didn't know we were as upside down as we were but if you believe wrong things for a very long time - I, I, did psychology at *** University, I don't know if you have heard of the experiment where they put glasses on people, and, and it turns everything upside down…'* [Marjorie]

As the rationalisation that family and outsiders are of little value (dispensing of existence) is introjected, members cut themselves off, believing this is the 'right' thing to do – that is, they believe it is necessary in the service of 'the higher purpose' (mystical manipulation), and 'the Truth' (sacred science).

The individual not only becomes disconnected from their family, and much that is familiar, but the crucial inner dialogue is cut off. This results in communication and contact within the self, self-regulation, and creative adjustment becoming blocked in a fixed-gestalt - a confluent self that is static and no longer growing.

In this interdependence, the member becomes an integral part of the process, because they suppress themself. As the authentic-self no longer creatively adjusts, the introjected inner dialogue is ruled over by the cult, ensuring they continue to rehearse the negative introjects (confession) resulting in them prohibiting their own internal dialogue, independent thought, creativity and critical thinking. In Marjorie's Bible-based cult a strong precept was

> *'…do not think for yourself [...] those thoughts are from the enemy'* [that is Satan].

She reflects that this applied to any independent thought but particularly thoughts that might criticise or be independent of the leader. I evidence these aspects further in Chapter 8.

The individual is now deprived of both external information, which could moderate their thinking, and their personal inner reflection, both of which are a necessity if they are to test reality and maintain differentiation and a separate authentic-self. This results in a polarisation and splitting between what is 'real (the prevailing ideology)' and the 'unreal (everything else)' (Lifton, 1989, p.421). The result of this is

> '…to free the individual from man's incessant struggle with the elusive subtleties of truth' (Ibid.).

Because they lack critical thinking skills, members resort to all or nothing thinking – and are, in effect, not thinking for themselves but thinking for and as the cult (introjective coercive confluence) - but feeling a level of relief in doing so (Lalich, 2004). Life, 'Truth' and reality is viewed as straightforward and clear cut. But there is a high cost to this certainty, and the individual

> '…encounters a profound threat to [his] personal autonomy' (Lifton 1989).

The lack of external and internal dialogue (the self-suppression), and the environmental controls and abuse, have serious consequences, entrapping the individual in the thought-reform system.

> 'Whatever his response – whether he is cheerful in the face of being manipulated, deeply resentful, or feels a combination of both – he has been deprived of the opportunity to exercise his capacities for self-expression and independent action' (Ibid., p.423).

This suppression nevertheless needs to be maintained and the thought-reform system ensures the maintenance of suppression of the authentic-self, along with the thoughts and doubts. These different responses, described in Lifton's quote above, may account

for different research outcomes and findings. I return to this in Chapter 8.

For both 1G and SGAs the process is similar but for SGAs many have had little or no contact with outsiders, including non-cult family members, who could help moderate the effect of the milieu control (Matthews and Salazar, 2014; Derocher, 2008; Kendall, 2005). This is illustrated in Jessie's story set out in Chapter 1:1.4.2 where she was taught that outsiders were 'of the devil' and should be treated with suspicion. Whilst she was able to accept some input from her teachers she remained suspicious and it was not until another person affirmed her internal critical dialogue that she was able to trust her authentic-self. She had, nevertheless, engaged with her authentic-self to some degree all along, evidenced by her curiosity and doubts; once verbalised, and acknowledged by another, she was able to leave psychologically (Chapter 8).

In milieu control new sensation and awareness are blocked resulting in confluence, introjection, projection, retroflection, desensitisation and deflection as the individual self becomes fixed.

2. Mystical manipulation

is the inevitable next step and is extensive behavioural and emotional personal manipulation (Lifton, 1989, p.422). It is a mystique purposely created, not only for control, but to elevate the leader in the eyes of the members (Ibid.). It appears to confirm the leader's special abilities, divine authority, and spiritual advancement and keeps the member dependent. Whilst this mystical manipulation appears to arise spontaneously from within the cult, and more usually from the cult leader, it has an element of 'planned spontaneity' (Ibid.). This is unbeknown to the member and it can assume a 'near-mystical quality' which provokes

> '…specific patterns of behaviour and emotion in such a way as these appear to have arisen spontaneously from within the environment' (Ibid).

For example, it has been reported that some leaders can manifest watches, gold dust or holy ash (Galanter, 1989a, p.151) which convinces members and legitimates the deception and lies (Lifton, 1999, p.25). One participant states:

> *'I saw this ball of light, about, I don't know, two-foot-wide and about two-foot off the ground going up the aisle between the other members, and disappearing into (the cult leader) and then shortly after he started [prophesying]'.* [P]

When I asked in interview what this participant thought it was they said it was: '*a spiritual thing*' and not '*smoke and mirrors'*. One participant believed she saw her leader walk through walls. Leslie (Chapter 1:1.4.1) was confused by the way his mind went blank in the presence of his leader, believing it was evidence of his power. Dillon would pray for his cult leader because of his terrible bouts of '*pain and suffering*'. Pain was viewed as the leader's spiritual practice, that is, he was suffering spiritually for the members, doing God's work. Dillon did not know if the pain was real, but whenever he prayed for him the leader would say he was instantly healed. This happened a number of times, convincing Dillon that miracles were real, and, paradoxically, that his prayers had worked because of the power of the leader.

There is also an addictive element to mystical manipulation and the confluential trance. The individual is desensitised, not fully interacting with the environment-field, leaving them further open to manipulation. It is similar in relation to ASCs, which also dull contact, but keep the individual coming back for more, convincing them that

the 'spiritual' experiences are really happening, are proof that the guru or higher spiritual being are real. This serves to desensitise and suppress them and stops them contacting sensation and numbs them from the emotionally painful abuse that the doctrine legitimises. This 'high' and emotional numbing are important points and I return to these in Chapter 10 and the emotional healing aspects of recovery.

Because members are also taught the group has a special ('divine') purpose, they believe they have been chosen to play a special role in fulfilling this purpose. This gives a rationale for believing the cult's mystique and justifies the manipulation even when it supersedes all considerations of decency or of immediate human welfare (doctrine over person and dispensing of existence). Members eventually feel betrayed but ultimately choose to betray themselves since all of life appears to support the claims of the leader (Dubrow Marshall, 2010; Lifton, 1989).

3. Demand for purity

is the requirement for

> '…an absolute separation of the pure and the impure, good and evil, in the world in general, and also inside each person' (Lifton, 1999, p.25).

'Purity' is redefined as being attainable but only within the confines of the cult and all that went before must be rejected, including outsiders (milieu control and dispensing of existence). The member is, therefore, at war with his prior 'impure' self and with 'impurity' in the world in general. The member must be convinced of their previous impurity (before joining) and the necessity of becoming pure or perfect as defined by the group. Life is viewed in all or nothing terms, and group members are constantly exhorted to strive for perfection. As the individual becomes caught up in a perpetual struggle for purity

> '…their guilt and shame mechanisms are taken over by the cult if not by the guru himself' (Ibid., p.25).

Absolute purity is therefore assumed to be attainable and by defining and manipulating the criteria of purity, and then by conducting an all-out war upon impurity, the ideological leader creates a narrow world of guilt and shame. This polarisation of good and evil makes it difficult to have an inner sensitivity to the complexities of human morality and the guru is the only one who is assumed to be completely pure. One participant elaborates

> *'There's this whole trap of being taught about the fall of man and original sin, that we are full of original sin and the only way to be blessed is by the [cult leader], you are all unworthy and "I am the only pure worthy one".'* [P]

Matt, who struggled with addiction, had to '*make amends*' and ask for forgiveness for any mistakes prior to joining – and to work hard not to make those mistakes again. The rationale was that his addiction was caused, in part, by these aspects weighing on his conscience and so he had to become 'pure' as defined by the cult. He says that these actions would

> *'…keep me on the straight and narrow, it was like, anything that happened after I joined was good and positive. Now it's okay, you're a good person because you are in the cult.'*

4. Confession

is getting the subject to let down their barriers and openly discuss their innermost fears and anxieties. If someone disagrees or criticises the leader either to themself or another, this is rationalised as 'sin' or 'negative'. Serious, and often not so serious, 'sins', as defined by the group, are to be confessed, either privately to a personal monitor or publicly to the group at large. These demands are made possible

because of the human tendency towards guilt and shame 'and the need to give expression to these tendencies' (Lifton, 1989 p.425), which are exacerbated by the demand for purity. Confession is

- a vehicle for a kind of personal purification or psychological purge
- an act of symbolic self-surrender, the merging of the individual with the environment
- a means of maintaining an ethos of total exposure – a policy of making public everything possible about the life experiences, thoughts and passions of each individual and especially those elements which might be regarded as derogatory (impure) (Ibid., p.425-6)

There is a demand that the negative introjects and beliefs about themselves be shared and reiterated in confession. This results in individuals confessing to

> '…crimes one has not committed, to sinfulness that is artificially induced, in the name of a cure that is arbitrarily imposed' (Ibid.).

Confession is, therefore, carried beyond its ordinary religious, legal and therapeutic expressions and makes it virtually impossible to attain a reasonable balance between worth and humility. It provides the mechanism for negative self-evaluation (Ibid., p.25), and negative introjects, and exacerbates feelings of guilt and shame (demand for purity).

The means of ensuring confession differs between cults but it is dangerous to confess in an abusive-cult, both psychologically and in some cases physically. When one participant's mother died, leaders of a small group within the cult asked her how she felt. She told them truthfully how upset she was and they turned this against her,

reversing the meaning of her words, implying that she was unfeeling rather than expressing her grief. They shocked her as they

> *'…all started like a feeding frenzy and coming up to me and spitting on me and pushing me [...].'* [P]

The beatings I was subjected to were a result of my 'confession' that I was 'resentful', as explained in Chapter 2. A number of participants evidence how the cult leader would encourage them to talk openly with negative consequences.

> *'[...] they encouraged me to talk about things I never dared speak about before, but looking back retrospectively, they would store it up and use it against me.'* [Matt]

> *' [...] he got us to reveal all the issues that were affecting us so he was able to very easily manipulate us by bringing up all the things that we had basically told him about our situation [...].'* [Fred]

For others, the leader would invite members to speak openly, '*has anyone got anything to talk about?*', although this was shorthand, or loaded language (below), for

> '*…is there anything going on in your life that is distracting you from being able to pay attention to God and what you are supposed to be focussing on.'* [Dillon]

This invitation resulted in Church meetings turning into

> '*…a big soap opera all of the time when you were always dealing with people's problems because these problems were apparently always interfering with their ability to perfectly hear the word of God. So, people would confess [...].'* [Dillon]

This confession led nowhere and did not resolve people's problems, but it contributed to the maintenance of control.

Confession resulted in humiliation for a number of participants.

> *'They knew intimate stuff about me, they were trying to use that against me to make me look stupid.'* [Joe]

The abusive cycle is therefore maintained by the leader and sometimes between members as they victimise one another. Although participants do not refer to the latter aspect a great deal, it is inevitable that each person's actions will have an impact on others, sometimes in an abusive and harmful way. Maribel views herself as a victim/accomplice of her cult leader, which led to regret, guilt and shame post-cult.

> *'But you know some psychopaths don't have partners they have victims and accomplices [...] I REALLY regretted being an accomplice to this man.'*

5. Sacred science

is viewed as an 'ultimate science of human behaviour' (Lifton, 1999, p.26). The leader builds the mystical manipulation on the belief that they have access to this ultimate 'Truth', that is, their system of beliefs is the only valid belief system beyond all questioning or disputing. In addition, they are above criticism as the spokesperson for God on earth. In some cases, the leader is buying into an established ideology and elaborating it (Howard, 1996); in others they devise a complex (and at times clever) philosophical system that is convincing to outsiders and members alike (Barrett, 2001). Leslie's (Chapter 1:1.4.1) leader borrowed from existing ideas and added others. Sometimes the ideology is dangerous, leading the individual to believe their physicality is not important, because they are just a soul, which can lead them to dismiss their physical needs, the

importance of life, and lead to a virtually suicidal ideation (dispensing of existence).

Anyone who dares criticise this 'Truth', or harbour even unspoken alternative ideas, becomes not only 'immoral and irreverent' (demand for purity), but also 'unscientific'. If a member begins to feel attracted to ideas which either contradict or ignore it, he or she may become guilty and afraid and feel the compulsion to confess. The personal quest for knowledge, therefore, becomes self-suppressed, as do the member's doubts and critical thoughts (milieu control) and the sacred science provides a rationale for doing so. This enables the leader to maintain their position of power, to suppress the individual, and to justify, in some cases, violence (Lifton, 1999) (dispensing of existence).

One participant evidences the suppressive nature of the sacred science, the ideology, referring to characters in the Bible. Cain was the first son of Adam and Eve, who killed his brother Abel.

> '*Another whole dynamic is the "Cain and Abel dynamic". So, [...] the leader is always in the position of Abel and you are in the position of Cain [...] so you have to overcome your desire to kill your leader, or rebel against your leader. So this is more of your "fallen nature". So if you have Cain thinking, Cain thoughts, or the Cain type desire to kill your leader, or criticise your leader, or judge your leader, then you are multiplying the sin [...]'* [P]

This leader is ensuring that members suppress their internal dialogue (milieu control) and their 'impurity' (demand for purity) in order to give a rationale for the maintenance of confluence, introjection, projection and compliance and maintains the thought-reform system.

6. Loading the language

is limiting the meaning of words to those that affirm the prevailing ideological claims of the sacred science (Lifton, 1999, p.26). It is creating a new vocabulary by creating new words with special meanings understood only by members of the group, or by giving new and special meanings to familiar words and phrases. For example: 'the world' can mean the sinful society that needs to be 'saved' by the cult. In the quote above, '*Cain thoughts*' are assumed to be something recognisable, and assumes that the individual is critical of, or has a desire to kill the leader, leading to self-suppression. '*Fallen nature*' and '*multiplying the sin*' are also examples.

Thought provoking complexities are, therefore, by-passed and ultimate truth is expressed in a single phrase or word. The cult develops this jargon, in many ways unique unto itself, often not understood by outsiders, and consists of numerous words and phrases which only the members understand, or think they understand. These thought-terminating clichés dull one's ability to engage in critical thinking and the most far reaching and complex of human problems are compressed into brief, definitive-sounding phrases, easily memorised and easily expressed. These exacerbate the confluential trance. Whilst many areas of society creatively develop language to assist understanding, for example, Gestalt psychotherapy or social psychology, they do so in order to educate and explain (Pinker, 2007), and not to manipulate, impose an ideology, and restrict thinking.

7. Doctrine over person

is convincing the subject that the group and its doctrine take precedence over any individual in the group, their wellbeing, or any other teaching from outside it. All private perceptions must be subordinated to the ideological claims (Lifton, 1999, p.26) (sacred

science), and private thoughts or doubts are attributed to residual impurity or 'defilement' (milieu control and demand for purity). Apparently contrary experiences must be denied, self-suppressed, or reinterpreted to fit the doctrine, and past events are retrospectively altered, wholly rewritten or ignored, to make them consistent with the doctrine. An example of this is the beatings I was subjected to, which were justified as being necessary to cleanse 'sin', the doctrine was more important than my personal wellbeing. When Roger realised there was a danger of exposure he changed the doctrine, asserting that the beatings had never happened (Chapter 2:2.6).

The totalist environment treats individual differences as 'deviant tendencies' that come entirely from personal problems related only to earlier 'evil' influences (demand for purity). The doctrine or ideology is, as a result, always more important than the individual, or teaching from outside (milieu control), and the personal experiences of members are subordinated to the sacred science, the 'Truth'. Doctrine over person attacks the authentic-self in service of the cult leader and ideology. One participant evidences how, even though he was seriously mentally ill and needed to see his doctor, the other members rationalised that he had all he needed in the cult, with the implication that he would be a failure if he sought outside help. This resulted in him not seeking this help

> *'I was experiencing clinical depression, and the members of the cult that I was close to, were discouraging me from getting help. They were telling me that my problems could be solved within the cult, and that if I were to go to outside help, the GP, and get medication, which is what I was wanting to do, that I would actually be a failure. There was a sense that everything that one needed in life could be provided by the cult. At the time I was, I was VERY (mentally) ill [...].'* [Matt]

Another participant evidences how the doctrine took precedence over his own personal choices and how the cult promised one thing, but when he became a member the rules changed and overrode his personal choices and wellbeing.

> *'They said "oh yes, you know, we can bless people in marriage and sanctify your relationship before God and all of that" and of course, as soon as we joined and moved in, very quickly we were sent to different cities and separated, which is, you know, part of the whole thing of cults, it is to separate people from their families, from their backgrounds, from all their attachments, so the attachment is toward the guru.'* [P]

The doctrine in this case was that the cult leader believed he was the only one who could choose marriage partners for members, but he obscured this information from potential members.

8. Dispensing of existence

is when the group decides who has the right to exist and who does not. This is usually held non-literally, and is ideological or judgemental, but in some cases the group has become murderous (Lifton, 1999). In the case of the Japanese cult, Aum Shinrikyo, dispensing of existence was rendered altruistic by 'offering a higher existence to those who are killed' (Ibid., p.26), a mind-set which is also applicable to terrorist suicide bombers (Bjørgo and Horgan, 2008). Non-members, or those who disagree with the philosophy of the cult are, therefore, doomed. If individuals refuse to join the group they must be rejected, including family members. Ultimately members combine the group's validation with personal identity and are aware that, should they stray too far from the 'Truth' (sacred science), the right to existence, at least as a worthwhile person, may be withdrawn. This more usually relates to members believing that if

they leave they will die spiritually and in some cases physically (Lalich and Tobias, 2006).

One participant was told she was a drug addict, although she had never taken drugs. She was warned that there would be dire consequences if she contacted people she knew prior to joining who were also assumed to be addicts.

> *'When I got out of the cult I was not allowed to speak to anyone that I knew before, because they were my druggie past and they would lead me into death, institutions, gaol [...] so it was like my past was erased.'* [Shannon]

Another explains how terrifying it was leaving because of the threats related to spiritual death and going to hell, something she strongly believed in as a member of a Bible-based cultic church, which increased the sense of threat

> [On leaving there is so much] *'…fear involved, because up to now they frightened you with, you are going to the lake of fire [...]'* [Marjorie]

One participant had been taught, before she joined the cult, that God loved everybody, including her, but in the cult she was told differently (this participant quote is also doctrine over person).

> *'The [cult leader] would say "why would he, the God of the universe, care about YOU? He only cares for the community, he doesn't care about you personally…that's the stupidest thing I have ever heard of…".'* [Winnie]

Another experienced doctrine over person as being in a state of '*constant criticism*' from the leader and other members.

> *'It was just a constant thing of, where am I going to go wrong, what am I going to do wrong, because nothing you ever did was right.'* [Fred]

When he got to '*breaking point*' then there would be

> *'…some acknowledgement that some of what you have done has been important for the cult and that was the reason why you were still there and not been cast away.'* [Fred]

This treatment maintained the coercive confluence as he worked even harder, rationalising that

> *'…if you managed to work through all of this then you would become the person you came here to become.'* [Fred]

For Leslie (Chapter 1:1.4.1), this entailed working 7am to midnight over a number of years including cleaning and offering therapeutic services.

This concludes the description and evidence of Lifton's eight components. For both 1G and SGAs the thought-reform process is similar, although the SGA participants in this study seemed to have a higher degree of cynicism which led them to questioning in a way that the 1G did not seem to. Perhaps this is because they did not join and become confluent, they were born into confluence and had it enforced upon them, which paradoxically may cause their natural self-actualising tendency to emerge, resulting in them fighting the control, especially as they enter their transitional teenage years (Rayner, 1986). If there is enough support in the environment (even only a 'k*ernel'* [Lavinia]) then the authentic-self may spontaneously begin to regulate itself, which is 'organismic self-regulation' (Perls, et al., 1951, p.247).

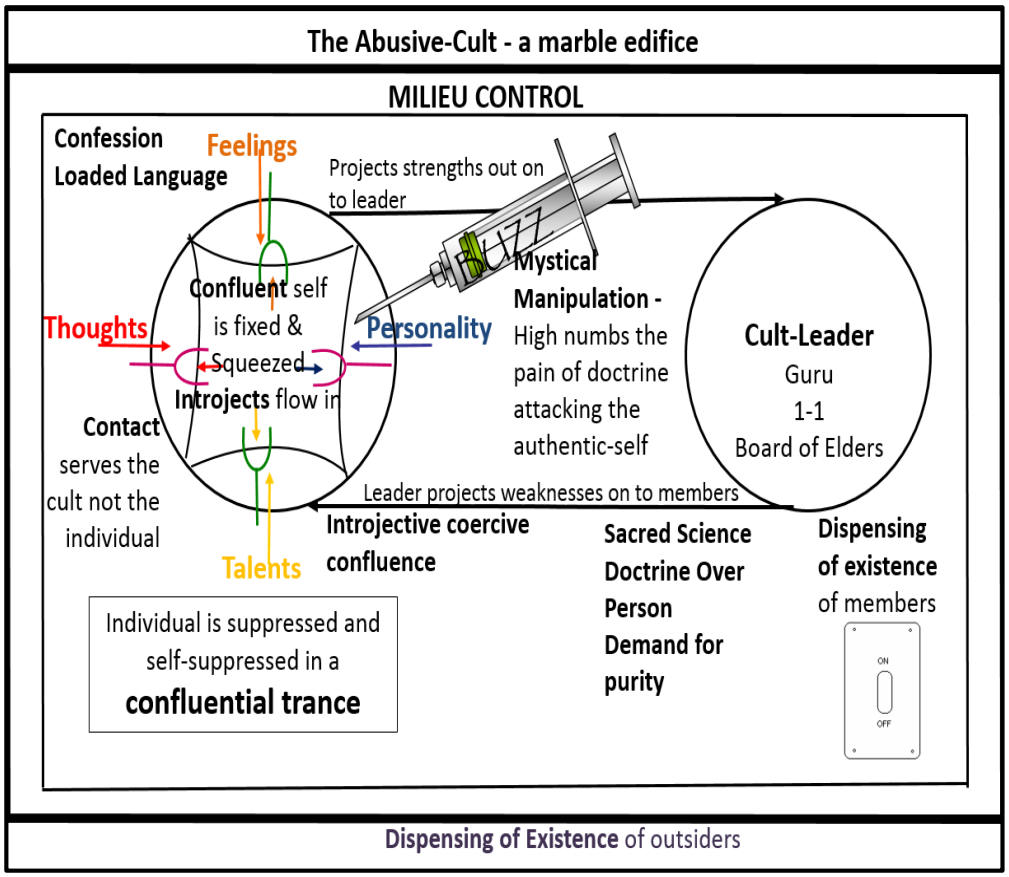
In this next section I map Gestalt and thought-reform together before proceeding to give an overview of the findings, the four Phases of Recovery and Growth.

7.4 - Mapping Gestalt & Thought-Reform

In this section I include a diagram, Figure 7.3, which is based on the WTRM. This was created by Dr Paul Martin and is reproduced and added to with permission of his widow and son (Martin and Martin, 2016). I reproduce the original diagram in Appendix 5 in order that the reader can compare versions and see which additions are mine.

In this diagram I map together both Gestalt and thought-reform. All eight components are included within the abusive-cult milieu which is a solid '*marble edifice*' [Max]. The individual is represented by the left circle, is confluent, in a confluential trance, and is squeezed in every aspect of their self. The relationship with the cult leader is indicated by the arrows that cycle around as the confluent individual projects their strengths on to the leader and the introjects flow in, in an introjective coercive confluence.

Figure 7.3: Mapping Gestalt & Thought-Reform



7.5 – What Comes Next: Introducing the Phases of Recovery and Growth

In this final section I introduce and evidence the emergence of the findings, the four Phases of Recovery and Growth, before explicating these in detail in Chapters 8-11. I have evidenced how the authentic-self is fixed and restricted within a thought-reform environment-field and the individual needs to be freed and/or to free themselves. It is the category, 'freeing the authentic-self' that forms the overarching BSP referred to in Chapter 6:6.16, and which is evidenced to occur as a result of certain strategies which are best achieved within these four Phases. By treating the Phases as conceptual categories with the overarching category 'freeing the authentic-self', I created a structure in which to explain what helps former-members recover from an

abusive-cult experience. In order to ensure accuracy, I continued with my strategy of constant comparison both within and between interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2014).

I described analytic strategies adopted in Chapter 6:6.10 onwards. The coding for this category emerged when I reordered the data into Phases, which were refined whilst writing up. The data is dense and complex and these categories emerged in analysis and represent processes indicated across interviews. The complexity of the recovery process is clear from the interview data which evidences it to be a multi-layered process over time and, as a result, no one aspect or strategy is the answer to 'what helps?' and what 'frees the authentic-self'. Whilst some categories in some Phases are less dense than others, they are included because I assert that 'what helps' some participants may help others (Langer, 2009). This is applicable to all Phases set out in Chapters 8-11.

Before introducing the Phases by way of brief overview and diagrams, I evidence how this conceptual category emerges from the interview data. I have interpreted these participant quotes as indicating that the process of '*recovery*' and '*personal growth*' occurs in progressive but flexible '*phases*' over time, although the timescale for the recovery process varies for each participant and is dependent on many variables explored herein.

> *M: For me I don't feel I am in a recovery phase; I feel just in a personal growth phase.*
> *G: Was there a recovery phase?*
> *M: Oh absolutely.*
> *G: So recovery was a PHASE.* [I am grasping something of the theory back in November 2013]
> *M: Yes, cos, you know, life is a phase (ha ha), you know recovery was a chapter in my life. I don't feel like I am recovering any more, um....*

G: Are you recovered?

M: Why yeah, I feel....

G: Is that what it means? So say 'what helps ex-cult members recover' some are in recovery, and some are recovered?

M: Yeah.

G: And when you come out I suppose hopefully you do go into recovery?

M: Yes, those are phases, just blend into each other, they are not a chapter okay, um, I did intense work; a few years, throwing myself fully into healing myself, and helping others. [Maribel]

I refer to the term 'Phase' in the sense evidenced above; that it is a period of development, a step, a temporary stage in a person's life, in which characteristic behaviours are observed (Reber and Reber, 2001). It is not used in the sense of a state which recurs cyclically (although it might do).

It emerged that each Phase consists of a number of processes and tasks that help. The core categories that arise in the Phases are summarised in Figure 7.4 and are set out in more detail in Figures 7.5-8 below. Chapters 8-11 explicate the analysis for each of the Phases and 'what helps'. The theory is, therefore, presented as a structure of Phases One to Four. The categories are:

Figure 7.4: Freeing the Authentic-Self: The Phases

	Freeing the Authentic-Self: The Phases of Recovery and Growth
Phase One	Freeing the self Leaving physically and psychologically
Phase Two	Freeing the self Professional and self-help strategies & Cognitive Understanding aspects of building sense of self
Phase Three	Freeing the self Emotional healing aspects of building sense of self
Phase Four	The freed self & posttraumatic growth

As there is a predominant piece of work to be addressed in each Phase, cognitive and emotional are split, in the main, into Phase Two and Phase Three respectively. If the former-member does not understand what happened in the cult (Phases One and Two) then it is likely they will struggle to accurately process their feelings (Phase Three), that is, they will still believe the introjected negative beliefs about themselves which is likely to delay recovery, resulting in building a sense of authentic-self on the wrong foundation. Once these cognitions are challenged and the process of working them through has begun, then former-members can more accurately address their authentic feelings and the emotional aspects, in Phase Three.

