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A Narrative Exploration of the Lived
Experience of being Born, Raised in, and
Leaving a Cultic Group: The Case of the
Exclusive Brethren

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Middlesex University and Metanoia Institute

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Jonestown survivor Deborah Layton wrote:

When our own thoughts are forbidden, when our questions are not allowed and our doubts are punished, when contacts and friendships outside the organization are censored, we are being abused for an end that never justifies its means. When our heart aches knowing we have made friendships and secret attachments that will be forever forbidden if we leave, we are in danger. When we consider staying in a group because we cannot bear the loss, disappointment and sorrow our leaving will cause for ourselves and those we have come to love, we are in a cult.

Seductive Poison. New York: Anchor Books. 1998, page 299

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It is not easy to be the child of a cultic group survivor and I know that at times, it has not been easy for them. They have encouraged, supported and comforted me when things got too difficult. They have also helped with proof reading, reference listing, formatting and collating the finished thesis. Thank you both.

This thesis is dedicated to them and all former members of the Exclusive Brethren.

Note to reader

Throughout this project, I provide notes for the reader which can be found before the reference list and indicated by superscript numbers in the main text.

Words and phrases that are idiosyncratic to the Brethren are listed in a Glossary on page 183 and indicated with superscript ^G in the text. The appendices in Volume 2 contain supporting documents and will be referred to throughout.

Throughout the thesis acronyms are used that may not be familiar to the reader. For reference I have listed them here.

AFF	American Family Foundation
BPS	British Psychological Society
CC	Charity Commission
DTS	Davidson Trauma Scale
EGIS	Extent of Group Identity Scale
Feeb	Family of Ex Exclusive Brethren (email group)
FGA	First Generation Adult leaver
GPA	Group Psychological Abuse Scale
ICSA	International Cultic Studies Association
MGA	Multi-Generational Adult leaver
SGA	Second Generation Adult leaver
UBT	Universal Business Team (see note 7 Chapter 4)

Abstract

There is considerable evidence that experiences in cultic groups can be harmful. Most studies have been on First Generation former members. Second Generation former cultic group members (SGA) are an under-researched population. Multi-Generational former members (MGA), i.e. those born into families whose membership of the cultic group goes back more than two generations appear never to have been researched. This thesis underpinned by social constructionism, explores the experiences of being born and raised in The Exclusive Brethren, an exemplar of a cultic group, and subsequently leaving. As a counselling psychologist and a former member of the Brethren, this thesis is of professional and personal interest.

Unstructured interviews were conducted with three male and three female participants in their mid 30s to mid 70s, who left at various times over the last 50 years. Two participants are 'true SGA' –their parents were the first generation to join the Brethren. The other four are MGA coming from families with a long generational history in the Brethren.

A qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was used, informed by critical and dialogical narrative analysis. Each story's interview was represented in collaboration with the storytellers using their words as far as possible. At the heart of every story lay their experience in the Brethren; the doctrines and practices forming the bedrock. The stories told how storytellers came to leave and how, in leaving, they renegotiated their identities. A cross-story view led to a continuum model of families' degree of enmeshment with the Brethren system. The representations were viewed through the lenses of disorganised attachment and identity theory.

The implications for therapy were discussed stressing the importance of therapists' knowledge of cultic groups. Approaches need to facilitate the telling of stories focussing on attachment, identity, trauma, bereavement as well as life and relationships skills.

Prelude

"I was raised in the Brethren"
I say quietly
looking at my hands resting on my lap
fingers twisting

The therapist sat back
flicking imaginary dust from his left knee
"So what do the Brethren believe?"
he asks briskly

My mind, as if often does
empties
a hollow cave

I looked away to the side
what do the Brethren believe
I think silently

I cannot speak
a hand
over my mouth
I don't know
perhaps I mustn't know

There is nothing to say
I feel a screaming inside of me
I was only a child

He shouldn't have asked

The memories of this session are with me still. He was asking about something that was so much part of me I had no frame of reference to answer his question. A profoundly disturbing question about beliefs inculcated since birth. They surrounded me all day, every day. Part of the fabric of my being.

I did not return to this therapist, or the next, or the next. Finally, I found a therapist who did not ask such questions. She had herself spent a few years in a cultic group. She helped me tell my fragmented story over and over until I was 'done'; done enough to be able to move away from the traumatic disjointed patchwork of memories and integrate them at least partially, making some sense of them, gaining some understanding. This thesis is part of my journey towards greater understanding.

Chapter 1. Personal Context

*For where two or three are gathered together unto my name,
there am I in the midst of them.*

(Matthew 18:20)¹

In 1828 a small group of young men held the 'Lord's Supper'^G in their lodgings in Dublin (Wilson, 2000). This meeting and those that followed were the beginnings of a movement that was to break away from the established churches, turning their backs on clericalism and looking for the simpler form of Christian Fellowship suggested by the verse above. Over the next few decades, the movement that started so simply and eventually led by John Nelson Darby, spread rapidly across the world.

Nearly 190 years later, in the opinion of some former members, this movement has become one of the world's most exclusive fundamentalist sects. Currently with a membership of around 46,000 worldwide², the Exclusive Brethren are in many countries including Australia, Canada, Argentina, New Zealand, United States, the British Isles, some other European countries and the West Indies³. One former member wrote:

Their separation from the world has been codified into a rulebook of separative [sic] regulations and practices, far beyond anything Darby could have envisaged or approved.

(Stott, 1993)⁴

I was born into this group. I had no choice about being a Brethren child. My parents were also born into it and some of their parents too - a long multi-generational socio-cultural heritage. As a child I strove for a strong sense of belonging and acceptance by the Brethren. I turned to God and the Brethren in the same way as a child turns to its caregivers, seeking comfort - but for me this was laced with fear and ominosity.

The Brethren are non-sectarian. They believe that God does not want divisions in Christianity and the body of Christ should be one. Ironically, they now have a hierarchy of officials in each locality who all relate to a 'universal leader'⁶. The mutuality and hopeful vision of those young men in Dublin has turned into what Stott (1993) described as 'a punitive system which disciplines those who dissent or disobey the rules'. Thousands have left the group over the years and it is with this exit population my interest lies.

Until relatively recently this group, in line with their anti-sectarian stance (McKay, 2013; Wilson, 2000), rejected any corporate name other than referring to themselves as the 'saints'⁶ or the 'Brethren' (Grant, 1875, Barker, 2013b). However, their early tendency to schisms is inconsistent with this non-sectarianism stance (McKay, 2013). In 2003 they registered the domain theexclusivebrethren.com (Anonymous, 2003), thus finally giving themselves a name. During negotiations with the UK Charity Commission in 2012, they rebranded themselves as the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church and set up a new website (Plymouth Brethren, 2016). This rebranding has created confusion for all concerned, since the term Plymouth Brethren is commonly reserved for the less strict Open Brethren. I have chosen to call them the Exclusive Brethren or simply the Brethren, mainly because this name is preferred by former members and has been used by other scholars (e.g. Doherty, 2012; Wilson, 1967).

In this research I have taken the position of embodied reflexivity by including aspects of my own narrative. Paul Barber⁵ interviewed me early in the research process. I spoke about the oppressive silence in the meeting rooms and in my head – a hand felt over my mouth. My intention is to break that silence and enable my voice, along with the voices of other former Brethren, to be heard. Bochner (2001:138) challenges 'the myth that our research is divorced from our lives, that it has no autobiographical dimension, that what we do academically is not part of how we are working through the story of our own life'. This link between life experience and research interests has been acknowledged by others (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Etherington, 2004; Sparkes, 2002).

During my teens, my parents were concerned about the emergence of new teachings. In 1960, they decided to leave, taking three of their four children with them. Their firstborn child, John, sadly stayed in the Brethren. I was barely 16. When we left, I became a stranger in an alien world in which even after 50 years I still feel a bit of an interloper.

Initially my interest and motivation for this research emerged from my desire to understand my childhood experiences. It was not until about 30 years after my parents left that this process began. I was barely aware of other former members, or that those I came across were anything other than happy in their lives. In 1990, I embarked on a piece of quantitative research as part of my MSc in Counselling, exploring the mental health of former members of the Brethren. I was surprised to find the levels of distress in the sample (n=201) were significantly higher than in the general population (Mytton, 1993). I was not alone: this gave me cause for reflection. I began to look outward and the purpose of the journey became less concerned with my struggles and more with exploring why and how the Brethren seemed to be implicated in this distress.

My experiences with therapists who seemed never to have heard of these small fundamentalist groups were also a prime motivator. In 1996 I came across a website set up by another former member, Dick Wyman⁶. His purpose was to provide information about the Exclusive Brethren and to help former members. On the website's guest book it was clear that many were seeking help. Former members began emailing me in search of support. In 1998 I set up an email support group called Feeb (Family of Ex-Exclusive Brethren). It is still functioning today. Four of my six participants are, or were, members.

I became involved in the cultic studies field. This field is at the intersection of many different disciplines including theology, psychology, sociology, philosophy and law; all are represented at the International Cultic Studies Annual Conferences (ICSA)⁷. From 2007 I began presenting papers at these conferences and connected with practitioners working in this field.

The theoretical and research literature to date has focused on those who converted into a cultic group and subsequently left, the so-called First Generation Adults (FGA). There is still a dearth of literature on those born into cultic groups, the Second Generation Adults (SGA). Since the Exclusive Brethren have been in existence for several generations, there are many former members who are third, fourth or even fifth generation. I have created a new acronym for them – MGA. Multi-Generational Adults are leavers who were born to parents who were at least second generation but might be more than that. SGAs and MGAs do not choose to join the groups they are born into and on leaving have no previous life to return to.

Life events side-tracked me many times on this long research journey, including my mother's lengthy illness and her death in 2011. She played a large role in my life through her mediation of the Brethren doctrines and practices; a role that continued long after my parents left the group. She never completely shook off her narrative inheritance.

Legal activity against me by the Brethren also side-tracked me. Researchers who are members of the community they are studying face several difficulties; these increase considerably when the area of interest is a controversial one. Cultic groups use legal activity to try to intimidate and silence people they perceive as a threat. This litigiousness threatens not only scholars, expert witnesses and support organisations, but also the freedom of the press.

The Exclusive Brethren have been a very secretive sect until recently. There were only occasional newspaper reports relating to their activities. The frequency of media reports increased during the 1960s and again over the last 20 years (Dyason & Doherty, 2015). Their legal activities against the websites for former members began in 2005 when they sued Dick Wyman and forced him to close his website. Two subsequent similar websites were also closed because of the Brethren's activities against them. A fourth website that my participants refer to – www.peebs.net⁸ closed unexpectedly in early 2013. Another website set up in 2013, called wikipeebsia has so far survived (Anon, 2010).

One event seriously brought the Brethren into the public eye: it had a considerable impact on this doctoral research. In 2012 the Brethren applied to the Charity Commission (CC) for England and Wales for charitable status for a new meeting hall in Preston Down, but this was refused. The CC was concerned that the Brethren trusts were not 'established for exclusively charitable purposes for the public benefit' (HM Government, 2014:3). After the Brethren appealed, the CC reached out to academics and former members to gather evidence for a First-tier Tribunal.

In December 2012, the CC asked me to write a witness statement based on my research. The research was not this doctoral qualitative study but a quantitative study I had begun in 2010⁹. They gave me a six-week deadline, which, with the help of Ian McKay¹⁰, I met (Mytton, 2013, Appendix One). However, the tribunal was postponed and eventually a negotiated deal was struck between the CC and the Brethren, who were required to sign a Deed of Variation (HM Government, 2014:24).

In October 2012, I received the first of many letters from lawyers representing the Brethren attacking me on both personal and professional levels. On receipt of this letter, the University where the quantitative research was lodged closed the research study down. The University allowed me to have the data provided I did not name it or the name of the chief researcher again in connection with the research – however this information was already in the public domain.¹¹

The Brethren hired psychologists to critique this research. As it was incomplete and unpublished these academics should have refused. Even so, with very little to go on, the psychologists – who were not from either the mental health or the cultic studies fields – submitted their critiques, which the Brethren continue to broadcast in their media releases to this day (Silkin, 2014). This legal activity against me continued for 18 months (for time-line of events see Appendix Two). I found these attacks threatening and distressing.

These events moved me into a wider educational agenda, namely to inform policy makers and legislators about cultic groups. Family Courts, Social Services, regulators like the Charity Commission, Government Departments of Education, Church leaders,

the law and police forces all need to understand the phenomena of cultic groups; they are often implicated in difficult decisions. Better understanding may allow mitigation of any harmful effects, especially to children. It is also important for leaders of mainstream churches to be aware of how these groups can emerge and evolve from a church to a sect to a cultic group. The public also need to be aware how these groups function, and how to cope with family members that get caught up in them.

In this thesis, I write as a counselling psychologist, a researcher, a parent and someone who was once a child in this group. I bring these identities and others to this work and inevitably they will influence my analysis. This thesis has been a collaborative enterprise and many former members have contributed to this project by sharing their experiences and by answering my many questions. Throughout this journey they have not only supported me but have also been a valuable experts-by-experience resource.

Over the last 30 years, I have been seeking the 'truth' about my experiences, only to conclude there is no absolute truth. There are only my truths and other people's truths. As Dawson (2003) points out, 'no two people ever share exactly the same vision of reality' (p23). This was just one of the many epiphanies I had during this long journey. At the beginning I believed there was something unique about the Brethren and therefore the experience of former members would also be unique. I realised very quickly that this was not the case. Different cultic groups hold different doctrines but their practices and the impact they have on their members show common themes.

Summary and Overview of the Project

In this chapter I have provided an outline of the personal context of this work and hopefully given a sense of my purpose. I feel passionately about the importance of informing the disciplines and professions who are in contact with former members. Cultic groups are of concern because of the documented harm they can cause individuals, families and society.

When I began this journey I had no premonition about how difficult it would be. I still thought in traditional ways about the nature of research and the structure of the

writing-up. The journey has however taken me completely outside my comfort zone into –isms and –ologies my brain feels ill-equipped to deal with – ontology, epistemology, theology, modernism, postmodernism, constructivism, to name but a few. The only paradigm I readily grasped was positivism, perhaps because that was part of my narrative environment as a child. Sometimes I have had to think so much ‘outside the box’ that all six sides of it seemed to vanish as I floundered without structure, boundaries and tasks.

During this process, I realised my original title, ‘An Inquiry Into The Psychological Consequences of being Raised In And Leaving High Demand Groups; The Case of the Exclusive Brethren’, had emerged from my positivist background and needed to change. I used the metaphor of a journey, as have many before me, and I had a goal I was heading for, as indicated by the original title. I have ended up in a very different place, as will become apparent. On an expedition one usually takes provisions and sometimes they are not the right ones for the terrain. Steps then should be taken to remedy this and in my case this meant venturing into social constructionism and so challenging my life-long tendency towards positivism. This research is underpinned by social constructionism (see chapter 5).

I invite the reader on a guided tour of the professional context in chapter two, followed in chapter three with an outline of the dynamics that operate in cultic groups. In chapter four I illustrate these with reference to the Exclusive Brethren. Chapter five outlines the methodology and method used to explore the research question describing how social constructionism informed this research. In chapter six I invite the reader to join me in a dialogue with the representations of the narratives obtained, followed by an analysis of these narratives in chapter seven which concludes with a discussion of the implications for psychotherapy and a summation. This project has been so much more than this written document: chapter eight provides the reader with a description of the impact this project has had on professionals working in the cultic studies field. The thesis concludes with an afterword.

The question this research seeks to answer is:

What can my readers and I learn about what it is like to be born and raised in the Exclusive Brethren and subsequently leave.

In the preface to her book, Etherington (2004) wrote about a kind of 'community' she had created of people she had met. I hope to achieve the same. A community that includes: the storytellers; members of Feeb; those who post on the social media; those who attend my conference papers; members of ICSA and other organisations; and those reading this thesis. I invite the reader as Etherington (2004) did, to think about yourself in the same way I have attempted to think about myself. I have reflected on how:

- My history has led to my interest in this field
- I have influenced the work, how am I positioned in relation to it
- My gender/history/cultural influence has influenced my positioning to my participants
- My knowledge and understandings have been transformed as a result.

Chapter 2. The Professional Context

The professional context of this research is complex and plagued with conceptual and methodological problems. After exploring the definitional problems with the term 'cult', I outline the relationships between religion, psychology, and cultic studies, followed by a summary of research in these areas. Finally, I discuss legal and political issues that can impact on research in this field.

This research is not about religion per se but about individuals' experiences of a particular kind of religious group; therefore I do not address the debate around the definitions of religion and spirituality. Religion is not monomorphic but a complex collection of beliefs, experiences and behaviours (Cowan & Bromley 2015; Hackney & Saunders, 2003; Hood et al., 2009; Salsman et al., 2005) and is therefore a multi-dimensional construct. This complexity may partly explain the definitional confusion. In this project I define religion as 'the belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a personal God or gods, a particular system of faith and worship and a pursuit or interest followed with great devotion' (Oxford, 2016). This definition refers to the belief in a transcendent reality but also to an awareness that religion has an important function in believers' lives.

What is a cult

Many attempts have been made to define churches, sects and cults. The goal of being able to define a group based on a typology seems impossible although some have tried (e.g. Niebuhr, 1929). Religious groups are on many different continua; and since religions evolve over time they are likely to move along whatever continuum they are being viewed on. As I journeyed through this area of literature, I found myself identifying more with the idea of different continua rather than categories, in line with my social constructionist stance.

Of all the conceptual debates, the definition of the term 'cult' is one that has long been strongly contested. The public know very little about cults, and what they do know

mostly comes from the media (Cowan & Bromley 2015). The word conjures up tragic events such as The People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, in 1978, when 911 people died, including 287 children; and the Branch Davidians siege in Waco, Texas in 1993, when 79 people died, including 20 children.

Hood et al. (2009) see cults as novel forms of religion likely to be in tension not only with the mainstream culture in which they emerge, but also with churches and sects. Tension is the degree of separateness and antagonism with the host culture, ranging from very low (ultraliberal) to very high (ultrastrict) (Finke & Stark, 2001). Cults are described as groups that do not break away from other religions as sects do, but emerge with often dramatic innovative ideas. However, cults are not always novel forms of religion but sometimes emerge from sects, a point supported by Bainbridge and Stark (2003). In the 1820s many small protest groups, like the one Darby was part of, were breaking away from the established churches and could have been labelled sects. As I suggest in chapter four, however, the Brethren have become more cult-like and are certainly in tension with mainstream churches.

Sociologists see 'cults' as alternative new religions to be studied as cultures of interest. Their interest lies in the historical, cultural and social context in which they emerge and develop (Cowan & Bromley, 2015). They seek to understand in a non-critical way what has contributed to the cults' success or failure, why people join, why many leave and how groups vary in the costs and sacrifices they require from their members (Sheitle & Adamczyk, 2010).

Theological definitions of the term cult tend to examine a group's belief system and their deviance from the essential Christian doctrines (Enroth, 1988). However, cults are not all religious but can be political, terrorist, philosophical, psychotherapeutic, commercial, or even one-on-one cults (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Many have a large following, while others are small and attract little attention unless socio-political events put them in the limelight. Attempts have been made to estimate the number of cultic groups worldwide. Since many operate in secret, and given the definitional problems, it is not possible to suggest even an approximate figure (Galanter, 2013).

Scholars working in the cultic studies field have attempted to create a precise definition of what a cult is. Each definition has four interlocking dimensions in common as defined by Lalich (2004): charismatic authority, a transcendent belief system, systems of control, and systems of influence. Partly for brevity, but also because I do not consider any of the definitions satisfactory, I have placed some of these definitions in Appendix Three.

None of the definitions are rigorous enough to allow for the categorization of a group as cult or non-cult. Chambers et al., (1994) developed the Group Psychological Abuse Scale (GPA) that has been used in several empirical studies (e.g. Almendros et al., 2011; Mytton, 2013). This scale has no cut-off point whereby it can be determined that a group is a cult or not. It measures degrees of abusiveness in the group (Chambers et al., 1994) and creates a psychological abuse continuum, from mild to totalistic levels of control. Whether a religion, sect or cult benefits or harms an individual or society must also be on a continuum. Another scale is the Extent of Group Identity Scale (EGIS) which is designed to measure a participant's level of identification with and adherence to a group, as well as the degree to which a person's group identity becomes dominant (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010). It has been used in empirical studies and found to relate significantly to levels of psychopathology in ex-cult member populations, (e.g. Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Mytton, 2013).

ICSA associates, rather than trying to categorise groups as cults, take a more functional approach, preferring to draw attention to potentially harmful practices (Singer & Lalich, 1995). They encourage the exploration of cultic processes, acknowledging that groups are on a continuum rendering the label 'cult' superfluous. They speak in terms of cultic relationships where 'a person intentionally induces others to become totally or nearly totally dependent on him or her for almost all major life decisions, and inculcates in these followers a belief that he or she has some special talent, gift, or knowledge' (Singer & Lalich, 1995:7).

Several alternatives have been suggested to replace the contentious term 'cult', including 'high-demand groups', 'totalistic or totalitarian groups' (Lalich & Tobias 2006), 'charismatic groups' (Galanter, 2013) and 'New Religious Movements' (Barker,

1997). None of these solve the definitional problems. The term 'cult' is embedded in popular culture and narrative. It can be a useful if inaccurate label that replaces long explanations. It continues to be used by some scholars.

Since this thesis is informed by social constructionism and critical realism, I take a critical stance towards the use of the term 'cult'. I decided to use the phrase 'cultic group' because it is a more neutral term that avoids the pejorative associations and subjective definitions evoked by the word 'cult'; the categories cult/non-cult assume a reality that does not exist. Attempts to categorise groups outside mainstream religions have proved futile; as Beckford (2003:27) said, 'there is actually a continuum between the problematic and the unproblematic aspects of all religious collectivities'.

The Relationship between Psychology and Religion

Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

Karl Marx 1844/1977

Some scholars have assumed a strong inverse relationship between religiosity and mental health, as this well-known quote illustrates. Freud also spoke out against religion, calling it an 'illusion' and a 'childishness to be overcome' (Freud, 1927:88). For centuries religion and mental health were closely entwined, with mental illness often associated with being possessed by the devil. 'Healing' was the domain of the church from whom the medical profession took orders (Bartocci & Dein, 2007). During the early 19th Century psychiatry and religion diverged and the scientific worldview competed with religion (Gross & Simmons, 2009). In 1993 I searched for books or journal articles addressing the links between religion and mental health and found very little (Mytton, 1993). There has since been some rapprochement. Contributing factors are thought to include the influx of immigrants to the West. They brought strongly held and largely different religious convictions (Wallace & Findlay, 2001) and a greater interest in the spiritual (Bartocci & Dein, 2007).

Poole and Higgs (2011) make the important point that psychiatry depends on a good understanding of a patient's life. Since religion is one way that an individual organises their understanding of the world, it follows that psychiatrists need to understand religion and spirituality, regardless of their religious orientation. I would argue that psychologists and psychotherapists have the same obligation as psychiatrists to understand their clients' religious and spiritual experiences. The goal of this project is to add to the body of knowledge promoting that understanding.

Until the early 1990s only sporadic studies explored the association between religion and mental health (Marks, 2006). Three seminal books marked a change to this (Koenig, 1998; Koenig et al., 2001; Pargament, 1997). The studies reviewed however, are mostly based on samples from mainstream churches. Key conclusions include: more than 80% of studies found positive associations between religion and well-being; and 15 out of 16 studies reported a significant association between religious involvement and a greater sense of meaning and purpose in life (Marks, 2006). Writers refer to these findings as demonstrating a positive impact of religion on indices of mental well-being.

The conceptual and methodological reasons that caution us against a premature assumption of a link include:

- construct validity and a failure to recognise religion as a multi-dimensional construct (Dein et al., 2012; Hwang et al., 2009);
- sampling difficulties - most samples are self-selected and may be biased;
- problematic analyses – studies are largely cross-sectional and therefore direction of causation cannot be ascertained (Pargament, 2002);
- lack of control groups.

Religion has been operationalised in many ways. Frequency of church attendance has been found to have significant positive associations with measures of mental health (Jansen et al., 2010). However, similar associations may be found with people who belong to and regularly attend non-religious organisations. Positive associations have been found between colloquial and meditative prayer and measures of mental health

(Poloma & Gallup, 1991). Again, however, one can find non-religious explanations for this association, as studies on secular meditation suggest.

In studies where a significant positive association is found between mental health and a strong belief in fundamentalist doctrines, as measured by, for example, the Religious Fundamentalism Scale (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 2004), these too may be explained in non-religious ways. Possibly the strength of the belief rather than the type of belief explains this association. People who are certain about the beliefs they hold about the world and their place in it may well be psychologically healthier than those who remain unsure (Dein et al., 2012).

Pargament (2002:169) concluded 'it depends' in answer to the question is religion is harmful or helpful. Maybe a more important question is: if religion is helping an individual, then what is the mechanism behind this? Conversely, if religion is harming an individual, in what way is it doing so, and how? Psycho-socio-physiological mediators have been suggested to explain why religion might be a protective factor in mental health (Hill & Pargament, 2003). Religiosity provides a sense of community and social support that buffers stress (Hill & Pargament, 2003). It provides purpose and meaning to an individual's life, answers existential questions people have and encourages healthy lifestyle-promoting behaviours that increase happiness (Koenig et al., 2001). Religions supply overarching frameworks providing individuals with motivation and a direction in their lives, as well as a sense of the 'ultimate destination in life' (Hill & Pargament, 2003:68).

Pargament (2002) concluded that well-being is positively influenced if religion is integrated into people's lives, is part of a large social context, and is a force enabling religious beliefs, practices and motivations to blend. Conversely well-being is likely to be compromised if a person's religious identity is not supported by the social environment and their beliefs, practices and motivations lack coherence.

Cultic groups, like the Exclusive Brethren, Jehovahs Witnesses, Transcendental Meditation, and Synanon, also provide a social context and are very much integrated into people's lives though they are not supported by the social environment around

them. Coherence is also compromised if an individual's beliefs are not totally in accord with the group's.

Cultic Studies History

The field of cultic studies is a separate strand of research from that which explores religion and mental health. One finds research on mainstream religions on the one hand and on cultic groups on the other, with no bridge between the two. I suspect this has hindered progress in the field.

The cultic studies field developed out of socio-historical dramatic events that emerged in the 1950s onwards, sparked partly by the journalist Edward Hunter, who popularized the term 'brainwashing' (Hunter, 1951). The 1960s were a turbulent period of major social changes (Aronoff et al., 2000; Langone, 1993). A counterculture developed in reaction to the conservatism and social conformity of previous decades. Communes sprang up offering a range of views, from free love to religious puritanism (Barker, 1989). Many families described their children as having been 'stolen' by the emerging cults in Europe and North America (Giambalvo et al., 2013) and organized themselves into support groups (Aronoff et al., 2000). Deprogramming – the illegal kidnapping of members of a cult with the belief they had been 'brainwashed' – was commonly used (Barker, 1989).

In 1979 Langone and colleagues set up the American Family Foundation (AFF), aimed specifically at helping the families whose children had joined cults, but also targeted at professionals (Giambalvo et al., 2013; Langone, 1993). The name was changed to the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) in 2004 for several reasons¹: by the late 1990s most people contacting AFF were not families but former group members, and increasing numbers of people from outside the USA were becoming involved. A list of other organisations is in Appendix Four.

The 'cult apologists' picture themselves as fighting an underdog battle against hostile lords of the media backed by their armies of 'cult bashing' experts. The 'cult bashers' picture themselves as

fighting an underdog battle for a voice in academia in which apologists seem to hold all the gatekeeper positions.

Zablocki & Robbins 2001:67

During the late 1970s a polarisation developed between the sociologists and psychologists (Langone 2000), often referred to as the 'cult wars'. Serious researchers deplored this polarisation, regarding it as an impediment to learning about these strange groups (Zablocki & Robbins 2001). Most sociology researchers (e.g. Barker, 1984; Bromley & Shupe, 1981; Robbins & Anthony, 1982) were critical of the deprogramming activities, rightly seeing them as a violation of human rights. They did not support the Cult Awareness Movement in America (Giambalvo et al., 2013). Psychologists, psychiatrists and mental health professionals who were increasingly concerned about the harm they were seeing began referring to the sociologists as 'cult-apologists' (Langone, 2000). In response, some sociologists labelled the critics of cultic-groups as 'the anti-cult movement' or 'cult bashers' (Langone, 2005a, 2005b; Zablocki & Robbins, 2001:160). The use of disparaging names can convey stigma in an academic context, with the implication that 'anti-cultists' are activists and not serious academic researchers (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001).

The battle eventually diminished, partly due to the cessation of deprogramming. Dialogue between the two sides began. Eileen Barker, a sociologist who founded INFORM², and Michael Langone, in particular, worked towards reconciliation and open discussion.

Cultic studies empirical research

Research exploring the impact of membership of cultic groups has increased over the last 30 years (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010). Research and theoretical papers published in the International Journal of Cultic Studies and elsewhere, indicate that cultic groups vary in their potential for harm. Harm may be physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual or economic. Research on the effects of cultic groups can be divided into research on current members, FGAs and SGAs.

Research on current members is minimal, largely because of the difficulty of access to participants. Aronoff et al. (2000), after reviewing studies carried out between 1976 and 1990, concluded that most indicate current members are psychologically well-adjusted; however, many of the studies are deficient. To the conceptual and methodological concerns outlined earlier in this chapter, can be added the possibility that current members minimise their problems and maximise their well-being. They might do so to protect themselves from adverse reactions by the group leader(s); out of loyalty to the group; from mistrust of the researcher; and/or from the existential threat they might face if they questioned their membership (Fromm, 2001).

The members of the cultic groups emerging in the 60s and 70s all chose to join, so comprise the First Generation. When they began to leave their groups they provided scholars with a population to research. Empirical studies on FGAs have flaws similar to those outlined already. Aronoff and colleagues (2000) in their comprehensive review, outlined some of these studies and list reasons why FGAs may develop psychopathology on leaving. These include: a realisation of and reaction to what they have gone through often only comes after leaving the cultic group; leaving can result in loss of social structure, meaning and purpose; they may feel hostility and anger towards the group and its leader(s) and therefore exaggerate their symptomatology. In general, empirical studies supported by clinical observations (e.g. Giambalvo, 1995; Singer & Lalich, 1995) show post-cult characteristics and symptoms. These include (see Aronoff et al., 2000; Hassan, 2000; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Martin, 1994; Martin et al., 1992):

- emotional states such as guilt, fear, anger, shame, anxiety, depression, phobias, complex post-traumatic stress disorder;
- cognitive difficulties such as an inability to make decisions, dependence, dissociation, depersonalisation, poor concentration.

There are now a growing number of studies being carried out with SGA samples. However, in these studies the SGA samples include MGA leavers too – there is no differentiation between the two. Most are masters or doctoral theses that have not yet been published. There are two strands to the studies: quantitative and qualitative.

In the early 90s I carried out possibly the first quantitative study of SGAs (Mytton, 1993). With a sample of 201 former members of the Brethren and using the Brief Symptom inventory (Derogatis, 1993), I found clinically significant higher levels of mental health problems compared to population norms. Most subscales, including depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation, interpersonal problems, obsessive compulsiveness and psychoticism were significantly elevated. Paranoid ideation perhaps reflects reality, since leaving the Brethren can be a threatening experience. The psychoticism scale possibly measured a strong sense of isolation from the dominant culture.

Between 2010 and 2012 I replicated and expanded this study as outlined in chapter 1 (Mytton, 2013). In the absence of a control group, the means of all scales were compared to population norms. All scales on the Symptom Checklist-90R (Derogatis & Savitz, 2000) and on the Inventory of Interpersonal Problems (Horowitz et al., 1988) were significantly elevated. The significantly higher means of the Davidson Trauma Scale (Davidson et al., 2002) and of the Wessex Dissociation Scale (Kennedy et al., 2004) provide evidence of trauma related symptomatology.

Significant correlations were found between some of the clinical scales and the GPA (Chambers et al., 1994) and EGIS (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010) scales. This suggests the pathology might be related to the group environment (GPA), coupled with how strongly the group identity and the personal identity were enmeshed (EGIS), a point I discuss in chapter seven. Regular church attendance ameliorated distress, as found previously (Jansen et al., 2010, Mytton, 1993), but the participants' rating of the importance of their faith to them had no impact. Those who experienced loss of close family on leaving had significantly higher scores than those who did not.

Kendall (2006) in her doctoral research used a battery of scales to compare SGAs with FGAs and found that SGAs experienced significantly higher levels of distress than FGAs, including a high indication of post-traumatic stress disorder. Kendall suggested these findings might be accounted for by several factors including: the SGAs' lack of control or choice over membership; experiencing an authoritarian culture high in fear and

guilt; a lack of socialization experiences; identity problems; dissonance; lack of resilience; and culture shock on leaving.

Despite the conceptual and methodological problems, these studies suggest that some former members are harmed by being born and raised in cultic groups and leaving them. Langone (2005a:161) said: 'Some groups under some circumstances harm some people' and an interesting question is why some are harmed more than others. Is there something in the cultic environment that impacts differently in interaction with the family environment? The work by Almendros et al. (2011) with the GPA scale (Chambers et al., 1994), and Dubrow-Marshall (2010) with the EGIS scale, may identify key aspects of the group experience that predict these high levels of psychopathology on leaving. Quantitative studies though are limited in their scope and do not tell us about the subjective lived experience of being raised in these cultic groups and leaving.

Doctoral theses using qualitative approaches are beginning to emerge but have yet to be published (e.g. Jenkinson, 2016; Matthews, 2012; Millar, 2011; Rardin, 2013). Millar (2011) explored how identity transitions are accomplished when individuals leave the groups. She interviewed 22 former members raised in various groups. Using narrative analysis, Miller identified four major themes: experience of growing up in the cult; process of leaving; what helped or hindered; outcomes of changes. I refer to some of doctoral research in chapter seven however, the researchers all take an essentialist rather than social constructionist stance.

Research with SGAs whether quantitative or qualitative, is still scarce. My research will add to this slowly growing body of literature.

The Political Context

The events involving the Charity Commission, along with presentations given by politicians and lawyers at ICSA conferences have made me aware of the political context.

The perceived dangers of cults has led to a spate of official reports by governments in Western Europe. Richardson and Introvigne (2001) conclude that, despite the concept of brainwashing being largely discounted in the US, it is still present in the European reports leading to policy recommendations. Governments seem hesitant to bring in legislation that might threaten religious freedom (Zablocki & Robbins 2001). In the US Constitution, the first amendment protects religious freedom, guaranteeing the absolute right of its citizens to hold religious beliefs. The US government may take action against harmful religious practices that are the result of religious beliefs (Landa, 1990); such practices are not covered by the first amendment.

Attempts have been made by some European countries to curb the harmful activities of cultic groups. In France the 2001 About-Picard law³ (About & Picard, 2001) made it possible to take action against organisations who destabilise people and abuse the vulnerable. A similar law was passed in Belgium in 2012, making it a criminal offence to psychologically manipulate someone (Kirkham, 2013).

The issue of reparation for former members has also been examined. The consensus is that where the damage is emotional, trauma is difficult if not impossible to identify; it is equally difficult to establish connections between the damage done and the sectarian aberration (MIVILUDES, 2003).

Article 18 of the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or in private to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, workshop and observance.

(United Nations, 1949:4)

To exercise this right by leaving a cultic group can seem almost impossible.

Summary

In this chapter I have placed this project into a professional context by discussing the definitional confusion over the concepts and have provided an outline of the relationships between religion, psychiatry, sociology and psychology. I have outlined the history of cultic studies, including the so-called 'cult wars' that have impeded research, along with the division between the two strands of research, with mainstream religions on the one hand and with cultic groups on the other. The next chapter focuses on the characteristics of cults.

Chapter 3. Cultic Groups: Characteristics, and Practices

The question of why people obey the sometimes bizarrely insane commands of charismatic leaders, even unto death, is one of the big unsolved mysteries of history and the social sciences.

Zablocki & Robbins, 2001:160

Our current understanding of cultic groups and processes that goes some way to explain this 'big unsolved mystery' is discussed in this chapter. 'Cultic processes' refers to the psychological mechanisms used to manipulate and influence members of cultic groups (Langone, 1994). I address those aspects relevant to SGAs and MGAs, and so will not be discussing recruitment. However, many of the concepts and psychological mechanisms used to explain recruitment help us understand why those born into a cultic group choose to stay rather than leave. As I am looking to understand how cultic groups in general impact on their members, I need to understand how these cultic groups function, how they control their members, and what impact that control has on them. This chapter outlines my current understanding and the following chapter explores the fit between these characteristics and the Exclusive Brethren.

