

The Mind-bending Effect of Mind-control: a Case Study

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Samevatting

Die doel met hierdie artikel is om die ervaring van 'n voormalige kultelid, wat ten prooi van die proses van psigiese beheer geval het, te beskryf. Die 21-jarige man, wat lid van 'n misleidende kerk/kulte was, het ingestem om as respondent in hierdie kwalitatiewe gevallestudie op te tree. Sy ervarings onderwyl hy in die kulte was en daarna, is teen die agt psigiese beheer-beginsels, soos deur Lifton geïdentifiseer, gemeet. Deur die respondent se kulte-ervarings teen erkende psigiese beheer-tegnieke te meet, word die geleidelike disintegrasie van sy persoonlikheid, totdat hy die toestand van geïnduseerde psigose bereik het, sigbaar. Die tegnieke wat in hierdie groep gebruik is, asook die simptome wat die respondent getoon het, lei tot die maak van bondige aanbevelings rakende terapie.

We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back. Things will happen to you from which you could not recover, even if you lived a thousand years. Never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter, or curiosity, or courage, or integrity. You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with our selves. (The torturer's words to the victim. Orwell in '1984').

1. Introduction

Realising that one has been duped into a situation which was initially understood as a necessary spiritual experience, can be a devastating and sometimes even a life threatening experience. After leaving a cult, ex-members slowly begin to realise that they have lost time, education, life experience, friendships, the trust of loved ones and even their autonomy and very identity. Relationships, such as those formed by the person initiated into the cult, usually start out in an atmosphere of trust. The individuals believe that they will attain spiritual enhancement and that

their deepest need for improvement will be met. However, what prospective cult members do not realise, is that mind control relationships (such as are found in cults and even in some religious movements that are not generally regarded as being cults) are designed eventually to erase discernment and personal autonomy and to control behaviour, emotions and thoughts in order to further the organisation and the leader's goals.

In this article a case study is used in order to illustrate the effect of mind control on a group member. The plight of the cult member and the ongoing trauma as he leaves the cult and tries to piece together his life again in therapy, is illustrated. In order to be able to do this, the idea of a cult, of mind control, as well as elements of life within the cult have to be presented. What then is a cult and what is mind control?

2. A cult

Although the concept "cult" usually conjures up the idea of Eastern sects, and of the Moonies and the Children of God movement, other groups could also be classified as cults (Langone, 1993). In fact, it can be said that any religious group that uses mind control (or thought reform) in order to enlist and retain members, can be regarded as a religious cult. The following are identifying characteristics of cults (Damiani, 2002:43; Langone, 1993):

- blind devotion to a person, group or belief structure;
- using mind control (thought reform) to recruit and to keep members;
- extreme dependency on the leader and senior members of the group;
- a totalitarian mentality of the group, as well as a strict demand for adherence to group rules and doctrines;
- a fear of leaving the group and;
- legalism as a way of relating to God and one another, which implies living strictly by rules and a belief that a punitive God's love must be earned and that God does not act out of grace, but out of a harsh justice.

Objectively one finds it puzzling that cult leaders are able to maintain such abusive power, and that cult members are seemingly willing to subject themselves to this abuse. The answer to this appears to lie in the personality of the cult leader and in the concept "mind control". In abusive cultic churches the personality of the leaders often fit the description of antisocial personality disorder (DSM IV, 1998; Louw, 1992; Tobias & Lalich, 1994) which implies that they can be "extremely manipulative and can frequently talk others into participating in schemes ... that may

eventually lead the unwary to ... ruin ... People with antisocial personality disorder are highly represented by so-called con men” (DSM IV, 1998:785). The concept “mind control” will now be discussed briefly.

3. Mind control

The elements of mind control seem to be the tools which enable abusive cult leaders to maintain their hold over their followers. Mind control is also called brainwashing, thought control, manipulative persuasion, indoctrination, cult programming, and cult indoctrination (Hunt, 1978: 18; Streiker, 1984: 77; McManus & Cooper, 1984: 27; Hassan, 1988: 55; Young & Griffith, 1992: 89; Langone, 1993: 3; Enroth, 1994: 17; Stoker, 1994: 12; Singer & Lalich, 1995: 52).