As the tasks in Phase One are predominantly cognitive I interpret that cognitive broadly precedes emotional, in the data, and have placed it

first within the Phases. This logic is supported by theory which is based on the simple notion that what we believe and think affects how we feel (Scott and Stradling, 1994) and if we challenge faulty beliefs we can change our feelings. Although the reverse is also true (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011, p.73), for the purposes of this argument, cognitive is addressed first because former-members cannot trust their feelings until they understand. By cognitive I mean internal, mental processes, including 'mental events, mental representations, beliefs, intentions, etc.' (Reber & Reber, p.129). I evidence the utility of this strategy:

> *'I was so embroiled in it, it was hard to distance myself and see it objectively, and it was important to be able to see it objectively, and then I could come to terms with it emotionally.'* [Maribel]

It is important to note that these processes are not necessarily linear nor necessarily distinct, and in reality they are likely to flow between Phases (Kepner, 2003). Nevertheless, for the purposes of coding and creation of theory they remain distinct. The coding is densest in the first two Phases because more participants had reached those Phases, that is, not all had completed the recovery process.

If the reader is to comprehend the challenge for former-members on leaving, and the whole recovery process, and to understand my interpretation of the data, it is important to hold in mind the theoretical framework and participants' experiences in the cult, including the abuse and resulting cult mind-set.

7.5.1 – Overview of the Phases

In conclusion I offer a brief textual summary of the Phases and set out the coding by way of introduction to the main tasks within each Phase. These core categories are then set out in diagrammatic form, Figures 7.5-8.

Phase One: Freeing the Self – Leaving Physically and Psychologically

The main tasks are 'Leaving' both 'Physically' and 'Psychologically'. The coding and structure is:

- Leaving Physically – Participant Experiences
- Leaving Physically and Psychologically
    - External Intervention – Breaking the Confluential Trance
    - Internal - Thinking the Unthinkable Thought
- Leaving Psychologically: Calling a Cult a Cult – Diagnosis and Understanding
- Leaving Psychologically: Unmasking the Cult Leader

This leads on to Phase Two.

Phase Two: Professional and Self-Help Strategies & Cognitive Understanding Aspects of Building Sense of Self

The main tasks are 'Building Sense of Self' and 'Cognitive Understanding' which includes 'Professional Strategies: Counselling' and 'Self-Help Strategies'. As there is a dismantling of the cult beliefs (through understanding) it is important to 'build a sense of self' at the same time or the former-member may be left with little or nothing.

The coding and structure are:

- Professional-help: Counselling
- Self-help
- Internal Processes: Building a sense of self
- External processes: Practical considerations that help

This leads into Phase Three.

Phase Three: Emotional Healing Aspects of Building Sense of Self

The main tasks are 'Building sense of self' by 'Facing feelings' and in particular 'Facing suppressed feelings' and 'Feeling emotional pain and grief'. 1G can then address any pre-cult vulnerabilities and childhood issues that had a direct impact on joining or that were not resolved in the cult, and/or issues that had rendered them vulnerable to staying longer than was necessary. For SGAs the task includes healing developmental and attachment issues as these are entangled in cult issues as a result of their upbringing. The literatures are applied and aid analysis in this Phase.

- What helps: Facing feelings
    - Facing suppressed feelings
    - Feeling emotional pain
- Emotional healing: The literature and data
- Developmental psychotherapy for SGAs and 1G[issues]
- Evidencing healing and integration

This leads into Phase Four.

Phase Four: The Freed Self and Posttraumatic Growth

The main tasks are, 'The Freed Self', includes integrating the cult experience and moving on to being 'recovered', and participants evidence posttraumatic growth. The literatures are applied and aid analysis in this Phase. The categories and structure are:

- I am myself again
- Posttraumatic growth
    - Personal changes
    - Philosophical changes
    - Relationship changes

This completes the Phases of Recovery and Growth, although individuals may need to revisit prior Phases if issues arise at a later date.

7.5.2 – Diagrams of The Phases

Before concluding this chapter, I set out the diagrams which summarise the four Phases and illustrate what helps and the process of recovery from an abusive cult experience. Each Figure takes up a whole page and is created as an overview and summary of the coding arising in each Phase.

Figure 7.5: Phase One

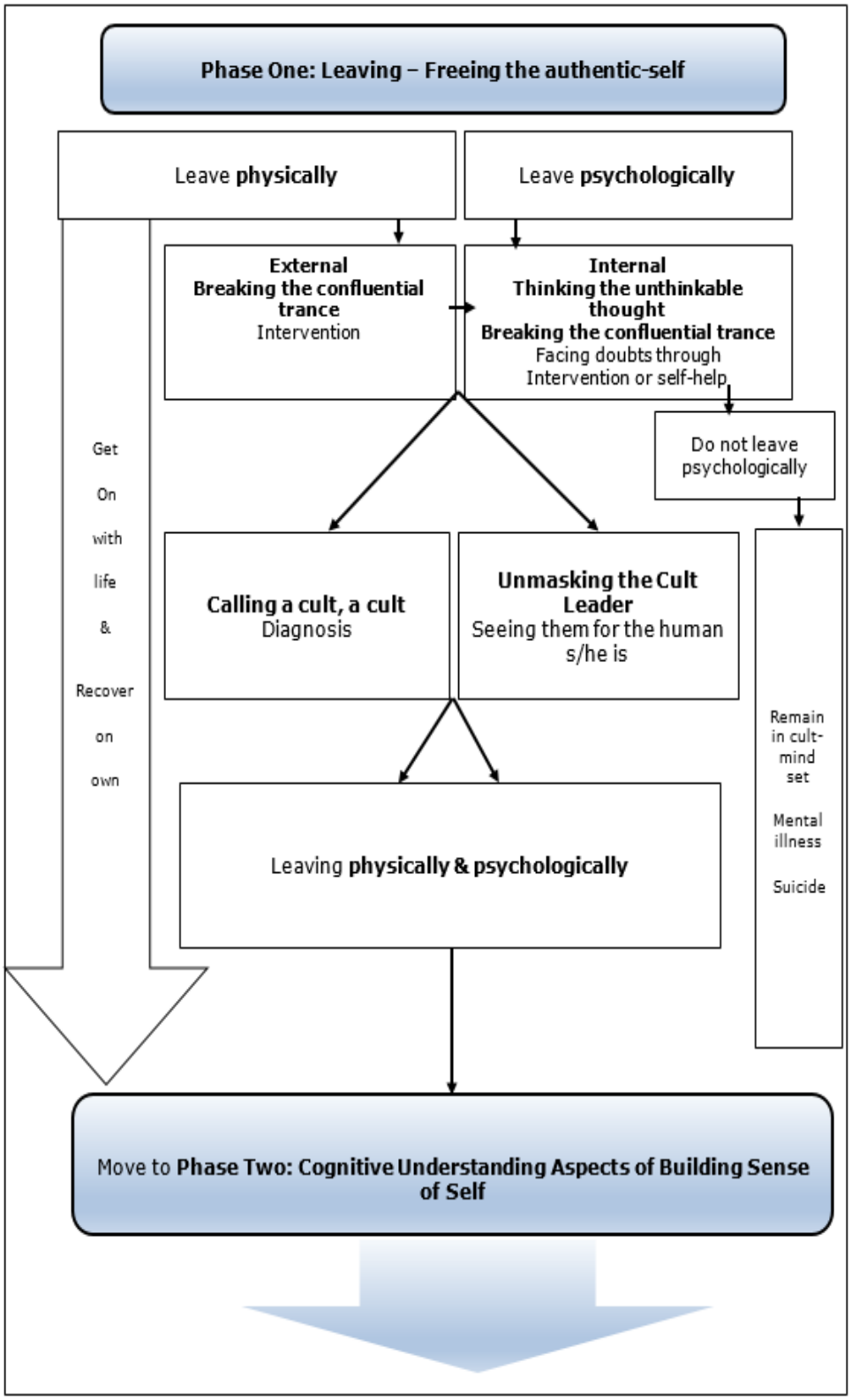


Figure 7.6: Phase Two

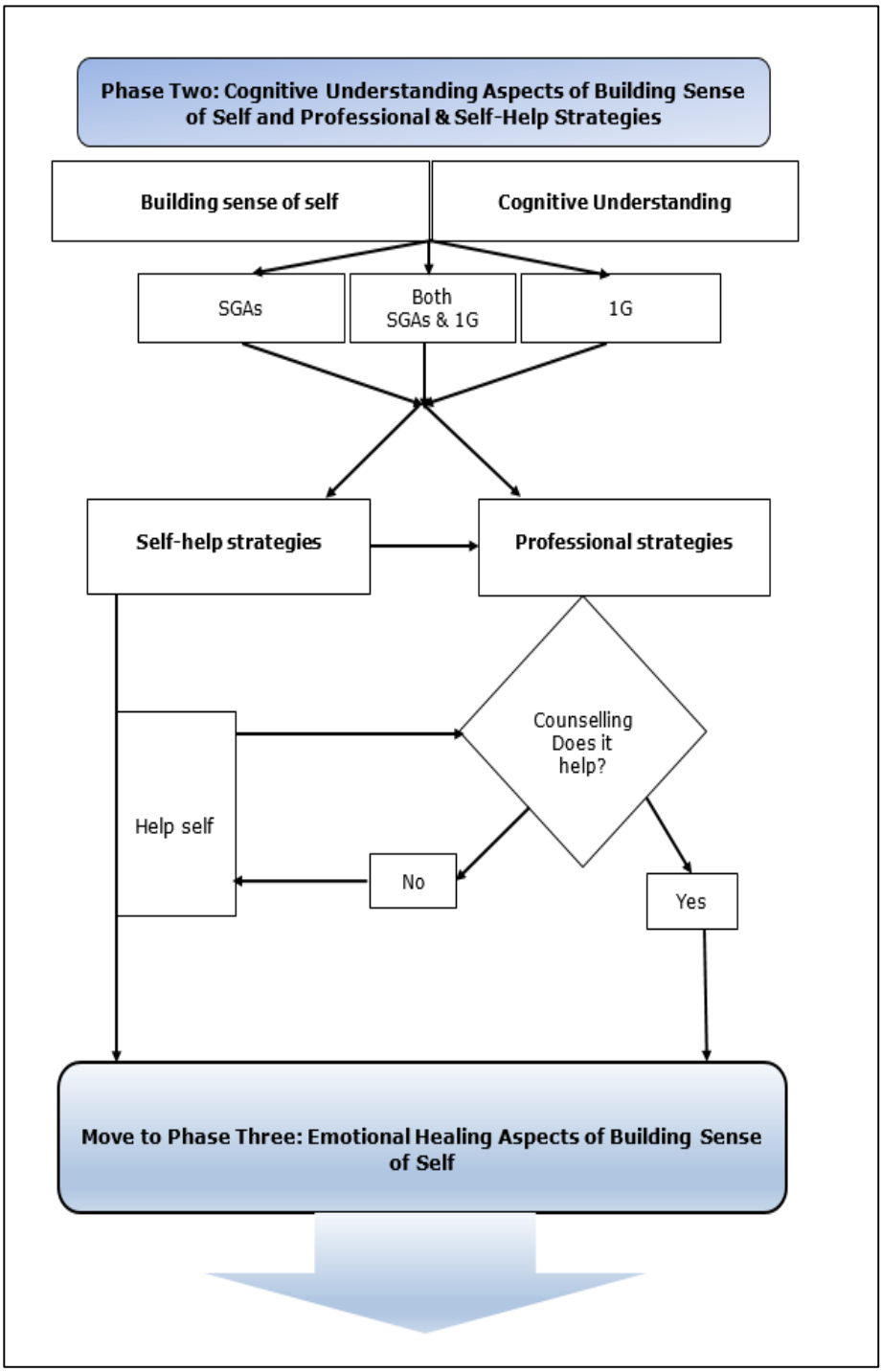


Figure 7.7: Phase Three

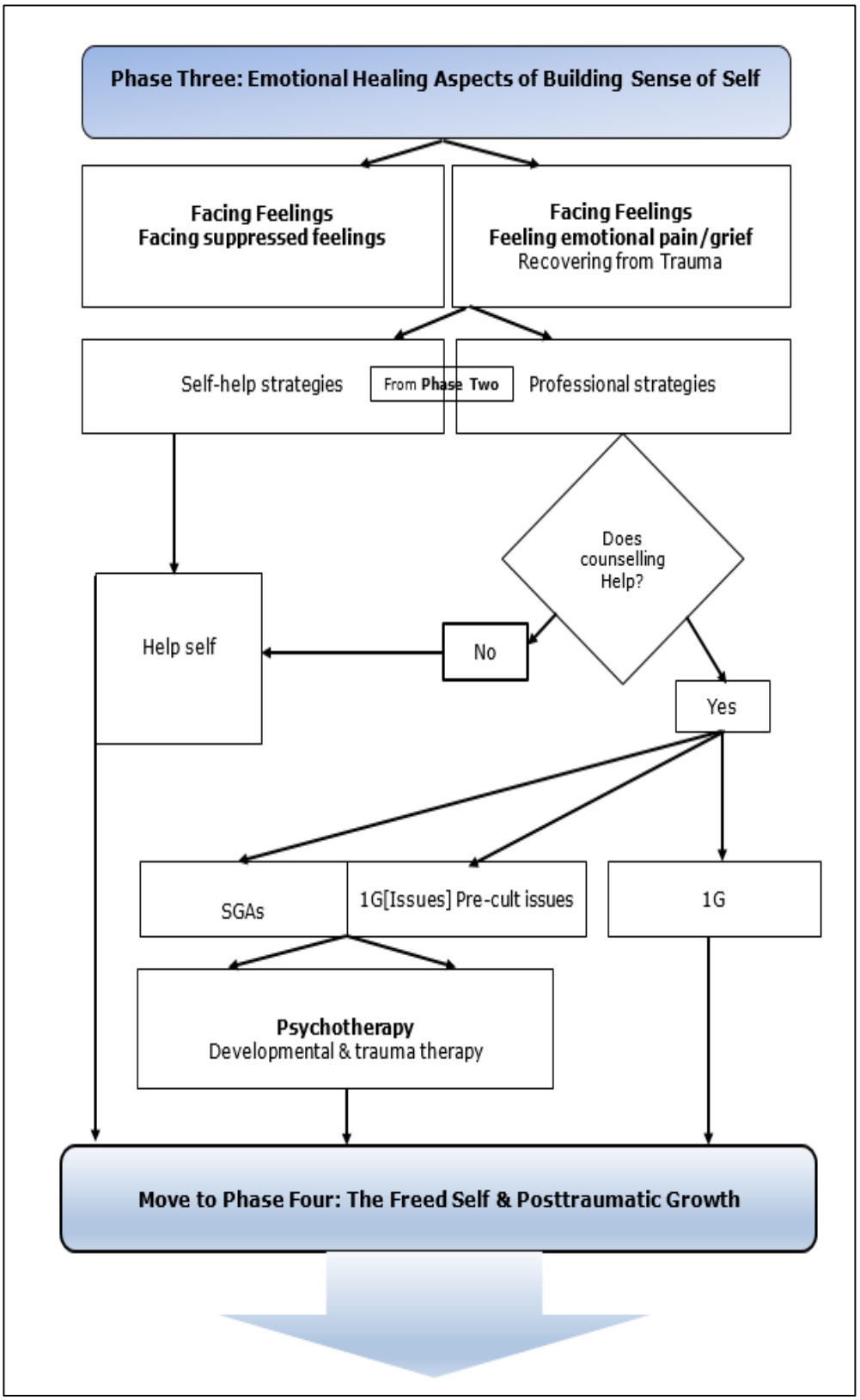
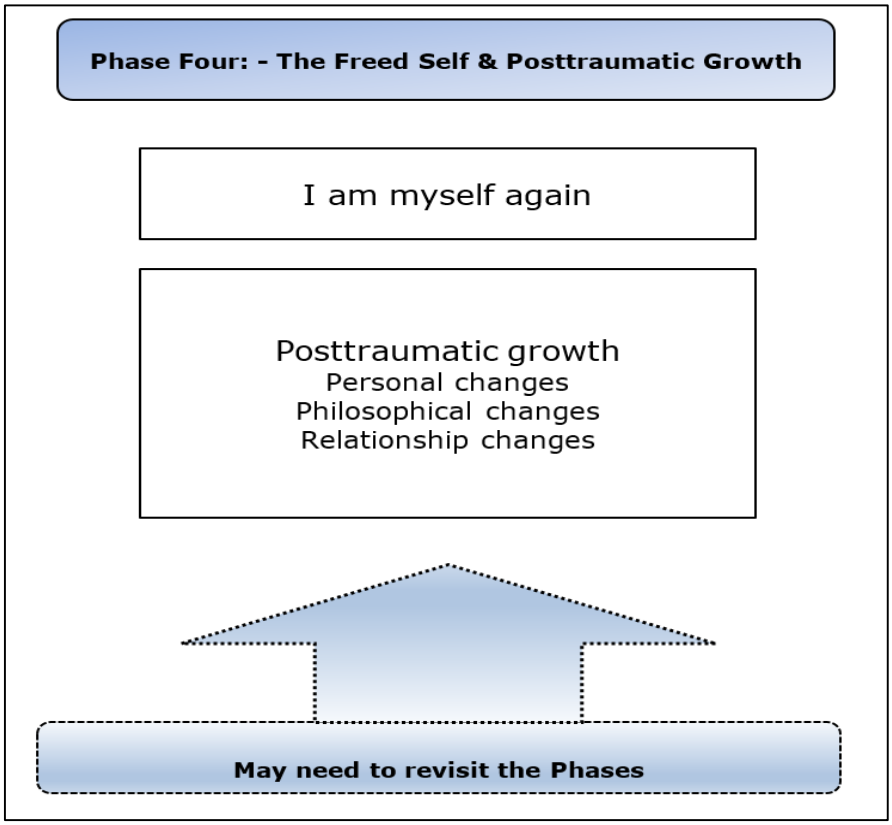


Figure 7.8: Phase Four



7.6 - Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored Gestalt theory of self and the Wellspring Thought Reform Model and integrated and applied these, evidencing aspects from the interview data. I have laid out my rationale for creating and adopting this new theoretical framework which integrates both 'normal', Gestalt, and 'brainwashing', thought-reform, aspects. As a result, I have contextualised the findings, evidencing what it is that former-members need to recover from. I have also introduced and evidenced the emergence of the categories, the four Phases of Recovery and Growth, and the coding for each Phase. I have set these out in diagrammatic form by way of illustration and for clarity.

In the following Chapters 8-11 I turn my attention to the findings, the four Phases of Recovery and Growth. I begin with Chapter 8, Phase One: Leaving - Physically & Psychologically.

Chapter 8 – Phase One: Leaving Physically & Psychologically

'You have to see the power and strength of just getting out. And you have to recognise the strength of being able to let go of something like that and just be back to rebuild.'
[Fred]

8.1 - Introduction

In this chapter I explicate what helps in Phase One, the first of the four Phases. The overarching category, 'freeing the authentic-self', is at the heart of the recovery process and is explored through various categories, throughout this and subsequent Phases.

The recovery process begins here, with leaving the cult, which is a significant event (van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015). It entails a transition out of the certainty of the narrow, rigid and restrictive mind-set and world of the thought-reform environment-field and entering a world of variety, choice, uncertainty and ambiguity. The processes involved leading up to leaving vary between participants but it is apparent that leaving must occur on both the physical and psychological level if the former-member is to move towards recovery and posttraumatic growth (Phase Four). Leaving physically involves leaving the cult environment-field. Leaving psychologically, that is, in the mind and emotions, necessitates freeing the restricted self, restoring the contact boundary and re-establishing genuine contact with the authentic-self and differentiation from the environment-field.

Before proceeding I set out the coding for this Phase and the resulting structure for the chapter. The categories for this Phase emerged as dense themes, that is, they were some of the most apparent across interviews, and emerged clearly in the early line-by-line analysis. The themes that arise within this Phase were applicable to all participants, to one degree or another, and leaving was the first step towards

recovery. I had originally assumed I would exclude 'leaving' from 'what helps' when reducing the data (see Chapter 6:6.12) and thought recovery would start at 'post-cult' (see Chapter 1: Figure 1.2). Evidently leaving physically does not automatically lead to recovery, including in my own case (see Chapter 2); there is, therefore, a need to leave physically and psychologically in order for the recovery process to begin. The categories and structure for Phase One are:

- Leaving Physically: Participant Experiences
- Leaving Physically and Psychologically:
    - External Intervention – Breaking the Confluential Trance
    - Internal - Thinking the Unthinkable Thought
- Leaving Psychologically: Calling a Cult a Cult - Diagnosis and Understanding
- Leaving Psychologically: Unmasking the Cult Leader

The coding is illustrated in Figure 7.5. In the next section I set out how participants physically left the cult. I then proceed to discuss categories arising in relation to leaving physically and psychologically and evidence these from the data.

8.2 - Leaving Physically – Participant Experiences

In no case was leaving straightforward, as so much had been invested in membership, including, in a number of cases, love for the leader and other members. Leaving therefore requires courage and resilience and entails a shift away from the closed, oppressive culture of the thought-reform environment-field that has become the individual's world, their mental universe as it were, to a society that is, for some, alien or no longer familiar (Derocher, 2008). The lack of familiarity with the world outside the cult can be marked, even for 1G. Powerful metaphors describing the distress and culture-shock (Adams, 2016; Ward et. al., 2001) on leaving are adopted, and

evidenced below. Some feel displaced, different, 'weird' even, and like a foreigner in their country of origin, a society that was once familiar to 1G.

> *'I felt like I had been beamed down to planet earth, you know, from this spaceship [the cult], and I was now living with all these aliens and it was very scary and weird.'* [Marietta]

> *'They left because they were [...] let's say standing on a precipice and didn't have, feel like they had, any other options, there was nowhere to go, then all of a sudden, it's like being forced out into a foreign land by yourself [...].'* [Lavinia]

Leaving may be initiated by external forces, that is, by way of intervention, expulsion or the cessation of the cult or programme. Expulsion and the cult or programme ceasing does not necessarily lead to the individual leaving psychologically or recognising and understanding their cult experience. In the case of expulsion, the individual leaves physically but they will not have had time to prepare themself psychologically. This can result in disorientation and confusion and is '*devastating*' [Marietta]. Shannon's cult disbanded and she left physically but she had not been able to leave psychologically, that is, she continued to perceive herself to be the negative, disordered person she had been told she was in the cult. She describes the shock and relief of discovering information about cults and identifying other former-members, decades after leaving. Her introjected beliefs about herself were challenged, her reality overturned. This was like '*worlds colliding'*, a violent metaphor describing the impact on the confluential trance, as her perception of reality was challenged. I address these issues further below.

Leaving may be delayed due to a number of practical issues, amongst which are:

- the need to change the distorted view of society
- lack of resources
- lack of outside contacts to turn to
- not knowing whom to trust

Participants left physically in a variety of different ways, the manner of which is illustrated in Figure 8.1. I adopt categories alluded to in the literatures (Lalich and Tobias, 2006), which are self-explanatory or previously defined. These categories are explored and evidenced further below, where relevant.

Figure 8.1: Participants Manner of Leaving

How Left	**Reason for Leaving**
Voluntary Exit [16]	Doubts outweighed fears Cult abusive to partner Cult leader child abuser Parents required to beat their children Death threat Moved to another country
Intervention [3]	Friend's strong challenge Parents arranged deprogramming
Information defined a cult [1]	Read article about cults
Gradual planned leaving [4]	Gradual realisation that it was a cult and moved away
Cult disbanded Programme ended [1]	No choice but to leave
Expelled [3]	Mental breakdown Disagreeing with doctrine Excommunicated
Not fully left [1]	Holding on in case need the cult

In the next section I apply the theoretical framework to the process of leaving physically and psychologically and then evidence and discuss these in the categories arising.

8.3 - Leaving Physically and Psychologically

Leaving physically and psychologically are two different but interconnected and interrelated processes. Evidently, if the member is planning to leave, but they physically remain in the cult, they have not fully left. Similarly, if they physically leave and do not leave psychologically, they have not fully left. Crucially, when the individual begins to leave in their mind (psychologically), the sense they make of the experience, and the help they receive on leaving, all has an impact on the trajectory of their recovery and whether it begins immediately, after weeks, years, or even decades in some cases.

In order to improve their circumstances and return to the authentic-self, the individual will need to change aspects of themself and the environment-field. Some participants evidence that attempts to effect change and challenge the cult leader had little or no effect, and resulted in further punishment and abuse. The choice is stark; the individual either continues in confluence, self-suppression and allows the abuse to continue (not changing), or leaves [Lavinia above]. It is therefore the individual member who has to effect the desired change if they are to begin to live out of their authentic-self. This comes at a high cost after dedicating their life to an abusive-cult, sometimes for decades, and involves many challenges. It is evidenced herein, in the Phases of recovery, that there are particular tasks that help in effecting this change and adjustment to life outside the cult.

The point at which the individual contacts the desire to improve their circumstances (sensation and awareness), and what activates it (action), varies between participants. For some it begins whilst they are in the cult, by way of doubts (the natural emergence of the

authentic-self), and others need assistance to break free of the confluential trance (intervention). For both, contacting this desire, however it is achieved, is necessary in order to begin to undo the introjective coercive confluence, which has tied up the energy of the individual in a fixed gestalt. Leaving is, therefore, a complex process entailing the reassertion and '*re-inflation*' [Daphne] of the authentic-self as it breaks free from the bounds of the thought-reform environment-field. In order, therefore, to undo the confluence, which supports the flow of introjects and maintains the cult pseudo-personality, and to begin the recovery process, the individual needs to leave.

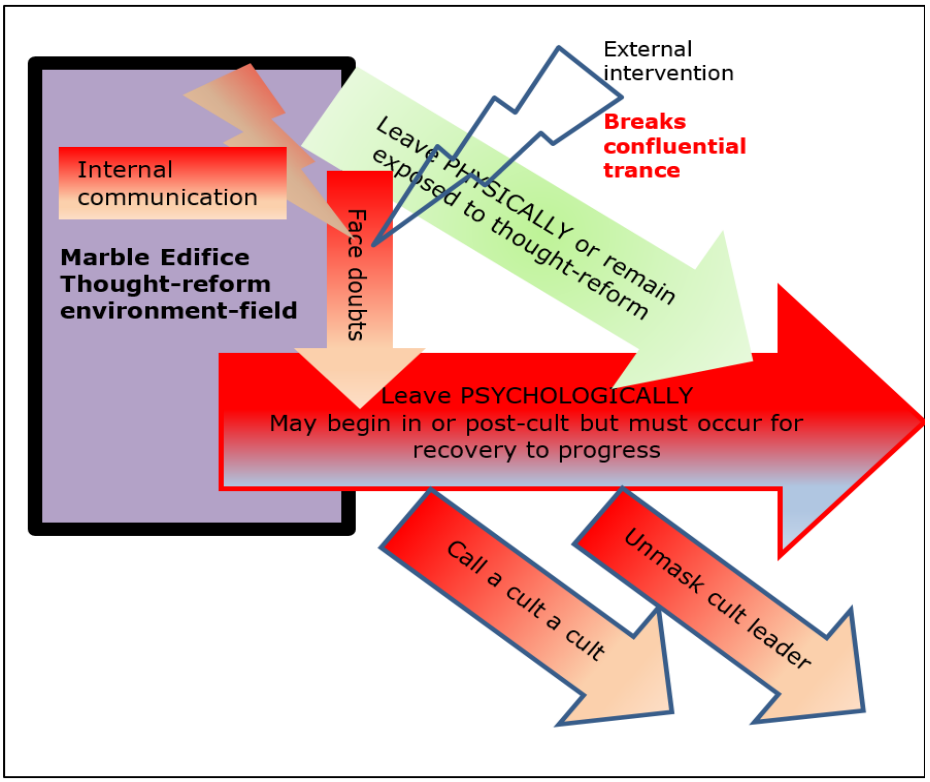
Some started to leave psychologically while still members, as evidenced by doubts and 'thinking the unthinkable thought' (I return to this below). In this case the psychological energy that has been bound or repressed out of awareness (Clarkson, 1999, p.49) and that has been expended on behalf of the cult (milieu control) begins to rise in service of the individual; but their dilemma continues because they are not in an environment that encourages differentiation, self-expression, self-actualisation, or self-regulation. They will need to operationalise a good deal of this energy to complete the gestalt cycle, and make full genuine contact, in order that a new set of possibilities can rise and a new 'figure' (see 7.2.2.) emerge (Perls et al, 1951, p.403) – a new life outside the cult. That is, the individual needs to operationalise their energy to creatively adjust, mobilise the fixed-gestalt, and to move towards fulfilling their natural needs, and to learn once again to self-regulate, to relate in a healthy manner. As the individual moves away from the introjective coercive confluence and pleasing others, they begin to transform the 'social character and pseudo-social existence' (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007, p.170), the pseudo-personality, and they can begin to contact their authentic-self.