Characteristics

This section explores cultic characteristics and processes covering: charismatic authority; transcendent belief system; and systems of influence and control (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The chapter concludes with a look at how cultic groups retain members.

Charismatic authority

A movement often begins with an individual who commands the attention of followers. Gradually he¹ inculcates followers with his own ideology and finds a way to deal with dissent.

Charisma has been defined as:

A certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he (or she) is considered extraordinary 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, 1947:241)

This definition differs to the general usage describing dynamic, charming, strong personalities. If members believe the leader possesses special divine qualities, they willingly grant that leader special authority over them. He is often perceived as someone with a direct line to God so therefore has 'the truth' (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Followers accept the leader's right to make decisions for them in most if not all aspects of their lives. A charismatic leader can offer hope, a cause, a clear belief system and the self-assurance needed to promote this. They are often unpredictable and issue new edicts or change old ones, creating anxiety amongst the followers.

All types of leadership can be said to be relational: without followers there would be no leader and vice versa (Hogg, 2001). The emotional bond between leaders and followers can powerfully give legitimacy to his role (Lalich, 2004). The cultic relationship is authoritarian in structure: the leader's position as the supreme authority means there is no process for the followers to appeal against the leader's decisions, unlike in other walks of life (Barker, 2013b).

Transcendent belief system

Cultic groups develop a doctrinal belief system to justify their existence and practices. In Christian-based cultic groups, these doctrines usually centre on the inerrancy and authority of the Bible. Some groups have their own translations of the Bible and some have more than one source of authority. Members are expected to believe without question the doctrines expounded to them.

Cultic groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons and Transcendental Meditation, vary in the content of their beliefs. However, when we look at the

processes and practices based on these beliefs we find similarities across groups. Regardless of content most cultic groups' doctrines promote isolation and separation from the outside world and are guilt and shame based. Guilt in a cultic group is usually based on a group conscience rather than an individual one. Shame is induced through exclusion following doubt or questioning. Doctrines build commitment and provide the basis for shared talk.

The theories of revisionism (Barker, 2013a) or deformation (Cote & Richardson, 2001), refer to significant changes in doctrines or practices that have both negative and/or positive effects. Cultic groups undergo change often resulting from external or internal pressure (Barker, 2013a). Internally driven changes are justified by the assertion they are revelations from some higher being coming through the leader thus reinforcing his role. Changes might be justified by statements that someone misinterpreted the leader's statements. The death of the leader and the arrival of a new one may also precipitate change. Externally driven changes may occur due to governmental activities and regulations directed at religious groups, as has happened to the Brethren recently. Key changes in various cultic groups are described by Barker (2013a).

A transcendent belief system is one that supplies explanations and answers, together with a worldview offering meaning and purpose. In the case of religious groups, this includes a path to salvation (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The shared belief systems define the group and therefore its members. To maintain boundaries and retain members, cultic groups need to ensure the group is the most salient group affiliation the individual has. This ensures individuals' self-concept, sense of self-worth and identities depend on remaining in the group (Stahelski, 2004). These belief systems form part of the systems of influence and control explored in the next two sections.

Systems of influence

Influence is ubiquitous and on a continuum (Dubrow-Marshall, 2010; Hassan, 2013; Langone, 1992). At one end, influence is benign, beneficial and largely choice-respecting (Langone, 1989; Singer & Lalich, 1995); it obeys ethical rules and has respect for human values and human rights (Krok 2009). It is part of daily life used by

families, friends, doctors, advertisers, teachers and even psychotherapists. At the other end, it is coercive or destructive, violates human rights, has an exploitative attitude, is not choice-respecting but compliance-gaining, and has little respect for human values (Langone, 1989).

Cialdini (2007) and Levine (2006) have written on the power of persuasion and its presence in all walks of life, emphasizing the ethical non-manipulative use of these principles. Levine (2006) concluded that we are all more susceptible to persuasion than we think. Cialdini (2007) developed a model of persuasion consisting of six principles.

- *Reciprocation* refers to the social norm 'do as you would be done by'.
- *Consistency* refers to peoples' desire to be seen as consistent and their beliefs, words and action match.
- *Social validation* aims to persuade someone to agree to a request on the grounds that many other people have adopted the same behaviour.
- *Liking* is based on the idea we are more likely to listen to someone we like and respect.
- *Authority* makes the case that people tend to defer to experts and those in authority
- *Scarcity* argues opportunities are more desirable if they are scarce.

These principles can all be found within cultic groups, but exaggerated in a manipulative and unethical way (Moestue, 2017). Teachings are presented as being consistent even when they are not, the groups have authority figures as leaders, and claim their doctrines are unique. Taylor (2004), for example, does not see the need for a special process to explain the 'big unsolved mystery' (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001): the processes used by cultic groups are no different from other psychological processes in everyday life (Moestue, 2017). If we take the normal processes we are susceptible to, and add into the mix a charismatic leader and coercion, we have the cultic processes that result in conformity.

In cultic groups, social pressure is used to enforce conformity and compliance, thus maintaining doctrinal purity (Salande & Perkins, 2011). Freedom of thought and action is quickly lost (Barr, 1984) or in the case of SGAs and MGAs never gained. The main source of doctrinal interpretation is the leader. Members are expected to accept without question. The loyalty to the group and the inhibition of contact with the outside reinforces the boundary between the group and society; essential to the continuation of a cultic group. Xenophobia is common: inside the group is good, outside is bad and to be feared (Galanter & Forest, 2005; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

The affinity for belonging to groups in most cultures appears to be innate (Galanter, 1999). Such affiliations probably emerged during human evolution as an aspect enhancing potential for survival by conferring advantages on individuals. In cultic groups, loyalty, commitment and engagement yield rewards such as relief from distress (Galanter, 1999, 2013). The closer a person feels to a group, the greater their relief and reduction of uncertainty. This links to attachment theory discussed in chapter seven.

When social cohesiveness is strong, members work to protect each other and share resources, thus maintaining their strength of commitment. Group cohesiveness is also fostered through practices such as frequent meetings where the unifying transcendent belief system is shared. Galanter and Forest (2005) have defined group cohesiveness as 'the result of all the forces acting on members to keep them engaged in the group' (p53); one of these key forces is the shared belief system. In my opinion, this drives a sense of emotional fusion where identities become merged and individual decisions are abnegated in favour of group decisions. Social norms are responsible for uniformity of behaviour within any group, providing a set of expectations for attitudes, beliefs and actions (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). They help ensure social interactions are predictable and that individuals conform to avoid conflict.

Explanatory Models

Researchers and scholars have attempted to provide us with explanatory models and concepts including brainwashing (Hunter, 1951), thought reform, mind control, undue

influence, coercive persuasion and indoctrination. A universal term is needed (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001) since they are probably all talking about the same thing: systems of influence. Whatever term is used cannot convey the complexity of interacting dimensions comprising the psychological mechanisms that encourage members to remain in cultic groups.

The term 'brainwashing' is often used by former Brethren to explain the behaviour of their lost families. It is a loose translation of the Chinese word 'hsi nao' meaning 'cleansing the mind' or 'wash brain' (Taylor, 2004). During the Korean War methods supposedly developed by Chairman Mao Zedung were reportedly used on American prisoners of war, many of whom emerged praising communism and denigrating America (Singer & Lalich 1995; Taylor 2004). Lifton (1961) and Schein (1961) are critical of this view, having interviewed returning prisoners and concluded they had not been subjected to a re-education programme or 'brainwashing' but rather had been subjected to pressures to act in certain ways to survive. They concluded coercive persuasion was a combination of powerful social, psychological and physical pressures. Any changes observed were not permanent, as once freed the prisoners renounced their acquired views.

The term brainwashing, however, has entered the public consciousness and is used by people faced with an inexplicable change in someone they know. It is 'a very strong metaphor for a very powerful kind of interpersonal influence' (Zablocki, 1998:217). The term implies that some mystical cleanser has been applied to a person's brain, clearing out all prior attitudes, beliefs and values and replacing them with the cultic group's doctrines. Even if this were possible, and evidence suggests it is not, I argue it cannot be applied to those born into a cultic group since the brain of a new born baby cannot be cleansed of prior beliefs: it has none.

Taking into consideration all the various labels used I prefer the term 'coercive indoctrination'. 'Indoctrination' is a term more relevant to those born into and raised in a cultic group than 'persuasion'. The latter suggests an influence used to persuade an individual to change their attitudes and beliefs, whereas indoctrination implies that beliefs, values and attitudes are inculcated into a child's mind before it is capable of

much thought. Indoctrination can mean to teach, as when parents give their children ethical or moral education. It can also mean something more ominous, as in the teaching of a doctrine using methods that undermine autonomy (Khawaja, 2010). The adjective 'coercive' makes it clear the person is pressured or intimidated into accepting the indoctrination.

The goal of coercive indoctrination is to influence the other person by inculcating thoughts, feelings, attitudes and behaviours. In the case of SGAs and MGAs, the aim is to indoctrinate children with the group's ideals and thus retain members within the group (Langone, 1993). Coercion indoctrination undermines a person's ability to act and think independently (Hassan, 2013) usually without the person's awareness (Robbins, 2003). There is nothing magical or mysterious about coercive indoctrination: it is the application of interpersonal psychological and social influence techniques in an organized way and in the presence of powerful control processes. For those who leave the group, the pressures and control are lifted and the various processes gradually lose their potency (Singer & Lalich, 1995); for SGAs and MGAs this can take decades (Mytton, 2013).

A programme of coercive indoctrination can involve various psychological mechanisms including Cialdini's six principles listed above. The use of psychological control processes, together with physical and/or psychological coercion, rely on the exploitation of fundamental human needs, both spiritual and physical, to create compliance and conformity (Langone, 1993). It is beyond the scope of this project to discuss these needs. However, according to self-determination theory, these are autonomy, competence and relatedness (Anderson et al., 2000); or, according to the more complex model of Maslow (1954), the fundamental human needs are: subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, recreation (sense of leisure, reflection), creation, identity and freedom.

Coercive indoctrination is not achieved through one element but by all interacting together, along with other psychological processes. Models have been developed to explain this process. The best known is Lifton's model which evaluates the degree of totalism in groups. Lifton (1961:156) defined 'totalism' as a 'tendency toward all-or-

nothing emotional alignments'. He rejected the term 'brainwashing' and used 'thought reform'. Central to the thought reform environment were eight criteria he identified through his research (Lifton, 1961). One might think these criteria are not applicable to my research, since Lifton's model is a process model based on conversion. However, through my studying of this model, I believe each of these criteria is present in cultic groups which comprise those born into the group. I demonstrate this in relation to the Exclusive Brethren's group processes in chapter four.

Milieu control

The individual's interpersonal communication with the outside world and intra-personal communication is regulated - 'his communication with himself' (Lifton, 1961:478). In the absence of information and self-reflection, individuals are deprived of being able to test the realities of their environment. Control is extensive and covers what the person sees, hears, reads and writes by restricting access to books, films, television, radio and so on, and by limiting what they express, debate or discuss (Beel, 1997). Individuals cease the struggle to know what is real or true, their search for understanding and meaning is thwarted, they surrender autonomy to the group and they stop self-questioning (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Lifton refers to this as 'personal closure', which frees the individual 'from man's incessant struggle with the elusive subtleties of truth' (Lifton, 1961:479). Reality is the exclusive possession of the group (Beel, 1997).

Mystical Manipulation

This refers to manipulation by the leader(s) that provokes behaviour and emotion appearing to have arisen spontaneously in some mystical way (Lifton, 1961). A sense of a higher purpose is generated to 'create a mystical aura' (Lifton, 1961:480) that cannot be questioned. Its pursuit supersedes all moral considerations since the 'means justifies the ends'.

The Demand for Purity

The world is polarized between pure and impure, good and evil, saved and unsaved – an all-or-nothing standard (Singer & Lalich, 1995). As defined by the group, the good and the pure are ideas, behaviours, thoughts, and beliefs consistent with the group's

ideology. Purity is regarded as attainable (Lifton, 1961) and members constantly strive and fail to reach this purity leading to humiliation and ostracism; guilt and shame become associated with the group's environment. Members are led to believe the impurities originate from outside influences and that the only relief from these burdens of guilt and shame comes from denouncing the outside world.

The Cult of Confession

Some groups (e.g. Jehovah's Witnesses) are obsessed with personal confession and this is closely related to the demand for purity (Lifton, 1961). Members are required to confess past and present behaviour to unburden themselves to escape guilt and shame. Confession is a 'symbolic act of self-surrender, the expression of the merging of the individual and the environment' (Lifton, 1961: 484).

The 'Sacred Science'

The doctrines of the cultic group are given an aura of sacredness. Questioning the assumptions, doctrines and the teaching is prohibited. Teachings are regarded as the 'ultimate science' (Lifton, 1961:487) and anyone criticizing or questioning them is immoral, irreverent and unscientific. Lifton (1961:488) powerfully states, 'It represents another continuous pressure toward personal closure, toward avoiding, rather than grappling with, the kinds of knowledge and experience necessary for genuine self-expression and for creative development'.

Loading the Language

The language of cultic groups is often peppered with thought-terminating clichés serving to constrict critical thinking. By controlling language, organisations can control thought. In cultic groups, jargon is used to claim the certainty of the 'sacred science'. Whole new meanings may be created for well-known words that derive from the doctrines of the group; this serves to cement the in-group/out-group dichotomy, reinforcing the sense of rightness of the group. The Hare Krishnas use 'Work now, samadhi (meditate) later'. The Jehovah's Witnesses use 'It's just around the corner' to quell doubt about Argadaddon. Information from 'apostates' (former members) is spiritual pornography'.

When talking to cultic group members, there is sometimes the sense that you cannot engage fully with them: they seem to be talking a different language. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, George Orwell uses 'Newspeak' to refer to the language created by his totalitarian invention Oceania. Newspeak 'differed from all other languages in that its vocabulary grew smaller every year. ... The smaller the area of choice, the smaller the temptation to take thought... the expression of unorthodox opinions, above a very low level, was well-nigh impossible' (Orwell, 2004:322).

Doctrine over the person

In all these criteria, doctrinal primacy is evident; it prevails in all areas of an individual's life, not least their identities. Individuals' identities are subjugated to the supremacy of the group's doctrines, which shape the reality in which they exist. For a member born into the group, experiences are shaped to fit 'the rigid contours of the doctrinal mould instead of developing their own personality and potential' (Groenveld, 1995). The underlying assumption is that the group's belief system and worldview is more valid and real than the experience of the individual.

The Dispensing of Existence

Cultic groups usually regard members as being part of an elite who are in possession of the 'Truth'. Anyone not walking the same path is considered not worthy to exist. In extreme totalitarian regimes, this can mean literal death. Being born into a cultic group confers the right to exist on that child. Anyone leaving the group forfeits that right (Beel, 1997). Those outside the group are 'non-people' (Lifton, 1961). The assumption is that cultic groups believe there is only one path to existence and all others are by definition false and invalid (Lifton, 1961). The group decides who will have eternal life and who will not. In the Jehovah's Witnesses former members who have been disfellowshipped are referred to as being 'dead to Jehovah'.

Systems of Control

Cultic groups are social systems. To control how they function, the group must be able to suppress dissent (Galanter, 1999) or exclude dissenting members. Systems of control cover the overt and covert rules, regulations and procedures that guide how

members conduct their lives (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). The goal is usually compliance and includes sanctions for failure to comply. The pyramid structure of many cultic groups facilitates the imposition of unquestioning compliance with the leader.

Despite the doctrinal differences between cultic groups their practices or systems of control are often very similar. Even though most do not live in communes, their boundaries are well developed and members' lives are disciplined, organized, controlled and communal; they spend most of their time in the company of other members.

Every cultic group has a way of disciplining members who 'transgress' to retain them. Lalich (1993) describes how a cultic group leader, Doreen Baxter, replied when asked how she was able to build such a strong organization: 'with a little carrot and a lot of stick' (p66). Each group develops its own carrots and sticks.

Staying and Leaving

Second and Multi-Generational Adults are born into the cultic group and so the questions are not why they joined but why some stay and some leave, how they leave, what happens to them when they do, and what helps or hinders that process.

The consequences of indoctrination are significant because they affect the very core of autonomous self-realisation. Indoctrination limits not only the ability to choose, but the very awareness of choice; it imposes a perspective that follows the individual in his or her most private thoughts and intimate moments; it is insidious and invasive, all the more so because it purports not to exist

Caws & Jones, 2010

The systems of control induce dependency on the group (Coates, 2012), making it hard to even contemplate leaving. So much of a member's life is regulated by the group, their lives in the group is all they have ever known. The high levels of cohesion and strong social bonds, the inability to think critically and independently renders the decision to leave even more problematic and encourages people to stay (Bernthal et al., 1993).. It might not even occur to members that leaving is an option; as Caws and

Jones (2010) state, many are not even aware they have a choice as it seems self-evident that in the group is where they are.

Leavers often lack life skills so writing a CV, finding employment often without references, or opening a bank account can seem insurmountable hurdles. They speak of the sudden void in their lives. The transition is enormously difficult and previous research suggests it can lead to depression, guilt, anxiety, grief, isolation, confusion and post-traumatic stress disorder (Kendall, 2006, 2016; Mytton, 2013; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

For many the exit costs, the 'sticks', are too high; and they may be persuaded to remain by the benefits of staying, the 'carrots' (Freckleton, 1998). Since the cultic group is central to their sense of selves, any desire to be authentic, autonomous and independent creates a dissonance that must be resolved (Coates, 2013). Festinger (1957) developed the theory of cognitive dissonance: the psychological tension experienced when our behaviours, thoughts and emotions are not mutually consistent. Dissonance can be very uncomfortable and can be reduced by rationalization, discarding the discordant belief, or blotting out the dissonant cognition – although it cannot be eliminated entirely (Festinger, 1957). However, if a group of people are all persuaded the new cognition is correct, it is easier for the individual to be persuaded too. Being in a cultic group provides similar rewards to religion, as outlined in chapter two. It provides a sense of certainty and both, informal and formal support (Freckleton, 1998).

To avoid repetition, I discuss these issues further within the next chapter on the Exclusive Brethren. A discussion about how leavers can be helped or hindered is contained in chapter seven.

Chapter 4. The History and Characteristics of the Exclusive Brethren

Yet the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, [The] Lord knows those that are his; and, Let every one who names the name of [the] Lord withdraw from iniquity.¹

2 Tim 2:19

In this chapter I outline the history, doctrines and practices of the Exclusive Brethren. For a fuller version see Mytton (2013) (Appendix One). When I began this research, I assumed the Brethren were a very strict isolationist sect. As I read about the characteristics of cultic groups as outlined in chapter three, I began to realise that the Brethren do have cultic characteristics and that Lifton's model for totalitarian groups could readily be applied to the Brethren (Lifton, 1961).

Brief History

The history of the Exclusive Brethren has been well documented (e.g. Bachelard, 2008; Coad, 1968; Ironside, 1985; Wilson, 2000). What follows is a brief synthesis of many sources: the interviews; autobiographies by former members (Appendix Five); discussion with former members and my personal recollections.

When the Brethren emerged, they were a 'protest group'. Darby's stance centred on the principle of ecclesiastical separation (McKay, 2013; Wilson, 2000). He and many others were unhappy about the inclusiveness of established churches that allowed non-believers to take part in Holy Communion. Separation was about a return to purity and a move away from clericalism. The key biblical text Darby emphasised was the one given above. This became known as the doctrine of 'separation from evil'.

Only those who fully accepted the assembly doctrine and separated from evil could be 'in fellowship'⁶. This principle of separation led to many schisms. The first and key split happened in 1848 and arose from an argument about degrees of separation. The

movement split into the less rigid 'Open' Brethren and the 'Closed' or 'Exclusive' Brethren who followed Darby's strict line. The exclusive branch continued to divide and the splinter groups were often named after their leaders or the local town, for example the Glanton Brethren (see dendrogram Appendix Six).



The Seven 'Ministers of the Lord in the Recovery'^G

This picture hangs in many Brethren houses.

From left with dates of leadership

J.N Darby	(JND) ²	late 1820s - 1882
F.E. Raven	(FER)	ca 1882 - 1903
J. Taylor, Sr,	(JTSr)	1903 - 1953
J. Taylor, Jr,	(JTJr)	ca 1959 ³ - 1970
J.H.Symington	(JHS)	1970 - 1987
J.S.Hales	(JSH)	1987 - 2002
B.D. Hales	(BDH)	2002 - present day

Throughout their history, the Brethren leaders emphasised different aspects of Brethrenism. A major period of transformation began when Taylor Jr took over in 1959. He systematised the teachings of separation with frequent new regulations, or 'directives'^G, taking revisionism to a whole new level⁴. A key doctrine emerged in 1959-1960 stating that Brethren should not eat with anyone not in the fellowship, known as the 'eating matter'^G. Many Brethren chose to leave or were withdrawn from^G including my parents. Others, although unhappy with the new ministry, felt

unable to leave because of the inevitable family losses that would follow. They remained hopeful that things would improve but what followed was a constant tightening-up of enforced separation from the world. This impacted on families where one member was no longer in fellowship: husbands and wives were separated, children lost their parents and parents lost their children.

In July 1970 Taylor Jr presided over 'three day meetings'^G in Aberdeen, Scotland. The Saturday afternoon meeting was incoherent (excerpt Appendix Seven). On Saturday evening he was found in bed with the wife of another brother (The Aberdeen Incident, 1970). His closest followers represented these events as an ambush, which the Lord had told him to carry out to distinguish between those who were true to Taylor Jr and those who were not. Thousands left.

Taylor Jr died that September and Symington, another American, became the new leader. The making of new rules continued: they included a ban on living in semi-detached houses because of sharing drives and sewers with neighbours. This would indicate shared ownership with 'worldlies'^G. He took a firm stance against technology: fax machines, computers and mobile phones were all dubbed 'evil' and 'conduits for filth' (Bachelard, 2008:37).

Under John Hales, an Australian accountant who succeeded Symington, business became a dominant theme. He encouraged members to borrow money from each other rather than from commercial lenders. The Brethren also took an interest in education, spending funds on building Brethren-only high schools.

When Hales' son Bruce took over in 2002, 'The Review'^G occurred. Its purpose was to clear the assembly of injustices. Decisions made about former members were reconsidered, individuals were contacted and apologies were made. Many former members, grateful for the renewed contact, welcomed the move, only to meet rejection again when they refused to return to the Brethren.

Characteristics

This section is structured using the four interlocking dimensions of Lalich and Tobias (2006).

Charismatic Leader

Former members told me:

BDH certainly doesn't appear to be charismatic from the outside! But with generations of brainwashing behind his followers, maybe he only needs a very weak charisma for it to work.

'Deb', 2015

Groups like the Brethren with a long generational history of granting authority to their leaders find it easier to convince members that new leaders are 'Men of God'.

Although Darby was against having ordained clerics or any kind of hierarchy, in reality, former Brethren have told me, an informal hierarchy is created in each congregation by political manoeuvring, flattery and other manipulative methods. If local leaders appear to be gaining too much power, the 'Man of God'⁶ blames them for any problems. This destabilises the hierarchy and topples the local leaders.

Transcendent belief system

The Exclusive Brethren are fundamentalists who believe in the infallibility of the Bible. They regard their own Bible, translated by Darby, as a 'better translation'⁵. They are creationists and believe in the deity of Christ. They view the key underlying doctrines as givens, not to be debated or discussed. Meetings conducted by their leaders are recorded, transcribed and published as 'ministry'⁶. The ministry is regarded as almost on a par with the Bible since it represents the revealed word of God. In the ministry of Taylor Jr he explicitly stated the Brethren should listen to him now instead of the apostle Paul⁶.

Darby has been called the 'father of Dispensationalism'⁶, a disputed doctrine that teaches God has two separate chosen people: the Church composed of heavenly

people; and Israel, his earthly people, to whom God promised a Kingdom of God (Donaldson, 2011). The Brethren await the second coming of Christ, the so called 'secret rapture'^G (Barker, 2013b). They will 'rise up' to meet Christ in the air, thus allowing God's purposes for Israel to resume (Donaldson, 2011). At the end of the rapture, Christ will come again to establish the seventh dispensation – the millennium, the Kingdom of God. Bruce Hales frequently teaches that the world is about to be destroyed; God has destroyed it once and is going to do so again. They believe the world cannot be helped, so they make no attempt do so⁷.

The doctrine of separation from evil was originally an ecclesiastical separation. However, it soon became an interpersonal one, as families became divided (Whately, 1877). 'Separation from evil' has now morphed into as complete a separation from the world as they can achieve. Their only real external contacts are for business purposes; more recently they have been involved in charitable activities as part of their appeal against the Charity Commission's decision not to grant them charitable status. In the Preston Down Trust document (HM Government, 2014), the Brethren state that separation is moral, not physical. Yet, families continue to be divided and leavers have little contact with those left in. Leavers are often forbidden to attend marriages of their children or attend funerals of relatives still in the group.

The Brethren believe that no other body has the 'truth of the church'^G, or 'walks in the light of the assembly'^G or 'acts in the power of the Holy Spirit'^G. These beliefs emphasise the separation from both non-Christians and other Christians. The fundamental certainty that they hold 'the only right position' underlies their identity.

The 'Recovery'^G is an important part of the Brethren's doctrines. In the early 1800s, they believed the Holy Ghost was working through them to recover truths long buried under church traditions and rituals (Wilson, 2000). The presence of the Holy Spirit is said to have been felt in several places in Europe, calling the Church back to its religious simplicity. The original line of ministry supposedly began with Paul and was then 'recovered' by the great leaders, from Darby through to the current leader, Bruce Hales, the 7th 'Minister of the Lord in the Recovery'^G (HM Government, 2014). However, to assert that their doctrines and practices are 'recovered' stretches belief

and carries no weight with theologians. For example, Darby's dispensational theories⁶ and eschatology had no equivalent in ancient times (Donaldson, 2011; McKay, 2016).

Systems of Influence and Systems of Control

In this section I indicate how the Brethren meet Lifton's eight criteria. This information has been provided by former members and is supported by quotes from the ministry indicated by the notes. The participants' narratives in chapter six also illuminate these criteria.

Lifton's Eight Criteria applied to the Exclusive Brethren.

Milieu Control

Members now experience the Brethren system much of their waking life. The week is highly structured, with daily meetings (services) plus additional meetings called the 'Interchange'⁶ and special 'three day meetings'⁶. Control of outside influences and of access to information reinforces the boundaries.

Education is also controlled; all children now attend Brethren-run schools where the range of books is limited (Spragg, 2016). Their doctrine states that there are 'demons in novels'⁸. Restricting children's access to information is said to be for their moral protection. Further education is restricted, and attending university is not allowed. State schools are seen as dangerous: the devil uses them to introduce evil ideas⁹. These restrictions mean careers and interests are limited: they cannot become professional musicians, athletes, novelists, scientists, doctors, lawyers, architects, school teachers and so on.

The use of technology is now allowed. Computers and mobile phones must be purchased through UBT¹⁰ and their use is limited, with certain websites blocked. Employment is almost exclusively with Brethren companies. Women have no say in official decisions and are expected to be subservient and obedient. They take no part in church activities, apart from baking the loaf for the breaking of bread, laying the table, singing, announcing hymns and saying amen. The husband is the head of the family unit, directly responsible for the actions of his wife and children. Social

networking is restricted to Brethren members and within that special friendships are frowned on (see chapter 7 note 3).

Independent critical thinking is explicitly suppressed, with questioning seen as dissent. A common phrase is 'trampling on the natural'^G which means the suppression of feelings.

The Brethren speak of a moral separation from evil and interpret this to cover everything outside their moral code. Arts, politics, fashion and intellectual studies are all details of 'man's world'^G. Visits to concerts, cinemas, theatres and art galleries are banned. Brethren members should not be 'attending venues of worldly entertainment including restaurants' (Letter from Bruce Hales, Appendix Eight).

Mystical Manipulation

The leader is called the Minister of the Lord and seen as the representative of God; disobedience of the leader is equated with disobedience of God. Stories of God's providence provide evidence they have found the truth, while negative happenings to leavers are viewed as God's punishment. They assert: 'The world is getting worse every day'¹¹ (Nason, 2015) and talk of the 'attack from outside'¹².

The Demand for Purity

The world is divided into those who are Brethren, and the rest of the world who are 'worldlies'^G. Other Christians are in the world but 'do not have the light that we have'¹³. The 'assembly conscience'^G is paramount and individual conscience is abnegated.

The Cult of Confession

Confession of sins is between the member and a priest^G who may ask personal and intimate questions. Members who are aware of a sin in others are expected to inform the priests.

The ‘Sacred Science’

By reading the ‘ministry’ members can keep up with what God is revealing to the saints through the ‘Minister of the Lord in the Recovery’. Questioning or doubting the ‘truth’ is viewed as Satan working in the person¹⁴. I have been told that Satan is doing his work through me. When rules are changed (e.g. computers being permitted, eating in restaurants now being accepted), explanations are used such as ‘the Lord has turned a corner’^G and ‘the Lord is putting his focus elsewhere now’^G. The phrase ‘He went ahead of the Lord’¹⁵ is used to explain why someone in the past was disciplined for an offence that is now allowed.

Loading the Language

The Brethren use value-laden words to reinforce their doctrines and practices. Many are listed in the Glossary. Mantra-like phrases are used – for example, ‘We’ll do the thinking, you do the doing’¹⁶. Former members often refer to the way the Brethren express themselves as ‘Brethren speak’.

Doctrine over the Person

Doctrines override sexuality: for example, attempts are made to treat homosexuals chemically since homosexuality is considered a sin¹⁷. Families have little or no contact with family members who leave. Marriage is approved by the leader. Mixed-race marriages are deemed unseemly¹⁸ and marriage to outsiders is forbidden.

The Dispensing of Existence

Members who leave are regarded as ‘dead’. They can no longer call themselves Christian and cannot have eternal life²⁰. When asked, ‘What does it mean to be excommunicated from the Exclusive Brethren?’ Craig Hoyle replied:

It’s like you’ve died. They will remove all the traces that you once existed. All the photos come off the wall. Any mention of you will come off the directories and they’ll even in some cases take you off the family tree. It’s as though you never existed.

Radio New Zealand. Interview by Sonia Sly with Craig Hoyle, January 2013.

Enforcing the systems of control

The Brethren say:

There is no authoritative answer to how decisions are made as we don't have a book of rules. We use scriptural authority and if we can find no clear scriptural injunction we rely on the Holy Spirit and mutual consultation.

(Personal communication 2008 cited in Barker, 2013b:18)

The Brethren specify disciplinary procedures in their leaflet Pastoral and Disciplinary Procedures and Practice (2010 cited in Barker, 2013b) and in the Charity Commission document (HM Government, 2014:22) where it refers to an 'ongoing process of discussion amongst responsible Brethren elders worldwide'. The ministry guides them in their considerations. Anyone who offends is admonished privately by two 'leading brothers'^G (Barker, 2013b). If this fails the member may be 'shut up'^G or, as it is now called, 'shrinking from', a process based on the treatment of lepers in Leviticus¹⁹. This involves 'minimising social contact with the person for a limited period to provide them with the space and time to make a private and personal choice about their continuing in the fellowship' (HM Government, 2014:22). It involves complete isolation, apart from visits from 'priests' to see if there is any repentance. This can mean living away from the family for months, with no attendance at meetings until they are considered 'right before God'^G. If this fails then the final stage involves being 'withdrawn from',^G now known as excommunication, either because the person has decided to leave or 'in other very rare cases where excommunication is necessary as an extreme or last resort measure for serious misdeeds wholly at odds with basic scriptural teaching' (HM Government, 2014:22).

Staying and Leaving

Loss of belief is a frightful experience... But worse than anything was the fear of being thrown out of the Party – the Party which was family, security, friends, faith. That would be living death. And so some of us stay through habit. Hoping, still hoping accepting through habit.

Han, (1982:451)

I was so struck by this quote many years ago that I have used it several times in workshops and conference papers. It refers to leaving the Chinese communist party. It encapsulates how former Brethren say they felt when contemplating leaving.

There are several factors influencing the decision to remain or leave. Former members speak of the three Fs – Fear, Finance and Family. Members fear being punished by God if they leave, thus hell and eternal damnation become their destination. They fear entering a world they have been led to believe is evil and one they have been taught to hate. This extract illustrates this:

Unless you have come to a hatred of the world you are likely to be sucked in by it and seduced by it. You must hate the world, every feature of the world, at every point you hate it.

B.D. Hales White Book 161. Reading in Sydney, March 2008

The Brethren claim it is taken out of context and was not meant to be taken literally. Even if we concede that, a child thinks in concrete terms, not in metaphorical ones. Children will believe this in a literal way.

Financially those leaving often lose their jobs. Employment contracts often include clauses similar to this: 'Employment will be terminated if fellowship with Mr. Bruce Hales of Sydney ceases'. Since mortgages are now set up between members they also fear losing their houses.

The inevitable loss of family is a particularly key factor. In my study 70% of the participants lost one or more members of their first-degree family (Mytton, 2013). Spouses, if separated, must get divorced though it is thought that legal separation is now accepted, and parents lose their children and vice versa. The reader can view this poignant short video based on the loss of family
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sih1gQA-4Hc>.

The Brethren claim that any family division is not an assembly matter but an individual one (HM Government, 2014; Barker, 2013b). However, Barker (2013b) states it is too

widespread for it to be purely an individual matter. The shunning of family members comes from the doctrine of separation and is stated in their ministry²¹. Sadly, family breakups occur in all societies, but for those who leave the Brethren it is inevitable.

One leaver received a letter from her family that confirms shunning is promoted by the Brethren:

The Brethren have concluded that you are now without hope, you are as dead to those that would have sought to help you.

“Janet”, 2015.

A leaver loses both tangible things as described above, and less tangible things such as their belief system, their world view, their identities, their role in society and what may scare them most, the loss of a heavenly eternal life.

Belief systems are transmitted from one generation to the next. In the Brethren, these beliefs are communicated not only through the families but more oppressively through their continual expression at the numerous daily meetings that all members, including children, are expected to attend.

For those who have been raised within one small social group, prevented from having friends outside and discouraged from having special friendships inside, the sudden loss of their social network can be devastating, especially as they may lack the skills to make new friends, as illustrated in the quote below. The difficulty of not being understood by those outside and the uncertainties surrounding employment combine to leave them feeling very isolated.

You lose our social network so completely it's like an amputation. Making new friends is hard because you don't have 'normal' social skills – even your language is a bit odd. ...You don't know how to find new friends let alone trust them when you do, you don't know the culture, can't fit in.... We are fundamentally social beings, and having no social support network makes an already hard situation almost intolerable.

'Mary', 2007

Many struggle with cognitive difficulties such as making decisions, learning to be critical independent thinkers, and changing dichotomous thinking (Mytton, 2013).

Ways of leaving

Individuals leave cultic groups in various ways including:

1. 'Walkaways' those who make their own decision to leave.
2. 'Castaways' those forced to leave due to some perceived and often minor transgression. Often castaways are unwilling to leave.
3. Schisms within the group can cause many to leave together, as happened in 1959-1960 and 1970.
4. 'Taken out' children and teenagers who leave when their parents choose to leave

One could conjecture that choosing and planning to leave would ameliorate the distress experienced. The 'castaways' might experience greater trauma; forced expulsion is seen as a severe sentence. Those who leave with their parents may struggle to understand why their structured world has suddenly vanished. In the 2013 study, 67% chose to leave and planned for it, 16% were forced out against their will and 18% said they left because their parents did. Interestingly, the statistical analysis found no significant differences between these three groups (Mytton, 2013).

Summary

The first four chapters of this thesis have placed this project in the personal and professional context. The journey has taken me from a position of knowing a little and wanting to know more, to one of knowing more and wanting to know even more. Such is the nature of inquiry. I have discovered much about the Exclusive Brethren, their revisionist doctrines and practices and how they influence and control their members. Their systems of influence and control are not unique, but mirror those used by most if not all cultic groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses or Scientology. For me, this knowledge and understanding forms the foundation of this inquiry. I am aware though

that the foundation may not be not as stable as a researcher would wish and that it continues to change. Even so, this level of understanding has taken me to a point where I feel ready to explore what it means to be raised in a cultic group and to leave. What can we learn from the stories of leavers that will help us understand their experiences better, and enable clinical practitioners to facilitate their recovery? I turn now to the methodology and method used in this narrative inquiry.

Chapter 5 Research methodology

If I have some doubt about where the Lord is in the testimony, some doubt about the truth of separation ...and our stand by the truth, that doubt could lead to a darkness, then the darkness overtakes you.

