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Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by second-generation ex-members of high control cultic groups. A life story narrative inquiry

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Title

Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by second-generation ex-members of high control cultic groups. A Life Story Narrative Inquiry.

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Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to the many thousands of people across the world who have experience of high control cultic groups and who have subsequently left.

You are not alone.

I feel fortunate to have met my participants and shared in their stories. I want to express my gratitude for their interest, their openness, their generosity and their desire to share their experiences with me and the wider world.

I hope your voices are heard in this piece and that together we contribute to greater understanding and support for those that say “me also”.

I would like to thank those professionals that have supported me through the many years that it has taken to produce this work. My supervisor Professor Kim Etherington has shared her invaluable expertise, support and encouragement. Your guidance, motivation and insight has kept me going at difficult and uncertain times.

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Abstract

This Life Story Narrative Inquiry explores the stories told of self and identity by four individuals who identified themselves as having been raised from infancy in high control, cultic groups and who subsequently left.

When a person leaves a group of this kind they often do not leave behind just group membership, or a belief system. They can leave behind material provisions such as housing, employment, finance and possessions, but on a more personal level they may leave behind a partner, family, friends, a complete social network and, at a psychological level, a sense of attachment, support, security, and identity: who they feel that they are as a person.

Research into the issues facing members who leave suggests that adjusting to life and self after leaving can be compounded by experiences of shame, guilt, ongoing belief in the ideology, the residual impact of possible thought-reform techniques, and previous trauma, both physical and psychological whilst in the group.

For those born into high-control cultic groups, the second and multi-generational, the challenges can be greater, particularly in terms of understanding who they believe themselves to be. Who am I without the group identity?

Research that focuses on the meaning making and experiences of self and identity is limited and this research increases the knowledge in this area. Conversational Life Story Narrative interviews were carried out bringing together a multiplicity of experiences of self, other, group and the wider world. Personal timelines were used as an anchor point to facilitate reflection at different life stages, using the research conversation as a vessel, holding the potential for identity to be storied and re-storied, constructed and re-constructed. The narratives and the meaning making within them were explored and reflected upon. Researcher reflexivity was an integral part of this process.

The aims of the research were two-fold: to support the understanding of a mental health practitioner who might, in the course of their work, meet a person who has experience of being a member of high-control cultic environments, and to demonstrate to affected individuals that they are not alone.

What is personal can also be political so the intimate knowledge shared within the narratives shone a light on cultic organisations and how the demand of these types of groups were experienced at a personal level, as well as the impact that they had on young and developing selves. This research invites professionals to consider that experiences of this type sit within a trauma framework that encompasses psychological, relational, emotional and physical trauma.

Table of contents

“Tell your story.

Shout it. Write it.

Whisper it if you have to.

But tell it.

Some won’t understand it.

Some will outright reject it.

But many will thank you for it.

And then the most magical thing will happen.

One by one, voices will start whispering,

‘Me too’.

And your tribe will gather.

And you will never feel alone again”.

L.R. Knost (2016)

1 - Introduction

Background to the Study

"We accept the reality of the world with which we're presented. It's as simple as that".

(The Truman Show, 1998)

The origins of this study lie in my own story of leaving a high control cultic group. As a psychotherapist, trainee Counselling Psychologist and second-generation ex-cult member the research has always felt like something I had to do, a personal endeavour within a professional domain. When starting my doctoral studies I remember talking with other students who were tailoring their research topics to their eventual career direction, and feeling that perhaps I should be doing that too, but deep down knowing that in some way my topic had chosen me already, that I owed it to myself and others to share the often hidden, quiet stories of individuals who from their earliest years have been raised within high control cultic groups and who subsequently leave, often in the face of disapproval, ostracism and rejection by those closest to them.

These stories are personal, intimate and inextricably intertwined with a person's sense of self, identity and self-esteem. Recollections are shared of on-going personal struggles to find a place in an unfamiliar world, to form opinions of one's own, and a sense of knowing and trusting oneself and allowing oneself to be known by others.

My early development happened within a fundamentalist sect that sought to remain apart from the world, await the end of days and survive into a world cleansed by god. Based upon literal interpretation of their own translation of the Bible the group's focus was on each member working hard at recruiting more members in order to secure their place in this new world and this was paramount. It meant that you might survive when the world was destroyed, that families would be able to stay together, and in the here and now you would not be disciplined by the group leadership figures who were effectively deemed to be god's conduit of communication to his worshippers.

I grew up with an implicit sense of desperate fear of imminent death. A fear held in the body, the mind, within myself. It was a fear couched within a smiling, outwardly happy organisation whose power and influence for group members supersedes all authority; governmental, professional and familial. Joyfully the organisation told of unseen demonic forces that swirled and twisted around us all seeking to snatch us away from our omnipotent, loving god and from his apparently safe organisation if we did not work hard enough to gain salvation. The group

regularly published artistic images of people judged unworthy being torn away from their families, slipping into dark crevices that appeared in the earth, leading down into places of destruction. For me as a child of perhaps seven or eight years, therein lay the trauma. I felt safe but not safe, alive but not alive, worthy but not worthy.

There was no reassurance as to whether I would survive or not, whether I was doing enough. Instinctively a child turns to their primary caregiver for reassurance and security (Bowlby, 1988; Wallin, 2007) but I quickly learned that within the group this did not really apply because expressing doubt or fear could be seen as a lack of faith or close relationship with god and his organisation, the group. The truth was that as a child I knew that my parents acquiesced to the organisation, it's leadership and power in all aspects of their life, so fear and doubt felt safer held within. My parents were needed but feared (Guntrip, 2019) because ultimately their loyalty lay with the group. It was common knowledge that this loyalty cut across family bonds. The ultimate punishment for disloyalty or disobedience was complete 'shunning' where you effectively became a 'non-person' invisible to the group and your family, and this was re-enforced, demonstrated and justified often to group members at meetings which took place at least three times a week.

As a child I became wary, introverted. I felt odd. I was encouraged to form friendships only with children in the group as everyone outside of the group was going to die imminently unless they joined us. I remember thinking about children at school that I liked and craving carefree friendships with them, whilst also bearing a heavy knowledge that they would be judged and destroyed soon anyway, like the people in those images, and that their friendship could mean myself and my family would be 'disciplined' by the group leaders, or worse, I could die with those people.

Everything around me felt tainted with death, whether that be the grandparents that I loved so much who were not group members, or the friendly kids at school, or the lady who owned the sweetshop who knew of my family and always gave me a few extra sweets.

On reflection I believe that it was the kindness of strangers and a sense of being dead already that saved me. I began to notice altruism, philanthropy, unconditional 'kindnesses' from and between people that I came across, which seemed in a small way to challenge the dominant narrative of the group's 'goodness' and the world's 'badness'. The group narrative was that only group members truly loved and cared for you and were good. There were a few good people outside of the group but they were alienated from the true god, so any goodness was meaningless. Most people outside of the group were absorbed with their own selfish desires, firmly in the hand of the devil, with no care for others or god.

Reflecting on who I was back then I would say I was a young person who was not living, but was trying desperately not to die by recruiting others into the group, and so it seemed was everyone else around me. Living daily with fear of imminent death and destruction was embedded in my psyche, my physical body, my emotional world, my behaviours, my relationships. Existential threat was re-enforced on a daily basis, but at some point in my late teenage years I craved the release of death. I physically felt myself give in to the idea of not striving for life eternal but settling for this short life and imminent death. I was not good enough or strong enough to keep striving.

This felt like the first choice I had made so far in my short life. I chose death. It felt like such a relief. This was not as dramatic and tragic as physically taking my own life at seventeen years of age, as some in similar circumstances have done, but it was a gentle unclenching of the hand that had held on so tightly to the group and the apparently 'life-saving' safety that it offered. I left the 'life group' and joined the 'death group'. It felt like psychological suicide as my belief in the 'truth' of the group narrative was so strong. It was the dominant narrative of my life so far, and remained with me long after leaving the group.

When I left the group I left behind the person I thought I was. I did not know who I was anymore. I could not locate myself in anything; the touchstones of my life were lost to me. On the day of my 'shunning' the group, family, friends, the belief system were all lost to me. Everyone turned away from me, quite literally. Nothing made sense at the time. The reference points for what I thought I knew about myself and the world had just been erased, and here I was with what felt like a blank page on which I had to try to draw myself anew, to survive, and not lose myself entirely.

Many years later, over a decade later in fact, I felt able and stable enough to reflect on my group experience, to see the group and it's influence through the eyes of an adult rather than those of a vulnerable, frightened child and adolescent. Studying towards a degree in psychology helped develop my critical thinking. I was able to critically appraise the group dynamics and the fundamentalist perspective of the group. Though still fearful I could scrutinise, assess and, at a cognitive level, reject the group narrative and ideology as no longer part of my chosen belief system. This created a distance, a vantage point within me and a seam of strength to become curious about other people's experiences. For my undergraduate degree research project I interviewed two ex-members of a high-control, cultic group. One was recruited into the group as an adult in their mid-thirties. The other participant was second-generation; they were 'born in' to the group and raised according to it's beliefs. To some extent my findings from that very small, limited piece of research acted as a pre-cursor to this study.

A key difference emerged from the narratives shared: for the person recruited into the group as an adult, post-exit there was a sense of returning to a core identity, and a self that had been lost for a while. For the second-generation participant, leaving felt distinctly more traumatic, leaving them faced with the question of who they were now, when everything that they knew about themselves had been in and of the group?

What also emerged from the research conversations was that neither participant sought help from mental health professionals in relation to their experiences in the group, and they both linked this to feeling that no-one would understand, and also a sense of strong disapproval of seeking external help which they felt was inculcated into their thought processes whilst in the high-control group, which they both experienced as still impacting ten years post-exit. Lack of trust in external sources such as psychologists and psychotherapists can be indoctrinated in members over many years, so that members look only to the group for support and instruction. Dependency is perpetuated. It is often seen as disloyal and punishable to look for help from sources other than the group. (Langone, 1993; McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). Lalich and Tobias (2006) bring attention to the potential for current cult members to not "seek therapy unless it is approved by the leader or acceptable to the belief system" (p. 290). They may not be registered with a provider or have the means to access healthcare systems and "may consciously or unconsciously hold onto a cult-instilled stigma against therapy" (p.290). This can also be compounded by many "mental health professionals having no real experience or knowledge of cults or the emotional and psychological toll they can take" (p.290).

Key features of high control and cultic groups

Over the last twenty years I have had the privilege of communicating with many people who were 'born in'; the second, third and fourth generation of their family raised from infancy in high control cultic groups. Although the groups have been many and varied, often the structures and dynamics are the same. A key feature of high control cultic groups, whether centred on religion, politics, therapy, self-improvement, meditation or otherwise, is a shared commitment to an often extreme ideology, sometimes embodied by a charismatic leader or leadership. Similarities can be seen in the group power structure and governance, for example, a high level of commitment is required from members and the hierarchy of power in the group is strictly adhered to. Life's biggest questions are often answered, through the doctrine, such as who am I, what is my purpose, what is the meaning of life, what happens when we die, how do I achieve self-enlightenment and my full potential? Critical thinking is discouraged, black and white thinking is supported, often resulting in cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957; Langone, 1993; Lefevor et al., 2020; Singer, 2003).

The groups often have little tolerance for internal disagreement or external scrutiny, requiring excessive devotion from members and sometimes separation from family, especially if family are not group members. Recruiting others into the group is often a significant element of group-life and sometimes basic freedoms of thought, speech, association and financial autonomy can be denied (Hassan, 1988; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993; Singer, 2003).

The language problem: Why call it a cult? Why call it high control?

I have grappled long and hard with the question of what language to use when attempting to write about these groups. Other researchers also acknowledge the difficulty of language when researching high-control cultic groups (Aboud, 2020; Jenkinson, 2016; Kendall, 2016; Mytton, 2017). I now regard the group that I was raised in as a cult. For me, my experience fits the definition of cultic involvement. I also know that if someone had used the term 'cult' in my presence to describe the group while I was a member I would have been very angry, completely rejecting the idea in defence of the group. The terminology available seems endless, slippery and not neutral; cults do not refer to themselves as cults, high control groups do not acknowledge the control and fundamentalist groups do not see fundamentalism, only a literal truth. Loading the language (Langone, 1993) is often a tactic to control and coerce.

For the purpose of this research I draw on Margaret Singer's (2003) definition quoted below. The terminology used in this research is not meant to be pejorative but rather to bring to mind groups which demonstrate a cluster of potential identifiers.

> "I will use the term cult and cultic group to refer to any one of a large number of groups that have sprung up in our society and that are similar in the way that they originate, their power structure, and their governance. Cults range from the relatively benign to those that exercise extraordinary control over members' lives…while the conduct of certain cults cause non-members to criticize them, the term cult is not in itself pejorative but simply descriptive. It denotes a group that forms around a person who claims to have a special mission or knowledge, which they will share with those who turn over most of their decision making to that self-appointed leader".
>
> (Singer, 2003, p. XX111).

On Leaving

Sadowski et al., (2018) describe extremist thinking within religious groups as referring "to the view that the revelation of truth can only be derived when staying within the sacred text. The

absolute truth discovered through this reading of the text constitutes a reality that is universally valid beyond the believer, serves as a source for how to live a righteous life and frames personal experiences of life in general" (p.2).

This description is highlighted as it gives a sense, regardless of the group focus, of the potential depth of the immersion of individuals into particular groups and accepted worldviews, and for those to shape and influence personal experience of self, other and the wider world. This suggests the challenges that may face those who were born and raised in high-control cultic groups and then leave, in an attempt to see self, other and the world through a different lens. (Kendall, 2016; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Rardin, 2013)

When a person leaves a high control, cultic group they often do not leave behind just group membership or a belief system. They may leave behind material provisions such as housing, employment, finance and possessions, but on a more personal level they may leave behind a partner, family, friends, a complete social network, and, at a psychological level, a sense of attachment, support, security, and of identity; who they feel that they are as a person (Coates, 2009; Jenkinson, 2016; Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Mytton, 2017). Research into the issues facing members who leave suggests that exit can be compounded by experience of shame, guilt, ongoing belief in the ideology, impact of possible 'thought reform' techniques, and previous trauma, both physical and psychological whilst in the group (Hassan, 1988; Jenkinson, 2016; Kendall, 2006; Langone, 1993).

Herman (1992) highlights a cycle of psychological domination that can occur for those involved in such groups and likens this to the force and coercion experienced within domestic violence relationships and child abuse.

> "Captivity which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control. This is equally true whether the victim is taken captive by force as in the case of prisoners and hostages, or by a combination of force, intimidation and enticement, as in the case of religious cult members, battered women, and abused children"
>
> (Herman, 1992, p.74)

Herman's (1992) description helps to potentially situate the experiences of cultic group members within a trauma framework that acknowledges the levels of coercive control and captivity that it can be possible to experience in these environments.

The Doctorate

Being accepted onto the doctoral programme at the Metanoia Institute in partnership with Middlesex University felt like a huge personal test of who I believed I was. My two phases of education to that point could not be more varied. Against a backdrop of complete immersion in an 'end of days' cultic group, where secular education was deemed more of a legal requirement than an aspirational opportunity, at the age of sixteen I had acquired a small handful of examination passes. These were not really necessary for the group's preferred pathway for me, which would involve some kind of part-time employment to enable more time to help achieve the group's main focus of evangelising and bringing others into the group, so that they might also survive the impending judgment day. The pressure to take this path felt that it came from my family, the group, from god and all those people who would die if they did not hear 'the truth'.

The second phase of my education, over twenty four years later, took the form of my undergraduate degree in psychology. I was over twenty years post-exit from the group, a wife and mother, and I nervously embarked on a part time course with the Open University, which resulted in my being awarded First Class honours. This felt like a very important part of my identity that I was keen to develop.

The research element of the doctorate has given me an opportunity to circle back and stand with that sixteen year old and her handful of exam results which felt meaningless and hopeless at the time. The group narrative seemed all-powerful to me then, suffocating, with a firm hand directing the way forward, despite my secretly held desire at the time to escape, try for a university education and a career in journalism, but when your life, and the lives of others depends on your adherence to the group and the religion, walking away can seem like a desperately dangerous thing to do.

2 - Literature review

The impetus for this study has been to increase understanding of how selves and identities are constructed and re-constructed in the narratives shared by individuals who were raised in high control cultic groups and who subsequently left them. How do people with this life experience understand themselves in and through their stories? The 'life story' of this research study began with my own experience of cult membership, from my beginning to adolescence, and the experienced ongoing influence on self into adulthood. This has been a story of initially a very connected, collective sense of self, to an isolated, individualistic understanding. Then very gradually letting in and hearing the voices and stories of those who said "me also",

changing, affirming, re-constituting my story of self, and a beginning of a small community of selves together, sharing stories, narrating identities, keeping on becoming.

Personal experience became a professional focus on how people who have navigated this particular type of journey understand and makes sense of themselves along the way. This focus involved immersing myself in what is 'out there' in terms of what others might have said, found, described and researched already. As I attempt to situate the focus of this study into a wider context I am mindful of the evolving, emerging process within which I find myself. The discovery and inclusion of literature and reading, as well as the analytic process, is not delineated to particular sections but weaves through and evolves just like stories and selves do. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) state: "The processes of analysis, evaluation, and interpretation are neither terminal nor mechanical. They are always emergent, unpredictable, and unfinished" (p. 479).

Throughout this research journey I have felt the pull to write extensively about the groups, to focus on their organisation, their structure and practices, their size and their potential influence. Inwardly I have waged a battle. On the one hand wanting to explain, to justify, to raise awareness of them, at other times, perhaps, to shout and punish. On the other hand I have wanted to keep the gaze of this research solely on the tellers, the narrators of lives and selves begun and lived in these groups.

To bring context and understanding to how this study might fit into the broader field I will briefly share three definitions which outline defining features of high control cultic environments that are broadly recognised within the field of cultic studies, and controlling/coercive groups. They demonstrate that it is the *process* of the groups that is important, rather than the focus, for example, religion, politics, psychotherapy to name a few.

I have decided not to review research relating to specific high-control cultic groups, viewing this as a broad distraction away from the focus of the research which is the stories of identities told by those raised in these environments. I am also concerned about maintaining anonymity for myself and those contributing to this study.

In order to demonstrate relevance to Counselling Psychology and mental health practitioners I will review some statistics related to potential prevalence, whilst acknowledging how obtaining accurate statistics can be problematic.

I searched numerous electronic libraries, repositories and journals against inclusion and exclusion criteria, including Clinical Social Work Journal, Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, Ebsco Host, Ethos, Google Scholar databases, International Journal of Cultic

Studies, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, Journal of Religion and Health, ProQuest, Psych Articles/Info/Source, PEPweb, Psychology and Behavioural Science Collection (PBSC), Social Psychology Bulletin, Taylor & Francis Online.

Given the research question it is important for this review to establish the context of the topic by looking specifically at, and for, studies in the area of second and multi-generational experience of high control cultic groups. There are relatively few studies, and fewer still have focused on self and identity processes for second and multi-generational ex-members, particularly from a narrative perspective. As this is presently the case, I will draw in other topics related to the 'born in' experience and also their disaffiliation and onward experiences. For example, research related to the experience of post-exit group support or studies that examine attachment, intimacy and relationships for this group of people.

Research and opinion on high control cultic groups straddles many domains; psychology, psychotherapy, sociology, law and theology to name just some. The academic field is contentious and polarised, but mainly split along the lines of those that claim and name harmful practice and undue influence in these groups and are often labelled as 'anti-cultists' (Robbins, 2001). Others are labelled 'cult apologists' or 'sympathisers' who focus on the perceived benefits of groups of this type, and are accused of defending them under a banner of freedom of belief and expression, and minimising the experiences of those with lived experience of membership and trauma (Coates, 2012; Kendall, 2016).

The perceived split between anti-cultists and cult apologists has triggered old anxieties for me. An internal voice asking "Which group are you in?" and "What's the truth?" and immediately I feel young, naïve and gullible, demonstrating for me, an ongoing influence of the developmental trauma of growing up in a high demand cultic environment. The split between these two groups feels of cultic origin to me; a re-enactment of in-group/out-group processes perhaps (Turner & Tajfel, 1979). What quickly follows my feeling triggered is an awareness of it; a reflection (almost) in action (Schon, 1991) that I have purposefully developed over time, through criticality, therapy, and storying with others. Key to this personal process was critical understanding of the dynamics and processes of cultic environments. I will now outline some of the theoretical background related to these processes, followed by a first-generation personal narrative that demonstrates them in action.

Definitions of high control cultic processes.

Robert Lifton and thought reform (1961):

Robert Lifton (1961), is an American psychiatrist with academic and research interest in the Holocaust, the psychology and effect of war and how evil can be socialised. Lifton (1961) proposed a theory of 'thought reform' and 'ideological totalism' to explain the power and control that some groups and leaders can exercise over members, outlining eight features as follows:

- Milieu Control – Information and communication is controlled at group level and within the person which can result in isolation within the group and from society.
- Mystical Manipulation – Manipulation of experience and interpretation of coincidence to elevate the leader/ship to potentially deity status, setting the leader apart as having special knowledge, power and/or enlightenment. Also reinterpretation of events to facilitate this.
- Demand for purity – A striving for perfection on the part of members, driven by processes that are guilt or shame inducing in order to control.
- Cult of Confession – Confidentiality and boundaries are breached, often publicly and sins, imperfection and impurity can be exploited and manipulated by the leader/ship.
- Sacred Science and Doctrine over Person – The group has the ultimate doctrinal or ideological truth. It is indisputable and cannot be found outside of the group.
- Loading of the Language – Language is loaded to create conformity and manipulate, often using a group terminology to skew thinking in favour of the group and its beliefs.
- Doctrine over Person – Personal experience is superseded by group ideology and should be denied or interpreted in a way that supports group doctrine.
- Dispensing of Existence – Conforming group members are alive, aware, accepted. Non-conforming others are rejected, deadened, without credibility.

Michael Langone (1993), a Counselling Psychologist who specialises in understanding psychological manipulation in cultic groups, describes five identifiers:

- Displaying excessive dedication or devotion to an individual, idea or phenomenon
- Makes use of thought reform
- Induces psychological dependency systematically
- Leadership goals are progressed through exploitation of members

- Members, families, communities experience psychological harm from the group/leader.

Margaret Singer (1995), a Clinical Psychologist and researcher of undue influence and control in religious and social contexts concluded that all cults have three elements:

- They focus on a charismatic leader who focuses adoration and veneration on themselves.
- Authoritarian power structures are operated.
- Thought persuasion which is covert and organised is used to take total control of members lives.

Janja Lalich (1992) writing about her experiences in a “feminist, Marxist-Leninist” political cult clearly demonstrates the high-control cultic processes described above. Drawing upon Lifton’s (1987) defining characteristics common to a cultic environment, outlining these groups as having a charismatic leader who increasingly becomes the object of worship and a series of processes that can be associated with coercive persuasion and thought reform and the tendency toward manipulation from above with exploitation, economic, sexual, or other, of often genuine seekers who bring idealism from below. Lalich (1992) describes all of these characteristics as present in the group and details a ‘finding the real thing’ narrative, the charismatic leader, strict discipline, commitment that was 24 hours a day, criticism and self-criticism to bring about change and the absolute necessity to defend the party.

Leadership rivals were expelled. The intensity of faith in the politics of the group contributed to a dynamic of discipline, control, humiliation and manipulation amongst other features. Assessments, extreme rules and regulations created a paranoid, defensive atmosphere that isolated members from the outside of the group, broader social and political contexts and family. Extensive study of political theory, behavioural change, criticism and confession were some of the methods used to indoctrinate those accepted into the group. Lalich (1992) gives in-depth insight into how structures of power and control are formed and embedded to create a “modified DDD syndrome” of deception, dependency and dread (Langone, 1991, p.264-265).

Loss of identity was described in very literal terms as new members were told to choose a new party name and never to share what their real name was. To do so would be seen as a

security breach and would result in severe reprimand. Aliases were to be used on utility bills, and postal box addresses for car registration documents and licenses etc.

Increasing internalisation of group norms created what Lalich (1992) describes as an inability to see beyond the world that they had created whilst immersed in a climate of alienation and terror. A constant state of demoralisation, fatigue and fear meant that thoughts of leaving the group were pushed aside for fear of shunning, loss of friends, and the punishments and revenge the party was known to exact upon those who tried or asked to leave. (Please refer to Lalich (1992) for her first person account of her experiences).

Tourish and Wohlfort (2000) offer a comprehensive review of political cultic groups, from the far-left to the far-right of politics, acknowledging the scarcity of literature on this topic. The authors outline cultic practices within political groups and call for "stronger awareness of techniques of social influence and greater skepticism toward totalistic philosophies of change" (p. 217).

Lalich's (1992) experiences in a political high control cult (cited above) are written from a first-generation perspective, as the author shares that she joined the group as an adult, thinking it was a national women's group describing this as the beginning of the 'deception'. The focus of this review will now shift to those who were born and raised in groups of this type.

So, what has been said about second and multi-generational experience?