This energy may have to be held in check if the individual cannot leave immediately; or it may explode out, either because of external factors, such as an intervention, or due to internal factors, such as the doubts, and critical thoughts, generated by the authentic-self (evidenced below). By way of summary, leaving physically and psychologically may therefore result from

- external sources by way of intervention; or expulsion; or the cult or programme cease, or
- within the individual internally, by independent thought, criticism of the leader, and doubts - thinking the unthinkable thought.

In order to illustrate the process of leaving physically and psychologically evidenced in this Phase, I present this in diagrammatic form, in Figure 8.2. The purple rectangle with thick borders signifies the '*marble edifice'* [Max], that is, thought-reform and the cult; the other shapes are related to the individual member and/or their family. Both lightning-bolts lead to the member facing doubts. The blue lightning-bolt indicates energy in the form of an external intervention, which breaks the confluential trance. The orange lightning-bolt signifies energy in the form of the individual's internal communication. The colour red indicates the emerging contact within the authentic-self and signifies sensation and raising awareness leading to leaving psychologically. The green indicates the need to leave physically or the individual remains exposed to the influence in the cult.

Figure 8.2: Leaving physically and psychologically



The language adopted by participants exemplifies these aspects and is energetic, lively, full of vitality and indicates a force in the service of the authentic-self (sensation and awareness). Words such as '*collapse*' and '*tumult*' [Jane] are evocative of the felt sense that prompts the mobilisation stage of the gestalt cycle, the internal force for change is now stronger than the introjects, resulting in action. I exemplify these below. For most this is a destabilising process because they are not used to the sensation of feeling and thinking for themselves, and they typically lack understanding and are unaware of the meaning or implications of this emerging awareness, often delayed until they 'call a cult a cult' (discussed below).

In order to fully leave they therefore need

- to break the confluential trance

- to contact their suppressed authentic-self, often evidenced as comprised of the critical thoughts and doubts – they need to 'think the unthinkable thought'
- to identify and label their group as an abusive-cult – to 'call a cult a cult'
- to evaluate their relationship by 'unmasking the cult leader'

All these aspects need to be addressed in Phase One in order for the individual to move on to the subsequent Phases, and these are addressed and evidenced in the categories below.

I begin by discussing how the confluential trance is broken or undone.

8.4 – External Intervention: Breaking the Confluential Trance

In this section I address the need for the individual to break the confluential trance in order to leave psychologically, restore the contact boundary, and create differentiation between themself and the environment-field. For some participants this is achieved with the assistance of others by means of an intervention, whether that be via planned exit-counselling or unplanned and spontaneous by a counsellor or family member/friend.

The purpose of a planned exit-counselling (defined in Chapter 3:3.4), is that the individual leaves physically (they are removed from the cult), rapidly followed by leaving psychologically (they are given information that challenges the cult mind-set and facilitates their contacting their authentic-self). The process is condensed into a short space of time and recovery is speeded up. The psychological aspect of the intervention entails creating differentiation, breaking through the introjective coercive confluence. It also helps the individual challenge the negative introjects about themself, and their projection onto and idealisation of the cult-leader. They are helped to understand what happened to them and identify the nature of the

group; that is, they identify it as an abusive-cult which results in an incipient understanding of thought-reform and the abusive power dynamics.

Exit-counselling is challenging, and can be traumatising, and the individual may be unwilling to listen or hear what is being said initially. For example, Daphne was '*shut down [...] I wasn't willing to hear anything*'; she would not listen to her family, she was disconnected from them, viewing them as the enemy. This resistance is in part because the individual is likely to be angry at the forced intervention, but also because it is challenging the confluential cult mind-set and the effects of the thought-reform. It is a shock as conflicting emotions arise as they are suddenly confronted with the reality of their situation and an incipient contact with the authentic-self. The individual may initially resist undoing the confluence and challenging the introjects - they resist 'throwing up' the metaphorical undigested food sitting in the stomach (Perls, et.al, 1951), by resisting the information. Showing videos and TV programmes, of other unrelated cult situations, raises awareness and helps the individual to recognise the same dynamics that were at play in their cult, and for some this aids a breakthrough. Daphne '*couldn't deny it any more'* and she evidences the power of beginning to recognise the coercive and controlling dynamics.

> *'I was almost having flashbacks in my mind's eye. I was remembering things that didn't sit well with me in the group and I started remembering about the humiliations; that they didn't think I was giving enough money although I was giving probably close to 50% of my salary. It happened over the course of a couple of days where, as they were showing me talk shows and things like that, of other groups that had been on TV - I mean they weren't talking about my group - I could just relate to what was being shown to me.' [Daphne]*

The recovery process began as she understood the nature of the group. The authentic-self that had been '*squeezed*', naturally began to '*reinflate*' [Daphne]; she was raising awareness of and chewing over the introjects. She was also helped to undo confluence and the confluential trance, re-establishing differentiation between herself and the environment-field.

Others have an abrupt experience of leaving with an informal intervention resulting in undoing the confluential trance, accompanied by a strong physiological sensation. For example, Nina describes having '*a snapping moment*', that is, she suddenly snapped out of the cult-mind set. This occurred, while still a member, when she was seeing a counsellor who showed her an article containing information about cults.

> *'I was reading this line on a page of an article about cults when I had what I called back then, a snapping moment. You know it was that clear cut. I was done. Snap. It's like my brain just went whoop. I was out of the cult mind-set at that moment. Now I still had a whole bunch of recovery, but that piece of information broke the spell.'*

I suggest her breaking '*the spell'* is coming out of the confluential trance brought on by confluence, introjection and ASCs, and this enabled her to see that she no longer needed the cult. The confluential trance has ensured the individual is in a suggestible state whereby they can be influenced because it bypasses both the mind (evidenced by the sensation of the 'brain' coming back 'on line') and the emotions and utilises the cult identity, as the individual self-suppresses.

If the participant has physically left but is '*still there, kind of mentally'*, a direct challenge to not return to the cult, from another former member or friend, may be powerful.

> '[It was] *'like an idea that kind of flew in the face of everything I had been thinking about for 9 years, you know, and so that sort of began to kind of stir a little bit in my brain.'* [Reginald]

Challenge from a friend about the guru's motivation resulted in Jane feeling like

> *'…something just felt so wrong in the pit of my stomach, then something just switched.'*

What is evidenced is that the hypnotic confluential trance requires certain strategies in order to '*wake up*' the individual, to '*snap*' them out of it. In these cases, it was cognitive challenges, the encouragement to think for themselves, in the form of information, leading to understanding and 'calling a cult a cult' (addressed below).

Reginald illustrates waking from the *'stale'* confluential trance when another former-member of his group challenged his assumption that he will return (above).

> *'And then one day I went out, I sat on the front yard on the grass and it was like waking up, all of a sudden it was as if colours changed and everything. I just went boi-ing. I felt like I had just changed my perception of the entire makeup of the universe. As if I had been in a kind of a trance. And I wouldn't usually emphasise that, but it really did have a quality of a sort of awakening from a hypnotic trance that had gotten stale. And, I thought, wow, I'm probably not going back and don't really need to!'*

He had already left physically, nine months before, but that day he finally left psychologically. I suggest this is evidence of contacting the authentic-self again, seeing the world through his own eyes, as it were. This waking up enabled him to make his own decision about

whether to return or not; that is, he was in genuine contact with his authentic-self and he started to self-regulate, gradually breaking his dependency. These participants evidence how someone can suddenly leave both psychologically and physically or do so within a short period of time.

When the individual is in a confluential trance, evidently it means that there is virtually no differentiation between them and the environment, they are merged and therefore desensitised. They cannot activate their energy for themself, and are unaware of their predicament. Max refers to that which holds the individual as a '*marble edifice*' (below). This data evidences that for some 'freeing the authentic-self' therefore requires external assistance.

I have explored how leaving can be assisted externally. I now proceed to evidence how leaving can originate internally, that is, it can be initiated from within the individual. This aspect of what helps leaving psychologically is: 'thinking the unthinkable thought'.

8.5 – Internal: Thinking the Unthinkable Thought – the Emerging Authentic-Self

The different categories of leaving in Figure 8.1 reflect when the member started to question, doubt and think critical thoughts (referred to as doubts), that is, to think for themselves and no longer self-suppress, as much. These doubts may emerge naturally from within the individual, or they may emerge because of an intervention (evidenced above). This is a necessary step the member must take in order to leave and signals the beginning of genuine contact as they allow themselves to become aware of sensation on the gestalt cycle. In this section I explore how these doubts originate internally, which leads, in many cases, to the member breaking the confluential trance for themselves, and leaving.

In the milieu control of a thought-reform environment, communication with outsiders, and mitigating information, is cut off; as is the internal dialogue and communication with the authentic-self, which is ultimately self-suppressed. This is not (only) activated defensively, but is rationalised as being the ideal way to live. Through introjective coercive confluence the individual complies and the thought-reform squeezes the self. Suppressing doubts is tantamount to suppressing the authentic-self and it is therefore challenging for members to face their own authentic thoughts. When they do, it may begin a process of contacting the self, for the first time in perhaps a long time, even decades. Facing doubts, therefore, heralds the emergence of the authentic or pre-cult self, signalling an incipient healthy and natural self-actualising process. The pre-cult [1G], authentic-self [1G and SGAs] is breaking through the confluence and control, and the restricted self is engaged in the healthy task of change, struggling to break free psychologically. This is a painful and difficult process, which I evidence below. The self-protective, self-regulating system is emerging, and the individual is beginning to discern that which is healthy and that which is toxic and the effect can be to turn their world upside down. It is, in effect, a breakdown of the cult's reality and can be like '*worlds colliding'* [Shannon], as the individual acknowledges difference. It is also an attempt to overcome obstacles that have been preventing genuine contact.

Members of an abusive-cult will have been taught to put aside their personal rights in service of a cause and to resort to self-criticism when they doubt or question (confession and demand for purity). They may assume, on the whole, that disagreement is due to some personal fault, some negativity or sinfulness (confession, demand for purity and dispensing of existence). The individual is likely to have introjected the negative view of themselves, seeing themselves through the eyes of the cult leader

'…as someone who is defective, deficient, unholy, unworthy, and, and so when that sense of self gets internalised it's like that self is not deserving of compassion or love or patience.' [Lavinia]

In order to leave it is, therefore, crucial for this negative inner dialogue to be acknowledged, to challenge the introjects, and for the individual to face doubts about the cult, its practices, and the leader (also addressed in Chapter 9:9.5.1). It is, nevertheless, risky, challenging, and fear inducing to face these suppressed thoughts because the implications are great as they may lead to change, including the individual deciding to leave or being expelled.

'That's the thought [slaps hand]. So, I think, "I don't agree" - and then I might have to leave. I mean, you hardly dare think the thought. It's an unthinkable thought.' [Marjorie]

For some, the cult mind-set is totally closed to doubts, and the individual member is encased in a '*marble edifice*' [Max]. This evocative metaphor provides a strong flavour of the enduring nature of the thought-reform, the confluential trance, and the rigidity of the cult system. Nevertheless, once even a small question or doubt becomes a thought, a '*crack'* [Max] may appear, and the individual can begin to question, which in turn may lead to leaving. This is the unthinkable thought, which once the member thinks, the cult mind-set, the marble edifice, may crumble quickly.

P. I have this idea, this sort of metaphor of the cult mind-set, a cult member being in this marble edifice, which can't be cracked, there is no way in, and then at some point, there gets what I call a crack. And the crack is where you are able to at least ask a question. So this is very important for me. My own belief is if there is no crack nothing can be done. I myself had no crack for like 29½ of my 30 years -

impervious. Once the crack is there very often the whole edifice crumbles down. The very first question that I just simply have is: "is there anything that if it were proved, would make you question the guru?".

R: So it's a very big thing to start facing the doubts?

P. And that's what I mean by the crack. [Max]

For some these suppressed doubts are like a '*drip, drip, drip*' [Jane] which are the unthinkable thoughts that the member repeatedly suppresses but that keep returning until they build up into such a torrent they break through the marble edifice. Once faced the member has made another step towards contacting their authentic-self and leaving. This final step is likened to a shelf collapsing [Maribel] as it gets too heavy with all the suppressed thoughts, feelings and introjects - 'other people's stuff' (Clarkson, 1999).

'Stuff that you don't wanna believe, and things that happen along the way that produce some cognitive dissonance, they go on the shelf and at some point the shelf gets so heavy it collapses and then you leave. You may not understand why you left, you just know it's no longer working and you leave.' [Maribel]

The impact of the shelf collapsing can be likened for some to '*a reality breakdown'* [Jane], that is, the reality that has been maintained in the cult breaks down. This may appear sudden, but because the drips have been dripping, and the 'stuff' being put on the shelf, when the individual finally allows themself to make contact with their authentic-self it gives way (sensation and awareness). In some cases, this is brought about by the genuine contact with another, for example, the counsellor, as in Nina's case above, or with a friend or family member, as in Daphne and Reginald's case above, resulting in breaking through the confluential trance.

The exploding emotion as the individual contacts their authentic-self may be traumatic and overwhelming. Jane describes the stages she went through; the shock, then numbness, then facing violent emotions (addressed in Phase Three) whilst her sense of identity, the cult-personality, dissolved and there was little left to replace it after 17 years of membership. The rug being pulled out, in the following quote, is similar to the shelf collapsing (above). I have retained the energetic, explosive, depressive, and dissociative nature of the dialogue in order to illuminate how challenging contacting the authentic-self can be.

> *'Well, its um, it's taken on, I mean it, it has just been, been mad, absolutely mad, just the most termultuous - is that a word? - Just, m, crazy year, the most, s, up and down, year of my life really – and I have had a pretty crazy life! You know, so this year really takes the biscuit and um, er it started off um with shock, I think, you know, um, and then a kind of period of numbness, while, while the shock was sort of going in and then when the shock hit I would say there was about three months of just really um, violent emotions, I don't mean violent as in I was violent but just as they hit me they felt violent, um, and, um just not even knowing who I was, my sense of identity just evaporated, all my coping mechanisms that I had built up over the years just vanished. I felt like the rug had been completely pulled out from underneath me and um, ah, you know, I just didn't know whether I was coming or going. That lasted for about three months.' [Jane]*

Here we see evidence of the authentic-self '*re-inflating*' [Daphne], expanding, asserting itself, taking up more room, cracking and crumbling the marble edifice. The colourful energetic language indicates contacting the self on the gestalt cycle as sensation and awareness, and is evocative of the felt sense that prompts

mobilisation, bypassing the introjects, resulting in action, that is, leaving and all the challenges that brings.

I suggest that doubts that are purposely self-suppressed are evidence the individual holds two contradictory ideas. This is cognitive dissonance [Maribel above] which results in inner conflict and mental discomfort (Travis and Aronson, 2013, p.13). In order to cope with the dissonance, the member resorts to self-justifying behaviour, which in turn continues to maintain the cult mind-set. MMRI imaging scans (Ibid.) related to studies investigating cognitive dissonance provide empirical evidence that when people are trying to process dissonant information the reasoning areas of the brain are virtually shut down, and that, when consonance is restored (the confluent cult mind-set and obedience in this case) the emotion circuits of the brain light up 'happily', thus providing evidence that

> '…once our minds are made up, it is hard to change them' (Ibid., p.19).

This concept demonstrates a fixed-gestalt, and resistance to change, and illustrates why it is so difficult to contact the authentic-self and leave. It explains why many remain members longer than they might, because facing these doubts entails becoming aware of a dissonance, which is mentally and emotionally painful (ibid.). Having dedicated their lives to something, sometimes for decades, facing that it is not what they thought it was, can be both devastating and humiliating (further evidence in Chapter 11: Phase Three).

Facing doubts challenges the introjects about the cult leader and whether or not they are as powerful or as special as the member believed (further discussion in section 8.7 below). I evidence this in the tentative discourse by Sean, who, whilst acknowledging his doubts, indicates that it may still be difficult to criticise the leader, on some levels, even 30 years after leaving.

> *'Prior to our both [with partner] leaving, as I began to um verbalise my um doubts and um negative judgements about the guru um ah it was very difficult to say that out loud and my partner was absolutely supportive of that and not in any way um you know defending the guru just really hearing me and when we left ur we both left at exactly the same moment with no uh ambivalence about it from that point on.'*

As evidenced by Sean, the genuine contact of being able to share doubts with a trusted other can affirm a sense of authentic-self, and helps the individual trust in their own judgement, mind and perception of reality. This aspect is also evidenced by Jessie, in Chapter 1:1.4.2 and discussed further in Chapter 9: Phase Two.

Doubts signal an opening up of the possibilities that choices bring and evidence an incipient flexibility in the mind. The individual can begin to think about whether to stay or to leave, to contact what they really think, rather than suppressing contrary ideas. It is nevertheless threatening, particularly when they have introjected warnings about the dangers and negative consequences of leaving (dispensing of existence). Admitting doubts to themself, or verbalising them, is reinstating the contact boundary and is challenging to all aspects of the environment-field and will most likely result in inner conflict, and possibly conflict with other members including the leader. One participant cites the case of a member of their cult who publicly exposed the cult leader's abuse and hypocrisy, and as a result received death threats, an unusual but terrifying and chilling occurrence in itself, made more real because they knew how vindictive this leader could be. Making independent choices is therefore challenging on many levels and requires various strategies that help (addressed throughout the Phases).

If former-members do not allow themselves to contact their authentic-self and face the implications that the doubts and critical thoughts raise, including looking honestly and fully at the cult experience and the cult leader (below), and facing the emotional turmoil and pain (Phase Three), they may lose many years, confused and lost to themselves. This is evidenced by most participants and it was only when they diagnosed their cult as a cult that they found access to appropriate resources and began to understand what had happened to them. It is to this category that I turn next.

8.6 – Leaving Psychologically: Calling a Cult, a Cult – Diagnosis and Understanding

> *'Well, if what I experienced was a cult, then I could study cults and come to understand what mind control, or thought-reform, is.' [Maribel]*

> *'I figured out "OH IT'S A CULT, it was a CULT that's why my life is so f*ed up", excuse my French. I didn't have a diagnosis for what I was getting away from. I put "cult" into Google and all this information came out, including sites exposing the group, including recovery needs and life issues, and I delved into that. Oh, it's just GREAT to have - you can't get a treatment if you don't have a diagnosis.' [Gloria]*

A number of participants explicitly indicated that they did not begin to recover until they had '*diagnosed*' and labelled their group as a cult. Diagnosing what a cult is and 'calling a cult a cult' leads to accessing appropriate resources and is reported to be an essential part of the recovery process. Diagnosis is the identification of the nature of an illness or other problem by examination of the symptoms (Soanes and Hawker, 2005), and in this case leads them to make sense of the experience and to understanding why they think and feel

the way they do (the symptoms). This heralds the beginning of coming to terms with the experience, and for some this 'diagnosis' came after many years of searching for understanding and appropriate help.

Some people voluntarily exit because they no longer feel the cult is right for them but they may not understand what they were involved in, that is, they do not leave psychologically, until they diagnose the group as a cult. Maribel suggests this may not happen until

> *'…they go through some kind of exit-counselling or exit therapy of some sort. [...] When my therapist defined the cult experience then I could start to come to terms with it. As soon as I could understand the experience, then I could look at how it affected me, and what I chose to do with it now. That was liberating. It was my choice and I took control over my life rather than being out of control.'*

In order to leave psychologically it is therefore necessary to understand cognitively what a cult is, to understand the coercion and manipulative processes involved, the thought-reform, and the implications of the influence of the cult leader (below). It also helps the individual recognise they have choices and that their life is theirs; it supports genuine contact with the authentic-self.

Winnie found her way to resources once she was able to *'call it a cult'*.

> *'So I started ordering books about cults, reading all those, and that was fascinating'.*

In Daphne's intervention (above) she reached a point where she said "…*so you think this group was a cult?*" and this was a breakthrough for her. She evidences the power of diagnosing the cult as a cult in aiding breaking through the confluential trance.

> *'[...] and that was it! I could not deny the things that I saw in those videos, they were the SAME EXACT THINGS; it was the other side of the story that I couldn't see with the blinders on when I was in the group. You know, my exiting of that group happened over the course of 5 days whereas for some people it takes years.'* [Daphne]

If the individual does not diagnose their abusive-cult as a cult, the consequences may be that they remain influenced by the cult mind-set, not recognising the symptoms – the fall out and emotional pain of having been a member (Phase Three). Marjorie evidences this aspect in relation to her friend who was a fellow member 40 years before interview, but who never understood what she had been involved in and so continues in the cult mind-set, evidenced by her suspicion of outsiders (milieu control).

> *'My friend is still in a sanitised version of our cult which has been accepted as a mainstream Church, but she's still in the cult in her mind, and she's still suspicious of me.'* [Marjorie]

My own experience was similar, as noted in Chapter 2.2.5. When I left LOGC I did not have the necessary information, or understanding, and therefore did not challenge the cult mind-set. I remained a member psychologically for many years, evidenced by a narrow focus and fear.

Diagnosing the cult facilitates raising awareness and continuing contact. This can lead to mobilisation and action as the individual strives to understand and to think critically. It supports their thinking and affirms their right to think for themselves. This can enable them to cease the self-suppression and to engage with their inner dialogue – it facilitates them thinking the unthinkable thoughts.

I noted in Chapter 3 the difficulties reflected in the literatures in relation to defining a cult and finding an appropriate label. This research highlights that adopting the term cult has great utility for former-members and that it is particularly helpful in order to access information and help, whether it be by publications or on the internet (see Phase Two: Section 9.6 for further discussion). This is an argument for adopting the term.

A further task in this Phase is to evaluate the relationship to the cult leader, to 'bring them down' and is coded as: 'unmasking the cult leader'. It is to this category I turn next.

8.7 - Leaving Psychologically: Unmasking the Cult Leader

In this section I address the necessary task of understanding and unmasking the cult leader, reported by participants to be an essential part of the recovery process. This is the densest of all the themes that arose in analysis.

The leader/ship was crucial to participants' experience of life in the cult as they held the balance of power and were the most influential member/s. There were a variety of experiences amongst the participants; some were in personal contact with the cult leader and others were following from afar, which included following them on the internet or TV. In all cases the participants were affected by the leader whilst in their group, sometimes positively but mainly negatively. For most they were the centre of their mental universe, although the success and reach of the leader varied across the cults represented.

For some participants the leader was their motivation for joining and they variously came to believe that they

- were the embodiment of a God
- had special power to point them to a higher spiritual being
- had the power to transform their life

- could heal them and/or fulfil their needs
- could give them purpose and direction for their life

The new member may initially be filled with optimism, thinking that they have found the answer to life's problems leading them to believe that

> '*...the world is wonderful and I'm enlightened or I'm working towards enlightenment, I have the perfect teacher.'* [Lavinia]

In the idealising confluence the member becomes convinced that what has been promised is actually real, the 'Truth' (sacred science), and that the leader is an inherent part of this. The projection of perfection on to the leader and belief in their actual power and the miraculous (mystical manipulation and sacred science) can lead to the member buying into everything else

> '*…once you see something that's miraculous you buy into every other thing very, very easily.'* [Maribel]

For some, their cult-leaders are gifted and charismatic, and have positive qualities which attracted them and contributed to the idealisation.

> *'But on the other hand he was quite brilliant. And he could talk a blue streak, he had a sense of humour, he laughed, um, was a performer, he would sit in his chair and he would suddenly just start talking and there were of course tape recorders or videotapes, and [they would] transcribe it, and then there would be an article or a book or a whatever.'* [Reginald]

Sean's aim on joining '*was to get closer and closer to the guru*', in order that he could '*replace myself [...] because the old me was just*

worthless'. Members hope that the leader's power will rub off on them.

> *'One of the magical ideas [...] was that to be near the guru in itself is some great - this is typical of Hinduism, to be near a so called Avatar, you know that kind of rubs off on you.'* [Reginald]

Getting close to the leader is, nevertheless, risky because becoming confluent means that there is no differentiation, no protective contact boundary in place whereby the member can judge what is healthy and what is not and so

> *'…when the member's openness, and let's say vulnerability, your protective shields go down, then unfortunately manipulative leader or leaders take advantage of that.'* [Lavinia]

If the leader is abusive then the cult is likely to be or to become an abusive-cult.

Abusive cult leaders may publicly present a charismatic, idealised and saint like mask, attractive to outsiders (including potential new members), but, like most abusers, they hide their abuse behind closed doors. One participant exposes why this might happen, explaining that because some cult leaders need to maintain their narcissistic belief in their own omnipotence, they think that they can do whatever they want with members.

> *'Keeping [members] enslaved one way or the other is sort of necessary for the leader or else they can't sustain their own delusion of omnipotence, that's the basic idea.'* [Sean]

For many participants, as they grew closer to the cult leader, the idealised view was challenged and they began to see them for the human they are. This may lead to confusion as to why the perfect cult

leader, the *'lover of all lovers'* [Max], who is also viewed as a god by some, would treat the member in such an abusive manner. In order to maintain the illusion, the member is likely to self-suppress (milieu control) the doubts and assume some wrong in themself (introjective coercive confluence and confession). The explanation as to why this is happening is more often to do with the leader and

> *'…the arbitrariness of abuse. That it has, so often so much more to do with the abuser and the abuser's mental state or let's say, on unworked through issues that get projected on to the member.'* [Lavinia]

This coercive confluence results in the member introjecting a negative perception of themself. Once the leader evidences '*cruelty and deception and corruption*' [Sean] then the inner conflict may begin in the member, leading to doubts, as evidenced above.

The confusion as to what sort of person the cult leader is can be a protracted process often only resolved by being given concrete evidence. Maribel expresses this dilemma.

> *'This man was either a pathological narcissist, a sociopath, anti-social personality disorder, or he was a God.'*

Unmasking the cult leader entails bringing them '*down to earth'* so the member can *'dissect their persona*', and '*take them down; and understand their psychology'* [Nigel]. It is helpful, therefore, to humanise them, to understand who they are as a person, their psychology and developmental background. When these aspects of the cult leader's persona and life remain a mystery it hinders recovery.

The idealisation and beliefs about the leader need to be '*debunked*' [Lavinia]. When one participant heard that the cult leader was dealing

in drugs, a fact that had been obscured from her for decades, she left immediately. She therefore needed to

> *'…unpick the person and see that he absolutely wasn't what he said he was.'* [P]

Fred came to see his powerful, abusive leader as a weak human being who was '*messed up with a lot of problems*'. These problems resulted in him unconsciously treating his followers in an abusive manner. Eventually Fred came to see that the abuse and control became conscious and deliberate although none of the members realised it at the time.

> *'I believe that there is only one person that was conscious about what he was doing.'* [Fred]

If the cult leader is not unmasked then it will be difficult for the former-member to recover and move forward in their life because the leader's power has seemed so real, mystical – and frightening (mystical manipulation and sacred science).

> *'It just reinforces the magic and the power, it's a very scary power. You don't want to betray that power, or go against that power because, I, it, you know, for me he was God like, and, and um the threat of his disapproval was horrible.'* [Maribel]

The death of the cult leader may not be enough to free the former-member from their beliefs about them. They may believe the power will continue beyond the grave, as evidenced by Dolores whose leader had died a few years prior to interview.

> *'I constantly struggle with this, the sense we got, that there's a presence there. He always would say he's inside you, he's around you, he's above you, whatever. Ah, you know, if there is an empty chair that would be where [cult*

leader] would sit, you put the chair out, you put a place for him at the table.' [Dolores]

Without unmasking them, a living or dead leader may continue to haunt the former-member for years to come.