Mind control is not a mystical process. It is a process which can be examined, understood, described and analysed scientifically (Singer 1994). Lifton (1989) summarises the elements of mind control (thought reform or brainwashing) techniques. He extracted these principles (or what he refers to as “tools”) from research done on American prisoners of war. These were the techniques used by their North Korean captors to de-humanise them, to break down the very fibre of their personality structure and to bend them totally to the will of their captors. The work of Lifton (1989) has become a primary source of reference for those who wish to understand cultic principles and practices. According to Lifton (1989) there are eight principles or “tools” which enable abusive churches, cults and other manipulative organisations to maintain their power over group members. These principles are: milieu control, mystical manipulation, the demand for purity, the cult of confession, the “sacred science”, loading the language, doctrine over person and dispensing of existence. These principles will be evaluated against elements found in the case study when the subjective experiences of the participant are presented.

3.1 Milieu control

Stringent demands are set and the behaviour and activities of group members are closely prescribed and monitored. Furthermore, group members are exposed only to information that the leader regards as permissible. The members’ experiences and cognitive input are therefore significantly curtailed. If members reach outside the group for information, they are regarded as being “not fully committed” and as “enemies, fallen from grace, to be shunned at all cost” (Damiani, 2002:44). This “tool” curtails the ability personally to select what one deems important, thereby shaping your identity and personal frame of reference.

3.2 *Mystical manipulation*

This refers to the belief that the leaders are the personal representatives of God, and that their judgement is infallible. The leaders often maintain that God communicates with them directly through dreams or visions. This principle disempowers the group members in the sense that their personal sense of judgement is not exercised, and their moral development is infantilised seeing that they unquestioningly have to follow what the leaders dictate.

3.3 *The demand for purity*

This refers to a strictly dichotomous world view, dividing behaviour into good and evil (with nothing in-between). The leaders are the moral judges and guilt and shame are the tools with which they manipulate group members. Since the standard of total purity is unattainable, subjects are always in a state of shame and guilt. This principle seriously compromises the intellectual and emotional flexibility of group members. In a sense it enforces upon them a rigid and uncompromising world view, with “restricted interests and patterns of behaviour”, reminiscent of patients on the autism spectrum (DSM IV, 1998:1190). Furthermore it forces the group member down to a childlike developmental level where reward and punishment are the only moral criteria. In this state the member easily lapses into bouts of depression (Langone, 1993).

3.4 *The cult of confession*

Obsessed with the idea of personal confession, leaders carry personal confession beyond its ordinary function as a religious or therapeutic tool. Normal boundaries between private and public knowledge are broken. By confessing, group members merge even more with the totalistic environment and render themselves vulnerable – because of highly personal knowledge about themselves that has been divulged. Healthy ego-boundaries are broken down by means of this principle and the group member is left with a loss of personal identity and a merging with the group identity. Furthermore, the resulting anxiety, guilt and shame break down the very fibre of a healthy psyche and of a strong self-concept. This whole process then facilitates manipulation by the leader.

3.5 *The “Sacred science”*

This refers to the idea that the doctrine of the group is equated with “the everlasting truth of God”. Any independent thought or questioning is frowned upon and is met with aggression, rejection and a blaming and

shaming by the group leadership. The cognitive functioning and flexibility as well as the normative development of group members are consequently seriously curtailed. The leaders seem to be enshrined with an “aura” of holiness and the doctrine that they present is regarded as infallible.

3.6 Loading the language

A special “language” develops within the group, in a sense reminiscent of the secret codes that pre-pubescent children invent - a code that is “just their secret”. However, this similarity with pre-pubescent behaviour belies the obnoxious nature of this “tool”. Only certain words or phrases are allowed, which develop into a dogmatic jargon and consequently the meaning tends to be obscured to “outsiders”. This serves further to isolate the group from the outside world, but also serves as insulation in the group. The constriction of language is used to narrow individuals’ capacity for thinking and feeling. One such an example is the word “disaffection”, which symbolises betrayal and all that is evil, rebellious and sinful – with reference to a group member who dares to question the “powers that be” within the group. The effect of this, is the restriction of thinking to the approved thought patterns of the group. Individual original thinking is then suppressed, which blunts the group members’ cognitive flexibility and creativity.