Second and multi-generational stories are often ones of immersion within a particular narrative; a narrative of self, other and the world that is dominant during young and critical development years. Research that differentiates between those who enter these groups as adults and those who were born and raised is key to more nuanced and effective support. Jenkinson (2016) carried out a cross-disciplinary research study exploring with ex-high demand cult members what their perspectives were on the 'recovery' process; what helped them. The study focused on a mix of first and second/multi-generational experience. Adopting a qualitative, constructivist grounded theory methodology Jenkinson (2016) carried out semi-structured interviews with 29 participants, 15 in one-to-one interviews and 3 focus groups to facilitate inductive emergence. The participants were predominantly people who had joined groups as adults though some were born and raised in their group. Findings were that a thought reform environment restricted the individual and inhibits what was conceptualised as the "authentic self" as opposed to a cultic "pseudo-identity (p.240)".

Jenkinson (2016) makes significant and nuanced recommendations for therapists who might work psychotherapeutically with first, second and multi-generational ex-members, making a distinction between the potential needs of those who were recruited into such groups as adults and those who were born and raised in them, highlighting that for those 'born in' "their developmental history is cult related and undergirds virtually everything" (p.324) and "application of 'normal' developmental psychology and psychotherapy theory may not be adequate" and they "need to be understood within a framework of how they developed psychologically within the cult, and a cult affiliated family" (p.324).

Jenkinson (2016) highlights the potential future contribution and current scarcity of research into second-generation ex-members experiences as they "have a particular view and position; they have insight into their parents' lives in the cult and even what helped them recover; they may also have insight into what helps other SGAs [second-generation adults], and therefore have a unique perspective and powerful contribution to make. They are generally under-represented in studies (Kendall, 2005) and the low numbers is a limitation and a loss to this study" (p.354).

I am curious about the under-representation identified by Jenkinson (2016) and others (Furnari, 2005; Goldberg, 2006; Kendall, 2005; Matthews & Salazar, 2014; McCabe et al., 2007) and in that curiosity search for reasons, drawing on my personal story. It has taken over 30 years to get to a point where I can research this topic. I connect this to trauma, shame, having to develop critical thinking from the ground up, over-coming learned dependency and indoctrination, though the latter is to a lesser extent now. Being able to re-connect with the source of the trauma even at an academic level has been troublesome yet cathartic, stressful yet enriching.

One of the story tellers in this study, who was raised in a political group, described having to go through a process of 'free-ing up' in order to be able to engage with politics again, and having to consciously navigate this, remaining aware of what feels like too much immersion and times when it has been necessary to take a step back. I also have had to free myself up to engage again.

Rardin (2013) explores 'engaging again' through the experiences of individuals born into high control cultic religious groups, who leave, in terms of their attitudes towards spirituality. As an ex-cult member and insider researcher Rardin (2013) notes that survivors of traumatic events can turn to spirituality and religion to sustain themselves, but for ex-religious cult members this can be experienced as the source of their trauma; a possible coping mechanism and comfort turned hostile, a passion turned oppressive.

Making use of a narrative approach Rardin (2013) interviewed 8 second-generation ex-members and adopted a categorical-content form of analysis, finding that all participants felt that they had a negative attitude towards spirituality at points in their journey, with 7 out of 8 losing their faith, not classing themselves as spiritual or religious. Several participants rejected the idea that spirituality required a group or religion to facilitate it. Nature was a valuable conduit for some. Some felt that they did not need to attend church to be spiritual or communicate with god, but expressed some difficulty finding a framework around such things as a family member's death and the concept of afterlife from a relatively newly acquired atheist perspective.

Critical thinking was identified as not being possible within the groups, or immediately post-exit, but was considered essential to on-going recovery. Emotions such as anger, feelings of isolation, depression and sometimes suicidal thoughts emerged at different times for participants, as well as the strain of trying to transition into mainstream society, organise housing, employment etc.

Though not the specific focus of the research, reflections on identity were shared. Some participants felt identity processes were enduringly problematic and this was linked by some to not having experienced life's milestones. Identities were also seen as emerging and evolving through education and academia. Some participants described identity as their personal endeavour to replace the cultic identity and feeling the need to have a new identity. Rardin (2013) quotes Hassan (1990) who writes "mind control may be understood as a *system* of influences that disrupts an individual's identity (beliefs, behaviour, thinking and emotions) and replaces it with a new identity" (p.7). The narratives shared with Rardin (2013) seem to resonate with the idea of a 'cult identity' or identities, and a desire to transition away from this, supporting research by Jenkinson (2016) previously referred to in this review.

For people who join high-control cults the research interest can often be around why they joined (Castaño et al., 2021; Coates, 2011; Rousselet et al., 2017). For those born into such environments research focus intuitively leans towards why and how did they leave? Or stay as the case might be? Matthews (2012) examined second-generation recovery experiences through grounded theory, constructivist social justice inquiry, describing ex-cult members as "a hidden minority in society whose voices may be overlooked in counselling research" (p.4).

The focus of Matthews' (2012) study was how individuals who are born into high control groups come to leave. What problems, issues and concerns do they have while leaving, and after? 15 individuals were interviewed, 14 females and 1 male, a limitation related to gender

acknowledged by the researcher. Matthews (2012) identified 12 'themes' ranging from gender roles to decision making, obedience, abuse and emotional consequences. As might be expected, the theme of 'sense of identity' was present across all of the stories, relating to having a cult-defined identity and needing to find out who they were outside of the group. A getting-to-know self outside of the group in terms of who they felt were and what they believed, in relation to decision making, values, morals and relationships. Participants spoke of "wearing a mask for most of my life" (p.184) and "you're supposed to fit in this mould" (p.167). Life after exit from the group was seen by some participants as a time to differentiate between the "cult persona" and the "real person" (p.170) and this period was experienced as "feeling lost" and a time of ongoing "personality integration" (p.171).

From a relational perspective Patricia de Young (2015) writes

> "a secure self develops in response to secure connection with caregivers who use their power benignly, with respect for a child's emotions. When parental power is used to control and coerce a child with no thought for the child's experience, the child feels powerless and obliterated by shame. Her ability to explore and assert herself fades as she worries about keeping safe by being good…in intimate relationships she fears abandonment, but at the same time she walls herself off against invasion and emotional take-over. Interpersonal conflict throws her into intolerable anxiety, for asserting herself means she will elicit the other's rage. Her only options are to rage back or to submit, and either way leads to annihilation" (pp.85-86).

Considering De Young's (2015) description of relational trauma through the lens of high-control cultic environments it is possible to see how parents, in submitting to the demand of the group, do not use their power benignly but become coercive and controlling themselves, having to dismiss the subjectivity and emotional needs of the child, in order to meet the needs of the group. Perhaps just as their own needs were also dismissed by their parents. Parental behaviours like this might have become normalised through several generations of group membership, creating a lasting and repetitive cycle and legacy (Main & Goldwyn, 1984). For adult children choosing to leave the control of the group and family system it is possible to see the likelihood for attachment trauma, fear, shame and relational difficulty.

Kern and Jungbauer (2020) explored second-generation experience of attachment, intimacy and close relationships using in-depth qualitative interviews and content analysis from 16 participants. Similarities and differences were identified and categorised, identifying:

- burdensome experiences in childhood and adolescence,
- suppression of personal needs in the cult,
- the cults approach to sexuality and sexual education,
- the impact on the second-generation adult (SGA) personality development
- mental health, impaired familial relationships
- problems regarding close relationships and sexuality.

Regarding personality development, the majority felt they had difficulty with self-confidence, trusting themselves, resisting the pull to be obedient and defending their opinions. The researchers acknowledge the small sample and do not aim to make generalisations from the findings but recommend further exploration in the under-researched area of second-generation experience, particularly longitudinal studies and research with a systemic approach. Though not explicitly linked by the researchers the categories identified connect with the symptoms of relational trauma described by De Young (2015). See also Martella (2015) who made use of a phenomenological approach, as an insider researcher, to explore how high control cultic groups have the potential to cultivate environments that create complex trauma in children, and researches treatment modalities to support recovery. See also Matthews (2017).

Why bother? Isn't this rather niche?

Castano et al., (2021) highlight the difficulty in identifying the incidence and distribution of high-demand cultic groups. Organisations that attempt to study such groups estimate that just in the United States there could be in excess of 2500 groups with potential membership of 2.5 million (West, 1990). Castano et al., (2021) note that in Spain "the most recent figures count more than 150 groups with between 200,000 and 500,000 members" (p.148). The group that I was raised in states they currently have in excess of 8 million members worldwide, across more than 200 lands and in excess of 80000 members in the UK (not referenced to preserve confidentiality). Some other high-demand religious groups claim worldwide membership figures ranging from 8 to 15 million (McBeath & Greenlees, 2016). See also Dave et al., 2022.

Potential contribution

We might infer that there is potential for many children to be born into these types of groups, remain in them and raise children of their own, but some will leave and attempt to adjust to life

outside of the group. This research study seeks to enhance our understanding and appreciation of how that journey has been experienced by others, how it has been understood and made sense of, to aid consideration of what might help, to raise ethical questions and support mental health practitioners in their understanding when working with a client who has experience of such group involvement.

The primary aim of this research is to raise awareness of the ongoing and evolving experiences of self and identity and provide a platform from which these voices can be heard. It is hoped that this will deepen understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals, and many like them, particularly in relation to personal knowledge of self and becoming. As part of this process knowledge may be gained about the nature of these groups and the potential impact that membership may have on personal understanding of self and identity and how this continues to evolve as time goes by. Another aim is to give confidence to psychologists and counsellors who, in the course of their practice, might come across individuals with similar histories, and feel unprepared, or have difficulty engaging, perhaps because of lack of knowledge or training in this area, or some misunderstandings about the immersive nature of these types of groups. A broader aim is to increase the body of literature related to second or multi-generation experience which might reduce the sense of isolation that those with lived experience might feel.

As such the learning and insights from this study require dissemination and the researcher's intention is that this would initially be via articles in professional organisation publications such as United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP) The New Psychotherapist and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) Therapy Today magazines. The research will be formally written up for journal submission to publications such as the European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy, British Psychological Society (BPS) Counselling Psychology Review and Psychotherapy Research Journal published on behalf of the Society for Psychotherapy Research, to name a few. It is also the researchers intention to pursue opportunities to present the research at conferences such as the International Conference of Autoethnography and International Conference on Psychology.

Research positioning in relation to counselling psychology

As a distinct division of psychology, Counselling Psychology seeks to engage with subjectivity and inter-subjectivity, to respect first person accounts and not to assume any superiority related to feeling, experiencing, meaning-making and knowing, keeping the therapeutic

relationship at the heart of practice, and not reducing the complexity and uniqueness of an individual to a narrow, rigid diagnosis or understanding (Orlans & Van Scoyoc, 2009). As a trainee Counselling Psychologist and researcher, I position this research within the field of Counselling Psychology, as the above values and principles are integral to this study, which aims to deepen understanding of the subjective meaning making processes and personal understanding of selves and identities.

Such depth of subjective knowledge is integral to the practice of Counselling Psychology as we work with our clients to know these processes and make sense of them together for the good of the client and for the good of the profession and those working within it.

Religion, spirituality, belief in a cause, and indeed group membership have often been associated with positive psychological wellbeing and social support (Aydin et al., 2010; Coates, 2013; Koenig et al., 2012, Lassiter & Mims, 2021; Park et al., 2018; Price & Callahan, 2017; Sedikides & Gebauer, 2009; Seybold & Hill, 2001). When these relationships are misused, become controlling and exert excessive demands on individuals the purpose that they once served can be experienced as traumatic. Disaffiliation and being conceptualised as apostates can bring relational disruption, identity confusion. Recollections of group experiences can also feel traumatic, despite paradoxically having been a previous source of comfort and support (Coates 2013; Dawson, 1998; Lalich & Tobias 2006). Winell (2011) links such experiences with symptoms associated with post-traumatic and complex post-traumatic presentation, conceptualising this as religious trauma syndrome.

Being born and raised within a high control cultic environment has the potential for exposure to and normalisation of abusive practices, including sexual abuse (Kern & Jungbauer, 2020; Langone, 1993). Supporting individuals with these lived experiences intuitively sits within the domain of Counselling Psychology. Psychologically informed ethical research that supports practitioners to work with those with this type of lived experience is valuable, particularly as these clients have the potential to be under-represented in mental health services because of indoctrinated scepticism towards psychological services.

Offering therapeutic support to those affected requires research-informed practice and practice-informed research (Cooper, 2008) which situates students of Counselling Psychology as well-placed and well-equipped, able to research and practice ethically, in ways that are non-objectifying, aware of power dynamics and person focused. As a person with a foot in both camps I feel that the exploration and support of my lived experience fits intuitively within the rigorous and ethically informed domain of Counselling Psychology.

3 – Research Design

In this section I begin by outlining my philosophical perspective and the epistemological assumptions that are fundamental to the choice of research design for this study. I share the process of consideration and thought behind decisions made along the way to choosing a methodology, and then the 'nuts and bolts' of how I carried out this research.

Philosophical standpoint

My philosophical standpoint as a researcher is intrinsically linked to my philosophical standpoint as a psychotherapist. Working with clients I bear witness to their stories, their realities, their truths in that moment. In the course of my work and life I accept the philosophy that there can be no one 'truth' about the person sitting opposite me. This allows a space to open up that does not force my 'truth' on to another, does not limit or restrict the other or their experience, a place that offers welcome, support and curiosity about what we might find, experience and co-construct. The idea of using only one theoretical approach to explore the complexity of personhood makes me uneasy, as do outcome measures, statistically demonstrated 'improvement', classification and diagnosed disorders that can focus more on symptoms than context, influence, history and experience. Seeing a person as situated, experienced, complex and nuanced intuitively leans towards a qualitative research framework that privileges subjectivity, seeking to provide insights into meaning making, motivation, experience and context, rather than a quantitative methodology which seeks to focus on what can be explicitly shown and quantified, with an eye to universality, generalisation.

I acknowledge that my philosophical values are influenced by my experience of being raised within a cultic, fundamentalist ideology. Many aspects of life were required to acquiesce to clearly defined 'truths' that were absolute, unquestionable. Subjectivity and freedom of thought was denied. Experience was restricted. Retrospectively I understand that non-conforming aspects of my psyche were disavowed. Post-exit I had to learn and allow myself to think critically and, through my own psychotherapy, to integrate split off parts of myself. My journey has taken me from one 'black and white' reality to acknowledging multiple realities and complexities in relation to self, other and the wider world. As a result, my epistemological lens focuses on subjectivity, meaning making, context, influence, power, co-construction and the relational processes of knowing, assuming that "the primary human reality is persons in conversation" (Harré, 1983, p. 58) and that knowledge is relational (DeYoung, 2014; McNamee, 2010).

Epistemological lens

My approach leans towards a social constructionist perspective (Burr, 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 1986). Hoffman (1992) wrote: 'All knowledge, the social constructionists hold, evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the 'common world' or the 'common dance' (p.116). Only through on-going conversation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice. As Hoffman (1992) describes, what can be regarded as truth about self and the world is constructed in a social context; our *current way* of understanding and interpreting, rather than an *actual* reflection of a reality which does not exist (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). For example, in social interactions we often draw upon shared meanings, descriptions and explanations of ourselves and the world (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Burr, 2015; Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

Research from a social constructionist perspective notes that "there no longer appears to be a good reason to privilege the account or reading of the researcher above that of anyone else, and this puts the researcher and the researched in a new relation to each other" (Burr, 2015, p.174). Burr advocates for collaboration where "the research process is informed by the needs and aims of the participants" (Burr, 2015, p.175). Gergen (2015) describes "an exciting alternative to this distancing orientation is to join with subjects to carry out research together. Through these collaborative efforts, the participants and the researcher become interdependent; everyone's voice counts. Multiple ways of seeing the situation may be revealed. Knowledge is understood as a collaborative achievement" (p.80).

I intuitively accept that knowledge is embedded in and restricted by language as our primary source of communication (Burr, 2015), and so becomes the social constructionist researcher's main focus, as it is used to interpret self (Gergen, 1999), and to reflexively make meaning out of social interaction and the world, taking into account social structure, positioning, history and culture (Bruner, 1990; Burr, 2015, Giddens, 1991). This idea of constructed, shared, negotiated and perhaps transient understandings seems to fit with the experience of the participants who have been born and raised with a distinct narrative of what self, other and the world is and can be, and who have then transitioned to new thinking, experience and alternative, broader influences around what knowledge and truth might be.

Choice of methodology

Qualitative approaches divide themselves broadly into two particular areas of focus; experiential and discursive. Experiential approaches seek to understand how a person makes sense of and understands their world, where discursive approaches focus on how language

is used to construct reality. My study is interested in the construction and re-construction of selves and identities for individuals born into high control cultic groups who chose to leave. Participants are being asked to put language to their experiences and share their understanding and meaning making in relation to self and identity. This intuitively validates a qualitative approach, but which one?

I reviewed several approaches very much with the participants in mind. I did not want to code their 'data', come up with an overall theory, drill down to categories, concepts or essences, so was initially drawn to Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because of the deep focus on lived experience and subjectivity. I appreciated the detailed richness of description and awareness and personal subjective meaning, but somehow felt that I might be trying to look at a mountain range through a microscope. I was conscious of the unavoidable breadth of the journey taken by participants, born and raised in a high control group and then transitioning out and journeying on. It felt big, broad. I needed a methodological lens that had the potential to take in the whole piece, keep pace with the storyteller but could also follow them when they chose to slow down, pause to focus in more intently, sharing more detailed reflection and stories when choosing to.

I have been encouraged by more than one tutor along the way to consider an auto-ethnographic approach, which focused on my story alone. This allowed me to think more deeply around how much of myself and story I felt able and willing to share without the option of anonymity. In less rational moments, trying to consider what that might ask of me, I returned to feelings of isolation and 'oddness' and imagined becoming totally submerged, drowning in the 'deep' of my reflections and history, losing any vantage point and space carved out for myself since leaving the group. I became aware of wanting, perhaps needing to anchor myself somehow, to share what felt comfortable for me, and to use my story and experience to deepen researcher reflexivity but not to become the sole participant, a lone reflector. I wanted to story with others, to be surprised, to be challenged, to be different, to be similar, to know and not know, to remain the same and be changed through the sharing of stories.

The process of considering auto-ethnography as a methodology was very valuable to me in understanding my potential vulnerabilities within the research process and to consider more deeply what was being asked of those willing to contribute to the study, and importantly what might be helpful or unhelpful in the process.

At this point I began to read more intensively about narrative approaches, in particular Life Story Narrative approach (Atkinson, 1998; Etherington, 2009; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). I realised how embedded narrative was in this research before the study even took an

organised shape. Based upon my 'pre-research' conversations with many individuals with lived experience, and other researchers in the field, I knew that most of the time there were no guards, fences or security measures to keep individuals from leaving the groups, but rather it was the narrative of the group that held them in. We have the truth about the world, everything else is false, meaningless or dangerous, so why leave? For those leaving high control cultic groups these narratives have longevity. Despite being 'physically out' individuals can still feel 'mentally in' the group, potentially compounding the possibility of building a new story of self outside of the group (Coates, 2009; Hookway & Habibis, 2013; Kendall, 2016).

I am asking my participants to try to make sense of their life experiences by narrating them and, in that process to reflect on their own sense of selves and identities. The idea emerged of using the continuum of the life-story as a potential anchor, whether for myself as an insider-researcher, for those contributing to the research or for us together in our stories.

Life Story Narrative approach

"…having the person tell his or her story from the vantage point that allows the individual to see his or her life story as a whole, to see it subjectively across time as it all fits together, or as it seems discontinuous, or both. This is what constitutes the individual's reality of his or her world. Storytellers are the first interpreters of the stories that they tell".

Atkinson (2002, p.124)

Life story researchers do not seek objective realities. They are concerned with personal perceptions, and meaning making through consideration of life stories (Etherington, 2008). Life, by its very nature and from the 'get-go', challenges us to evolve and adapt and this may require a re-constituting and a re-storying of ourselves based upon new understanding, new self-interpretation, new experience and context (Angus & McLeod, 2004; Etherington, 2009). Identity is understood as a process of 'becoming' that continues throughout the lifespan; an ongoing project of understanding and interpretation of self (Dunlop et al., 2020; Mc Adams, 2019).

Learning happens in and through the stories that we tell ourselves and others. Life stories are personal, but also interpersonal. "Life stories allow us to bring together many layers of understandings about a person, their culture, and how they have created change in their lives: we hear people struggle to make sense of the past and create meanings as they tell and/or show us what happened to them" (Etherington, 2009, p. 225). Life stories show us how identity is shaped in the social spaces of our lives, the relationships, experiences and influences, as we make sense of and construct this in storied form and share with others, becoming part of

their unfolding story. So "as we speak together, listen to new voices, raise questions, ponder alternatives, play at the edges of common senses, we cross the threshold into new worlds of meaning" (Gergen, 2009, p.5).

To interject some of my own life story here as an example, a significant shift in my thinking, my sense of self and my relationship with and understanding of the group occurred when I began to notice what felt like small discrepancies in the dominant group narrative that I had grown up with; that the in-group was good and the out-group was bad. Through a series of small but cumulative epiphanies (Denzin, 1989) I began to notice more and more 'good' in the out-group; altruism, compassion, charity, everyday kindnesses and values. My evolving personal understanding became more and more juxtaposed with the group narrative, there was disturbance and disruption, and this mobilised significant change in my own life course, and a transition away from a particular narrative that had dominated my life and my family from birth. I came to know myself more by my desire to empathise with and support others in this mortal world, I realised that the immortal was not for me, and that this was part of who I am.

As the research focuses on identity and transition, chronology becomes important, so a suitable research method needs to capture detailed subjective understanding over time, allowing space for exploration of turning points, epiphanies and new understanding of self with self, self in relationship and self in the world. Life story research enables multi-faceted telling and sharing, the opportunity to interweave meaning making, context, influence, interpretation, culture, the past, present, hopes and fears for the future, change, the micro and the macro, and gives space to see what internal resources participants have been able to draw upon in building, navigating and reconstructing their own sense of self and identity.

Narrative identity

> *"a person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor, important though this is, in the reactions of others, but in the capacity to keep a particular narrative going"*
>
> Giddens (1991, p.54)

It feels important to consider the concept of narrative identity. McAdams (2013) conceptualises narrative identity as "an internalised and evolving story of the self that explains how I came to be the person I am becoming" (McAdams & McLean, 2013), and proposes that the narratives that we create around and of our experiences in life are in fact our identity, a narrative self, and the key to how we know ourselves and are known by others. Life narratives are construed and understood from a psychosocial perspective as we draw upon what is available to us

culturally; ideas, customs, family memories and interpretations, social behaviours, political contexts and how we symbolise things through art and literature, and report and document through media and record keeping. We live in and through societies (McAdams et al., 2006).

Bluck and Singer (2001) suggest that consideration of life story narratives facilitates an opportunity for *autobiographical reasoning*; a standing back from the stories that we tell ourselves and others in order to infer, interpret and learn from what our lives tell us about us (see also Baddeley & Singer, 2006, p178). Ongoing interpretation and acquisition of knowledge allow for processes of revision, re-shaping and new understanding of self.

As my intention was to explore personal experience of self and identity for persons raised within high control cultic groups that set themselves outside of mainstream society, and make use of highly situated knowledge, discourse and meaning making systems (Hassan, 1988), a narrative approach which acknowledges the important interplay between identity construction, cultural context and life experiences, prioritising subjectivity and meaning making based upon life experience and relationship seems intuitively appropriate. Life Story Narrative approaches provide opportunities to hear intimate accounts of how a person understands their identity while they are in the group, whilst leaving and up to the point of narration. Miller Mair (2014) suggests that 'intimate knowledge is likely to teach us more than distant knowledge' (p.2), and as such, this qualitative research, adopting a Life Story Narrative approach, has the potential to offer important insights into identities and their construction and re-construction and developmental processes of selves construed inside and outside of a specific context.

Trustworthiness

> *"In fact, the stories we tell are value laden, maybe even value driven; they express what we value most as well as provide clues to how we construct personal meaning. What matters most, perhaps, is that the life story is able to be deemed trustworthy, more than true. The subjective reality is, after all, what we are seeking in a life story".*
>
> (Atkinson, 1998, p.60)

Qualitative research cannot employ the same conventions as quantitative research. For qualitative studies concepts such as representative samples, reliable measures, objective findings or replicable outcomes, do not apply. We cannot generalise from subjective experience and meaning making in highly situated contexts. To do so would be to reduce uniquely lived, situated, storied lives and meaning making. Narrative researchers are more occupied with trustworthiness rather than truth (Atkinson, 1998, pp.59-60).

Yardley (2000) outlines elements that might be used to add to trustworthiness, identifying sensitivity to context, commitment, rigour, transparency and coherence as important to assessing good qualitative research. I have summarised below some of the quality criteria I aspire to in this research:

- Sensitivity to context is demonstrated by knowledge of the theoretical field, relevant literature and empirical data, the socio-cultural setting, participants perspective is clearly demonstrated and appropriate consideration of ethical issues is also shown throughout.
- Commitment and rigour is demonstrated through in-depth engagement with the topic; methodological competence and skill and analysis that demonstrates breadth and depth.
- Transparency and coherence is seen through the clarity and power of both description and convincing argument, as well as transparency around methods and presentation. Coherence comes in the form of a convincing fit between theory and method.