It is important that the former-member understand both the psychological make-up of their cult leader and also the psychological mechanisms and relational dynamics that maintained membership. This is in order that the interconnected and interactive nature of the experience is understood.

The thought-reform milieu demands that the '*locus of control'* [Emma, Lindsey] be externalised to the cult and the leader, which is achieved because of the power imbalance in the relationship. In order to maintain membership, cult members need to suppress their doubts about the leader (milieu control) and in exchange introject their own negativity (or sinfulness). One participant explains these dynamics by way of the concept of the 'drama triangle' (Karpman, 2014). A triangle is labelled at each corner with roles that people play out with each other. These are: persecutor, victim, and rescuer.

'He (the cult leader) is putting himself as the rescuer, we are the victims and Satan is the persecutor. So then, you know after a while I realised, now hang on that's a huge lie.' [P]

The cult leader projects their weaknesses into the members, maintaining the illusion of strength. This reinforces the member's victim stance, and reinforces their need for the leader to rescue them from those weaknesses. This dynamic ensures the continuing need for, and dependence on, the leader to save them from themself and the persecutor, perceived in this case as the spiritual power of Satan (mystical manipulation and sacred science). It is helpful for the former-member to understand these dynamics, challenge the

introjected view of themselves as negative or sinful (victim on the triangle). They also need to disown the qualities that are not their own, relocate them with the leader and take ownership of their own strengths and positive qualities.

It is important that the former-member acknowledges that they are a true victim of the leader's abuse, rather than blaming themself.

> *'It was important for me to see him for what he was. I really saw myself as a victim, not as a willing victim, I don't see myself that way. I see myself as someone who was a victim, who was psychologically raped. Spiritually and psychologically raped and um, it would be the same as if I was walking down the street and he came out of a dark corner and grabbed me. Yeah, he had me emotionally captive for 10 years.'* [Maribel]

Unmasking him helped because

> *'…as soon as I realised he had no power over me there was just me left.'* [Maribel]

When referring to confluential trance Perls et al. (1951, p.122) note that:

> 'We are all suggestible in this way, but the safeguard is the availability of the suggestion to awareness and the ability to evaluate the emotional attachment to the other person'.

This point is important. When awareness is raised and identification with the abusive-cult leader is challenged, and the emotional attachment evaluated, the contact boundary is reinstated and the confluential trance undone. That is, the former-member is left with just their authentic-self, albeit with many complex feelings, including a sense of loss of the cult leader, for some. This step is vital for the

recovery process to proceed. It is painful and disillusioning to face, but a necessary task.

As evidenced, within the confluent thought-reform environment-field there is little opportunity for self-evaluation. Once self-evaluation and doubts become a sensation, 'cracks' occur. As doubts arise and choice comes into the field, the member can begin to evaluate their relationship, resulting in them unmasking the cult leader and leaving psychologically. As the former-member separates their identity from that of the cult, and the cult leader, they may begin to realise they don't need them for anything. This is '*healing*' and contributes to '*personal growth*' [Lavinia].

I now summarise and conclude this Chapter.

8.8 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored Phase One of what helps former-members recover from an abusive-cult experience. The recovery process necessitates that the individual leaves both physically and psychologically. Leaving psychologically is aided by: undoing the confluential trance; thinking the unthinkable thought – facing doubts; calling a cult a cult – diagnosing and understanding; and unmasking the cult leader. These tasks support the former-member to return to their authentic-self. Once the member has left physically and the psychological tasks are engaged with, recovery has begun and they can move forward into Phase Two.

These processes, essential for leaving psychologically, continue into Phase Two. Because of the need to dismantle the harmful introjects and leave harmful behaviours behind, that is because something is being dismantled, left behind or taken away from the individual, it is important that they attend to '*building a sense of self'* simultaneously and strengthen the authentic-self. Moving on and recovering therefore entails leaving behind the world members have given their

all to. Understanding therefore requires sensitive handling both by themselves for themselves (self-help); by family; and by professionals and counsellors (professional-help). These are all aspects which are explored in Chapter 9: Phase Two under the category '*Cognitive understanding aspects of building a sense of self'*.

Chapter 9 – Phase Two: Cognitive Understanding Aspects of Building Sense of Self

'I think the most helpful thing first and foremost is to find whatever it is a person is interested in on their own outside of the cult as it is a validating situation for building sense of self. It reinforces a sense that there's a person of themself there besides what they are told to be. And then the next thing is learning what is considered the normal exit-counselling strategies.' [Gloria]

'I haven't really left it completely behind; I've left those bridges unburnt. Just to emphasise, get help! Leaving is a massive thing, massive, massive thing and for me, my experience tells me, almost 10 years after I left, it still has a very profound effect on me because I haven't had exit-counselling.' [Matt]

9.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I explicate what helps in Phase Two, the second of the four Phases. The overarching category continues to be 'freeing the authentic-self'. In Phase One it is evidenced that the former-member must leave physically and psychologically in order to recover. As they diagnose their group as a cult, begin to assess and understand what happened to them, undoing the confluential trance, challenging the introjects, leaving behind the harmful beliefs and behaviours, they dismantle the cult-identity. This process continues into Phase Two and because something is being dismantled, left behind or taken away from them, it is important that they attend to '*building a sense of self*' concurrently. If they do not they may be left further depleted and vulnerable, with nothing or little left. Phase Two therefore involves a dismantling ('*understanding*') and a building up ('*building a sense of self*') and addresses the internal and external aspects of the cognitive

processes required. These may occur with professional help and/or self-help which are also discussed in this Phase.

Before proceeding I evidence the coding that emerges from the data and the resulting structure for this chapter. The data is dense and complex and in order to be transparent I summarise how categories emerged for this Phase. The overarching category '*building a sense of self'* emerged when I reordered the categories into Phases and it was apparent that it applied to both Phases Two and Three. It was evidenced that participants needed to address cognitive before emotional and these were split (discussion in Chapter 7:7.5).

The analysis in Phase Two was coded with two overarching categories: '*building sense of self*' and '*normal exit-counselling strategies'*. These 'in-vivo codes' (Richards and Richards, 1994) arise from Gloria's interview (quote above) and are representational of other interview data and summarise the recovery process in this Phase. I retain the in-vivo code, '*building a sense of self*' as the term is relatively self-explanatory. '*Normal exit-counselling strategies*' requires further explanation. Exit-counselling is previously defined in Chapter 3:3.4, and is evidenced in Phase One to speed up leaving both physically and psychologically and is therefore an important component of recovery. As exit-counselling includes both educational aspects (information leading to further understanding) and a contractual counselling relationship, I have interpreted the term to refer to:

- Those 'educational' topics that help former-members recover; that is, the information necessary in order to cognitively reassess their experience, which in turn leads to further understanding and supports adjustment to life post-cult. This category 'understanding' is also evidenced in Phase One: Section 8.7 as being crucial for recovery. In order to account

for this in Phase Two, this aspect of 'exit-counselling strategies' is coded as 'understanding'.

- My original categories included 'formal' and 'informal' strategies that help. These were renamed 'professional-help' and 'self-help' as both were indicated in the data. The contractual counselling aspects became 'Professional-help' and was split further into 'counselling that helps'; and 'counselling that doesn't help' and then merged in the discussion below into 'counselling' which includes both. I retain 'self-help'.

It is also apparent from the data that there are both internal and external processes that help and these are reflected in the structure of this chapter. That is, I have grouped strategies that help broadly into 'internal' and 'external'. I begin the chapter by explicating professional-help and self-help strategies and relate to these in the succeeding categories and Phases where applicable.

Whilst some categories are less dense than others, they are included because I assert that 'what helps' some participants may help others (Langer, 2009). The structure for Phase Two is therefore:

- Professional-help: Counselling
- Self-help
- Internal Cognitive Processes: Building a sense of self
- External processes: Practical considerations that help

The coding is illustrated in Figure 7.6. I evidence the professional and self-help strategies before addressing 'building a sense of self'.

9.2 – Professional-help - Counselling

In this section I address the category 'professional-help' which refers predominantly to 'counselling'. There are also references in the data to professionals other than counsellors including spiritual leaders,

clergy and theologians who were helpful in providing spiritual reflection and alternate understanding of spiritual and Biblical texts. I focus on counsellors and these different categories of professional are not addressed further herein, but the discussion may apply to them in some respects.

Once the leaving process has begun, the individual may seek professional-help outside the cult. The benefit of attending counselling with a professional counsellor is that they are trained, and required to adhere to a code of ethics. That is, they should be accountable, exhibit integrity and trustworthiness, and be able to provide a safe space in line with accrediting organisations, for example BACP and UKCP in the UK. An ethical counsellor can offer a therapeutic relationship which entails relational support and comfort for emotional pain, combined with psychological knowledge (Crocker and Philippson, 2005). This creates a layer of safety for any client and a framework for ethical counselling. The terms counselling and psychotherapy are applied differently by a range of different authors, counselling modalities, and countries (Cooper, 2011). For the purposes of this study, I define counselling as a contractual relationship between the client and the counsellor which is a relatively short-term intervention (up to a year) and may include educational and information giving aspects (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007). I define psychotherapy, which I distinguish from counselling, although it contains the basic aspects of counselling, as longer-term (over a year), and which addresses developmental and characterological issues in depth within an ongoing therapeutic healing relationship (Ibid., Prochaska and Norcross, 2007; Gerhardt, 2006).

Participants' experiences of attending counselling were varied and this section discusses 'counselling that helps' and 'counselling that doesn't help' under the following categories

- accessing appropriate counselling

- ‘normal’ and ‘brainwashing’ aspects
- pathologising is unhelpful
- addressing childhood issues in the appropriate Phase
- implications for the counselling profession

9.2.1 – Accessing appropriate counselling

Accessing appropriate counselling was a challenge for most participants and there is a sense of desperation for some as they visited numerous counsellors. Unfortunately, ‘*most of them were a waste of time and money’* [Maribel] and some were unethical causing further harm. The most serious aspects of this fruitless search is that in some cases inappropriate counselling hindered the recovery process, sometimes for many years.

> *‘I think I went to 25 or so therapists and body workers and you know helpers of some kind or another. None of them were o, of any help, quite a few were actually abusive...I am sure, you know, if I had had more self-esteem I could have reported them and taken it further. [...] I had to leave the therapists to get to the client centred therapy [...] Client centred is the, the any progress is due to the client [...] I rather, ah, ah, naughtily call most therapies, therapy centred therapists.’* [Max].

I evidence these aspects further below.

9.2.2 - Normal and brainwashing aspects

Generic counsellor training addresses the ‘normal’ aspects of recovery, but not the ‘brainwashing’, thought-reform and cultic-abuse, aspects. Participants evidence that whilst ethical counsellors can be helpful in the ‘normal’ ways, they may be ineffective when it comes to the cult issue due to lack of knowledge. They are likely to

be unable to help the individual diagnose the 'cult as a cult' or illuminate the dynamics of thought-reform

> [Whilst trying to leave] *'I was in therapy and the therapist was, was um, I wouldn't say as fully comprehending of the whole situation as I was later able to discover talking to other [former-members], but he was very uh, supportive and sympathetic and caring and that was good. So when I began to talk about the cult he was perhaps a little confused but he tried to understand and he ultimately was understanding in a good helpful way.'* [Sean]

It is important that counsellors do not assume an understanding of cults from popular and media sources as evidenced in this case where the counsellor assumed he understood.

> *'I think the counsellor really didn't know very much. He didn't really because, I think even myself, I didn't get how much I had been manipulated, and how much the whole cult induction process is actually pretty well organised and orchestrated.'* [Nigel]

The power of information when shared by a counsellor who has a realistic awareness of the level of their own knowledge can lead to the individual raising awareness and contacting their authentic-self.

> *'She was one in a million. Yeah, she had some background. She said she didn't know about our group particularly but, "here's all this stuff from the workshop I just went to, you read it and tell me what you think". Well, that was it, you know, it's like they are describing my experience - and they don't name my group.'* [Nina]

9.2.3 - Pathologising is unhelpful

An additional aspect of the counsellor not understanding is that they may pathologise, that is, treat the individual as psychologically abnormal (Marshall, 1998), and make inaccurate and uninformed assumptions about their life-history and the cult experience. It may be difficult for them to comprehend, or be empathic of, the former-member's version of their experience, resulting in them being unable to help raise awareness. In a number of cases counsellors assumed some developmental or mental disorder to be the reason for the individual joining a cult. Some counsellors also raised additional, and irrelevant, problems, causing further delay and distress and exacerbating the individual blaming themself and viewing themself negatively.

> *'[The counsellor said] "Well you were in a cult, that must mean you were sexually abused as a child". It was HORRIBLE and I had to really confront that issue in myself. Three therapists told me that, THREE!'* [Maribel]

> *'One therapist um within 10 minutes told me I was an alcoholic, […] and when I said, "well I don't think so, because I don't drink socially", she said "that's what all alcoholics say, and she ticked the thing 'alcoholic'".'* [Max]

Participants evidence that former-members are often left feeling that counsellors assume

> *'…the only person who goes into a cult has to be disturbed to begin with - right! (said sarcastically). [Implying] there was something WRONG with me […] it was a horrible thing to do, for years I had a struggle with that…'* [Maribel]

and that they

'…kind of think you are weird, they kind of think there's a loose thread inside.' [Estella]

These participants evidence the challenge of finding a counsellor who understands the cult experience and who does not pathologise them. Some former-member internet forums warn others about the dangers of counselling.

'Someone had put up a post about the damage that counsellors can do when they want to look at the reasons why you joined the cult. [They said] counselling is a bad idea; you need a specialist counsellor. [...] In fact it was a bit of a joke on the forum.' [Jane]

I evidence what does help below.

9.2.4 - Childhood issues in the appropriate Phase

These arguments highlight that certain tasks are better addressed in a certain order, that is, they need to be Phase appropriate. Pre-cult and developmental issues, which may include '*childhood issues*' [Harriet] and pre-cult psychopathology, need to be addressed, for some, but later in the process, in Phase Three (Chapter 10:10.5).

Jane exemplifies this aspect, which is evidenced by others, but, as the only participant who had recently left, the process was fresh in her experience and memory. She attended counselling a few weeks after leaving the cult. She accepted that the counsellor did not know about cults but hoped she would *'do some research maybe and have just a little bit more of a clue next time'* but she did not follow up the suggested resources. Whilst Jane continued to try to address the cult issue, the counsellor insisted on exploring her childhood issues which were not her priority at that juncture.

> *'It wasn't the time to start digging around in that because my reality had already completely evaporated, so to start smashing all the foundations of my childhood then [...] I did have a really bad triggery wobble that just happened, and I was all over the place, I was having a bit of a breakdown, sort of, just one day, um, something happened, I just struggled a lot, that day. I was screaming in a ball on the floor [...] and how I didn't smash the house up I don't know.'*

Jane's reference to 'smashing foundations' is an important one. All she had left, on leaving the cult after 17 years of membership, was her family, who are her foundations. Implying that her membership was in some way because of her family was unhelpful and destabilising and she felt '*the rug had been completely pulled out from underneath me*' (see Chapter 8.5 for full quote).

9.2.5 - Implications for the counselling profession

This study raises serious implications for the counselling profession and evidences the need for specialist training in order that the full implication of therapeutic interventions is understood. It takes a good deal of courage to ask for help post-cult and the implications of this had been overlooked by Jane's trainee counsellor, not because of any flaw in her, she was *'a really pleasant girl',* but because of a lack of training. This study evidences that standard counsellor training does not go far enough. When counsellors assume that their modality is the only way, or the best way, to treat the client without matching it to the specific client needs or issues (Norcross, 2014; Prochaska and Norcross, 2007) or Phase of recovery, it may lead to unintentional insensitivity (Matthews and Salazar, 2014), and even be dangerous and destabilising. This is evidenced in Jane's case where her breakdown was, to some degree, exacerbated by the counselling.

'Normal' aspects can create a base and structure for counselling, such as offering an attuned and empathic relationship, but this data suggests that counsellors need to understand the processes that go on for former-members, in depth. This is particularly in relation to 'diagnosing' and understanding what a cult is (Phase One) and helping the former-member to understand the dynamics of thought-reform.

> *'It's not gonna be just about learning [counsellor training], you know, this is about what thought-reform is, but HOW does that happen in that person's inner world, how does that materialise? [...] What are the thought processes that go with one's mind being held captive, so to speak. And what is that release process like? So they have to, I believe they [counsellors] HAVE to understand that. If, if you don't understand that then you don't really need to be working with these people.'* [Daphne]

In order to address these challenges the counsellor could attend '*hands on*' practical training specifically to work with former-members, or shadow a counsellor experienced in working with former-members.

> *'How do you get therapists to understand? Well then they have to be trained, I think sometimes it may be helpful to actually shadow a therapist who is working with someone who is doing this.'* [Daphne]

I now introduce the category, self-help before proceeding to further explicate what helps in Phase Two.

9.3 – Self-help

It emerges that what helps is a mixture of professional-help and self-help strategies. There are those who do not need or want professional help and many manage to leave and recover on their own.

> *'I also know a number of people, particularly people who were in the group I was in, who never really did recovery work as we think about recovery work, like therapy related to their cult experience, or participate in conferences or workshops, and they seem to be living just fine.'* [Lavinia]

All participants sought professional help except: Reginald who did not need, seek out or attend counselling post-cult; and Matt who was holding on in case he needed the cult in the future.

After many years of living in the cult mind-set, having their life structured for them, it is important to develop self-help strategies. The *'locus of control'* [Emma, Lindsey] is then with the former-member, as they learn to trust and think for themselves, which encourages autonomy - all of which contributes to reinstating the contact boundary and building an authentic sense of self.

I adopt the following definition of self-help and have added the wording in square brackets:

> 'Concerted, self-initiated efforts to modify your behaviour [and to help you recover] without professional treatment. However, it does not mean that you cannot, or should not, turn to useful books, films, websites, and support groups for additional assistance' (Norcross, 2014, p.210).

A number of participants either attended, or had set up, a former-member support group. The contact with other former-members who understand the cult experience is a beneficial aspect of self-help.

Other resources, alluded to in the definition, contribute to former-members developing self-help skills. Participants reference a number of sources of information which are helpful:

- cult aware organisations

- internet forums specifically related to their cult
- the internet and relevant websites
- sceptics websites
- publications including books related to cult recovery
- psychological theories, especially Social Psychology theories, such as influence, cognitive dissonance, and critical thinking
- specialist TV programmes and movies about cult related issues

I now proceed to introduce and evidence what helps under the category 'Building a sense of self: internal processes'. Some of the categories may be more applicable to self-help, and others to professional-help, but they are grouped together for simplicity because many apply to both.

9.4 – Building Sense of Self: Internal Processes

All participants evidence how difficult it was to leave. Many felt dejected and depleted, and were emotionally traumatised (further discussion Chapter 4:4.6.3) having been constantly exposed to '*mental torture and miserable deprecation'* [Sean]. Nina evidences the depletion she felt after she had identified her group as a cult and left.

> *'It was pretty awful. It was a rough time, it was a very rough time because I was so empty, you know, they had drained everything out of me.'*

As previously evidenced, other participants felt leaving was a challenging crisis resulting in identity confusion and disorientation. The strategies and tasks that lead to understanding therefore require sensitivity as to the implications and impact they may have on the existing sense of self, and may present some level of risk for the individual. This is evidenced by some former-members resorting to suicide or addictions to ease the pain. This may be particularly pertinent for SGAs whose identification and sense of self is with the

cult as their home or family background, even if it was abusive. On the one hand, therefore, if former-members do not understand what happened in the cult, they are in danger of not leaving psychologically and/or repeating the abuse:

> *'If you do not do some of the exit-counselling simultaneously you are vulnerable again.'* [Gloria]

On the other hand, if sense of self is not encouraged and built, the individual, who may have little existing sense of authentic-self, risks being left with nothing to build their future on.

> *'Because if you exit counsel them then you take away the cult...okay great...and then what's left is nothing, so, they have to have something else simultaneously.'* [Gloria]

There are a number of categories that emerge from the data which indicate specific tasks related to cognitive aspects of building sense of self and these are

- challenging negative introjects & unmasking the cult leader
- understanding thought-reform
- thinking critically
- rebuilding the contact boundary
- figuring out what you like
- being special and ordinary
- using non-cult role models
- putting the cult out of your mouth
- validating the cult experience

- reflecting on Religion/spirituality

The chapter concludes with practical considerations that help including

- sources of information
- structure for living and
- practical skills

9.4.1 - Challenging Negative Introjects & Unmasking the Cult Leader

Former-members introject a negative view of themselves - they have the metaphorical stomach full of undigested food. As evidenced, the cult leader is an important factor and the tasks and related categories explored in Phase One: Section 8.7 continue into this Phase. By challenging their idealisation of the leader, and bringing them back to the level of a human being by investigating their background, they undo projection, establishing that the leader is not the perfect person they purported to be. The individual then needs to challenge the negative and harmful introjects, which act as *'internal predators and voices'* [Nigel] and either digest or eliminate them, as it were. This frees the former-member to recognise that perhaps they are

> *''…a more righteous person and* [...] *I should listen to my own conscience; I should listen to my own voice.'* [Nigel]

Analysing the dynamics with the cult leader in fine detail helps the individual to assess their part more realistically. This strengthens the contact boundary as they reinstate difference, and face the well-integrated introjects that supported the rationale for being confluent (Hamilton, 2014, p.139).

'Realise the cult leader was consciously manipulating you every day. So then you can go to every one of those negative experiences and go: "there I was being manipulated, there I was being manipulated, there I was being manipulated, no I don't have a black heart, no I'm not a bastard, no I don't treat people badly".' [Fred]

'You make the person kind of slow down and think for themselves and kind of take a look at it and then they kind of go, "oh, well, that came from here" [...].' [Lavinia 1G therapist]

Loaded language indicates introjects. This clichéd, thought stopping, language, of which there are a number of examples in the data and which are exemplified in Chapter 7.3.1(6), needs to be analysed in order to get behind the meaning and implication of each word. In the cult this language may result in the member automatically obeying, without thought (Cialdini, 2001), exacerbating the impact of the confluential trance and hypnotic suggestion.

Loaded language distorts sense of self and cognitive understanding as the individual makes generalisations and judgements about society and others. Challenging the notion that all outsiders are doomed has consequences, and can result in the individual's world being turned upside down` [Marjorie], as they start to think for themself and view many things differently. As the individual challenges these introjects and expands their understanding of language they can begin to build more balanced, nuanced, nourishing relationships with others and society, not based on assumptions exacerbated by such clichéd language, which is rooted in the beliefs, the sacred science, of the cult.

The loaded language was also part of the negative inner dialogue (confession) and it is important, therefore, that former-members

raise awareness of this. They are likely to '*beat themselves up*' [Lavinia]. They need to learn to speak kindly to themselves and treat themselves well. This can be challenging after years of abuse and negative beliefs about themself and necessitates

> *'[...] …time, patience, and somehow being able to develop, over time, a compassion for oneself.'* [Lavinia]

It is important individuals look at the reality of their fear when they leave and to '*debunk*' [Lavinia] their beliefs, not only the cult's beliefs, but '*beliefs about yourself right now in relationship to it*' [Maribel].

In order to build a sense of self it is important that former-members consciously recognise how abusive the cult was and stop engaging in automatically doing what they were expected to do.

> *'The cult was exploitative - recognise it for what it was, and quit engaging in the cult related things. If they told you to do something don't do it. If they said don't do something, do it, that's how you inflate your sense of self.'* [Daphne]

Challenging introjects in this way may result in a fear reaction but it is important that former-members reassure themselves, or a counsellor reassures them, as they become more practised at making their own personal choices.

One aspect of this process of chewing over introjects is developing critical thinking skills, which I address in the next section.

9.4.2 –Thinking Critically

> *'What helped for me was to learn how I was recruited by the cult, what the definition of a cult is; how psychologically they managed to manipulate me and this kind of, for me, was like undoing what they did, what harm they did to me. [...] Ah, to undo this I use critical thinking.'* [Alan]

A number of participants highlight the importance of critical thinking. In Phase One it is evidenced that facing doubts and critical thoughts about the cult and cult leader is a key component of the recovery process. It leads to the individual getting in touch with their authentic-self resulting in them making their own choices. The critical thoughts are indicative of psychological contact, the fixed gestalt beginning to shift. As these come into awareness they can lead to the individual contacting their authentic-self resulting in them mobilising critical thinking which is crucial as they transition out of the cult.

> *'I am really into critical thinking! Processing how people get deceived, how they are gonna be able to see through the manipulations that people are putting on them.'* [Dillon]

> *'It became really important for me, in terms of my own transition out of all this sort of emotional and belief based stuff - which is very artistic and wonderful and has its place - but it was completely out of balance with the more rational critical thinking, and "can you have a basis for what you are saying?" - in other words, learning about how to be sceptical.'* [Marietta]

It is important to question the cult experience in every way. Critical thinking aids this process as it entails challenging, questioning, researching and not taking for granted. It balances up the emotional rationalisations and gives a basis for an argument, especially important as cult beliefs are often unsubstantiated, belief based and metaphorical but presented as the ultimate 'Truth' and reality (sacred science and mystical manipulation). It helps to establish the differentiation between the individual and the environment-field, and aids them in discerning that which is toxic and that which is not (Chapter 7:7.2.1).

Learning to be sceptical is important as it helps people understand how they can be deceived, and to see through the manipulations within the cult. It helps them '*debunk*' [Lavinia] the teachings and brings a balance to the emotional overwhelm, the confluential trance and ASCs which shut down the cognitive processes. It is interesting that a number of participants refer to their brain going 'whoop' or 'boi-ing', and I speculate that this is the critical thinking faculties of the brain waking out of the confluential trance (Chapter 8:8.4). Critical thinking also helps former-members make sense of their experiences and take ownership of their opinions and thoughts, which contributes to a sense of self and helps them undo the harm caused. Understanding thought-reform can aid this process and it is this category that I explore next.

9.4.3 – Understanding Thought-Reform

> *'Yeah, a lot of aspects of thought-reform were going on in that process. Not that the leader has read Lifton necessarily but it's a process that grows up organically. But it IS what happens.'* [Dillon]

Helping former-members analyse thought-reform as a system and a process that occurred in the cult is healing and freeing. This strategy gives them a framework from which to understand the controlling cult dynamics and to actively challenge and act against them.

> *'Well actually what I'm talking about, doing the things that they told you not to do, don't do the things they told you to do, I am talking about throwing away the doctrine over person. I'm talking about being YOU without the group constraints, so I am speaking of thought-reform.'* [Daphne]

I evidenced in Chapter 7 the complexity and power of thought-reform in the lives of participants. It helps to understand the dynamics of all eight components, in order to undo the effects of the introjective

coercive confluence, and reinstate the contact boundary, build a sense of self and recover. Identifying aspects of thought-reform helps the individual understand and relate it to their experience.

> *'Because you would read those books about cults and thought-reform, and you can see "oh that's what happened, oh that's what happened". You know you read up on the cult of confession and realise that's what that means'.* [Winnie]

The result is the self that has been restricted can '*inflate*' [Daphne] as the contact boundary is reinstated, nourishing the authentic-self. This in turn helps the individual to internalise their locus of control and it is this category that I explore next.

9.4.4 – Rebuilding the Contact Boundary

> *'So the main thing that is important is the realisation that a person emerging from this kind of situation, at least trans-generationally [SGAs], is operating without any concept of choice, and so therapeutically that's one of the first things we wanna start to scaffold within them. The internal locus of control can be anywhere on a spectrum or it can be very external because that is what mind control is, it is an external locus.'* [Emma]

Thought-reform is an '*external locus of control'*, that is, the control and individual's focus, is located in the cult and the thought-reform system, rather than in the individual and their choices. It is therefore important that this 'locus' or focus returns to the individual and they rebuild the contact boundary.