Fellowship Meeting, Barbados. Bruce Hales. July 27, 2012

The Exclusive Brethren believe they possess the absolute 'Truth'. Their ontological position is that God exists and demands separation from evil based on their fundamental belief in the inerrancy of the Bible. The similarities between the Brethren's epistemology and positivism are clear. Positivists believe human nature exists and can be measured objectively and accurately: the truth will be revealed through systematic study of the world. The Brethren too believe there is a reality, a truth out there, being revealed by their 'Man of God'. The disadvantage of both approaches is that they oversimplify the complexity of human experience, failing to acknowledge the subjective nature of autonomous human beings (Langdridge, 2004).

After leaving the Brethren, it took me decades to break free from this absolutist stance. It coloured my undergraduate studies of experimental psychology some 18 years after leaving – I believed the truth was out there and it would be possible for psychologists like me to discover it. This began to change when I embarked on a Master's degree in Counselling and carried out a quantitative study (Mytton, 1993). I noticed many of my participants were not content with ticking boxes: they wrote stories in the margins of the questionnaires. I drew on this unsolicited data in the discussion section of the dissertation and realised the quantitative findings did not provide information about the nature and complexity of the difficulties they were experiencing, nor did they tell me what it was like to be born and raised in the Brethren.

My current stance reached via many sources, modes of thinking and experiencing, is that there is no absolute truth, God does not necessarily exist and 'He' does not

demand separation from the world. I now take a constructionist-interpretive stance and this leads naturally to a qualitative methodology. Individuals are 'not passive phenomena waiting to be measured' (Langdridge, 2004:252) but are constantly experiencing change. This echoes my experiences. I now realise that as active agents we construct and reconstruct our social reality and experiences. I am curious about how meaning comes into existence, how it changes, evolves and is shaped. We continually re-story our pasts, changing the significance of events and discovering connections (Mischler, 1986). In this research therefore, I draw on social constructionism and critical realism.

The overarching research question addressed in this study can be framed as:
What can I learn from these stories narrated by former members of the Exclusive Brethren about what it is like to be born and raised in this group and subsequently leave?

Choice of Method

The method chosen depends on methodology which in turn is influenced by the epistemology of the researcher. Stebbins (2001:6) stated 'Researchers explore when they have little or no scientific knowledge about the group, process, or situation they want to examine but nevertheless have reason to believe it contains elements worth discovering'. This is an exploratory study and has been a journey of discovery allowing me to explore my curiosity about how my participants experienced the Brethren. Unlike my previous studies (Mytton, 1993, 2013), I have no hypotheses to test and so have chosen to use a qualitative approach, which is more suited to an investigation of subjective experience of the phenomenon in question (Langdridge, 2007).

Taking my research question into consideration, I focussed on approaches that emphasised meaning rather than language use (Langdridge & Hagger-Johnson 2009). I also wanted to preserve the integrity of the participants' stories and not fragment them using coding or thematic analysis. I therefore discounted Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I considered Heuristic Inquiry (Moustakis, 1990) which invites the telling of stories but intuitively felt this approach

was inappropriate. Moustakis developed this approach to explore the universal phenomenon of loneliness and then create a 'synthesis of essences and meanings' (Moustakis, 1990:33). Having read and heard many stories of former Brethren, I know their experiences are not homogeneous but are often vastly different depending on various factors including the ever-changing doctrines and practices of the Brethren. Their stories are idiosyncratic with possibly no universal phenomena to identify. To create a synthesis from all these stories seemed to discount the individual participant's narrative. I wanted a method that felt congruent with my own experiences of the therapeutic value of story-telling.

My journey towards narrative inquiry began at a Masterclass given by Darren Langdridge on Critical Narrative Analysis at Metanoia. I experienced an emotional epiphany and intuitively felt this method would be more congruent with my thoughts. However, on talking with Langdridge, we decided the word limit would make this difficult to achieve but that some form of narrative analysis would work. I later attended a workshop run by Brett Smith and Andrew Sparkes on Dialogical Narrative Analysis. This approach provides guidelines to follow thus giving me a sense of security. However, as I researched further, I found the approach complicated and prescriptive. My final choice is informed by both Landridge's critical narrative analysis (Langdridge, 2007) and Smith and Sparkes (2006, 2008) accounts of dialogical narrative analysis, but follows the narrative approach used by Etherington (2004:75) which is based on 'collecting, analyzing, and re-presenting people's stories as told by them'. Using this method the stories would not be fragmented: I could enter into a dialogue with them.

Narrative Inquiry

.. a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.

Jean-Paul Sartre, 1970:39

The telling of life stories has a long history and is a cultural universal (McAdams, 1993). Stories have many functions, including the validation and transmission of a culture's

morals and values; they educate and entertain (McAdams, 1993). Stories serve to bind us together as family and cultural histories are passed down and they facilitate close social relationships. Stories raise awareness (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013): they often mobilise listeners into action for social change. Stories are less about facts and more about meanings (McAdams, 1993). Perhaps above all, it is through narrative that we make sense of our lives; stories are central to meaning-making. As Polkinghorne states (1988:11): 'Narrative...provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful.' Bruner (1990) views narrative as constitutive of the self, a point I pick up in chapter seven.

Over the last 20 years the narrative approach to research, arising mainly in sociology and social anthropology (Langdrige, 2004), has become interdisciplinary (Landridge & Hagger-Johnson, 2009). It is concerned with human experience as expressed in stories. In addition to events, stories include thoughts, feelings and interpretations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013). Life-story researchers focus on longer narratives about specific aspects of a life, as in this research. Narrative inquiry is underpinned by constructivist and constructionist epistemologies. It is ideal for exploring experiences within a socio-cultural context. It takes account of how knowledge and power impact on individuals.

The term 'narrative analysis' covers a variety of methods (Langdrige, 2004; Mischler, 1986). These range from the simple chronological account, with little analysis or interpretation, to a full critical analysis of the meanings and structures in the narratives. Some researchers focus on aspects such as the plot, narrative coherence, use of metaphor and language used (Langdrige, 2004). Others use systematic approaches to the analysis, such as thematic analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and phenomenological psychology. However, since these analytical methods can fragment the stories (Langdrige, 2004; Riessman, 1993) I have chosen to use the narrative method of re-presenting the stories (Etherington, 2007a) followed by a viewing of the stories through various theoretical lenses.

Study Design

Selection of contributors/participants

Due to the ever-changing doctrines and practices of the Brethren, I wondered how similar the stories of people from different eras would be. From my lived experience of this group, I thought I might find underlying connections across the narratives. I decided not to restrict selection to variables such as age, date of leaving or gender, but to take a pragmatic rather than formal approach to recruitment. No attempt was made to obtain a representative sample.

Four criteria were set. Participants should have:

1. Been born and raised in the Exclusive Brethren
2. Left the group and have no intention of returning.
3. Acquired the capacity to make an informed decision about taking part in the research.
4. The competence to consent, which excluded children as well as adults with severe impairment in understanding or communication.

Participants were invited to take part in this research via personal contacts, Feeb and social media.

The table summarises the contributors and includes myself for comparison. To protect participants, date of birth is approximated and names have been changed.

Table of Participants

Name	Date of interview	Date birth	Date left	Country raised in	Country now
Bryanie	2016	Late 1960s	1987	Australia	UK
Darren	2011	Late 1970s	2008	UK	Canada
David	2011	Early 1970s	2007	UK	UK

Ian	2011	Mid 1940s	1969	UK	UK
Rachel	2016	Mid 1940s	1980	Australia	Australia
Sally	2011	Late 1970s	1997	South Africa	UK
Jill	2010	Mid 1940s	1960	UK	UK

Influences on the narrative

A range of factors may influence aspects of the story telling and its analysis. One challenge for researchers is to examine how the life story or narrative is created in the interview (Smith et al., 1995). No story is just a story; it is created within a series of social domains surrounding the story-teller, the researcher, and their interaction. Smith et al. (1995) list three domains that may ensure rigorous analysis.

1. The Narrators

Narrators may wish to present a false front to hide aspects of their stories, perhaps because they are embarrassed or ashamed. They may wish to convince the researcher how well they are faring or conversely how terrible it all was. They may attempt to create a coherent integrated story by rehearsing it before the interview.

Smith et al. (1995:57) provide a list of questions to dialogue with the story, including:

- Has there been any evasion?
- Is a 'front' being presented'?
- What may the informant 'take for granted' and hence not reveal?
- How far is the informant 'pleasing you'?
- How much has been forgotten?
- How much may be self-deception

I considered these questions when writing the representations. Of particular relevance was how much informants may take for granted. They knew I too was a former member so did they skate over some issues thinking 'she already knows that'?

2. The Researcher

Researchers may hold prejudices and assumptions that drive the questioning. Even in unstructured interviewing the researcher may convey assumptions about what they want the narrator to demonstrate. In this study, knowing my background was similar to theirs and with the charity commission issue looming, I considered whether they emphasised the more harmful aspects. Or did they hold back from issues they thought I might judge them for or that they felt embarrassed to reveal, such as child sexual abuse?

The stories were analysed through my eyes so collaboration with the story-tellers seemed to me essential. As Hyaggman-Laitila (1999) suggests:

The research process is a balanced cooperative relationship between the subjects and the researcher. Generating knowledge about an individual experiential world is based on both the subjects' self-knowledge and the researchers' ability to overcome his point of view and to understand another person. And understanding requires interpretation.

Some qualitative writers advocate the researcher should bracket off their own experiences to avoid contamination or bias, and approach the research question without any assumptions or presuppositions that might bias the data. This idea has been rigorously debated; it is questionable whether it is even possible (Langdrige, 2004, 2008). Hyaggman-Liatila (1999) state that researchers cannot detach from their own views so any interpretations are inevitably based on their existing understandings.

My understanding of more recent decades of Brethren practices was limited. Throughout this research, I have discussed these with other former members and was often surprised by what they said. These discussions helped me become aware of the intrusion of my own beliefs, thoughts and feelings about the participants' experiences.

3. The Interaction

The final domain is the interaction between my participants and myself. Has bias resulted from any of the following (Smith et al., 1995:57):

- The physical setting – ‘social space’.
- The prior interaction.
- Non-verbal communication.
- Vocal behaviour.

I had had prior interaction with all the participants, something I reflect on in chapter seven. Throughout the interviews and analysis, I have considered all these factors.

Ethical issues

Research with human participants requires the investigator to consider ethical issues very carefully, particularly in narrative research where the participants are entrusting the researcher with their life stories. The British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2014), to which I adhere, lists four principles: respect for the autonomy and dignity of person; scientific value; social responsibility; and maximising benefit and minimising harm. This code states: ‘Good psychological research is only possible if there is mutual respect and trust between investigators and participants’ (p4). This trust can only be built up in the context of ethical behaviour on the part of the investigator.

Psychologists value the dignity of and worth of all persons equally, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over others and with particular regard to people’s rights including those of privacy and self-determination.

(The British Psychological Society, 2014:8)

The issue of ‘perceived authority’ is of particular relevance to the Brethren. Their leaders occupy powerful positions and the almost automatic acquiescence by the members to their directives⁶ can linger long after the individual has left. Former members continue to be easily influenced. They also fear that if they speak out, relatives still in the group will suffer, and any contact they still have with them will be

terminated. The issues of anonymity, confidentiality, and respect for their knowledge, insight, experience and expertise are crucial.

Participants were given clear information about anonymity and confidentiality. Narrative is 'saturated with identifying markers' (McLeod, 1996:311); it can be very difficult to disguise the participants' identity. Readers of a published work may recognise the participants. With a small group like the Brethren this increases this likelihood. The representations were sent to the participants with an invitation to request that identifying markers were removed. However, no one requested I remove anything from the representations.

The BPS code (2014) states that even if the participant is not troubled by potential loss of confidentiality, we must ensure their data cannot be traced back to them. The code adds, however, that if a participant wants to have their voice heard, we should respect this wish. My concern is that while they give permission at the time, they might regret this action later. I therefore decided to change the names, with the participants' permission apart from Ian who expressly wished to have his name used.

Josselson (1996:70) makes an important point.

My guilt, I think, comes from my knowledge that I have taken myself out of relationship with my participants (with whom during the interview I was in intimate relationship) to be in relationship with my readers. I have, in a sense, been talking about them behind their backs... Where in the interview I had been responsive to them, now I am using their lives in the service of something else, for my own purposes, to show something to others. I am guilty about being an intruder, and then, to some extent, a betrayer.

Her words may appear strong, but for these participants, who have been betrayed by the people they were raised to trust, it is my responsibility not to let them down. I ensured that my participants realised I will be talking both to them in the interview and later to my readers. All participants were sent their representation for comment and were invited to collaborate in the construction. Some made more use of this opportunity than others.

The phrase 'informed consent' is problematic in qualitative research, as what happens in an interview depends on factors that cannot be controlled. What emerges might be distressing for the participant and trigger traumatic memories. As Lieblich (1996:177) relates when she asked her participants to describe their lives in a kibbutz, 'I seemed to open Pandora's box'.

Narrative inquiry brings additional ethical considerations, including the question of narrative ownership (Smythe & Murray, 2000). The participants have a considerable investment in their stories; I have the ethical duty to do justice to their narratives and ensure they have considered the fact that their stories, even though disguised and re-presented, will be in the public domain. Telling our life story is an unfolding process and we cannot know what the results will be (Smythe & Murray, 2000). The usual one-off informed consent form is inadequate to cover this evolving process. Process consent is essential (McLeod, 1996). Issues of consent, confidentiality and anonymity were discussed repeatedly.

The BPS code (2014) states that poorly designed and/or poorly conducted research devalues the contribution of the participants. The participants need to know their contribution is valued and will be used to benefit others. To ensure the scientific integrity of this research, the Metanoia Research Ethics Committee (scrutinised by Middlesex University) considered and approved the proposal (Appendix Nine). At all times the research was supervised by competent researchers in the field.

As a counselling psychologist, the principle of maximising benefit and minimising harm is important to me. There is a difference in power between myself and my participants. I was mindful of the possibility of distress as participants recalled episodes from their past; I was ready to offer to stop the interview should the need arise. After each interview I encouraged the participant to contact me if they wished to share any further reflections, to talk about their experiences of the interview, and to ask for professional help if needed. None of the participants asked for any support and none have sought it elsewhere to my knowledge.

With narrative approaches the need to minimise harm goes further than this. The representations may be taken as authoritative accounts which impact on the individual's understanding of their experience. Encouraging the participants to collaborate in the representations will hopefully enable them to own the accounts. I have taken a collaborative approach to minimise the intrusion and possible damaging impact of the analyses.

As I knew I would be using the material in conference and journal papers as well as in this thesis, the participants were and, in future, will be sent anything I want to use for their feedback and comment. For confidentiality reasons, all interview recordings and transcripts, and all other documentation, are stored on a password-protected drive.

The ethical guidelines around research were reviewed and the ethics release form completed. The letter sent to participants outlining the purpose of the research, their rights to withdraw at any time and support available is in Appendix Nine with the consent form.

Collection of stories

Unstructured interviews were used to obtain the participants' stories. This was based on my thinking that uninterrupted stories allow participants to develop their narratives in whatever way feels important to them (Bryman, 2004; Frost, 2011). Semi-structured interviews can lead participants to limit their answers to short statements instead of a free-flowing narrative (Mischler, 1986). My goal was to generate detailed accounts rather than disjointed stories (Riessman, 2008).

As unstructured interviewing is non-directive, this helps control researcher bias or any distortion of the more sensational episodes (Smith et al., 1995). It empowers the participant, as they are more in control of what they want to share (Frost, 2011). This can lead to rambling and side-tracking by the participant; however, the payoff is that the rambling can be of interest as well as raise questions such as why the participant needed to go off on a tangent.

No interview can be entirely unstructured, as in initiating an interview the researcher is already determining the nature of the event (Collins, 1998). By staying in the background during the interview, the researcher gives the participant 'permission to speak' (Langdrige, 2009); of particular importance to this group. Langdrige (2009) also suggests that more than one interview may be necessary. However, this was beyond the scope of this word-limited research. For one participant, Darren, two interviews were scheduled as explained in Chapter Six.

During the interviews, I was aware that as I shared the experiences of my participants, and they knew me and my work, this could influence the content and process of the interview. I took a nondirective, non-judgmental, phenomenological stance. The quality of the relationship between researcher and participant is central here (Elliott, 2005). My role was that of an interested, attentive, empathic listener to the narrator rather than interviewer of an interviewee; but also ready to question and clarify (Langdrige, 2004) and to encourage the narrator to explore memories and deeper understandings of their experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).

The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 hours; all were carried out using Skype. They were recorded in two ways: a digital voice recorder, and Call Recorder, which records the Skype session in video form.

The stories generated through these interviews were supplemented by discussions on:

- The Feeb email group.
- Facebook groups set up by former Brethren for former members.
- Internet forums for former members.

Procedures

Some qualitative approaches provide steps for the researcher to follow but I believe this can move the analysis away from a phenomenological stance. Another approach is to use a set of guidelines, a heuristic guide. These encourage freedom of thought and imagination. The lack of a prescribed and linear procedure in narrative analysis can lead the researcher to feel self-doubt, bewilderment, lack of confidence or anxiety

(Smith, 2016). I experienced all of these; at times it felt overwhelming. Yet narrative analysis can also be very rewarding. It is a craft requiring practical wisdom or phronesis (Smith, 2016). I realised I would need to set aside the pure scientist in me and embrace this artistic creativity. I also realised I needed to reflect on my own experiences and at times this proved too much and breaks from the work became essential.

The narratives were gathered and analysed using the following guidelines.

1. Before each interview, I emailed an outline of the research rationale and process and the information sheet. Contact details were kept separate from the transcripts. Participants were informed they could withdraw at any time, something that was repeated as part of the process consent (Josselson, 1996; McCleod, 2001).
2. The interviews began with an opportunity for the participants to ask questions and discuss ethical issues of consent and confidentiality.
3. Participants were invited to tell their stories with this statement:
'Tell me the story of your life as it relates to being brought up in and leaving the Brethren'.
When participants found this daunting, I encouraged them to think of their lives as if they were a book, as Langdrige (2009) suggests. The book is unfinished but it already contains some interesting chapters which they could talk about.
4. The initial transcription was performed by a professional transcriber (with the participants' consent). Although transcription is often regarded as the first part of the analysis process aiding familiarity with the material (Frost, 2011, Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2009), it is a time-consuming activity that can lead to frustration not familiarity (Etherington, 2004). I found it more useful to edit the professional transcriptions, making corrections and adding non-verbal messages such as facial gestures, crying, and laughing. Like any other representation, a transcription is incomplete, partial and selective (Riessman,

2008; Willig, 2001). Data is reduced but I attempted to keep this to a minimum staying as close to the participants' speech as possible. (Langdrige, 2007).

5. The transcripts were sent to the contributors for comments and corrections.
6. Smith (2016) advocates writing throughout this process of analysis. The process of writing helped me think through my ideas, discover new insights, and integrate the new knowledge.
7. The process of familiarisation with the stories began with the transcription corrections and note-taking. I read the stories several more times, a process of indwelling, (Maykut & Moorhouse, 1994) giving me a feel for the story and acquiring an empathic understanding of each one.
8. In the analysis stage, each interview was written up creating a re-presentation of the story in which I gave primacy to the voice of the storyteller. This method has been used by other narrative researchers (e.g. Etherington, 2007a; Martin, 2008). I considered what narrative resources each person was drawing on and how they were portraying their identity: 'Who is this person and what kind of person does this narrative construct?' (Langdrige, 2007:138). I reflected on how the story resonated with me and commented on this without foregrounding my story.
9. The re-presentations were sent to each participant for comment. Was there anything I had over-emphasised or left out? Was the representation of their story fair and balanced?
10. The first four participants were interviewed in 2011. The process was interrupted by my mother's death and the Charity Commission action. When I restarted in 2015, I sent the initial four participants a follow-up letter, inviting them to tell me anything they wanted about the interview and their life since (Appendix 12).

11. Having created representations for all the participants, I stepped back to consider the over-arching issues or connections. I made notes to help identify communalities and differences. I then viewed the stories through various theoretical lenses.

Research journal and Field Notes

Several writers recommend using a research journal (e.g. Frost, 2011; Silverman, 2011) to record how the research was carried out, including aspects that can be forgotten when the work spans a few years, like mine. I am not naturally a journal-writer, so my notes were made on scraps of paper or in note books. I made some records on a research blog but stopped when this was used by the Brethren's lawyers and misinterpreted. I have kept a record of key experiences; of my thoughts and feelings about the interviews which are separate from those arising from my participants' accounts; of my moments of realisation; and to aid reflexivity.

Validity and reliability

Traditional criteria used for quantitative research such as internal/external validity and reliability are largely inappropriate for qualitative research. However, qualitative methodologies do engage with these concerns, particularly validity. Validity addresses the question: 'To what extent can we ensure that our data collection and analysis really address the question we want to answer?' (Willig, 2008:16). Does the research describe and explain what it aims to describe and explain?

Willig (2008) suggests three ways qualitative researchers can address concerns about validity:

1. Participant validity. Data collection needs to ensure that participants feel free to challenge and correct any assumptions made about their narrative. I met this requirement by encouraging participants to collaborate with the representations.

2. Ecological validity. Often data collection takes place in real-life settings, which means there is no need to extrapolate from artificial settings. This requirement was also met, since all participants were in their own homes when interviewed.

3. Reflexivity. This helps ensure researchers are not imposing their own meanings on the data. I have aspired to be transparent and open about my role throughout this research.

Qualitative researchers are less concerned about reliability because qualitative methodologies explore a particular phenomenon in detail. There is disagreement among qualitative researchers on this point. If the research is fully reliable, the same data analysed by different researchers will generate the same results. The use of supervision and critical friends to read and challenge findings helped ensure adequate reliability.

Legal considerations

When the learning agreement (research proposal) was originally submitted, I was working at London Metropolitan University. The university lawyers who were aware that the Brethren are litigious, were asked whether confidentiality can be maintained in the event of law suits. They had approved the conference papers I had given and assured me that any legal action would be handled by the university. Their statement is provided in Appendix 10.

Now that I am retired, I no longer have legal back-up from any university. However, when I received the first letter from the Brethren's lawyers hired in October 2012, I consulted my Professional Liability Insurers. They advised me that my insurance level was adequate to cover any action resulting from a lawsuit.

Limitations

Research, whether quantitative or qualitative, inevitably has limitations. Here the small sample was self-selected and cannot be viewed as representative of the whole

population of former members of the Brethren. No attempt was made to gather a representative sample. Phenomenological narrative research seeks rich descriptions rather than decisions about the influence of a particular variable, group differences or relationships between variables. Any interpretive qualitative approach makes weaker claims than quantitative approaches. Qualitative research is intensive and does not look for 'universal' laws.

Chapter 6 Representations of the Narratives

Introduction

My aim in this chapter is to convey a sense of the six personal, idiosyncratic leavers' stories to enable the reader to gain a more intimate knowledge of the experiences of being born and raised in a cultic group. I have attempted to preserve the integrity of the stories by using the person's own words or by close paraphrasing. This approach to narrative analysis treats the stories as knowledge that constitutes the 'social reality of the narrator' (Etherington, 2004:81). I invite the reader to 'think with stories' rather than 'think about them' (Frank, 2013:23), as I have attempted to do when creating these representations. To 'think with' is to experience the story and to think about how it is affecting one's own life. It is to see the stories, not as 'data' to support proposals I make, but to think with them, shaping our perceptions of experience (Frank, 2013).

While giving primacy to the voices of the storytellers, it is I who have created these representations. I made the decisions on what to include or omit. To return ownership to the participants, I sent the representations to them, inviting comments on my choices and on my reflections. I have reflexively referred to my own experiences, bringing my expert-through-experience knowledge to the stories, while taking care that my story did not take centre stage. Unlike with some narrative paradigms, I do not see these stories as windows on to a knowable reality; rather I see them as constructions of knowledge.

I knew all but one of the participants before interviewing them. Ian, Darren, Bryanie and Sally are or have been members of Feeb. I had met David before he left, as described below. I had 'met' Rachel on Facebook but had had little contact. I wondered how these dual relationships would impact on the interviews and whether the storytellers would hold back from telling me very personal things about their lives.

After each interview, I reflected on the experience and wrote notes; my reflections following Darren's interview are in Appendix 11.

The representations are laid out with the storytellers' words formatted to the right of the page and in italic font with my reflections formatted to the left and in comic sans font. The presence of three dots in the excerpts indicates some text has been removed; more than three dots indicate pauses.

Bryanie

Born late 1960s in Australia, left 1987.

Bryanie's narrative was told mostly in chronological order and contained several illustrative vignettes. These were often connected by themes she assigned such as 'isolating', 'disconnectedness' 'flawed', 'other' and 'difference'.

She began her story by telling me that only recently has she found her voice, nearly 30 years since leaving. *"When I started therapy ...14 months ago, I actually couldn't articulate"*, which reminded me of my first session with a therapist.

I just remember a kind of mesh of feelings and thoughts. ...I have a few stories but most of them, I've forgotten because that's what you do.

I smiled inwardly because I too only remember a "kind of mesh of feelings and thoughts" and it was strangely reassuring to hear this.

Bryanie's parents were first generation, having converted into the Brethren as adults. Her father was evacuated as a child to Canada during World War II and thus separated from his family. Returning to the UK at the end of the war was difficult: his family were strangers. After obtaining a degree in agriculture he went to Australia with the dream of becoming a cowboy. During the voyage he met a Brother from the Exclusive Brethren. When his attempts to become a £10 "Pommie Jackaroo" failed he reconnected with this Brother and joined the Brethren, where he met a woman who had also recently joined. They married and Bryanie was the fifth of their six children.

...both of them were fairly isolated and very much disconnected in so many ways. And as a family, that's what it felt like because we were first generation, we were so estranged and did not have that historical social bank and resource behind us ...and I say that emotionally and theologically. My parents were always new, for want of a better description ...and we, as a family were, felt quite that we were blow-ins anyway. You know, just these things that had tumbled into the Brethren.

The words 'blow-in' and 'tumbled' seemed to emphasise her sense of disconnection. Bryanie's comment about not having an historical social bank caught my attention. I realised that not all former members were born into a family with a long generational history like mine.

Continuing the theme of being other and not fitting in, Bryanie talked about her non-brethren relatives in the UK and how curious she was about them. She proudly told me her paternal grandfather "*was a Don at Oxford you know*" and that these relatives, whom she had not known, were "*hugely interesting people who obviously could think critically*" – with the implication this was different from her own experiences.

Despite her comment about having only a "*few stories*", her narrative contains several stories about her father. His mental illness required several spells of in-patient treatment. This added to her sense of otherness, since mental illness "*within the Brethren it was just an ostracising thing*". Another contributing factor to feeling 'other' was that the family were poor. These experiences were isolating, not helped by "*almost bullying*" by other children.

As I heard her reflect on her otherness, not fitting in, my own memories of feeling alienated came into my mind. My experiences were very different, my parents were third and fourth generation, neither were mentally ill, we were not poor and I was not bullied at school. Yet I identified with her feelings of being 'other'.

As her two older brothers reached their teens, they began to do things the Brethren would disapprove of, so they were 'shut up'^G on several occasions. Symington, the leader at that time, ruled that anyone who was 'shut up' had to be kept separate from the rest of the family to avoid corruption and contamination. As the boys were still under age, Bryanie's mother was told to keep them at home while Bryanie and the rest

of her siblings were farmed out to other Brethren families; they were not always kept together.

Her stories of being fostered out so many times surprised me. How damaging was this I wondered.

Once again, that sense of isolation and just being put with people, you know, I personally as an adult question whether it's even legal ...um...that idea of unofficial fostering ...that occurred several times.

As she spoke of this sense of otherness, she gestured behind her head, saying: *"It just festered in the back of my mind"*. She said she never felt the *"divine connection that was preached about"*.

...this lack of understanding within myself, this sense of a flawed being because I didn't feel God's love. I just felt pissed off, abandoned, confused ...I started really ..um.....[deep sigh]. I just couldn't be good enough. It was frightening. I just couldn't be good enough, it didn't matter. This sense of self-doubt and shame and guilt within me was just so deep and solid by the time I was you know, 11 or 12 years old.

At the end of each day she would reflect on the transgressions she had committed and would end up *"just terrifying myself with the fear of hell and damnation"*.

I identified strongly with her thoughts and feelings. I reflected on the positions that the Brethren narratives were imposing on us, the narratives of worthlessness, sinfulness, wickedness, destined for eternal fire. As children we could not resist these identities; we were not even aware resisting was an option.

Around the age of 12 she began not sleeping, having nightmares and becoming very stressed. By 14 she realised she had two choices: *"I had to leave the Brethren, or I had to go mad"*. Having seen her father's journey with 'madness', that was *"just too terrifying"*.

So, I just dissociated - to go... to sleep at night. And I do thisit was something on the right-hand side of my head about a foot away from my head [indicating with her right hand] that there was a black sheet, and that was what I focused on. And that stopped any thought entering my mind because if a thought entered my mind, it would go down a journey that would eventually lead to me being eternally tortured. So, this black sheet would help me to totally control my mind and prevent thoughts from building up.

For the next three years she continued to feel haunted.

I had that realisation that I'd have to go. I was so terrified of that realisation that I had to really come to terms within myself that my destiny was going to be hell. And in fact, the sense of going mad was so profound that I clearly had to make that choice. And I remember making it and saying well, you know, I can't do this anymore. Hell is my destiny but I'm alive now. I've got at least another 70 years. I'm in control of that. I'm going to manage that and hell can be my destiny. ...So why have this torturous existence and end up in hell.

And considering how it [hell] really was such a ...tangible place. There's nothing metaphorical about it. It was real and its essence is real.

A critical event when she was 17 led to her finally leaving. Her Brethren boss groped her and she immediately handed in her notice. A customer while collecting some business cards for the Moonies had spoken to Bryanie, telling her to call if she needed help. One day, wearing several layers of clothing, she caught a bus into the city centre and sent a telegram to her mother saying: "I have left the Brethren. I am okay. I love you all lots". She rang the woman from the Moonies and with her support found a job and a flat.

She now felt very isolated. She recounted how, having lost the boundaries created by the Brethren and her family, she became promiscuous and drank too much and was

...incredibly vulnerable and incredibly fortunate to have survived as well as I did.

She described how her mother tracked her down and told her to go to her sister's house to meet the family. Reluctantly she agreed to go after the Moonies said they would follow her. The Moonies gave her mother an ultimatum: if Bryanie did not come out after an hour, they would call the police.

But that was the toughest hour really of my life, because I was in my sister's house. Her husband was there... My mother and my father and we were sitting around their lounge and they were talking, they were kind of persuading me not to do what I had to do and I just couldn't speak. I couldn't articulate. ...I just knew that if I gave one utterance, I'd be gone, it would have been too much for a crack.

By a “crack” she seemed to mean a crack in her defences, because she went on to say...

I would have given them something and they then would have just fed on it, and festered on it. And that just would have been too much.

Her mother told her the stress could cause her sister to miscarry and this would be her fault. Her brother-in-law spoke to her too.

...it was that kind of preachy being aware of eternal damnation, that being aware of God's love and Jesus's love would be able to hold me and turn this around me. I just had to trust...

Her two-year-old nephew said: “Aunty Bryanie you are bad”.

My father sat and just wept.

She left without responding and did not see her parents again. Her father died about 13 years later. Bryanie ‘knew’ her decision would not only take her to hell, but would sever all the ties she ever had. In an email she sent to me before the interview, she told me she did not miss her family, apart from her sister.

...who was my rock and constant in the turbulence. I like to imagine the great times in my life would be even more spectacular if she had been beside me and that some of the darker moments wouldn't have been quite so bad.

She found the short time with the Moonies relaxing; being with a group felt familiar. Some of the women ran insight development courses which she attended. The Moonies’ communal life style created a transitional safe space. About six months after she left, a man knocked on her door telling her the world was going to end in six weeks. By then she was working in a florist’s shop owned by Jane, someone she had met on a personal development training course. They became lifelong friends. The preacher’s words triggered a reaction.

...which just totally put the shits up me. So, I went into work and I told Jane that I was going to quit. I had to quit, I had to go back.

Jane responded by asking Bryanie to mind the shop for an hour. Then Bryanie received a telephone call telling her an anonymous donor had paid for her to attend the next insight course. Many years later, Bryanie learned that in fact it was Jane who had arranged this. This act of kindness prevented Bryanie from going back to the Brethren.

Bryanie: It's almost like a fairy tale land throughout my narrative where these people have just come.....

Jill: At the right moment.

Bryanie: Yeah it's just those little bits of serendipity that are kind of little bits of coincidence that I was able to grab or respond to, the goodness of people.

Her paternal grandmother in England, who had never been in the Brethren, sent her some money which Bryanie spent on going to live with her. This grandmother had visited the family in Australia a few times.

...which must have been hugely difficult for her because she experienced separation in all its righteousness. ...I think what those visits gave me was a sense that there were 'bits of me' outside the Brethren.

...this woman had an understanding of me, she had a connection with me, but she knew nothing of the turmoil, the challenge, the conflict....

She met other relatives in the UK whom she described as “lovely and very kind and very nice and celebratory of my strength”. But she suspected they had no real understanding of what she had been through.

About five years after she left, she completed a BSc. in Psychology – and in that time, she said, she grew up and became an adult. Later she met her future husband and they married after eighteen months together. They decided to try living in Australia, where she studied for a BEd. After a few years they left Australia as the politics did not agree with them and they found suburbia very cliquy. She found a teaching job in Kuwait and they moved there.

This part of her story, and their move to the UK five years later because of the imminent war in the Middle East, felt dead to me; I could not connect with it. It felt as if the time in Kuwait was a disconnected narrative. I asked whether the Brethren

background was still with her while she was there. She replied, laughing, that it was “*put behind the black sheet*”, adding: “*I am the master of dissociation, Jill*”.

They returned to England in 2007. She said she was becoming very agnostic, but she “*didn’t have the ability to share that voice with anyone*”. She described how she gradually transitioned to a new identity. She described how the www.peebs.net¹ website created conflict within her, a mixture of curiosity and reluctance to engage. Curiosity won and she found it “*hugely helpful*”.

Towards the end of the interview we talked about conversations at home when she was a child, largely around things happening to the Brethren: “*The degree of terror or shock at the most recent person who had been withdrawn from or shut out*”. She does not remember any conversations “*being about anything that didn’t meander back or was tangibly linked to reinforcing the indoctrination*”. She suggested this was because her parents were “*blow-ins*” and this could have been part of their drive to understand the Brethren history and beliefs.

She described how she talked to the school counsellor because she felt terrified and could not sleep. Back home, as the counsellor had suggested, she shared these thoughts with her parents. She found that feelings, intentions, hopes, and desires were not topics to be discussed at any time.

I think my father....I remember him going to Isaiah to read a scripture for me, which was a totally bizarre response to a teenage child who was in absolute crisis

She described leaving as being about survival.

You'd lost all your structures for survival, housing, food, water. Everything was gone. I had to find a job really quickly. And I was fortunate that I did.... it was basic survival that was the absolute key..... Yet, at the same time, it was balancing that up against this overwhelming desire to self-destruct and drink too much and go out partying too much. And just be totally unregulated and unrestrained ...also this whole ...fear of what the hell have I done.

I wondered what made her decide recently to go for therapy. She told a story about a former student of hers who had joined ISIS, which made her “*black sheet wobble. It made everything wobbly. It resonated on so many levels*”. Realising that she needed to get help or reconstruct her black sheet, she chose the former. Therapy has helped her find her voice. She referred to the ease of talking with me.

...what's very comforting about this conversation is the fact that I know you know. I don't have to necessarily explain theological positions to you that I don't agree with, whereas with my counsellor I do.

I asked her if there was anything on her mind before we finished. She told me that she still struggles with being “*good enough*”. She was concerned as to whether what she had told me would be good enough for my doctorate.

She returned to her former student and other memory triggers of distressing events.

And I think they are almost like an eternal mystery because you didn't even know it was going to trigger you. But then, it does.

But for most of us, it's a bruising. It's something that we are dealing with and we're trying to reconcile and trying to heal in our own ways. And I think that's ...for so many reasons because it was so consuming, wasn't it?

Irrespective of how we left or where we left, when we left, those points of consumption were right there, were just absorbing our essence. It's almost like the Harry Potter dementers, you know. Just coming and sucking all that creativity and joy out. That's my final word, dementers. (Laughter)

After the interview, she kept in touch. She was keen to keep the conversation going and we discussed attachment, in particular disorganised attachment, something that really resonated for her.

Darren

Born late 1970s in the UK, left in 2008

Darren and I first met at a former Brethren social gathering² shortly after he left the Brethren in 2008. Both of his parents were raised in the Brethren, as were his maternal grandparents; he is therefore a MGA. At the time of the interview Darren was in his

early 30s. After one and a half hours we decided to schedule a second session to complete his story.