Reflexivity

> *"to be reflexive we need to be aware of our personal responses and to be able to make choices about how to use them. We also need to be aware of the personal, social and cultural contexts in which we and others live and work and to understand how this impacts on the ways we interpret the world"*
>
> (Etherington, 2004, p.19)

Smith and Luke (2021) highlight that, historically from a positivistic view, reflexivity has been linked to researcher bias and viewed with suspicion, but Pillow (2003) describes researcher reflexivity as "providing methodological power in qualitative research" (p.175). Josselson and Hammack (2021) use researcher reflexivity as a practice that "appropriately places the knowledge produced in a narrative analysis in a highly contextualised encounter" (p.64).

By using reflexivity I was able to reflect on, and be transparent about my own 'situated-ness' within my experience, within the research and particular contexts, as well as within the research relationship (Berger, 2015; Etherington 2017; Probst, 2015). Researcher reflexivity supports recognition of how we can make transparent use of our understanding of what is happening in the research at different levels; self with self, self with other and self in the stories and contexts shared. Despite being a sometimes "ambiguous, uncomfortable process that is

never-ending, contextual and always in flux" (Smith & Luke, 2020, p.167) the use of reflexivity brings transparency, accountability and acknowledges influence and power, which intuitively fits with research related to how selves are understood when raised in high control environments.

I have been transparent and reflexive in sharing my story, situating my epistemological, ontological and ethical stance within the sphere of my meaning making and on-going influences and experience. I have been reflexive concerning my physical, cognitive and emotional responses in the research encounters and within my analysis, all with the aim of increasing the trustworthiness of this research.

In preparation for carrying out this research I wanted to get a sense of what it might feel like to be a participant; to share my own stories with a researcher (Probst, 2015). I wanted to really reflect, in the moment, on what each step might possibly feel like; recruitment, talking with the researcher, being recorded, and afterwards having shared something of myself and my story (Dennis, 2014). Fortuitously I found, via an ex-member social media group, a recruitment poster for a study asking for participants, people who had left the organisation that I had left. I made entries in my research journal about what the experience was like for me and these reflections in part helped to shape my considerations going forward. For example, it was important for me to know who the researcher was and if they had lived experience of cultic groups. I noted my unexpected thoughts in the interview around what I was sharing and how this might compare with the researchers experience, how I might react if I felt unsteady in the emotion of the telling, how I experienced telling and then walking away. These journal notes were important, not to be used in a predictive way, but to support my preparedness for the unexpected and my holding an empathic and ethical stance towards those contributing to the research study.

Ethical considerations

This study was guided by British Psychological Society ethical principles (British Psychological Society, 2014) to uphold the autonomy, privacy and dignity of each person participating in the research. Ethical approval was received from the Metanoia Institute in advance of carrying out the research. This was not a 'tick-box' exercise but was given significant consideration in light of the background and history of participants, especially in relation to potential objectification of individuals in the past as members of high control groups. In light of my own recent participation as a participant, I was aware that as researchers we are unable to predict our reactions to participation in a study of this type, and my own experience of unexpected thoughts and feelings during and after participation helped me to broaden my thinking in terms

of ethical considerations. I made use of my connections with other researchers in this field and my training cohort to discuss ideas and issues that might emerge. Priorities centred around acknowledging power in the research relationship and respecting dignity; empowering individuals to share their stories as they see fit and situating the person as the expert working within a transparent process, with a researcher who seeks to work collaboratively and understand their personal meaning making. Before our research conversation we discussed support, any concerns participants might have, as well as their right to withdraw and also outlined measures taken to maintain confidentiality and secure data storage. Regular updates were offered and feedback was welcomed (see Information sheet in Appendix 3).

Certain additional ethical considerations have been made which pertain particularly to the research topic and those involved. I have chosen to anonymise the participants in this study, replacing names with pseudonyms, taking into account any participant preferences around names. Special care has been taken to anonymise the groups also, which means not naming them and ensuring that as far as possible group terminology and identifying practices have been replaced with generic terminology. At times this may impede the flow of the stories but is considered a price worth paying to ensure anonymity.

The decision to anonymise was based upon two considerations; firstly to protect myself *and* those contributing their stories. High control groups are, in some cases, very protective of their public image, they are often well-funded, money-making organisations, have charity status and are very litigious. It is possible that this has contributed to the lack of research in this area. I am a lone, self-funding researcher and unable to defend myself against, or come to a financial settlement in, any legal action.

The second consideration goes straight to the heart of this research study. By not naming the groups I hope to prioritise hearing the individual and collective voices of those telling of their own experiences and meaning making in relation to who they feel they are, now that they are no longer a group member, or upholding a group identity.

Additionally, there is much debate in this field around terminology and particularly the definition of the word ‘cult’. Language is never neutral, and “loaded language” (Langone, 1993, p.210) can be a tactic of coercive control in cultic groups so prior to the research conversations, where appropriate, agreement was made with participants about the terminology to be used when referring to the relevant group so as not to cause offence and reduce triggering. I used my skills and training as a qualified counsellor to ensure that levels of possible distress were monitored during the research conversations. Sources of potential post-research support were highlighted in a de-brief sheet that was given to participants (see Appendix 6).

In terms of my own self-care, I made ongoing use of my own therapist and supervisor during the course of the research. I consciously attended to my own self-care via relaxation techniques, social support and therapy. A crucial part of looking after myself as an insider researcher was to consciously check in with myself as I carried out and put this research study into words. Sometimes I had to take extended breaks making my progress painfully slow at times, but I was conscious of my traumatic memories and retrospective meaning making as I reconnected with my own pain at times, and the pain of others. I had to also acknowledge that I was working in the UK National Health Service (NHS) supporting patients and their families who were adjusting to life changing injury, and against a backdrop of the Covid-19 global pandemic (2020-2022). I was very aware that people and narratives are influenced by and situated within cultures, social worlds and sometimes turbulent historic events, and so are researchers.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via three means. Firstly, via two international conferences: one in Bordeaux, France, and the other in Manchester, UK. These conferences were organised by International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA). ICSA run a yearly conference which is attended by a broad range of professionals and academics active in the research field, and also by many ex-members of different groups, and mental health professionals. I presented my research proposal at the 2017 conference and was able to assess the suitability of recruiting participants via this avenue. I was satisfied by the contribution of qualified mental health professionals, academics and researchers as well as individuals with lived experience, and with the governance, organisation and ethical considerations addressed by the organisation and structure of the conferences.

Secondly, this research was advertised in social media support groups for ex-members of various high control groups. Initially I contacted group administrators to seek information about how the social media groups were run, and then requested permission for my electronic flyer to be advertised if the administrators also felt it was appropriate to the group (See Flyer in Appendix 2).

Thirdly I made contact with researchers and academics researching and monitoring high control and coercive groups to ask if they would publicise my research.

My inclusion criteria was as follows:

- Males and females over the age of 18 who were raised in a high control cultic group.

- Individuals who had left the group and lived outside of the group for a minimum of two years. Because I was researching second-generation experience I was aware of the potential for trauma, developmental trauma and disorganised attachment (Furnari, 2005) so the rationale for not including individuals who have very recently left a group was informed by the DSM-5TR criteria ((American Psychiatric Association, 2022) for the diagnosis and treatment of post- traumatic stress disorder, in that two years may allow time for trauma related symptoms to emerge and become consistent over time, be recognised and potentially treated.

- Someone who felt that they had a sufficient support network that they could draw upon ie family, friends, peer support group, therapist (as discussed in the initial exploratory telephone consultation).

- Someone who had engaged in therapeutic work with a trained counsellor.

An information sheet was sent to each potential participant outlining details such as the aim and purpose of the study, what participating would involve, the voluntary nature of participation, and how data would be stored (Appendix 3). Participants were advised that they were able to withdraw from the study up to one month prior to submission, and in this event all data pertaining to them would be destroyed and not used. The implications of data and analysis being shared with fellow researchers, supervisors and examiners was also discussed with participants for feedback/agreement prior to sharing.

At this point a consent form was provided for participants to review and sign (Appendix 4), and a statement regarding confidentiality outlining the researcher's duty of care in light of disclosures, current or historical, that indicate risk to self or other. This also included disclosures related to terrorism (Appendix 3). All of the points above were re-iterated prior to the research conversation, in order to re-confirm and clarify further as required. A total of four participants were recruited. I was hopeful that a comparatively small number of storytellers would provide space to gather in-depth knowledge rather than trying to stretch the research too thinly across a larger number of participants (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). Guided by participant preference, we met at my training institute or in the person's home or finally due to a global pandemic, via video conferencing.

The on-going dialogue

The initial research conversations were sixty to ninety minutes long with a focus on following the life story narration, with few interruptions (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000) then, at times,

prompting to clarify and invite further stories, occasionally bringing focus back to reflections on self and identity (Josselson, 2013). This was handled with a 'light touch' because this was the first contact in what was hopefully to become a dialogue of checking back in, clarifying meaning and story progression after the initial conversation. The on-going nature of the research relationship was discussed at first contact. The conversations developed over this time with adjustments e.g. when questions arose as the stories progressed and occasionally were repeated, suggesting significance to the storyteller (Bruce et al., 2016; Etherington, 2008; Josselson & Hammack, 2021). I was also aware at this point of my inexperience as a narrative researcher. I was trying hard not to fall into my usual role as a therapist whilst developing a relationship that was empathic. I ended up keeping in mind a role of empathic 'detective', wanting to know what happened next and how the storyteller made sense of and understood that (Josselson & Hammack, 2021).

Follow up contact was via telephone and/or email after participants had received a copy of the first transcript as agreed in advance with each person. This allowed a clarification of meaning, and my understanding and invited further reflections. From this more memories emerged and once again clarifications were made. Participants were also invited to let me know how it felt to read the transcripts. The focus was on collaboration, reflection and gaining a deeper understanding.

Choices made around how to analyse

Czarniawska (2004) notes that "the narrative approach to social sciences does not offer a method" (p.125). The ultimate aim is the re-storying of experience (Lieblich et al., 1998), with a focus on meaning making rather than truth and generalisability. There is no attempt to reproduce the real. As Denzin (2014) notes

> "as we write about lives we bring the world of others into our texts. We create differences, oppositions, and presences which allow us to maintain the illusion that we have captured the "real" experiences of "real" people. In fact, we create the person we write about, just as they create themselves when they engage in storytelling practices" (p.3).

Without a defined structure or template for analysis of narratives, it behoves each narrative researcher to make choices. I have found that this process has been dynamic and evolving and intuitively true to the narrative ethos that rejects a formulaic, rigid approach (Clandinin, 2007; Etherington & Bridges, 2011). Though this perceived lack of structure felt daunting to me at first, what has emerged in the process of collecting narratives and transcribing them myself, in order to fully immerse myself in the stories, is a simultaneous process of collection

and analysis. The process organically evolves. It feels that something might have fragmented or been lost if these processes were viewed and approached as distinct or separate.

What emerged for me was a cross-disciplinary, non-formulaic perspective, formed whilst thinking about the stories told of second and multi-generation experiences of high control group membership. What *they* say about on-going processes of becoming, and how this research study might re-present this, by taking note of reflections on their notions of self within the stories, the different voices and epiphanies that shaped meaning making and action. Additionally, what researcher reflexivity might add, and reflecting in and across the stories told. The driver in the consideration of these personal stories is what they, the story-tellers, wanted to say and what they wanted others to hear. To force, re-shape or mould this into a neat analytical process and presentation would be to diminish it.

As choices are inevitably made about how to approach, analyse and re-present the stories, I have a responsibility to outline and justify the choices I have made which I will now do where particular areas of focus are identified.

Voices, epiphanies, empathy and reflexivity in and across the stories.

I am guided by Bleakley (2005) who draws attention to the value of "thinking with stories" (p.534) rather than using methods that can risk remaining descriptive and detached. Narrative methods allow research 'with' people rather than 'on' them, allowing researcher, participant and other readers to enter the person's world "through the medium of story" (Bleakley, 2005, p.535).

I draw on the distinction made by Polkinghorne (1988) between narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. Narrative analysis focuses on the individual story as it unfolds temporally, over time. As such I present each story as told by each person distinctly via the data; the verbatim as it flows and is reflected upon, as well as a brief overview of what each individual person did with their story. Then I included an analysis of what the stories collectively can tell us; what they did together, using reflexivity throughout.

I am drawn to voices and stories, how people understand themselves and their lives in a storied form, making connections, forming a plot, carrying particular narratives forward in the construction and re-construction of narrative selves, in the never ending process of becoming (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Inevitably as these stories are narrated, other voices are also heard, recounted, made sense of and carried forward.

In line with my ontological assumptions which views people as situated, influenced, meaning makers, in my analysis I also note those 'other' voices and their potential influences, whether they are the voices of other family members, friends, group members/leaders, societal, cultural or ideological voices.

Focusing on other voices in personal narratives intuitively fits with how I work as an integrative psychotherapist. Many times I have invited clients to reflect together on the other voices that can be heard in our sessions and to understand and reflect upon personal meaning making and resonances around these voices. Who can we hear the loudest? Who speaks more quietly? Which voices resonate more powerfully? Which voices endure and are carried forward in our personal stories?

I am also interested in what the narratives might say about how a person experiences and attends to their own internal voice within the context of high control groups. My own experience was that, at various times, I have had to learn to trust my own voice for the first time. I have spoken to many first-generation ex-members (individuals who joined such groups as adults) and several have described having to learn to trust their own voice *again*, not for the first time, but once more, as if the volume of their inner voice had been turned down, muted and replaced by that of the group for a while. For individuals raised from birth in such groups it is possible that the process is not the same; that they may have to learn to recognise their own inner voice potentially for the first time, to listen for it internally rather than listen out for an external voice to guide and inform them just as a dependent child might turn to a trusted parent.

In the research conversations and the analysis my voice as an insider researcher is not without influence (Etherington, 2016; McSkimming, 2016), so to uphold methodological integrity, researcher reflections and reflexivity are seen as an important component in the representation and analysis of the stories shared.

As previously stated, this research focuses on individuals who have been raised from infancy in high control groups who subsequently leave. Intuitively the topic hints at potential narrations of turning points, twists in the road, culminations, new beginnings, loss and adjustment. As such as well as noticing the voices along the way I will also note the realisations; the epiphanies, the narrated moments of significance to the story teller.

Life stories provide opportunities to journey as fellow travellers, offering the possibility of breadth, layering, construction and re-construction of identities and specific meaning making at various junctures. Often individuals will recount moments of epiphany; times of sudden realisation; turning points. Generally, we might think of epiphanies as big moments of

realisation, often made explicit by behavioural change or personal transformation (MacDonald, 2007). I am guided by Denzin's (1989a, ch.7) more nuanced explanation which discerns four different forms of epiphany: the major epiphany that seems to touch every thread of a person's life; the cumulative epiphany as several reactions to happenings over a longer period of time, the illuminative epiphany emerging from a crisis in a person's life or relationships, and finally the re-lived epiphany found in the reliving or the re-telling or both.

Reflecting on my own experience and the stories of others, I believe that this more nuanced understanding is helpful in light of the context of the lives being narrated. I grew up in an environment where everything was held within me in order to conform and be safe. A personal epiphany or realisation explicitly manifested could be very unsafe and seen as rebellion or apostasy, generating consequences that could be traumatic and shaming. When considering the process of distancing oneself from an indoctrination from birth within an immersive group environment it seems sensible to consider that this process might include many minor or micro-epiphanies as well as major ones. The analysis will capture and consider some of these cumulative reactions over time.

An additional reason for thinking about epiphanies or turning points, however small, is curiosity about the *how*; the process of leaving. When we listen to a person telling their life story we hear in many different ways *how* they came to be where they are now, in the moment of telling. When that journey involves significant change, in this case leaving a high control cultic group which yourself and sometimes several generations of your family have been raised in, intimate knowledge of the *how,* for those in similar situations and others, can be particularly salient and interesting.

To summarise, without becoming to rigidly attached to a particular style my analysis will weave together reflections on self found within the narratives; the different voices and epiphanies that shaped personal meaning making and action; researcher reflexivity and also offer reflections on what emerges across the narratives shared.

4 – Representing the stories shared: the data.

I do not strive for impartiality, I believe this is an unobtainable goal for any researcher. I seek what is described by Mies (1993) as "conscious partiality…through partial identification" (p.68) with the participants in this study. I cannot be unbiased towards them as I resonate and empathise with their stories, and I believe that just like the storyteller, the researcher, the supervisor, the examiner and the reader, will all view, feel and read this piece through the lenses of our own experience, our own knowledge, our own truths at the time of reading.

My intention for this study is that the reader will hear what it was like for the story-tellers; through their telling of the various times in their lives that they have chosen to share with me in our togetherness, as we travelled along, quite briskly at times, then sometimes more slowly, circling back, jumping forwards, and in the moments where we stopped to peer intently. This is the data of this research, and is knowledge in its own right.

I have presented the transcripts, not in their entirety but as verbatim accounts, following the flow and direction taken. I have chosen to condense by removing some repetitive filler words such as 'like' and 'you know' which were important parts of verbal connection at the time but when transcribed can sometimes 'muddy' the dialogue a little. I have taken this decision after consideration, to preserve clarity rather than change meaning or disrupt. My aim is 'ease of read' rather than manipulating what was said, hence my transparency around this. I have included a little of my own voice to give evidence of the process of co-construction.

It has been important to me during this process to stay as close to each person's story as possible. It has been helpful to hear each contributor's voice, their way of expressing themselves; the intonation, pausing, pacing and pitch. Frequent replaying of the recordings has helped me to 'hear again' and be reminded, in order to stay close to the multiple facets involved in communicating personal stories as they were shared.

Atkinson (2002) reminds us that "Storytellers are the first interpreters of the stories that they tell" (p.124). Whilst I seek to hear the participants own voice, a voice that may have been supressed by others to the point that the person disavows their own internal voice even to themselves, I do not seek to privilege the insider view to such an extent to share it as the only voice. Lieblich et al., (1998) note that "by studying and interpreting self-narratives, the researcher has access, not only to the individuals identity and it's system of meaning, but also to the tellers culture and social world (p.9)".

The construction, co-construction, and sharing of narratives of personal experiences and lived lives shines a light on how people are positioned in relation to power structures (Miles & Crow, 2000). This study illuminates experiences of membership of high-control groups which operate worldwide, today. The personal is political whether we like it or not. As author of this research I will leave it to the reader to draw their own conclusions, for example as to the ethics and appropriateness of children being schooled and educated by such groups, the potential for a lack of safeguarding and reporting pathways, and external accountability. Often these types

of groups have charity status enabling access to financial/taxation advantages despite encouraging practices such as shunning and pursuing non-inclusivity.

What follows are extracts of verbatim which track the flow as each person narrates their life story as they see fit. I have interjected descriptions of moments of salience that occurred in the room and in my mind, as well as my personal resonances, as I experienced them. I have reserved deeper reflections, representations and discussion for the section after this in order to preserve this space to immerse ourselves in these stories.
Some symbols appear in the verbatim text:

- Brackets [-] indicate that a missing word has been added by the author, to aid flow but not change understanding or meaning. Also, where group identifying name or practice has been anonymised for example by the use of [group name].
- Three full stops … indicate a pause in the flow of speech or omission of words for abbreviation purposes, perhaps if already stated previously.

Diana's story

Diana was 47 years of age when she contacted me in September 2019 and expressed interest in contributing to the research study after seeing a description of it and a call for participants which I placed (after gaining permission from the group administrators) in an ex-member support group on social media. Diana identified with the concepts of high control groups, cults, fundamentalism and second-generation ex-members and used these terms to describe her own experience, though in fact Diana's family had a long multi-generational history of membership. We acknowledged together that Diana might describe herself as possibly third or fourth generation. I was broadly aware of the group that Diana had grown up in, having read several research studies that specifically focused on this group, and from a personal perspective, having sat outside of religious education lessons in junior and senior school with girls from this group. Like myself those girls were not permitted to take part in any religious education other than that provided by our respective group. I felt curious to hear about Diana's experiences. I was curious to know something of the life of someone like those girls from my school who I had stood outside of classes with. We had never spoken or acknowledged our shared experience of separation from the school curriculum, submitting to our respective group's rules, together but separately, in school corridors, long ago.

Diana told me that she did not feel that people really understood what it was like to be raised in a high-demand group unless they had experienced this themselves so she was keen to "get

the message out". I was moved by her commitment to this and resonated with the sense of wanting to share people's stories of their experiences as well as my own to increase understanding. I explained to Diana that I had tried to structure the research so that individual participant voices and their stories could be heard, and that it was important to me to be guided by what Diana wanted to share. I was struck once again by the importance of this against a backdrop of being raised from birth within a dominant ideology which controlled who and how you should be and what you should say.

We agreed to meet up in November 2019 at my training institute which seemed to be a geographical mid-point for us both and convenient for Diana to get to. Unbeknown to me the room that was allocated to us was one of the larger ones. When we had settled ourselves in and had agreed to switch on the recorder Diana mentioned that she had made some notes on the train journey in and asked me where I wanted her to start. I was struck in that moment by the vastness of the room, resonating somehow with what felt like the vastness of the project and potential breadth of the life stories that had brought both Diana and myself to this point. I asked Diana when she felt she first became aware of the group that she was raised in. Diana describes a realisation of difference which seemed to resonate and be familiar for her as we began.

"…I didn't really know I was any different until I started going to school…

I was the last of my generation actually to go to a 'normal' school…

they don't anymore…"

I felt chilled by Diana's words. My thoughts went to children today, unseen though in our midst, taught from one dominant perspective with potentially little access or reference to broader ideas, a wider world of possibilities. In response I asked Diana about her school experience:

"…when I was at school I was really aware that I was different but I didn't mind too much at that stage…

I just thought it was normal and I was comfortable in the group…

It was actually at the end of junior school (age12yrs) that I realised I didn't want to be classed as one of the [group] anymore.

We had a religious education teacher…

…and one day as I was preparing to leave the class before the lesson started

…she just kindly put her hand on my shoulder and told me I could stay if I wanted to…

I was quite terrified as I hadn't ever thought that was a possibility

…but I stayed and really enjoyed the lesson.

She talked about Christianity in such an easy to understand way that I had never heard before…

…but everyone in the Junior School knew I was [group name]

…so I couldn't start pretending I wasn't"

Diana shares her growing desire to not be known as one of the group but at the same time not thinking that alternative ways of being were available to her. Indeed, the thought of alternative action felt terrifying. Hearing about Christianity from a different perspective to the group felt new and fresh, easy and enjoyable, but she felt unable to 're-new' herself in school as she felt known as the [group name] girl. An attempt at something different was construed by Diana as a 'pretence' suggesting that her self-concept was more aligned to the group identity.

"Then when I started secondary school (age13yrs) I thought I could pretend to some of the new people there that I was normal.

This didn't last too long though as I had two [group name] girls in my class who we were supposed to stick with the whole time.

It really frustrated me as I just so much wanted to be just one of the normal children.

I absolutely hated being classed as a [group name] and being called all sorts of names

…like Bible Basher…

I dreaded going to school

…at break times I would desperately look for the other two [group name] girls…

…because otherwise I had no one to talk to.

It was a lonely time…

I just so wanted to fit in"

Diana begins to use words like ‘hate’ and ‘dread’ ‘desperate’ and ‘lonely’ to share an increasing intensity of feeling related to how and who she wants to be known as. Diana describes observing other girls and seeing not just their material possessions but also their ability to be free and wanting this for herself. At this point in her life Diana seems to begin to challenge the rules and beliefs that are alienating her from her own emerging needs and desires.

“…I would look at the other girls and they seemed so free…

…laughing, chatting freely to boys, wearing makeup, their hairstyles.

All these things to me were forbidden.

I longed to be like them…

…I was about twelve when I first started questioning the [group name] a lot….

I started questioning the rules…a lot

….I could see how the other children lived, I began to question the way that we lived

…to start with I started questioning these things only in my head and when it felt like they would explode out of my head I would write them down in a secret diary.

I didn’t dare to question the [group name] openly….

I just had to write in my diary otherwise I felt I would completely break down. I felt compelled to write…”

Diana describes the stages of her questioning from about twelve years of age. At first questions about the beliefs of the group are implicitly held within as she feels fearful of sharing her feelings and thoughts. Then as the intensity of holding the questioning within builds, she finds a way to externalise by writing in a private diary, describing herself as “compelled to write” of herself, who was different to the group self. This then progresses, despite feeling frightened, to explicitly questioning leaders in her group. I asked Diana about this process. Drawing on my own experiences of fear and lack of questioning in a high control group I felt that she had been incredibly brave. I recalled adults from my own group who had been shunned for questioning the beliefs and rules in the group. I was curious to know if Diana’s own questioning had felt courageous to her and asked her about this. Diana described feeling fearful but in some way unstoppable, beginning by questioning her Dad and “in a very small way” a few other people in the group first, describing her “heart pounding and pounding” the first time she questioned a male other than her father in the group.