Former-members do not have a '*basic trust in themselves'* [Lindsey] and struggle to make their own decisions about their own life without looking to others for permission. It is essential that the individual

rebuilds a positive sense of self which in turn reinforces the contact boundary. If they do not undo the introjective coercive confluence and the beliefs that they are bad, and that others know better, they are likely to continue to look for confluence and this is evidenced by turning to others. They may assume others know them better than they know themselves and they need to learn to trust in themselves and reconnect with

> *'…their authentic inner wisdom, you know and instead of calling a therapist saying "well what do I think?", you know, instead asking myself "what does the wise part of me think?"'* [Lindsey]

This process of undoing introjective coercive confluence and rebuilding the contact boundary enables the individual to begin to regulate themself, make choices, and continues throughout the Phases.

Some former-members have little concept of choice or that they have a right to put themselves first. It is important, therefore, that they learn this (self-help), or are taught (professional-help), early on in the recovery process. It helps if the individual can acknowledge any ways they have already operationalised personal choices made within the cult. This highlights ways in which they are different to others, and affirms existing sense of self. The parts of the authentic-self still functioning are, therefore, evidenced by choices made, or by individual differences, even within the chaos of living with a confluent cult mind-set where the contact boundary is minimal. These individual differences are evidence of a contact boundary, albeit a weak one for some. It is important for the former-member, and those supporting them, to look for these '*positive identifications*' or '*kernels'* because it is something, however tenuous, to build sense of self on.

> *'Even amidst all of this chaos and confusion and role confusion and boundarylessness, in the cult, there seems to always be some sort of kernel of, "I was able to stand up for myself, or stand up for my sister, or I was the only one who could draw that thing just the right way". Whatever it is, look for those kernels, yeah, look for those kernels, those are positive identifications.'* [Lavinia]

In order to build on these kernels, it is important that the individual '*figure out*' what they like and it is this category that I explore next.

9.4.5 - Figuring Out What You Like

> *'Maybe you don't know what you like; so go to a book store and look at magazines, or books and become interested and develop a social interest. You know, learn, and figure out what you might like to do. It could be a career, it could be hobbies, it could be relationships, healthy relationships, because that is what life is about. Life is about relationships, it's not about unhealthy relationships that are coercive and exploitative.'* [Daphne]

An important step for former-members is to '*figure out*' what they like and this continues the task of rebuilding the contact boundary. This can lead to them discovering what they find pleasurable and what they are good at, and builds sense of self.

> *'Do things that you enjoy doing, just take hot baths and go for long walks and you know throw yourself into everything that you do.'* [Jane]

It may help to experiment and try different things out until the individual finds what suits them. This is challenging as it is very different to life in the cult where they have been told what to do and who to be. It is important they give themselves permission to try out

these strategies and learn to throw themselves into a set of very different pursuits outside the cult. This may feel selfish to start with and a counsellor could support former-members with these aspects, encouraging them to find their own locus, their own way.

Further education can be helpful and lead to identifying personal interests and may result in a career path. As previously evidenced (including case vignette Jessie in Chapter 1:1.4.2), some have little education (and some cults discourage further education) and so as former-members grow in knowledge it encourages them to develop an open enquiring mind, very different to the cult mind-set, and builds sense of self.

> *'Build on the successes, then the positivity builds upon the self. One person I know became a tennis pro which led to coaching tennis pros and that enabled him to have his voice because he could then discuss tennis with other people.'* [Gloria]

Study can be '*like food to a starving person'* and can help bring the individual '*back to life'* [Marietta]. As the individual makes genuine contact with themself and the environment-field, the Gestalt cycle is energised. Rather than being depleted or full of introjects, they can learn to chew over, and be nourished by, the information in an educational setting which in turn becomes 'useful' enabling the self to be formed at the contact boundary (Philippson, 2001). This is different to learning within the cult, and by way of contrast, encourages the self-protective aspects of the individual as they select new experiences leading to a new sense of self (Clarkson and Mackewn, 1993 p.55) – a healthy aspect of contact.

The implications are enormous because as former-members learn new skills they then have a shared experience with others in society, which helps them acculturate and gives them a voice. Education and

career preferences can lead to developing social skills, which in turn can lead to meeting new people and making new friends. This can result in them building a new life outside of the cult. They can also learn how to establish genuine contact in relationship with others, enabling the healthy authentic-self to grow and develop. These strategies can potentially help them view themself as a popular and good person (not a sinful or negative person) with whom others want to be friends. By making healthy choices, giving themself to and identifying with these new experiences, the individual is beginning to live spontaneously, fluidly and naturally (Crocker and Philippson, 2005), which is building sense of authentic-self. This process requires developing a balanced and nuanced view of the self, and I explore this next in the category, being special and ordinary.

9.4.6 - Being Special and Ordinary

One aspect of thought-reform, and a cult mind-set, is that members are likely to believe their mission is of the utmost importance; that they are saving the world, or their political views will revolutionise society amongst many other variations (Lalich and Tobias, 2006; Lifton, 1989). Some participants believed in a mission which resulted in a sense of self with great purpose, even a grandiose importance, and a feeling of being unique and special. Sean believed that getting closer to the guru would contribute to

> *'…the glory of the guru and God and everybody else, and the whole wide world.'*

That is, his group and mission were special (sacred science). These introjected views need challenging on leaving, and the former-member will need to develop a more realistic, nuanced and balanced view post-cult.

It is paradoxical being a terrible sinner but also part of a perfect group with a perfect leader that has almost magical aims. This paradox is

further exacerbated for some SGAs who have been told they are the perfect child of the cult, a Prince or Princess, and specially chosen

> *'…just to serve this role, to serve the leader and the scripture or the directives, the higher purpose, the meditation and chanting.'* [Gloria]

This is in addition to being amongst others who believe they are all specially chosen, that is these SGAs are doubly special, and this role may be their main purpose in life. This means that, for some, when they leave, this identity is obsolete and there may be little or no sense of self or purpose to life. They need building up and validating as a unique individual who is both special but also ordinary. It may be helpful for these former-members to receive affirmation that being ordinary is acceptable (Johnson, 1987), and this is something a counsellor could do by offering developmental psychotherapy. These former-members who oscillate between feeling ordinary and special may be 'thin skinned narcissists', those who are the children of, or who have been brought up with, traumatising narcissists, and who

> '…in development have suffered severe damage to their self-esteem system and whose self-esteem regulation is therefore inconsistent' (Shaw, 2014, p.12).

As they leave the cult and enter an unfamiliar world where there may be no one they can trust, and no one to help them understand what they have been through, it is likely to be a danger point, including the risk of suicide for some (Derocher, 2008). They may also have no one who sees them as special - a need a healthy family can meet (Gerhardt, 2004). This may be especially pertinent if the family members remain in the cult and the individual knows no one outside. If they have left family behind in the cult they may have been rejected and 'shunned' (Mytton, 2015; Kendall, 2006) which can only

exacerbate the pain and trauma of leaving (addressed in Phase Three). It will help, therefore, to have access to someone who can help them build a sense of self, whilst simultaneously helping them understand cult dynamics, so they can fully separate from the cult safely, and build sense of self. A psychotherapist knowledgeable about cults, with an understanding of developmental needs, is well placed to safely provide this support. In order to address these issues, former-members need to talk about their cult experience, and I address this in the next category, '*putting the cult out of your mouth*' (an in vivo code).

9.4.7 – Putting the Cult out of your Mouth

It is important for former-members to get the cult out of their head by putting it '*out of their mouth'* [Marietta]. As the individual 'throws up' the introjects that have been stuck in their stomach, this mobilises genuine contact, undoing the fixed-gestalt. Other former-members are well placed to help because they understand.

> *'The more I talked, and the more I connected with other people who had left [her cult], the more the cult was leaving me.'* [Marietta]

This indicates reinstating the contact boundary through genuine contact, and builds sense of self.

Because the individual has suppressed their authentic inner dialogue (milieu control), and had little opportunity to discuss what they genuinely feel and think, there may be a good deal of talking, and many thoughts, feelings and experiences unexpressed, all dammed up inside.

> *'I would feel like this intense experience of pressure, the need to talk, and too much to talk about. [...] I would describe it as like having a 5lb bag of [small sweets/candy],*

and you tear a teeny little hole at the bottom, and then you tip it and they all rush to the hole, and the pressure of all of that weight of the sweets pushing to get out. That's what I felt like. And my need to talk, the pressure would build up and I did talk, like crazy.' [Harriet]

It is important to share '*war stories*' [Sean] with others who understand. Support groups and group therapy can be beneficial as this shared experience has the added benefits of being validating, affirming and strengthens the contact boundary. Counsellors are well placed to offer an understanding and safe space as it is a fundamental aspect of counselling that clients talk about their life experiences (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007; Mackewn, 2000).

'We shared secrets and lies and incidents and information, it was very corroborating, and of course verifying, and validating'. [Sean]

Sharing with others who have been through the same or similar experience is validating. It is to the category of validating the cult experience that I now turn.

9.4.8 – Validating the Cult Experience

In the closed environment of a cult there may be few influences that counter the beliefs, the culture and the view that the cult leader knows best and is entitled to abuse. Abuse is often reframed as a spiritual discipline necessary for salvation or enlightenment (doctrine over person; demand for purity; dispensing of existence), or deserved because of the negativity or sinfulness of the member (demand for purity; confession). This rationalisation can result in confusion and cognitive dissonance (evidenced in Chapter 8:8.6). As with all survivors of abuse, it will help former-members to understand that when someone abuses them, the responsibility for the abuse lies with the abuser, and not in the member themselves (Briere, 1992, p.124).

> *'I think this is that arbitrary kind, this is the arbitrariness of abuse. That it has so often so much more to do with the abuser, and the abuser's mental state, or let's say on unworked through issues that get projected on to the member.'* [Lavinia]

Acknowledgement that their abusive experiences were abuse, that it actually happened, validates their view of reality, builds sense of self, and enables them to challenge negative introjects that the abuse was somehow all their fault. Memories can then be realistically explored and the former-member can assess whether what they remember about their experience is true and real and decide for themself where the responsibility lies and who is to blame. But before that can happen they have to accurately understand. It helps when others verify the individual's view, which normalises their experience, and helps them to stop blaming themself.

> *'And so when you hear from people that you trust and love [family], and know that they trust and love you, that they were also manipulated when they visited the cult, and even though they weren't part of the community they felt manipulated by [the cult leader] too, then you realise without a shadow of a doubt he was manipulating you every day.'* [Fred]

Shannon had a powerful experience when she searched online for information about her cult. She discovered YouTube videos from the time she was a member decades before and discovered a Facebook page created by former-members. As she watched the videos she reports:

> *'[...] For so many years I had no contact with anyone that knew me. When I got out of the cult I was not allowed to speak to anyone that I knew before, because they were my*

so called druggie past and they would lead me into death, institutions or gaol. So I had no childhood friends because we had moved, so it had been like my past was erased. And at this moment all these people came forth [on the internet] and said "I knew you, I remember you". It was like being validated that I existed. I had felt like a ghost floating in between two worlds, and nobody knew I was there until that moment - it was like I was being validated and acknowledged'. [Shannon]

Counsellors are well placed to validate and affirm the individual. Validation helps them challenge the introjects and change their perception of their past, giving new confidence in their perceptions of their experience, which builds a sense of self.

I now explore participants' reflections on Religion/Spirituality before explicating practical considerations that help and concluding this chapter.

9.4.9 – Reflecting on Religion/Spirituality

A number of participants evidence that it was helpful to reflect on their Religion/Spirituality (R/S). Thinking through their philosophy of life so they can '*forge a new life, spiritually'* [Marjorie], helps. Chewing over the sacred science and beliefs from the group helps and can lead to reviewing their view of their R/S.

'There was all that scary stuff [warnings about what would happen on leaving] and that for some reason, I don't know how it came into my head, but at some point pretty early on I realised, God is not an asshole, he's not going to punish me, cos he's not really this big mean old jerk.' [Marietta]

For some this results in them eventually leaving this aspect of their life behind.

> *'I needed to go through this thing called religion, process it, learn about it and then I was ready to move on to the other side of it, I was ready to move on with other things in my life and leave it behind.'* [Marietta]

Others decided to hold on to the healthy aspects of their R/S and continued to draw support from it. When Winnie left she did many things right, in spite of not knowing what to do, and she ascribes this to God intervening on her behalf and says

> *'It was a God deal; I think He brought the right people into my life.'* [Winnie]

This category can be applied to any belief system, be it political, psychotherapeutic or philosophical in origin. It helps if, at some point, former-members challenge the introjects and decide for themselves what they want to believe. Sifting through their beliefs and deciding what they want to go forward with, therefore, helps them assert themselves in an area which may have been at the heart of the abuse, and builds sense of self.

Before concluding the chapter, I address external practical issues that help.

9.5 – Practical Considerations: External processes

Former-members rebuild the contact boundary through engagement with multiple sources of information and support. In this section I explore two categories:

- Structure for living
- Learning how society functions

When former-members leave the restrictive world of the cult, they will need to learn how to structure their lives differently. They also need to begin to live their lives for themselves, and this is likely to

prove challenging. Life in a cult can be confusing and chaotic and former-members' concept of boundaries is likely to be distorted because they were distorted in the group. Those not used to fully engaging with society may have a strong need to

> *'…quickly get with the rest of the world, you know - catch up.'* [Jane]

This includes creating a new structure to their life as the individual stops dedicating their time and energy to the cult, or practising meditation every day, and turns their attention to engaging with new projects. In order to achieve this, it helps to create structure, a '*scaffold*' [Emma]. A scaffold is a temporary structure used by workmen in order that they can repair or clean a building, for the sake of their safety and in order not to damage the building.

> *'[...] One of the tragedies with transgenerational cult survivors [SGAs] is that a lot of recovery has to begin on the outside which is why the term scaffolding is apt.'* [Emma]

It helps to create structure from the outside, in order to build sense of self on the inside. This strategy is particularly important for SGAs, those 1G who have been members for decades, or those who are highly dissociative when they leave (Chapter 4:4.6.3). Some struggle with the basic tasks of life and simple, basic, grounding, strategies help.

> *'I'd have a problem with the basics of my life so the exit counsellor said let's plan dinner, let's go out walking, it was very grounded.'* [Harriet]

Creating structure will take time and practice. In order to be able to create a new structure, former-members need to learn about the practical skills necessary for living in society, including learning how

society operates, how to live in a very different culture to that of the cult. This may include the most basic of things, such as how to use public transport, how to shop, how to enrol in school or higher education, how to handle money, amongst numerous other things (Derocher, 2008). This understanding leads to independence and building sense of self. Counsellors who are prepared to be interactive with clients are well placed to help in these respects, by teaching the former-member coping skills and strategies for living in the alien world outside the cult.

I conclude Phase Two.

9.6 – Conclusion

In this Chapter I have explored Phase Two of what helps former-members recover from an abusive-cult experience. The recovery process necessitates former-members build their sense of self whilst at the same time dismantling the thought-reform and resulting introjects. It is evidenced that dismantling without building may leave the former-member vulnerable, either to further exploitation if they do not understand, or to being stripped of any existing sense of self if they do not simultaneously build a sense of self. It is evidenced that both professional-help and self-help strategies can help.

It is hugely painful facing a cult history and much emotional work will have arisen whilst addressing these cognitive issues. These include the need to face feelings, which involves facing supressed feelings and feeling emotional pain. These aspects are addressed in Chapter 10: Phase Three under the category: '*Emotional healing aspects of building sense of self*'.

Chapter 10 – Phase Three: Emotional Healing Aspects of Building Sense of Self

'It was important to be able to see it objectively and then come to terms with it emotionally.' [Maribel]

'It takes a lot of courage to decide to work on this stuff. I think it takes a lot of courage because there are a lot of painful experiences.' [Lavinia]

'And then you come out wounded but you can be healed and this is what recovery is. You could call it a process of healing.' [Marjorie]

10.1 – Introduction

In this chapter I explicate what helps in Phase Three, the third of the four Phases. The overarching category continues to be 'freeing the authentic-self'. The predominant tasks in this Phase are facing the suppressed feelings and healing the emotional pain resulting from membership and leaving - feeling the pain heals the pain and builds a sense of self, with the right support and strategies.

> 'To complete the gestalt in the present situation it is necessary to destroy and assimilate the unawareness as an obstacle [...] for the effort of concentrated awareness and mobilising of the block entails destroying, suffering, feeling, and excitement' (Perls, et al, 1951, p.464).

Whilst the cognitive understanding addressed in Phases One and Two is essential, it only goes part of the way to alleviating the impact of the cult and does not automatically relieve the build-up of feelings that were suppressed. Once the introjects are challenged and the member understands the cult dynamics and thought-reform, then they are well placed to more accurately address their resultant feelings. For 1G, once cult related feelings are addressed,

developmental and childhood issues can be faced and healed. For SGAs, cult related feelings are enmeshed in developmental aspects, which will need to be addressed throughout this Phase.

The tasks in this Phase build on strategies addressed in Phases One and Two, and the categories 'professional-help' and 'self-help' apply and are developed further herein where relevant. In addition, in this chapter, I illuminate pertinent discourses in the literatures where they have not previously been discussed in order to augment the findings. This inductive/deductive strategy is consistent with a GT methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The same strategies were used to search the literatures as demonstrated in Chapter 3 and these were applied retrospectively, after analysis and whilst writing up. That is, the issues addressed emerged from the data.

Before proceeding I explicate the coding that emerges and the resulting structure for this chapter. The data is dense and complex and in order to be transparent I summarise how categories emerged for this Phase, which represent processes indicated across interviews that emerged in analysis.

The overarching category '*building a sense of self'* emerged when I reordered the categories into Phases. It was apparent that it applied to both Phases Two and Three but as participants broadly indicated a need to address cognitive before emotional, and as there is a predominant piece of work to be done in each Phase, cognitive and emotional were addressed separately. In reality, the processes addressed in the Phases are not necessarily linear, and will flow into each other.

It emerged that participants could only recover if they faced and healed their painful feelings, and '*emotional healing*' became the core category for this Phase. '*Healing*' is a term adopted by some participants (Marjorie above), is descriptive of the task of 'healing'

emotions, and is Phase appropriate. Originally I had coded '*facing the pain*' but not '*facing suppressed feelings'*. The category related to grieving the loss of the guru was to some degree initially obscured to me although there was a general category '*grieving losses*'. These categories emerged with more clarity in writing up and achieved further definition from related literatures. In addition, it became apparent that once these issues have been addressed, it is important for 1G to heal pre-cult hurts, which was originally coded, '*picking up the baggage left at the door*' indicating unfinished business from life pre-cult. 1G can then address any pre-cult vulnerabilities and childhood issues that had a direct impact on joining or that were not resolved in the cult, and/or issues that had rendered them vulnerable to staying longer than was necessary. This category was to have comprised Phase Four of five Phases but I merged it with this Phase Three whilst writing up as it was not dense enough to warrant its own Phase. It contains elements of '*emotional healing'* although the difference is that these aspects are not directly cult related for 1G. This category, therefore, indicates a divergence in the 1G sample which I explore in Section 10.5 below. These categories have, therefore, emerged, developed and clarified as I have been writing and as I returned to the data, constantly checking and comparing interviews and categories (Ibid.).

The core categories for '*building a sense of self'* in this Phase, and the structure for this chapter, are:

- What helps: Facing feelings
    - Facing suppressed feelings
    - Feeling emotional pain
- Emotional healing: The literature and data
- Developmental psychotherapy for SGAs and 1G[issues]
- Evidencing healing and integration

The coding is illustrated in Figure 7.7. I now turn my attention to what helps and introduce the category 'what helps: facing feelings'.

10.2 - What Helps: Facing Feelings

> *'To me it's actually pretty horrible because cult members are not feeling, but you can't even think straight unless you pay attention to your feelings.'* [Max]

Facing the impact of the cult experience, including facing suppressed feelings and emotional pain, is unavoidable if the member is to build sense of self and progress to full recovery, integration, and posttraumatic growth (PTG) (Phase Four). This process entails making genuine contact with their authentic-self and a fundamental aspect of the healthy cycle includes contacting feelings. Without experiencing full sensation and awareness of authentic feelings (Perls et al., 1951), the individual becomes fixed, rigid, and inflexible. But the feelings are there somewhere, squeezed, restricted, and/or dissociated and they need to be faced, and awareness restored, in order that the individual begins to live for themselves in a healthy, self-actualising manner.

My thesis for this Phase is, therefore, that both facing suppressed feelings and facing the emotional pain related specifically to the cult experience, with the right strategies, support and conditions, can lead to integration and healing (Siegel, 2009; Perls, 1992). These are the foremost strategies/categories that help in this Phase, and if feelings are not faced it is likely to hinder the recovery process. Or put another way, all the participants who indicated they were recovered had faced their suppressed and painful feelings (discussed further in section 10.6 below).

I evidenced the impact of thought-reform on participants in Chapter 7 and posttraumatic reactions in Chapter 4:4.5.3. Participants refer to or imply many related feelings and amongst these are:

dependency; feeling weakened; loss; grief; sadness; despair; bitterness; shock; dejection; shame; humiliation; inner torment; guilt; regret; anxiety; fear; terror; anger; rage; low self-esteem; lack of confidence; and confusion. Participants also refer to positive emotions *'that the cult latched on to'* [Lindsey]: having fun; expressing humour; being idealistic; compassionate; loving; and wanting to make a difference. These positive aspects were, in some cases, assumed to emanate from the leader (mystical manipulation and sacred science) or were attributed to them, through projection.

> *'They tricked you into thinking it was them that did that to you, but actually it was something inside of you that was good. And when you realise that, you take that with you, whatever that is - that idealism, the love, the peace, the joy, whatever it is, you learn to realise that you can do that to your own mind. It's yours.'* [Lindsey]

One SGA learned to take ownership of her feelings, even amidst the abuse as a child, and these feelings helped her identify her sense of authentic-self. She did this by acknowledging that her joy, when singing in the cult, was emanating from herself, and that although others may have misappropriated those joyful feelings, they were nevertheless hers. She held on to these

> *'…not wanting them to rob me of my ability to have a deeply felt sense of myself.'* [P]

These negative and positive feelings all need to be acknowledged as belonging to the individual, in order for them to recognise and build their sense of self. Just as the '*locus of control*' [Emma] must be internalised, so too must the locus of feelings. This is reinstating the contact boundary and creating a differentiation between the individual and the environment-field. The challenge can seem so huge, and the feelings so out of awareness, that it may be difficult for a former-

member to perceive how vital it is for them to face their feelings in order that they heal and recover. As addressed in Chapter 9.4.6, 'being special and ordinary', they need to learn that they matter as an individual, that their feelings matter, and that it is not healthy psychologically to be confluent and merged, introjecting negative aspects and projecting, desensitising, and disowning their positive aspects.

The two categories, 'facing suppressed feelings' and 'feeling emotional pain', are both distinct and connected and it is the former that I evidence next.

10.2.1 - Facing Suppressed Feelings

> *'When the crack really widens, the marble edifice starts to fall, and then you move out of the cognitive into what I call emotional turmoil. Then there's just pain, freak out, trauma, the trauma of leaving a cult'.* [Max]

> *'I compartmentalized certain feelings and thoughts that were considered "wrong" or "negative", and lost self-autonomy and trust in self, while connection to others in the cult were without healthy boundaries. Self was sacrificed for connection with the leader and the dictates of what was acceptable for "spiritual growth".'* [Cheryl]

Thought-reform and cultic-abuse may result in certain emotions being harshly suppressed, punished or forbidden (Langone, 1993, p.307) and others amplified, particularly negative ones. Some 1G joined specifically in order to suppress or avoid their feelings, and for all the suppression evolves as the introjective coercive confluence increases. As the individual is '*squeezed*' [Daphne] and they suppress themself (milieu control), they also suppress their feelings. This suppression, nevertheless, occurs on a continuum, may be worse at certain stages

of cult membership than others, and is not always total, but it does occur.

This creates a dilemma and difficulty for former-members on leaving because many feelings will have been suppressed. It is these which need to emerge, and if the individual does not attend to their feelings then they '*cannot think straight*' [Max] (Hogg and Vaughan, 2011; Scott and Stradling, 1994).

The feelings may have lain out of awareness, sometimes for years, and the individual may have had little practice in genuinely contacting, controlling and self-regulating these feelings. In Chapter 9:9.5.7 Harriet refers to an '*intense experience of pressure'* and the need to talk. I suggest that within this pressure is the build-up of feelings which need to be expressed. Her metaphorical bag of sweets with a small hole is indicative of the clogging up of feelings, the individual is unable to either eliminate them, 'throw them up', or chew them over, because they are stuck, fixed. Once the '*crack'* occurs, and the feelings emerge, either as doubts when in the cult, or on leaving, the feelings may be fighting to be expressed, and for some they explode out, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. This is evidenced in Chapter 8:8.5 as Jane describes the raw emotional pain and turmoil of the first three months, post-cult, when her feelings first started to explode out after 17 years. She felt '*the rug had been pulled out*' from underneath her. She did not know how to deal with these feelings as she moved from shock, to numbing, in order to cope, trying '*to find my feet'*. This '*crazy*' process evidences what it may be like, for some, when the confluential trance breaks down and suppressed feelings explode into awareness.

This is where a major challenge lies for many; they are not used to expressing their own feelings, as they have not been safe enough to do so. They are also used to being confluent, compliant and expressing group related feelings (to one degree or another) and so

they need to learn to go one step at a time, dealing with the most pressing in a hierarchy of emotional needs. In Chapter 9:9.6 I discussed the need for former-members to create a *'scaffold'* [Emma] or structure for living and this is also applicable in relation to facing suppressed feelings. They will need to learn new skills, both cognitively and practically, but also in relation to self-regulation and expressing feelings (see further discussion of literatures below in section 10.4). 1G might remember how they used to regulate their feelings. SGAs may have to learn to self-regulate and develop their authentic-self, as they become familiar with, and make sense of, feelings that they have not necessarily acknowledged before.

Difficult feelings, such as anger, need to be acknowledged, because when feelings are suppressed, anger is often amongst them. In some cults the anger is projected out to outsiders (dispensing of existence) which results in disarming the individual and is likely to contribute to depression and disempowerment. It is important to connect with constructive anger and a counsellor can help with this aspect.

> *'People would come into counselling depressed, and our goal really was to get them angry. I am speaking now as a therapist. Yes, you turn all that emotion around into constructive anger.'* [P]

> *'In the cult I wasn't supposed to be the angry one, I was supposed to be this sort of angelic kind of a person, you know, this loving [person]. I had trouble with anger, it really held me up.'* [Cheryl]

Facing and expressing this once suppressed anger dispels depression, activates sense of self, is empowering, encouraging self-confidence and a healthy contact boundary. Anger can support the individual as they learn to determine what is nourishing in the environment/field

and what is not (Parker Hall, 2009). Some, nevertheless, avoid facing suppressed feelings because what helps is also emotionally painful.

In the next section I address the category 'feeling the emotional pain.'

10.2.2 - Feeling Emotional Pain

Participants express how challenging it was for them being a member, leaving and post-cult. All indicate this process to be emotionally painful except Reginald. The emotional pain results from having been '*abused, manipulated and neglected*' [Sean] and as they leave, the feelings that emerge include pain associated with

- harm caused by the thought-reform and abuse
- posttraumatic stress
- cold reality and realisation of all that the individual has been involved with
- shame and guilt
- humiliation and feeling a fool for having been a cult member
- loss of relationships especially with the leader
- loss of idealism and time

Going back through the cult experience and 'confronting what has happened' (Regel and Joseph, 2010), whilst important and necessary, is described by one participant as '*psychological chemotherapy'* [SGA.P]. Chemotherapy is a drug treatment administered to rid the body of a cancer and is, for some, reported to be inordinately painful. This level of pain is why some avoid this Phase delaying recovery through addictions to soothe the pain, or even resorting to suicide. Some may delay recovery by raging (Parker Hall, 2009) against the cult.