3.7 Doctrine over person

The doctrine of the cult/group is more important than the individual and therefore the person must be moulded to a perfect fit with the thought patterns of the group. Original thinking, creativity and questioning are suppressed – with a resultant “dumbing down” effect on the group members. People who find themselves under such pressure to subjugate absolutely to an ideological system, are thrown into an intense struggle with their own sense of integrity. This principle also leads to a weakening of the self-concept.

3.8 Dispensing of existence

In terms of group membership and social existence in the group this is a death sentence. If one bears in mind that over many years group members may have severed bonds with family, friends and colleagues in “the outside world”, this is a banishment from the only social group that they know. “Offenders” are emotionally crushed and “put to death”, in the sense that their spirit is destroyed (Peck, 1983). Furthermore, their

reputations are besmirched through revelations of information that was obtained in what was believed to have been a relationship of trust (inter alia during the “confessions”). This principle has the supreme capacity for leaving the victim vulnerable, both at intra- and inter-psychic levels.

4. Problem statement

The problem addressed in this article, is the effect that mind control within a cult has on the psyche of a group member. More specifically the research problem can be stated as follows: *What is the effect of mind control within a religious cult on the psyche of an ex-cult member?*

4.1 Research methodology

A qualitative research approach was chosen as it was the intention of the researchers to home in on the personal experience of an ex-cult member (Gillham, 2000; McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). Face-to-face, unstructured in-depth interviews and therapeutic sessions were conducted by a skilled interviewer/therapist – the interviewer/therapist being an experienced, professionally registered educational psychologist. A single case study of one respondent was done. This participant was chosen as he was thought to be representative of more than twenty members that had been debriefed. Case study is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required (Feagin, Orum & Sjoberg, 1991; Yin, 1994). The emphasis is on understanding the social phenomenon as it affects a specific respondent (De Vos, Strydom, Fouché, Poggenpoel, Schurink & Schurink, 1998; Edwards, 1996; Gillham, 2000; Higgins, 1996; McMillan & Schumacher, 1989). One of the aims of a case study is precisely to bring out the details from the viewpoint of the participant. Although it may compromise the generalisability of the findings, it lends phenomenological depth to the research.

4.2 Case study

4.2.1 Background

Marius was 21 years old when he sought psychological help. As a child he grew up in an intact family, consisting of both his parents and an older brother. According to Marius, he experienced emotional security as a child, although he mentioned that his father was very strict and often made authoritative decisions on behalf of the family. Marius had a close relationship with his mother. He enjoyed school, performed well academically and studied architecture at university. During the time that Marius was debriefed, he was still a student. In the meantime he has completed his degree in architecture.

Marius joined the group when he was eighteen years old and remained a member for almost two years. He only approached one of the researchers for counselling after a further 18 months, at the age of 21. At that time he had concentration and memory problems as well as an inability to be creative and to solve problems in his studies. He suffered from severe panic attacks and withdrew from everyday situations by sleeping excessively. He stopped exercising, over-ate and consequently became fat and flabby. Marius complained that he had problems in his personal relationships and that he was unable to become involved in an intimate relationship. Marius felt desperate and was in an extreme state of emotional conflict – to the extent that he was beginning to have suicidal ideation. He believed that he was not spiritually “saved”, as he had left the only means of attaining salvation (belonging to that particular religious cult) because on his own he was made to believe that he was unable to “claim complete victory over the devil”. He had intense feelings of guilt and shame and was emotionally extremely vulnerable.

4.2.2 The lure of the group

It was his openness and willingness to grow as a Christian that lured Marius into a destructive Christianity-based religious group. At the time of initial membership (Marius was then 18 years old), the group looked legitimate. It predominantly consisted of young people who travelled from various towns to attend one particular church. He later learned that that particular congregation believed that their church was the only true Christian church on earth.

Marius perceived love, commitment and hard work among the members. He saw that they gave up what seemed like worldly pastimes, such as drinking alcohol and smoking. They willingly paid their tithes (10% and often 20% of their income) and drastically changed their daily routine in order to be more functional in the church.

Marius acknowledged that before he met the group, he felt alone and had many thoughts about his relationship with God.

“It seemed they really wanted to get to know me. We chatted... Chester [the leader] seemed kind and caring. He asked about past disappointments... I shared some things with him. He said he knew there was more and that if I didn’t open up, God wouldn’t heal me.”