He recounted his story in some detail, with many illustrative vignettes, held together by the overall narrative that progressed from his early memories to recent times. He drew my attention to the inner conflicts he faced and his sense of lack of choice and control, as illustrated by phrases such as “*released back*”, “*allowed to*” and “*rigidly enforced*”. His story helped me to understand the extreme difficulties he faced, such as being under ‘assembly discipline’⁶ and how that impacted on his life.

When Darren was about 18 months old, his parents were put under “*assembly discipline*” which lasted six years. His parents desperately wanted to be fully reinstated in the Brethren so they behaved in ways they believed would bring this about.

They rigidly enforced that I kept what they call “separation” – in other words I didn’t eat with other students, non-Brethren or Brethren. They also saw to it that I was removed from school assemblies ...they did let me go off site for some visits [school trips], but they wouldn’t let that happen too often, because of the problem of ...having to eat with the other students.

This story surprised me: I had not known that families or individuals could be ‘shut up’⁶ for so long. I felt Darren’s isolation from all children. I had also felt isolated at school but his experiences felt more absolute.

He sounded bewildered as he talked perhaps still trying to make sense of his parents’ behaviour.

...they were doing all this, what I regarded as sacrificial stuff...We were very isolated, because we got very few visits from priestly persons in the Brethren during that time. We had no social life to speak of [laugh]. ...I was like, “What is all this sacrifice about ...if it doesn’t result in anything”.

He went back to the time before they were ‘shut up’ when he was about 18 months old recalling an incident relating to being ‘in fellowship’.

...it’s normal to start the younger children on the wine as soon as they are able to swallow and keep solid food down. ...the directive was ...as soon as they can say “no”, then they are old enough to take part.... But with me, I don’t recall

that too much, except one occasion when I was violently sick after having the wine.

In my time, teenagers were pressured to ask to 'break bread' and for me this was a distressing ordeal. At the age of 13, I called my father into my room and, sobbing, told him I wanted to ask to break bread. I felt terrified that if I didn't ask, the eternal fire and damnation preached so vehemently in the gospel that evening would be my lot. Years later my father told me he was worried by my fear and distress as he thought I should be happy to have committed myself. Darren's membership of the Brethren was assumed; mine had to be fought for.

Eventually the family were "released to come back" when Darren was seven or eight. He had "missed out on a lot of doctrine" and "found the meetings very boring". He struggled to understand "why they seemed to be such abstract wordy concepts" and could not "get to the essence of what they were talking about".

His next vignette drew attention to his sense of alienation that continued despite their return to the Brethren. Some of the Brethren children invited him to join them in play.

...and I was like well, what do you play at, because I was used to playing on my scooter in the street, and things like that. I wasn't used to "playing meetings" with other kids...a very popular game at that time. I had no idea what they were doing.

When he was about 14 he was faced with what the Brethren call 'breaking through'.

...you're breaking through the fear of getting up in front of between 20 and 50 people, ...to say something to a God that you might not even believe in, which was to me a very big conflict ...I can remember particularly ...the Prayer Meetingsgenerally there's an unwritten rule that the younger ones go first. ...Then at the end before the hymn, there'd be a long, long silence, and lots of pointed looks at the microphone stand, ...on one occasion when my uncle was there, he literally passed the mike to me, 'cos that's a way that they often got people to take part ...a forcible push in the deep end. I remember being absolutely traumatised by that. I'd be shaking when I got home.

The other children of his age had already gone through this rite of passage. At his age there was no excuse not to take part, he was criticized and called "mentally unstable" and "morally weak".

Darren referred to an internal conflict many times. He was a young boy living in a strict rigid family environment influenced by the power of the Brethren system. His relationships with others were very limited. Relationships with non-Brethren children were not allowed even when the family were under 'assembly discipline', and relationships with Brethren children were difficult; he felt he did not fit in. He had older brothers but his relationships with them were broken when they were 'shut up' for some misdemeanours.

Darren told a poignant story of an important friendship with a Brethren girl.

...we were good friends at school...we had to sit out of assembly together, and not take part in some activities. ...occasionally we did a bit of "show and tell" because we were left alone in the classroom together, and it was of a sexual nature. One day, the teacher found us doing that, and she reported it to our parents, and the reaction from both my parents and from hers was what I regard beyond, um, well it was beyond what you'd normally expect.

He described how his father in his opinion over-reacted.

...my father was taking it one step way further, [laugh] to say it was absolute wickedness, and that was the way the devil entrapped people in the world. ...I remember the absolute terror that my Dad put into me.

After this incident Darren "was always scared to get too close to somebody else" and developed "this internal belief that all women were innately dangerous; they could all lead me astray; they could all entrap me". And he learned "You can never show an emotion that could be construed as having feelings for somebody".

At the age of 11 he began to realise he could not fully enter the Brethren world and that one day he would leave.

...I also took good note of the doom and gloom preachers, who said ...people who leave always end up in the gutter; they end up in debt; they end up losing their lives; they end up losing their health, and basically never ever mentioning the fact that some of them lived happily [laugh]. But the main difficulties really come about because they lack the tools to face a normal life, and I think also the Brethren upbringing for me, it didn't prepare me with tools to deal with normal relationships.

He continued to explore how the Brethren restrictions on the showing of emotion and intimacy impacted on him.

I always came up against this thing where the Brethren are so po-faced ...they couldn't really show emotion. I just yearned for contact at that time. It wasn't all sexual either, it was literally just for somebody to hug ...which was why, you know, at school I had terrible guilt issues during junior school, when one [non Brethren] girl got very fond of me. ...One day she held hands with me all day. And when I quit the school, I was absolutely desperate to make sure she didn't go at the same time, in case she tried to hold hands with me outside, and my parents were to see that [laugh].

And it was experiences like that that made me feel that the Brethren's restriction of the children went way beyond what was naturally normal [laugh] ...where they referred to trampling on the natural.

I asked him what "trampling on the natural" meant to him.

I think that it meant that you put all desire, any bodily desire for somebody else, all physical desire behind you. You tried to put it away from you... we were even taught to regard it as wrong, which was what I couldn't reconcile. [laugh] There was no way I could reconcile that with what was normal. [laugh]

He twice referred to being "po-faced" and I knew what he meant. Emotions showed rarely in his face although he spoke of them. Every now and then he would smile but not with his eyes, an artificial smile often accompanied by a short laugh. We discussed this after the interview; he said others had pointed this out and thinks he no longer does this.

I remembered visiting my brother unannounced some 25 years after we left: his face too seemed empty, zombie-like. Members of the Brethren attending conferences where I am presenting also seem "po-faced". A mask.

Darren related a time before they were "released back". His mother had bi-polar disorder and was in hospital, something other children bullied him over. He would also be bullied when he had to leave lessons when television programmes were shown.

...generally the consensus with the other students³ was, "Oh, he's ...he thinks he's above us, because he doesn't watch TV. He thinks he's more cultured".

Mostly there's kind of a constant need ...for affirmation, a constant self-questioning. I didn't know whether even that was right in itself [laugh],

because I thought I'd read in the Scriptures that it was wrong to think too much; that you should just follow obediently like a baa lamb [laugh].

I often wonder why I did not question things as a child, why did I not think more critically about what was going on - I seemed to have been one of the obedient 'baa lambs'.

Perhaps to resolve the conflicts in his mind, when he was about 14 he began to see being a "good PB as the only route to being settled at all in life".

It wasn't an attractive option, but the only way I would ever meet somebody nice, and settle down and have a house, blah, blah, would be to tag along with everything the Brethren said and did.

...there was a number of turning points, because I kind of had this constant readjustment, ...I'd go off at a tangent from the way the Brethren were wanting me to go, or I'd have something illicit, for example, music, ...or even visiting the cinema, things like that, and then I'd try and recall myself to a state which is very much the Brethren way of thinking, they think you can retrace your steps, and stop at a point, and then go on as though nothing else has happened.

To illustrate the going "off at a tangent" he told me how he had bought a Walkman he kept hidden from the Brethren. He only listened to classical music because he "had a terror of listening to something that would be really corrupting" and send him to hell.

Then it seemed that the Brethren's power over him would kick in again.

I attended some preaching where they were saying that anything concealed is much much worse than just doing something wrong... I went and burnt the radio on our allotment behind the house. Even as I was burning it I was crying, because I knew I'd miss it so much. And I thought, ...I've destroyed that. It's so stupid.

He bought a laptop then destroyed it for the same reason.

I knew then that there was some really major disparity between the life I felt I could lead, and the life I was trying to lead.

Rather poignantly, he told me he did not feel much affection for his mother.

With my parents particularly I was uptight because I just felt I couldn't touch on anything that was even remotely taboo. I couldn't ask them, because they'd just give me an explanation from the ministry, or the Bible.

I didn't want the conflict between what I myself understood, and what was coming to me through all the channels the Brethren could bump in, you know, there was the meetings, there was ...the entertaining in Brethren's houses too, for meals.

I think why I had trouble reconciling this was because I felt that the non-Brethren aspect was kind of like instinct, it was kind of like an animal or the 'natural man' as they call it in the Brethren. It was ...the thoughts of man, the things they try and protect you from.

In 2002, when the Brethren under Bruce Hales were carrying out the 'Review'^G, contact was allowed with his brothers who by then had been 'withdrawn from'^G. Darren realized his brothers were "nice ordinary people" and not "pure evil" as his father had described them. They had not been "killed, or left for dead in the gutter". They were making a life for themselves.

I really wanted to be able to express a lot more of my feelings for my parents, that they [his brothers] seemed able to do. It was almost as though in the Brethren I had to remain po-faced, even to my own relatives, because they'd done something that I regarded as callous in kicking their sons out.

...I think it shook me awake [laugh], if you like. I'd been trying to stupefy myself into thinking that the Brethren thinking was the only way to work.

This point struck home when the 'assembly judgement'^G against his youngest brother was reversed and the Brethren said he had been wrongly excommunicated.

...the same evening ...I just had this sense that I could hold my head high, finally, because my brother, although he was outside of the Brethren, he was a really decent person, and I felt proud to know that I actually had some real family, and people I could relate to really well... It kind of gave me a link to a bigger world.

Probably the conflict was stronger, because there was kind of these two warring [laugh] factions, you know, one telling me that the only way is to settle down, get rid of all your bad stuff, all of the music, the computers, the involvements, blah, blah, and be a good PB. [laugh]. In other words, to settle down and start breeding children. But that was conflicting a lot with the fact that I'd seen there was a bigger world where you weren't obliged to do all those things, you could live single if you wanted to, you could make your own way in life.

Still Darren did not leave. In 2006 it was decided he should buy his own house in preparation for marriage. As he was not yet married, his parents moved in with him. He had become tired with the stress of it all and began missing meetings. He began going to the library to use the internet and found www.peebs.net. He decided to install broadband at home to explore the website further, keeping it hidden from his parents. He found penfriends online and valued their friendship; they opened his mind to other perspectives.

The final impetus to leave came when a friend of his, who had been withdrawn from, returned during the Review. The Brethren gave this man an apartment and whatever else he needed – including alcohol. Knowing that his friend was an alcoholic, Darren took him out as much as possible to distract him from drinking. One night his friend died in his sleep.

After he died, the Brethren were literally muttering that I had been the cause of that, and I found that was too much to take.

Alcohol has become part of the Brethren culture. Taylor Jr was a heavy drinker of whisky. He insisted that strong drink was a creature of God and nothing to be refused (1 Timothy 4:4)⁴; he drank openly during meetings. Whisky was also drunk freely in Brethren homes. The insistence on drinking whisky was an odd exception to the generally ascetic nature of Brethren and there were and still are serious problems with alcoholism (Bachelard, 2008).

Darren stopped going to the meetings and refused to allow the priests to visit because he could not forgive the Brethren for his friend's death. They had hardly ever visited his friend and regarded "*his death as the best thing for him*".

Given the right care, and being kept away from alcohol by activities, not being put under the social pressure of the Brethren to drink ...I'm sure he would have made it [laugh] ...I still feel very embittered about that.

I think you can liken it to a process of gradually waking up to the fact that some things just don't compute [laugh] between what the Brethren preach and what they actually practice, and what's possible to practice normally.

Bruce Hales came to the UK in 2007, Darren was expecting a spiritual experience; he was, after all, the 'Minister of the Lord'.

Instead I just felt rebuffed, I felt he was a very dismissive person, and I felt he was trotting out a whole load of maxims from a self-help, or self-run your own business book.

It just didn't make sense to me, especially finding his personality so different from what Brethren had told me. The Brethren had lauded him, saying, "Oh, you really feel loved when you speak to Mr. Bruce. When you talk to him, you get the impression here is a man who's really in touch with God." Ten minutes after the experience, I felt pretty much like I'd been talking with a policeman, and a very arrogant one at that.

He described the security arrangements for Hales' visit costing £10 000: walkie-talkies, and a cavalcade of cars...

...which travelled about 130mph on the A1, because he was the Lord's Servant, he was more important than any politician or diplomat, of course. It was just the whole cloak and dagger proceeding of the whole thing, I thought was a farce.

He reflected on the long process of leaving.

Yeah pretty much all my teenage and most of my early 20s was spent making this huge decision, because it's a vast decision, you know it's got repercussions not only for one person, but it extends on a whole family, friends...

You've got to learn to live differently. It's very difficult to sum up a particular turning point, but definitely for a date to fix on, it would be late 2007.

We ended the first session and reconnected ten days later. At the start of the second session he reflected on the first.

It's very helpful having my international pen-pals, because with each new one that I encounter, I have to re-go over the history, so it does actually get it clearer in my mind, each time I do that, but more so when I spoke with you, it kind of put everything a bit more in perspective to be able to actually tell it to somebody in real life.

Through this internet activity, Darren met and developed an online relationship with his future wife, Susan.

When I think back, that was kind of the moment when I was talking to her one day, and I kind of felt I was plunging in the deep end. I was making a move that was going to affect the whole rest of my life, where it was kind of like the rest of my life was going to be a different chapter. And at that point I knew there wasn't ...really any looking back.

I felt this is the parting point between me and my parents.

I noted his use of the present tense here, often a marker for trauma. He visited Susan in Canada. On his return it seems the Brethren assumed they had stayed in a hotel and “we’d had relations” and concluded he should be ‘shut up’⁶. His parents moved out of his house to live with his sister leaving him on his own.

He began learning about everyday life skills including: his own shopping; food preparation; life on his own. Coming home to a house that was “deathly quiet” felt strange. Members of the Brethren are not used to being alone.

He was busy planning his wedding, so had little time to take stock.

During that month I kind of, well I tried the things I couldn't really have done when my parents were there, like I would play music, rather than through head phones, through the music system, and ...I felt a lot happier because I wasn't leading a double life any more. I could have my laptop on the table, I could have the CDs in the rack, rather than hidden under the bed.

...when you have to hide things that are relatively normal, when you have to check your bookshelves to make sure you haven't put a slightly dodgy book back in there.

After his marriage, his wife went back to Canada to continue working. Darren stayed in the UK to sort out his immigration papers and sell his house before joining her. Having had to leave his job with the Brethren company, he looked for something to tide him over until he could join Susan. Finding a job was difficult because he was “unfamiliar with how to search for a job outside of the Brethren”. It was hard to explain why his CV lacked official qualifications without it sounding like a “put-up story”.

Christmas, I felt lower than I've ever felt before because I was on my own completely. I had run out of money completely, I was hungry, I had basically some rubbish in the freezer, and that was it.

He was still keeping his journal “with almost a dialogue in it, with all my self-doubts, all my things I couldn’t reason” and found the self-narrative helped him put troubling things into perspective. Eventually he obtained work with a cosmetics company, where the down-to-earth people helped him to observe how people interact in the outside world.

With the paper work finished and his house sold, he left to join Susan. Since then he has had very little contact with his parents.

They did come and see me off at Heathrow, but they didn’t delve into anything brethrenry, it was quite a difficult moment to say goodbye to them then. I mean, I really and truly at that moment I didn’t know if I’d be seeing them alive again.

As with all the other participants, I asked him what he is left with now.

Something ...that’s a kind of an indelible belief that when I think something is right, it is. It is a great difficulty to accept that somebody else might have a point of view, which although it’s subjective, is actually right [laugh].

He also talked about his difficulty sleeping and his constant anxiety, worrying about how things will work out. He began a nursing course and worried that Susan would become fed up with supporting him.

I miss the security of having a lifetime mapped out for you...sometimes. It’s almost like when you leave the Brethren, you have too many choices to make. You have a fear of making a bad choice.

He ended by talking about our conversation.

I think it helps me to reflect, certainly to reflect on where I am now, yes. It’s a good way of finding where you are in the current scheme of things. But that’s what this session has really helped to do.

In his response to my follow-up email four years after the interview, he wrote:

Since being interviewed, I have divorced and changed career direction, as well as establishing a new long term relationship. I temporarily halted my studies in order to make a living in the aftermath of my divorce, and though I don't intend to return to nursing, I hope one day to pursue a career as a licensed art therapist.

The interviewing was done sympathetically and yet professionally, and in a way that I did not feel I was being exploited for my history and upbringing. It is just one part in many experiences which have contributed to making me the person I am today.

Since our interview, I have watched Darren walk and at times race through his journey. Much of his story continued on Feeb and in emails he sent directly to me. In five years he has changed and seems happier within himself.

David

Born late 1970s in the UK, left 2007

David contacted me in 2001 via Dick Wyman's website. We met secretly on a few occasions. His mother was born into the Brethren and his father's parents joined the Brethren when he was very young.

In this representation I made the decision to remove his frequent use of 'umms' for better flow of the narrative. David's normal manner of speech is to have frequent 'umms' so their use was not indicative of anything in particular, and he himself suggested I remove them. In his interview, David referred to a blog (David, 2007) he began a few years before he left. In 2009 I gave a conference paper based on his blog that has since been published (Mytton, 2016, Appendix 24).

He began by saying that the first few chapters of a book about his life "*would be pretty scanty because I don't remember much of my childhood*". He did the usual sort of childhood things such as "*digging in the garden as a kid ...making forts and climbing trees and playing with Lego*".

Yes, well all I mean really I suppose is that it's hard to disentangle just from childhood what was sort of particularly brethrenish, because everything was all just normal.

As he seemed to be struggling to find anything about his childhood that might be related to the Brethren, I asked him to tell me something about how he was brought up. This seemed to free him up.

I suppose my earliest memories would be school age memories of some kind ...and I always felt really that ...that I think I felt lucky compared to other children at school ...I mean there is ...the Brethren thingy that ...you are part of a privileged community that other people aren't, but it wasn't really so much that as ...my parents always felt very supportive of me, whereas I remember being quite aware that ...other childrena lot of the kids, it was fairly obvious that their parents didn't really ...give much more than the basics, whereas I always felt ...that my parents would be interested in me and my day and help me.

I too had this sense of being part of a privileged community. I 'had the light' and the other children didn't - when they rejected me I often comforted myself with this 'knowledge'.

I wondered how he experienced the meetings as a child. His reply suggested he saw himself as a member of the Brethren and the meetings are "where you want to be", it was "where everybody was".

.... I didn't sort of consciously wait for it to be over, it's just kind of it, there was that bit.

Sometimes ...I would listen, sort of almost ...in critic mode ...just taking stock of how well everybody was doing, whether they'd sort of come up with good things, or said them well, or got a good reaction, if it was all a bunch of clichés this time ...but yes, certainly always it was a good time if I had something I wanted to think about, then it was a good time to do it.

I noticed he used the phrase "in critic mode" which suggested that as a child he somehow learnt to be a critical independent thinker.

He told me he had to take part in the meetings; it was expected that everybody did. But he only ever did the minimum expected, namely once during the 'Lords Supper'^G and again at the Monday prayer meeting.

In his blog he refers to the Brethren's approach: they would say to members, 'We'll do the thinking, you do the doing'⁵, a statement he felt was treated as of great wisdom, along with the idea that questioning is an ongoing sin.

I remember that it occasionally popped up that children would say ...it's come and play at my house or ...or come to my birthday party, or whatever, and it wasn't an option, but I dunno for me it was just you know it was just a fact of life, it was just one of those things that some children did that and I didn't do that, and that's just the way the world was.

David's childhood happened some 30 years after mine yet I could identify with the idea that any restrictions were just a 'fact of life': that was how things were. It seemed so self-evident.

David seemed to be normalizing his experiences and reducing the tensions between the various narrative environments around him. This was helped by his experience at school, where he found other children accepting of difference. He talked about two children in wheelchairs: "that was them in wheelchairs, you know that was their particular feature". His "particular feature" was not wheelchairs but having parents who "didn't let him do various things". He said it did not worry him being the odd one out.

David focused on the supportive role his parents played in his life. His mother encouraged him to think and read; she gave him a different perspective, one that was more in sympathy with school than with the Brethren. The encouragement of his parents towards school differed from the Brethren attitude which was that being intellectual was "not the way to be". Brethren children went to school because it is the law.

His journey towards leaving began in his teenage years. Some of his struggles seem like normal teenage troubles: rebelling against authority, trying to make sense of his sexuality and so on.

... there are things Brethren don't do because there are things the Brethren don't do, if you see what I mean. ...and the fact that Brethren don't do them makes them wrong, the Brethren don't do them because they are wrong.

He reminded me of the time I wanted a pair of roller skates but as no one in the Brethren seemed to have them, I assumed they were wrong: as David said, the Brethren not doing something made them wrong. Later I discovered the reason I did not have roller skates was because my parents did not know I wanted them.

Like many teenagers, he began to hide things. When I suggested this was leading a double life, he again stated that this was normal; perhaps it is for a teenage boy. He would do things with other Brethren boys that they weren't supposed to do. It seemed that pushing the boundaries by doing these things was condoned, so long as it stopped at some point. Getting married was viewed as the time to knuckle "*down and everybody is pretty clear you're going to abide by the rules from now on*". He saw his teenage rebellion as being normal – and yet not normal, because for it to be exciting he did not have to do dangerous things. There was enough excitement in doing forbidden things seen as normal and accepted in the outside world. As an example, he cited going to see a film being against the rules.

David's process of leaving spanned several years. During his teens he saw his

...goal was that ...at the end of the struggle would be that I would stop doing the things that ...I had been told were wrong, because however it's done...they would come to feel wrong to me too, and so I would stop doing them

He was aware that at some level he did not feel comfortable with the Brethren discourse on morality. He still believed that "*sometime I'll have this flash of light and all these things will seem wrong to me too*".

He became aware of other "*viewpoints*" to the Brethren's and found this "*unsettling*".

He continued to explain how he wrestled with this.

... I got to the point of appreciating that there were different world views to have, different sets of rights and wrongs ...and that ...I'd been set squarely in one that didn't really fit me.

I didn't have any quibble with the fact that what the Brethren said was right and wrong was right and wrong ...but I was also aware that if I'd been born and brought up in the house next door, or whatever, then quite a different set of things would have been right and wrong ...and it still didn't particularly feel like I had the choice of that, it ...still didn't occur to me at that stage that ...I could go from one to the other.

I recalled thoughts I had when I was about six years old. Next door lived a non-brethren girl who went to my school. I remember wondering one day: 'Why can't Joanna and I simply swap souls, I would be in her body and she in mine?'. She seemed to lead a much freer life than I. Maybe, like David, I resented being born into a group whose ideas about right and wrong did not suit me.

Gradually David saw there did not need to be these limitations. But he was also fully aware that the idea of leaving had implications.

...it was a very, very tough thing to think about because ...what right do I have to select my own set of morals, to reject one in favour of another set, or even to make my own up. It felt like ...something I wasn't really entitled to do.

David could not make sense of his observations that *"the Brethren's rules didn't match the rules of other people"*. School had given him a window on different viewpoints, an alternative discourse. The teachers talked with him about going to university and playing in the orchestra – both things the Brethren said were wrong. He recalled a discussion with a Muslim boy and how they swapped the Bible and the Koran. Such events gave him an awareness of alternatives and it *"felt a very big and scary thing to even contemplate being without the ones I already knew"*.

I thought of the Brethren's right and wrong as the "right" right and wrong, and all the rest of them were spectrum of ways of being wrong.

It seemed to me to be ...hard to imagine going from one set of rules to another set of rules ...because how can you know them well enough or be comfortable in them or anything?

...for whatever reason I had that structure ...and it wasn't for me to decide ...what I ought to have, if you know what I mean.

As I was not sure I did know what he meant, I asked him to explain.

It's hard to take on the responsibility that I can say what goes in my life because ...I dunno all my life ...the unstated assumption is that you don't get to say what goes on in your life ...I wouldn't say it's drummed into you, because it's not really even said, it's just the ground rule underneath everything, so it doesn't even need to be said, which also makes it quite hard to get rid of, because you're not really aware of it as an assumption.

This time I understood - he used the words 'drummed into you'; what is drummed into you, you may not even be aware of. His phrase, 'it's just the ground rule underneath everything', really resonated with me. Ground rules just are. They exist

and often we are not really aware of them. They are like the roots of a plant, essential to existence.

He had now reached the stage where he realized he wanted to make a change; but there would be consequences. And he still felt guilty since he continued to believe he had no right to make a decision about his life.

He referred to the BBC programme about the Brethren made in the early 2000s. It was to have been about David leaving and his transition to the outside world. David said at that time he was still feeling guilty about contemplating leaving. He kept secret from the Brethren his connection with Dick Wyman, the BBC and me. He kept his laptop, iPhone and digital camera hidden as these were considered unacceptable at that time.

...I went into that [BBC] quite dissatisfied and assuming I would leave and wondering how I would cope with the guilt feelings ...when it became apparent in the course of that, that they [BBC] were waiting for me to leave ...then I thought well when I leave, I'm already going to feel massively guilty. If I've left on live television that's going to multiply the thing by a factor of ten ...so suddenly, the whole idea of leaving became a complete impossibility and ...that sort of mucked up ...their plans for the filming anyway.

The Brethren knew about the film because the BBC were obliged to tell them just before screening it. They figured out who the current member was and came to see him. David told me at the time that he felt the two worlds he had carefully kept separate, the Brethren world and his outside world had collided. He decided to stay in the Brethren for the time being, and cut contact with Dick and me.

He gave me a succinct run-through of his thinking.

I was still in the Brethren ...while knowing that I didn't agree with it ...which meant I could look at it in a different way from the inside and sort of iron some of the kinks out of my system I think.

Because ...over that time I remember coming to the conclusion that ...it must have been gradual ..."I shouldn't do this because it's wrong", then thinking to myself, "I shouldn't do this because the Brethren say I mustn't do it", and then ...thinking to myself, "Do I actually feel it's wrong?" ...and beginning to look at things ...and thinking "If I think it's wrong, then it's for me to say to myself I'm not going to do this thing", if I look at it and think "No I really don't see why this is wrong, but still the Brethren say it's wrong" then I can look at it and say, "How much trouble would it cause if I do it?"

Sometimes I still won't do it, because it's not worth the trouble and other times I think, well, so far as I'm concerned it's not wrong, nobody else needs to be bothered by it, so I will do it and have no guilt feelings. But ...if I'd jumped overboard, I don't know if I would have had the space to sort of come to those kind of conclusions.

As I listened to David I felt envious that he could think through things like this while still in the Brethren. He had that skill of independent critical thinking I did not have and only many years after leaving felt I could have.

He knew he could not live with this inner conflict indefinitely.

I was attempting to live with a different set of values ...in amongst people who shared a set of values and you know I could go along with their values for the sake of keeping the peace but ...I felt I couldn't, well for obvious reasons I sort of couldn't commit to their way of life, because already by then I felt like I didn't share it.

Although he felt he was “in a kind of limbo”, he had already begun to transition to the outside world. He contacted Dick and me again.

I could see it was a sort of recipe ...for steadily increasing bitterness to be honest, because of trying to ...have an interior life that didn't really match to the external. ...already by that time I had ...the internet contact so I felt fairly well ...you know I had ...an alternative set of people, an alternative set of values, an alternative almost anything I suppose.

It was a whole load of people out there in the corner of my bedroom.

Things “kind of jogged along” for a while until there “started to be massive changes within the Brethren, sort of one of the periodic upheavals”. He said the Brethren were blatantly saying they were so sure everyone would accept the changes they instigated that the changes did not have to make sense any more.

So suddenly we're just going to change this and change that and do something different about this and make a radical change here, and suddenly everybody will do this and suddenly it's important that, and meanwhile ...all of the men that have said ...that everybody has said okay ...suddenly we're going to throw the whole lot overboard and say all at once that they were all wrong.

He described how for things to make sense, someone had to take the blame for them being wrong before. The “man at the top” could not be blamed, so the blame “tended to

get picked up the next rung down". Many respected elders were "thrown overboard" and "gradually everybody who was respected was suddenly knocked completely off their pedestal".

All the time I've been alive these people have been respected and their judgment trusted and everyone hangs on their words, and all of a sudden they were wrong. So you know, what's the point of even pretending, frankly?

He described some of the new things, e.g. projects that were started to keep everyone busy. It was decided that *"lots of people should move from one place to another and some meetings should be shut down entirely"* while new meetings were being started in different areas. David sounded angry.

It's really not, it's not for anything. ...And you are seriously messing up everybody's lives, and it just really, really irritated me.

As he felt increasingly troubled, he began his blog, using it to help him figure things out and make sense of these experiences.

...it was almost as though if I didn't get it out somewhere ...that I could point to my thoughts existing somewhere, then I might as well not have them, because ...it didn't seem to have any effect, what I did or thought otherwise and there was always the nuclear option of just saying, "Okay I'm off now", but short of that ...I didn't seem to have much control over my life and it sort of seemed like everything was changing for pointless reasons

I had read his blog over the years and felt in awe of his ability to talk out his feelings and thoughts. I too used to write but the writing only gave me temporary relief. I seemed unable to think things through and discuss things with myself as he did.

He began to tell the Brethren bluntly what his thoughts were and fully expected them to take action. But they didn't.

It was kind of, I dunno, like they thought I was on elastic or something, and they could sort of let me go as far as I wanted and ...it would never be all the way and then sort of gradually, gradually I'd be sort of pulled back in again.

Eventually, perhaps because his thoughts were now public on his blog, matters were brought to a head: they told him he could not go on attending the meetings.

I had a sort of good hard think, and thought well, unless I do a massive about turn, and decide that I am willing to put up with their rules for the rest of my life, then this is the point where really I have to say, okay, enough is enough. And it was at that point I moved out.

...by that stage I think I'd done enough thinking through, not to really ...not really feeling guilty at all about the actual moving out, just feeling bad for my family because I knew how it would feel to them. ...it was a long, long, long slow process, and I strongly suspect that if I tried to leave much before that, I could have bounced back in again quite easily because my ...at least for me I think it took a long time ...to sort of wiggle away the little tendrils of thought that are in Brethren pattern if you know what I mean.

I knew exactly what he meant - the tendrils. It was because of them that for years I did not dare to consider whether I was still a Christian. If I did, those tendrils would grab me and I would have to rejoin the Brethren.

It's just layer on layer on layer on layer on layer, at least it was for me ...and ...I think I hoped to get ...I don't know if it's possible to ever get to the bottom of it, but I think I had to get to a point where I could think okay, well I'm comfortable here, I can examine and unpick more if I want. I don't feel I need to anymore, because this is a point where ...I feel, I feel it's me, I'm coherent, I'm not something that I feel is imposed on me that I need to wrestle with.

He found a small rented house and moved out.

I asked him what he found difficult after leaving. He replied that it was mostly practical things. Work was a “*massive uncertainty*”, as he had assumed he would have to leave the Brethren company he worked for. They clearly wanted him to leave, but in the end let him stay. His computer skills possibly explained this, since the Brethren were beginning to use them in their businesses.

He said it was “*very tough dealing with leaving my family*”. He made the decision not to keep in contact with them “*because it will be awkward and upsetting for them*”. Eventually, after 18 months, he did meet them and explained why he had kept his distance.

Meeting me and Dick, he said, had dispelled some of his fears.

There was ...there was meeting you, of course, which ...I dunno it was a kind of milestone in ...making actual the thoughts that people outside the Brethren,

even people who've left the Brethren, are still just people, you know, there's no sort of big dark hole you fall into.

However much I knew in my head that people were just people ...it didn't necessarily feel that way until I had actual contact and there was the ...years of pretty much daily correspondence with Dick Wyman... He had strong feelings about a lot of things which were different to my strong feelings about things, but we could accept each other's point of view and just sort of thrash things out, a lot of it was nothing to do with the Brethren at all.

He recalled his school teachers and the librarian who had given him a glimpse of people outside, reflecting a sense of his intellectual ability. His attitude to university was interesting.

I probably would have gone to university but it wasn't really an attractive thought for me, even if there had been a possibility at that point. I dunno, I suppose ...I was thinking of education pretty much like I was thinking of the Brethren, that it was just another lot of people telling you how to think. I'd had enough of the whole lot of it really.

As the interview wound towards its close, David reflected on his work and family situation.

I'm still in a bit of a limbo in that my work is with them and I still have a bit of contact with some of my family, and I am very aware that it's conditional ...whereas really I would like to be in a position where I don't have to worry at all about what they think.

David told me that the previous day a Brother had come to see him unexpectedly and asked when he would be back. David told him this was not something he intended to do.

...his reaction to that was well, you know so and so, they left for a while, and the instructions were, from the top were "cut him off completely and see if he comes to his senses", so no family contact, no job, no money, no support of any kind, just chop! And ...if you don't come back then at some point something like that has got to happen to you, was the message sort of thing.

This threat was meant to shock David into returning. Since leaving, he has completed an Open University degree in Mathematics and Computing.

Some years after the interview, I invited him to tell me about anything he thought I would be interested in since the interview. This is what he told me:

I have got married, moved town, bought a house, and just had a son born. Further to what was covered at the time of interview, my marriage was the result of finding that a woman from a very different culture actually seemed to share more in terms of attitudes relevant to a relationship than I'd found in women from my own country but without a shared background, maybe partly because her culture is more conservative than Western Europe, but also possibly because there is less of a clash when both parties are well aware that there will be differences than when a couple expect to share more than they in fact do.

Ian

Born mid 1940s in Scotland, left 1969.

Ian's narrative was clear, thoughtfully presented and cohesive. He spoke continuously and freely about his life in the Brethren and about leaving, using a few illustrative stories. His narrative gives a glimpse of the inhumanity of the Brethren experience seen from the perspective of a caring, sensitive, intelligent man.

The interview was interrupted twice by telephone calls that lasted some minutes. I had been waiting some time to hear how my mother was, she had been admitted to hospital, and Ian was waiting to hear from his brother's wife, his brother being in hospital with cancer. We discussed this likelihood before the start of the interview and agreed both calls were important. The calls did not seem to disrupt the storytelling unduly.

He began his story by letting me know that his parents were not born in the Brethren, they had joined either before or not long after he was born – he was unsure. He said it was possible they joined when his father, who was in the army at the time of his birth, finally came home and met Ian who was by then two years old. He mentioned that he and his father sometimes had personality clashes but did not find these significant.

I always got on well with my mother, although she was sometimes a bit highly strung, agitated and nervous of things particularly when the Brethren were having fights and arguments.

My early life in the Brethren was reasonably happy. I ah, there were some things I couldn't do, but I didn't find them intensely irritating. I quite enjoyed the Brethren's company, and they were often in the house, I usually looked forward to them being there, or being invited to their houses, umm, the meetings were a bit of a bore, because as a child I remember I had no idea what they were talking about, and I paid no attention. ...I don't think it was particularly harmful necessarily, because an hour's day dreaming can be quite a good thing. You can spend a lot of time thinking, and it can be quite productive... for a child to have a sort of obligatory period of reflection. I did a lot of thinking and dreaming, and imagining, thinking about science for instance, and how things worked ...so the meetings weren't a dead loss.

As I had been raised during the same decade, Ian's narrative drew my attention to differences in our experiences. I would not describe my childhood as 'reasonably happy' but as one filled with striving to be accepted and approved of, fearful of the consequences if I failed. I wondered if my family with the multi-generational family Brethren background were more immersed in the Brethren discourse than his. I identified with his experiences of the incomprehensible meetings being a 'bit of a bore'.

He went on to say that he fitted in quite well in the Brethren. He felt he belonged, they approved of him, seeing him as an "up and coming spiritual brother".

However, by the early 1960s he became less happy, largely because the Brethren were changing in ways that seemed to challenge his sense of who he was or wanted to be.

... up until the 1950s they had been, I would have called them a fairly benign church, fairly harmless, ...a bit eccentric certainly. They were strictly fundamentalists that had a very naïve understanding of the Bible, of Christian doctrine... but they didn't umm, during the 1950s they didn't seem to do much harm, they didn't impose limits on what you were allowed to study, if you were at school, or what you were allowed to study at university.