"…and I began questioning them

…sometimes I'd be brave and I'd question the elders which was really quite scary

…and they always were so angry of me, and really…

I think they started….I felt like they thought that I was the devil…

…questioning them I felt really, really evil….

…like I was something wrong, to be questioning…

…all the questions that I asked was seen as an attack of the devil"

Diana describes feeling like she was being seen as "the devil" and feeling evil was located within her, like she was "something wrong". This really resonated with my own experience. As a young girl I lived with a deep, embodied knowledge of being faulty, of my own guilt and shame, in my case silently and fearfully held within. In those moments of our conversation I felt a great sadness for Diana and myself; two young girls believing that they were demonic, somehow evil and of the devil at twelve, perhaps thirteen years of age, for questioning two different but similarly uncompromising group narratives. I recalled an incident when I had misbehaved, pushed the boundaries at home and my mother had written on the wall-calendar "Satan attacks". I was unsure if my mother was referring to myself or my half-brother, but I remember feeling terrified and thinking if Satan lies within me or has control of me, what else might he use me to do?

Diana narrates a sense of multiple selves at this point; fearful, evil yet unstoppable. A place of internal incoherence, of potential crisis bringing about a shift; a resigning of oneself to not being totally identified with the group, and a consideration of the consequences.

Diana goes on to describe feeling desperately afraid that her whole family would be taken up to heaven 'in the night time' and that she would be left alone. These fears plagued her so much that she would wake in the night and engage in checking behaviours, running into her parent's bedroom at night, almost hourly, to check that they were still there and that she had not been left behind for being wicked.

Sleep remains a problem for Diana in adulthood. Diana describes being told that if you were "wrong in your heart" you would not be 'taken up' so, in terms of her own sense of self and identity, even before the age of twelve, Diana had assessed herself as not meeting the criteria to be taken, because of not aligning enough with the group identity.

"I felt like I wasn't 100% [group name]

…so I thought well if they are all going to be taken at one time…

…they're not going to take me so I'll be left behind without my family…

…I used to run in…run into my parents' room in the middle of the night…

…often…maybe every hour or so to check that they were still there"

Part of Diana's sense of self at this time is that she felt that she was not "100%" group and it seems that she was vividly aware of the possible consequences linked to this; loss of, or permanent exile from the family that she loved so much.

"When I was writing my diaries it was such a relief to be truthful and reveal myself.

I guess I was trying to work out who I really was. I wrote pages and pages!

My diary was like my one and only true friend…

…and I would start writing each day "Dear Diary"…

It was a way to unburden all the turmoil that I was going through inside

…without fear of the [group name] shunning me for wicked thoughts"

I felt very moved when Diana told this part of her story, describing a desperately needed secrecy and outlet for herself. Diana's diaries gave her an opportunity to be what she considered truthful about herself, to reveal herself and create a space to work out, through her private writing, who she felt she was. For Diana's sense of safety this had to be secretly held and worked out, between herself and the blank pages that she gradually filled.

"I began leading a double life

…there was a notice in a shop window saying that home-help was required…

…I should never have applied for that job

…because I wasn't allowed any contact with worldly people.

I remember being absolutely terrified when I rang the number in the shop window...

my hand was shaking…

…so many times I started dialling the number and then stopped.

I really wanted a job because we were poor and I needed some money…

…but also I wanted to know more about the "worldly" life that I so desired…

…but was also terrified of.

I wanted to know what it was really like…

I guess I was curious into how others lived…

…and actually that has stayed with me all my life

…it is definitely my identity now.

If I go away on holiday I will always try to find local people there

…and find out what life is like for them

I love to know what their story is…

…but at that time…going for that job in a worldly house was so scary

…but I just knew I had to do it"

Diana shares that she feels that learning about others and connecting with how they live their lives is definitely an ongoing part of who she feels she is; part of her personal ongoing narrative of self. Thoughts turn to her grandfather.

"When anyone leaves the [group name] it is as if they are dead

…and are no longer spoken about

…so I didn't know my grandfather lived so close to us…

…as I had never known he existed…

…strangely I never thought to even ask if he did

…but the family I started working for introduced me to him…

…as by a strange twist of fate they had lived next to him in their previous home…

…he told me about the rest of my extended family who had also left

…and I started having contact with them via secret letters…

…through him”

After returning the initial transcript to Diana for her review I asked her more about how she was able to connect with her grandfather. Reflecting again Diana told how she connected with him and other extended family via her new employers, but my question prompts her to recognise the disconnection; a strangeness in never having thought to ask about him at the time. This resonated with my experience. I can think of extended family who seemed like shadowy figures that I never knew; individuals on the periphery, disapproved of for not being ‘in the truth’ of our group. It feels like a deadening or a ‘cancelling’ of the outsider by the group. I also reminded myself that these were not just ‘outsiders’ but they were also close, blood relatives.

“…I felt tormented at this time because life felt intolerable each way I looked at it”

…for quite a few years [I] led a double life like that

…and then as time went on I began to think more and more…

…that I needed to leave…

the [group name] was starting…, they really were so nasty to me…

I felt like such an outcast within their group”

I note how Diana is positioning herself as she describes how she felt at this time in ‘*their* group’. No longer hers. I am struck by what feels to me like Diana’s potential ‘refugee’ status; needing to leave but fearful of where she might go.

Diana describes how parts of herself are not identifying with the group identity.

“…I didn’t feel like I belonged

…it was a real…umm…feeling of unrest

…and being torn from two different lives

…and that went on for quite a long time…

I had begun to hate a lot of the [group name] men…

…the way they treat women…

…we always had to cook and wait on them…

…their rules felt stifling and many of them morally wrong…

…like not being allowed to see my grandfather

…there was so little freedom to do what I wanted to do…

…but on the other hand leaving the [group name] felt intolerable too

…because then I would be in the outside evil world that I knew nothing about…

…without any of my family who I loved so much...

I felt absolutely awful a lot of this time…

…the anguish I felt at this time was almost indescribable

…but I also felt an outcast in the real world as well….

…the only place I did really feel I belonged was in my family"

Diana describes how her love of and care for her family and older people is an ongoing and important part of who she feels she is as a person; a self-narrative that has held firm throughout various life stages and situations. Diana goes on to describe feeling fearful, trapped and shunned.

"…many of the girls my age were not allowed to talk to me by their parents

…for fear I might influence them…

…this was because I dared to do things that were forbidden,

…like wearing a necklace

…or cutting my hair a little bit

…but the elderly in the [group name]…didn't listen to the gossip about me

[and[were really nice to me still and didn't judge me for breaking a few rules...

…so they would speak to me at the end of the meeting

…otherwise it was a very lonely time"

Diana tells me how she understood the cost of freedom versus the cost of feeling completely trapped.

"I felt like I was completely trapped by the [group name]

I didn't agree with a lot that they were saying and I wanted, I wanted my freedom

but I felt like my freedom might come at a terrible cost.…

…I knew that if I did leave the [group name] I wouldn't be able to see my family again

…and they, at that time, they were all very firmly in the group…

…it seems strange to me now that I was a rebel as really, I am not that courageous…

…although even now I don't like to follow rules just for the sake of it...

I will still question things in society and am still a bit of an "odd one out"

Diana takes a moment to reflect on who she felt she was then, feeling the strangeness of her 'rebel-self', but resonating with those enduring parts of herself now, as we are speaking. I think in the moment of what 'rebel' means to me; strength, fear, resilient, alone. I think of Diana surrounded by people she has known all her life, in those meetings but feeling isolated, alone, shunned by some. The room in which we sit feels large again to me, and somehow disconnected from the rest of the building, despite being one of many rooms within the busy training institute. I wonder about the disconnecting nature of the experiences being shared. Disconnection from the mainstream. Disconnection from desire and ideas of self. I glance at the clock, the trees outside the window and back to Diana to orientate myself.

Diana attempted to leave the group at the age of seventeen but missing her family felt unbearable to her, so she returned to the group. Diana names the way that she was treated by the group for ten months after her return as abusive.

"When I think of it now it was most definitely a form of mental abuse…

…and I thought well the freedom isn't really worth it without my family

…so I thought well I'll have to go back into the [group name].

…so I did go back…

…and it was really, really difficult…

I missed my family so much. It felt like I was dying inside without them...

…so I went back to the group for at least another year

…this was a really traumatic year as three of the elders visited me every week

…for ten months for…

[a group name used for a type of meeting with senior group leadership]

…trying to get me pure

…they said they knew what my heart was, it wasn't really [group name]"

Diana tells me about the repercussions for the family group and what this felt like, describing a place of limbo. The image of a detention centre comes to my mind.

"…we couldn't go to the meetings with the group…

…we couldn't speak to anyone in the group…

…but we couldn't also associate with the world either

…it was like a place of limbo

…and I was like that for ten months

…and they would come every week to visit me...

…three of them and they'd…it was really awful.

I actually felt quite suicidal at that time...

I just didn't know what to do

…they tried to turn me then

…they said that they were coming to 'get me right'

…but really it was just a form of brainwashing"

Responding to Diana's description of these visits I asked her if this felt like a place of punishment; not being allowed to be in the world and not being allowed to be in the group, and having three men come to your home to visit you to 'get you right'?

"it was three [male] elders and they came once a week…and they questioned me

…always with the door shut, just me and the three of them…

…they questioned me for like about an hour and a half

…about what evil thoughts I'd had that week

…and there'd be such long moments of silence when I'd really start to panic…

…and just blurt anything out

…and it was really traumatic…

but eventually they did let us come back in"

I found myself questioning how groups can gain so much power to able to question young people on their own, without support, without intervention, but I was aware that this type of scenario is commonplace in many groups. I thought about the concept of transgenerational trauma and the normalisation of abusive and exploitative practices. My own experience, despite being in a different group to Diana, was that I was called to a meeting of this type with three male elders, but I did not attend despite being pressured to do so. A group member who I was very close to at the time urged me to attend saying that this was my last chance to save my life. I already felt that I was, by leaving.

Diana describes her sense of guilt and responsibility towards her parents.

"it was definitely a place of punishment

…but also I felt so guilty because I felt like I was punishing my parents as well

…because they couldn't go to the meetings and they were really missing all their life-long friends

…and they didn't know anything about the outside world

…they'd been born into it as I had.

I did start talking to them about the outside world…

…it's not as bad as you think

…and this family is really nice that, that had helped me

…but it did take a long time to get through to them…umm…and it was really awful…

…all this brainwashing"

Diana describes a desperate situation for herself and her family. Selves derived and validated within a group known from birth seem in jeopardy. Attachment bonds become suspicious, punishing, rejecting.

"I left again when I was about nineteen…

I was a bit more…sure of myself…

…I knew a little more about the outside world

…strangely I felt they were losing their power over me"

Despite Diana feeling empowered to leave, it seems the group was still trying to exert power over the family as a whole.

"…the [group] said that was it…

…my parents had to make both myself and my brother leave the home…

Mum said no way was she going to do that…

Dad said he couldn't possibly live without my mum

…so we all left"

At this point the demand from the group seems to become unbearable for the family group resulting in their leaving. Diana movingly emphasises words such as being "adrift" and having a "massive void". The family lineage through several generations has been one of group membership; familial, social, emotional bonds are held within the group as they keep apart from the wider world, taking daily instruction and association from within the group, living to guidelines to ensure physical and spiritual survival, surrounded by a closed group of like-minded people doing the same.

Diana begins to ask the questions around who she might be outside of the group and what is this outside world like? Knowledge feels important to Diana in her becoming and her lack of knowledge weighs heavily.

"I couldn't make sense of a lot of the outside world

…I didn't really know who I was

…also my education was so poor…

I was taken out of class so often because I wasn't allowed to study something…

I didn't really follow the main curriculum

…if there was anything on TV

…we weren't allowed to use computers

…or anything to do with evolution

…anything to do with sexual education

…so there was quite a lot that I didn't know anything about"

Diana reflects on ideas given to her of the world outside and her initial experiences. I resonated with her sense of confusion and reflected on my own feelings of fear of exposure as an imposter which have at times crippled me and, in better times, linger on in the periphery.

"…and I was quite scared of the outside world as well

…even though I wanted to taste it, I was scared as well…

…when I went to my first restaurant with my first job

I just didn't know what everything meant on the menu.

I had never seen a menu before

I found it so confusing and I tried to just copy what other people were doing around me…

…and try to be a chameleon…

I was so fearful…

…the group used to tell us all the time that if we left terrible things would happen

…we'd be struck down

…be swallowed up by the devil

…or really awful things would happen

…probably get cancer

…and die or be run over

…and the devil would get his claws on us”

Outside of the group, Diana describes herself as trying to be a chameleon, shifting colour and appearance to adapt to her environment, blending in, to defend herself. Changing herself dependent upon her environment. Diana describes her fear which was based upon what the group had told her about the world she was trying to be part of. I recognised the fear tactics as similar to those exercised in the group I was raised in, and in the moment of our conversation I recognised the old familiar embodied fear too.

…everyone outside was evil and they were all going to hell

…they might pretend to be nice

…but really they were controlled by the devil”

But Diana feared staying in the group more than leaving, as she so poignantly describes:

“I had to have freedom, my whole heart ached for it…

I just knew that…it was almost like a, maybe a death punishment if I did stay in…

…by death, I mean death to my soul….

…that my soul was going to be buried…

…it would be the end of me…”

Diana shares the existential threat that she feels towards herself, her “soul”, demonstrating in her narrative a more definite sense of separate-ness and separation from the group identity.

We jump from the past to reflections on self in the present and Diana shares a persistent narrative of self, of not really feeling quite normal; feeling like a pretender.

“…I’m forty seven now, so I have been left for quite a long time…

…even in my life now I don’t really feel quite normal….

I feel like I’ve got sort of a secret past….

I always feel like I’m the odd one out…

I feel like I’m pretending a lot of the time to be something that I’m not

…I feel people are interested but they don't really understand,

…they can't understand because they haven't really been through it.…

…people that do really understand are people who have been in a cult…and have left…

I don't really think that people understand otherwise"

Diana reflects at depth on her process, making meaning as she speaks:

"It could be that people who have been in dominant groups feel unable to fully grasp their own freedom…

…even when they have it

I'm still sort of fearful of different things…

I know it sounds ridiculous but I quite often have their words in my mind…

…about the devil and that we are going to hell…

…which I don't really believe…

…my rational…doesn't believe that but…

…then quite often when I'm alone at night and can't sleep I think about that…

…yes I feel like I am, I am still quite a fearful person

I slip into that role quite easily

…subservient woman, bringing up children, doing the housework, cooking.…

I am really comfortable in that role…that is what I am now, a mother

I felt like all through my two marriages.…

that I was an object and needed to adhere to the rules put in place for me…

…internally I rebel against…

I have found myself trapped and then having to escape quite a lot"

As Diana reflects on herself in the role of mother and wife she shares a sense of comfort that she finds in taking a role that she links to the groups ideals; subservient woman, homemaker, child-rearing wife, but also her sense of rebellion against feeling like an object. Diana shares

that she feels that most of her relationships have been with controlling men who she seeks out and then finds herself hating, and eventually leaving, a cycle that she wants to stop. I was reminded of my own process, not so much in personal relationships but more at an institutional/organisational level; in training or employment. Appraising the standards required and excelling at them, feeling the comfort of being in an approved place, then feeling trapped, overwhelmed and suffocated, and having to create distance to avoid a perceived loss of self and separateness.

In our follow up contact, I asked Diana how she understands herself in these relationships in terms of who she feels she is. Her analysis is as follows:

"it is hard to distinguish between what has been brainwashed into me

and is the [group] identity

…and what is actually me, my own identity…

I think the two are very blurred

…I believe my own identity is partly the [group name] identity

…there are things that I like about the [group name]

…I would go as far to say that I will always view myself as a [group name] woman actually

…that at the heart of who I am I have the [group name] identity

…however these are parts of their identity that I have chosen for myself…

…hopefully and that I am happy keeping"

"…at times I think….should I be doing something else, you know…

…what about getting a better job or umm…getting a better life for myself

…am I only going to be what the [group name] wanted for me…

…or am I going to be something else as well?

…so yeah, it's kind of an ongoing conflict…

I think maybe I am only partly my own person now"

Diana now introduces a theme that pervades the stories of all three ex-religious group members as well as my personal understanding of self and identity after leaving the group…what's me and what is of the group?

"I feel like I can never get away from what the [group] designed me as…

I am who I am now because of how the [group] shaped me...

…and I am happy with that

…there is a big chunk of knowledge missing and maybe when I do finally get that knowledge and experience, the "who I am" will change…

I think this new search of who I am will be a life-long quest…"

Diana reflects on what she feels is lacking because of her upbringing in the group:

"…the lack of education has bothered me all my life…

…often I haven't got a clue what people in the world, as I call it, are talking about…

I've got such a big void when it comes to cultural parts of our life…

I don't know anything about music or art or political views…

I've never really learnt that, I've tried to but…

…I sometimes feel like I've been in a prison

…and I'm never going to catch up, and I'm trying to catch up but I never will"

I was interested to hear Diana's thoughts about "not knowing anything about…political views" because at the time of our conversation the country was a few days away from a general election; preparing to vote in the next government. We acknowledged this and I asked Diana how she felt about this. Diana shared that she was trying to work out who to vote for and this was causing her to reflect on her own values and her difficulty trusting black and white ideas, preferring to feel free to see and embrace complexity.

"…what are my values?

...if I have those values, which political party am I most closely aligned to?

…I just don't know

…because in the [group] we didn't vote, we didn't have any political view

…I need to let go of what people think of me…

…it must be linked to growing up in a controlling group…

…always fearful of what everyone thought of me…

"I still feel a little bit trapped by the [group name],

but I wish I could get free of that feeling"

When Diana had the opportunity to read the transcript of our research conversation, she shared her emotional response to reading what she had said about herself, and still feeling trapped and fearful.

"Reading this section back actually makes me shed a few tears for my trapped spirit!

It has become such a scared spirit now

…afraid of doing anything that I really want to do

… like just taking off one day and walking the pilgrim trail Santiago de Compostela

…the more I have gone through life the more wary and afraid I have become!

…which is crazy I know

I think it might have come because after leaving the [group name]

…I have been with controlling men for so long and now devoted to my children.

…but I need to set my spirit free"

Diana shares her need to free her spirit suggesting that she herself still feels entrapped. She reflects on her parents and the long history of group membership in her family.

"My parents were born into it so it is very difficult for them

…I think I am fourth generation….

…families just stay in

…they're in and then it almost gets to the point of….

the idea of not being in just feels unimaginable"

In follow up contact I asked Diana what was it that made it possible for her to imagine not being in. She described feeling from a very young age that she was not a true [group name] and feeling that she was a fake, pretending to be what they wanted her to be but deep down knowing that she was something different. Diana felt that it became impossible for her to keep on being fake. I asked her how she felt at this point in her life.

"…today I do accept who I am

…and don't feel I am being a fake anymore.

I have totally come to an acceptance of many of the things in my life that happened…

…were out of my control

…or I behaved like that because of circumstances beyond my control

…more survival instincts really"

Diana observes that feeling validated and valued by others is very important to her, linking her with a sense of being a normal person.

"…the validation from people saying thank you so much...

…that would be so rewarding for me…

I found I really do need to feel valued by people and…

in that validation from people…I begin to feel normal

I think it's a very, very slow process of getting away from a cult…

I'm filled with all different colours and I can't decide which colour is the brightest…

I'm just lots of different things and umm…

I don't think I'm ever going to find out who I really am…because I don't really know"

Jessica's story

I made contact with Jessica in January 2020 via a fellow researcher who kindly advertised my research on her social media page. Jessica agreed to contribute to the research after considering the information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, the research question

and the inclusion criteria for potential participants. Jessica was 41 years of age when we met up for our initial conversation, has two young children and was born and raised within a high control group with a fundamentalist worldview. I was more intimately aware of the ideology of the group that Jessica had grown up in and, as such, was curious to hear her story and how she made sense of her lived experiences up to now.

I recall an anticipatory nervousness about meeting Jessica as we had both been raised in the same group (ideologically the same but not geographically). Reflecting on that sense of nervousness then I have concluded that I felt I may be 'swimming closer to the rapids', as it were; that there was potential for more pull into experiences that could be quite similar, and also very different, to my own, hearing things that I might have buried in time, group terminologies, assumed norms. I was curious about what this might bring up for me and how this might shape where we drift to within the narratives. I was also curious about difference. Within high control groups collective identity, collective behaviours and group-think often creates an illusion that everyone is thinking, feeling and behaving the same way, reinforcing the message to 'not step out of line'.

Jessica began her story with memories of being very obedient and doing what was expected of her by the group; carrying out necessary duties despite feeling uncomfortable at times. Jessica describes "having to", and that she "needed to" in order to meet the expectations of others.

"I just toed the line. I did what I was told to do…

…what I was supposed to do…

…didn't cause any trouble…

I absolutely one hundred percent believed everything I was taught

…but I wasn't happy

…I was baptised when I was….I guess 16

….summer after I left school

…and I did really well at school

….I wasn't allowed to go to any further education

….I had to leave school

…and I became an [unpaid role in the group] after that

…because I felt that was what I needed to do"

Jessica had shared that she was studying towards a degree at the time of our initial conversation so in response to Jessica sharing that she did really well at school I asked Jessica how she felt about this and whether that felt like part of who she feels she is. I felt physically moved by her sense of deprivation revealed in her reply to me.

"In reality it feels like there wasn't a 'me' as a person

….I mean now with hindsight I…I really felt like I was a pawn…

I was a [group name] and that everything that I did related to that

…so even me doing well at school I knew it was expected that I should behave

…that I needed to do well to be a good [group name]

…so everybody could see how great we were

I don't think there was really me as a personality growing up because I just toed the line…
just did what I was supposed to do"

Jessica reflects on her sense of personhood inside and outside of the group.

"I think it's really hard… to be a person

…when every element of your life is dictated to you…

…you know even down to …what media you consume…

…you don't have free rein to choose the music that you like or the films you watch

…you don't go through that normal process you know of…having a boyfriend"

And

I mean there must have been elements of me in there…

…but…I don't know what those are…

I think you only really start when you leave, once the control is gone…

….then you are building from ground zero essentially

…not in a natural way

…because there's all this learning…

…social learning that you should have done when you are growing up

…but you haven't learnt any of that"

Jessica names a ground zero point in her life after leaving the group. For her it felt like a starting point for social learning without a tight control exerted on her. Various theories from developmental psychology came to mind at this point in our conversation. I imagined newborn babies, maternal attunement and stages of development gradually building on each other and I tried to connect this with Jessica leaving a high-control group, without most of her family, in her adolescence.

"…so you come kind of tumbling out…

…and you come tumbling out in some ways like a newborn

…and you've got no one…to guide you

…and especially when you are so used to having everything constructed for you…

…it's a shock…

I believed everything still, even on the outside, the teachings one hundred percent

…that persisted for about fifteen years…

I still believed it…

I essentially thought I was about to die, every single day…

…so I was in this weird no man's land I guess for a very long time…

…you're trying to construct yourself

….with this thought of well what's the point...

…because I'm going to die soon

…what is the point of finding out what I want to do or what I like to do?"

Jessica describes the tight grip the ideology of the group still has on her at this point in her life, believing that she is about to be destroyed, facing existential despair on a daily basis at

the age of eighteen. My experience was similar in that I continued to believe the ideology for at least ten years post-exit. In doing so I felt that my impending destruction was in some way justified; I had made certain choices in leaving and I knew and accepted the consequences. At the time of leaving I thought that everyone around me had turned away from me because of my wrongness; that I had torn the family apart. It was a struggle to interact with non-group members without feeling my 'wrongness' and that I was deceiving others, because what I thought was the 'real' me was so very wrong.

Jessica describes the isolation that she felt when shunned by her family and the wider group and her sense of "becoming the problem". The shunning has continued from when she was eighteen years of age to the point of our conversation. Jessica was forty one years old when we spoke together.

"I got isolated and still am, isolated from them

…I then became the problem…

…because I wasn't allowed in the house…

…so not only do you get isolated from [the group]

…you get isolated from your extended family

…my little sister's three years younger than me

…and me and her were really, really close

…and I got cut off from her as well

…and I didn't really realise at the point of leaving how drastic it would be

I didn't really understand how isolated I would be"

In response I ask Jessica how she made sense of this:

…for about, I guess maybe ten, fifteen years after I left

I never talked about it, I never told anybody that I had grown up that way

…I avoided discussions about my family…

and I think a large part of that was because I still perceived that as my fault

I perceived that as being me causing it"

Jessica describes what happens next; the seduction of another being interested in her, the need to be cared for, the use of drugs to avoid and numb intense internal pain. I wondered at the acceptance she might have found, and lack of demand put on her, with her newer friends at the time, looking to avoid the pain and party on together.