> *'I think at the end of that period [of speaking out publicly against the cult] somebody in the group of former-members very kindly wrote me a note and said "are you*

sure that being angry to the extent that you are, and as much as you are, for as long as you are, is the best thing really?"' [1G.P]

Facing the reality that those they looked up to, and thought genuinely loved them, but in actuality had other priorities, is devastating. For SGAs, when confronting the cult-experience and realising their family may not have been, on the whole, trustworthy, and did not prioritise their needs nor necessarily have their best interests at heart, is distressing. The process of facing up to these painful realities can be long and hard - but ultimately worthwhile.

P: 'I didn't think it would take as long or be as hard. It was like psychological chemotherapy. And it is very, very painful to go back and pull it apart and realise that you can't trust everybody you used to love, and that you couldn't trust them then. And you then repeated the patterns with new people who were not trustworthy, and who were manipulative, because that is all you know, and that's what you defined as love. It's INCREDIBLY PAINFUL. Its psychological chemotherapy, you need to go through the chemotherapy to kill the cancer, it's REALLY ugly, it's REALLY painful, and it's the only way out - it's not fun.

R: So actually it does help but it really hurts?

P: YES, and it was psychological chemotherapy and it was incredibly painful, but SO worth it.' [SGA.P]

Facing painful and uncomfortable feelings that arise from the introjected belief that the individual is '*defective, deficient, unholy, unworthy'* [Lavinia], and naming and understanding them (Regel and Joseph, 2010), helps.

> *'And I let the pain come out, and I let the guilt feelings come up, got the suffering out, physically, mentally, and the self-blame, and all those uncomfortable feelings. And then I found that when I let myself have these feelings, I can cry, I can be angry. I try to be kind to myself, and I try to be understanding, especially when I cry, and I try not to think when I have these feelings, just to be, embracing them - and not to always be alone.'* [Ginny]

When facing the pain, it is important to retain a balance in terms of support and the former-member may need to both support themself (self-help) and seek professional-help. Meeting with other former-members who validate the individual's experience helps because they understand, but it may be like opening up a wound.

> '*It was painful and healing, I mean it was like opening up the wound and now it gets to heal. [...] It wasn't a bad thing, but it was intense [...] and traumatic but also INCREDIBLY important and healing. [...] It was like THEY KNOW, they can see it, they know what's inside me. And I sat and cried and cried and cried. I hardly talked at all, yeah they had been there and so it was way different and very much deeper [than speaking with her counsellor] - and that was incredibly good fortune.'* [Nina]

Grieving is another area of emotional pain (Wright, 1991). As the individual unmasks the cult leader, the resulting loss of attachment to, and idealisation of them as the ultimate lover, saviour, hero or parent, is, for some, devastating and painful. It can be '*…heartbreak in slow motion*' [Jane]. When the truth about their true nature emerges and the individual discovers the perfect guru has '*a shadow life and a dark side*' [Ginny], when this has previously been obscured from their awareness, it can come as a terrible shock. This can result in an acute sense of loss and grief for the person the individual

believed their guru to be. Three participants' leaders had died at the point of interview, but all the others were living gurus. The loss of the guru may, therefore, be, for many, a living loss.

The loss of a guru results in a particular form of grief not recognised by society or counsellors. It is both a loss, and a betrayal of all the member has believed and invested their life in. Counsellors who have no knowledge of cults may also have no idea about

> *'…the idea of grieving for losing your guru.' [Max]*

The danger is they may trivialise the experience, evidencing a lack of attunement and understanding, resulting in them dismissing an aspect of life that had been paramount, for some, for decades. This can leave the individual feeling that the counsellor is saying in effect:

> *'Oh snap out of it, it's nothing like losing a parent. [...] …[but] the fact that it was all in our head doesn't make the pain any less.'* [Max]

This is a form of 'disenfranchised grief', where the significance of the relationship is discounted (Attig, 2000); it is not recognised by society and so it is not socially sanctioned (Doka, 1989) which means that normal grieving rituals are not operationalised. Grief that is unresolved can become 'abnormal grief' and there are certain tasks that need to be accomplished for the mourning to be completed, and for equilibrium to be re-established (Worden, 1991, p.10). These are (square brackets are my additions)

- to accept the reality of the loss
- to work through the pain of grief
- to adjust to an environment in which the deceased [or other] is missing

- and to emotionally relocate the deceased [or other] and move on with life (Ibid.)

These tasks are applicable for former-members, so long as the grief and loss are no longer disenfranchised. There may be little opportunity to complete these tasks in the chaos of leaving and it is therefore appropriate at this Phase of building sense of self and emotional healing that these tasks be accomplished either by self-help strategies or with a counsellor who understands.

Those participants who had not understood the experience and had not faced their emotional pain, who had not grieved, were still trying to make sense of the cult experience many years later. They were, paradoxically, living in emotional pain, being triggered, dissociating and often remembering life-in; that is, they were suffering from the well-recognised after effects of abuse and trauma – posttraumatic stress (Briere, 2004; van der Kolk et al., 1996; Herman, 1992), evidenced and discussed previously in Chapter 4:4.5.3.

I proceed to discuss what helps in the light of the literatures and the data.

10.3 – Emotional Healing: The Literature and Data

There is evidence from the literatures and the data that facing suppressed and painful feelings, and grief, is ultimately healing and that

> '…the awareness of the ability to endure unwanted emotions are the condition sine qua non for a successful cure' (Perls, 1992).

This notion has been supported by more recent research that indicates that

> '[...] wellbeing is related to the capacity to experience the full range of emotions' (Harris, 2007, p.154).

It is evidenced herein that emotional healing entails feeling emotions. This can lead to 'integration' (Herman, 1992), where the 'linkage of differentiated parts' (Siegel, 2009) results in the split becoming a whole (van der Hart, 2006). An integrated state is one of 'harmony and coherence' (van der Hart et al., 2006). This 'promotes patterns of enhanced well-being' (Siegel, 2009) where the individual can flexibly flow between feelings, in awareness and genuine contact with themself (Wilkinson, 2006; Kepner, 2003; Mackewn, 2000; Perls et al., 1951). Emotion is, therefore, a 'unifying gestalt' between external and internal aspects of the individual/environment-field (Perls, 1951, p.79).

Participants speak of a split both in relation to the cult-identity and dissociation (defined in Chapter 4:4.6.3) (Hassan, 2013; Jenkinson, 2008; West and Martin, 1994) and for some the split is clearly evidenced between feelings (emotions) and body, which are 'mutually dependent and inseparable in terms of function' (Damasio, 2006; Ogden et al., 2006). Markers of non-integration are chaos or rigidity (Siegel, 2009), also evidenced in Chapter 7 and throughout. A number of participants struggled with '*dissociation for a long time after leaving'* [Harriet]. It was important for them to find strategies to help them deal with emotional overwhelm, come back into their body and 'ground' themselves (Kepner, 2003; Rothschild, 2000). Whilst connecting to the body can be extremely challenging, especially if there has been physical, or sexual, abuse, it is essential in order to build sense of self because the individual cannot 'be fully who s/he is' (Kepner, 2003, p.239) if they do not, which may delay recovery.

Regulating feelings (affect regulation) and emotional processes are central to psychotherapy practice and

> '…most current treatment models emphasise the resolution of unresolved emotions of painful past experiences and the expansion of the affect array' (Ogden, 2009, p.204).

This creates a dilemma for the individual, and those supporting them, because, as evidenced above, the emotions can explode out, unintegrated, and the individual may struggle to regulate those feelings (they are 'dysregulated'). Directing attention to the emotions in psychotherapy may result in further dysregulation (Ibid.). More effective interventions are

> '…bottom-up or sensorimotor processing interventions' [that use] 'body sensation and movement to address and change how information is processed on a bodily level' (Ibid., p.205).

These strategies have been evidenced to facilitate integration (Ibid.). This is congruent with a Gestalt approach in which genuine contact and awareness facilitates integration of disparate parts which are stronger together than when split – a bunch of sticks is stronger than one (Perls, 1992, p.172). Raising awareness within the Gestalt approach includes a body focus (Kepner, 2003) (which involve bottom up or sensorimotor processing interventions), helping the individual to concentrate on certain movements or actions or sensations in the body in order to raise awareness of and support movement through the gestalt cycle to complete unfinished business and process their emotions (Perls, et.al, 1951). This body focus has been evidenced in more recent clinical studies to be a helpful strategy in the face of overwhelming emotions because, in certain circumstances, if the individual directs attention to emotions too soon, it might exacerbate dysregulation (Ogden, 2009, p.205).

One strategy suggested by participants is grounding techniques because *'I prize that really down to earth grounding kind of stuff'* [Harriet]. Strategies that help are

- concentrating on one thing, e.g. people's shoes, colours etc.
- being with animals
- walking
- being outside
- movement

There is evidence that supports a strong relationship between physical activity and wellbeing (Joseph, 2015, p. 209). Some participants discovered that if they were overwhelmed it helped them to dance because it put them in touch with their body, got them out of their head, and built their sense of self.

> *'I still dance. It gets me out of my head.'* [Harriet]

Knowing when to 'emphasise emotional processing' (emotional focus) and when to 'emphasise sensorimotor processing' (body focus) and how to integrate these is essential to working with dysregulated emotions. Ogden (2009, p.206) highlights the difference between 'trauma-related' and 'attachment related' emotions, both of which may be experienced by former-members. 'Attachment related' trauma ensues when unhealthy and abusive attachments with early childhood caregivers cause emotional distress, because those experiences were dangerous and became overwhelming (Ogden, 2009; Gerhardt, 2006). 'Attachment related' is relevant to SGAs, because their developmental history is tied up in the cult, and for some 1G because they have regressed to a dependent state (Langone, 1993) and are attached to the leader, and other members. 1G may also have pre-cult traumas they are grappling with, which can only add complexity to their experiencing. Trauma related emotions stem

> '…from overwhelming experiences that cannot be integrated and typically solicit subcortical animal defensive mechanisms and dysregulated arousal' (Ogden et al., 2006).

The 'trauma related', and 'attachment related', are in actuality connected, but depending on which is primary will indicate what will help clinicians to prioritise the emotional or physical tendencies pertaining to either attachment or trauma (Ogden, 2009).

> 'These clinical choices become paramount in an integrative therapeutic approach' (Ogden, 2009, p.206).

This is important in relation to counselling former-members because the source of the feelings needs to be accurately assessed as evidenced in Chapter 9.2.4. Psychotherapy will need to include the communication of feelings, that is, to be an 'affect communicating cure' and not simply a 'talking cure' (Ibid., p.204) because cognition and feeling ultimately go hand in hand [Max above]. I discuss these aspects further below.

> *'When a client says something, there's not only the words but there's an experience, their feeling from it.'* [Max]

It is not the creative adjustments, the defensive responses themselves (those that avoid genuine contact), but their somatic (physical) and emotional over-activity and inflexibility that contribute to chronic dysregulation of feelings and 'pathology in traumatized individuals' (Ogden, 2009, p.210). These tendencies can in turn reinforce 'chronic negative emotions'. This will then, also, reinforce the individuals 'cognitive distortions' and may lead to them constricting the array of emotions that they allow themselves to feel (Ogden, 2009, p.211). The individual may continue to suppress

certain feelings because they are painful, and because they believe them to be sinful, negative, bad.

Facing emotions and feeling the pain therefore needs to be approached with appropriate strategies and care with those who are not used to self-regulating. I have evidenced that thought-reform '*squeezes*' the authentic-self, and the individual is self-suppressed and split off from themselves. Within a therapeutic counselling relationship, the individual and the counsellor or psychotherapist are collaborative partners in the 'journey towards healing' (Ibid.). Neuroscientists suggest that integration that occurs in effective psychotherapy also 'creates lasting change by altering the synaptic connections in the brain' (Siegel, 2009, p.165). When the individual returns to the authentic-self, I suggest that the growing differentiation between the individual/environment-field leads to more emotional flexibility evidencing integration.

> *'[...] In the drama class I really let myself dance, and be sexy and sensual and jump around. Feelings I had, I would acknowledge within myself. Something very different from the cult.'* [Cheryl]

The route to integration is therefore contacting sensation, raising awareness, and reinstating the full functioning of the contact cycle, in order to build a sense of self as the individual increases genuine contact with themself and others. Participants suggest further strategies for dealing positively with the self

- learning to identify and accept feelings
- understanding where feelings are emanating from [cult or pre-cult]
- celebrating positive qualities
- learning to trust themself

- developing empathy and compassion for themself
- being kind to themself
- validating their experiences and sense of self (also Chapter 9:9.5) and
- developing a sense of humour about themself and the cult experience

In addition, in order to recover from abuse and trauma it is important that the individual feels safe and that the environment allows for safe expression, with safe people (Ogden et al., 2006; Kepner, 2003; van der Kolk et al., 1996; Herman, 1992). If the individual does not have this safety, further harm may be caused, or at the very least, the counselling may abort. It is integrating to face the feelings but when doing so it may be important to have a cult aware and experienced other there to support the individual, or a lack of support may result in some individuals splitting further, or exacerbating the split, and then '*it may be amputation and not integration*' [Emma]. These professional-help aspects are evidence in Chapter 9:9.3.

10.4 - Professional-help and Self-help Strategies

As the negative sense of self emerges post-cult, and the individual faces the grief and loss, in addition to the negative introjected cult-identity, it is important that there is an antidote, that there is emotional healing, and that building sense of self, in a positive but realistic way, is encouraged both through professional-help and self-help strategies. Family, and other former-members (self-help), are well placed to provide support and comfort in the task of facing feelings. The individual will also benefit from being in contact with themselves and facing the feelings alone (Ginny above). Counsellors who understand the cult experience are well placed to help with all these aspects as well as the posttraumatic stress. Both professional-

help and self-help will, therefore, apply to the categories discussed herein.

This Phase specifically requires counsellors/psychotherapists to have awareness raising skills (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007), as well as psychotherapeutic and developmental knowledge. The data suggests that counsellors will need to know about and understand supporting former-members in relation to trauma as well as cults and supports similar findings from my Masters research (Jenkinson, 2013; Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009) and the clinical literatures. Undergirding this knowledge, and the next most important thing counsellors can offer, is a therapeutic relationship which is empathic, sensitive, stable, strong, and safe (Cooper, 2011; Ogden et.al, 2006; Herman, 1992). This entails understanding the particular challenges former-members face as well as having the knowledge and ability to listen deeply for feelings and experience

> *'…actually listening for the experience, as much as the words, because you can tell a lot just by body language.'* [Max]

This is congruent with a Gestalt psychotherapy approach in which raising awareness entails contact with the authentic-self and feelings as discussed above.

It is important to make sense of the cult experience (Burks, 2014; Martin, 2012; West and Martin, 1994) evidenced in Phases One and Two, and raising awareness involves the former-member and their counsellor accurately assessing the source of feelings, that is, whether they are cult related or pre-cult. Not understanding can lead to many lost years trying to make sense of the cult experience and engaging in inaccurate interpretations as to where the problem lies (as evidenced in Chapter 9.2).

> *'You need to realise that it was systematically done to you. And it's important to understand that before you look at what were the things going on inside you that kept you involved. Before you look at those things it's important to understand that you weren't stupid for getting involved, they are very, very tricky ways they get you.'* [Lindsey]

I now proceed to explore the category which addresses developmental issues that require psychotherapeutic strategies for all SGAs and some 1G.

10.5 – Psychotherapy for SGAs and 1G[Issues]

There are some 1G who did not have an overly difficult childhood, who, after leaving and addressing the strategies suggested in Phases One and Two, and having faced their cult-related feelings in this Phase, can move directly to Phase Four.

There is another population of 1G whose motivation for joining, or staying longer than was good for them, is rooted in repeating childhood patterns of abuse, trauma or attachment deficit (Wilkinson, 2010); that is, they were vulnerable to both joining and the abuse within the cult, and stayed longer, because of these '*childhood issues*' [Harriet]. These 1G therefore need an additional opportunity to heal these 'issues'. I coded those 1G who have a need to heal childhood issues, and those who stayed longer than was good for them, by adopting the in-vivo code '*childhood issues*', reduced it to '*issues*', and then to: '*1G[issues]*'; this then highlights the difference from 1G who did not have childhood issues.

That 1G have a pre-cult self to return to is, therefore, problematic for a number of participants. There are those who joined the cult because of the promise to heal or transform them. Many cults offer a '*quick fix transformation*' [Lavinia] and the reality that healing and transformation did not take place, and the resulting disappointment,

can be heart breaking [Jane] and a challenge post-cult. The reality of this lack of hoped for transformation, and the ensuing abuse in the cult, exacerbates post-cult healing needs for these 1G. One participant was shocked to encounter her unresolved pre-cult issues after being cast out of the cult.

> *'When they pushed me out the door, all of my baggage that I had brought with me when I had entered the group was still sitting on the front step of the building and they pushed me out the door and there was all my stuff, and it was like, OH!'* [Marietta]

This baggage is *'not necessarily good stuff'* and some join a cult because they were not *'a really happy person'* [Harriet]. They therefore have to pick up their unfinished business where they left it on joining, which is challenging and requires professional-help, for some.

Some remain members because the abuse in the cult is familiar and repeats childhood issues. One participant reflects on how his mother never bonded with him, and so he dealt with the pain by

> *'…burying my head in work and that would make it easier to deal with the difficult emotional situations.'* [P]

He repeated this strategy in the cult, staying for decades, unable to address either the pre-cult emotional pain nor his cult-related feelings.

This category applies to me as I have had to address issues related to my parents' divorce in psychotherapy (discussion in Chapter 2). I evidenced in Phase Two, Chapter 9:9.3.4, that pre-cult issues need to be addressed after 'understanding' the cult, otherwise it may undermine former-member's foundations and destabilise them. It is, therefore, important that healing childhood issues is Phase

appropriate but is also addressed at the appropriate juncture within the Phase – that is, after addressing cult-related feelings. This is, in part, in order not to 'blame the victim' (Singer, 2003a; Herman, 1992) and also because an individual can only process a certain amount at a time.

In this Phase, therefore, there is a need for relational developmental psychotherapy (defined in Chapter 9:9.2) for both SGAs and 1G[Issues]. For SGAs their developmental history is cult related and undergirds virtually everything. The application of 'normal' (Coates, 2012a) developmental psychology and psychotherapy theory may not be adequate and SGAs need to be understood within a framework of how they developed psychologically within the cult, and a cult affiliated family (building on Phases One and Two). They therefore require interventions with a psychotherapist knowledgeable about cults who can offer long term relational and reparative psychotherapy (Wilkinson, 2010; Wilkinson, 2006; Ogden et al., 2006).

As evidenced throughout, for 1G[Issues], their developmental history is only part of the task. Nevertheless, once the cult issues are addressed and the former-member begins to address pre-cult issues, then there is likely to be the need, within psychotherapy, for a flexible movement between cult-related, pre-cult and current aspects of their life.

Before I conclude this chapter and move on to Phase Four, I evidence integration and healing.

10.6 – Evidencing Healing and Integration

A number of participants, who said they had recovered, were, in interview, able to remember the abuse in the cult and contact their pain, cry with tears, and withdraw from it. I suggest this fluidity of contacting their painful feelings on remembering, and being able to then withdraw from them, without getting stuck, evidences their

ability to complete the gestalt cycle; moving through sensation, awareness, mobilisation, action, to final contact, satisfaction and withdrawal and on to creating a new gestalt, new contact. That is, they have integrated the experience and indicate a whole, healthy fluid personality structure – they have built a sense of self and evidencing they have '*recovered*' [Daphne, Maribel]. I evidence this aspect in interview with one expert-therapist participant who keenly remembered the pain as she accessed memories from decades ago. I was conscious of my code of ethics (Chapter 6:6.2) and proceeded with care, checking out with her if she wanted to halt the interview, but she did not, and proceeded with great courage (I have left in the silences and the dissociative nature of this part of the interview in order to indicate how painful remembering was):

P: (Crying.)

R: Is it upsetting?

P: It, it's not upsetting it's just, just...

G: I will get you a tissue. If you don't want to talk about it...

P: No, its fine, it's fine. It's ah, I just haven't thought about it in YEARS you know.

R: Really? Thank you for sharing it (gently). (Silence) Hmm. Have some water.

P: (Long silence x 2 minutes) (cough) (sound of movements and pouring water). So anyway, I think (silence x 1 minute) (sniff) You know it's nothing in the here and now, I think, I think I am just remembering (emotional voice) (silence)...I remember how I FELT.

R: Yes. Thank you for remembering (silence). It was REALLY hard?

P: Yes (coughs) so (silence) yeah these tears aren't, ah...it's more about remembering how it felt at the time (silence). So he, he ...caused ...so much pain ...the group leader (crying) (silence) ...I DIDN'T WANT TO BE PART OF THAT.

R: Are you are saying this is the past ...it's not here and now?

P: Yeah, well exactly, I mean I have recovered. [P]

Whilst this participant may appear defensive and these statements could, on the face of it, be interpreted differently; and it may appear that the tears are evidence that she is not recovered, it is clear from the context in which these statements occur in the interview that she has in fact recovered. This is evidenced by many aspects of her current life and other parts of the interview. Recovery is not an all or nothing experience (defined in Chapter 4:4.6), without emotion or memory. These aspects are also evident from my personal experience and clinical counselling with former-members, that painful feelings related to memories of incidents in the cult do emerge, but this does not necessarily mean the individual is not recovering or recovered. That recovery is being able to raise awareness of thoughts and feelings, be in full contact (with the authentic-self) and withdraw, and complete a healthy gestalt cycle is evidence of integration and recovery.

'It's just like when you have, you know, it's silly but simple, just like if you have yellow and blue and you become green. You know, all the pigment, all of that self, becomes ever present.' [Emma]

'Oh yeah...it's like I can be a whole person!! It, its, I, I AM A WHOLE PERSON!' [Gloria]

10.7 – Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored Phase Three of what helps former-members recover from an abusive-cult experience. The recovery process necessitates former-members build their sense of self by facing suppressed feelings and feeling the emotional pain. These tasks lead to healing and integration which I evidence from the data and the literatures. I evidenced that it is important that cult-related feelings are addressed before pre-cult childhood issues, for 1G[Issues], and that SGAs need to address developmental issues throughout. I discussed Phase appropriate professional-help and self-help strategies. In addition, I illuminated pertinent discourses in the literatures in order to augment the findings. I concluded this chapter evidencing integration and recovery.

I conclude the Phases in Chapter 11: Phase Four under the category '*The freed self & posttraumatic growth'*. I evidence that in the final Phase of recovery the individual returns to their authentic-self, 'I am myself again', and evidence posttraumatic growth because of, and in spite of, the cult experience.

Chapter 11 – Phase Four: The Freed Self and Posttraumatic Growth

'And I've arrived here today having gone through the whole cleansing process. It feels like this interview is the final piece of the puzzle - I'm now free of that experience. It feels like I am myself again! It feels like my life is mine and that I'm autonomous again and that I'm not beholden to anyone else's wishes.' [Fred]

'So certain kinds of life experiences make people really examine who they are, you know and this was one of them, b*ecause people either have to completely invent themselves or reinvent themselves and do so much self-examination to figure out who they are, who they wanna be. There aren't very many life experiences that push you to do that like this does. So that's a good thing, I mean, I wouldn't wish it on anybody but I don't regret it.'* [Harriet]

'I don't feel I am in a recovery phase; I feel just in a personal growth phase.' [Maribel]

D: I don't relate the word recovery to myself anymore. I did at one time. It's a process going on […]
G: Recovered implies it's done?
D: Yah, I feel it's done. [Daphne]

11.1 - Introduction

In this chapter I explicate what helps in Phase Four, the final of the four Phases and the overarching category changes from 'freeing the authentic-self' to 'the freed self'. Once the individual reaches this Phase they have completed the tasks set out in the first three Phases. That is, they have left both physically and psychologically; they have built their sense of authentic-self through developing a cognitive

understanding of cultic dynamics and thought-reform; and they have faced and healed their painful feelings. It is apparent that once these tasks have been accomplished then former-members can, and many do, move on with their lives. The cult is no longer haunting them or triggering them, as much. As healing is not an all or nothing process, the individual may need to revisit tasks from previous Phases if something emerges for them, either developmentally, or resulting from the cult-abuse and trauma, or if they need to gain additional understanding. As evidenced in Chapter 10:10.6, a fluid contactful movement within the authentic-self and integration is the aim, not forgetting, or returning to suppressing or dissociating. For all participants, membership left its mark and continued to be an important aspect of their lives, either because they were still striving to recover or because they chose to use the experience to help others.

The coding for this category emerged when I reordered the data into Phases and the codes were refined whilst writing up. The coding is less dense because some participants had not reached this Phase. The former-member expert therapists all showed evidence that would place them in this category of 'the freed self', that is, being recovered, and having learnt from the experience. They had all chosen to use their cult-experience. Whilst this might, in some cases, be a sign they had not recovered and healed, the data suggests their desire was to put to good advantage a difficult experience in order to help others – both to support former-members and to warn others about cults.

> *'I don't want to be indifferent to the cult I was in, so I maintain this website; and I offer myself as a counsellor pro-bono to people from my cult.'* [P]

I did not explicitly ask participants if they were recovered, but the issue arose, and was directly addressed, in some interviews, and is discussed in relation to defining 'recovery' in Chapter 4:4.7. When I reordered the data into Phases, therefore, a number of categories

indicated that some participants were 'healed' or 'recovered', and within this there was the sense of being back to their authentic-self, as evidenced in the quote from Fred, above. This was coded as an in-vivo code, '*I am myself again'* [Fred].

Another category that arose indicated growth arising directly from the experience. That is, in spite of the trauma and abuse, there were some aspects of the cult experience that led to gain and growth, as evidenced in the quote from Harriet, above. In relation to this category, I searched the literatures on posttraumatic growth (PTG) and viewed the data through this lens in order to ascertain whether it was applicable. This inductive/deductive strategy is consistent with a GT methodology (Charmaz, 2014). The literatures were therefore applied retrospectively, after analysis, and whilst writing up. That is, the PTG issues addressed emerged from the data.

To reiterate, there is both a returning to (for 1G), and a developing sense of (for SGAs), the authentic-self as the individual completes the healing tasks set out in the previous Phases. And there is a growing through and from the experience (Joseph, 2011).

The coding and structure for this Phase is

- I am myself again
- Posttraumatic growth
    - Personal changes
    - Philosophical changes
    - Relationship changes

The coding is illustrated in Figure 7.8. I proceed to evidence these categories, starting with 'I am myself again'.

11.2 - I am Myself Again

When the individual has reached this Phase they can now move on with their life, in touch with their post-cult authentic-self – '*I am myself again!*' [Fred]. Over time the individual becomes

> '*…more and more grounded in the new me, the post-cult self, having a positive sense of self - the resilient self.'* [Lavinia 1G therapist]

As the contact boundary is reinstated, differentiation is restored, and this in turn helps build the authentic-self evidencing final contact, satisfaction and withdrawal in the gestalt cycle. This includes a genuine healing process rather than the false '*transformation*' [Lavinia] promised by the cult.

> *'I know that I am healing myself, that I am now making real progress, as opposed to the fictitious - lack of - progress in the cult.'* [Fred]

Participants also express a sense of freedom in being back to their authentic-self. Their life belongs to them now, they are no longer expected to be dependent, but are autonomous, not beholden to others (see Fred's quote at head of Chapter). There is self-acceptance in this Phase, a joy, exhilaration, and relief, at being free, for some.

> *'I am who I am and who I want to be, [...] that's what makes me happy ha ha ha (laughs), or a feeling of fulfilment. [...] I have learned to leave behind the most depressive part of myself [...] the most self-deprecating, the most empty part of myself. I have learned to [...] manage that part and not to be trapped and enslaved by it, and I've allowed myself to enjoy and take pleasure and pride in things I've done and accomplishments, relationships.'* [Sean]

There is also evidence of PTG in this quote, which I discuss further below in 11.3.1.

I now explore the category 'posttraumatic growth'.