Again this did not fit with memories of my childhood. For me the Brethren were not "fairly benign". His words 'rocked my boat'. Have I misattributed my problems such as my struggles with critical independent thought to something that in fact did not exist? How was it that he felt free and independent enough as a child to have these thoughts? I was aware of my thoughts and reflections as he spoke and decided to refocus and ask him for clarification.

Jill: Can I just ask you – you said a little while back that when you were in the meetings you would sit and reflect, and think about science and all kinds of you know other imaginings and thoughts and so on. Were you able to talk about those things with your family?

Ian: Yes, yes, we did umm, we had some quite deep philosophical discussions as a family sometimes, and when that happened my father used to be quite proud of his little family.

Umm, and when I asked questions about how things work, or why things work, it was usually taken seriously. My parents weren't particularly well educated parents. They did their best to listen to my questions and answer as well as they were able.

Conversations around the table were encouraged about topics that for most Brethren would have been unacceptable, such as biology, drama, philosophy, even extra-terrestrial life.

This did not match my experiences. I wondered why it was that he seemed to have had a fairly unrestricted life in his family that did not seem to appear to follow the Brethren rules.

Later he also explained how his Scottish heritage impacted on his emerging identities.

Ian: Scotland did have a kind of tradition of aspiring to and wanting education, thinking of education as a good thing. Scotland was a pioneer in providing free school education and Scotland was the place where the great flowering of learning began that was known as the Enlightenment, and Scotland had four universities when you only had two. (Chuckle)

Jill: So it sounds like you were quite free as a child to quench your thirst for knowledge.

Ian: That's right, yes, which is I think not true now among the Brethren. And my interest in science was encouraged by my parents.

I felt sad for the little girl I once was, growing up in a family that was so enmeshed in the Brethren that none of this was available to me. Ian did not talk about the Brethren narratives of sin, worthlessness and a fear of hell and the impending rapture that had coloured my childhood.

During the 1960s he became progressively dissatisfied and troubled.

... what really made me change my views of Brethrenism was not its irrationality, it was its inhumanity, its cruelty which began to develop. It was feelings and emotions and desires that freed me from Brethrenism. I could stand, I could put up with a lot of irrationality, but I couldn't put up with a lot of brutality.

I asked him for some examples.

I remember my mother was in tears when she had to tell her sister that she wouldn't be able to eat with her. My mother was very upset at not being allowed to do this. And I was upset by the fact that my mother was upset.

He described how the Brethren had become ...

...overrun by people playing power politics.... They didn't display what you might call Christian virtues, they were power hungry and quite ruthless about it... they wanted to be the kind of people who like controlling people, and imposing their rules and enforcing their rules and the rules became more and more restrictive as the decade went on ... and the people who were in charge became more and more unpleasant and unlovable, and umm, so it was that change that made me decide that maybe I had serious doubts about whether I wanted to remain among the Brethren.

After my family left, I remember my mother's shocked and distressed voice as she told us about husbands and wives being made to eat in separate rooms of their house if one of them was not a Brethren member. I would like to think that had we stayed, like Ian I would have eventually chosen to leave for the very reasons he states here. But I was very deeply entrenched in my identity as a Brethren sister.

It [leaving] would be quite an upheaval because by then I had no friends outside the Brethren ...being cut off from all my relatives that I knew, and older friends that I knew, it's not something you take lightly.

So for a while he stayed. Events at a nearby town when an entire assembly was withdrawn from was the final straw.

I was only 24 years old at that time, and didn't expect anyone to listen to me, but I reached for a microphone and said, "How can we reach that decision without being given the facts; can we be given the facts?" umm but umm there was no satisfactory answer to that, and there were about a thousand Brethren present at that meeting, and no one else raised any questions.

His sense of justice and his ability to think critically and independently enabled him to take on the identity of a questioner, normally unheard of in a Brethren brother. He realized when nobody spoke that the Brethren were now totally under the control of one man, James Taylor Jr. However, he remained hopeful that something would change and was confident in his own abilities to initiate this.

I remained for a few months more, because I hoped to convince them that they were wrong to put so much trust in one person. And I also hoped to spread around enough subversive ideas that would destabilize their own system.

I let it be known that... I found Jim Taylor's ministry incredible, I didn't believe what he was teaching. Now I knew that they would throw me out, but I wanted to stay as long as I could, and spread these ideas, umm in the hope that a few other people would perhaps think about umm.

He added with a chuckle:

most of the Brethren would think that was enough grounds to have me burned at the stake

I had not heard Ian talk about how he had attempted to change things from within and wondered at his presumption that he thought he could. I smiled with his dour Scottish sense of humour and reflected on how this and his doggedness had helped all of us who had worked hard to produce witness statements for the Charity Commission.

Eventually in January 1969 he was “*thrown out*”. though it sounds as if he made the decision to leave home himself based on his love for this mother. I noted his frequent use of the phrase “*thrown me out*” – he uses it 12 times in the interview, illustrating perhaps his feelings about the brutality of the Brethren practices.

...my parents didn't exactly throw me out, but they would have done if I had been thrown out of the Brethren first, but while I was still nominally among, one of the Brethren, they weren't obliged to put me out of the house. But I left the house anyway because my mother couldn't stand the stress of Brethren coming to the house, if they needed to harangue me, and try to persuade me and convince me that I was wrong.

I asked him how he felt at the time.

... it was certainly stressful. I would sometimes be physically shaking after umm after being at a meeting, I would sometimes, or after a bruising encounter with some of the people who were trying to convince me.

I was very aware at this point of how different his leaving experience was to mine. He was thrown out. I was taken out. It was not my choice or decision. I did not go through the thought processes that Ian went through. I did go through a very painful long drawn out transition process that lasted many years as I renegotiated my identities, morals, beliefs, and values. Also I did not go through the upheaval and loss that Ian describes. I wondered how that was for him.

The day I left was probably the most traumatic, because the night before my mother was showing signs of going insane with the stress. She was going hysterical and terribly distressed, and I decided that evening that I would have to leave the house the next morning, because I couldn't bear seeing my mother

so upset, so I put some essential belongings into a brief case and left the house, not knowing where I was going, but knowing I wasn't going to come back that evening.

As I read his narrative, I reflected on how those left behind also suffer. When we left, my oldest brother remained and I do not recall us ever talking about how he felt. Did he feel we had abandoned him and how did he rationalize the distress his absence caused my mother? He would have been praised for remaining with the "Lord's chosen".⁶

In the next section of his narrative, he powerfully uses anaphora to emphasise the sense of loss and bewilderment he experienced. Elsewhere he has described himself as "a very naïve 24-year old" and "ignorant of the world outside EBism".

I left the house, there was no one, I didn't know any friends that I could call on to give me a bed for the night; I didn't know how you went about trying to find accommodation; I didn't know all the different kinds of accommodation that were available; I didn't know what the various words meant like lodgings, digs, umm, shared flats, and furnished and unfurnished accommodation umm I had heard of hotels but never stayed in one umm, so I had really no idea what I was going to do for a bed that night. I didn't know who to ask or where to look, or what to ask for.

He had noticed however that in a shop window were cards with offers of accommodation for students and phoned one of the numbers. The woman offered him bed and breakfast and an evening meal if required. He took the room and became friends of the family, a friendship that subsequently lasted through many decades.

It was sheer bliss to have the peace and quiet and safety of a place where I could sit and recover and ahh relax and feel safe and unstressed, it was sheer bliss. For several days and evenings I just sat there and did nothing, just recovering.

Gradually he began to rebuild his life. He contacted relatives he had not seen for many years. One of his uncles invited him to their house and to attend their Baptist Church. After doing this a few times, he began to realize this was a recruitment effort when one of the women said to him "we missed you on Sunday, Ian". He distanced himself from them and tried other churches but warily, as he did not want to "get sucked into anything else". He never joined another church.

During his childhood he had made friends with a young Brethren sister called Sylvia. Not long after leaving, Ian met up with her again just after she had graduated. She was still in the Brethren but was later to leave and became his wife. Thinking back to before he left, he said he is still very grateful to her.

...because she had found a sneaky way in which we could get a university degree without breaking the Brethren rules.

Sylvia ... found, this thing called an External Degree at London University, where you could get a degree by studying elsewhere at a college or something, ...a prestigious degree of a high standard.... I suppose it was a sneaky underhand way... and I didn't tell the Brethren what I was doing any more than I had to, but I did finish up with a First Class Honours Degree in Chemistry, which was the first one I think that that college had ever seen.

Ian began to read topics he had not read about before such as “cosmology and anthropology and astronomy and all the different branches of biology. I studied mathematics ...found it fascinating”. He enrolled to do a PhD in the biological field.

I found myself envying him because he seemed to have been able to embark quickly on this new journey of discovery.

He also began to educate himself culturally.

I attended a classical concert given by the Glasgow Chapel Choir in the Glasgow University Chapel, and umm, after experiencing their stunningly stirring music, I could never dream of going back to Brethren dirges and Brethren rules, Brethren irrationality, and Brethren bullying. But the contrast between life inside and outside the Brethren was like night and day.

After making the decision to leave the Brethren, or to provoke them into throwing me out, as it were, umm, I just constantly found, constant confirmation that it was a wise move, because the ahh, I found that outside, the best things in life were all outside Brethrenism

I did not experience the contrast between life inside and life outside until many years after leaving. This was I think because on leaving we simply carried on meeting up with other Brethren who had left at the same time. The break was not so complete.

Ian had very clear well thought out views on the meaning of his experiences.

I think religions are a terrible mixture of good and bad, but the best bits of it just don't occur in Brethrenism anymore. There aren't any good bits of religion

there. If you want, ummsome of the supportive and beneficial practices and attitudes and values of religion, you won't find it in Brethrenism. There's absolutely nothing to commend Brethrenism at all. Umm, they don't understand the Bible, they, they're profoundly ignorant of Christianity and they're profoundly, contrary to umm, what most people would regard as Christian values and emphasis and aspirations and teachings

I asked him if had had these thoughts at the time of leaving.

...at the time of leaving I umm, in fact throughout the 1960s, I was aware that there was something, I was conscious, I felt that there was something vital was absent in theMinistry and in meetings. There previously had been a kind of all inclusivepeople who ministered or communicating feelings of love for one another. In the 1960s there weren't..... there wasn't ministering, it was demanding, it was laying down the law, it was controlling people, it wasn't what, it wasn't what most people would regard as Christianity. It was a means of deceiving them, controlling them and exploiting them.

I had to think about it [leaving] for a while, and umm, to make the ...decision that I would lose my, contact with all my friends I'd ever had....and except my mother who remained in contact with me secretly.

His mother, wanting to go on seeing him, used subterfuge: a newspaper visible on an upstairs window meant it was safe for him to come and see her. These links to his mother and to Sylvia perhaps eased his distress.

The Aberdeen incident ("The Aberdeen Incident", 1970) happened not long after Ian left, thus achieving what Ian himself had tried to achieve, a loss of confidence in the leader. Many of those in Scotland, who had rejected Ian for rejecting the 'Man of God', were now rejecting the leader themselves. He told me after our conversation that those who left including his family, treated those who were still following Taylor Jr as the ones who had been withdrawn from. Those who rejected Taylor Jr formed a group which later split into the Rentons and Strang/Walker groups. His father and both brothers joined the Renton group, whereas his mother did not rejoin any Brethren group.

His older brother came to him in 1970 to say he felt bad about the way the Brethren had treated Ian and reconciliation was achieved. Ian was not inclined to go back or join the new Brethren groups that were forming. He was rebuilding his life and found that outside the Brethren was "*...the best anything you like*".

For about 30 years after leaving the Brethren, Ian was unwilling to talk about his experiences. Partly this was because anyone who thought differently to him seemed to get so “*heated and upset*”. Having found www.peebs.net, he finally was able to talk and write about his views on religions and Brethrenism. He submitted an essay to the site called ‘Why I am not a Fundamentalist’ (McKay, 2004) that provoked discussion and debate, some of which became acrimonious but he managed to remain polite.

I found that being able to talk about my views and how they had changed was of great therapeutic value. I somehow felt a relief at being able to talk openly for the first time in many years, first time in decades, without having to watch my back or worry about people denouncing me and umm, umm, trying to blacken my character.

I wondered what it was that enabled Ian to deal with the acrimoniousness of some of the debates. Before I could ask he provided the answer.

...there were some people who were able to engage in very insightful, helpful and intelligent discussions. People like Roger Stott for instance. I never actually met Roger Stott until he was on his death bed, but we developed a kind of habit that if somebody misrepresented what he was saying, and made a personal attack on him, then I would wade in and defend him while he maintained a dignified silence, and he returned the compliment when people attacked me.

As he spoke I recalled times when Roger Stott had done this for me too. I wonder whether there is something in the Brethren background that leads people to attack rather than discuss or debate. The gender discourse that women should be silent and submissive still makes it hard when people disagree with me in what I perceive to be a judgemental way. It silences me. Is this a skill that we did not learn as children, a cognitive deficit? It reminded me of the saying David used “We’ll do the thinking, you do the doing”. For a group that believes they have “The Truth” it was difficult if not impossible to question anything: this would be seen as apostasy.

I asked him what stopped him talking for long, wondering if his reasons were the same as mine.

Well, umm, part of it, part of it was that it was such a contentious subject that ...these people will drop you like a brick and have nothing to do with you if you disagree with them. Partly it was because I didn’t, in society at large, I didn’t really like to be thought of as strange and an odd ball, eccentric. ...I had an eccentric upbringing and umm, the lifelong consequences are that you are a bit eccentric for the rest of your life, but I didn’t want to be seen as eccentric

... and part of it was, I wasn’t very sure myself how much of Brethrenism, how much of the things I’d learned I still believed. It’s quite difficult to defend much of Christianity on a rational basis, so umm, I reckoned, I didn’t want to commit

myself too quickly to any decisions about what was worth salvaging and what was not worth salvaging from the foundering wreck of Exclusive Brethrenism

Our reasons were not quite the same then. I held back from speaking out because I feared that either my mother would admonish me in much the same way as the Brethren would or that the person I was talking to would ridicule my thoughts. Often when meeting other former members I would be asked, "So where do you stand with the Lord today?". A question that terrified me - I had the feeling that if I responded as they wanted me to then quite simply, I would have to go back to the Brethren. A kind of superstition I suppose.

Later he added

I think I umm am kind of grateful that I escaped virtually unscathed, compared with a lot of my contemporaries.

Reflecting back to my earlier thoughts when his words had "rocked my boat", I smiled to myself because he was acknowledging that not everyone from his era 'escaped virtually unscathed': that for some of us our experiences were more damaging. Strangely it was reassuring.

Ian referred to some leavers, who seemed to lose their moral compass - perhaps because, unlike him, they had never thought for themselves and so "went completely wild": being promiscuous, smoking heavily and committing crimes. Some ended up in jail.

He explained the difference between his behaviour and theirs by telling me that when he was told something was wrong, he wanted to know why, even as a child. If he did not get an explanation, then he didn't obey the rule. He gave the example of Brethren being told to wear hats. As he could see no moral ground for this he did not comply. From an early age his morality and values were not based on simply accepting what another said. He seemed to have had acquired the ability to think critically and independently and thus resist the indoctrination.

As the conversation drew to a natural ending I asked him what if anything he was left with.

Ahh, I umm I'm left with what I think is a pretty good understanding of quite a lot of subjects, including Brethrenism.... I get a certain amount of satisfaction out of exposing Brethrenism and trying to undermine it because Ihave come to the conclusion that despite its benefits to some people in the system, the fact that they have a kind of organised society where they provide employment

for one another and business for one another and houses for one another and all that, despite that I think on balance it's a bad system.

He went on to talk about what might happen in the future: they might undergo radical reform; there may be another major split; it might just dwindle away over time; or it might collapse entirely. He did not want to see a collapse as this would be traumatic for current members.

He ended by talking about his happiness now, one of the happiest periods in his life but then something reminded him that he wanted to tell me about his father. After the Aberdeen crisis, his father went through a period of depression and at one point took an overdose of barbiturates but survived.

I think part of the, part of the reason for his depression was perhaps the fact that he had umm effectively cut off communication with me and was perhaps feeling upset about having done it and was perhaps not very sure about whether he should stick with the Rentons or not, umm, they, I'm just pointing that out to show that a lot of the process of me being thrown out was stressful for me, and it was also I think maybe even more stressful for my father since he ...he had gone along with and effectively been one of the instigators.

Excommunications are not just stressful for the people excommunicated, they can also be very stressful for people doing the excommunication.

Again I wondered how my brother had felt when we all left the Brethren and he lost his family

At this point Ian said he felt he had given me all the "important part of my Brethren and ex-Brethren experiences" and added with a smile that "you're quite an agreeable companion". We finished by talking about his brother whom he was visiting that afternoon in hospital.

As we ended I reflected on our conversation. I felt honoured that Ian had volunteered to talk about his childhood and his experiences of leaving with me: he had not done so before.

Rachel

Born mid 1940s in Australia, left 1980

Rachel started out by expressing some concerns because the family had been the recipient of “legal stuff”. Before the interview her husband had said “Make sure you don’t say anything bad that could come back”. After reassuring her that I would send her my representation of her story so she could let me know if there was anything they would like taken out, we continued.

Rachel’s story was quite different to all the others. She had no thoughts of leaving and repeatedly stated that she had not wanted to leave. She began by asking me if I was interested in her family history and how they came to be in Australia. Before I could answer she began to go through their history in some detail. Her paternal grandfather had worked in Argentina but, as her grandmother could not cope with the climate there, they moved to Australia. The rest of her paternal family lived in the UK. She thinks her father’s family came into the Brethren at the end of the 19th century. She also told me about the maternal side of the family who were also all in the Brethren. She is fifth generation.

While she was explaining this quite complicated family history, I got the sense that her family background and its connections to the Brethren were very important to her and her sense of identity.

But that was our heritage, you know. That’s where we came from. And all of them were in the meeting basically. So we never had any sort of thought or anything.

She continued to tell me details about her family and stressed again:

They were all in the meeting, so you know, it’s allYou know all her relatives were in and all our relatives were in.

About 12 minutes into the interview she was still talking about her family history and commented “I don’t know, I feel like I’m talking of Brethren pedigree [Laughter]”.

She continued with a story about the building of a big new Brethren hall. Her maternal grandfather had put money into the building. When he died his will was contested and led to a division in the town where they lived. Her comment "*I mean nobody but me probably would ever remember that*" implied that she saw herself as the holder of the family history. She went on to tell me the story of how her father had gone into business with a relative of the current leader, Bruce Hales.

[this relative] bankrupted the company and took off and left my father holding the baby. So we've been through the ups and downs of life in the Brethren but we never would've thought of ever leaving.

I had felt disconnected from Rachel so far. Her world seemed to be still made up of Brethren stories. This was no longer true for me. I felt curious though about why these stories were important to her and wondered how it affected her at the time.

I asked her what it was like growing up in all this.

It was just normal. That was normal life. ...this girl wanted me to go to the pictures with her and my mother did tell me that "You couldn't go. If you went to the pictures and Jesus came back He wouldn't know where to find you," which I see now as patently ridiculous, but that was what she said to me.

I reflected on our similarities here. It was just 'normal' for me too. Like Rachel I had no thought that there was any other way to live. When the whole school went to watch "Scott of the Antarctic" I was not allowed to go; to me this was self-evident. I did not question the restrictions on my life as a child.

She continued.

Rachelbut never any thought of not

Jill Why do you think that was?

Rachel No thought?

Jill Yeah, no thought of leaving... it didn't occur to you?

Rachel No thought of leaving. No. It's just this was normal life. And it was kind of a bit sort of half-privileged if you like.

Jill Half-privileged in what way?

Rachel Privileged as, I don't know, we were special people. You know, we were not exactly the chosen, but sort of on those lines. And all our relatives, friends and relatives, were all in there, you know... And there were kind of ups

and downs, but the thought of ever leaving ...of ever leaving never crossed my mind.

The powerful generational history and the messages from the Brethren of being special seemed to be deeply entrenched in this family and in Rachel.

To emphasise that she had no notion of leaving, she told me that when her sister-in-law said “*We’re going to leave*” she felt shocked and bewildered.

You know, how could you possibly live in any other sort of situation

It was decided she should go to an “*opportunity school for bright kids*”.

...a selective school in Sydney, but I knew that I couldn’t go to university which would’ve been a thing that I would’ve been well able to do.

Her father got a job in another town so they had to move; she missed out on a lot of schooling and even had to repeat a year. When her father lost that job too she had to leave school and start earning. Rather wistfully she told me her brother once said:

...“you were the one that was always held up. You went to the opportunity school and you graduated to Fort Street and none of the rest of us did” which I had no idea was being spoken of behind my back. So there was never very much...you know, no one wanted you to be proud. So there was never very much positive reinforcement.

The next stage of her story seemed to be told as if she was on a conveyor belt.

So, yeah, then I went to work and I changed jobs a couple of times and then I married a boy from the meeting and that was it. Just kept going. I had three little girls.

As I reflected at this point on what she had said, I found it hard to connect. There seemed to be a deadness about it all, an inevitability that she was powerless to even consider changing. It felt the same to me as a child yet I could not connect with her words. Perhaps because, even as I think about this now, I can feel physical pain as if that is a place I cannot go to and perhaps neither can she.

She moved on in her story to the Aberdeen incident.

When the 1970 thing happened and my husband got a little bit sort of fiery... And he walked out of the meeting because he'd been told to go out because he objected to something. And I said, "Whatever have you done?" And he said, "I'm not going back in there." And it was like I had to try really, really hard to persuade him that, you know, things will settle down.

The belief within the family was that *"things would sort themselves out."* Eventually her husband returned to the Brethren.

She then related a series of difficult events that come across as somewhat confused, perhaps because they are still distressing to her. She told me about her younger brother. Before she was married, her brother had set up his own lawn-mowing business, eventually employing their father. At one point he sought advice from one of the leaders in confidence and what they had discussed was fed back to him later from other Brethren. The lack of integrity led to him having *"a breakdown"*.

So all of that time our family had great difficulty sort of toeing the line and we went through an awful lot of unsettled..... And I remember sitting in meetings and just my stomach churning and shaking, shaking, shaking. And Geoff ...he's said since, "I don't know how you sat there during those times," because he was there. We weren't connected then, but he saw and heard what was going on.

But in all of that time, we knew things weren't right, but we just believed that it would all get fixed. And we still didn't want to go out [laughter].

At this point her story is difficult to follow with various members of the family being 'shut up'^G for supposed misdeeds.

There were lots of accusations and things about the dreadful things that our family was supposed to have done and none of them were true.

Despite all this she still did not want to leave. The family lived through the so-called 'system days'^G when the Hales⁶ brothers brought 'commerce into the assembly'^G. Taylor Jr had the Hales brothers withdrawn from so *"he'd kind of saved Australia at that stage from I don't know what."* She described what life was like during this time.

At the time [of the Hales brothers]like you had to write down your timetable and account for every few minutes of your life as to what you did and had to give somebody a sheet of things that you had actually done every day during the week. ... It was quite bizarre when you think about it.

Her brother, Graham, had bought a house with some land with the intention of building a new Brethren hall there. However, he was “put out”. The next Saturday the Brethren who were helping him with the build came as normal not knowing this. Graham gave them food as usual which the Brethren took even though eating with those who have been withdrawn from is not allowed.

... he'd put all his money and time and effort into building this churchhe was pretty much giving it to themhe said, “Well, no, don't come back on my property until we get this sorted out.”

So Geoff asked a very innocent kind of question in the next meeting. “What would make somebody who has done so much for the brethren suddenly turn against us?” And his uncle said, “That's a very good question, Geoff.” And another young fellow said, “I think our brother's being contentious and I can no longer walk with him.” And someone else said, “And I agree, I can't walk with him either.” So Geoff walked out and I gathered up my three little girls and walked out with him. And as we walked out, my middle daughter started crying and Geoff says, “What's the matter, sweetie? We're out.”

She says, “Are we? Goody”. Okay. (Laughter) That was her and she was 8. “Oh, are we? Goody.” So then we went down to see Geoff's mother who had never seen our youngest daughter because she and her husband and daughter had gone out sometime previously over some awful treatment that they'd been given, yeah. And that was what happened on the 6th of March, 1980. (Laughter)

I asked her how it felt just walking out.

Dreadful. Dreadful. It's more, you know, shaking tummy kind of thing, you know, sort of what is happening? Yeah.

But, yeah, so...but the consequence of that and losing everybody that we knew was awful. My dad's sister, the youngest one that was still here in Australia, ...said, “We hope things will be sorted out soon”. ...She never spoke to us again. My brother, Paul, who was living out in Sydney, he spoke to me twice in 33 years when I rang him to tell him that our parents had died. And the first time he said to me. “You know there's still time for you to get right with the Lord, Rachel.” But in the middle of that...I used to have an Avon lady. Do you have Avon ladies?

The Avon lady was a member of the local Baptist church and had asked the vicar to visit the family.

I wondered if this story felt to Rachel as confused as it sounded to me. I struggled to keep track of the sudden twists and turns. The sudden expulsion from all that she had known when she did not even want to leave was almost palpable. I did not want to leave either and what happened around that time was confusing and traumatic for me too.

Rachel continued to convey more of the confusion around that time.

But I think in all of that time, I think I had pretty much a nervous breakdown, yeah. I mean there were people that ...my parents connected with and then they eventually joined up with a splinter group and then they got me to join up with a splinter group, but that wasn't any good...

But yeah, it was like we landed from another planet, you know, with three little girls kind of knowing nothing, not knowing what to do or where to go or anything. And basically, there was no kind of help. None.

She referred to Lifeline, a charity that offers telephone counselling. One of her brothers invited her to go to a fundraising event.

He did a speech and he said, "My sister doesn't know this, but I spend a lot of hours on the phone to Lifeline just talking to somebody..." ...I don't know if he knows that I spent an awful lot of hours on the line too, on the phone to Lifeline. Yeah.

But nobody from the brethren has ever spoken to me since... Nobody. And I didn'tthey didn't even say, you know, "What are you doing? Do you want to stay with your husband or stay with us?" or anything. No options like that were ever given to me. So I think we must've just been really bad people. (Laughter) Or I must've been. I probably confirmed all their worst fears about me.

And the loss ofwell, I never thought that I had very much of a support system while I was in there, but at least there were people around. And I'm probably a people person and maybe that was the thing.

As she spoke these words, I sensed her pain, perhaps feelings of being neglected by the Brethren after she had invested so much in being a good sister and yet not good enough. The narratives of worthlessness somehow entered seemingly by osmosis into our psyche.

Before they left, she had bought a sewing machine. In her time, Brethren sisters were not allowed to go out to work so she worked from home making curtains for shops. After leaving she continued with this.

She had said so little about life at home, I encouraged her to say more.

I don't know that I had a normal childhood because my mother was always sick. She was...you could probably say she enjoyed very poor health and she did enjoy it or she seemed to.

She continued to talk about her mother and about her sense of being different.

So growing up, I probably...she organised...we went to private schools. I went to one and then Paul joined me and then ...we all transferred to another one, but we had a taxi come and pick us up every day to take us to school. I don't know that normal people did. So maybe that was part of the...how I'm a bit different or something.

Reflecting on this and how she felt at the 'opportunity school', she told me about the 50th anniversary of the school.

So we've all been meeting up. We're all these ageing people and he's our teacher who still comes to these reunions with us. And their memories of me as a child, I was quite surprised they were very kindly, they thought kindly of me when I felt quite different and separated from them as if I'd be something kind of unusual or something. But none of them have treated me like that at all.

I smiled inwardly as I often did when my participant's story resonated with my own. I too had felt alien and separate from the other pupils at school and assumed that they recognized this difference and disliked me for it. I also once attended a reunion when I too was surprised to hear from them that they thought kindly of me at the time.

Towards the end of our conversation I asked her what she was left with now.

What it's left me with is it's almost like I'm two people, this person I am now and the person that has this background history.

I've never thought of that before, but it's like you see me or anybody who sees me now and who I am and how I am, but there's a totally different part of me that was...yeah, no, I've described it like landing from another planet. Whether people who have emigrated from where they've lived feel the same or what, I

don't know, but it's like, you know... there's no going back. And whether that is just the normal progression from ...that people have as they get older or what, I really don't know. And sometimes when..... you feel really umstrange in the company that you're in that sometimes if it's appropriate, I was Exclusive Brethren almost as if that's a blanket thing that covers anything weird that there might be about me and I hope I'm not too weird now. (Laughter)

She seems here to be referring to her past identity that was so wrapped up in the Brethren world and her new present one. The old Brethren identity is still there and this explained everything that is weird about her.

As we reached a natural end I asked her how she was feeling now and whether there was anything on her mind.

No, not really, I don't think. There were...then there were other things that kind of raised their ugly heads as in sexual abuse still went on, but still... still didn't want us not to be there. They were just bad people.

You just have to get on with your life even though things have happened to you. And premature awareness of, yeah, that kind of thing was probably not good kind of thing, I mean you know. That was probably one of the things that sort of alerted me to the fact that things have gone further than what I had allowed myself to remember. So maybe there's just been an awful lot of pushing down on memories and, you know, just getting on with life. And that was the only life that we knew, so that was the only life that we kind of wanted basically.

Jill So you mentioned sexual abuse, did you hear about that or was it part of your family...?

Rachel Oh, I heard about that, but I experienced it.

Jill You experienced it as well?

Rachel Yes. Within the family, but we all sort of had to sit through meetings where it was discussed, you know, when people were either accused or confessed to it. Yeah, there seemed to be a lot ofand maybe it is just because of the number of people that, you know, if you get a lot of people you are going to get all sorts of different things that happen amongst that group of people, but because it was so close and unspoken of, you know, in care meetings.

She put her hand over her mouth and frowned deeply, as if this was something too hard to speak about. Then she continued:

So do you think it'sor do you think it's just ...just a weird mind set? Do you think it's just like a weird mind set that I've got myself into to cope with what's happened?

I was unclear what she was referring to here, wondering if the sexual abuse she referred to was what was troubling her. She clarified this for me.

I think maybe what I'm questioning is if you've got any insight into what would make somebody just feel like there's all there is and, you know, that that's the only thing that you wouldn't go outside and leave it all.

Yeah, I think I'm trying to understand. But I'm wondering if it's something like if you're in a particular family that you don't sort of really expect that you'll just get up and leave. You know maybe that happens more today than it may have in the past.

What seemed to be troubling her most was the memory that they did not even think about leaving and why they did not do so earlier.

In all the times where things were happening that we didn't agree with that we thought were wrongwe just expected that something would happen and it would be fixed.

You know, that God would somehow fix it.

And I didn't know whether it was because I didn't have any sort of maternal grandparents that I turned out strange or what it was. And I mean I've been conscious with my grandchildren that it's almost like I don't know how to be a grandmother because I wasn't grand-mothered myself.

She told me another story about when she was about 9. She had been given a doll at Christmas because her mother had always made sure they had something. On visiting some of the family they asked her if she had received the doll for Christmas.

And I said, yes, and I got into awful trouble because I shouldn't have been having Christmas presents. ...I thought about it for years and years ...why couldn't I have said something that would've got me off the accusation, almost

as if it's kind of driven me into a, kind of a, subterfuge that the truth doesn't come straight out, but it can be worked in such a way that it's not going to damage something or someone and I wonder if that is something that's actually...yeah, is a legacy, I think particularly from that, but from the whole system, the whole brethren thing that you don't always answer straight out because if you...and talking to another cousin of mine, he will often answer a question with a question... rather than answer with an answer because, you know, sort of what would you be thinking of. And if you think about it, that's what we've heard in meetings. You know, if somebody asks someone a question, they will answer with a question rather than come out, come straight out and say something when you might get into trouble for saying it.

We concluded our conversation with me explaining about the transcription of the interview and repeating that I would send her what I wrote so that she could comment on it.

Sally

Born late 1970s in South Africa, left 1997

Sally's story progressed from her early childhood to the present day and consisted of many small cameos held together by the overall narrative. At times it lacked cohesion, as memories emerged apparently triggered by what she was telling me. I wondered if her slightly chaotic way of exploring her memories reflected how she felt about her life-story, which seemed to draw attention to her fight to "stop pretending" and "be me".

Sally delayed leaving the Brethren until her father, who had terminal cancer, died to avoid distressing him. Her mother is still alive, as are her siblings, and all are still in the Brethren.

As she told her story she smiled and laughed a lot sometimes through tears; at the same time appeared to be reflecting on what she was telling me. She seemed to be trying to bring meaning to her experiences and to her struggles.

She began by telling me that:

I always tell everyone I had a really good childhood.

She seemed to find it hard to continue, as if reflecting on what she had just said. I wondered if she was trying to portray her childhood in a positive light in order to distance herself from the distress she felt.

After a long pause, her next words seemed to qualify her first statement.

Ah... but yes, I think I had a nice childhood up until the point where umm... There was a stage when I was about five when I suddenly felt like my family didn't love me anymore, and I didn't belong.

I had these kind of feelings that I was actually not a real person, that I was some kind of experiment, umm and it even, it sounds really crazy, but I even, you know how your neck creaks sometimes if you move it back? I had this belief when I was a child that I was made of metal and I just really wasn't real at all

Later she told me she thought this feeling of being made of metal could be related to having to conform, to be like a robot. A robot does not have feelings and obeys without question.

She repeated the phrase “*I think I had a good childhood*” as if trying to convince herself of this. She then told me of an incident when she was in her early teens, and had been seen looking at a forbidden magazine. It was her first experience of a ‘priestly’⁶.

I had to say I was sorry about that. And I'm thinking, I'm not sorry at all, why am I sorry, why am I saying sorry for something I don't feel sorry for?

She jumped back to being at school around the age of nine: some library books had been torn. One morning when the Brethren children were sitting outside the library, (they were not allowed to attend religious instruction lessons) the Vice Principal said someone had written a letter confessing to tearing up the books – and it was in Sally's handwriting. Sally protested that she did not write this letter, but was not believed.

...my mother came and got me from school and took me home, and begged me to confess. ...you've obviously done it, it's your handwriting..... And it's the first time I remember, I remember throwing a tantrum. I remember lying on my back and kicking my legs and sobbing and just like “nobody loves me, nobody

trusts me, nobody believes me" [loudly and mimicking child], and that ...I suppose accentuated the whole kind of theme of not belonging.

Her story reminded me of one from my childhood. When I was about eight, someone in the family scribbled in a book. My mother said it was my handwriting and I should confess. I remember sitting on her knees sobbing because I had not done it but she went on and on until I felt guilty anyway. Our stories were about injustice, forced confessions and induced guilt.

She described her relationship with her father as good, saying she spent many pleasant times with him alone, especially in the mountains. She remembers her mother taking pink pills which she believed were antidepressants. She has no happy memories of times with her mother until after her father died when they "really bonded" – but this was short-lived for she left the Brethren soon afterwards.

Sally does not remember much about her early childhood, saying she might have blocked the memories. She does not even remember things that were "drummed into" her as a child, such as Bible scriptures. Given her comments about not feeling real, I wondered whether this absence of memory for much of her childhood was because she was dissociated, as has been reported by other former members (Mytton, 2013). She described herself as "one of those kids who were labelled dreamy and put on Ritalin and you know, I was just ...never quite there". She said many of her friends in the Brethren were also on Ritalin and I have heard since that this in indeed the case.

The remainder of her childhood stories were about her teenage years. She related how she had her first kiss with a non-Brethren boy in high school. The priests found a letter she had written to him.

I remember thinking ...I'm saying I'm sorry, but am I sorry, really [quick laugh]. [unclear] coming out of the Brethren is that my social relationships, and relationships with men especially, were totally, totally retarded. I didn't know how to interact, I didn't know how to communicate. I'm only really learning now to kind of have a conversation like this, umm, and to, to bond with people. Umm, I thought the only way to kind of win people over was to have sex with them, or [laughs] do you know what I mean?

She was taken out of high school because of this incident and sent to a Brethren-run school. While there, she was seen holding hands with a cousin and so she was taken

out of that school too and home-schooled. I wondered if her short laugh and her comment “do you know what I mean” was to reassure herself that it was all right to talk to me about sexual experiences.

I did know what she meant, I too had gone through a phase of sexualizing relationships. I had taken in the message that if a man showed even mild flirting he was saying he loved me. For a long time I too was confused about friendships and intimate relationships.

I invited her to say more.

We were never really allowed to speak to men in the first place.

We were never..... I guess we were just never taught about any of that, at all. You know, we were never taught about sex. We were never taught about relationships.

The only relationships we knew were the ones between our parents, which were fairly, you know which weren't the ones... they weren't the ones of teenagers' feelings, and you know, umm... I guess they weren't really real to me ...umm, and I guess there was also this desire to be normal, and I saw people out there ...people my own age, walking around holding boys' hands and having relationships with people, and I just had to guess what normal was.