"…essentially I went with the first…

…you know the first person who actually genuinely showed an interest in me

…which is something I had not had in a big family or in the congregation…

I'd never had that

…because I think when you come out at that age…

…having grown up in that situation you kind of do need someone to look after you

I just didn't think I was going to live very long

…so I did absolutely everything that I hadn't been allowed to do…

…but it was more than that…

…it was more I guess avoidant because of how my brain was at that time

…I just wanted to feel okay, and I didn't feel okay

…and at any point I felt miserable and depressed

…and taking drugs was a way to not feel like that for a period of time"

I ask if this was about numbing pain….?

"…yes, entirely, entirely numbing it out…

…incredible pain and that lasted for a long time"

Jessica goes on to describe a period of about ten years where she felt she was just trying to survive, putting one foot in front of another to keep a roof over her head. I ask her about this time and if/how she was able to find some meaning, pleasure, care for herself. Jessica reflects on being one of three generations of women for whom personal well-being was secondary to the needs of others and the demands of life. For a moment her stories of the impact of the group seem to recede as Jessica describes potential transgenerational influences within her family narrative but then she reconnects with her experience of self within the group. I

considered how a transgenerational pattern of always putting self second might have been accentuated by joining a group where individual identity was secondary to group identity and group aims, and how this might result in a co-dependency; enabling self-denying tendencies and histories to be exploited in groups of this type.

"I'm horrible at self-care

…I'm trying to, I'm getting better at it now…

…again it's something when you grow up being completely controlled

…and the focus is on a group you…

…you're essentially nothing, you do not matter…

…as long as you are toeing the line how you feel doesn't matter

…if you are feeling bad or depressed that's your fault

…because it's something you're not doing right

…you need to pray more

…be more spiritual"

Jessica's focus on her life story now shifts to the present and the next generation through her parenting of her own children.

"so my kids know that that is important and that people need time for themselves

…they need to do things that they enjoy

…because I don't want them growing up with that attitude that it doesn't matter

… yes, I've consciously made that decision that basically…it stops with me"

My own thoughts and feelings push suddenly up to the surface as I hear Jessica say that it stops with her. I see a mother in front of me unwilling to pass on what she herself has inherited.

I feel that Jessica is speaking into something very deep and challenging for those born into multiple generations of group membership. Bearing the consequences of their predecessor's decisions they also bear the repercussions of breaking the line. My experience of being in this position has been multi-faceted, at any one time feeling fear, pain, confusion and pride; fearful of rejecting a punishing 'end of days' ideology known from birth; painfully broken relationships

and the hurt of being shunned; confusion as the beliefs linger through the years, and pride at having the strength to redirect a course that allows future generations more choice, acceptance, space to be undecided without punishment, and to explore.

Jessica describes some of herself as a mother.

"…and you know I'm trying to…

…you know…they (Jessica's children) ask questions from time to time

…and I tell them as much as they can kind of process at this age

…but yes I just want them to be as far away from that kind of mentality as I can do"

She continued…

"if I think about someone showing her [Jessica's daughter] the stuff that I saw growing up…

I find that horrific…that it's…it was forced on me…

…those pictures are burned into my head…

I've been shown those pictures since I was born and that is horrific to me

…so yes, I very consciously thought, okay, whatever that is, that's going to stop"

There feels like an intensity in the room at this point. The air feels very still for me, and I feel like I am holding my breath, submerged.

I know the images that Jessica speaks of, and I too feel traumatised by them. I become acutely aware of what the insider position can mean for a researcher as we sit together. Fearful images are brought to life again, the narratives speaking out the fear and horror felt by children, and now as adult mothers wondering how it was okay to have regularly seen these as children. I feel unwilling and perhaps unable to dwell on this part of Jessica's narrative, and with what felt like an unspoken mutual agreement we come back to some kind of surface and carry on. We break to the surface through laughter, reflecting on a felt sense of freedom, particularly in relation to parenting.

"…weirdly…I think being…

…although it's not nice being isolated from your family [Jessica grins at me and we laugh]

…theoretically I think that has allowed me to do things very differently

… and to be a different type of parent”

Jessica shares her thoughts about herself apart from her family and the space she feels this has given her.

“…obviously there’s parts of me that are natural…personality

…but I believe that personality has grown away from them

…and because I have been away from them and because of the people I have met

…I’ve left places so many times….

I’m now tethered because of my children

…but I have completely upped and changed several times…

…sometimes just moving with bin bags”

Jessica begins to reflect on what she has internalised by seeing herself through the eyes of others…

“…when people were encouraging me to go to university

I was like [pulls an unbelieving face]

…and this is kind of…real self-perception thing

….no, I’m not the kind of person that goes to university…

…and people [said] “why”?

…and I can’t answer that

…because they [said] “you are really intelligent, you love learning…

…what is it about you…that makes you think that you are not that type of person?”

I asked Jessica how she made sense of this:

“I guess going through that process has kind of shown me that…

…your perception of yourself can be incorrect

…and the way you think other people perceive you can be incorrect”

I asked Jessica if she could say more about what this meant for her sense of self:

"…because you have no sense of self before you leave

…in a way that's kind of all you can do…

…how do these people…what do they think of me…

…but also for I guess for a very long time

…I would take on people's negative view of me

…but I would not take on their positive view"

"I could not be complimented…

…anything like that was psychologically pushed away

…a few years ago, when I went to see a therapist

…she complimented me

…and I actually physically went like that [moves hand and arm in a pushing away movement]

…and physically pushed it away with my hands

…she said, "Do you realise what you just did?"

[laughs] because I do…I did it so naturally"

Jessica shares her sense of dilemma around how to move forward from a 'given' identity

"…when you've grown up having essentially no identity

…not no identity…

…but an identity that is given to you….

…what can you do when you leave…?"

Jessica describes a multi-faceted, collection of selves constructed through her experiences in life. Reflecting on her experience as a parent evokes curiosity for Jessica about the possibility that parts of her identity might be naturally pre-existing as opposed to shaped and conditioned by others. This is prompted by how she experiences her daughter's developing personality,

and I found these reflections particularly moving. Was her experience of her daughter's developing personality in some way signposting Jessica to parts of herself that were not prescribed and shaped by the high control group in which she was raised? Jessica acknowledges how important it is to her to create space for her daughter to develop, to question, to learn, to grow, to have her own mind. A freedom not explicitly available to Jessica until she was in her late teenage years, and in taking that freedom Jessica incurred significant consequences; shunning by most of her family and friends.

" I've been collecting different identities if you like…

…and there's…lots of them

…and now they are just kind of all bunched together…

…but I am, you know, essentially all of these things"

"I have been building who I am now…

I feel…that the people I've met, the experiences I've had…

…have all built who I am

…but it's…especially with my daughter,

I can see myself in her"

While thinking about her sense of identity linked to her experience of her daughter, Jessica describes 'seeing' herself in her daughter and begins to reflect on what might be innately who she is and what might be related to nurture; socially shaped and influenced, within the context of being raised in a high control group; a supressed self.

"So there was something pre-existing obviously

…because there can't be….there can't be nothing

…but it was very…very pushed down…

…yes, it was very suppressed I think"

Jessica reflects on her experience of parenting her daughter and links to how she has experienced this as a form of parenting herself also.

"…you know when people talk about…

…especially through therapy…parenting yourself

…that's how it feels

…it feels like I'm parenting myself

…because you have all these, all these traits and attitudes and reactions

…which are exactly like me…

…but she's been given a completely different environment…

…to become who she is"

I pause, to hold the moment and prompt further reflections

"Maybe that is the child I should have been, if I wasn't in this

…what would I have been like if I'd been…

I guess I could have been…let's say me…

I could have been me far earlier

…you know there is the odd thing, when …I wonder where that comes from…

I wonder whether that's me or whether I'm conditioned in that way

…and I don't know

….I don't know whether you'll ever…tease those apart

…because they are so inter-meshed"

Jessica reflects that despite not always feeling comfortable with public speaking, putting together and sharing her story has been helpful, giving her a felt sense of power over what happened to her, normalising and validating the difficulty that she experienced at times. Jessica also links this to helping those with similar experiences of high control groups as well as supporting others to have insight into these types of experiences.

"…the process of getting up and talking about my experience kind of forced me to

…give my story a narrative

…it was difficult….

…it's not comfortable for me to get up and talk about this stuff

…but actually forcing [myself] to go through that process

…was really helpful to me

…it's okay…that you found that hard…because it is hard

…it's not normal, normal people don't have to go through this

…they don't have to go through these experiences

…but also you know getting to the point where you're…you're standing up

…and saying this happened to me… these bad things

… gives you an element of power…

… that you probably never had and I think that is helpful…

…that was more helpful to me than any counselling I ever had…

…because for so long you are so kind of...

…so focused on surviving, like eating, getting a roof over your head

…that you don't think about these things

…I didn't talk about it because I still felt guilty

…so I didn't really tell anyone

…and I guess in my mind that changed my perception as something that…

…not some dirty little secret in my past

…but something that is umm…potentially can help people in some way

…and I think there's probably some strength in that

in turning your bad experience into something that can help…

…help people or give you some kind of insight into some situations"

Jessica goes on to reflect on her own experience of working with counsellors

"…for me I found that when I went to counsellors it was almost like there was a brick wall …because I could only go so far

…because they didn't understand the situation and…

…they may have thought they did understand

…but I didn't feel they understood so with most counsellors

I…I left when I thought I had gone as far as I could…

…but the real core issue in my life was never really addressed"

I picture Jessica in counselling rooms trying to explain what she has grown up in and how it felt and feels, and not feeling that what she is describing is getting through somehow. Jessica is physical proof of her own survival and of the powerful process of putting together a coherent story of herself and her experiences. This has enabled her to create her own meaning, that makes sense of who Jessica feels she is in, light of her experiences.

"I should have been me twenty years ago…

I'd probably be a different me [laughs] yes…

…and I'm happy with…happy with who I am now…"

Sarah's story

Sarah was 42 years of age when she contacted me in April 2021 and expressed interest in contributing to the study after seeing a description of the research and a call for participants, which I placed (after gaining considered permission from the group administrators) in an ex-member support group on social media. Sarah felt that she met the criteria as outlined in the participant information sheet. Sarah had physically left her group approximately four to five years prior to our meeting. Compared to the other participants Sarah was unique in that she had spent the longest time as a member of her particular group, having begun to raise her own children within the group. Sarah, her husband (also a group member from birth) and young children had subsequently left as a family group.

Sarah was born and raised within a group which is represented across the globe. She was very well travelled, having lived, studied and worked for the group in several different countries, and having spent a significant amount of time in United States, United Kingdom and Europe.

Sarah's family heritage, on her mother's side, could trace their ancestors back through several generations of group membership, potentially to the time of the groups origins. Due to geographical distance and ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, our first conversation was via video conferencing. Sarah was made aware of the potential security limitations of platforms so as to make a considered decision as to whether this felt comfortable for her. We both agreed to proceed. Sarah shared a little about the structure of the family; she has six older brothers, the eldest being twelve years older than Sarah who was born as the first daughter, subsequently followed by her younger sister. Sarah beings:

"I'm…born into this exclusive club situation and then of course going through church…

…you're definitely told that you are special that you are…

…that you have a plan...

…that you have a purpose"

Early in our conversation Sarah shares the significance her father's life story has on the family narrative, particularly in terms of his early developmental experience. His mother was raised in the church and then left home to be with a non-believer, they married and had three children, one being Sarah's father. Sarah has the sense that her father experienced his parents as not being very present or available to him, so when he was invited into some of the local groups activities for children he participated.

"…he felt…for the first time in his life he is feeling loved, and welcomed

…and part of a group…

"…they would do like weekly activities and a Sunday school for kids

…and also weekly activities for kids

…so my Dad started participating with some neighbours

…who like gathered him in and loved him

…and his own parents were kind of absent"

Sarah reflects on the narrative of church as a place of safety and saviour for herself and her family, resulting in her father wanting the family to really be involved.

"…he was always looking for ways to be like really, really in….

…because that was his sense of family

…he met my Mum

…and it was [as if] the church saved him and has given him a place…

…we are so lucky to have the church in our life to save us

…from the loneliness and dysfunction that is outside of the church"

Sarah reflects on this narrative in terms of how it might have spoken into her sense of who she felt she was.

"…so lots of identity…

…this is where you belong, this is who you are, and this is who your family is

…as far as we can see back

…and everything beyond that

…in a lot of ways, it was really, really, comfortable

…really empowering to feel so certain

I would say I was a very certain individual

I mean we were always being told we are so lucky we are so lucky and blessed

…to…be in this safe place

…we know this is the way to have happiness

…to have peace in life

…and other people who aren't in this just don't get to have it…

…they're missing out"

Sarah shares that her father gradually became unwell and that the family later realised that he had early onset dementia. Sarah recalls him being unavailable to her from the age of four and being unable to support the family. At this point the group provided significant practical support to the family and Sarah's mother.

"…then she had to support eight kids on her own

…so then the church network held us

…and one of his friends who [was] in the church [said]…

"…oh you are falling on rough times right now…

I can afford to put you in a house right now"

…so that's why we weren't homeless growing up

…it's because the church really actually came through and helped our family

…and we got food from the church through a welfare system…

I felt that that was embarrassing to my family…

I didn't even realise that the house was given to us until I was an adult

I heard the real story about why we lived in that house"

At this point Sarah begins to reflect on the reality of her lived experience, which felt messy and difficult, comparing this to the narrative of the group of the 'special-ness' and 'blessed-ness' of members. I asked Sarah about how she understood this mismatch.

"…the narrative that our family is special…

…and everything is wonderful and we belonged to the right truth

…the reality that I was actually living in was……our family is a mess

…we were trained that we should be grateful for our trials

…and not really talk about them

…because God will ultimately fix it if you have enough faith

…so I just kept saying well obviously…

…since I'm having a hard time I just don't have enough faith"

Sarah tells me how she makes sense of the mismatch between the group narrative of herself and her life and her own lived experience by constructing herself as faulty, not having enough faith. This leads on to Sarah also reflecting on the beginnings of her sexual identity, seemingly in conflict with the identity prescribed by the group, where sexual interest and sexual feelings were wrong at this stage.

"…when I went through puberty and started having a sex drive

I [thought] I must be actually…not the chosen person that everyone thinks I am

…because I have a sex drive

…and that's bad…

…at some point in adolescence I felt this divide…

…that I'm special

…and I have to be special

…and I'm supposed to be special

…but I'm also not special

…because I have these sins…

I'm interested in bodies"

Sarah recalls thinking that the wrongness lay within prompting her to work harder, be more faithful.

"…everything else was right and I was definitely wrong

…so it was because I was deficient or not doing enough

I thought well I definitely need a new level of spirituality

…because I clearly do not measure up…so the problem is me

…and so I dealt with this by throwing myself even more…

…into the certainty that there is probably something wrong with me

…and I need to just…do everything more and harder

…and be more grateful and be more faithful

…and silence the negativity more

…and repeat the positivity and the faith and the Jesus more…

it was punishing

because I had physical proof of being financially supported

…not being let down by the social network

…when you look at human beings there are a lot of terrible stories

…things that really disappoint us about humanity

…but at the same time there were always many adults in my life

…that I felt cared about my family"

I am curious about how Sarah might have tried to balance the perceived goodness and kindness of others in the group with her own personal, internal sense of wrongness at the time. Sarah links this to an 'all-or-nothing' narrative of either good or bad which can be characteristic of high control groups.

"…because even though there was definitely this schism inside of me…

am I wrong, am I right?

am I good am I bad?

the idea that I could be both

or neither

…didn't occur to me"

Sarah gives a glimpse of how straying from a group narrative has the potential to impact relationships.

"I learned a little bit about feminist thought…

…and I told my Mum I am learning these things…

…and she would listen and I could see her…

…drawing away from me

…feeling threatened

…and I could feel myself becoming dangerous in her eyes"

"I was just…really interested in liberal ideas

….instead of conservative ideas

….that I had been raised with

…and required to meet”

Sarah identifies study and work as a pathway out of comparative poverty and dependence.

“if I’m going to get out of this hole that I was born into

I need to work harder…

…and I did

…I was really, really good in school”

Sarah describes her thought processes and experience while in the group and facing a particular life challenge that required some adjustment on her part. I asked Sarah about this and how she made sense of herself in this. Sarah tells me that this experience, at that time, helped her to overlook differences in her self-narrative and the group narrative.

“…then after so many prayers didn’t work

I remember praying again…

I prayed a lot, I felt like that was the good part of me

…it gave me hope that I was actually a righteous person

I felt like I was talking to somebody that cared about me…

…and I got this answer in my head that was

…you know it does not have to be a punishment….

…it could be a blessing, you get to decide

…and this was like the idea that came to my mind

…and I knew that god told me that

I knew that was a message from god…

…that kind of like spiritual revelation let me know

…number one, certainty…god is real and he is going to tell you the answers…

…and he loves me even if I'm kind of bad sometimes

…it definitely helped me to overlook the difference between the narratives for a long time"

Sarah reflects on what feels to her as a long-standing part of who she is as a person; a person who has a relationship with a god-figure who cares for her.

"…and that's definitely part of my identity

…I am a person who has a relationship with god

I am a person who god loves

…I am person who out of my own sheer will

…and gods support

I can do what needs to be done"

Sarah reflects on her sense of the group at a particular point in her life, and the group being everything about who she felt that she was.

"…there was this larger circle to embrace me and support me and my goals…

…the church pay is great in that regard

…so that's how I finished putting myself through school

…and I was like very invested in how the church works

…I worked for the church

I went to the church school

…it was everything about who I was…

…then I met my husband!"

We spontaneously laugh together at this point, recognising a significance and potential changing up of gears as we travel Sarah's life story. I ask what happened next. Describing their relationship at the time prompts reflection on the group narrative around the role of women.

"…never feeling like we naturally fit the narrative of what it means to be a good….

…maybe outwardly looking the part

…outwardly playing the role

…but always being a little unsure….

…am I fake?

…I'm not as good as I say I am

I felt like I had a voice around him…

I didn't feel like he didn't think less of me or think that I was less intelligent….

…because I was a girl

…he was like a closet feminist

…he didn't know it

…but he didn't treat me with misogyny"

Sarah gives an example of how she experienced her husband in terms of their education, and how this differed from some of her expectations based upon her experience of other couples in the group.

"…it never occurred to him to say since we're both broke…

…lets only put one of us through school

…it was….how can we work together so we can both graduate

…maybe we can save money by getting married

…and both finish"

I was curious as to how Sarah could balance the needs of her church identity without alienating herself from her own sense of self and identity at the time.

"…so I felt like I had been able to find an appropriate church approved partner

…who treated me with equality

…and so I didn't feel threatened by the church in my goals

I was still able to align my sense of self

…and what I needed

…and what felt right to me

…within these boundaries that were given to me

…so as long as I could conform my life

…in a way that worked for me

…and the church

…it was good"

Sarah describes how she and her husband and children relocated for work reasons several times. Sarah shares her experience in relation to the group during these times of relocation and reflects how a narrative developed of the group representing home when abroad, but gradually this begins to change for Sarah.

"…because in all of these places we didn't have family

…but we knew that we had a congregation to go to

…we knew that there was going to be one circle where we knew what the expectations were

…and if you say...I want to participate" then they're like [makes a hugging gesture] mmm…love, embrace…"

And

…it set in my mind that I cannot live without the church

…it was the centre of my world

…no matter where you are in the world

…you are at home with the church…

…but life became a lot more work….

…then trying to…be enough for life

…and be enough for church

...things started cracking

…and I couldn't be enough for both…

I felt like my old answers were not working…

…just pray harder…

…just combine powers with god

…and it is going to turn out right"

Sarah describes a series of realisations at this point concerning the widening gap created by the difference between the group's story of her and her own sense of herself

"Everything about my sense of self just shattered…

…and the church wasn't helping me to put it back together

…it was…well you should pray harder…

…and suddenly the stories just woke up inside of me

…and I was alone…

…turning to the Bible one more time

…was not giving me any wisdom there

…and then I realise…

…this is like the two stories are now so different

…that I cannot keep trying to put them together anymore"

Sarah then tells her husband how she is feeling, and describes the shock they felt, perhaps about realisations of what they had not acknowledged to each other and themselves, in terms of how they felt about the group and their own sense of self at that time.

"…so once we kind of got over this initial shock

…we both have like these little mismatch of stories of…our real lived experience

…and what we are supposed to say is a lived experience

…so that was like the beginning of the end…

…then we'd start talking about all of the different things that we had just held inside…

…about the mismatch of stories

…how maybe it was actually the church that was making us feel bad about ourselves

… and not the church that was holding us together

…and making us feel good and supported

…maybe it was the church all along that was telling you

"You're broken we are going to fix you""

…we worked out that we might not damage the children if we left

…even though our whole entire lives is….

…if your children don't go to church they are damaged…

…we decided to just try on our own

…to not take them to church sometimes

…this felt like a very brave…

…our scariest move…

…scarier than our scariest move"

Sarah describes uncertainty and fear, particularly in relation to who she felt she was as a person, and why. Despite having heard and listened to many experiences of leaving high control groups, and having experienced this myself, I was impacted by Sarah's narrative around leaving and her fear of a total loss of self without the group. The fear of potentially losing oneself completely when leaving the group feels very real in these moments of our talking together. I ask how she felt at this time.

"Total uncertainty…

…and then so many unanswered questions

…and I was really afraid that

…maybe my entire self was actually…the church

…maybe myself and church were so intertwined

…that if I subtracted church there wouldn't be anything left"

And later…

"…why did we help other people?

…because god said so

…why do we have a happy family?

…because god teaches us how to have a happy family

…why can I forgive people?

…because god told me to

…why do we contribute in our communities?

…because god told us to

…because the church told us to

"…so if the church isn't telling us what to do anymore…

…who am I?"

I am struck by the many aspects of herself that Sarah considers here in her story and how it might have felt to feel wave after wave of questions about self.

"Am I going to be a bad mother?

…a bad person?

…am I going to be a less special person…

…because I was so special?

…I know I've talked a lot about many, many things

…and in all of these different places and all of these different scenarios

I could keep myself in tact

…because of who I was in church

I was…afraid of what might be left of myself

…or maybe there wasn't anything

…or there was just this big gaping hole…

…of just questions and uncertainty

…and that was just the most terrifying thing…

…if I rip this out what is going to be left…?"

Sarah tells me how she began to connect with the idea of separation because of difference, rather than the group actually being who she herself was. Listening to Sarah this felt to me like a turning point; a claiming of self.

"…then I could see that the whole reason that I broke from it…

…is actually because my sense of self is different from the church

…and that is why I couldn't do it anymore

…not because I was turning away from something and looking into a void

…but it was because what was me

…had been different for so long"

Sarah then tells what happens next for her, a process of connecting with those parts of herself, a process of getting to know and accept her own views and her positions on things; working out what was herself, going forward. I ask how she understood herself in this:

"…opening the door of…if this isn't the only right way to be…

…then I could look inside of myself

…and take each one of these pieces out

…and say "You're allowed here"

I can love my friends who have come out as gay"

…and that's not a bad part

… and I don't have to shut it off

…and I don't have to forgive myself for it

I can just say “yes, that’s the kind of girl I am”

…not every girl is like that

…not every guy is like that

…I’m just this kind of human”

…and I’ve had to reacquaint myself with myself

…now that everything is allowed”

Sarah chose to share at this point a very powerful experience of personal self-reflection and an evolving discovery, and some acceptance of the parts of herself that she had to shut-off and reject as they did not match up to the group identity. I resonated with what felt to me, as Sarah described it, like a frightening process of fragmentation and re-construction. I was aware of my own experience at this point, but very much wanted to hear about Sarah’s experience. I ask Sarah what this time in her life felt like for her.

“…Well, if you had asked me this…3 years ago…

I would have [said] terrifying

…or I would have said I still don’t know who I am

…or I’m still finding all sorts of weird monsters under my bed

…that I didn’t realise they were there

…because I wasn’t ever allowed to feel them….

I would have felt shattered

I would have felt lost in the uncertainty”

And how do you understand yourself now..?

“I would say I am more ok…

…with…being curious as to why am I feeling that way

…lets observe this about myself

…this was an unexpected reaction that I had to this situation

…what's fuelling this?

…I just feel like I still don't really know who I am

…but I realise that I don't have to know…"

And:

"I guess I know that the centre of this has been my relationship with myself…

And a realisation in sharing her story:

I'm just realising as you are talking

…that one of the things that the church says…

…they repeat over and over is [they] answer the big questions…

…the questions of who you are

…and I think well yes they did answer the question of who I am

…they told me who to be

…and then to have to come up with that for myself

…was both scary and amazing"

Sarah tells me that she feels that she herself came up with the answers when praying in those difficult life situations, and this personal realisation seems to have helped her to connect with her inner resilience, strength and power.

"The thing that I have come to….

…those deeply spiritual experiences where I felt that god answered

I realise for me

…that…that was me"

And

"I'm basically god [we laugh together]

…no!