11.3 – Posttraumatic Growth: Introduction

It is evidenced herein, both from the data and the literatures, that physical and psychological abuse are traumatic experiences and can have harmful physical and psychological consequences (Regel and Joseph, 2010; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004; Langone, 1993; Herman, 1992). It is also evidenced that some people grow through and even because of their traumatic experiences, a phenomenon that has been termed posttraumatic growth (PTG). PTG is the notion that

> '…people exposed to even the most traumatic events may perceive at least some good emerging from their struggle' (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996b, p.455).

PTG challenges the idea that trauma inevitably leads to a damaged and dysfunctional life and is therefore a hopeful concept (Joseph, 2011, p.79), and is an 'accepted facet of the PTSD condition' (Turnbull, 2011, p.413). It is, nevertheless, important that PTG is not used as a measure of someone's character, that is, if they have not achieved PTG they are in some way failing (Joseph and Murphy, 2013b; Joseph, 2011; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004a; Linley and Joseph, 2004). Because the concept occurs in the context of trauma and suffering it is important that it is approached sensitively and not imposed on the other, nor is it necessarily a measure of being recovered (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). Psychological growth occurs in many settings and certainly occurs without trauma (Ibid.) and is likely to be, in part, because the individual has a natural propensity towards health, growth and self-actualisation (Perls et al., 1951; Maslow, 1972). PTG is one possible outcome of this 'organismic self-regulation' (Perls et al., 1951) although

> '…continuing personal distress and growth often coexist' (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004, p.1).

PTG can be viewed as a process (Joseph, 2011) and also an outcome (Tedeschi and Calhoun, 2004). This research evidences it to be both. Whilst many participants express PTG as a final phase and as an outcome, Jane, who had recently left the cult, also states that, in spite of her leaving being so traumatic, she could also view it in terms of '*getting a second chance'* and an opportunity to '*start again'* (see philosophical changes below).

I proceed to evidence PTG from the data and am not aware of any other empirical research evidencing PTG specifically in former cult members.

In interview, as one 1G participant referred to concepts signifying PTG, I asked her outright if she knew of the concept. She had not, but found the term interesting and enlivening.

> *'I LOVE that idea, posttraumatic stress disorder verses posttraumatic growth, I love that, oh man, I wanna hear about that.'* [P]

She kept returning to the concept, grappling with its meaning, referring to her own experience as an expert trauma therapist.

> *'So you say post traumatic growth? I think of those who used every possibility in the book to grow, and it's beautiful. And they are not victims any more, [...] they've grown.'* [P]

The concept was not raised or mentioned by any other participant but it is implicit in some other interviews. These are evidenced below by adopting three categories identified for PTG (Joseph, 2011, p.73-5; Tedeschi and Calhoun, 1996):

- Personal changes
- Philosophical changes
- Relationship changes

Applying these categories to former-members is not straightforward. The language of PTG in some respects is redolent of language adopted by some cults (Chapters 4 and 7). For example, terms like 'transformation' and 'spiritual change' are used, and whilst they are not applied in the same way as the promised enlightenment, salvation and '*quick fix transformation'* [Lavinia] promised by many cults, the ideas need explicating. For some, the reason for joining the cult was in order to achieve transformation; the desire to change and the hope of a better life, of being useful, impactful and of being part of something spiritual and significant with someone they viewed to be a powerful and admirable charismatic leader. These ideas, and the semantics, are therefore, loaded and add complexity to the analysis and interpretation of the data. For example, Tedeschi and Colhoun (1996) talk of growth in the R/S field, but this is an all too familiar concept for former-members. I discussed in the literature Chapters 3 and 4, and evidenced from the data, the changes that take place when people join and leave a cult. The cult experience in itself inevitably raises existential issues (Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; Pargament et al., 2006; van Deurzen, 1997) and questions about the meaning of life, R/S issues for many, and having to reinvent yourself, as evidenced in the quote from Harriet, above - all issues that PTG theory has identified as being a possible outcome after trauma.

Because of the nature and depth of thought-reform and extracting the self from the cult, the former-member will, as evidenced in the previous Phases, need to sift through and review all aspects of their life – in my Masters research one participant said it was like 'separating salt and sugar'. There are few experiences in life which

require this level and depth of reviewing an individual's life. This looks, in some respects, like PTG. Also, the abusive-cult experience and leaving have a severity about them and there is evidence that PTG and severity of trauma go hand in hand (Pargament et al., 2006).

I suggest that there are two issues related to former-members

1. the inevitable need to sift through all that one is, and much of what one believes, in order to heal and move on from the abusive-cult, to become the freed self, and
2. posttraumatic growth

It is, therefore, important to distinguish these aspects, to perceive them accurately in accordance with the Phases and PTG theory, and demonstrate the differences. If this is not done the danger is the theory and language may appear to trivialise the traumatic nature of the cult experience, which has been evidenced to be abusive and painful.

With these warnings in mind I proceed to address Joseph's categories of PTG and evidence them from the data. These categories overlap in some respects.

11.3.1 - PTG: Personal Changes

This category is related to finding new inner strengths, achieving greater wisdom or becoming more compassionate (Joseph, 2011, p.73). I previously evidenced how dependent individuals become in the cult; and so being able to return to autonomy and take responsibility for their life, whilst in many ways challenging, may also bring a sense of freedom and joy (as evidenced by Fred and Sean above) (Derocher, 2008). This requires the individual to learn to flexibly take control of their life (Joseph, 2011, p.141). One 1G participant learned from the work of William Glasser (2011), a psychiatrist who developed Reality Therapy and worked with

disturbed youngsters and others in California at Correctional Institutions. She says he taught people to make choices and take responsibility for their lives and that

> *'…you are responsible for your life, it's not your mother's fault, it's not your father's fault. I know there's a place for that, but he was trying to get a change in behaviour that would put them on a right track.'* [Marjorie – 1G]

These aspects are also evidenced by Fred.

> *'You know you have to make decisions about the quality of life that you want. And, and what it is that you want to create, because in the end you are master of your own destiny and so you have to captain that ship and, and through the experiences the important thing is to recognise, okay, this is an experience that I don't want to participate in again, and when they come to you, because they will come to you in life again, to recognise them and to say "no I've been there, thank you, and I don't want to go there again".'*

Some learned to be more balanced in relation to others and that

> *'…it is important to belong but not at the cost of my integrity or individuality.'* [Marjorie]

Others learned that they do not need to be perfect, and that being human is good enough:

> *'I think, that being human is a good thing and one does not need to be a saint or perfect etc. [...] you know, that being a human being is good enough.'* [Sean]

It is important the individual learn to understand and have compassion for themself, rather than berating themself as a fool for joining. It helps to ask

> *'…what am I going to do to become that person that I wanted to become by joining? And how am I going to now build on that and not give up on myself because I had good reason for being there. My reasons were genuine and heartfelt and good. So I ask myself what am I going to do to create that?'* [Fred]

Sean evidences in the quote in 11.2 above, that he learned to leave behind the most depressive part of himself, and that in spite of the cult experience he grew up. He continues:

> *'So, so, you know I'm not indifferent, I'm not forgiving, but I am not obsessed and I am not filled with hate or rage, I've gotten on with my life and tried to make my life good and the life of people in my world better or good enough - God knows I am trying!'* [Sean]

Some participants were able to view the experience as part of their lifelong learning, and build on aspects, such as the work they had done in the cult. Being able to take these aspects with them, rather than cutting off from everything to do with the cult, can aid the transition into life post-cult.

> [Continuing to see clients, post-cult] *'…gave me a confidence that otherwise I would never have had. And that, that meant that I could immediately translate all the negative experiences in the community into things that I had to go through in order to become this therapist that I had become in order to help people.'* [Fred]

Building on successes post-cult can disconfirm the teachings from the cult and builds sense of self.

> *'[I believed] …all those bad things would happen [when I left] until I finally had more successes and then I, when I had more successes, better outcomes, I felt better about myself and I look at it now as a disconfirmation of those inaccurate self-limiting beliefs.'* [Cheryl]

In some cases, the cult leader is genuinely knowledgeable, and '*despite the negative experiences'* [Fred] the individual can learn from them, for example, in relation to therapy and spirituality. After the individual leaves they have to decide what to do with what they had learned. Some decide to take that knowledge with them, thus gaining from their cult experience.

> *'It is still a wealth of knowledge that I carry with me, it's mine and I can use it in whatever way I see fit. It's all mine, it doesn't belong to anyone else'.* [Fred]

Similarly, others learned practical skills, for example, becoming an electrician or plumber or training as a Priest. One participant decided, because she had invested so much in the cult, she would train as a psychologist, help others, and earn her living out of all she had learned.

I now evidence PTG: philosophical changes.

11.3.2 - PTG: Philosophical Changes

This category is related to the individual being unexpectedly gifted with a new-found sense of what is really important in life (Joseph, 2011, p.75). As previously evidenced, healing and leaving the cult-identity behind requires the individual to challenge many aspects of their life; so much has to be sifted through: the introjects, the

relationship with the cult-leader; the beliefs about themself; relationships with family; and for some, pre-cult issues.

The individual has an opportunity to invent or reinvent themself. This category overlaps with 11.3.1: Personal changes (above). Harriet (quote at head of the Chapter) evidences how the cult experience, and the trauma, can challenge the individual to examine themselves, to *'figure out who they are, who they wanna be'* which is in part related to 'figuring what you like' addressed in Chapter 9:9.4.5.

> *'One good thing is that actually you are getting a second chance to really decide who you wanna be and who, what you are going to do [...] I know it's a bit of a consolation prize but, but actually that's really quite exciting, you know, you, you can start again.'* [Jane]

Harriet notes how the cult experience is, therefore, one that can lead some people

> *'…to completely invent themselves or reinvent themselves and do so much self-examination.'*

She reflects that this is positive and evidences courage and PTG when she reflects that many years after leaving, she is able to say that she does not regret the experience.

> *'So that's a good thing, I mean, I wouldn't wish it on anybody, but I don't regret it.'*

Many join a cult because of their desire to make a difference and it is important to *'continue to dream big dreams'* [Marjorie] and hold on to idealism, the very idealism that led the individual into the cult in the first place.

> *'Idealism is a wonderful thing and although it may be what got us involved we need to hold on to it and after [I left] I*

had a BURNING hatred of injustice and misuse of power. And it makes very little people able to do very big things and that is how it should be.' [Marjorie]

'As I understood the ridiculousness of the cult doctrine, that was completely 'not me', such as the elitism, arrogance, oppression, and disregard for autonomy and individualism, I was able to hold on to the idealism, the enthusiasm, the compassion, the love, the fun etc. that was also very much part of my cult experience [...].' [Lindsey]

Some participants learned that it is important to never forsake their own value system again, and that a better stance is to be

'…willing to rethink, reconsider, ask questions, be persuaded, always reading, always wanting to know more.' [Marjorie]

Many join cults in order to help others, including to 'save the world' but these attributes are diverted. It is clear that some have manged to hold on to, or return to, those aspects of their personality that were used for and by the cult and evidence compassion and a desire to help others. This time it is their choice, and emanates from their authentic-self, rather than being in the service of someone else's agenda. For others they learned these attributes from the cult, and as a result of their own suffering.

What the individual does with their cult experience differs between participants but many were active in helping others in one way or another e.g. writing books; counselling other former-members; and warning others about the dangers of cults, that is, social action. They

'…found a way to make a positive and to give something back and help people.' [Dillon]

For some, at this Phase, they decide to concentrate on the future and evidence integration and healing.

> *'[…] what I do next, that's what I concentrate on, rather than what happened and what didn't happen.'* [Fred]

I now evidence PTG: relationship changes.

11.3.3 - PTG: Relationship Changes

This category relates to the fact that many take a new approach to their closest relationships and may feel the pain others feel more readily (Joseph, 2011, p.77).

Some, who had joined in order to get rid of themselves, to change and be transformed, learned to develop healthy relationships with others. For example, one expert therapist explains how her four-year counselling training helped her to ascertain who she liked and admired and could learn from, without giving her whole life over to an authority figure as she had done in the cult. That is, she learned to approach others with balance and boundaries. She was also able to form healthy professional relationships within an ethical community, which was so different to her experience in the cult. This aspect is exemplified by Leslie in Chapter 1:1.4.1.

Reginald was one participant who clearly said he benefitted from being a member on a number of levels. He was shy when he joined, but being thrown together with people from many different nationalities was beneficial to him as he learned to relate to others in new ways.

> *'I had gotten tremendous growth as a person in my ability to interact with others.'* [Reginald]

Others learn the difference between healthy and unhealthy relationships through comparing current relationships to relationships in the cult.

> *'That's the mirror image isn't it? My relationship with [partner] is this strong healthy, adult relationship, and there's no controlling, manipulation, there's none of THAT going on...um, and it makes me much more able to see and feel how damaging the cult was.' [Matt]*

I now conclude PTG and the Phases with two further points.

Ginny felt that, in spite of the cult ending up being extremely abusive, it was important to remember the good times, which were the best years of her life.

> *'I promised myself to have that perspective in mind, later on in life too. So that I wouldn't paint everything black.'* [Ginny]

Sean evidences PTG:

> *'You know, this is a horrendous, really kind of insane and evil guru, the group is very destructive - but they were selling and I was buying, and I learned a lot, and for a time it felt good until it didn't, and coming out of it gives me knowledge and experience that many people don't get to have. And being able to bear the traumas of life, because everybody has them, is in the end where I am left, which is a good place.'* [Sean]

I now conclude this chapter before I move on to the final Chapter 12 and conclude this thesis.

11.4 – Conclusion

This chapter concludes the Phases of Recovery and Growth. I have explored herein the evidence for being 'recovered' and cautiously explored the potential for positive outcomes from the cult experience under two main categories which are: I am myself again; and posttraumatic growth. This Phase concludes on a positive note, that recovery is possible, and that it is possible to grow in spite of, and sometimes because of, an abusive-cult experience and the resulting trauma. I reiterate: former-members can recover. It is a journey, sometimes a long journey, and certainly a personal journey, but with markers that help along the way – the Phases of Recovery and Growth. The end story is, or can be, positive and life can be rich again. For some, therefore, their life is enriched by, and they learn from, the experience. They are changed either way - it is inevitable.

I now proceed to the final chapter 12, and the conclusion of this thesis. I revisit and reflect on previous discussions and debates, the controversies and the Phases in order to draw conclusions and highlight my contribution to knowledge. I consider the limitations of this study and identify areas in need of further investigation. I give final reflections on the vignettes, Leslie and Jessie; and conclude by further reflection on, and linking back to, my professional and personal biography and the impact of conducting this research study.

Chapter 12 – Discussion and Conclusion

12.1 – Introduction

In this concluding chapter I revisit and reflect on previous discussions, debates, the controversies, and the Phases, in order to draw conclusions and highlight my contribution to knowledge. I consider the limitations of this study and identify some areas in need of further investigation. I reflect on this study's contribution to the counselling profession and Leslie and Jessie's journeys. I conclude the thesis by offering final reflections on my personal learning journey and my own sense of relief and loss in completing and moving on from this thesis.

At the inception of this study I set out to explore an area ripe for investigation:

> 'What helps former-members recover from an abusive-cult experience and what is life like post-cult?'

This was both the focus of the study and the question asked across interviews. Therapeutic strategies for recovering from harm caused in an abusive-cult are underrepresented in the clinical literature and have generated little empirical research in the counselling profession in UK, and worldwide. I have risen to the challenge from the counselling and psychotherapy field (Bond, 2006), which values research but acknowledges the disparity between practical understanding, clinical practice, skills and empirical research (McLeod, 2011, p.83). This research is my empirical theoretical contribution to this gap and evidences what helps. I suggest the Phases can be transferred into a clinical setting although this will require further verification.

The 'cult scene' is a controversial and complex field in which to conduct research (Chryssides, 2016; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001), and this complexity is further exacerbated by my personal and

professional interest. I have endeavoured to address these limitations, including the potential for bias, by adopting a recognised methodology and conducting an inductive GT study which allows for categories to emerge from participant accounts (Charmaz, 2014; Artinian et al., 2009). In order to remain consistent with this strategy, I delayed searching the literatures until categories began to emerge, rather than imposing preconceptions or a hypothetico-deductive framework to the data (Charmaz, 2014).

The analysis and discussion within the preceding chapters illuminates the complexity of the recovery process for former-members which evidences it to be a multi-layered process over time and, as a result, no one strategy is the answer to 'what helps?'. Recovery, healing and posttraumatic growth are evidenced to be achievable with pertinent strategies applied at particular Phases post-cult – the four Phases of Recovery and Growth. The danger for former-members is that, without appropriate help, they may

> '…live in an in-between place that is neither the cult environment nor mainstream society' (Boeri, 2002, p.353).

They may not fully integrate into society, and Matt was one such participant in this study. He was unable to heal and recover because he '*left those bridges unburnt'* – he had neither left nor was he still a member. That is, he had left physically but not psychologically, a necessary step as evidenced in Phase One.

Durocher's empirical research into the effectiveness of support groups for former-members led her to the conclusion that further research is required and that

> '…examining the impact that destructive cults have had on their followers and how survivors have been, and can be, helped in recovering from cult abuse, will

> also be useful for therapeutic purposes' (Durocher, 1999, p.582).

I have addressed this gap.

I stated at the commencement of this thesis that my aspiration was to be of utility to former-members and counsellors and to increase the depth of understanding of the field (Charmaz, 2014). I did not know what would emerge, and now I am at the end, I look back, and ask myself, does it have impact? Is this a contribution? I can assert confidently that it does and it is. I contribute a succinct summary of the recovery process, which is evidenced both in the categories that name the Phases, and the theory that has emerged and been fleshed out within the theoretical framework and the Phases, in Chapters 7-11.

However, I am realistic and recognise there is the possibility for limitations ('blind spots') and the influence of my own shortcomings ('blank spots') and these will need to be addressed in future research (Kamler and Thomson, 2006; Wagner, 1993). I strive to be reflexive and transparent in relation to the methodology and processes adopted, whilst acknowledging that it is challenging attempting to describe clearly every stage of qualitative research.

I have, nevertheless, worked hard to present the findings grounded in the data and to maximise the accuracy and utility of the Phases. This study grapples with human and basic social processes, distilling complex ideas into categories. Whilst qualitative research can facilitate in-depth investigation into life worlds, there are limitations in terms of sample size and usefulness (Charmaz, 2014). I do not know, therefore, if the findings from this study are applicable to all former-members, or former-members of cults not represented by participants in this study. These aspects require further investigation and I leave it, therefore, to the reader to judge if my striving to be

transparent, to reduce bias, to give my participants voice, has been achieved. Whilst this study provides empirical evidence of the recovery process and is conducted under 'scientific' conditions (Glaser and Holton, 2004; Hughes and Sharrock, 1997, p.12), that is, it is produced by a methodology, under University conditions, further research is required in order to confirm my claim of clinical impact.

I proceed to discuss the implications of the findings in relation to relevant controversies and previous discussions. I begin with my adopting the term 'abusive-cult'.

12.2 - Adopting the Term 'Abusive-Cult'

When I told people I was conducting this research, I was surprised by how many told me of situations that they now look back on as a cult experience. A few told me they had a 'lucky escape', in some cases because their family strongly intervened early on, in others because joining would have been impractical and meant leaving their family. This has not stopped many, and some told me of friends who had become members. Fred affords a salutary warning that cults are a danger, particularly in this day and age of naively promoting certain unmonitored and unregulated 'spiritual' practices, which occurs even within the counselling profession, such as mindfulness and yoga (Jenkinson, 2013a).

> *'A very close friend of mine had his wife taken in by [...] a yoga cult. And he, he, we went from an experience where she was a very loving caring mother, and they had a really, really good relationship - it was one of the relationships that [...] I put up there as examples of what a good relationship is - and she started doing yoga and gradually got taken into this cult to the point where [...] they vilified him and his role within [...] her development as a woman, that he was abusing her, stopping her from...and eventually she*

became estranged from him and the children to the point where all she was doing was living in someone's floor, earning enough money to pay to go to another course in this community, so all she was doing was earning money so that every 3 or 4 months she could spend 3 or 4 grand paying for another week's course in this community and she was doing design work for them for nothing, you know and all kinds of things. And that mirrored the kind of things that I had done, kind of like, I was working you know for 10 years I took 4 days off apart from Christmas Day and New Year.'

The popular image of cults, characterised by mysterious people in black hooded robes with kohl round their eyes and ketchup blood dripping from their lips is a parody that the word sometimes engenders. Sadly, the cult phenomenon is more prosaic, down to earth and explainable. The abuse is painful because it involves human aspirations, beliefs, desires, needs and longings and is, in the end, relational, and relational abuse is among the most challenging from which to heal and recover (Pargament et al., 2006; Briere, 2004; Kepner, 2003; Herman, 1992).

The utility of the term 'cult' is evidenced herein. Those who leave physically but do not '*diagnose*' and '*call a cult a cult'* [Gloria] may continue to struggle post-cult, sometimes for decades, because they are not able to identify and access resources and appropriate help, and leave psychologically. Their difficulties may be exacerbated by a continued belief in their 'sinfulness' or negativity and that they will be punished for leaving (dispensing of existence).

To address and overcome some of the definitional complexities I chose the term 'abusive-cult' in order that it is clear that those groups represented in this study are abusive, are a 'cult' and that they cause harm. I left it to participants to categorise their group as such, and I

did not define or label when issuing the invitation to partake. I defined 'abusive-cult' in Chapter 3:3.6, drawing on current definitions, enhancing these with evidence from the literature and data. That is, I defined 'abusive-cult' after data collection and analysis.

Any situation or relationship can go wrong, people fall out and relationships break down, and this is likely to occur for cult members, especially when they have been intensely involved in a group for many years. The cult experience, nevertheless, has a depth to it, because of the intensity, idealisation of the leader and the sense of betrayal, which, for some, is great (even if it is only in their mind [Max]). The betrayal is relational, as well as of ideals and existential meaning, and is a complex mix for former-members to negotiate post-cult. The balance between the individual and the environment-field tips against the individual victim, who is the 'weaker' one (Lichtenberg, 1990) within the thought-reform power structure. These aspects exacerbate the crisis of leaving and transitioning into normal life.

I have named a few 'cults' herein, in the literature chapters, but have restricted these to those that have been evidenced to be abusive from other studies and published former-member accounts. I have purposely not named the participants' cults, and this was in part because some did not want their group named for fear of identification and litigation. On the other hand, others wanted me to name theirs or said

> *'I wouldn't mind my group getting publicity.'* [Pete]

My reasoning for not naming cults was also because of the complexities in the field of NRMs, cults and R/S, and the challenges regarding definitions and labels. My position is that R/S can be both harmful and helpful (Pargament et al., 2006) and it can be life-enhancing (Crowley and Jenkinson, 2009; West, 2004). It is self-

evident that not all religions, spiritualties, politics, psychotherapies etc., are cultic. On the other hand, I do believe that human beings are vulnerable to undue influence and abuse, and that there are individuals who are drawn to control and abuse others. The statement that some groups harm some people some of the time and that some are more likely to harm than others (Almendros et al, 2013), is convincing to me, but is an area that invites further investigation. An aspect that adds further complexity, and may go some way to providing further explanation for the different perspectives is that

> '…what is traumatic for one person may not be traumatic for another' (Regel and Joseph, 2010, p.9).

In addition, the individual member's position in the cult, including whether they are close to the guru or not, may account for different reports of life-in and whether it is viewed as abusive or not. These accounts may, in turn, affect the positioning of different researchers, particularly if they do not recognise the different layers and positions their participants inhabited within the cult (Lalich, 2001; Ayella, 1990). For example, someone remaining on the outer layers of the cult will almost certainly experience it differently to those who are at the centre. Participant Reginald belonged to the '*service layer*' and is the only participant who did not directly experience their cult as abusive. There was, nevertheless, another layer which was comprised of the elite, those who surrounded the guru and managed the group. These individuals experienced a level of abuse he did not, as the guru controlled their relationships and sex life. Reginald gives an example of a woman who was chosen by the guru to be one of his nine wives, but she refused to leave her husband. The guru initially allowed her to remain with her husband and

> *'…consented to let her have two husbands, him and her regular husband. And her regular husband lived in the household as a sort of a handyman. [...] And at some point*

> *the guru said "you will have to dump your husband" and she refused to do it and so he said "then both of you have to leave". So they both left the community, so there is a good example of abuse.'* [Reginald]

In the next section I discuss debates related to 'thought-reform' and how they impact this study.

12.3 - Thought-Reform

I recognise that I have taken a risk in applying thought-reform theory as a theoretical framework. I did not come to this decision lightly as I struggled to apply other paradigms that ultimately did not fit. As illuminated in the literatures, the issue of 'brainwashing' has been the subject of much heated debate and polarisation in the 'cult scene'. Brainwashing was, nevertheless, a subject raised by participants, and I did not prompt or raise it with them. It demonstrates itself to be of utility in providing an explanation as to the dynamics that occur in an abusive-cult environment-field, also demonstrated by the Wellspring data (Martin et al., 1992). It is, therefore, evidenced to be applicable as it emerged from the data. I took courage from this emergence and from Coates's recent study with former-members (Coates, 2012a) and her conclusion that 'normal' and 'brainwashing' processes occur in cults. Drawing on these sources, I created the theoretical framework through which to view the data (explicated in Chapter 7: Figure 7.1) which applies both Gestalt psychotherapy theory of self ('normal') and thought-reform theory ('brainwashing'). These two perspectives enhance analysis and enrich the findings, especially when the literatures and my 'sensitising factors' are included.

Like the term 'cult', 'brainwashing' brings to mind conspiracy theories with 'seedy associations' (Taylor, 2004). But it is also more prosaic, more down to earth and explainable, as it is not difficult to break someone down, to reverse the core-conditions, the conditions of

growth (Merry, 2002; Rogers, 1991) and self-actualisation, to control and cause harm. Former-members in this study evidence how brainwashing occurs by way of certain practices, which can be explained by thought-reform theory.

One of the debates has been whether individuals are 'brainwashed' on entry to a cult (Kent, 2008; Zablocki and Robbins, 2001; Barker, 1984). This study evidences that deceitful recruitment, undue influence and the induction of confluence does occur at entry to the cult, for some, and in certain circumstances (Hassan, 2015; Cialdini, 2001) and with certain cults. It also supports findings that evidence that 'brainwashing' does not occur for all former-members (Coates, 2012a; Barker, 1989 & 1984) on joining.

It is necessary for the individual to introject the cult in order to really be brainwashed; that is, it is an interactive experience and process (Lalich, 2004; Lifton, 1989 & 1999), which certainly contributes to the power of thought-reform. As the individual becomes confluent, this allows introjects to flow in and they take the cult into their psychological system, through this introjection. But, it is not irreversible, as evidenced, and it is possible to recover, although it requires particular interventions to aid this recovery. These findings, therefore, speak to the polarisation within the cult scene, and contribute a balanced view of the recovery process from a 'normal' and a 'brainwashing' perspective, as it evidences both are applicable.

Addressing brainwashing is Phase appropriate (One, Two and Three); continuing to address it when the individual has fully understood their cult experience, or leading them to believe it is not possible to recover, could leave them stuck, in another fixed-gestalt and would be counterproductive, unethical, and even harmful in itself (Healy, 2011).

I proceed to discuss the implications of the findings in relation to harm.

12.4 - Harm

That an 'abusive-cult' causes harm is both self-evident and demonstrated in this study. The findings suggest that trauma theory only goes part of the way to explaining the resulting harm. This is because many former-members suffer both posttraumatic stress AND their sense of self is purposefully attacked leading to them losing their sense of authentic-self. A complicating factor is that former-members are not only controlled but also give themselves away to others, as it were, as they interact with the environment-field, by following and focussing on the leader (sacred science, mystical manipulation), and in self-suppression (milieu control, confession). This may be the marker of what takes someone deeply into the confluence; the loss of the internal contact boundary may be the precursor of, and/or an indication that harm is already taking place within the individual in response to the induction/invitation to align themselves to specific 'Gods' or 'ideals'.