I felt very close to Sally at this point, identifying with her struggles over wanting to be normal. I too had had to guess what normal meant. I also recall seeing people walking around holding hands and wondering enviously how such closeness could be achieved.

While being home-schooled in her last year of compulsory education, she was struggling with mathematics. Her mother sent her for extra classes where she met a girl, Rosie, whose family offered to take her in should she decide to leave.

I finished my schooling ...and packed a big bag full of my clothes and jumped over the wall in the middle of the night, and this girl came to pick me up with her boyfriend and took me back to her house, umm... I left a long letter to my Mum explaining where I was and why I had done it, and one of my main reasons was that I wanted to study, I wanted to do something more than... get married and have children.

She said she chose to escape because she feared if she had told anyone she would be prevented from leaving by her parents and the Brethren explaining:

...they would have kept me in the home as much as possible, because the priests were on my case heavily, umm and I had no one to back me up at all, whereas when I went to Rosie's, the priests still came round to see me, but I had Rosie and her parents to back me up. I just had a bit of support system, and I'm so glad I did that, because I honestly don't know, I don't know what I would have done on my own, whether I'd have gone back into the Brethren, because I couldn't handle the pressure.

Rosie was involved in a "charismatic happy clappy" church that Sally decided to join. Her mother contacted her and asked her to visit them in the family home. Sally would not agree to this: they could see her either in the house where she was now living, or in their car. As they would not come to the house because of the television and computers, she met her mother in the car.

I remember the first time I plucked up the courage to wear jeans instead of a skirt when they came to visit and they were horrified. They said, "Do you know you're wearing men's clothing?" [laughs] ...I remember saying to them, "Well, no actually these are women's jeans" [laughs] and I know they started quoting scriptures at me and umm, I said to them, well if you look back to the Old Testament, didn't the men wear robes there? So [laughs] ...what is your issue? [laughs]

... yes I remember telling them that I was baptised into this happy clappy church, and they were completely horrified about that too, and said well you've been baptised into the Brethren already, you belong in the Brethren. Umm... to be honest I can't remember now exactly what they said, and can't, I don't knowI felt like they were just speaking another language.

In the Brethren, jeans and trousers are men's clothing and not to be worn by women.

Reflecting on what she had just said, she continued:

...so I really do just feel so lucky that I'm just not in that horrible place where my whole life was, at least my whole teenage life, was just full of lies and deceit. That was the only way to get by, and being normal was to be deceitful and lie and I'd do things behind my parents back all the time. It was very sad.

I asked if she was deceitful as a child too.

No, I think it started when I was 14 or 15, I started sneaking out in the middle of the night umm, so I suppose I wasn't a child as such. I think I did lie a lot as a child, I think I was quite deceitful as a child, cos I was scared of getting into troubleyes, and there was always obviously this big fear of umm, of going to hellumm, you know? Even up until fairly recently, I would wake up in a nightmare that everyone around me had gone [laughs].

She refers here to the fear that the rapture had happened and she had been left behind. At this point, Skype froze. On reconnecting she returned to talking about meeting her mother in the car and going to a nature reserve. The only conversation she remembered from that day was her mother criticising her for wearing makeup.

While she was talking about being deceitful as a child, I found myself wondering whether I had been deceitful. I remember times when I kept things from my parents during my teen years, such as going to Dulwich College, London to watch a performance of a Shakespeare play, but as a young child I cannot recall any instances.

In the late 1990s all Brethren living in South Africa were told to emigrate back to their country of origin because John Hales, the leader at the time, had decided as it was “*becoming a communist country*” they should all leave. Her family moved to Australia; she remained in South Africa.

Sally continued having what she called “*weird relationships*” including one with a woman.

I had a tendency to hero worship anyone.... There was this girl that, that you know, I just, she was absolutely wonderful and amazing and I totally hero worshipped her andshe was into drugs and ecstasy and that kind of thing, and I ended up going down that road, and was very, quite heavily into drugs for about three years.

I do remember the first night I did drugs, and I remember the wonderful feeling of not thinking about my family for an entire night. It was, it was the most blissful feeling in the world, wow, this is amazing [laughs].

I wondered about this hero worshipping - the truth lies with the Brethren as revealed by the Man of God. Was it this belief that led Sally and me to hero worship? This is something I still have to be watchful about.

Eventually she realised the downside to taking drugs was worse than the upside, so stopped taking them. She moved in with a family who were former Brethren. While this gave her a sense of being part of a family again, which she craved, the couple “*had a very open relationship so they were seeing other people in front of each other, and I was trying to look after the kids*”. She decided to leave because it “*became a bit full on*”. She wondered whether having an open relationship was normal.

Wanting to “escape” again, she went to the USA to work. She told her brother who found out when she was leaving. Some Brethren were waiting with gifts when she arrived at the New York airport. Having made friends with some young people on the plane, the Brethren’s presence at the airport embarrassed and “mortified” her. Not even escaping to the USA had worked in terms of being left alone.

I had bonded enough for them to stick up for me, and for them to understand... so once again, lucky. I think that’s the theme of my life, it’s lucky really [laughs].

In the USA she met Mike, another South African, “a lovely young man and I fell in love with him”. Towards the end of her year there, she had a phone call from her mother, who invited her to visit them in their new home. Sally seemed to be gaining in her ability to resist the position the Brethren wanted her to take. She replied setting out the boundaries and conditions.

I’ll come over but I have conditions, and my conditions are that I am no longer in the Brethren, and I’m not going to pretend to be, and I don’t want any priests to visit me, this is you know, between, actually I just want to see you, that’s the only reason I’m coming, I want to see you, my family and spend time with you

After returning to South Africa for a few weeks, Sally left Mike there and flew to see her mother.

The first night.....well it was really lovely in my mum’s house. She was lovely to me. Umm, but you know, the first morning in my mum’s house, ...I put on a pair of jeans because I thought, you know, I stipulated this is who I am, and I’m not changing to suit youmy sister ...was completely freaked out and she burst into tears and begged me to put some, you know, Brethren clothes on. And I just, I guess I was, I was stubborn too. And I was saying no that this was my condition on coming over, I’m going to be me, I’m not going to be you [laughs].

She reflected on this and wondered if it was a bit childish. It was decided she could not stay in her mother’s house so she moved to a nearby hotel where she felt very lonely, even though her mother visited her every day. Sally was reaching a powerful turning point.

But it was then I realised this whole peeby thing was just absolute bullshit.

She became distressed at this point. I asked if she wanted to stop or take a break, but she chose to continue.

Although she had asked for no 'priestlies', the priests came to see her.

They were sweet, and...they were talking to me you know about the Lord Jesus and the place I should be in...blah blah.....and then they said, "Do you know we paid for your flights to come over here?" And I said, "Well no, actually I didn't. I thought my family paid for it. If I'd known you paid, I wouldn't have come, because you know, this wasn't to do with you. This is to do with my family. ...with all due respect, I don't really want to speak to you. I don't know you, I'm here to see my family." [laughs] And eventually.....after realising that there was no way of getting me back, they left.

The pressure continued. Her mother promised her a job, a house and a car if she stayed. Sally was tempted: *"the idea of having family close by was just really appealing at that stage."* But when Sally asked if her boyfriend could join her, there was a marked drop in enthusiasm.

Eventually she returned to South Africa. She has not seen her family since. Back in South Africa, she discovered Mike had been seeing someone else. They tried to make the relationship work but she ended up leaving him. He was then diagnosed with cancer so she moved back in to help look after him. But she realised relationships are not always healthy and can harm us.

I hurt him when he was really sick and I can't really forgive myself for that [crying].So I came over to England, and umm[distressed] and he came over to get a second opinion a few months later, and I saw him then and spent time with him.

He returned to South Africa where he died two months later. She was on her way to visit him but he went into a coma while she was on the plane. She was unable to let him know how sorry she was for hurting him. She told me she had never told so much

of her story to someone she barely knew. She seemed very distressed as she said this. I felt very moved she had chosen to share this with me.

After a few moments pause, she said the event also reminded her of her father's death.

My father died of a brain tumour, which was operated on and then came back and he died a year later, and so you see there is this theme of people dying on meor rejecting me.

There was another pause while she calmed herself, then she continued.

Anyway, so of course this was in the Brethren's opinion the Lord speaking to me, and when was I going to wake up [laughing through her tears]. I came back to the UK after I had been to his [Mike's] Memorial Service and everything, umm, and..... I guess I just got on with my life, and I met Stuart four months later, [inaudible] and we got married about four months after that I think, and I'm so lucky to have him. He's so understanding and I have my own family now. It's just amazing.

She realises she will probably never see her family again, then pulls me into the conversation.

Sally: But er I suppose in a way it's easier to,it's been easier for me to, to ...deal with death, than to deal with my family who are there and don't want to speak to me [inaudible].umm, but yes, certainly as far as my Dad goes, I only seem to have happy memories of him, and I know that's something you do too.

Jill: I do have happy memories of my father. ...Like you, it was my mother who was more the difficult one. Umm. I wish I was there, I'd give you a big hug. You look as though you need one.

Sally: I haven't cried in a while. [laughs with me]

We talked about what she is left with now. Mostly she referred to her struggle with relationships.

As I listened, I could hear my voice in hers as if she were speaking for me.

I do struggle, I don't struggle nearly as much, but I often find myself very nervous of going to ...events, somewhere where I am going to have to make

new friends, and you know, I think it was easier when I was a bit younger, when I was doing drugs and things, because you didn't have to make real friendships. You could just fake it.... But I guess I am at that stage of my life where I want real connections with people.

Still feeling an outcast at times, she also recognised that she undermines her own experiences. She referred again to idolising people such as the other mothers waiting outside the school for their children.

And I see them as this, as ...someone completely different and superior to me, and I think that makes it really really hard for me to have a relationship with them and then when I realise that actually they are just human, and they make the same mistakes as me, I guess I'm kind of in a way disappointed [laughs].

Reflecting on this, she said she has always relied on other people to make decisions and choices for her. She was made to feel she wasn't good enough with statements such as "you're never going to get married" - the ultimate insult in the Brethren. She returned to her opening statement, when she told me she had a "really good childhood".

...you're so sheltered that you literally don't get to find out [laughs] what reality is.

Umm, it might just be to do with my personality too, you know, but I think it's a lot to do with my so called happy childhood [laughs]. It's only how you think of these things as happy, until you really, really think about the incidents, and then you realise, maybe, maybe it wasn't happy all the time. [laughs]

Sally continued to provide her own reflections and observations.

My relationships were very warped for a long time too. I think I just craved affection so much that I didn't, didn't mind being used in the process, and I didn't want to commit to anyone for quite a long time, because I felt like they would just leave me at some stage. It was easier for me to see lots of people and get my little fixes of intimacy, even if it meant, you know, me being neglected and abused in the process

As the conversation drew to a natural close, I asked how she had experienced the interview.

More emotional than I expected. Umm, and really nice actually to just speak, just speak about it. Umm, it's kind of made things a bit clearer when I speak

about it, it kind of makes me realise why things may, why I may be the way I am. And that's, you know but then I have to cut myself some slack too, but I tend to be quiteespecially when it comes to parenting and the kids, I'm always giving myself a hard time for the way I actually felt. If I get angry with the girls, I really, really hate myself, and that doesn't make me an any better mother, in fact it actually makes me worse. [laughs]

Following the interview, she sent me a time line of her story. She seemed aware that her story had been confusing at times and that writing it down would help her create some order. At the end she wrote: *“Continued insecurity about people leaving me, dying and continued idolizing and feeling like my opinion is not valid”.*

Since the interview, Sally and her husband have separated, so once again she is on her own.

Summary

In this chapter, we have met six people who were born and raised in the Exclusive Brethren. They all left in a variety of ways. Their stories powerfully convey their lived experiences and illustrate many of the Brethren doctrines and practices. In the next chapter I explore some of their connections and differences.

Chapter 7 Analysis of Narrative

Two ways of seeing competed with each other: on one side stood the apparent continuum of a Jewish tribal literature, the absoluteness of the New Testament with its 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' and all the construction of John Nelson Darby; on the other stood the persuasive, fallible, infinitely diverse subtleties of my A-Level texts. One was graven on stone, the other rippled like water. One asserted itself: this is true, you know it is true, it is the Word of God and you will be damned if you turn away from it. The other side sang and whispered, beguiled, suggested, asked questions, claimed nothing, resonated. The battle was on.

Stott (2017)

Introduction

I began writing this chapter in my mountain retreat, looking out over snow-covered mountains. Each mountain has its own life-story of when and how it was formed; a story that never ends, as glaciers, rivers and avalanches continue to carve out the rocks. I watched the clouds, some like gossamer threads linking all the peaks, others like drifting cotton wool briefly touching just some of them. Beneath the mountains is the bedrock that unites them all. I reflected on how the participants' stories speak of their origins; how they too are continually forming and changing. They have connecting threads, like the clouds, made up of similarities and differences. The stories, like the mountains, are connected by the bedrock beneath them – their experiences of being raised in and leaving the Exclusive Brethren. David referred to this as the “ground rule underneath everything so that it doesn't even need to be said”.

The quote by Stott at the head of this chapter illustrates a powerful metaphor of a battle between the two forces permeating every story, including my own, like storm clouds linking the mountains: the absolute certainty of the Brethren doctrine on the one hand, and the freedom to be on the other. The themes of coercive indoctrination, control and separation can be found across the stories. I wondered if the conflictual atmosphere of Brethren life, so well captured in this quote, had played a role in the

surprising finding that Bryanie, Darren, Ian and Sally all had one parent with mental health problems.

The narratives are not data to be analysed, but stories I dialogue with, stories I can 'think with' (Frank, 2013). The social-constructionist views of truth and reality have opened up spaces for me to do this. Stories are produced and created within social relationships; we tell stories to someone (Frank, 2013). The storytellers were telling their stories to me and to the imagined readers of the final project. Darren hoped he had given me some idea of how a person feels after leaving the Brethren. Rachel said at the start: *"If anything I've been through can be of help to anybody, I'm quite happy"*. Bryanie said:

What I want is for the information that I've given you to be good enough for your doctorate to be published so that this can be all moved forward and further, rather than being a consumption of an error of your life that isn't going to be significant.

My concerns about whether our dual relationships would affect what they did and did not tell me were to some extent assuaged. Rachel, towards the end talked about her experience of child sexual abuse, although not in any detail. Darren told his 'show and tell' story after positioning me as a professional. At the end of his interview, Ian referred to the confidentiality of our conversation, saying I could be trusted, and then told me a story about his father's attempted suicide, giving me permission to mention it. Sally spoke of things she said she had never spoken of before. Bryanie said: *"...what's very comforting about this conversation is the fact that I know you know"*. Maybe they trusted me because they knew I shared their Brethren heritage. I wondered what they would or would not have told me otherwise.

In telling their stories, they expressed themselves freely in a stream of memories, impressions, feelings and thoughts in ways of their own choosing. At times this was a deeply personal encounter. The tone of the stories shifted from optimistic to pessimistic, from tragedy to comedy and back again. We laughed, we cried, and we empathised with each other. I sensed the multiplicity of voices within each of them: the hurt, angry, restrained, silenced, critical, struggling, rebellious, thoughtful,

deceitful, longing, humorous, hopeful, uplifting, and at times chaotic voices. They are relational stories of belonging and separateness, closeness and isolation, acquisition and loss, periods of storm and turbulence and periods of calm as they searched for meaning in their lives, a sense of mastery over their experiences, the losses and difficulties they faced when they left the Brethren.

My feelings of being silenced were echoed in their stories. We were used to silence in the long meetings and to repressing our innermost thoughts and feelings. Like me, it took Bryanie and Ian three decades to overcome feeling unable to talk. Darren, caught between two worlds as a child, had no one to talk to and later could not talk except through his journals. It seemed that the doctrine of separation had not only moved from an ecclesiastical to an interpersonal separation one but was now also intrapersonal – a feeling of having to separate from our ‘selves’, our feelings and thoughts, with self-expression and self-awareness restricted.

In the next section, drawing on all six representations, I propose a model of family and Brethren enmeshment or entanglement. This links to the theory of attachment that follows. Next, I view the stories through the lens of social identities. I conclude with a discussion of the implications for therapy.

A Theory of Family Enmeshment applied to Cultic Groups

In 2012, while preparing for a conference paper using the stories from Darren, David, Ian and Sally, I wondered why our experiences were so different, despite the underlying bedrock of Brethrenism. First, I realised that Ian was a true second-generation leaver. The other three all came from families who had been in the Brethren for many generations, the ‘Multi-Generational adults’ (MGA): their experiences seemed different. Secondly, for some the family context seemed more open; the Brethren doctrines and practices less in evidence.

At the same time, Gillie Jenkinson and I were preparing for a workshop based on Sally’s narrative. We discussed how families take various positions. They might only overlap with the group, in which case the family would mitigate the effect of the group on the

developing child. Or the family might be surrounded by the group, in which case the control by the group would be much more powerful.

I began to see parents as gatekeepers who determine how far the Brethren doctrines are passed on to the children and how far outside influences are allowed in. I created a diagram of the relationship between family and the Brethren and used it in the conference paper (Appendix 20).

In some families, the parents are part of the coercive influence of the Brethren. Learning is not encouraged and questions are given inadequate answers or dismissed. Dissent is not tolerated, activities are restricted, love is experienced as conditional, and fear, threat and guilt are present. The family is deeply enmeshed in the Brethren system and, in varying degrees, it accepts the doctrines and systems of influence and control. It may be hard for the child to distinguish between the family and the group; the boundaries between the two are blurred. While the Brethren families do not live in a community like the Amish, I believe the universality and cohesiveness of the system creates strong enough bonds for the gossamer threads of Brethren doctrines and practices to reach all corners of each member's world. The stronger the group's social and ideological boundaries, the greater the tension with society; and the more segregated the socialization of the children, who are indoctrinated into the culture and belief system from birth (Van Eck Duymaer van Twist, 2015). As Deardorff (2009:42) said:

... the degree of collectivism of a society is a measure for the solidity of the invisible wall that divides a moral group from another.

Bryanie's, Darren's, Rachel's and Sally's families all seem to fall into the enmeshed end of a continuum. In 1974, in his seminal book *Families and Family Therapy*, Minuchin outlined his theory of family enmeshment. In enmeshed families boundaries between the subsystems are blurred. He states that such a system can become overloaded and lack the resources to change. This can lead to an undermining of a child's sense of independence and autonomous exploration. These ideas echo my thoughts about

Brethren families being enmeshed in the Brethren system. The boundaries between the two are diffuse.

Towards the autonomous end, parents encourage learning and independent critical thinking, provide unconditional love, and answer questions posed. The parents mitigate the Brethren doctrine of separation and their practices. Ian's and David's families seem to fall into this pattern.

Ian grew up in a family that was first generation. His parents brought their knowledge of the outside world with them into the family system. He spoke of his family and of the Brethren as separate entities, although there was some overlap. He posted these words on Facebook, illustrating how unique his experience was compared to most Brethren families.

My parents ...were always aware of the alternative views of other churches. This enabled them to exercise some critical scrutiny of Brethren teachings. My mother never thought they were in any sense uniquely right or uniquely enlightened. Their system of teaching was just one among many competing alternatives. Some of this rubbed off on me, and helped to protect me from the Brethren's methods of mind-control.

His family discussed a wide range of topics such as physics and philosophy. Independent critical thinking was nurtured and Ian's interest in science was supported. He was encouraged to ask questions – which were answered.

David's family, like Ian's, had some autonomy despite being a multi-generational family. He told me later he often had interesting discussions with his mother. In his story, though, we can hear the strong influence of the Brethren context. He rarely mentions his parents and does not connect them to his struggles over the Brethren's views of right and wrong. Evidence that the family were at least partially enmeshed, and more so than Ian's, comes from his statement "*you don't get to say what goes on in your life*". His story only contained what the Brethren saw as right and wrong and not what his parents thought. His explanation given to me after the interview, suggested that his family was more enmeshed than Ian's.

My parents never allowed themselves to consider whether their personal sense of right and wrong differed from the Brethren ...therefore any version of theirs as distinct from what they put forward to me as the Brethren one wasn't going to register as such.

Darren's parents wanted to be totally enmeshed within the Brethren system. Despite being 'shut up'⁶, they continued to bring Darren up in keeping with what they believed were the Brethren's doctrines and practices. Darren's stories about his family seem to be also about the Brethren. Although he mentioned his parents, it was in relation to what the Brethren were saying or doing, for example over the show-and-tell story.

Sally's family rigidly adhered to the principles of separation. In her narrative, we find stories of how that played out in her life, with priestly visits, forced confessions, restrictions she tried to rebel against, and the "drumming" into her of bible scriptures she did not understand. Sally said to me recently:

I would say that my family and the Brethren were definitely merged. The fear I got from the Brethren was the same as the fear I got from my family.

Bryanie, like Ian, was born into a first generation family: her family lacked the Brethren historical social bank. After our interview she wrote: "In so many ways our family would try to do what was 'right' and be slapped down". Ian's family were content with not being fully in the Brethren system. Bryanie's family were very different: they worked hard to be fully-fledged members; but as 'blow-ins' they could not make it. Nevertheless, she described her family as enmeshed with the Brethren.

Rachel's family had been Brethren for several generations like mine. Our families seemed so merged with the Brethren that it was as if they were part of our biological family. Rachel's preoccupation with her Brethren heritage, along with her assertion that leaving never even occurred to her, suggest that her family was at the deeply enmeshed end.

Of course, as soon as we create theories like this, we find that no one fits them exactly. Also, there are other socio-cultural influences such as the position of the child in the

family, different life experiences at school, and so on. Sometimes key people come into members' lives and sow seeds of doubt. Darren was "allowed" to go to the doctor, who said: "Go to the library, learn how to use the internet, and use it to realise there's more to life than the Brethren".

Individual family members may position themselves differently. One child might strive hard to be accepted by both family and Brethren, seeing the two systems as one, as with Rachel and me. Another child might perceive the Brethren context as even more salient than the family and allow a greater influence from the Brethren. Perhaps this is why my oldest brother John stayed when we left. Another child may only be marginally socialised in the Brethren culture, even though the family is enmeshed. My second brother Graham was 'naughty' and rebellious as a child and as a teen. He never bought into the Brethren beliefs and practices. Looking at my family in this way has helped me to understand why my experience of my Brethren childhood was so different from my brothers'. These positions within the family, and the family's position within the Brethren system, are not fixed however. My family, although firmly enmeshed in the Brethren, changed this entrenched position to one of dissent and left.

While this proposed model of degrees of enmeshment of the family within the Brethren family is speculative, there is some supporting evidence. Millar (2011:95) found that her participants' stories illustrated 'that cultic group influences are completely entangled with family system dynamics'. Olsen (2000) explored family cohesion, describing an enmeshed relationship where high levels of 'emotional closeness and loyalty is demanded' and where a 'lack of personal separation and little private space is permitted' (p145). Applying this to the Brethren, some members possibly lose a sense of separation between family and Brethren.

Disorganised Attachment

Towards the end of 2016 I read an article linking disorganised attachment to cultic groups (Stein & Russell, 2016). It resonated with my thinking. Bowlby's attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) is an extensively researched evolutionary theory. Beyond the need for food, shelter and sex, humans have a biological need for

attachment, thus ensuring protection of the young (McAdams, 1993; Prior & Glaser, 2006). Attachment bonds are of importance throughout the life span (Bowlby, 1977a). With disorganised attachment (Main et al, 1986), the child experiences a paradox: they approach the caregiver as the safe haven, but the caregiver is also the source of threat so they want to flee. Fear without solution means the homeostatic system fails. The child ceases to struggle and displays contradictory behaviour such as avoidance or freezing. Emotionally a trauma bond is created (Stein, 2017) and the thoughts and feelings become disconnected, leading to dissociation. Because the attachment behaviour of seeking proximity fails, it cannot end. The child has no secure base from which to explore.

Attachment theory can be applied to believers' relationships with God (Granqvist et al, 2009). Christians refer to God as 'Father', and sometimes to other believers as their brothers and sisters – as the Exclusive Brethren do. However, God as a safe haven and secure base is not experienced by all. For many, God is a wrathful judgemental figure and is thus perceived as both a source of comfort and threat. An individual's attachment to God may therefore be of the disorganised type. Bryanie developed a sense of being "*a flawed being*" because she could not feel God's love, only the terror that came with thoughts of hell and eternal damnation.

Stein (2007) in her research found that cultic group members become attached both to the leader and to the group itself. The attachment needs of people are often exploited by leaders (Shaw 2003) facilitating their authority. She described this attachment as disorganised, since the group offers a safe haven, but as it is also the source of threat, it cannot provide a secure base. 'Sarah', another former member of the Brethren, said:

I used to think I came from a loving family. I have no doubt my parents loved me, but it was delivered through an EB covered haze ...they were my parents but also a source of threat and eternal damnation.

In the 'Subject Index to the Ministry of B.D.Hales' 2014¹ the word 'attachment' occurs very frequently: attachment to God, Christ, the saints, and the testimony. The leader is perceived as the 'Man of God' so it is easy to regard the leader as an attachment

figure. This links with the idea of a charismatic leader as outlined in chapters three and four. James Taylor Jr is still referred to as 'our beloved' and is revered as evidenced by Ian, who told how the Brethren refused to listen to any criticism of him – "*For us it was now really a matter of being obedient to the Lord's servant*". James Taylor Sr is referred to as 'the beloved' and John S. Hales as 'our beloved brother'.

There are two key markers of an attachment bond: it is to a specific other, and the person experiences extreme distress on separation (Stein, 2017). Ian said he belonged to the Brethren but this was more of an affiliative relationship than an attachment bond. Perhaps his SGA status in a family that was not enmeshed protected him. He seemed relieved rather than distressed on leaving, although the loss of his parents was keenly felt. David also felt he belonged to the Brethren, evidenced when he talked about the meetings as "*where you wanted to be*". There is a suggestion that this attachment was at times disorganised: he worked hard to rationalise their doctrines and normalise their practices, suggesting he was aware that not understanding and accepting would bring consequences. For both Ian and David, any attachment bond to the Brethren seemed less salient than their attachment to their parents.

Three times Rachel referred to things somehow being "*fixed*" by God or the Brethren, indicating they provided a safe haven. The notion of exploration did not even enter her mind. The Brethren were not providing her with a secure base. She and her husband went through frightening and distressing times and continued in this state for many years: fear without solution.

Alternative competing attachments are discouraged by restricting exploration (Stein, 2017). The Brethren achieve this by emphasising separation from evil – in other words, separation from everything outside the group. The Brethren's ministry promotes the idea of the group being a safe haven² but not a secure base. Any dissent, including exploration beyond the confines of the group, threatens the presumed safe haven and can lead to disciplinary procedures. Bryanie's and Darren's brothers were 'shut up' for these reasons. Ian's dissent led to him being "*thrown out*". Darren was excluded for presumed intimate relations before marriage. David was told not to attend the meetings when his blog went public. Memberships of other groups or organisations

are forbidden and even pets are not allowed. Even within the Brethren, relationships are controlled, with special friendships being frowned on³.

The systems of control outlined in chapter four discourage members from exploring the outside world. The words used by the storytellers illustrate this, such as: restricted, confined, rigidly, pressure, conflict, drummed in, force and struggle. David summarised this when he said: *"...you don't get to say what goes on in your life"*. He referred to the *"hard and fast rules"* and being expected to abide by them once married. Darren echoed Stott's words by speaking of *"warring factions"*. He spoke of the *"constraints of his upbringing"* and illustrated this with stories of friendship restrictions at school; purchasing forbidden things then destroying them; and his use of phrases such as *"allowed to"*, *"rigidly enforced"* and *"released back"*. Restrictions on university or any further education, the control on relationships and separation from the outside culture, are all methods the Brethren use to limit exploration.

Ian illustrated wonderfully how cultural life is restricted when he said:

I discovered that all the best things of life ...could be barred to you if you were among the Brethren, the best music, the best drama, the best poetry, the best science, the best ethics, the best religion, the best anything you like.

Attachments to members' biological families are also seen as competing attachments. Hales teaches in his ministry that the Brethren are the second family⁴. Darren said the *"link God has given you with your fellow Brethren...is actually stronger and more important than the links within your own blood family"*. He spoke about *"trampling on the natural"*⁵; the putting away of those natural feelings. Bryanie told how it was not acceptable to talk about feelings, so she put her feelings behind her *"black sheet"*. Sally remembered feeling like a robot.

Both Ian and David seem not to have had such restrictions; possibly indicative again of lower levels of enmeshment. In his blog, David wrote:

A day without a hug in my parents' home was rare, even though I often had the impression that we were unusual in that respect.

The weakening of competing attachments isolates the individual from other sources of comfort. Members are encouraged to rely on the leader and the group with phrases such as *“we’ll do the thinking, you do the doing”*⁶. Stein (2017:92) refers to ‘islands of resistance’, which describes how small groups within a cultic group find support. Only Ian referred to this when he spoke about some *“more educated elderly Brethren”* with whom he had *“one or two secret communications”*. The storytellers’ entire lives as members were within the Brethren. Contact with the outside world was minimal. This contributed to the sense of the group as the only safe haven. The attachment is emotional, economic, social, personal and cultural.

To induce disorganised attachment, the cultic group needs to generate fear (Stein, 2017). Darren said he was fearful of making a *“bad choice”*, describing the *“doom and gloom preachers”* who instilled fear. He feared listening to something corrupting on his forbidden radio. He felt traumatised by being forced to take part in the meetings. His father instilled terror in him. He found it hard to reconcile *“a loving God and a loving church that cared for everybody”* with this fear and terror.

Bryanie described her fear of staying and going mad versus leaving and going to hell. After leaving, emotional blackmail and threats were deployed when she met her family. Sally described having nightmares about hell and eternal damnation. Neither Ian nor David spoke about fear or terror, possibly because the Brethren were not their most salient attachment; they both seemed to have secure attachments to their parents. However, both did experience distress on leaving. David described one priestly visit when he was threatened with being cut off from everything in a bid to induce him to return. The priests who visited Darren, Ian and Sally seemed to usurp the authority of their parents.

Leaving through the lens of attachment theory

Leaving means the sudden loss of the person’s attachment to their first (natural) and second (spiritual) family and even to God (Scheitle & Adamczyk, 2010). Disorganised

attachment is like an emotional glue binding the person to the group. Leavers from enmeshed families with disorganised attachment do not develop autonomous exploration. They do not know how to be independent. Often because of the traumatic experiences the individual will have dissociated to the point where their cognitive processing ceases to function, although their emotional centres continue to work (Stein, 2017). The goal of the attachment system is to feel safe; one might argue that avoiding the danger would achieve that goal. In the Brethren, the only way to avoid the threat would be to leave – which brings further threat. The sudden release from a well-defined world may prove too much for some people, leading to a period of extreme conflict and confusion. Leaving a closely-knit group means facing belief systems and values that appear threatening and confusing. Roger Stott's quote at the start of this chapter and Darren's warring factions describe this lose-lose situation. Those who fully immersed themselves in the group's teachings have the most difficult integration problems (McCabe et al., 2007). The more cohesive the group, the greater the difference with the outside world (Taylor, 2004). Some find it all too much and return. Fear that maybe they were wrong after all and that defectors come to harm plays into this (Mytton, 2013; Singer & Lalich, 1995).

Three of the storytellers found alternative transitional attachment figures outside the Brethren before they left. They achieved this secretly and found that the warnings of dangers outside were untrue. David was in contact with Dick Wyman⁷ and me; he realised that outside *"there's no sort of big dark hole you fall into"*. Darren found many alternative attachment figures outside, first his pen pals and then his wife Susan. Perhaps more importantly, he was in contact again with his brothers, finding them *"nice ordinary people"* and not *"pure evil"*. Thanks to her mother sending her for extra mathematics tuition, Sally found a transitional attachment figure in Rosie.

The other three found alternative attachments after leaving. For Bryanie, ironically, the Moonies were her transitional attachment and Sally found the *"happy-clappy church"*. Other researchers have noted this tendency of leavers to seek refuge with other groups, a phenomenon they term 'cult-hopping' (Eichel, 2016; Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Ian was fortunate in his choice of lodging after leaving, as this family provided safety leading to a lasting friendship. He also kept in contact with his future wife Sylvia and

with his mother, albeit in secret, and this eased his loss. Rachel did not mention a transitional attachment before or after leaving. However, she left with her husband, unlike all the others who left alone, and was reunited with family members who had left before her.

Children who are securely attached to their caregivers develop a sense of agency and separateness with their relationships. To be human is to be relational (Buber, 1937) and this leads us into the next section on identity. Trauma leading to disorganised attachment violates any sense of agency the child has and this disrupts the connection between the child and those it is in a relationship with (Herman, 1997). Since the formation of identities is a co-construction of an individual with significant others, it follows that the person's attachment history impacts on this (Pittman et al, 2011). The role of exploration in identity formation is key, yet those with disorganised attachments and from deeply enmeshed families do not have a secure base from which to explore.

Identity

Identity has been variously defined: there is an immense volume of work on this construct. I agree with Etherington (2007:455) and take the position that views 'selves and identities as multiple, constructed and constantly reconstructed through the stories we tell ourselves' (see also Burr, 2015). The stories are not windows on to a knowable reality but are constructions of knowledge. Some writers have used the ideas of a pseudo-identity (Jenkinson, 2008), a false or shadow self (Anthony & Robbins, 2004; Zablocki, 1998) or a doubling of selves (Lifton, 1993). These ideas come from an essentialist perspective since they all assume a core self. The narrative turn that conceives of the self or identity as a narrative construction has challenged this traditional essentialist view of an authentic self (e.g. Bruner, 1990).

Prior to embarking on this research, my views on the concepts of self and identity were influenced by Carl Rogers' notion of an authentic core self. While studying for an MSc. in Counselling, I read his book '*A Way of Being*' which led to an epiphanic moment. His ideas of the actualizing tendency, the organismic valuing process, an authentic self and

the introjection of the values of others enabled me to make sense of my past and gave me hope for the future (Rogers, 1980, 1994). Since then, influenced by social constructionism, I have moved away from the idea of a core self that reduces the person to a biological and social phenomenon (Burr, 2015).

Since 'identity' is itself a construct, 'perhaps it is a question of what works or is most helpful to us - whether we're thinking in terms of an authentic essential self, a fragmented or saturated self, a unified coherent self, or an episodic or narrative self, or several selves' (Martin, 2008:52). Rogerian theories were so helpful to me that I have been reluctant to let go of his ideas but have now embraced the ideas of a multiplicity of selves.

If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am. And if I want to know *myself*, to gain insight into the meanings of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story.

McAdams, 1993:11

Children are born 'devoid of story' (Bochner & Riggs, 2014:196) into a world full of stories and storytellers. For Brethren children, however, their storied world is restricted. I wondered what role stories played in Brethren homes and how they influenced the storytellers. In a discussion on social media, I was told they ate, slept, worked and went to meetings; there was not much time for stories. The stories that were told were about their Brethren lives: the conflicts, rivalries, leaders, schools, employment in the Brethren companies, who was being disciplined and so on. Stories that confirmed how special the Brethren were, how wonderful and compassionate the leaders were, were preferred over others.

This Brethren narrative convention seemed to be echoed most in Rachel's story. She focussed on people in her life and events in the Brethren, only rarely on herself. Bryanie spoke of her family back in the UK but her reasons seemed to be more of pride of her intelligent non-brethren family 'back home'. Sally's was a very personal story, seemingly not influenced by the Brethren narrative convention, yet there was a sense

of power and control in her life that came from them: stories of confession and 'priestlies'.

We construct our identities through relationships and the telling of stories (Bruner, 1990). When my storytellers were relating their stories, they were not only making sense of their past but also talking about how their identities and sense of selves were constructed and reconstructed. It is therefore not surprising to find former Brethren, whose sense of identities was so shattered on leaving, telling stories by any means possible. In any autobiographical recollection, a 'remembered self' is created (Fivush & Neisser, 1994). Our memories are constructed and interpreted by us (Riessman, 1993). The representations in this thesis are therefore representations of the storytellers' representations of their past experiences.

Bryanie told me that she would run long internal narratives, often over many months. She had no one to confide in. These stories, she said, were about connections to children and being in control. Perhaps with no one to tell her stories to, she told them to herself – as I did.

Darren was isolated from developing relationships, apart from a few Brethren children and his parents. The rigid adherence to separation meant he was alone most of the time. When they were allowed back into the Brethren, he found himself unable to relate to the Brethren children. When he was talking about his childhood I had the sense of a lonely, isolated, frightened and puzzled boy who could not understand what was happening. He talked a great deal about feeling conflicted.

Sally's early relationships were also restricted, as were her feelings and thoughts – so much so that she saw herself as not real, like a robot that conforms and does as it is told. She described herself as having a happy and healthy childhood up to the age of five, when she began to see herself as unlovable and felt she did not belong.