I am a resilient person

I was able to work through problems

…that was me

…and I'm not weak

…and I'm not dependent on an organisation to tell me who I am

…that was me the whole time

…figuring things out

…trying to push through things

…using the systems that I had

…to make a path that was liveable for me

…and I feel really empowered

…in being able to look backwards and see that"

In follow up contact I ask Sarah about any new understandings or reflections on self since our original research conversation. Sarah shares in more depth what she calls "identity shifts" and getting in touch with her "authentic identity":

"My new self-oriented self was disappointed in the self-sacrificing self

…and maybe vice versa

I've had to make a conscious effort to forgive my former self for giving up so much

…having so many babies so young

…putting my goals, sense of morality and wisdom, etc. in second place

to what my religious/community expectations were

…for a religion that I ended up walking away from

…I can also congratulate myself

…for making that transition

…refusing to invest more of my life

…into a self that wasn't totally authentic”

Jane’s story

I first met Jane in 2017 at a conference in Bordeaux hosted by the International Cultic Studies Association (ICSA) which was established in 1979 and who describe themselves as “a global network of people concerned about psychological manipulation and abuse in cultic and other high-control environments” (*Cult Info since 1979 - about Us*, n.d.). The organisation is made up of former group members with lived experience of high control groups, helping professionals, academics and researchers. I attended to speak about the proposal for this research and to learn more about support available to those affected. I also wanted to connect with others with an interest in this area, and potential participants for this research.

Jane is an experienced counsellor and supervisor who runs her own private practice in the UK and was co-facilitating a group session at the conference. Jane describes being raised in a political group which she views as a “cultic group” which was founded and run by a member of her family. At the time of our meeting Jane had co-written at least two published articles related to post-cult recovery, one of which was from the perspective of attachment processes for those individuals who had been raised from infancy in such groups. The article highlights the broad nature of cults and high demand groups, and the similarities in their governance and control processes (Article not referenced to preserve anonymity).

I was interested in speaking with Jane as religious groups can often come to mind first of all when considering cultic and controlling groups with a fundamentalist worldview. As previously noted in this research such groups can form around various interests, be they religious, political, yoga, health, psychotherapy, self-improvement, to name a few. It is the structure, dynamics and governance that are similar, and set them apart as high control, cultic. Similar to religious ideology, political beliefs backed up by a detailed manifesto, can create a worldview which dictates loyalties, behaviours, allegiances, strong group affiliation and grounds for expulsion (Lalich, 1992; Stein, 2012; Stein, 2016, Tourish and Wohlfort, 2000). Set this within a group environment led by a charismatic and demanding leader figure and one can see how a fundamentalist, high demand group might operate, influencing members and situating those born into such groups within a prescribed worldview which permeates an individual’s own sense of identity, self and purpose, against a backdrop of highly complex group dynamics.

I met with Jane in her home on a Wednesday morning in early November 2019. I was interested to hear about Jane's stories of growing up within a far left political group which she considered cultic. 'Comrades' were expected to put the group first, ahead of everything else, including family and friendships. They were not expected to disagree with the group leader.

Jane told me that she had read an article on cults in 2012 that resulted in a major epiphany for her. A dramatic realisation that resonated with her life experience. The author wrote about political cults, prompting realisation for Jane about the cultic nature of the group in which she was raised. This happened approximately 7 years ago, and I recall feeling surprised at what seemed like a recent event, as my understanding was that Jane had drifted away from the group about 40 years ago. Jane began by sharing the focus of the group and her understanding of it as a young child

"a Trotskyist group that I would now think of as a high controlling cultic group"

"…we understood the group to be very, very important, what they were doing and we knew a little bit about politics

…oddly my mother left the group

…so that meant a bit of a shift for me…

but having said that, in a political group lots of stuff will be happening in the home…"

Themes of being different and special emerge:

"having some knowledge that other people did not have, and therefore being different but in a good way"

Jane describes parts of herself that feel special but neglected:

"Some jealousy when other people had family outings, went to see the Sound of Music etc…

there weren't many other children in this group, so for example, Communist Party, a lot more children, bigger group"

And

…it was about feeling I was superior, i.e. more intelligent…

…with a better grasp of politics

…but at the same time feeling jealous and sad of their lives…"

"also...lonely

…because we didn't have any money either, it all went on politics, so I was jealous of other people's clothes and things like that"

Jane describes finding security for herself in her mother, though she worked very hard outside of the home to bring in the main finances. Also, not moving house and being at the same schools created a sense of grounded-ness for her, describing herself as lucky in this.

"yes so that lessened the effect, so that was a constant…

as a home our house did feel quite secure, although also bleak"

I feel reminded by Jane that she was a young child at the time she is describing. It felt difficult for me to hold the 'adultness' of political ideology and groups with a far-left political focus with the idea of a very young childhood. It felt like a sharp and stark contrast somehow. I ask Jane if she could say a little more about home:

"…we had our photos of Engels, Marx and Lenin and Trotsky on the walls….

…we had people staying at different times…

…comrades…

…so all of this meant, made a difference to me as a child"

Jane recalls:

"…wanting to chair meetings, wanting to have a role in political meetings

…I wanted attention and to be included in what was going on"

Jane describes some instances when she felt upset as a young child, and how she received a very grown up, logical, rational response from the adults around her. I imagined a young child, left holding emotions that could feel overwhelming, without the support to help regulate these.

"…so the way we were spoken to sometimes was very adult

…so if I give you an example when I got upset when I was seven

I remember somebody saying…

"Lenin said the point is not to laugh, not to weep but to understand"

Jane shares how she tried to make sense of how to relate to her child-peers. She describes being familiar with relating to adults, knowing how to take the lead but not really knowing how to connect with children of her own age in her school.

"I was used to relating to adults but, because the group was small, there were few other children to connect to in terms of life outside of school. I knew from seeing [the group leader] take the lead, how to do this…inventing a game, but I didn't feel close to any other children…

I would try to take on discussion at school"

Speaking of the group…

"it was always there…but then as you grow up you kind of realise…

this is a bit different to everyone else"

Jane tells me how she tried to claim something for herself:

"so when I was about 8 [yrs old] I actually decided to believe in god….so I thought, I think I believe in god now, so I had my own little line…"

"I needed to make an articulate argument for my right to make my own choices, which was accepted to some extent"

Jane describes a sense of transience in the home; sometimes quite troubled people coming and suddenly going. Feeling attached to them but then those people left without explanation. This is a theme that is repeated in Jane's stories of her experiences suggesting importance to her.

"so I had a lot of I would say interesting adults that I interacted with

…but they left a lot

…because there were also lots of people leaving this group

…people left the group especially people who challenged [the group leader]

…so there was lots of…adults that I would connect with

…who would then go…"

In follow up I asked Jane if she could say a little more about what these attachments meant to her. Deeper layers of experience and understanding emerged as she recalled two young men that stayed in the family home when Jane was 2 years old until she was 7. Jane shared:

"They were warmer and gentler than [the group leader]. I was attached to them both and remember being very upset when [one of them] left…"

"…if people left the Party I never saw them again

…and I know that this upset me"

Jane moves forward in her story to when she was 18 years old, living at home and wanting to become a Roman Catholic. I asked her how this was received:

"not very well…

so there the conflict began, with [the group leader]…

that was quite sharp

…I needed to make an articulate argument for my right to make my own choices, which was accepted to some extent"

When thinking about her initial distancing from the group Jane shares her process of surmising that it was more her own difficulty and a personal lack of understanding rather than deciding that the group or the politics were right or wrong.

"Well I didn't know if the politics were right or not

…but I think possibly it was me

I couldn't understand them

I took it as my difficulty…

…as understanding…

rather than say that I thought they were wrong"

University becomes an important place of learning about self and others. Describing herself as observing others to learn about how to be, Jane shares:

"…I remember at Uni watching…

…to see how other people related

…as women with Asperger's sometimes need to

…and deliberately trying this out…"

And

"I think the processes are really similar to religious groups as well

…I wasn't relating very well to other people

…because it is difficult being in a sort of group

…you don't really learn that so much

…I didn't have a range

I had to grow that

…I realised I could learn by watching others…"

In response I asked Jane how she experienced herself at this time. Jane told me:

"…I believe, at that time, I was quite schizoid

…I was very focused on specific goals

…but I also realised there was more to life than that"

Jane describes a physical leaving, but also feeling confusion about what that meant for her:

"but the first leaving is not actively being involved with the group

…but that's a bit different to being clear on what's happened"

Jane moves forward with her story by telling me that she met her husband and had a daughter before the relationship broke down and they separated. Jane reflects on raising her daughter as a single mother. She described what felt problematic at the time, and also what she wanted for her child's upbringing, potentially giving insight into her sense of her own upbringing.

"I knew I had emotional problems

…and relating problems

…but when [my daughter] was younger

…I could corner a part of myself for her if you like

…I knew I wanted her up-bringing to be more child centred

…and to be available to her

I certainly didn't want her environment

…to be as narrow as mine had been"

Jane describes a period of family crisis when the group in which she was raised split up, accusations were made against the leader, and he was expelled and passed away 3 years later.

"I was kind of standing up for him

….even though I wasn't involved in the politics…

…so I aligned with him at that point…

…a loyalty…

…and I think I didn't want to think it had all been a waste of time"

Jane narrates that a sense of purpose and values are an important, ongoing part of herself, but that she now feels free to decide on the focus of those for herself rather than taking on those of others.

"…you know, it was a purpose in our childhood…

I mean the values and the ethos

…purposes and values are important"

I asked Jane how she felt about the group's political focus at this point in her life. Jane shares her ongoing commitment to politics and change, an important part of her self-narrative that repeatedly returns. Jane tells me:

"…at present I am quite active in [name of a political party]

…but wasn't free to do this

…until I had clarified my family's issues"

Reflecting on her experiences of therapy Jane tells me that an important part in free-ing her self up, to know herself, was to know what had happened to her in relation to the group and her family.

"…you know in therapy you say "Oh tell me what you feel",

…well we don't always know what we feel

…I was starting….from a…I would call a bit of a low base

…in relational terms…

Well that's when I experienced a sort of explosion of….

…uncertainty and that's when I started therapy….

more than that really…distress…

and…all the stuff I hadn't thought about

…or realised at that point, was…was troublesome…

so I would say that I was suicidal"

And

"…nobody knew anything about groups

…they didn't understand any of that

…they took it as family dynamics

…they didn't think of the group"

At this point, Jane thinks again of the distressed adults that she came to know in her childhood via the group

"…in that group there were a lot of distressed adults…

so that would affect…

I was aware of that as a child

I would pick that up…my Mother I think felt sad…that she hadn't been able to help them…

…but that group dynamic would generally not come into therapy would it

…or therapy as practised”

Jane reflects on her parent’s sense of determination, work ethic and their hope for change and recognises these as being persistent part of her own sense of self and identity, and a useful way of managing and playing her part, whilst also acknowledging that at times she feels that she has to pull back intellectually, recognising that this for her can be driven by anxiety

“My parents were both very determined and hard-working people

…even if not always with good goals

I also have had this as a way of managing things which is useful

…they also believed in the possibility of changing things

…and I believe in this in relation to the internal as well as the external world

…and that I have a part to play in this”

Jane describes recently staying at her daughter’s home where there was a large wall-mounted television and Jane watched some clips of the group leader delivering some of his speeches in years gone by. This resulted in some helpful realisations for Jane around thinking and believing that she was free of the group narratives of her childhood but finding at some level that she was still emotionally attached to the group’s beliefs and directives.

“I watched a couple of these YouTubes

…and they were old

…but the second one

…he [group leader] was doing his speech

…and he talks very emphatically

…he’s very articulate

… he talks quite well

…but then there was a bit where….

[I thought] this really isn’t making sense

…and that was helpful to me…

…because it's one thing to have beliefs or thoughts

…but it's another thing to get there emotionally

…I didn't realise that there was still a bit of me that thought he did make sense"

Describing how she feels about herself at the time of our conversation Jane says:

"I…like to be intellectually ahead…

maybe too far ahead

Sometimes I have to pull back…you know

…and that makes me feel better…

…but then we were always arguing….

…but it's a bit of an anxiety drive

so it's important sometimes to really not do that"

Jane shares what she describes as important transitions or stages of leaving which freed her up. Coming across an article that talked about political cults rather than religious ones Jane told me:

"I got a chance to realise that I had been in a cult

but I maintained a loyalty [to the cult leader]

So then I did some work with [a post cult counselling specialist]

Jane then wrote about her experiences with another writer who was also in a political cult and is now a specialist educator in coercive control. Jane describes that these experiences were important to her in being able to understanding what happened, understanding the mechanisms by which it happened, and any residual hold. Jane describes this as developing a coherent narrative of herself and wanting this narrative to be as rich a narrative of self as possible.

5 – Reflections on the stories – the analysis.

Some personal reflections on this stage of the research

As an insider reflective researcher and writer my representation of the stories has been the most challenging part to write. At times I have felt overwhelmed by the weight of what feels like a huge responsibility. I understand that this is indeed a heavy responsibility felt by many narrative researchers, described by Josselson (1996) as "the dread, guilt and shame that go with writing about others" (p.69), but at times I have felt incapacitated, to such an extent that I have become curious about some deeper process being potentially at play. As always at such times on this research journey, I return to the original research question: What narratives do people tell of self and identity when born and raised in a high control cultic group and who subsequently leave? I realise that the notion of 'control' resonates for me in the representation of another person's story and is contributing towards my feeling of discomfort, even incapacitation. I reflect on my history of membership of a high-control group and the many stories shared by others with similar histories in other groups. A common theme that runs through these experiences is that of being exposed to, and impacted by, a tightly controlled group narrative that was supposed to represent them personally, but which ultimately did not. A seemingly complete narrative of self, other and the world. I link my hesitancy and discomfort to not wanting to control my contributor's narratives of selves and identities in my representation of them.

I question myself and in that questioning, return to my ethical stance, where I have aligned myself with the phenomenological ethics of Emmanuel Levinas (Levinas & Hand, 1989; Llewelyn, 1995) who rejected the idea of using the other for our own purpose, acknowledging the 'irreducibility' of the other, and rejecting relationships that reduce the other to a 'use-object'. I try to soothe and mediate my internal discomfort by considering my on-going dialogue with my participants; back and forth to clarify meaning, to gain deeper understanding, to ensure opportunity for their clarification, some removal, some addition. I reflect on the emphasis that I have put on holding the research conversation as a space, not to rigidly guide, but to follow the narrative as it emerges, with the participant's priorities of telling. Finally I reflect on the verbatim; using their words and my erring on the side, not of less is more, but on more, in the hope that more helps us to stay closer to their truths in that moment and to their meaning-making around self and identity and our ongoing becoming within the life stories.

I do not wish to defend, justify or rationalise away my feelings of uncertainty and responsibility around representing another person's story. I accept the control this affords me as an ethical

responsibility. I take responsibility for staying aware of these feelings, to revisit the design and ethics that are integral to this research, to be aware of any drift from the original objectives, or parallel processes linked to the research topic, and above all to demonstrate transparency of thought and action. This is wisdom to me. Josselson (1996) cites Janet Malcolm (1990) when considering the ethics of journalism:

> "The wisest know that the best they can do…is not good enough. The not so wise, in their accustomed manner, choose to believe there is no problem and that they have solved it (p.162)".

I accept the limitations, the 'not good enough', whether in the influence and limitation of the language and discourse available, or some smearing on the lens through which each of us looks, or the extent to which each of us can know and be known. I acknowledge these explicitly and continue on.

In the evolving process of carrying out this research I have shown something of what it was like for Diana, Jessica, Sarah and Jane to exist within high control cultic groups, to leave and to journey onwards as they reflect on their own evolving sense of themselves at different times in their journeying. Across the narratives we hear that leaving is not a distinct, straight forward, linear event. As Jane says, "what we're talking about is the process of free-ing"; Diana says "it could be that people who have been in dominant groups feel unable to grasp their own freedom"; Jessica says "I believed everything still, even on the outside, the teachings…one hundred percent…and that persisted"; and Sarah told me "I just feel like I still don't really know who I am".

Together they tell us that despite a potential presumption of linear, chronological life storying on the part of the methodological choice, and a researcher with a self-declared curiosity as to what happened next, the processing of the leaving and the constructing and re-constructing of selves and identities involves a veering to and fro, circling back, projecting forwards, layering, extending, flexing and reflecting. The idea of an on-going process of becoming never felt more appropriate (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

During the research conversations I found myself, at different times, hearing the evolving narratives of what it was like to be an adult woman, a mother, a worried and scared child, a longed for daughter, a rebel, a child labelled evil, a realising adult, a tentative but determined teenager. What did, or do, Diana, Jessica, Jane and Sarah find within themselves to enable them to break free from the dominant ways of thinking in the groups of their childhood? Did they navigate to a place where they recognise, accept and trust their own voice,

thoughtfulness and meaning making? Is this a continuous finding, and re-finding, constructing and re-constructing process as life stories evolve? As selves becoming selves?

What did they do with their stories?

Diana, Jessica, Jane and Sarah co-constructed their stories with me, and with the knowledge that others were doing so also. How did each person use their story? My understanding and overview is as follows:

Diana shares how she managed to find security within her close family unit which, for most of her childhood, existed within the group blueprint for life, handed down through the generations of the family. The family lived, worked and played together, quietly sustaining each other. Diana begins to connect with her own desires for herself and her life. A period of implicit questioning and gradually breaking group rules begins, and connection with families outside of the group, taking chances as they arose and making opportunities for change. This process resulted in confrontation with group leadership, punishment and isolation for the family, finally resulting in an ultimatum to the family that was a step too far for them and they left, breaking a chain of family history that went back decades. Diana's was a story of conformity, confrontation and abuse, but the picture that remains in my mind as I think of what Diana shared is herself as an adolescent, holding the hands of her beloved family and gently guiding them to another way of being, themselves, together.

Jessica told of immersion without choice, conformity without questioning, and a lonely story of a brutal shunning and rejection. Jessica tells us how ideology and indoctrination from birth can linger far beyond a physical leaving. A process of survival began as Jessica tumbled out of the group, facing the world as a newborn foundling might; vulnerable, seeking connection to survive and trying to avoid pain. The image that I was left with from Jessica's story was of raw survival. A period of partying on death row as the indoctrination still pressed into her consciousness, of herself and imminent death. Jessica's instinct for survival drove her on, one step after another, until discovery of aspects of herself came through expression and validation of her intelligence and scholarship via higher education, hope for life going forward and grounded-ness through her children, seeing herself in them, and the restorative process of putting her story together, telling it to others, and realising, through them, the magnitude of her own survival.

Jane, the only storyteller to have been raised within a political group, showed us through her story that, in cultic groups, it is the dynamics and governance rather than the group focus that define such organisations. Jane shared a trail of painful broken attachments experienced in

her early years. Group values and concentration on the conscious, rational mind and putting higher value and focus on the ability to make a political argument, ultimately neglected her emotional and relational learning. Unsurprisingly so when so much of human experience is not rational, conscious or logical. Security, grounded-ness and love came from Jane's mother who was not a member of the group though the family home was an epi-centre for it. Importantly Jane demonstrated that leaving is an ongoing, sometimes life-long process. One can be physical out but mentally in for much longer. Jane was able to create a vantage point from which to be able to view the group and its leader through the eyes of an adult rather than those of a young child. Learning from others, reserving parts of herself for motherhood and Jane's focus on resolution of difficulties in order to free herself up to engage again with politics helped her in her ongoing process of enrichment of her life and self-narrative.

Sarah's story demonstrates how our stories are intertwined and at times strongly directed by our predecessor's stories. Sarah shared with us the significance of the back-story; the generations of group membership that often run in families, positioning the group and it's ideology as the only source of safety and community, and sometimes making the idea of other ways and other selves unthinkable. At times the investment in the group feels all-encompassing in the narrative, whether it relates to financing home and education, to providing your social group, your career path, your church-approved partner, your purpose in life. Sarah describes how time and time again she felt that, for any difficulty, the problem was located in herself and not the group. It was a matter of not having enough faith or not praying hard enough. Eventually praying harder no longer works and in partnership with her husband Sarah comes to realise that the mismatch between the group narrative and her personal narrative was no longer reconcilable. Sarah describes the frightening fragmentation involved in trying to decipher what is group and what is herself, and also the joy of accepting parts of herself and others without group restrictions and group mentality. Significantly Sarah shares having to come to terms with the level of self-sacrifice that she had engaged in as a member, and the importance of self-forgiveness in this on-going process.

These are stories of on-going becoming and self-discovery, a striving for freedom, getting to know one's personal voice and locus of power.

How did they describe themselves in the narratives?

Diana:

Diana describes a 'secondary self', defined and understood via her relationship with the group. Firstly because of the group narrative which positioned male as primary, female as secondary

and submissive to male and group leadership. This was emphasised through the use of religious teaching, group and family hierarchy in terms of leadership, and was also powerfully demonstrated in the seating positions in group meetings. Senior males would be seated at the front, less senior would be slightly behind, then women deemed senior, and behind them would be the less senior women. A physical representation of position. Everyone seemed to have their place, and Diana described an internalised 'secondary-ness'.

Diana also narrated a 'controlled self' and with that control comes violation of personal boundaries. Boundaries perhaps never known, and dismissal of individual subjectivity. Control came in the form of dress code, restrictions around hairstyle and jewellery; removal from parts of the school curriculum, keeping apart from the world and non-group friendships. Diana described feeling controlled in school in terms of having to find the other group girls at break times to save herself from being completely alone. Control also comes in the form of how non-group pupils saw her. Diana felt unable to adopt any other persona with them as they know her as the group girl. She felt controlled and rejected by them when she described their calling her "Bible-basher" and putting chewing gum in her hair.

In her teenage years Diana described feeling like a 'deceived self'. The outside world seems not as bad as the group would have her believe. A series of epiphanies occur when Diana makes a connection with a local family who employ her and put her in contact with her non-group grandfather, resulting in her connection with other non-group relatives.

Diana began to tell how she connected with her 'agentic self' more and more, as she found jobs, gained understanding of things she had no previous knowledge of, and also found outlets for expression; including her Secret Diary and her gradually increasing ability to question, first implicitly then within the family, and finally by asking questions of the group leadership.

Diana also told of her sense of 'wrongness' in her belief at twelve years old that, in a rapture type of event, she would be separated from her family and left behind for not "being 100% group". The traumatic weekly hours of interrogations alone with 3 elders, who were there to "get me right" reinforced those beliefs.

Finally Diana narrated a 'self with choice', finding herself in a place where she felt able to accept the parts of herself that are of the group, but not foisted upon her. They are accepted through her personal choice, for example her love for elderly people and how this helped her to "feel normal" and accepted. Diana's reflections on her developing political understanding emphasised her freedom to choose and ability to differentiate in terms of how political parties might match up to her own values and subjective understandings. This narrative is in direct

contrast to those in her young days, where focus was on how she matched up to the values, narrative and understanding of the cultic group in which she was raised.

Jessica:

Jessica described an 'obedient self' as she "toed the line", did what was required of her and after leaving school devoted a minimum of 30 hours a month in the un-paid service of the group, on top of attending all of the meetings and preparing and delivering presentations, despite "detesting" it. She described there "wasn't me as a person" but saw herself as "a pawn" and described herself as "slotting in" to an "expectation".

Jessica described leaving as a "shunning" and "very abrupt" and feeling unprepared for being disregarded by everyone. Describing herself as "the problem" Jessica felt she had caused difficulty for the family. Set adrift from her family, relationship in the group, Jessica described a 'self on borrowed time' not feeling "that I would make it until 30". Jessica felt physically out but still very 'mentally in', believing the ideology and the narrative that the end of the world was imminent and only group members would survive. Jessica shared that she felt she had done the wrong thing by leaving and as such was on borrowed time so had "no concern" for herself "on a personal level". A period of dancing with the sinners on death row ensues, included drug taking and numbing out pain.

Jessica then began to narrate a 'tethered self', not in the sense of being trapped, but more from a perspective of being grounded, when she has a daughter and son of her own. Significant epiphanies were experienced as she watched her children grow, develop and learn. Epiphanies occurred around what might be innately her and then suppressed within the cultic environment, consumed by the need for an adapted self within the high-demand cultic group.

Finally Jessica reflected on herself as 'gate-keeper, turning the tide of the generations of women in her family who put their own self-care and development in second place. Reflections on what she herself was exposed to in the group; traumatic images, rigid lack of choice and stifled potential, fuelled Jessica's commitment to provide a very different environment for her children. Her own self-nurturing was demonstrated through her educational gains and her engagement with the reparative process of sharing her story with others and the validation of herself in how her story was received in this process.

Sarah:

Sarah narrated a very 'certain self', and one of many generations of her family growing up as members of an all-encompassing high control cultic group. The group was directly involved in

supporting family finance, housing, employment, education, location and re-location, career development, and choice of partner.

Gradually a 'disillusioned self' emerged in the story as Sarah described a mismatch between how her group-prescribed life was supposed to be and what her lived experience actually was. Sarah located the problem firmly within her rather than the group, describing a 'faulty self'. As Sarah said, "the problem is me and so I dealt with this by throwing myself even more into the certainty that there is probably something wrong with me…I need to do everything more and be more grateful…faithful…and silence the negativity". This feels confirmed at an embodied level as Sarah began to experience the emergence of her sexual identity, describing emerging physical desires as validation that she is "supposed to be special but I am not special".