It is evidenced that different people are affected to different levels and that not all former-members experience their leaving as traumatic but that it is always difficult to extract oneself from the group. Reginald is the outlier, as he was not traumatised, although he still struggled to leave and needed his friend to intervene in order to break the confluential trance (Chapter 8:8.4).

For some the cult experience was the best of times and the worst of times [Ginny, Raymond], for others their experience was mainly one of being controlled, being increasingly separated from the real world and their families, and abused. I have questioned myself as to whether my view of cults is biased, influenced by my experience; is it because I was abused, because I suffered PTSD, because I was a

'victim' and perhaps less resilient than others that I have angled this research project towards abuse? If I had not been abused in a cult I certainly would not have undertaken this study and so my experience has necessarily influenced this study. But I invited others to take part and they recognised my research question to be relevant, of their own accord – in fact I could have interviewed many more participants than I did as evidenced in Chapter 6:6.4. Participants were also sourced from individuals who had been influenced by the anti-cult movement and those who had not. In addition, as a counsellor, I have heard many stories of abuse and seen so many suffer at the hands of cults and I reiterate the importance of former-members speaking out and that

> '…survivors need to provide critical information on their life-worlds and what they believe is in their best interests' (Coles and Mudaly, 2010, p.57).

This includes my voice which is integrated herein with other former-member voices.

12.5 - Researching SGAs and 1G Together

When recruiting participants, I deliberately did not state whether I wanted 1G or SGAs and as it transpired, I ended up with a mixture. Does this work? I believe so. In my private practice I have worked as a counsellor with both and recognise that these populations have both similarities and differences. I have applied the Phases to both but highlighted when it is apparent that the needs are different. I may have missed some aspects and recognise that this requires further investigation. SGAs have a particular view and position; they have insight into their parents' lives in the cult and even what helped them recover; they may also have insight into what helps other SGAs, and therefore have a unique perspective and powerful contribution to make. They are generally underrepresented in studies (Derocher,

2008; Kendall, 2005) and the low numbers is a limitation and a loss to this study. In spite of this my aspiration and hope is that it goes some way to giving SGAs a voice and addressing this imbalance. The limitations also point to the need for further research studies in order to address SGA issues.

12.6 – Counselling

As I reflect back on my own personal experience of counselling over the past forty years, I am struck by how much it has been part of both the abuse I experienced, but also the healing process. This research speaks to the vulnerability of all who seek counselling (Bond, 2006), but particularly to former-members who usually do not have current knowledge or understanding of: the world outside the cult; the counselling profession; and ethical standards. In addition, the introjected negative view of themselves, and a naiveté that assumes authority figures know better (which is likely to include counsellors), exacerbates this vulnerability. In these next sections I reflect on various aspects of counselling that arise.

12.6.1 - Specialist Training for Counsellors

Former members are a hidden group within counselling and psychotherapy as discussed in Chapter 9. The findings of this study support clinical findings and other empirical studies, that counsellors require specialist training in order to work with former-members (Boeri and Boeri, 2009, p.88; Jenkinson and Crowley, 2009; Whitsett & Kent, 2003). Kendall's (2006) study with 1G and SGAs suggests that specialist training for psychotherapists may be less important when working with SGAs than 1G because addressing developmental issues is imperative and a core aspect of psychotherapy training. This study evidences that it is necessary for SGAs to have both an understanding of cults AND attend psychotherapy for developmental issues; if they do not 'diagnose' their cult problem they may not find

their way to appropriate information and professional-help, and be left floundering, sometimes for decades.

Matthews and Salazar's (2014, p.6) empirical study with 15 SGAs, suggests that counsellors need to educate themselves

> '…regarding mind control tactics, emotional consequences, and ongoing trauma in the lives of former members.'

In assessment counsellors need to explore both the client's personal history in detail and also their experiences of rigid gender roles, manipulation techniques and patriarchal cult structures (Matthews and Salazar, 2014, p.193). Their six-step process can serve as a guideline to counsellors who need to:

1. Educate themselves about cults and cult recovery
2. Assess clients' individual cult experiences
3. Help clients realise the nature of cults and power dynamics
4. Help clients explore the ramifications of growing up in a cult
5. Teach clients new skills and encourage them to gain control of their lives
6. Facilitate the empowerment of their clients by encouraging them to help others (Ibid., p.193)

These aspects are applicable to 1G also, and honour the individual client's needs, evidencing that some require education, temporary help and advocacy, which they in turn can then utilise to help others. These findings are, therefore, similar to this study which supports the need for the individual to reclaim their authentic-self and move on to PTG; and that counsellors need to educate themselves about cults and cult recovery, and be interactive with former-member clients (see below).

12.6.2 - Therapeutic Relationship

> *'You know the relationship that the therapist has with their clients is so important [...] and empathy, you are doing your best to put yourself in that person's moccasins [...].'* [Daphne]

Undergirding the professional-help aspects of all the Phases is an empathic therapeutic relationship. In order to be empathic and walk in the client's '*moccasins*' the counsellor will need to understand about cults in order that the empathy is '*very advanced'* [Matt].

Previous research studies evidence that the therapeutic relationship is considered the most helpful factor in facilitating growth with clients (Cooper, 2011) and that 'people not programs change people' (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006, p.80). There is, nevertheless, a growing body of evidence that more is required than simply the relationship, or simply a treatment modality, and that treatment should, in effect, be tailored to each client. There is

> 'a deep synergy between treatment methods and the therapeutic relationship' [and both] 'shape and inform each other' (Norcross, 2011, p.4).

The therapeutic relationship within Gestalt is an 'authentic' one (Woldt and Toman, 2005, p.109) and the counselling is, therefore, a co-creation between two individuals within an authentic 'dialogic relationship' (Ibid., p.37). This theory is drawn from Buber's work (1970), where he highlighted relationships in terms of 'I-Thou' (genuine or authentic contact) and 'I-It' (treating the other as an object). In an authentic I-Thou relationship, the counsellor advocates: an openness to difference; the uniqueness of the 'other'; and they are emotionally available to be changed through contact with the client (Harris, 2009), as the client is also changed.

Person-centred humanistic therapies advocate that the necessary and sufficient conditions for personality change are located in the therapeutic relationship, and this alone (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007). This research challenges the notion that the therapeutic relationship is sufficient for former-members, advocating an interactive and, in some Phases, cognitive and psycho-educational approach, which leads to 'understanding' (Phases One and Two). These psycho-educational aspects are supported by the Gestalt aim to facilitate raising awareness, which is contacting the authentic-self and completing the gestalt cycle of contact.

Marjorie refers to motivational interviewing, a derivative of Rogers' person-centred therapy, which interactively and purposefully builds clients' confidence that change is possible (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007, p. 155). She evidences the aspects that help in the therapeutic encounter in relation to abuse survivors (including former-members):

> *'I'm not leaving them to think in silence as much as I would with someone else [...] because silence is quite threatening to some people. Those who've been abused [...] find silence quite difficult, almost abusive. So it's far more Motivational Interviewing as with addicts isn't it? You know, where you aren't just sort of being tentative all the time - and, there is a place for that, of course there is, you want the person to have their own breakthroughs and insights and illuminations, which I am VERY aware of - but, you do, as in Motivational Interviewing, you do need a sort of tutor in a way. [...] Because like Mr *** was to us, you are trying to help the person get the right side up.'*

Different therapeutic modalities are therefore more suited to certain processes and stages, than others, and to certain client situations than others (Prochaska, et al., 2013). Stage matched relationships, 'relationships of choice' as well as 'treatments of choice' that do the

right things (processes) at the right time (stages) (Ibid.) are most effective. Creating the optimal match in psychotherapy has been accorded multiple names and in Gestalt is referred to as attunement (Norcross, 2011; Mackewn, 2000). The goal is to enhance treatment effectiveness by tailoring it to the individual and his or her 'singular situation'; in other words, psychotherapists endeavour to create a new therapy for each patient in effect (Norcross, 2011, p.128; Norcross and Wampold, 2011). In addition, adapting or tailoring the therapy relationship to specific patient characteristics (in addition to diagnosis) enhances the effectiveness of treatment (Norcross, 2011, p.129) because 'treatment methods are relational acts' (Ibid., p.4).

This is the case for the Phases explicated herein. By way of summary, it is evidenced that the counsellor/psychotherapist needs to gain specialist knowledge through their own education, training, reading and practical learning (Chapter 9:9.3.5). It is also important that they offer to the former-member client a safe, affirming, supportive, attuned relationship in which they are able to respond to their needs on an emotional, practical and educational level (I-Thou). This is in order that the former-member can adjust to life outside the cult. This entails helping them become aware of and tune into their own bodies, letting their creative energies for genuine contact and growth emerge naturally from their authentic needs – and to have confidence that in the counselling, their needs will be appropriately met in the dialogic relationship.

The counsellor will therefore need to understand about cults, and also to be versatile and relationally attuned, willing to co-create the therapeutic journey with the client and enable them to explore and experiment with new thoughts and behaviours. Gestalt is well suited (to certain Phases) as it offers an approach that includes experimentation in counselling. This is a 'teaching method that creates an experience in which clients can learn something' that is part of their next growth step and 'transforms talking into doing, and

reminiscing and theorizing into presence and action' (Woldt and Toman, 2005, p.107). Experimental approaches such as psychodrama or therapy that utilises figures in a sandtray to raise awareness and act out scenarios (Stevens, 2004) (amongst others) may be utilised as the experiment

> '…flows directly from the psychotherapy theory and is crafted to fit the individual as he or she exists in the here and now' (Woldt and Toman, 2005, p.108).

That these experiments are helpful is evidenced in Chapter 10:10.3.

There is, therefore, a need to integrate the relational and the treatment method, and to be mindful that these aspects are interrelated. By relying solely on either the relationship, or on their treatment modality (including Gestalt), counsellors do former-members (or any client) a disfavour.

A number of counselling modalities that helped are referred to by the participants and I surmise that these will be more or less helpful depending on the different Phase (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007). Figure 12.1 below, whilst somewhat speculative and in need of further verification, brings together

- the Phases and where the individual is placed on the gestalt cycle
- the required therapeutic action and
- treatment modalities mentioned by participants and suggested stance of the counsellor (e.g. Socratic teacher (tutor [Marjorie]), etc.)

It is interesting to note that these counselling modalities are broadly theoretically humanistic in nature, confirming that humanistic 'normal' modalities can be helpful for former-members when applied knowledgeably. In the figure it is assumed that professional,

relational counselling and/or psychotherapy (professional-help) is applicable to all Phases, except Four.

Figure 12.1: Counselling Modalities, Interventions and Phases

Phase	**Therapeutic Action**	**Modality** *mentioned by participant
Phase One (Leaving) Voluntary exit Expelled Cult disbands Intervention Sensation Awareness (doubts) Mobilisation (to leave) Action (leave)	Intervention	*Socratic teacher/educator (Norcross) *Intervention
Phase Two (Cognitive) Sensation Awareness (understanding) Mobilisation (to understand/learn) Action (understand)	Professional and self-help strategies (cognitive)	Gestalt psychotherapy – cognitive awareness raising/ experimentation *Socratic Teacher/educator *CPT: Cognitive Processing Therapy (Resnick, et. al, 2010) *CBT: Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (Scott and Stradling, 1994) *Motivational Interviewing (MI) (Prochaska and Norcross, 2007)
Phase Three (Emotional) Sensation (pain/grief) Awareness (painful & suppressed feelings) Mobilisation (to feel) Action (to feel) Full contact (feel feelings) Satisfaction/Integration (integrate)	Professional and self-help strategies (emotional)	Psychotherapy – address developmental Psychodynamic therapy Gestalt therapy – body focus including Sensorimotor Psychotherapy (Ogden, 2006) for trauma *Person-Centred (Merry, 2002) *CPT *CBT *EMDR for trauma (Turnbull, 2011) *Focussing (Gendlin, 2003)

Phase Four (PTG) Satisfaction/integration Withdrawal	End counselling	Cheerleader/peer/consultant (Norcross, 2011) Mentor (Kendall, 2006)

I now discuss further implications of this study in relation to trauma aspects.

12.6.3 – Complex-PTSD

Herman (1992) proposed the diagnosis of complex-posttraumatic stress disorder (C-PTSD) which is similar to the concept of Type 2 trauma (Wastell, 2005). As previously discussed, she has applied this diagnosis to brainwashing, captivity and cults which is characterised by 'coercive control' (Ibid., p.99; Herman, 1992). The loss of separate identity evidenced in complex trauma is applicable to survivors of child abuse, domestic violence, and cults (Wastell, 2005, p.100), the self-concept taking on

> 'a sinister form' [where the] 'resultant self-structure is malformed in the likeness of the traumatic circumstance' (Ibid., p.100).

These aspects are evidenced herein as individuals are abused and introject the negative view of themselves and society. In addition to this, is the effect of the complex trauma and coercive control, within the thought-reform system. In order to recover from these challenging and damaging situations a number of phased or staged models are proposed by various authors. Phases are, therefore, not a new concept but as there are many staged or phased models it is beyond the scope of this thesis to explore these further. I briefly address similar issues instead in Figure 12.1 above.

12.6.4 - Further Implications of the Phases

In relation to 'formers of radicalisation', that is former-members of terrorist organisations, Bjørgo suggests that they be offered a personalised form of therapy, as one size does not fit all and they require a tailor made approach (Bjørgo, 2011, p.1). Whilst this is the case for all, I surmise that Bjørgo refers to the need for specialist counselling for these formers, where the counsellor has specialist knowledge, similar to the expert therapist former-member participants in this study. I suggest that the Phases may have utility for these individuals, although this would require verification. Boeri in her research with ex-CoG women (2002, p.353) suggests that the resocialisation for former-members

> '…must shed light on the experiences of individuals exiting from other closed environments'.

As this study addresses what it is like re-entering mainstream society, and what helps with that process, it may shed light on what helps others as they transition from a closed 'total' environment into society.

12.6.5 - Ethical Considerations for the Counselling Profession

One participant reports that members of his international cult, which has been documented to be a cult in the literatures, has members who are counsellors who are accredited with BACP but who offer strategies that are promoted by, and learned within, the cult:

> *'There is one [counsellor who is a cult member], [...] I mean she's got a whole bunch of qualifications. Um, but she still thinks, you know, *** (cult leader) is IT, and will use that to keep people in their marriages, and, you know they will put guilt on people and so on.'* [P]

This presents an ethical challenge to the counselling profession as it strives to find a balance between promoting healthy spirituality within counselling (Pargament et al., 2006; West, 2004) whilst at the same time addressing the ethical issue of protecting organisational members and the public from cults (Jenkinson, 2013a).

I now reflect on Leslie and Jessie before revisiting my positioning as a researcher working with sensitive data.

12.7 – What Helped Leslie and Jessie

This research provides a succinct summary of the recovery process for former-members of an abusive cult, including the hopeful notion of growth, for some, from the experience. Leslie and Jessie (Chapter 1) both exemplify, in their individual ways, the utility of the Phases and the categories and theories that arise from this study. As 1G and SGA, they have both similar and different needs but I suggest that the similarities outweigh the differences.

Leslie needed to face his doubts, secretly save money and plan to leave. Once he diagnosed his group as a cult he began to critically appraise it and learned about thought-reform as a means of understanding the dynamics in the cult. This was similar for Jessie and they both had to face their painful, suppressed feelings in order to begin to recover. Both had to build a sense of self; Leslie after being depleted by the cult and Jessie because she did not have a sense of self outside of the cult. They both evidence that it is possible to recover and even grow as a person in spite of the abuse (PTG).

I now reflect on my positioning as a researcher working with sensitive data and conclude this thesis.

12.8 - Researcher Positioning, Sensitive Data and Conclusion

It has been challenging conducting this research. Like other researchers investigating traumatic subjects it has taken its toll (Jenner, 2016). Trauma is catching (Herman, 1992) and I experienced feelings that paralleled those reported by the participants (Dickson-Swift, 2007, p.329; Pearlman and Saakvitne, 1995), which also elicited my own trauma reactions at times. I keenly felt the need for social support as I experienced emotional overwhelm and depressive symptoms at times (Dickson-Swift, 2007; McGarry, 2010; Glaser, 1978). I attended to these aspects, recognising they are an ethical issue, by adopting certain strategies discussed in Chapter 6. It has, in spite of this, been worth it, and I have achieved what I set out to do, to conduct research into what helps former-cult members.

This is my life's work, as recognised by my supervisor, Dr Belinda Harris, at the inception of this study, and I appreciated her recognition and support in this endeavour. I came to study in a University late in life, all my previous training having been conducted in private institutions affiliated to Universities, that is, I am a non-traditional researcher. As a former-member counsellor, a woman, and a mature student who embarked on this study at the age of 59, I have, in some respects, like my participants, lacked social capital (Bourdieu, 2011). I have nevertheless completed this, and learned that I am tenacious! I have challenged various introjects about authority, having to be a 'good girl', and that others know better than me. Of course they do in some respects, and that has been one of my challenges in conducting an academic study, finding a balance between trusting myself and listening to others - I have resisted confluence, experimented with where the contact boundary is for me, and tried to maintain difference whilst also being flexible and not fixed. The research journey has therefore been one of changing – again! This

has been triggering at times, and I initially resisted it, but I finally gave in, assured that it is not the same as the cult, and I am not confluent, I am in control of the process. There are criteria in place to ensure my safety and ethical guidelines.

Whilst concluding this research a case came to the Law Courts in the UK in which a Pastor was prosecuted for 'spanking' some female parishioners whilst they were naked or semi-naked (Tonkin, 2016). His rationale was to cure their depression or cast out demons, and has, therefore, some similarities to my own experience (Chapter 2). The press talked of his Church as a 'cult' and Judge Peter Gower QC convicted him to a six-year custodial sentence for sexual assault. I have finally heard of a public case where beating a member of a congregation in such a manner can be viewed as sexual assault and hearing it affirmed in the UK courts was validating and freeing – as if I had been 'heard' in this respect.

Did I go through these Phases of Recovery? In some respects: as stated previously, until I named and understood that LOGC was a cult I was unable to access appropriate support and help. I had to leave physically and psychologically before I began the recovery process and for me it entailed 'exit-counselling strategies' and understanding. I had to build my sense of self and face the emotional pain and grief and this took many years. I also evidence posttraumatic growth. In terms of personal changes, I am more compassionate and have a strong sense of empathy with those who suffer. I have achieved greater wisdom and discovered inner strengths I did not know I had. In terms of philosophical changes, I have certainly discovered a new-found sense of joy in the freedom my life affords and know what my priorities are. In terms of relationship changes, I feel the pain of others more readily but have learned to balance these aspects up with taking care of myself. I am struck, in looking back at my personal biography, that I entered the cult with no ambition and that is certainly not the case now. I learned focus and application which is

now operationalised for good, something I thought I was doing in the cult. This time it is for myself AND others, not just for others. I have also healed, not the false healing that was promised and not delivered.

I therefore gained many things from, and in spite of, the cult experience, not least meeting my husband and having my children. I have ended up living a life that was different to the one I vaguely assumed I would live, having been diverted and pushed right off course. But it has, nevertheless, been a good one, with love, acceptance, kindness, provision and healing – not perfect, but more than 'good enough'. I also forged a career out of my life experience, like many of these participants. I would not have chosen to have gone through such a difficult time, but it has taught me compassion, to value life, people, including people who are different to me. I retained the desire to help others, but moderated the idealism I had developed within the Church. I can say, with my participants, that I am myself again, I am autonomous, and I am healed and recovered. Was it worth it? Well that is hard to judge but, like Harriet I can say, '*I wouldn't wish it on anybody but I don't regret it'.*

I now move on, and leave this behind and, like my participants, I experience a sense of relief and loss in doing so. I have completed my own gestalt cycle, I can now withdraw from this thesis and this part of my journey and what has been such a huge part of my life for the last four years - and the cult experience, for the last 40 years! As I come to the end, I return to where I began, and whereas at the beginning I feared my contamination, now I see integration; how our life-histories, and what helped us all recover, in many ways have parallels, similarities - and differences.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Advertisement

Advertisement placed at the end of article entitled: Working with Cult Survivors (Jenkinson, 2013) seeking participants for this study:



Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Project title: *What helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience? An investigation into former-members' experience of recovery post-cult.*

Researcher's name: Gillie Jenkinson – School of Education, University of Nottingham

Supervisor's names: Dr. Belinda Harris (email) and Prof Stephen Joseph (email).

WHO AM I

My name is Gillie Jenkinson and I am a UKCP accredited Psychotherapist in my first year of a Doctoral research programme in the School of Education at the University of Nottingham, UK. I hold a clear and current Disclosure and Barring Service Report (DBS – was CRB).

AIM OF RESEARCH PROJECT

- To investigate what helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED TO DO

- Provide (optional) details of: your name (which will only be on your signed 'Consent Form' – you will then be allocated a code name which will be used from this point on and only Gillie Jenkinson will know your identity); contact details; age; which cult you were in; at what age you entered; how long you were a member and when you left.

WHAT WE WILL DO

- Conduct a semi structured interview which may lead to further interviews, if you are agreeable. These will entail you telling me what life has been like since you left the cult with the overarching question 'what has helped you recover from your abusive-cult experience' informing the interview. At this time, I intend to audio tape the interview but may decide to use video as well - I will forewarn you if I decide to do this. The recording will then be transcribed by me and I will analyse what you have said in order to learn from your experience. This entails

producing 'data' or 'themes' which will be set alongside other people's interviews with a view to creating a 'theory' or a 'grounded theory' of former-members experience of recovering from an abusive-cult experience. I will, therefore, be interviewing a number of people. My research methodology will be informed by grounded theory and you can see more about this at these websites: http://www.methods.manchester.ac.uk/events/whatis/gt.pdf and http://www.groundedtheory.com/.

ETHICAL DETAILS

1. You can withdraw from the research at any time without any negative consequences.
2. Information gained during the study may be published, but you will not be named or identified and your personal details will remain strictly anonymous and confidential.
3. The data will be stored with the researcher in a lockable drawer or filing cabinet and password protected on a computer.
4. You can request to see any data relating to you at any time.
5. I will treat your story and your feelings sensitively at all stages of this research.
6. If you require support following the interview, I will ensure I am available to de-brief after for up to an hour.
7. Information arising from the interviews will not be shared with any other person or groups of people apart from my supervisors and examiners.
8. Once the work is published it will be in the public domain and I cannot account for what it is used for.
9. You may contact me if you require further information about the research, and you may contact my supervisors, or the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if you wish to make a complaint relating to your involvement in the research.

Thank you for taking part in this research it is much appreciated.

Warmest wishes,

Gillie Jenkinson

Date: _____

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Project title:
What helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience? An investigation into former-members' experience of recovery post-cult.

Researcher's name: Gillie Jenkinson – University of Nottingham

Supervisor's names: Dr. Belinda Harris and Prof Stephen Joseph

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me. I understand and agree to take part.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage and that this will not affect my status now or in the future.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, I will not be identified and my personal results will remain confidential.
- I understand that I will be audiotaped (and may be videotaped) during the interview.
- I understand that data will be stored in a lockable drawer at the University of Nottingham or in a lockable filing cabinet at Gillie Jenkinson's office at her home. I understand Gillie Jenkinson will password protect access to both recordings and transcripts. The only people who will have access to these transcripts will be the supervisors named above, Tony Jenkinson, Gillie Jenkinson's husband, and examiners. I understand that a code will be allocated to me and that the transcripts will be held anonymously and confidentially by all involved.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor/s if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

Signed …… (Research participant)

Print name …… **Date** ……

Contact details

Researcher: Gillie Jenkinson

Contact Details:
Email: xxx
Tel: xxx
Mobile: xxx

Supervisor: Dr. Belinda Harris
Tel: xxx
Email: xxx

Supervisor: Professor Stephen Joseph
Tel: xxx
Email: xxx

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: (email)

Appendix 4: Brief Biographical Information Sheet [BBIS]

As stated in the Consent Form related to my research project – *What helps former cult members recover from an abusive-cult experience? An investigation into former-members' experience of recovery post-cult* - I would appreciate you providing me with the following basic information – please note that each section is optional and you do not have to fill it out although it will be helpful for me in understanding your background. I will not name your cult unless you give me explicit permission below:

Anonymous Basic information

Code: _____

Gender: M / F

Age now _____

Cult Membership

Were you a member of a cult - if yes:

Age/year entered the cult

_____

Age/year left the cult

_____

Name of cult

_____

May I name your cult in my Thesis and any summary of my research YES/NO

Which country/countries you were a member in

_____

Which generation former-member are you [first, second, third etc.]

_____

Do you regard your cult to be abusive and would you be prepared to briefly state below what you have had to 'recover' from – we will address what it has been like since leaving in the interview itself:

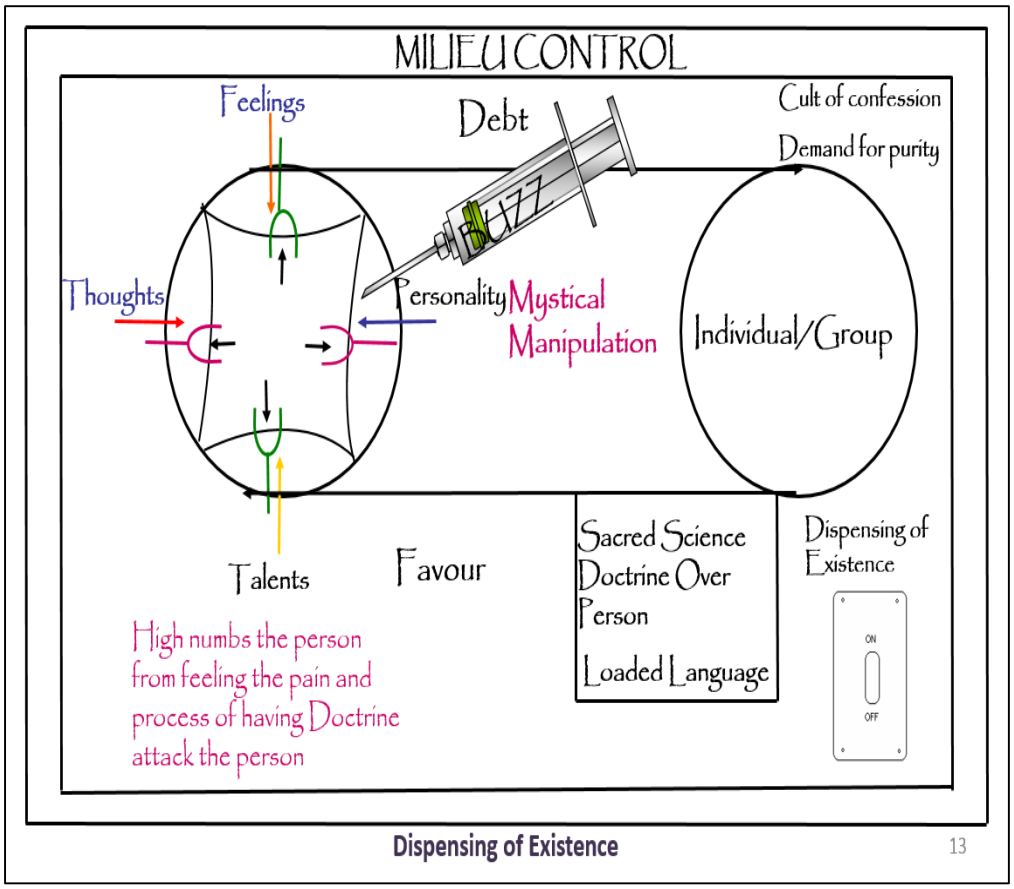
_____
_____
_____
_____

[If you need more space please write on the back of the form.]

Thank you for providing this information which will be held anonymously and confidentially.

Gillie Jenkinson, MA, UKCP Accredited Psychotherapist
University of Nottingham, School of Education
Email: XXX

Appendix 5: The Original WTRM Diagram



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