Rachel did not seem to want to talk about her childhood: she was preoccupied with her family's credentials and their place in the Brethren. *"That was our heritage ...that's where we came from"*. When I encouraged her to talk about her childhood, she

described it as normal, and she saw herself as part of that normal. It was as if she did not know how to tell stories about her childhood.

David told me he had a normal childhood, he was just “being a kid”. Unlike Darren, he was not isolated or disconnected. He saw himself as lucky compared to the other children; his parents were supportive of him, as were Ian’s. The families of Ian and David were more open and the opportunities for relationships with others were there. David nevertheless also described himself as “fairly insular” and the odd one out, but added that it did not worry him. Both Ian and David described themselves as happy. They both felt they belonged but both also had relationships with school friends, teachers and their parents. These relationships enabled them to construct their identities as children in the context of a greater variety of discourses than the other four.

The societal discourses that surround us inform our construction of self/ves and identities (Davies & Harre, 1990). They tell us what it means to be, for example, a ‘good child’ or a ‘bad parent’. The stories tell us ‘who we are; where and how we are located in ethnic, family and cultural history; where we have come from, where we might be going and with whom’ (Bochner & Riggs, 2014:196). Burr suggests ‘...identities are achieved by a subtle interweaving of many different threads’ (Burr, 1995:34) made up of age, class, religion, gender and so on. For each of these threads there are a limited number of discourses. Those limits may depend on the positions adopted by others around us, whose identities are in turn shaped by the cultural, familial and historical discourses available to them.

In the Brethren, the messages about who we should and should not be are very clear. A recent leaver wrote to me about this:

...the concept of 'grooming' is associated with being intentional and consciously manipulative, but it does describe the effect of the restricted narrative environment I was brought up in. The power of this environment was not just in the limited message of the narrative, but in the negativity shown towards alternative narratives by all the significant persons in a child's life - so a child going to a normal school has already been instilled with negativity towards the narratives that

will be encountered there, and will view any challenge to their presuppositions as evil or 'worldly'. Our narrative as EB was special, we were different, the world would not understand us - as a result we were hugely protective of our narratives as something that would only be appreciated in an EB context.

'Vanessa', 2017

Rachel, David and I all talked about feeling special and privileged in the Brethren. Multi-Generational Brethren families, such as David's, Darren's, Rachel's and Sally's, will have a more restricted narrative inheritance than first generation families like Bryanie's and Ian's. The Brethren discourses are around dichotomous concepts: saved versus sinner; worthless yet elite; heaven versus hell; Brethren versus the outside world; and so on. Reflecting on my childhood, the most salient discourses available were mainly the Brethren discourses of sin, worthlessness and needing salvation, along with defined roles including the gendered discourse of women needing to be silent in the assembly and submissive to their husbands.

Ian in particular had a rich narrative inheritance to draw on. His FGA parents brought with them a variety of narratives and discourses from which he could choose. Central to his identity was his love of knowledge that was nurtured by his family's narratives. Although David's family was more enmeshed than Ian's, he also seemed to have a wider choice of available narratives than the others. Of all the groups in David's life, his family seemed to be the most salient.

The discourses available to Darren were particularly limited. The most salient was the family discourse based on what they believed the Brethren discourse to be. Although Darren attended a normal school, the restrictions meant that this alternative discourse was not available to him. The pressures on him from his family and later the Brethren were such that he struggled to be the Brethren boy as required.

There are several key theories relevant to this discussion. Symbolic interactionists argue that our sense of self/ves and identities needs a sense of personal uniqueness as well as of belonging and connectedness (Holstein & Gubrium, 1999). Coates (2013:316) argued that some individuals, depending on what cultural and personal resources are

available, 'may construct selves that are more strongly informed by the personal and are internally negotiated, whereas others may construct selves that are more strongly anchored in the social and become dependent on others'. A balance between the personal and social is considered optimal.

In the Brethren world, the focus is on the belonging realm and not the personal. The personal is repressed, as illustrated in the stories. Those whose families are deeply enmeshed will have a greater focus on social identities while those who are less enmeshed may show more balance between the personal and the social. Being raised in any cultic group can restrict the development of a sense of being an independent person. There is little encouragement of personal development or betterment, as evidenced by the ban on higher education in universities, and on anything cultural.

Constructing selves informed by the personal involves personal feedback from relationships. The following vignette illustrates how important such feedback was for me. When I was eight, my parents decided to go to the Trooping of the Colour; my father drove us there and a friend came with us. My father went to park the car while we found our seats in the stand. I was feeling anxious, perhaps scared he would not find us, so was scanning the crowds. Suddenly I spotted him and pointed him out. The friend said, "Well, aren't you an observant child?" I treasured that comment; such feedback was rare. I was no longer just a Brethren child, I was an observant child.

Social identity theory (SIT) states that part of who we are comes from the groups to which we belong (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986). Normally a person has multiple selves and identities associated with their affiliated groups. In brief this theory states that to help us understand the social environment, we categorise objects, others and ourselves. By categorising ourselves as a member of a group we can define appropriate behaviour according to the norms of that group.

Dubrow-Marshall (2010) developed SIT to cover instances where the usual repertoire of social categories an individual can belong to is unavailable; he named this the totalistic identity theory (TIT). Normally categorisation takes place at several levels in an individual's cognitive system. At the superordinate level we are human beings. At

the group level we are defined by our job, where we live and so on. At the individual level we are mothers, fathers, and so on. The TIT theory states that at the group level, there is only one option, the cultic group. It becomes so dominant that it subjugates all other groups. I argue that this dominant group also subjugates the personal level. Where the family is not completely enmeshed, the members have several social identities available. Where the family is enmeshed, the group level becomes so dominant that the personal is lost so that even natural feelings seem to be absent, as Darren described.

Ian described himself not only a Brethren brother, but also as a scientist. David too saw himself as a Brethren brother but he was also a pupil at his school and a son. Darren was almost only a member of a family merged with the Brethren. The personal part of his identity had to be suppressed. The same is true for Bryanie and Sally who both tried, like Darren, to develop a personal identity, but the surrounding influences proved too powerful.

Leaving through the lens of identity theory: epiphanic moments and reconstructions

Epiphanies are interactional moments and experiences which leave marks on people's lives. ...They alter the fundamental meaning structures in a person's life.

Denzin, 1989:70

Bruner (1990) sees identity as one way we think about ourselves and as something that emerges during adolescence when the person begins to see themselves as different from whom they believed they were. In the Brethren the discourse is not conducive to normal healthy exploration during adolescence. Resisting the dominant discourse is difficult when the range of discourses available is limited (Burr, 2015) and when the child is raised not to question. Normally a child has a multitude of discourses with which to construct its identities – these are not stable but subject to change (Burr, 2015). Within the Brethren culture, this notion of change becomes more difficult, if not

impossible. Neither Rachel nor I questioned or resisted the positions we were expected to fill. Burr (2015:127) states 'we are all in the process of claiming or resisting the identities on offer within various prevailing discourses'. In Ian's and David's stories, their decisions to resist and change were easier than they were for Bryanie, Darren and Sally. This is because both Ian and David had a wider range of discourses available to them.

For those who have been raised within one small social group, prevented from having friends outside and discouraged from having special friendships inside, the sudden loss of their social network can be devastating, especially as they may lack the skills to make new friends. This can lead to difficulties during and after the transition period impacting on the reconstruction of their identities. The difficulty of not being understood by those outside and the uncertainties surrounding employment combine to leave them feeling very isolated.

You lose our social network so completely it's like an amputation. Making new friends is hard because you don't have 'normal' social skills – even your language is a bit odd. ...You don't know how to find new friends let alone trust them when you do, you don't know the culture, can't fit in. We are fundamentally social beings, having no social support network makes an already hard situation almost intolerable.

'Mary', 2007

Eventually all the participants experienced a crisis or epiphanic moment precipitating their exit. My own epiphany did not precipitate my leaving but came some nine years after. I was in a children's clothes shop in Switzerland. There was a tweed coat I really liked, it reminded me of home. I picked it up and took it to the counter. Suddenly I noticed it was double-breasted. My immediate thought was: "I cannot buy this, I don't like double-breasted coats". Then I heard another voice: "But you like this coat". I froze as I realised the voice expressing dislike was not mine. It was my mother's and therefore also the Brethren's voice. It was an epiphany. I realized that other more important values, likes, dislikes, and beliefs were not really mine. I bought the coat. Afterwards I sat in my car in some distress. What was right, what was wrong? I felt I no

longer knew. That moment triggered a renegotiation of my identities as I began to explore my values, likes, beliefs and so on.

Epiphanies are major turning points. As Denzin (1989:70) in the quote above states, from that moment, the person sees the world differently. Denzin also refers to a moment between that past and the present, when the person feels as if they are in 'no-man's land'; a time of being in limbo.

Bryanie

Bryanie's story illustrates a difficult childhood of striving as her family tried to overcome their 'blow-in' status. Feeling ostracised, "*almost bullied*", different to children around her, and then seeing her brothers trying to explore the outside world, which resulted in the other children being fostered out several times: all this led her to realise at the age of 14 that she had two choices. The accumulation of stress led to feelings of 'I am not good enough'. Her sense of herself was of a frightened child filled with shame and guilt and of being "*flawed*".

A part of me wanted all the 'worldly trappings', prohibited experiences, education and freedoms and a part of me wanted to argue the 'rational' of the doctrinal position. Perpetual indoctrination!

She did not want to choose the submissive, silenced, repressed housewife role that being a Brethren sister entailed. To her that was torturous; her experience of being in the Brethren had been isolating, filled with shame and guilt and lacking in love. The alternative, her preferred identity, would lead to hell. There was no alternative way of seeing: no perception of Stott's other side that 'sang and whispered'.

Her crisis point came when her Brethren boss groped her. She escaped to avoid being trapped by the priests, and in that limbo when leavers feel so vulnerable to being pulled back she was fortunate to find the help of the Moonies. Even so she went through a period of wanting to self-destruct, a time of exploring all the forbidden aspects of Brethren life. Without their control she saw herself as "*unregulated and unrestrained*".

She began, initially with the help of the Moonies, to reconstruct who she was now and who she was going to be. She said in an email later:

Besides survival, I think the most significant thing I had to develop and put in place was a sense of who I was going to be. All my original constructions and moral bearings were no longer functioning, or I was very afraid to use them.

After moving to live with her grandmother in the UK she explored her beliefs about Christianity and came to the point where she could identify with being an agnostic. She became a wife, a mother and a teacher. Having freed herself from the group level of identity, she could focus on and develop the personal level. She searched for some “sense of a core of what Bryanie was”. She has been in therapy for a couple of years and told me she still struggles with seeing herself as not “good enough”. She said recently:

I am so grateful that the freedom, knowledge, and experience-desiring self persevered and courageously went seeking and found an alternative position.

Bryanie talked very clearly about the reconstruction of her identity:

...for that large period of time I was developing and finding myself and creating and it feels like a creation, this new person, this very capable, very able woman who's a mother.

I've got all this stuff I've managed to develop and create and construct. And it feels like a construction because it's taken conscious real effort.

Because in fact you know, I'm aware of this underlying.... fragility. Because what I've created, what I've made, and that sounds so egotistical, doesn't it? The great ominent one. But what I have forged here is so precious, and yet it's based within my own flawed character, and I had to deal with that perception of my own deep flaws and deep badness that being imposed upon me through the doctrine and accepted by me, embraced by me, through the doctrine as a young child.

I asked her what words she would use to describe herself. She chose “tenacious, courageous ... something about fortune and being lucky”.

Darren

Darren's story is about his struggle between what he saw as his instinctive non-Brethren self and what the Brethren and his parents wanted him to be. He likened the conflict he felt to a war – a war between what he understood and felt was right or wrong and what the Brethren wanted him to believe. Deciding to leave was a gradual process over many years. Sometimes he felt he could not think.

It's when you're in a sandstorm, you don't really notice when a mosquito bites you.

Several times he resisted the position the Brethren culture put him in, as when he bought a radio and laptop but had to retrace his steps, thinking that if only he could accept and settle down he would not have these conflicts. He still saw himself as a Brethren brother.

He began to realise though that things were not quite as the Brethren portrayed. When contact was allowed again with his brothers, he realised they were not pure evil as he had been told; a light-bulb moment. He used the internet more, *"trying to build the skills to try and learn how to live with other people"* and to explore other possible identities for himself. He described himself as lucky for stumbling on websites offering pen friends. This experience *"opened my mind to not only other cultures and other countries, but other religions as well"*. He realised he could be something other than a Brethren brother.

The final epiphanic moment came when his friend died and Darren was blamed. *"And now it's taken somebody's life, I'm not going to stand for it any more [laugh]"*. It finally woke him to an awareness that *"some things just don't compute between what the Brethren preach and what they actually practice"*. Darren stopped attending the meetings and refused to allow the priests to visit him. He was finally able to stand up to his father and the Brethren, resisting the position they had tried to force him into and asserting his preferred identity.

As expected, he had to leave his job and was cut off by his family and friends. His difficulties on finding temporary work illustrate the difficulties of finding new employment without a reference or qualifications. He was largely helped after leaving by his future wife, his journal, pen friends and other former members. He moved to Canada and began to reconstruct his life and identities through the exploration of careers and relationships.

David

It was only when David was an adolescent that he began to struggle with the rules. He did forbidden things but still saw himself as normal, like other teenagers. The process of leaving was very drawn out. His group identity of belonging to the Brethren was there but he also developed his personal identity from the alternative discourses at home and at school.

He saw that the Brethren's ideas of right and wrong did not suit him. He tried to rationalize this, as he did not think he had the right to leave, but increasingly resisted the positions the Brethren discourse was imposing on him. He knew he could not commit to the Brethren way of life. Being a Brethren brother increasingly seemed wrong. He ended up caught between two worlds: his Brethren identity; and his identities as a friend of outsiders like Dick and me. His awareness of other "*viewpoints*" was unsettling. He maintained this until the BBC programme resulted in his two worlds colliding. Leaving became impossible and he decided to identify more strongly with his Brethren identity.

After a period when he felt he was "*in a kind of limbo*", he contacted Dick and me again. A crisis point came when the Brethren system changed – "*one of those massive upheavals*". He felt angry with what they were doing to people and his journey out progressed more swiftly. He left the Brethren and therefore his family. Using the present tense, he said: "*I feel it's me, I'm coherent, I'm not something that I feel is imposed on me that I need to wrestle with*".

Having dealt with the practicalities for survival, he continued to write his blog, reconstructing his identity. No longer held back by the identities enforced by the Brethren, he felt free to study at the Open University and make new friends, and he eventually found a wife. He now has multiple personal identities such as husband, father, employee, friend. In recent months he has been able to negotiate with his mother to a certain degree, so that he has a relationship with her as her son again.

Ian

Initially Ian identified as a Brethren child. Even during his adolescence, when one might expect him to begin to see himself differently, he still felt he belonged to the Brethren. Thanks to the autonomy of his family, he created both personal and social identities, although the Brethren social group dominated. Taylor Jr came to power in 1959 and Ian began to notice the Brethren were becoming ever more “*power hungry and quite ruthless*”. He began to question whether he wanted to retain his Brethren identity but, like Darren and others, recognised that leaving “*would be quite an upheaval*”.

The “*last straw*” or epiphany occurred and pushed him into deciding to leave. He described this in the interview, then summarized it in an email:

In 1968 ...the Glasgow Brethren decided to withdraw from the entire meeting in Hamilton. We were not told what they had done wrong, or what principle was being applied. We were just told that Jim Taylor had instructed us to withdraw from them. That was when I realised the Brethren had strayed intolerably far from their traditional principles, and I decided that I had no future among the Brethren, and I began to say so. It was more of an emotional response than a cognitive response. For years I had felt disgust at the way some Brethren were treated, but this was the ultimate example of brutal draconian enforcement of Jim Taylor's dictates, and it filled me with more disgust than ever.

Seeing himself as someone who could bring about change, he tried to spread “*subversive*” ideas in the hope of convincing the Brethren they should not place so much trust in one man. He left before the Brethren could withdraw from him to spare his mother the distress of the pressure from the Brethren. He began to “*gradually rebuild my life*”. He contacted non-Brethren relatives, made new friends, read widely on

topics he was interested in such as cosmology, anthropology, and astronomy, and began attending theatres and concert halls.

Rachel

We do not hear much about Rachel's childhood in her story. We only know that she identified as a member of the Brethren and felt privileged to be one. She recognised that she was different from outside people. On leaving, she lost not only people but also her way of life, her safe haven, and her identity as a Brethren sister.

She and her husband rebuilt their lives with the help of relatives who were outside already and the kindness of strangers such as the Avon lady she refers to and the telephone Lifeline. Rachel perhaps has not fully integrated her past and her present: *"What it's left me with is it's almost like I'm two people, this person I am now and the person who has this background history"*. This epiphany occurred in the interview and she told me she continued afterwards to process these thoughts.

Sally

Sally described herself as not feeling real when she was very young - like a robot that conforms and does as it is told. When she reached her teenage years she began to see differences between her life and those of other children at school and engaged in normal teenage exploratory behaviour with boys. Those in positions of power, the priests, came to talk to her and – as on other occasions she felt she had to say sorry. She began to see herself as someone who could only be loved by sexualising relationships – and yet as someone who could not communicate or have relationships with men. She craved affection but it was not acceptable for Brethren women to explore relationships with other young people, especially with those who were non-Brethren. She had a strong desire to be normal, although she did not know what normal meant. What was normal for the Brethren seemed wrong to her.

She reached the point where she realised that the only way she could be who she wanted to be was to leave. The priests were pressuring her to accept the identity of a

submissive, obedient Brethren sister and her act of leaving was a powerful move towards establishing her identities.

She began experimenting with different identities. She joined a 'happy clappy' church, moved in with a man she barely knew, and identified as a drug user for three years. One day she realised she did not want this identity either. She experienced the power the Brethren still had over her when her mother visited her and tried to persuade her to return. Again Sally resisted, wearing jeans and arguing with her mother. Her preferred identity was of no concern to them: they were not hearing her. The battle for Sally was between the Brethren and the outside world.

She said several times that she saw herself as lucky: lucky because she had known she had to resist the Brethren, lucky that she was able to question the influences surrounding her, and lucky that she was no longer in the place where deceit and lies were normal. She felt lucky that she no longer needed drugs because she did not need to escape from her past any more. In all of this we see her renegotiating her identities and sense of self.

When Sally visited her family in Australia, she resolved to be her true self and resist the positions her family still wanted to enforce on her. *"I am going to be me, I'm not going to be you"*. Her stubbornness and rebellion enabled her to continue to reconstruct her identity. She resisted the family's emotional blackmail and even when the Priests visited her she was firm, expressing her anger that it was they who had paid for her flight, not her family.

The price she has paid for choosing to be what she wanted to be was the loss of her family. She repeatedly indicated that she felt she could not *"carry on pretending"* to be something she did not want to be. She now values what is real, which includes being angry with her mother for turning her back on her. She describes herself as nervous about forming new relationships and still feels like an outcast who undermines her own experiences and thoughts.

Returning to the mountains

Looking across the stories again, the bedrock underlying the experiences of these six people is no longer the doctrines and practices of the Exclusive Brethren. The bedrock now is made up of new values, beliefs, attitudes, identities, and assumptive worlds. There may and probably are still some remnants of the Brethren experiences left, but as time passes and as more stories are told and new experiences carve out their futures, these remnants become less and less important.

All six storytellers have now developed a personal as well as a social sense of identity. The totalitarian group had sabotaged the attempts of Bryanie, Darren, Rachel and Sally to develop a sense of who they were as unique individuals. Only Ian and David had to varying degrees managed this while members. Instead of belonging to one totalitarian group, they now belong to several non-totalitarian ones. The storytellers are no longer imprisoned in the totalistic identity of the Brethren – the balance has swung to the personal. Research by Greenlees (2016) also found that the sense of self changed during the period of leaving the Jehovah's Witnesses, moving from the group identity to a more individual sense of selves.

The words they used in their stories provide evidence of trauma: terror; shaking; fear; scared; nightmares; threat; afraid; and terrified. Quantitative research on SGAs and MGAs has shown that a very high percentage suffer from trauma-related symptoms (Kendall, 2006, 2016; Mytton, 2013). This is an area for further qualitative research.

Implications for therapy

Born into a group you have no previous life to return to, no previous personality, no previous identity. When you leave, you enter an alien world and probably one you have been taught to fear and hate. Most likely you have few life skills and it is likely you may still feel loyal to the group you have left. There will be a strong pull to go back– it is, after all, all you have ever known and what is familiar to you. And above all it is where your family is and, having left, the chances are they are shunning you

Mytton, 2016 (quoted in McBeath & Greenlees, 2016)

There is evidence that interviewing, especially when unstructured, is therapeutic (Rosenthal, 2003). Darren told me:

I have learned to process what has happened to me in a logical way that might not have been possible if I had not been interviewed in a systematic way. With each recap, whether to professionals or individuals, I find it easier to talk about my experiences without need to over dramatize, self-victimise or exaggerate.

Sally continued to think about her story and sent me a time line of events that had helped her integrate it further. Bryanie's response in her follow-up form (Appendix 12) indicated how difficult she still found it to talk about her experiences, but she appreciated the need to talk about what still troubled her. Only Bryanie, to my knowledge, has had any therapeutic experience, but Darren and David have used their blogs to talk and they all use the social media to tell their stories.

McBeath and Greenlees (2016) point out the importance of therapists' personal knowledge of how cultic groups work. The poem about my experience of therapy demonstrates one reason why this might be important. Bryanie spoke of how comforting it was to talk with me because she did not have to explain the theological positions; I already knew. Many have spoken on social media of how their recovery process only began to progress when they met someone, a therapist or friend, who understood how cultic groups work (Jenkinson, 2013). Former members have even described how their therapists listened to their stories and struggled to hide their disbelief or their lack of understanding (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). The therapist needs to understand the enormity of what has been lost both at the point of leaving and in childhood. Roger Stott, in this extract from his writings, powerfully describes the impact on a child.

Children are taught that their whole natural personality is corrupt and unless they completely denounce their whole natural condition, their thoughts, the intellectual capacity to reason and introspect about God and the nature of existence, feelings, actions, and instincts they are in an anti-God state and will be damned. Spiritual health and enlightenment come through the realisation that you are wholly bad. Common sense is worthless, self-respect is wrong, the human mind is seen as ignorant and wicked and therefore should not be nurtured or listened to.

The message is that normal development of the mind, body and personality is to be dismissed and condemned. The child's discovery of its own physical body, its likes and dislikes, its own kind of curiosity, its instinct to rebel and be independent, is crushed and dismissed by the constant reiteration of the ugliness and the worthlessness, the darkness, of 'the natural man'.

The method of leaving is also an important consideration. Those who are forced out or who, like me, have that decision made for them, experience a great loss and one that is not of their choosing. A whole plethora of emotions may be experienced: anger; bitterness; shame; guilt and trauma. On leaving, the individual loses their assumptive world – their core beliefs, values, attitudes, all the assumptions that guided them through life. My tweed coat story illustrates how I clung on to that assumptive world for many years.

Another important consideration is that although the Brethren appear content to have medication such as Ritalin or anti-depressants prescribed for their members, they look unfavourably on therapy. There may also be a mistrust of authority figures. Stott's words above indicate other areas that a therapist would do well to reflect on: feelings of being undervalued and worthless; an inability to entertain differing views; dichotomous thinking; an inability to use their own intuition; dependency; decision making; and self-doubt.

Normally cultic groups do not offer any support to those who leave; because of the shunning practices, support is withdrawn. The Brethren usually visit the person who is thinking of leaving or who has just left, but only for the purpose of persuading them to return.

Other issues a person might present with, that might surprise some therapists, include an extreme lack of life, relationship, and social skills. David poignantly refers to his lack of social skills, as do Bryanie, Darren and Sally. Ian did not know how to find lodgings for himself; he did not know all the terms or what they meant. The Brethren themselves are aware that people who leave are not equipped for living in the outside

world⁸. I still do not understand the concept of 'friendship': cognitively I know what it means, but emotionally I do not feel it.

As McBeath and Greenlees (2016) point out, it is now generally agreed that therapists need to be knowledgeable about cross-cultural practices: this should surely include sensitivity to the culture of these cultic groups. The problems that clients present us need to be understood in the context of their past. In the quantitative study, I found that half of the sample (n = 264), had seen a psychotherapist, counsellor, clinical or counselling psychologist (Mytton, 2013). The study did not tell me how these people experienced their therapy – another topic for future research.

An awareness of their clients' attachment experiences would facilitate therapists' awareness of relational issues and how to use the therapeutic relationship to facilitate change. There is a growing interest in how attachment theory can inform psychotherapeutic practice (Burke et al, 2016). Evidence suggests that changes in attachment styles can occur (Waters et al, 2000) and that early attachment failures can be repaired (Bowlby, 1977b). Berry and Danquah (2015) conducted a narrative thematic review of texts from a wide range of therapeutic approaches. They concluded that 'attachment theory provides a useful framework to inform psychological therapy with adults' (p15). Although there is a growing body of research demonstrating changes in attachment styles (Taylor et al, 2015a), further research is needed. One theory is that the therapist-client relationship provides a secure base that enables psychological exploration. There is evidence suggesting that a secure attachment to therapists is related to a significant reduction in client distress over time (Taylor et al, 2015b), although these studies are quantitative in nature.

In the early stages of dealing with disorganized attachment, it is important to keep emotional levels at a manageable level. Berry et al (2016) concluded that direct treatment of traumatic memories should only be considered when the client has acquired sufficient emotional regulation skills to prevent re-traumatization. The ending of therapy needs special care as it can provoke anxieties for insecure and disorganized clients (Berry et al, 2016). In a qualitative study using grounded theory, Burke et al (2016) interviewed 12 therapists and identified six themes to show how attachment

theory was used in clinical practice, as follows: complementing other therapeutic models; providing a framework to understand the development of clients' mental health problems; working with different attachment styles; thinking about the therapeutic relationship as an attachment relationship; influencing the different stages of the therapeutic process; and influencing clinical service design and delivery. There are several areas that need further research, such as the influence of the therapists' own attachment styles and an exploration of the client's perspective on working in this way.

Each storyteller in this research has told stories of the construction and reconstruction of their identities and sense of selves. On leaving the Brethren they may experience an identity crisis. Approaches such as narrative therapy (White, 2011) that encourage exploration of the clients' stories are recommended. Narrative therapy encourages the 're-storying' of the client's narratives. Once when I was in a therapeutic group I put my head in my hands and said: "I just want to tell my story over and over again until I am done". Eventually I found a therapist who was cult-aware and enabled me to do just this by using Traumatic Incident Reduction (TIR) (Volkman, 2008). I likened my stories to a 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle that had been swept on to the floor, with little cameos of memories among the chaos. TIR enabled me to reconstruct my jigsaw puzzle. I was reminded of this as I listened to the chaos stories from Rachel and Sally.

Other factors to consider include the losses experienced of self, childhood, family and friends, and the loss of meaning and purpose in life. Bereavement work is likely to be an important component of any therapeutic approach. Psychoeducation may help the person understand how their group had such a hold over them. Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) may be contraindicated initially, depending on how it is practised . David said:

I was thinking of education pretty much like I was thinking of the Brethren, that it was just another lot of people telling you how to think. I'd had enough of the whole lot of it really.

Anecdotally, I have heard comments along these lines about CBT in the former Brethren social media groups. However, I have also heard it recommended by former members. CBT would usefully target the cognitive deficits of poor decision making, dichotomous thinking and lack of critical thinking skills.

Langone (1992) suggested that therapists should contrast psychological abuse with its opposite, 'respect', which implies honouring four aspects of the person, thus forming the acronym MAID:

1. Mind, the natural inclination to seek truth to make sound choices.
2. Autonomy, the capacity to make choices with minimal pressure from without.
3. Identity, the sense of individuality, of belonging to a wider community and culture and of internal integration
4. Dignity, the need to feel worthwhile in the eyes of others as well as themselves.

Langone, (1992:211)

This model provides a useful framework to guide the therapist.

Summary

A child born into any cultic group experiences the transcendent belief systems of that group, along with the systems of control and influence. These systems affect the child's attachments to those around them. A disorganised attachment to the cultic group can develop depending on the degree of enmeshment of the family in the group. The limited narrative discourses around the child impact on how they develop and negotiate their identities.

In this chapter I have looked at the narratives through various theoretical lenses. These theories are just some stories among many; none can be held up as right or true. Over time, theories and models may change in the light of new knowledge. For example, in accordance with the stories of the time, battle-stressed WWI veterans were labelled as having low moral fibre. Now they would be diagnosed as having post-traumatic stress disorder.

When I came across Lifton's ideas I felt excited and drawn to them since they offered some explanation for the stories I was hearing. Reading Rogers' books 30 years ago excited me in the same way as the theories of attachment, identity, and social constructionism have done since. They are all helpful and interesting frameworks to view the stories but they do not provide us with a definitive answer – perhaps because there is not one to find.

Chapter 8 Products and Impacts

So, shout loud your professional come personal desire as to the outcome and your hoped for future influence. Your lived knowledge belongs to human kind

Paul Barber, 2016

One goal for this project was to raise awareness and understanding of the experience of being born into, growing up in and subsequently leaving cultic groups. Professionals, including social workers, psychologists, psychotherapists, politicians, doctors, teachers, lawyers and the media, often do not know much about these experiences.

In my learning agreement, I predicted that the outcome of the research would be to:

1. Develop training workshops for trainee and qualified psychotherapists
2. Continue to disseminate my research via papers and workshops at conferences
3. Submit papers based on the research to relevant journals thus adding to the body of literature.

These products are directed at any professional involved in the support and assistance of former members of cultic groups. Unexpectedly, I have also had an impact in the political domain with the Charity Commission and thus also on the Exclusive Brethren. My involvement with the media was also an unexpected outcome.

In this chapter I will first describe the products that were agreed in my learning agreement and then discuss products that are additional. All items can be found in the appendices or on-line so my descriptions here will be limited.

Section 1: Predicted outcomes as listed in the Learning Agreement

Workshops

University based training workshops

I ran annual workshops on the Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology at London Metropolitan University from 2005. As an example, in 2008 I designed and ran a two-part workshop (totalling six hours) for trainees (Appendix 13). The learning outcomes stated that by the end of the workshops, and with further reading, the attendees should:

- Have an understanding of the positive and negative effects religion can have on mental health.
- Have an understanding of the psychological problems that former members of fundamentalist sects/cults might experience.
- Know where to go for further information.
- Have some knowledge of the state of the research in this field.

The two sessions included:

- A consideration of whether therapists should consider the religious background of their clients.
- Research findings demonstrating positive and negative associations between religion and mental health, including the findings of the quantitative study (Mytton, 1993)
- The limitations of research in this field.
- The Exclusive Brethren as an example of a cultic group.
- Online chat session between the students and former members of the Brethren about their experiences and what helped them transition into the outside world.
- An HTV (Harlech Television) documentary about the Exclusive Brethren was shown, followed by a final debriefing and reflective plenary.

This workshop is currently being revised using the understanding and knowledge gained from this current research with more focus on how therapy can help those who leave cultic groups. It will then be submitted to the BPS for inclusion in their Continuing Professional Development programme, aimed at clinical and counselling psychologists and psychotherapists.

Conference based workshops

On two occasions at the International Cultic Studies Conferences (ICSA) I took part in workshops/panels for professionals working with those who leave cultic groups.

Montreal 2012 Case study – Sally (Appendix 14).

This workshop involved close collaboration with Gillie Jenkinson, an experienced therapist working in this field. After I presented the case study on ‘Sally’, a participant in this current research, Jenkinson presented her ideas around pseudo-personalities and related these to Sally’s story. Delegates were invited to discuss how best to understand Sally’s journey and how one might work with her therapeutically.

Stockholm 2015 Finding Forgiveness (Appendix 15)

For this panel/workshop I collaborated with Gina Catena and Cynthia Kunsman, both experts in the cultic studies field. The title was: ‘*Finding Forgiveness – a panel describing three different SGA experiences*’. We presented our understanding and experiences of forgiveness as we had experienced it. The aim was to answer the question: ‘How do some Second Generation Adults find forgiveness and personal peace with systemic abuse and abusers from their childhood?’ The event was a very moving one for us all. The workshop impacted powerfully on the audience and on us, the presenters.

Michael Langone was present and spoke with us afterwards about the impact the workshop had made on him. He later wrote:

One of the highlights was a two-hour panel on forgiveness, conducted by three women professionals. One grew up in an eastern guru group, the other two grew up in Bible-based, fringe Christian

groups. Their professional and personal backgrounds and current religious belief systems vary markedly, yet their three stories movingly revealed the common psychological dynamics in cultic groups. Though each of them has been out of her group for many years and is an accomplished professional, the traumatic pain of their childhoods reverberates still in their lives, so much so that many in the audience were moved to tears as these women told their stories of subservience, fear, shame, guilt, and abuse and grappled with the question of forgiving their abusers. As a primary organizer of this conference, I am grateful to these panellists for increasing attendees' understanding of the nature and degree of abuse commonly perpetrated on children in cultic groups.

Conference Papers

Since I first carried out research as part of my MSc (Mytton, 1993), I have been keen to present my findings, being aware of the almost complete dearth of literature on SGAs. I had already presented papers to trauma conferences in 1993 and 1994, and to the Division of Counselling Psychology conference in 2000.

Since enrolling on the doctorate in 2003, I have continued to present papers at conferences. The impact all these papers made is evidenced by the number of questions and discussion points that were raised afterwards. The audiences at the ICSA annual conferences are very diverse, containing theologians, researchers, former members of various cultic groups, clinical practitioners, social workers, clerics and often current members of various cultic groups. The audiences at the Division of Counselling Psychology (DCoP) annual conferences are mostly made up of trainee and qualified counselling psychologists. Usually current members of the Brethren attend my presentations.

2007 DCoP Annual Conference Chester (Appendix 16).

The paper was called '*Resonances of Childhood Controlled by a sect: The case of the Exclusive Brethren*'. This was the first time I presented qualitative rather than quantitative material. I could no longer stand back objectively and talk numbers! Seeing the words of people I knew quoted on the screen was triggering for me. The

audience contained colleagues and friends and was well received. I learned that even when nervous I can give an interesting paper in an energised manner.

2008 Joint Conference of the Division of Counselling Psychology UK and Psychological Society of Ireland, Dublin (Appendix 17)

The theme for this conference was: 'When endings are beginnings'. Using this in the title '*When endings are beginnings: David's story*', I presented a paper based on one of my participants, David. This was before our interview in 2011. I used his blog, with his permission, to construct my paper. I have referred to his blog a few times in this thesis – it has had quite an impact on my thinking.

2008 Information Network Focus on Religious Movements (INFORM) and Centre for Studies on New Religions (CESNUR) Conference London

I presented a paper titled '*On being raised in and leaving the Exclusive Brethren*', based on the early themes emerging from this research. For the first time, three current members of the Exclusive Brethren were in the audience. To provide support, one of my daughters and a former member also attended. The organisers had warned me about the Brethren's presence. I prepared for this by being careful about what I said and passing the paper through the London Metropolitan University lawyers. It was a daunting experience. My paper provoked a wide range of responses from the audience, many of whom had not heard of the Exclusive Brethren before.

The paper was subsequently published on the CESNUR website (Mytton, 2008). Recently I received an email from a former member, 'Neil', who wanted to thank me for the article. He had been in therapy for severe OCD for many years. His therapist was curious about his background in the Brethren.

Teachings that were particularly damaging were the graphic teachings about hell as a place of physical and eternal torment alongside the teaching that I could be abandoned by my parents at any time night or day when the rapture happened.

The statistics for the incidence of OCD was particularly relevant. It was a huge help to me to find I was not alone, that the teaching I had received had been extremely damaging.

2009 ICSA Annual Conference Geneva, Switzerland (Appendix 18)

I presented a paper titled '*The Psychological Consequences of Being Raised in and Leaving High Demand Groups: The Case of the Exclusive Brethren*' using ideas from this thesis, along with quotes from other sources, to demonstrate how the Diathesis Stress Model (Zuckerman, 2000) could be used as an explanatory model for former members of cultic groups. Present at the conference was also a media company, Arthio Films, who filmed my presentation (see below).

Four current members of the Exclusive Brethren attended, including my oldest brother John, whom I had not had a relationship with since 1960. Most of the conference organisers attended, concerned at what could happen. Two other non-Brethren members of my family were also present: my second brother, Graham, and my daughter, Jane. Writing these words now I feel a deep sadness as I recall the events of that day.