Self is narrated as 'deficient' and despite working as hard as possible at her group identity the cracks began to appear resulting in a 'divided self' unable to bring together what Sarah describes as the "schism inside of me" between what is right and wrong, with no room for an answer in-between these polarities.

A series of epiphanies occurred, for example in Sarah's reflections on her husband being "a closet feminist" prompting evaluation of the group's ideas of what a husband should be and how a wife should position herself around that, and what Sarah's own views and experiences were in relation to that. Events culminated in Sarah and her husband gradually drawing away from the group, resulting in a period of fragmentation, evaluation and differentiation. Sarah described feeling that if the group was not telling us who we are and what to do, then who are we and what do we do? A 'lost self' evolves into a 'becoming self' within the narrative, via a process of differentiation from the group self, acceptance of and curiosity towards facets of self and others, and a forgiveness of self for engaging in processes related to the group identity.

Jane:

In her story Jane narrates an on-going freeing of self. Though not explicitly describing herself as captive, the subtlety of the psychological processes of cult involvement are demonstrated in what Jane chose to share. Her story of growing up in a political cult demonstrated that though it seems that the physical leaving was less abrupt than some religious high-control cults, who employ shunning practices, the psychological leaving was a much longer process, and the psychological consequences required a deep level of processing.

Acknowledgement that political cults exist and an understanding of coercive control helped Jane make sense of who she is and importantly what happened to her in her home and family

life. Realisations at particularly times were helpful, as well as therapeutic support and peer support from impacted others as well as from fellow professionals. Jane describes a 'realising self', who came to know and acknowledge the complexity of coercion and control. Jane's story importantly demonstrated the realisations, the grief and the new understanding that can emerge around enmeshment and residual loyalties that can persist, unconsciously and consciously, impacting our thoughts behaviours and narrative of self.

I will now share my learning to date through this research process specifically related to what the stories tell us collectively, together, also making use of my story and experiences as a reflective researcher, looking across the narratives.

Children of the cult

"Children are the least powerful and most helpless cult members"

Lalich & Tobias, 2006

Diana, Jessica, Jane and Sarah all began their stories by reflecting on their early lives as children and adolescents within the high control cultic groups that they were born in to. Recollections were narrated, at times recalling memories of school, early sibling/peer interactions, or remembered feelings about the lack of children in their group and realisations of the adult environment in which they learned and developed.

All described initially being in a place of *not-knowing* about the wider world*,* accepting the group worldview of their families, the group and its leadership in terms of what was required of them as children. Jessica described doing what she was told to do so as not to cause any trouble. Sarah emphasises her clear understanding of being special, born into an exclusive club with a definite plan and purpose for her life. Sarah described herself from a young age as "a very certain individual" and feeling very empowered and safe in this certainty within the group. Jane describes knowing as a child that the group was very, very important, holding a special knowledge within it.

The social system and leadership of the groups communicated the need for subservience to their ideology (Burks, 2017; Hassan, 2013; Langone, 1993). Diana described group requirements related to hairstyle, dress, behaviour and shared how she became aware of a group narrative of male superiority. This was confirmed by the requirement for females to submit to male authority, acting in support but never in leadership roles. The male was head of the household, but the group was head of the males. This subservience was modelled when the group came together on a daily basis and also in the home.

Similarly, Jessica told of doing well at school but not being allowed to study further, having to leave school and work unpaid for the group, saying “that was what I needed to do”. Sarah described being trained to be grateful, find a church approved husband and raise children in the group, just as everyone around her appeared to be doing.

Lalich and Tobias (2006) describe the children of cult members as becoming the property of the cult and sometimes a measure of the family’s investment in it, as dependent adults raise dependent children within a closed, controlling environment. Singer (1995) writing about children raised in cults notes “children adopt the cult’s right-wrong, good-bad, sinner-saint starkly polarized value system…we are inside, they are outside…In many cults normal aggressiveness, liveliness, and assertiveness in children are labelled as sinful or as signs of demons, and often warrant severe punishment and suppression. Thus like their parents, children learn to be dependent upon the leader and his system. As a result, anxious-dependent personality traits can be built into cult children’s developing character” (p.248). Langone (1993) described how some cultic groups can set themselves up as a family and “turn parents into middle-management with regard to their own children” (p.328).

My experience growing up in a high control cultic group, leaving in late adolescence and many years later qualifying as a psychotherapist and studying psychology at doctoral level has helped me consider some insights that child development theories might offer for children growing up and developing in these types of groups. As a therapist I am convinced by Clarkson (2003) who describes relationship as the first condition of being human, and goes on to note that the bond between the two becomes something greater than just the two. From this relational viewpoint, theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1988) and internalised security (Winnicott et al., 2002), care-giver attunement (Stern, 1998), emotional regulation and affective neuroscience (Schore, 2001) become important features of child development. My clinical framework is held together by belief that people seek relationship and are neurologically wired for connection,which can create security and flexibility, but also insecurity and rigidity (Bowlby, 1973; Cozolino, 2014; Schore, 2011; Wallin, 2007).

In a good enough developmental setting infants learn, via their primary caregiver, to trust and find safety in the world. As they grow, trust and autonomy develops, children learn to take initiative and build self-competence resulting in individuation, seeing themselves as separate from their parents, and feeling secure enough to begin to develop intimate relationships with others, potentially building families and careers of their own. Through the lens of a high control group parents can be dependent upon the group and/or group leaders (Lalich & Tobias, 2006) and subject to group instruction as to how to raise and care for their children. In some

instances parents have been separated from their children (Kendall, 2016) or normal human feelings are constructed by the group as wrong as they detract from group devotion, endeavours and beliefs (Furnari, 2005).

In the cult, from a very early age, I never felt secure. The mission of the group was paramount, took precedence. Conformity seemed to pre-occupy everyone. Somewhere deep within me it did not feel possible that painful emotions, uncomfortable experiences and internal states would be regulated by those around me, either by primary caregivers or the leadership in the group. These things felt better silently held within. An anxious-avoidant response, that persists to this day, though in a lesser, more consciously known way.

On reflection it feels hard to define who my attachment figure might have been (Bowlby, 1988; Kamrath et al., 2020), when the group ideology and those that enforced it played such a large role in my day-to-day life and that of my family; from what I should wear, what food was approved to eat, to what medical care should be withheld from me, and deciding who was safe to associate with. Fear and anxiety was an everyday experience and the group narrative was that the only source of security was the group and its leadership, who were often distant and punishing, prioritising group identity and aims over individual needs (Furnari, 2005; Kendall, 2016).

Looking back I see in myself the symptoms of relational trauma (Fonagy & Luyten, 2009, Gross, 2015) but also post traumatic growth (Boerner et al., 2017; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Attachment figures emerged in the form of my paternal grandparents who were not group members. Relationships that offered ‘earned security’ later in life have been very valuable to me (Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

Jurist (2014) identifies an aim of attachment as not only to create security, but also “to spur the process of self representation and the agentive self” (p. 494). However within high control groups parents and attachment figures can adopt, for themselves and their children, group defined identities shaped for group aims; agents of the group rather than self or family. The group may be offered as a secure base, but can actively discourage separation, venturing and independence.

Difficulty with relational connection, proximity and separation emerge across all of the narratives. Jane described feeling fortunate that her mother was not in the group, recognising that her mother prioritised her, creating security and reliability, despite the family home being something of a group headquarters, something I have understood as the leadership epi-centre. Jane also told of the painful process of attaching to individuals who sometimes stayed

at the home, and then disappeared, never to be seen again, often following disagreement with the group leader.

The memories seemed painful and sad and after reading the transcript more memories emerged. Jane recalled two people who she experienced as “warmer, gentler and more playful” but who left and Jane remembered how much this upset her. I imagined how a child might make sense of a cycle of broken attachments acted out within a family home under the influence of cultic group demands.

Jessica also described walking away from relationship and situations many times; broken attachments after being shunned by her parents, friends and family, when the supposed secure base of the group dictated that her non-conformance to group rules meant expulsion and shunning.

Diana shared a series of broken attachments with “controlling men” who she found herself initially attracted to but then needing to escape from. In childhood Diana and her immediate family managed to maintain a small, secure space for themselves, where they were able to conform to the control of the group but in the home they quietly kept something for themselves, together. Further afield for Diana the mainstream school environment gave opportunity for a narrative of childhood, family life and aspiration that was different from that of the group and was important to her in terms of realisations and micro-epiphanies around self-representation and agency. This helped her to connect with her own desires and emerging, evolving sense of identity. Diana described envying how other girls were, not just their hairstyles and clothes, but significantly how free they were in themselves and how they were “chatting freely” to others. Diana identified this period as a turning point for her. A time when she identified her desire to be more like these girls. This began a period of questioning and cumulative epiphanies that lead to changes in Diana’s behaviour, and a connection with her internal voice that differed from that of the group, voicing who she wanted to be.

Quietly asking questions of her parents who had also been raised from birth in the group progressed to eventually questioning male group leaders. When Diana spoke about her parents and sharing her own ideological doubts with them I noticed her care and concern about the impact this might have on them, and her empathy for their commitment to the ideology of their own parents. Diana was aware that at this time in her parent’s story the group represented attachment security and any form of dissent or divergence from the group created fear and anxiety for them. Diana’s story as she shared it with me took on almost a parental care towards her parents.

I recall feeling a creeping anxiety in my own body when Diana spoke about questioning the leadership. I felt surprise at what seemed like an embodied legacy from my own childhood. A fear of upsetting the group status quo, stepping out of line and concern for the potential consequences. Diana remembered that she was very fearful but she "could see how the other children lived" and "I began questioning the way that we lived". This part of Diana's story was the first telling of some thoughts outside of the group viewpoint. An observing 'I' looking at the 'we', setting the stage for consideration of the 'I' within the 'we'. We live this way, but is that the way that I wish to live?

Erikson's (1950) stages of psychosocial development (Erikson, 1980) views this age (13 to 21yrs) as 'identity versus confusion' and links to the concept of identity moratorium, an active period of contemplating and adopting different forms of identities, often through consideration of the choices that family and peers and others have made and modelled about how they choose to live their lives and who they seem to be. This can sometimes be conceptualised as teenage rebellion; a period of testing, trying out, accepting or rejecting ideas about identities and ways of being.

How this might sit within a high control group is complex when the group has a clearly defined narrative of who each member should be, and claims to have every answer to every question an adolescent might have about themselves. Within an environment that values group identity and image over that of the individual and shapes worldview for its members, the stakes are high. They are rather more existential because not only is the young person questioning who they might be, they are also, perhaps inadvertently, questioning a whole group narrative of self, other and the world that they have been raised within. In some cases this is a life or death narrative where getting it wrong might lead to the death of intimate close relationships, death of a day-to-day situation and worldview, and in some groups, ultimately death if a member does not do enough to survive the 'end of days'.

The other consideration might be loss of yourself to yourself, as you give up ideas about one's own evolving identities and become consumed by the collective identity of the group. The narratives described fear inducing tactics used to perpetuate dependency and reduce independence and contemplation of other ways of being. As Diana narrates "they used to tell us all the time that if we left terrible things would happen…we'd be struck down…or really awful things would happen…probably get cancer…and die or be run over…and the devil would get his claws on us". Jessica described pictures in group magazines that showed the frightening consequences for those who left the group. Similar images still rest in my own mind, inducing fear, at times generating echoes of traumatic experiences.

Ultimately being lost to herself felt worse. Diana said “I just knew that it was almost like…a death punishment if I did stay in…by death, I mean death to my soul…that my soul was going to be buried…and it would be the end of me”. Diana’s sense of ‘me’ at that time was described as a ‘me’ that needed to be free.

In my own case I recall thinking that I did not really have a choice because I was certain that I could not maintain the standards that the group set. As such I felt that I was dead already so should just live the short time that I had left, enjoying my final years. I felt saddened that I should have felt this way at 17 years of age. Looking back I realise my vulnerability as I left the confines of the group, venturing out into the world, a young, naïve person, not at all ‘street-wise’.

Jessica’s narrative shows similar thinking as she shared that “I just didn’t think I was going to live very long…so I did absolutely everything that I hadn’t been allowed to do…I just wanted to feel okay…and I didn’t feel okay”. Sarah, despite leaving her group in adulthood, describes leaving her church with her husband and young children as “scarier than our scariest move” whilst knowing that “the whole reason I broke from it…is actually because my sense of self is different from the church…and that is why I couldn’t do it anymore”.

Wonderings about self within the world, particularly from a Western individualistic perspective seem typical of adolescent considerations of who they might be, how others see them and how they might see themselves through the eyes of others in the developing, lifelong process of becoming. Who am I? Who do I want to be? What are my interests? Which direction do I want to take? Who do I want to be with?

Indeed, the elements that give rise to these considerations are protected by the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 2022) as the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education. An overview of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Unicef, 1989) describes the right to freedom of thought, belief, to express thoughts freely, and to have access to all kinds of information within the law, and their right to protection from all forms of abuse.

The restrictions on and consequences of free choice and expression were captured in the stories of Diana, Jessica, Sarah and Jane. Diana reflected on only feeling able to be truthful when she could reveal herself in her Secret Diary. She experienced this as a way to unburden herself without fear of the group “shunning me for my wicked thoughts”.

Jessica shares “I wasn’t allowed to go to any further education” and later in life despite having left the group for many years, she was still feeling and saying to others that “no, I’m not the kind of person that goes to university”. It turns out that she was.

Jane gave an example of when she was tearful at seven years old and a group member said to her “Lenin said the point is not to laugh, not to weep but to understand”. Sarah describes learning about feminism at school and telling her mother a little about this and seeing that “she would listen and I could see her…drawing away from me…feeling threatened…and I could feel myself becoming dangerous in her eyes”.

My understanding and the message I took from the extracts above is that the groups are communicating that thoughts that do not conform to group narratives are wicked and should be shunned. Education is not for you, that is not your purpose. It is better to understand than feel, your emotional world is not of value or validated here, and musings on non-group thought can impact relationships, however close they might be. Freedom of thought is dangerous and makes you dangerous to me.

To add to the complexity for children in cultic high control groups the narrative of the group, and messages therein, are not just delivered from a top-down authoritarian leader or team but often via parents, other members and through implicit, personal meaning-making. Challenging or rejecting this can, for some, feel like risking everything.

These stories gave a glimpse of the deeper internalised messages about self that can be experienced when raised in a high control cultic group. I am wicked and should be shunned. I am not worthy of education and self-investment. My emotional self is not meaningful or worthwhile and is irrational, not to be trusted. My personal relationships can be impacted by freedom of thought on my part and I am dangerous to myself and others.

Lack of choice echoed across the narratives. Jessica said, “I really felt like I was a pawn” and “every element of your life is dictated to you” and “I think its’s really hard to be a person” and “once the control is gone…then you are building from ground zero”. Jessica recalled difficulty in trying to move forward with her life after leaving because “when you are used to having everything constructed for you…it’s a shock”. Recalling a time when still in the group Sarah talks about “finding a church approved partner” and “we knew what the expectations were” and trying really hard to find a psychological space where she “didn’t feel threatened by the church” and could “conform my life…in a way that worked for me…and the church”. Sarah described trying to find an internal coherence that satisfied the needs of the church group

whilst connecting with and satisfying her own developing needs. Difficult choices and compromises were being made to satisfy the group identity.

As a young person I felt that the path ahead for me was already mapped out. It was one of survival; a working hard to ensure the survival of self and others when the world as we knew it ended, and those found worthy would make it through, but had you worked hard enough? Everything was interpreted through this lens, by parents, relatives, friends, leaders and myself. I felt pressured to work part-time and spend the rest of my time working unpaid for the group, to complete group aims, handed down by a faceless global leadership team, and operationalised by a local leadership team of male elders.

In line with Denzin's (1989) conceptualisation of the re-lived epiphany as I re-visited the stories I realised anew, but with more clarity, that the stories indicated at several points that there is little room or oxygen for self-expression, self-construction and re-construction in high-control cultic environments.

The descriptions of self in relation to the group are similar to how individuals and therapists have described their interactions with persons who present as narcissistic (Robinson & Fuller, 2018). Through this lens the narcissistic agenda of some cultic high control groups create a system where members are used as "narcissistic appendages" (McWilliams, 1994, p.175). McWilliams (1994) describes narcissistic processes from a child's perspective where there is "a confusing message that one is highly valued, but only for a particular role that one plays, [it] makes a child feel that if his or her real feelings, especially hostile or selfish ones, are found out, rejection or humiliation will follow" (p.175).

The stories shared by Diana, Jessica, Sarah and Jane support the cycle outlined by McWilliams (1994) of feeling highly valued, but for the function you serve rather than for yourself as a person, and if you express non-conforming parts of yourself you risk rejection. Sarah described being in this "exclusive club situation…that you have a plan…a purpose…you feel loved…this is where you belong, this is who you are". Jane described being part of a group that was "very, very important…having some knowledge that other people did not have" and later in her narration described feeling that there was "a status" related to her relationship with the group leader and that if you "give up that…you give up in a way…being a little princess" in a special, unique group. In the on-going dialogue I shared with Jane my resonance with what she had said and myself, as the daughter of a prominent elder, having reflected on the seductive nature of status within groups of this kind, which can be strategically used by leadership to control, manipulate or satisfy narcissistic demands (Shaw, 2014). Jane responded by saying that she felt "it is very seductive" and that she did not feel that she had

entirely freed herself from this at the time of our talking, which was many years after having distance from the group.

Jessica described being shunned and isolated from her family, when no longer conforming herself to the group identity, saying “I then became the problem…because I wasn’t allowed in the house…so not only do you get isolated from the [group]…you get isolated from your extended family…my little sister’s three years younger than me…we were really close…and I got cut off from her as well”.

I also felt humiliation by being viewed as “the problem” in my family. As a teenager, I recall sitting in my family home after I had left whilst my father discussed with another elder what should be done with me, “the problem” of me, for the family and the group. As I sat in the next room hearing their hushed voices I experienced a major epiphany that shaped things for me going forward. A major epiphany that touches every part (Denzin, 1989a). Firstly I realised that nothing was holding me there other than myself, and the group narrative. The two people in the other room had no legitimate power over me or my life. It was a moment of claiming myself for myself. Not a reclaiming of self that was familiar from pre-cult times, as those recruited into a cult as adults might feel, but a new claim made, because I did not really know who I was, or might be, going forward. Everything about self going forward felt unfamiliar. All I knew was that I had to be alive to myself even if that meant being dead to those that I had been raised with.

The surviving, adapted self

I now understand that my way of coping while still in the group was to develop a “false-self” (Dethiville, 2014) in the face of the narcissistic demands. A false-self that was well-developed for survival in the group, by adapting myself to the demands of it, to such an extent that my inner voice felt, at times lost to me, and at other times threatening. An internal compromising of self as I alienated myself from subjective needs and desires. Awareness and acknowledgement of these needs remains difficult for me. I struggle to verbalise need, vulnerability and desire. Sadly, this false self, a defensive façade, left me feeling dead and empty, lost to myself with no spontaneity or tolerance of ambiguity. When thinking about self I relate to the idea of becoming (McAdams & McLean, 2013); the ever evolving process of selves, rather than a fixed self, but I make use of the idea of an adapted false self to recognise and acknowledge the idea of a self which is constructed and adapting to survive, in this case, the dominating environment in which it is immersed. In a child’s case, to defend against loss of identity within an environment over which the child has no control.

For those raised in high control cultic groups relational and developmental processes can be compromised when the group fosters a caregiver role alongside a “domination-submission dynamic of doer-done to” (Benjamin, 2004). Personal experience is secondary to the doctrine of the group, and members function to maintain the esteem of the group, at the cost of perceiving themselves as separate individuals and this has implications for the development of subjectivity, internalised security and inter-subjective relatedness.

Jessica shares that “I didn’t think there was really me as a personality growing up because I just toed the line…just did what I was supposed to do” and “I really felt like I was a pawn”. Jane uses the word “schizoid” in self-description. Guntrip’s (2019) schizoid “mechanized, robot personality” (p. 30) came to mind when thinking about these parts of the narratives. A withdrawal in defence of the self in the face of an all-encompassing group ideology that positions itself within families, as mother and father to all; authority, rule-maker and self-appointed source of security.

Nancy McWilliams (1994) when writing about the development of schizoid features notes that “a type of family background commonly observed…is a seductive or boundary transgressing mother and an impatient, critical father” (p.194) and stresses the role of “contradictory and confusing communications…a child raised with double-binding, emotionally dishonest messages could easily come to depend on withdrawal to protect the self from intolerable levels of confusion and anger” (p.194).

Reflecting on my own experience it seemed that all of the adults around me acquiesced to what the group prescribed in terms of family life and how to raise children, so in that sense the group leadership was seen as the primary caregiver, the secure attachment and the group was the secure base (Bowlby, 1988) but it did not feel caring or secure. It felt emotionally dishonest. Reflecting as an adult, a parent and a therapist the oversight of the group felt punishing, over-intrusive, intolerant and dominating. Messages were confusing. Love and care and ‘special-ness’ was communicated but at any one time I felt safe, loved, embraced as well as tainted, wicked and at great risk of being cast out and destroyed. It was easier to take on a robotic response; to know what conformity was and to do it. As Jessica said, “we toed the line”.

I recall many years after leaving I had a brief, unexpected encounter with some members of the group that I was raised in. We had no prior knowledge of each other and they did not know my history of membership. In conversation I gently and respectfully questioned them on some points about their beliefs and I found that the answers were the same ones I was trained to give over thirty years before; the phraseology, references and emphasis were all the same. It

felt like an automated recorded message, yet delivered by a living, breathing person, and part of the same message perhaps being delivered worldwide, by persons who were individuals but were robotically the same. It felt like a replicated uniformity and conformity; robotic.

Selves with others

Uncertainty and difficulty related to connection is often present when individuals share their experiences of being in high control groups and subsequently leaving (Aboud, 2020). Themes related to trust emerge. For individuals recruited into cultic groups as adults there can often be feelings of shame and guilt at having been 'duped' and sometimes concern at not being able to trust oneself or others again. (Jenkinson, 2016; Kendall, 2016, Langone, 1993). For individuals who were born and raised in these types of groups a deficit in relational knowledge and learning can be felt.

Jane shared her felt sense of social isolation and anxiety by saying "I wasn't very good at integrating with other children…I didn't feel close" and "as a teenager I was very much on my own". Jessica describes having to "build from ground zero" in terms of social learning and relationships "once the control has gone". She spoke of how vulnerable she felt as she described herself on leaving the group as a "newborn" who comes "tumbling out" and having "no-one to guide you".

Jessica began a relationship with "the first person who actually genuinely showed an interest in me which is something I had not had….I'd never had that". When reflecting on her ongoing relationships and situations Jessica said "I've left places so many times…I have completely upped and changed several times" and described herself as more "tethered" now because of her children.

Diana shared that, in her late teenage years, she would "just copy what other people were doing around me…and try to be a chameleon". Reflecting on her life many years later and at the time of our conversation Diana said that she "always feel[s] like I'm the odd one out and I pretend… feel like I'm pretending a lot of the time to be something that I'm not". Diana also described in previous relationships having "found myself trapped and then having to escape quite a lot".

Diana was raised in a religious group whereas Jane was raised in a political group, but both shared realisations about self particularly when engaging with peer groups in educational environments. Both shared how copying others helped them to blend in. Jane's story demonstrates how self-understanding is particularly difficult for her when attending university. Cumulative realisations and micro-epiphanies occurred around the depth of difficulty that she

experienced in her ability to relate to others and develop friendships. This generated reflections on her upbringing and reflections on self. Jane described times of difficulty relating to others and feelings of disconnection, describing that she felt driven to maintain a position of being cognitively "superior" and "more intelligent" while also feeling "jealous and sad" knowing at some level that she did not have the lives that other children and adolescents enjoyed. My understanding is that Jane felt that being raised as a child in a very adult environment, with little social visiting with other children, had impacted her ability to relate to her peers. The skills that the cultic group considered desirable in a person did not transfer to a broader social environment provoking confusion and anxiety for her.

Jane said that becoming aware that she was "lacking in appropriate development" caused her to take action, sharing that she "had to try and make this up quite deliberately", describing employing observational strategies to try to catch up on social learning whilst at university, linking this to techniques that women with Asperger's syndrome have employed (Bellebaum et al., 2014) but feeling that she was starting from, in her words "a low base…in relational terms".

My own difficulty in forming and maintaining relationships was very present with me when connecting with the participants stories. Reflecting on my own experience, not in a political group but a religious one, I am struck by the similarities, and have to acknowledge, like Jane and also Diana, I have used observational strategies too. Seeing how others do 'it' helps but also, for me, has at times re-enforced feelings of isolation and strangeness. This narrative research journey has allowed me to expand my understandings and meaning making in this area. For many years I have seen my difficulty in maintaining relationships as an internal, personality fault, but the opportunity for deeper reflections and layering of understanding that narrative methods offer have allowed me to think more broadly and deeply.