The paper was well received and stimulated some interesting discussion. The Brethren as usual did not comment. One of the conference organisers asked how I was able to speak in front of the Brethren. This question powerfully triggered me. I realised that, had it not been for the good people present who wanted to support me, I could not have done it. I said, choked up with tears:

What people perhaps do not realise is that I don't just have one brother in the audience today [indicating Graham] but I have two. The other is right in front of me. John, I love you and miss you like crazy and this is the first time in 48 years that we three have been in the same room together.

That emotional moment probably made more impression than the paper because it highlighted so dramatically the impact the shunning practices of many cultic groups have on the family unit. That moment continues to have impact around the world, as it was included in the film '*Cult Witness*' (see below).

2010 ICSA Conference Rome, Italy (Appendix 19)

I was invited by Michael Langone to give a paper at the Rome conference titled '*How Cults can Harm People*'. I felt honoured to receive this invitation. In the paper, I compared the experiences of Janja Lalic, a former political cult member with those of Samuel Stefan, the producer of *Cult Witness*. They are both first generation adults. Janja left because her group imploded and Sam left for survival reasons following abuse and torture. Reflecting on this paper afterwards, I realised that when I create these papers I tend to structure the papers around a story with a strong emotional thus making a stronger impact on the audience.

2012 ICSA Annual Conference Montreal, Canada (Appendix 20)

The theme for this conference was 'Manipulation and Victimisation'. Some members of Feeb living in the US and Canada were interested in presenting. I took the lead and put together a symposium. The three other speakers were: Peter Caws, philosopher; Gordon Martin, film producer; and Stephen Ballard, lawyer. The abstract shows clearly how we used our expertise to create four papers that hung together very well.

As expected, a group of Brethren from Montreal were present, as well as a group of former members. It felt powerful to be sharing a platform with three friends and colleagues, all experts in their own fields. As usual the Brethren were silent

My paper, titled '*Manipulation and Victimisation: The Impact of the Doctrines of Separation on the Experiences of being Raised in and Leaving the Exclusive Brethren*', was based on the research described in this thesis. I had not completed all the interviews at this stage but I created a paper outlining a possible model to explain why people can have very different experiences in the Brethren (see appendix 20 and page 136).

2012 DCoP Annual Conference Leicester, UK

I presented the Montreal paper again, with some revisions, to make it more relevant to an audience made up of counselling psychologists. There were no Brethren in the audience.

After this conference, Linda Berkeley, one of the attendees wrote a review.

Brief biographies of the participants described experiences very much outside the experience of many people. The premise of this work is that the Exclusive Brethren's doctrine of "separation from evil" can delay and block cognitive, social, interpersonal, and moral development for children. This is argued to be abuse, coupled with alleged sexual abuse, with grave implications for adult psychological health.

Leaving such a group seems to result in further trauma with the loss of family and everything familiar. Using narrative analysis for the qualitative interviews, the preliminary findings suggest that some childhood experiences are similar and that this is possibly dependent on how enmeshed the gatekeepers, the parents, are with the group which mitigates the doctrine of separation. From the beginning of the presentation, Jill Mytton owned the work completely. She "came out" as a survivor of the Exclusive Brethren. I was struck by her personal courage in sharing her own experience parallel to the experience of her participants. This paper at once spoke of the social injustice we allow by sanctioning these cultic groups.

2013 ICSA Annual Conference Trieste, Italy (Appendix 21).

Although the Brethren's legal interventions had halted the quantitative research in October 2012, I had sufficient participants (n=264) to create a good report on the findings. The paper, titled '*The Mental Health of Second-Generation Adult Survivors (SGA) of the Exclusive Brethren: A Quantitative Study*', was as usual well received. Surprisingly no Brethren were present.

2013 DCoP Annual Conference Cardiff, Wales

Again I took advantage of the fact that the ICSA and DCoP conferences occur close together and repeated the Trieste paper. Once again current members of the Brethren attended. Afterwards, a colleague brought me some papers and said she had found one of the Brethren distributing them to the delegates. These papers contained

defamatory statements about me on a personal and professional level. The sheet, along with my responses, are in appendix 22. This was very distressing. The Brethren were not only on my territory but were trying to diminish my work to my professional colleagues. Subsequently they denied distributing the papers, which is at the least disingenuous.

2014 DCoP Annual Conference London

I repeated an edited version of the paper I gave in Rome, *'How Cults Harm'*. There were no Brethren in the audience, perhaps because the paper was not specifically about them but about cultic groups in general. On a slide illustrating how cultic groups often threaten people who talk about leaving, I used a quote from one of my brother John's emails. It said:

I must warn you that continuing as you are can only result in dire consequences. God is not mocked and it is with Him you have to do.

It remains a mystery how my brother found out about this. He accused me in an email of betraying him. I did not, however, name him on the slide.

2015 ICSA Annual Conference Stockholm, Sweden (Appendix 23).

The theme for this conference was 'Children in High-Control Groups' and focussed on Second Generation Adults. My paper, titled *'On Being Born and Raised in a high-demand group: A position paper based on former Exclusive Brethren members' experiences'*, therefore focussed on the possible impact of these experiences on aspects of child development.

Two current members of the Brethren were among the delegates. Unusually, they decided to speak out and began to read out a list of things I was 'wrong about'. I interrupted and insisted I be allowed to address each point one at a time. As a result, they were unable to complete their list; we ran out of time. As I sat down I realised I was shaking from the effort of keeping calm in the face of what felt like a barrage. The people I sat down next to were former Jehovah's Witnesses. They thanked me, whispering I had spoken for all other former members of cultic groups.

A video was made of this presentation and is available (Mytton, 2017).

2015 DCoP Annual Conference Harrogate

At this conference I presented a revised repeat of the 2008 Dublin conference paper as part of a symposium on cultic studies. No brethren were present but a large number of interested delegates were.

Published Academic Papers

After the ICSA 2015 conference in Stockholm, I was asked to submit my DCoP Dublin Conference 2008 paper '*When Endings are Beginnings*' to the tri-annual journal *ICSA Today*. While this is not officially a peer-reviewed journal, it nevertheless is reviewed by an academic editing team and reaches a readership of 900, comprising a wide variety of professionals as well as former members of cultic groups. Having more of a magazine style, it is very readable and accessible (Mytton, 2016). A scan of the article is in Appendix 24.

Section 2. Additional Impactful Products

Charity Commission Witness Statement (Appendix One)

When I created the list of outcomes for the Learning Agreement I only thought of impacting on other professionals and their clients. The events with the Charity Commission opened up the possibility of impacting on policy makes and on the Brethren themselves. That I did have an impact is evidenced in the time line of events from October 2012 to the present day (Appendix Two).

The first section of my witness statement is a description of the history, doctrines and practices of the Exclusive Brethren. The second section is a report on the quantitative study I carried out in collaboration with a researcher as mentioned in chapter one. My witness statement drew on knowledge I had gained during this doctorate.

The final decision document prepared by the Charity Commission (HM Government, 2014) set out how the evidence provided by other academics, former members and myself, impacted on their decision to grant conditional rather than unconditional charitable status to the Brethren's trust. The conditions contained in a Deed of Variation the trustees had to sign are based on the evidence the Charity Commission received. The conditions included a statement that separation was moral not physical, that families should be allowed to continue normal relations even after leaving, and those who leave should be given assistance to do so. Anecdotal evidence suggests these conditions are not being met.

Media Involvement

Since enrolling on this doctoral programme, I have been involved with the media as follows:

2005 Channel 5: *The Spy who stole my Life*. A programme about Robert Hendy-Freegard. Consultant psychologist and participant.

2006 BBC South West: *Inside Out*. A documentary about Philippe Sauvage. Consultant on Mind Control

2006 Channel 4: *Religion the Root of all Evil?* Richard Dawkins. Consultant and participant

2008 Leopard Films, Bern, Switzerland: Consultant during development stages of a documentary and participant in film based on the life of someone raised in a high demand group in the process of leaving.

2010 Arthio Films Switzerland: Interviewer, consultant and participant in the film *Cult Witness*.

2012 Swedish TV Company: *The Schools of the Exclusive Brethren*. Interviewee and consultant.

2016 Consulted by Sunday Star Times, New Zealand in relation to Child Sexual Abuse (Hurley, 2016).

The most impactful of these were:

- The Channel 4 documentary with Richard Dawkins in 2006. Following the broadcast, I was inundated with emails from former members of various cultic groups seeking help. Richard Dawkins subsequently mentioned me in his book *The God Delusion* (Dawkins, 2006) which brought another wave of emails. People seemed to identify with the struggles I described on a personal level as well as with my other comments in the entire uncut interview that is now on youtube though not viewable in the UK.
- The film *Cult Witness* (2010) has been shown at ICSA and DCoP conferences as well as broadcast in Switzerland, Germany, Scandinavia and the US. It has reached a very wide audience. One couple even came up to me in a Swiss mountain village and, having recognised me, thanked me for my contribution! The film is still being distributed around the world and is available on YouTube (Stefan, 2016)

Summary

The outcomes described above indicate the impact I have had and continue to have on professional audiences as well as on the Charity Commission and the Brethren themselves. Inevitably, as a member of the community I am researching, this has taken its toll. The events surrounding the Charity Commission activities and the relentless arrivals of lawyers' letters were particularly stressful and illustrate how difficult research in this area can be.

Chapter 9 Afterword

Met my only daughter in the local shop today... hardest thing ever. We just had a stilted conversation like strangers ...then I hugged her tight before she quickly ran out of the shop. Why, why, why? She's only 16! Just stood in the shop and cried. ...My heart just hurts so much!

'Anne'

People often ask me why, given the difficulties I have experienced on this doctoral journey, I have persevered. This quote provides part of my answer. In this final chapter I reflect on my journey and consider where I go next.

In this thesis and the various products arising from it I have given myself permission to have a voice. I hope my work will help other former members of cultic groups to find their voice, a process requiring an empathic audience. Some have been silenced by family loyalties, as they want to avoid harming those left in the group. Denial, minimisation and normalisation of painful traumatic events – these silence people too. Some leavers find they have no frame of reference or language to describe what happened to them. Cultic groups attempt to silence those they regard as apostates through threats – especially if, like me, they speak out.

It is increasingly fashionable to personalise research by including the voice of the researcher. Initially I resisted this but then found it difficult to avoid. I am human, which means to be relational and emotional. I naively embarked on this research journey with little thought of my own emotional safety. Inevitably I experienced the research both intellectually and emotionally. I became aware of this risk and set up an informal support network that included my family, members of Feeb, colleagues and friends. There came a time when this was not enough.

As outlined in chapter one, life has a habit of throwing curve balls at inopportune moments. All day and every day I found myself surrounded by people and issues relating to the Brethren: my mother's illness brought my brother John back into my

life; current members of the Brethren attended my conference presentations; former members, perhaps not understanding what was going on, sadly became critical; and the lawyers' letters stirred up fears and unresolved issues from my past. I needed a supervisor from outside – with no connection to the Brethren, someone neutral with whom I could debrief. Yet even my academic advisor was a former Brethren. At times, I felt naked, with my name besmirched on the internet by the Brethren and under personal and professional attack by other psychologists – members of my own profession.

The situation felt 'incestuous' – a strange word to use, but that was how it felt. On the advice of my personal therapist, I asked for a different supervisor in the hope that someone not connected to the Brethren would provide that neutral ground. Eventually one was allocated. In the end, it was my personal therapist who bore the brunt of my 'burnout'. The subjective method of using the researcher's personal voice meant I could no longer hide behind anonymity and objectivity.

When considering the ethical issues related to this research, my thoughts and those of the university ethics committee rightly centred on the protection of participants. Little thought was given to me as a researcher. There is a growing body of literature around the issue of risk to the researchers. In several papers, Dickson-Swift and her colleagues concluded that these risks are real (Dickson-Swift et al, 2006, 2008, 2009). They report emotional and physical symptoms including gastrointestinal problems, headaches and sleep disturbances (e.g. Burr, 1996; Etherington, 2007c) together with the challenges of guilt, vulnerability, exhaustion and even feeling a fraud (Hochschild, 1983). I experienced them all. Qualitative research can be emotionally draining. Qualitative interviewing by its nature gives the researcher little control over the topics raised, especially in unstructured interviews where the participant is encouraged to tell their stories freely and openly.

Dickson-Swift and her colleagues recommend strategies including: professional supervision, preferably outside the university; policy development; and training in how to manage distress arising during interviews. However, they fail to consider researchers who are researching within communities they are members of themselves,

or unexpected actions from outside, such as the legal threats from the Exclusive Brethren.

It is knowledge that enables us to minimise and deal with the emotional risk that can lead to burnout. If I were to embark on this journey again with the knowledge I now have, I would expect the university where the research was lodged to collaborate in considering potential risks to the researcher and to devise strategies such as access to an outside supervisor. As many sensitive areas can trigger legal activity, it would be wise to consider this too. The researcher should have adequate legal insurance and access to the university's legal resources.

Despite the physical and emotional cost, I have completed this research. It has been a steep but rewarding learning curve. When I embarked on this journey I thought I knew all there was to know about the Brethren. I did not. I still often discover something new. The journey has taken over my life, at times to the detriment of family and friends, but it has been worth it.

The mountains are still reassuringly there, still changing, still calling me, still invigorating me. My climb has been of huge personal significance. I have reshaped my sense of identity and can recognise the pain that comes from having disorganised attachments in my life and the resultant traumas.

I remain frustrated that the word limit prevented a more in-depth analysis of the stories. I would like to have looked more closely at the impact of being raised in the Brethren on children's development. However, this is not the end of the road and I can continue to reflect on what more the stories can teach me. In all of this, I have had to live and breathe uncertainty – not easy for a former member of a cultic group.

At the end of this journey I feel more integrated and coherent than that client self so many years ago who sat twisting her fingers unable to speak. The culture of the Brethren and their attitudes to education influenced my sense of who I was: that I was not worthy or clever enough. 'Thou art weighed in the balances and art found wanting'

(Daniel, 5:27) – a verse that strangely lodged in my childhood memory as ‘thou shalt be judged and found wanting’.

I am already anticipating feelings of loss and ‘what now?’. I hope this work will be of significance to former members of the Brethren and other cultic groups. I also hope it will add to the growing body of literature on second generation adults, as well as expand into exploring the different problems multi-generational adults face: nothing has been written about them until now.

I intend to continue my work by publishing papers based on this research; presenting papers at conferences; providing workshops for clinical practitioners; and talking to the media when requested. My aim will be to explore ways that professionals working with former members can help this group of people become survivors. I hope I have provided a platform from which these stories can reach the wider community and contribute to studies concerning the thousands of former cultic group members. Those who leave these groups have been through so much, they deserve to meet with understanding when they turn to professionals for help. It is my hope that my work will go some way in helping them to achieve this. That is the least I can do.

The effects of this childhood still affect me. I never knew love. I never knew security. I never knew safety. I never knew the basic care and rights of a child to be protected. I never knew I had any rights. I never learned to make good decisions. I never knew how to have a voice and be heard. I never knew I could be anything I wanted to be. I was too busy trying to fit in the mould that was created for me...

It hurt, it still hurts.

‘Susan’, 2017

Glossary

Acts in the power of the Holy Spirit

This refers to their belief in the power of the Holy Spirit in the assembly.

Bruce Hales Vol 38:247

When we are carrying on lawlessly, and without restraint, out of control, it only leads to famine, and disaster, destitution. Whereas being subdued, recognising the authority that's in the assembly, recognising the special place, you might say, that Christ has, involving the power of the Spirit, and the idea of kingship, the idea of absolute monarchy, to recognise it, what I'll find is prosperity, would you say?

Assembly conscience

In the event of any perceived wrong-doing, two brothers or priests would present a case for judgement to the assembly. The Assembly Conscience is then called on so collectively that conscience is meant to carry everyone with it to make a judgement. Thus no one person makes a judgement - it is the Assembly (all those assembled) conscience that has made it.

Assembly discipline or judgement

Being under assembly discipline means to be withdrawn from, the Brethren's form of excommunication.

Breaking bread

The Brethren phrase for Holy Communion

Commerce into the assembly

In the mid 1960s attempts were made by J.S.Hales and Bruce Hales Senior to bring commercialism into the assembly to make money. It included time and motion studies that involved every member keeping a record of what they did each day. Life became very regimented. Eventually J.Taylor Jr banned it all and the Hales brothers were withdrawn from.

Directives

Rules, made by the leaders under the guise of suggestions. These are usually things said by the leader in the meetings, that the members must heed.

Dispensationalism

In addition to what is written on page 47, more information on Dispensationalism can be found on this website.

<http://www.informationclearinghouse.info/article4531.htm>

Eating matter

As early as 1955 James Taylor Jr was saying we should not eat with those who have been withdrawn from. (Ministry of James Taylor Jr, Vol. 1 page 59; London, July 1955)

Then in July 1960, first in Horsham and later elsewhere, he said we should not eat with anyone who is not in our fellowship. Vol. 5 pages 14, 77, 81, 151. Many people left as a result of this, some in 1959 and others in 1960. This is described as the ‘Eating Matter’.

In fellowship

Being in fellowship means being a current member of the Exclusive Brethren – that is taking part in the breaking of bread.

Interchange

Exclusive Brethren belong to a local “assembly” – a group of people who meet together regularly. Interchange is when neighbouring assemblies travel to other cities for meetings, usually at least once a week, alternating the venue between the different cities where the assemblies or meeting halls are located.

Leading brothers or leading light

Used to describe men who are leading the smaller local meetings.

Lord’s Supper

The Brethren's weekly gathering for communion. The Brethren sit in two circles - Brothers in the inner circle and sisters on the outside. The bread and wine - the "Emblems" - are passed from person to person in silence. Children participate as soon as they hold food and drink in their hands.

Man of God

see "the Minister of the Lord in the Recovery"

Man's world

Not currently used, this phrase refers to anything outside of the Exclusive Brethren

Ministry

The Ministry usually refers to the printed ministry, which are notes of meetings taken by prominent brothers. Every Exclusive Brethren household is expected to possess a copy of the complete works going back to J.N.D. Originally ministry was the result of carefully transcribed meeting notes, but with the advent of digital recording and transcription, they faithfully represent every single word that are spoken in meetings, without any editing apart from by the 'Man of God' of the day.

Priests

Although a common term in use by members of the Exclusive Brethren, it has been remarked that 'Priest' was an Old Testament term and the function of such an official position was rescinded once Christ was raised, as he is now our High Priest (ref Hebrews). Priestliness, however, is an attribute much sought after in the Brethren as being a mark of spirituality and proof of the 'Work of Christ within us'. In recent times, 'Priest' has become more of a slang term to define those who used to visit you when matters were gone over.

Priestlies

A slang term, 'getting a priestly' was an informal (and disrespectful) way to describe being visited by the priests.

Right before the Lord or God

Getting right before the Lord means to confess one's sins and make amends, often but not always involving confessing to a priest.

Secret rapture

The Brethren believe that they will be taken to be with the Lord in Heaven in an event they call The Rapture. They believe that the Lord will take them and other believers directly up to Heaven (while living) to take them out of the world when the wickedness on Earth becomes too much. There is a focus on maintaining purity to ensure they will be ready, and fit to enter Heaven when the Rapture occurs.

Seven day matter

During J.H. Symington's leadership, based on 1 Corinthians 5:11-13, many who had confessed to a sin but were forgiven, had to be confronted with their sin all over again and be withdrawn from for the statutory minimum of seven days. After this they could be restored to fellowship or be made to wait another seven days.

Shut up or shrinking from. The process of being 'shut up' or 'shrinking from' is part of the Brethren's disciplinary procedures and comes into play after visits by local priests have failed to persuade the member to change. This involves 'minimising social contact with the person for a limited period to provide them with the space and time to make a private and personal choice about their continuing in the fellowship' (HM Government, 2014:22). The length of time varies but has lasted many years for some.

Shunned

Shunning is the act of ignoring and cutting a former member out of one's life after they have been excommunicated.

The Lord has turned a corner or the Lord has moved on

A term used by the Brethren when a rule is changed, indicating that when the rule was in force, this was what the Lord wanted, but now he has changed his mind.

The Lord is putting his focus elsewhere

Similar to the term above, this may be said when direction changes are questioned by members or outsiders

The Minister of the Lord in the Recovery

A title used for the current world leader of the Exclusive Brethren.. Used synonymously with 'Man of God', "the Lord's servant" and "the Elect Vessel." It is normally an until-death appointment. There is no election, it is managed and maneuvered politically.

The Recovery

The Recovery is the recovery of the truth, which the Brethren believe is being revealed by God through their leaders.

The Review

When the current leader came to power, he ordered that the Exclusive Brethren all over the world review cases of people being withdrawn from. As a result some people received apologies, or were invited to return.

The Saints

A collective term for describing the Brethren as a group

Three day meetings

Large events, often involving hundreds of members from all over the world. These events last for three days, and visiting members stay in the houses of Brethren who live in the city hosting the meetings.

Trampling on the natural

The Brethren see earthly pleasures and desires as part of the 'natural' world, and believe it is necessary to 'trample on the natural' thoughts and desires in order to keep oneself clean and pure in the eyes of God. 'The natural' could range from thoughts of lust or greed to an appreciation of 'worldly' music.

Truth of the Church

The Brethren believe that the true Church was re-established after centuries of darkness through John Nelson Darby. Darby broke away from the established church and its hierarchy, legalism and corruption. Links with 'Walks in the light of the assembly'.

Universal leader

See Minister of the Lord in the Recovery

Walks in the light of the assembly

The light of the assembly is the special understanding of the scriptures that the Brethren leaders have uncovered. This special understanding is unique to them and cannot be found in other churches. One must be in fellowship with the Exclusive Brethren to "walk in the light of the assembly".

Bruce Hales, Vol 118:98 (Buenos Aires, 7 December 2011)

"the breakthrough that came in in J.N.D. was new, it was a new move, wonderful move in the recovery, when he got the light of the assembly and recovered Paul's teachings really in all their purity and their greatness as established, re-established in a collective position, which, you might say, had been dormant for many years, so many centuries"

System days

A phrase used to refer to the time in the past when 'commerce was brought into the assembly'. See above.

Withdrawn from

The final stage of discipline, where the Brethren formally declare that a person is no longer a member. A withdrawn from person is said to be wicked, and members cannot communicate or socialise with them.

Worldlies

The term current members traditionally use to describe people who are not, and have never been Exclusive Brethren. In recent times, members have been encouraged to call outsiders "Non-community" rather than worldly.

Notes

Chapter 1 Personal Context

1. Any biblical quotations are taken from the version of the John Nelson Darby translation of the Bible used by the Exclusive Brethren
2. The Brethren have a Facebook page and under information they state that they have “around 46000 members globally”. See https://www.facebook.com/pg/PlymouthBrethrenChristianChurch/about/?ref=page_internal retrieved 29.08.17
3. The locations of the Brethren churches are shown on a map on their website. <http://www.plymouthbrethrenchristianchurch.org/our-locations/>
4. Roger Stott 1938-2007 was a former member who, like myself, came from a long line of Brethren families. He left the group in 1970 and eventually became a BBC TV producer for the Everyman programmes. A poet and author, he was a good friend of mine, collaborating with me on many occasions (e.g. Mytton, 1993). His knowledge of the Brethren was invaluable. Some of his writings can be found here <http://wikipiebia.com/roger-m-stott/> accessed 19.03.17
5. Professor Paul Barber was one of my academic co-ordinators from Metanoia.
6. Dick Wyman is a former member of the Brethren living in the US. His website is no longer live and cannot be found on the webarchive.org. This valuable resource has been lost though some documents have been saved.
7. The International Cultic Studies Association based in the US, runs annual conferences, alternately in North America and Europe. Their website URL is www.icsahome.com
8. Peebs.net was closed down early in 2013 for reasons unknown. There is an archived version here <https://web.archive.org/web/20120210170658/http://peebs.net/>
9. I presented the preliminary results of this research at the International Cultic Studies Association Annual Conference in New Jersey, July 2010.
10. Ian McKay, an academic, former member of the Brethren and friend, has been one of the collaborators in this project.

11. Baroness Berridge, whose parents were born into the Brethren but who had left before she was born, mentioned both the University and my colleague in a speech in the House of Lords
<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld201213/ldhansrd/text/121122-0003.htm> retrieved 17.03.16

Chapter 2

1. See <http://www.icsahome.com/aboutus/name-change> retrieved 04.11.15.
2. INFORM is an independent charity providing up-to-date information about new religious movements. <http://www.inform.ac>
3. This law was named after the two members of parliament responsible, Nicolas About and Catherine Picard

Chapter 3

1. The majority of leaders of cultic groups are male therefore the male pronoun will be used.

Chapter 4

1. The full biblical text is

2 Timothy 2:19-22 Darby Translation

19 *Yet the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, [The] Lord knows those that are his; and, Let every one who names the name of [the] Lord withdraw from iniquity.*

20 *But in a great house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also wooden and earthen; and some to honour, and some to dishonour.*

21 *If therefore one shall have purified himself from these, [in separating himself from them], he shall be a vessel to honour, sanctified, serviceable to the Master, prepared for every good work*

22 *But youthful lusts flee, and pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace, with those that call upon the Lord out of a pure heart.*

The square brackets indicate 'gloss' i.e. the translator has added something, not in the original text, to make the meaning clearer. This is often because of language usage changes or because direct translation is not possible. It is inevitable in translating ancient languages. I have been informed that the current version of the Darby bible no longer has square brackets around the phrase 'in separating himself from them' however, Darby's original translation did.

2. From their early days, the Brethren have referred to their leading members using their initials, not only in their ministry but also in their meetings and in conversation.
3. Between 1953 and 1959 there was an interregnum after James Taylor Senior's death. During these six years there was considerable jockeying for position.
4. A list of rules ("directives") made by James Taylor Junior for his followers, known as the Taylorite Branch of the Exclusive Brethren appears to have been compiled originally by a member of that fellowship at some time after 1970. This list can be found here <http://wikipeebia.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/EBDirectives.pdf>
5. There are several quotes in the ministry from the leaders referring to the Darby translation as being the better one. This is one example.

Everything in Scripture has significance. We're thankful for the original translation, but we're thankful for J.N.D.'s translation, it's been, referred to as a better, a better translation.

Bruce D Hales Vol. 96:190 (Kellyville, 28 February 2010)

6. Extract from Readings at Nostrand Avenue and Other Ministry. Vol.1 page 50 9th August 1970. Explicit statement that the Brethren should listen to him now instead of Paul.

J.T.Jr. Well, they had better listen to me instead of Paul just now. Paul is all right, and when I see him he will say. 'That is fine Jim, what you did'.

7. In a meeting between Senator Bob Brown and representatives of the Exclusive Brethren in 2013, Richard Garrett said:

Richard Garrett: This is a dispensation of grace. ... we're not trying to change the world. We can't. This world is ripe for judgement...But our obligation, according to the scripture and the word of God is to walk a pathway of separation, that's separation from evil. Now we're not taking the higher ground, it's not a haughty approach.

The full document can be retrieved here

<https://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P3-1051086081.html>

8. Bruce Hales, the current leader, has spoken several times on the evil of fiction. Here are two examples.

One of the most damaging things is to be, fall, under the power of worldly literature ...you might get a novel, and you might think, well, it looks, the cover doesn't look too bad... all of a sudden there's evil there. It's the way the devil works the damning, damaging influence of worldly literature, it's frightening You see lovely young people getting engrossed in novels, not realising that Satan is slowly, carefully seducing them, drawing them into a web and to a net, and entangling them .

Bruce Hales, Vol 31 page 251. Reading at Christchurch, 21 August 2004

See, there's demons in literature, there's demons in corrupt literature, there's demons in filthy literature, there's demons in novels. Might think you're doing well, start off the first few pages, all of a sudden you run into a demon, demon after demon. See, our beloved brother used to quote F.E.R., I think he said there's nothing more lawless than a novel. It took me a little while to understand it. But you get these writers, and they can express to the extent of the wickedness of their imagination in a novel

Bruce Hales, Vol 26 page 73-74. Reading in Montreal. 11 March 2004

9. Quote regarding the devil using state schools to introduce evil ideas.

J.H.S. . . . Perhaps we haven't been watchful enough. But what the schools are doing is still devilish, I mean much of it. They're trying to bring in a teaching of how to use means to carry on evilly. That's not of God. That's of the devil, devilish. Earthly, natural, devilish, — it doesn't come from above. It comes from the pit.

J. H. Symington Vol. 95 page 182 (Neche, 4 September 1981)

10. UBT stands for Universal Business Team – a global enterprise spanning 19 countries. It is described by one former member as the business arm of the Brethren with Bruce Hales as the CEO. Former members who have recently left gave me the following information. All Brethren businesses have to sign up to it. Any electronic equipment has to be purchased or leased from UBT. Businesses are monitored by UBT and some former members state failing businesses are closed. None of this is apparent on their website <http://www.universalbusinesssteam.com>. The Rapid Relief Team is their charitable arm. Any profits from computer and mobile phone sales are supposed to contribute to their schools.

11. There are several references to the evil in the world and that it is on the increase in the ministry. Here is one example.

The world is a terrible place, it's getting worse.

12. Bruce D Hales Sydney, 29 December 2012

12. The actions of some former members including myself during the Charity Commission saga were seen by the Brethren as one such attack from the outside.

Yes, how central it is. And this attack currently in the U.K. against the Lord's Supper is futile.

It's an attack on the essential, enduring, eternal character of Christianity.

Bruce D Hales, Sydney, 23 June 2012

13. Part of Brethren folklore is that they have the light and that anyone who leaves is turning their back on the light. There are several references to the light in the ministry.

It's very fine to meet true believers in the world; haven't the light of assembly, must be grasping after something.

Bruce D Hales Vol 49:121 Sydney, 10 January 2004

Well, we've seen it, we've got the truth... See our beloved brother said once, he said we're holding the full light of true Christianity for all Christians. That means we're not taking the sectarian ground but we're holding the truth for all Christians.

Bruce D Hales Vol 25:28 Sydney, 10 January 2004

14. To provide an explanation as to why someone was withdrawn from for something forbidden that is now allowed (e.g. having a mobile phone) the Brethren say that the person 'went ahead of the Lord' meaning ahead of the Lord's revelations. This is one quote I found from the ministry

John S Hales: I've thought of it a little bit lately that we don't want to go ahead of the Lord, we don't want to go behind Him. We cannot do that. Our franchise might be at stake, but we don't want to go ahead of Him . . . we may do damage. Wonderful thing with these great men is that they were just in the divine timing.

J. H. Symington Vol 25:110 (Southampton, 9 March 1974)

15. Quote for the oft heard phrase from former Brethren "We'll do the thinking, you do the doing" (my bold)

*You often find it sometimes with younger persons, and they're thinking . . . I said to them a few times, You're thinking too much, you're thinking, you're just about thinking yourself crazy. You're trying to think through a problem, when all you have to do is be obedient. We'll do the thinking for you. Here's a list of ten things to do, just do it, don't even think about it. If you think about it, you'll get down to number two, and give up. **We'll do the thinking, you do the doing.** But it's a good exercise when you're younger. If younger persons are prepared to subject their minds and their wills they'll find life a lot easier. I mean, not only a lot easier, they'll find life just going right ahead, just on the principle of subjection and obedience.*

Bruce D Hales Vol. 41 page 79

16. This story by Craig Hoyle is in the public domain and is just one of many.

I came out as gay to the priests when I was 18.My father never discussed it and my mother mentioned it once when it came up in conversation. She just said in passing that she'd known I had issues but that was not what she expected it to be. The church subsequently spent a year and a half trying to change me. I was told on several occasions that I had demons that I was possessed, under the grip of Satan they would say. So there was a period of 18 months where I was compliant with the church's instructions. They had done almost everything imaginable to change my sexuality. I'd been through prayers and counselling, been told I had demons, and finally they ended up sending me to live in Australia... The church leader [BDH] sent me to a church doctor who put me on drugs. The drugs that he put me on were Cypostat which is a hormonal suppressant. So it cuts off the supply of testosterone, typically only used for registered sex offenders or for advanced cases of prostate cancer. I took the drug for about a month and then took myself off. Fairly terrible side effects leading to nausea, dizziness. Potential side effects, tumours, impotence, kidney failure could have happened down the line if I had continued taking the drug for any length of time. "

Radio New Zealand. Interview by Sonia Sly with Craig Hoyle, January 2013.

17. Mixed-race marriages

R.W.S. A word may be fitting now as to Mr. Taylor's letter on the seemliness of the races marrying, that it is unseemly for those who are white to marry those who are coloured, yet it is being done.

J.T.Jr. In the assembly there is no difference, in the assembly we are all of one, there is no difference whatever; but in the public ordering of God there is a difference and a spiritual state in us would respect that. There should not be that.

James Taylor Jnr, Vol 22, p200. Meetings at Kelvin Hall, Glasgow 5th July 1963.

RWS = Robert Stollery

18. Leavers cannot call themselves Christian.

And if you leave the fellowship you don't have Christianity. I want every young person to understand that here: you give up the fellowship, don't think you can hold on to Christianity. You haven't got it. Young people that give up the fellowship, and turn their back on the fellowship, and leave what they've been brought up in, and leave the position they've been set in, they can't claim Christianity, they can't do it.

Bruce Hales, Brown Book, Volume 35, p276-277. Readings in Sydney, 29 January 2005

19. Shunning or shrinking from

Leviticus 13:3-5 Darby translation

3 *And when the priest looketh on the sore in the skin of the flesh, and the hair in*

the sore is turned white, and the sore looketh deeper than the skin of his flesh, it is the sore of leprosy; and the priest shall look on him and pronounce him unclean.
4 *But if the bright spot be white in the skin of his flesh, and look not deeper than the skin, and the hair thereof be not turned white, the priest shall shut up [him that hath] the sore seven days.*
5 *And the priest shall look on him the seventh day; and behold, in his sight, the sore remaineth as it was, the sore hath not spread in the skin, then the priest shall shut him up seven days a second time.*

20. Two biblical texts are used to support the dividing of families.

For I have come to set a man at variance with his father, and the daughter with her mother, and the daughter-in-law with her mother-in-law;

Matthew 10:35

If any man come to me, and shall not hate his own father and mother, and wife, and children, and brothers, and sisters, yea, and his own life too, he cannot be my disciple;

Luke 14: 26

Chapter 6

1. www.peebs.net was a website about the Exclusive Brethren holding a great deal of information about the group as well as a useful forum for former member. See also Chapter 1 note 7.
2. It has become the custom for former members to meet up socially at times during the year. One key such meeting occurs annually in an hotel in Maidenhead in June. The social event when I first met Darren was a gathering organised in London at a pub.
3. Darren now lives on Canada and there school children are referred to as students.
4. When JTJr became the Man of God he introduced alcohol to their way of life. It is now expected that members drink mainly whisky. He used 1 Timothy 4:4 *For every creature of God [is] good, and nothing [is] to be rejected, being received with thanksgiving.* The argument being that if nothing is to be rejected that includes alcohol.
5. See chapter 4 note 15

Chapter 7

1. All meetings attended by the leader are recorded, transcribed and published as Ministry Books which the members are required to purchase. A new subject index is produced from time to time that indexes all the possible references. In 2014 this ran to nearly 1500 pages: the writing is very small.

2. The Brethren as a safe haven
That's the 2 Timothy 2 charter, in Christ Jesus. So that separation, extreme, it's been said, extreme separation, separation from the world and all that's around us keeps using that position. It's the only position of safety.
Bruce Hales. Boston, Fellowship Meeting, Lord's day, 11 December 2011. Vol 18:199

3. Special friendships frowned on.
Well, that's what would save us from special friendships. Special friendships are a bane amongst the brethren, just a bane; see, whether we really have got to grips with it. Beloved Mr. Symington used to labour at it. I mean, I think I can honestly say we were brought up under that kind of teaching, that you couldn't afford to have special friendships. When you first got married you didn't think in terms of having special friendships.
Bruce Hales, Nelson, 22 February 2002, Vol 2:161

4. The second family is more important than the first.

The first family is what it is, that's our households, then the second family is something greater.
Bruce Hales, Barbados, Reading. 18 September 2008

The endeavour was to try and get through to the second family in the first family, that is, you're trying to ...bring in a heavenly influence that supersedes just natural links.
Bruce Hales, Sydney, Reading. 26 December 2009

5. Putting away natural feelings.

It's just the natural man, isn't it, totally unacceptable to God? I think Mr. Symington at one point referred to, I think, trampling on the natural.
Bruce Hales, Lyon, 16 March 2002 Vol 3:200

6. See chapter 4 note 16.

7. See chapter 1 note 5.

8. Comment by Kevin Dormer, member of the Brethren in the BBC Everyman Programme, The Exclusive Brethren, 2003

When someone goes out of fellowship as you'll know it's a major major change for them. They're not equipped for the world.

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