I see now that no real effort was required in terms of developing relationships or friendships as a young person within the group, because everyone was required to get along with their group 'brothers' and 'sisters' as other members were called. It was a holy command, a righteous endeavour, so relationships were forced and automatic rather than developed or nurtured. Everyone had a shared common interest and endeavour and drew upon the same assumed knowledge, and had a regular schedule of coming together. No negotiation, acceptance of difference, compromise, relational vulnerability or reaching outside of your own frame was required. Interpersonal disagreement was not tolerated and could bring about discipline so was avoided or never spoken about.

Interpersonal relationships felt similar to Buber's (1958) description of the "I-It" position; based on separateness and detachment rather than on mutuality and reciprocity. The "I-It" position is to be in relationship with another in the service of oneself rather than in service to the other. The other is your subject used for your own benefit or gratification (Sayre & Kunz, 2005). In the context of a high control cultic environment it is possible to think of the group exerting force on and making use of group members individually, but also making use of their relationships to maintain control.

Reflecting on the narratives of others alongside my own prompts, for me, what Denzin (Denzin, 1989) described as the 're-lived epiphany', some realisations in the hearing and telling around relational difficulties experienced by second and multi-generation high control group members. Sarah's story gave an example of what could be referred to as 'automatic relationships' within high control groups. She described the immediate embrace of others she had not had time to get to know or develop meaningful relationships with. When re-locating, while still in the group, for a church-funded work role, Sarah described how, if the local group that she was moving into discovered that her family had a birthday or significant date, they would immediately offer to arrange a party or celebration despite not knowing the family. They were already known, not as themselves but as group members. Whilst these offers might seem wonderfully kind and generous, and may well have been, when viewed through the lens of a high control cultic environment and learning to build friendships and relationships it is possible to see how this might reduce opportunities for relational learning and skill-development, as well as choice. Sarah asked in her own reflections "why do we help other people…because god said so…why can I forgive people…because god told me to".

This also links to a broader theme that emerges across the narratives, in terms of personal sense of self and identity. Am I being treated in this way because of who I am as a person or because I am a group member and it does not really matter who I am as a person? A deeper question might then emerge. Am I acceptable, or even possible as a person in my own right or just as a group member? Would it really matter who I am? As Jessica says "there wasn't a 'me' as a person…I was a pawn". As Sarah says "I worked for the church…I went to the church school…it was everything about who I was" and "I could keep myself in tact…because of who I was in the church…I was afraid of what might be left of myself…if I rip this [the church] out what is going to be left".

What's me, what's the group?

In three of the four stories, questions emerged that suggest an ongoing dilemma related to selves and identities for those who have been born and raised within high control cultic groups.

Diana, Jessica and Sarah all refer to lasting uncertainty as to what ongoing parts of themselves are because of the group and what parts are of themselves. Diana said “it is hard to distinguish what has been brainwashed in to me and is the group identity and what is actually me, my own identity”. Jessica said “I wonder whether that is me, or whether I’m conditioned that way, and I don’t know whether you’ll ever tease those apart because they are so inter-meshed”. Sarah shared that she was “really afraid that maybe my entire self was actually the church”.

Unlike those who join such groups as adults, second and multi-generational ex-members who have been born and raised in them, and who leave, are faced with questions such as who or what they believe in, why they think or feel a certain way, what is of them and what is of the group? Often, in a high control cultic group, identity is rigidly shaped, allowing little room for difference or experimentation. Exposure to other ways of being, role models outside of the group, or even debate to discover one’s own opinion, likes or dislikes is restricted, and often seen as subversive or potentially corruptive of self and the group (Lalich & Tobias, 2006; Langone, 1993).

Related to this dilemma regarding what is me and what is group identity, the benefits of taking a Life Story narrative approach are demonstrated within Diana’s story. Life stories are situated within social systems, cultures and historical time, and are recounted with particular backdrops and within contexts (Josselson & Hammack, 2021). At the time of our first research conversation, the United Kingdom was days away from a General Election to vote in the next government. It was quite impossible to avoid, in the media, newspapers, on-line and on the door step, and Diana and I both acknowledged this.

Within her story Diana reflected on her difficulty deciding who to vote for, and even if to vote at all, saying that “I don’t know anything about music or art or political views…I sometimes feel like I’ve been in prison”. I asked her if she might be happy to elaborate on her understanding of herself in this, which prompted deeper reflections and meaning making around a felt deficit of lived experience in these matters. Diana described feelings of uncertainty about which political party might be more aligned to her own personal values and difficulty navigating the grey, some might say murky, areas of politics, asking herself, what do I believe in and value and which potential candidate stands for those beliefs and values? Who can I trust? How easy is it to trust?

I was curious about whose voices Diana might identify in this part of her narrative. A trans-generational voice was heard: Diana’s parents had never voted as they conformed to the group. The ideological voice was also there instructing followers not to vote or have an opinion.

As Diana encapsulates in her story “in the group we didn’t vote, we didn’t have any political views”. It is clear that Diana is committed to developing her own voice in this as she says “there is a big chunk of knowledge missing and maybe when I do get that knowledge and experience the ‘who I am’ will change”.

In this part of Diana’s story another voice emerged and similar voices emerge and call across the other narratives too, inciting deeper reflections and wonderings about the nature of self. These new voices influence behaviour too. They are the voices of the children of the participants in this study. Participants who as children were raised in high control cultic groups and went on to leave, changing the direction of, in some cases, many generations of family life and who are now raising and listening to the voices of children of their own; voices formed in a very different context. Diana shared how she spoke with her son about politics, about voting systems, about her thoughts and struggles to decipher what comes from her and what is from the group. In this process she learned, about herself, about her son and about political viewpoints.

Jane’s reflections on deciphering self from group identity focus more on the process of leaving and on understanding residual loyalty. Jane described that believing and thinking that she was now separate from the group was not the same as “get[ting] there emotionally”. Jane shared several realisations that only happened when she looked at, and heard again, the group doctrine delivered by the group leader in a video recording. Via this process of watching and listening to him speak on a large wall-mounted TV it seemed that a spell was broken. This happened many years after no longer being a group member. Jane realised that “there was still a bit of me that thought he did make sense”.

Gaining a deeper understanding of those parts of herself was “helpful” to Jane, as well as claiming parts of herself which she understands were influenced and part of the group, but which she continued to hold through choice, as her own; that “purpose and values are important” and being “determined and hard-working”. Jane demonstrated in her life story the power in hearing the leader’s voice again, and also the different narrative versions of herself along the life story continuum, as she moved from a self that withdrew from politics, wanting to avoid triggering, to a self that felt freed up to engage again, on her terms.

Displaced selves

When contemplating this research and the voices that might emerge within the stories, I had not anticipated the potential influence that the voices of the participants children might have

in relation to the participants meaning making in terms of their understanding of their own self and identity processes.

Jessica described leaving the cultic group as feeling like “you come tumbling out in some ways like a newborn” and goes on, “I feel that the people I have met…the experiences I’ve had…have all built who I am…but…it’s especially with my daughter, I can see myself in her”. Jessica made sense of parts of herself through her experience of her daughter. Jessica described an innate, inborn, natural self as feeling that “there was something pre-existing” that was “very pushed down” which was essentially her, just as she experienced these things as core parts of her daughter’s evolving sense of identity. Speaking about her daughter Jessica went on to wonder “maybe that is the child I should have been, if I wasn’t in this…I guess I could have been me far earlier”.

I recall feeling moved as we sat together in this part of Jessica’s story and resonated with her curiosity about the co-construction and re-construction of self watching your own child develop. It brought to mind various elements of my own experience as an ex-cult member and as a mother. I have felt that my leaving the group, painful as it was, has created what I consider a place of relative freedom for my child, and is similar to the stories told by refugees, and the drive to create better opportunities for their children. As Jessica’s experience of her daughter influenced her own narrative of self, my thoughts have also at times drifted to how I may have developed as a child without the influence of the group.

Memories emerged in terms of my processes around identity construction and re-construction, and the confusion I have felt along the way as I tried to shake off old doctrines and ways of being me. I left the cult in my late teenage years, and had my daughter when I was twenty five. However it took until my early thirties to deprogram myself from the doctrine. I recall desperately wanting to create a ‘normal’ life for my daughter involving activities the cult disapproved of, which I had not experienced myself as a child, but, like Diana and Jane, I learned ‘how to’ by observing others; how other adults organised such things for their children. I remember feeling at the time that my beliefs were such that I did not actually approve of these activities, which typically would be deemed entirely appropriate for a five year old. I realised that, despite hearing the group voice in this, I was alienated from the group, and could not use it to support my beliefs and my sense of self around this. I also recall really wanting to go against these beliefs and give my daughter fun experiences suitable for a five year old and her friends. I felt torn between two ideas of myself, all the while trying to navigate two different cultural ways of being.

Reflecting now, I felt like a refugee experiencing what I would describe as a form of cultural identity confusion, having left a particular culture, feeling displaced and uncertain, in territory, and with people that felt foreign to me, and trying to work out who I was in this in-between place. Groen, (2019) writing about cultural identity and mental health describes cultural identity as the "norms and values that constitute an image an individual holds of him or herself which urges an individual to decide what is right or wrong, what kind of behaviour is appropriate or not, as well as on norms and values…within the group the individual belongs to…These characteristics are often underexposed in mental healthcare (p.70)". At this time in my life it felt difficult to find cognitive and emotional coherence in terms of the urgings of my developmental context; the cultic ideology and identity, and my new situation which felt at times like a self-induced madness. My story at this time was one of confusion, divided loyalties, a wrong-footedness. I knew that I did not belong in any camp.

As Diana described, "I did not feel like I belonged…it was a real feeling of unrest…being torn from two different lives". She shared that she felt like "an outcast in the real world as well" and that "I always feel like I'm the odd one out and I pretend". Jane described struggling to find a place for herself when trying to relate to other young children during school play-time, wanting to play like a child would, but trying to find a coherence with the group by creating games with political themes, such as a chase-game where workers chase capitalists. At university a friend told her "when you go out with a boy, you don't always need to talk about politics and religion". Drawing on the values of the group did not feel like it worked in the broader contexts that Jane found herself in.

In my confusion I was not ready to engage with mental health support because the voice of the ideology was still influencing my thoughts and behaviours in terms of not looking externally for help. My inner voice was telling me what I think of now as the 'old answers; that I needed to look to god, the bible, god's organization; the group, but the group was not there anymore so I had to look to myself, to listen to my own voice. My own voice was tentative, hesitant, not sure at this point, but another voice called loudly: the five year old voice of my daughter. A voice that helped me to prioritise, stabilise and hone the part of myself that was a mother. I was grateful for the "tether" that Jessica described when narrating the stage of her life when her children entered her life story.

Diana described different experiences of self as seen through the eyes of others when narrating what it was like for her to attend group meetings when she had begun to challenge some of the groups rules related to her appearance; wearing a small necklace and cutting her hair a little. Diana shared how she understood herself as now dangerous to others. Parents of

girls her age in the group had forbidden their daughters to speak with Diana for fear of her influence on them. Diana remembered this as a very lonely time but also recalled herself as seen through the eyes of “the elderly in the group” who were “nice” to her, “did not judge” her and “would speak” with her.

A version of self that persists for Diana seemed linked to her experiences of herself through the eyes of “the elderly”. Diana told me several times how much she now values her relationships with older people in her community, describing the care that she felt and how much she enjoyed supporting them. Diana believed that the validation that she received from them was crucial to how she felt and “in that validation from people…I begin to feel normal”.

This part of herself has persisted over the years for Diana and pushed back other ideas of self. For example, the internalised voice of the group leadership telling Diana that she was evil and needed to be corrected and her own sense of guilt, wrongness and being someone who was fake, not genuine. I imagined the various vignettes of experience that Diana was bringing to mind as she told of her care for older people in her community and how her personal self-concept is constituted and re-constituted in these experiences and in the telling of them, and the potential for those experiences to carry on throughout her life story and into her own ‘elderly-ness’.

From this collection of stories, my own included, we can see how ideas of self and identity are “fluid and shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms” (Kumar, 1995, p.122).

6 – Learning so far (rather than conclusions)

> “We come to be who we are, however ephemeral, multiple, and changing, by being located or locating ourselves, usually unconsciously, in social narratives rarely of our own making.”
>
> (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 606)

I came to be in this part of my personal and professional story later in life. The narrative of my early life felt as though it was already written for me, but somehow it was not. At some point I grabbed the pen and began to write myself. Narrative identities are “very much in-process and unfinished, continuously made and remade as episodes happen” (Ezzy, 1998, p.247).

I, for one, take comfort in that.

Diana, Jessica, Sarah, Jane and I have shared some of our stories; the sometimes un-processed, the unfinished, the known at this point, the unsure, and the parts of ourselves that persist and are more continuously with us.

As an insider researcher I have acknowledged that I have adopted a narrative approach as it was impossible to adopt a distanced research style. Distanced felt objectifying and powerful which intuitively feels inappropriate to the research focus.

The findings from narrative researches of this type do not always speak to large populations and absolute conclusions. The knowledge is subjective and the detail that they provide is of intimate, situated, personal and unique meaning making, but "stories transcend our individual subjectivities by connecting different minds, different places and different times. We put ourselves in the grip of a story in order to know more than we can know when we are not in its grip" (Goldin, 2019, p.512).

The 'grip' of this research is the stories told of self and identity for those born into high control cultic groups who subsequently left. The aims of the research were two-fold: to support the understanding of a mental health practitioner; that they might 'know more' if, in the course of their work, they meet a person who has experience of high-control cultic environments or relationships. Another aim, of equal significance, was to demonstrate to those affected individuals, whether members or ex-members of such groups, that they are not alone.

I am mindful and acknowledge that most of the contributors to this research have affiliated themselves with 'cult-recovery' resources in one way or another, so are potentially more likely to come forward for participation, and might feel more able to be reflect. This misses a swathe of other voices and stories. Further research into how to creatively and sensitively hear these voices is needed. Likewise there is a lack of diversity in that the four participants are all women. This is a shortcoming of this research and further research into male experience could inform support services.

The participants have told individually and collectively what it was like for them, and how they have made, and go on making sense of themselves. The stories tell of power, control, coercion and abuse. They also tell of survival and growth, small personal realisations, and epiphanies that touch every part. Gentle, kind voices and voices that demand and persist. All have contributed to ongoing knowledge of self and becoming.

Often the stories have described the influence on selves of very fixed and stark narratives of what is true and what is false, what is right and wrong, who is good or bad. The idea that something or someone could be both, all, or somewhere in between emerges as novel in some

of the narratives, but Diana, Jessica, Sarah and Jane are living proof that the evolving narrative is that the narrative evolves.

All participants in this research, myself included, acknowledge the ongoing influence of being raised in a high control, cultic group environment. The concept of being physically out, but mentally still in the group is convincing and demonstrated in the narratives shared. The narratives are significant exemplars of on-going influence and loyalty that can be experienced and the significance of becoming aware of this even if many years later.

My hope for the on-going story and contribution of this research is that mental health professionals find that these stories support them to understand:

- the levels of immersion that high control cultic groups can demand. These are not, for example, a regular meet-up on a Wednesday evening for people with a shared interest in a particular topic. They are often groups that seek to shape and influence every part of a person's relationship with life, their viewpoint; self to self, self to other and self to world.
- the levels of objectification of group members can rightly fit within a trauma framework
- research that sheds light on what it is like for a person to live and develop around a narcissistic structure can be relevant
- the importance of acknowledging the significance of how language can be loaded, even within the therapeutic exchange, and what a person's history of this might be
- the importance of understanding the mechanisms and features of coercive control, the subtleties and the implications
- the range of groups and relationships that can coercively control

My hope for the person with second or multi-generational experience of high control cultic groups is that this research, and the stories therein, will support them to know:

- that there are those who say "me also"
- that our stories begin even before we do
- that there is value in finding out about the mechanisms of coercive control
- that therapeutic support can be helpful, but your therapist may need to connect in with the growing body of research about stories similar to yours
- that others have found some choice and coherence around what is them and what is group
- that telling your story, so far, to others can be reparative and self-confirming

Appendices

1 – Ethical Approval letter

2 – Recruitment Flyer

3 – Participant Information Sheet

4 – Consent Form Blank

5 – Research Supervisor Confirmation of Participant Consent

Appendix 1 – Ethical Approval Letter

METANOIA INSTITUTE
13 Gunnersbury Avenue
Ealing, London W5 3XD
Telephone: 020 8579 2505
Facsimile: 020 8832 3070
www.metanoia.ac.uk

Kimberley Broom
Doctorate in Counselling Psychology and Psychotherapy by Professional Studies (DCPsych)
Metanoia Institute

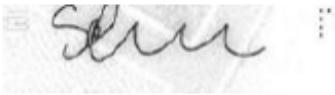
11th June 2019
Ref: 8/18-19

Dear Kimberley,

Re: Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by second generation ex-members of fundamentalist religious groups. A Life Story Narrative research.

I am pleased to let you know that the above project has been granted ethical approval by Metanoia Research Ethics Committee. If in the course of carrying out the project there are any new developments that may have ethical implications, please inform me as research ethics representative for the DCPsych programme.

Yours sincerely,



Dr Sofie Bager-Charleson
Director of Studies DCPsych
Faculty of Post-Qualification and Professional Doctorates

On behalf of Metanoia Research Ethics Committee

Appendix 2 – Recruitment Flyer

RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY - Doctoral candidate, Middlesex University, UK

Were you born and raised within a fundamentalist group, a sect, cult or high control group?

I am an experienced psychotherapist and counsellor, and as part of my doctoral training with Middlesex University in the UK I am carrying out research into the second-generation experience of identity before and after leaving the group that you were raised in. It is an opportunity to reflect on the story of your life so far and how you see yourself before and after leaving the group.

Second-generation experience is under-researched. The aim of this study is to address this by increasing our understanding of how people make sense and meaning around who they are, when they have been born into a fundamentalist group and subsequently have chosen to leave.

By adding to professional knowledge it is possible to increase understanding and engagement by health care professionals with those who have grown up in and left control groups.

I would like to interview males or females who:

- Are at least 18 years of age
- Were born and raised (second-generation) within a high control group
- Have lived outside of the group for at least two years
- Have engaged with a therapy/counselling service post exit

The interviews will last for approximately one hour, and take place in a neutral but public place that is convenient for you. If you are interested in taking part in this project please feel free to telephone or email me so that we can arrange an initial phone conversation to discuss further.

Kimberley Broom	**Phone:**	**07527 951387**
BSc (Hons) Psych, MBPsS, MBACP	**Email:**	**kimbroomtherapy@gmail.com**
British Psychological Society No: 321338	**Website:**	**www.kimbroomtherapy.co.uk**

Appendix 3 – Participant Information

Information sheet

Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by second-generation ex-members of high control cultic groups. A Life Story narrative study.

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out, and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of this study is to explore how persons born into a high control cultic group who chose to leave, experience matters of self and identity, before and after leaving their group. In particular, the aim is to illuminate meaning making, how a person makes sense of their experience and their sense of personal identity through this transition. The study is undertaken as part of a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology by Professional Studies (2014-2018) at The Metanoia Institute, Ealing, London, in partnership with Middlesex University.

Why have I been invited and do I have to take part?

You have been invited as you are an adult who has left a high control cultic group.
Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project up to one month prior to submission for examination, and avoid answering questions which are felt to be too personal or intrusive. You will not be penalised or disadvantaged in any way if you choose to do this. It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason up to one month prior to submission for examination.

What will happen if I take part?

Your participation would involve an audio-recorded interview lasting approximately 60 minutes. You may be asked to take part in a second meeting to review the transcript of the initial interview and emerging analysis. The interview will take place in a private room in a shared location that is convenient to you, for example on a university campus nearby. Following this, your data will contribute to a doctoral thesis in Counselling Psychology. If you would like to request a copy of this, please make this known to the researcher on the day of your interview.

What do I have to do?

You would be asked to take part in an audio recorded interview discussing your experience of identity whilst a member of your group and subsequently since leaving. The interview will involve questions pertaining to your experience of self and identity growing up within the group, how was self and identity experienced post-exit, and some reflection on what you felt was helpful or unhelpful in relation to your experience.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Your information will be used only for the purposes of this research project. Only the primary researcher will have access to audio records, however the research team will have access to the anonymized (transcribed) data. All names and identifying details will be anonymized and kept confidential and protected. During interviews, information may need to be passed on if disclosures of criminal activity, violence, abuse, or harm are made. All data, including audio recordings and transcripts will be encrypted, stored securely and destroyed by the primary researcher once research requirements are fulfilled.

The only restrictions on confidentiality would relate to any situation where reporting of violence, abuse, self-inflicted harm, harm to others or criminal activity is required to protect you, or others. This information may be shared with social services, and/or local authorities under UK legislation.

If you decide that you do not want to take part in this study after the interview has been conducted, your information can and will be withdrawn from the research project up to one month prior to submission. In the event the project is abandoned before it is completed, all records will be destroyed.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There is a possibility that the interview may cause some psychological discomfort. If this happens, and/or you feel that you would not like to talk about certain topics, or do not feel comfortable at any stage of the interview, you have the right to make these known to the interviewer and/or stop at any time. You may also have your data withdrawn at any stage of the research interview up to one month prior to submission for examination. If you do not feel comfortable and would like further help or support during or following your interview, several appropriate resources will be provided to you.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

There are no direct benefits to you personally for taking part in this study. However, you may find it helpful to explore and reflect on your experience with an accepting, curious and ethically informed listener. The research will contribute to informing others of the various features and challenges of leaving a high control cultic group into which you have been born. It may help clarify common beliefs, biases and challenges that others may have when working with persons with similar experiences. The research also seeks to make contributions to the wider community about the experience of fundamentalist beliefs and insights into potential impact on mental health.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

Once complete, the results of this study will be made available in the repository of research at Middlesex University, and then in ETHoS, the British Library's thesis discovery service. The thesis may also be published in academic journals. Throughout the use of data collected, anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained. If you would like to receive a copy of this final thesis, please make this known during the research interview or after through an email to one of the researchers (see below for contact details).

What will happen if I do not want to carry on with the study?

You are free to leave if you choose not to participate in part or all of the study, and you can withdraw at any stage of the study, up to one month prior to submission, without being penalized or disadvantaged in any way.

Further information and contact details
Kimberley Broom - Researcher
Kimberley.broom@metanoia.ac.uk

Professor Kim Etherington – Research Supervisor
kim@etherington.com

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet

Appendix 4 – Participant consent form

CONSENT FORM

Participant Identification Number:

Title of Project: **Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by second-generation ex-members of high control cultic groups. A Life Story Narrative.**

Name of Researcher: Kimberley Broom

Please initial box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated .....for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. ☐

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason. If I choose to withdraw, I can decide what happens to any data I have provided. ☐

Delete 3 and/or 4 if not applicable:

3. I understand that sections of any of my medical notes may be looked at by responsible individuals from [company name] or from regulatory authorities where it is relevant to my taking part in research. I give permission for these individuals to have access to my records. ☐

4. I understand that my interview will be taped and subsequently transcribed ☐

5. I agree to take part in the above study. ☐

6. I agree that this form that bears my name and signature may be seen by a designated auditor. ☐

_____	_____	_____
Name of participant	Date	Signature

_____	_____	_____
Name of person taking consent (if different from researcher)	Date	Signature

Kimberley Broom

_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature

1 copy for participant; 1 copy for researcher

Appendix 5 – Research Supervisor Confirmation of Participant Consent

Research Supervisor Confirmation of Consent

Name of student: Kimberley Broom

Name of research project: *Who am I? Self and identity narratives told by ex-members of high control cultic groups. A Life Story Narrative research.*

This is to verify that as Research Supervisor for the above research project I have seen proof that appropriate consent has been obtained from the participants used in the project.

Supervisor's name: Dr Kim Etherington

Signature: 

Date: 28.07.22

Appendix 6 – Participant de-brief sheet

Participant de-brief sheet

Researcher: Kimberley Broom – Doctoral Candidate

Metanoia Institute in partnership with Middlesex University

Thank you for your participation!

If you have any concerns of queries regarding this research study or you wish to obtain a summary of the findings please do not hesitate to contact Kimberley Broom at Metanoia Institute/Middlesex University via email: Kimberley.broom@metanoia.ac.uk

If you have any concerns or complaints about the research study or your experience as a participant you can contact Metanoia Institute, or Professor Kim Etherington, Research Supervisor at kim@etherington.com

If participation has raised any concerns or issues that you would like some support with I have listed below a number of resource/options for your consideration:

- Contact your local GP
- Contact your local community mental health team via NHS website https://www.nhs.uk/
- Private counselling services local to yourself can be found via 'British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy' (BACP) Tel: 01455 883300 or website: https://www.bacp.co.uk/ or via other directories such as 'Counselling Directory Tel: 0333 325 2500 or website: https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/
- Charities such as 'Mind' can offer free or low cost counselling services Tel: 0300 123 3393 or website: https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helplines/
- Samaritans offer 24 hour confidential telephone support. Call free on 116 123
- Specialist cult recovery support is not widely available but organisations such as ICSA (International Cultic Studies Association) https://www.icsahome.com/ have lists of resources, support and research. UK based Hope Valley Counselling Tel: 01433 639032 Website: http://www.hopevalleycounselling.com/ offer post-cult recovery counselling

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