They said that Marius needed Biblical input and spent a lot of time doing this. Marius related that he attended more Bible studies and described it as a very “intense” time and that he soon felt “overwhelmed”.

Initially, Marius was totally unsuspecting of the dangers of such a group. He devoted himself to Bible studies and, as a junior member, to the advice of senior members who would “guide him in all his decisions, confessions and behaviour in and outside of the church”. During Bible studies, he was gradually influenced into the belief that faith in Jesus Christ alone was not enough for salvation and that it was imperative for him to work for the church of Christ (that particular group) in order to earn his salvation. Only when senior members were convinced that new members had changed satisfactorily, would they be allowed to be baptised. Furthermore, it was only through baptism that individuals would be considered to be “saved”. Marius recalled feeling anxious and desperate as weeks went by before his baptism was approved. He recalled waking up at night praying to God not to let him die before his baptism. Marius’ life in the church was characterized by always trying to attain certain set standards and never feeling that he could relax, never feeling certain whether he was “saved” or not.

4.2.3 The effects of Lifton’s principles of mind control on the ex-cult member

The effects of the principles of mind control on Marius will now be described. A description of some of Marius’ experiences will be given and the psychological effects thereof will be discussed. Illustrative excerpts from notes made during therapy are presented in text boxes.

Milieu control

Marius said that the leader had absolute authority and was considered the spokesperson of God. Members were obliged to interpret the Bible only in the light of the teachings of the leader. Any other interpretation was seen as unacceptable and sinful and was ascribed to the member’s low level of spirituality.

“I was reluctant about many things but they made me feel as if I was not committing to God... they made me feel guilty until I obeyed.” Marius was told that he was “obviously not serious” about his relationship with God by being hesitant.

Personal reflection, which should contain elements of objective evaluation, became a meaningless repetition of what was taught and lost its quality of critical evaluation and the testing of incoming information. It would seem that a measure of de-personalisation took place.

Very strict demands were set concerning daily routine and tasks. Marius recalled that –

he sometimes doubted whether it was the right time to pray. “I always waited for an ‘unction’. Is it God’s will that I must pray now?” He explained that when the leader decided for members when to pray, they felt as if they had God’s “covering”.

Soon after he joined the church, he realised that he was struggling to meet all the demands of prayer, fasting, recruiting new members and doing other work for the church. When he explained to senior members that he did not have enough time, they offered to help him draw up a new schedule so that he could tend to all the priorities (which only concerned the church) each day. He believed that this was to help him, but did not realise that in actual fact the leadership of the church now had total control over every minute of his day.

Mystical manipulation

New members were told that they were a special, chosen group of people who were called to fulfill God’s promises to mankind and to complete the work of Jesus Christ on earth. A blind faith was demanded – not directly in God, but in God through the leader and the senior members in the church. Marius (as did other group members), developed a “blind faith” in what he believed to be the unique and special mission of the church and the judgement of the leader. Group members were taught that the church was the only way to salvation and in order to be a part of this “great higher purpose”, “blind obedience” and “total commitment” were mandatory. Marius acknowledged that he felt daunted, but in a sense initially also empowered, by this church (cult) and its “special purpose”. It is evident that this cult capitalised on the adolescent need to identify with an idealised role model and to pursue a worthy cause.

According to Marius, group members were greatly influenced by the visions and dreams of the leader. A turning point for Marius was when they (the group) were told that the leader had received a vision that he (Marius) had a special purpose in the church. That same night Marius dreamt that he turned his back on his family and walked away from them. Clearly this dream resulted from the suggestion by the leader. However, to Marius the dream was “a sign from God that he was on the right path”. The mystic “message from God”, manifested in his dream which resulted from a subtle suggestion by the leader (“Marius has a special purpose in the church”) left Marius willing to lay down his capacities of independent thought and action. At that stage he was willing to serve and obey the group leader totally. He tested all his thoughts against what “the church” wanted and made no further decisions without the input of the leadership.

Rational thinking had become compromised and even Marius' identity and reality contact were becoming affected.

Demand for purity

Within the cult Marius encountered an extremely dichotomous world view. One was regarded either as being completely sinless or as being vile and sinful – with nothing in-between and no compromise.

When Marius became a member of the group, he was prepared “to do anything for God”. He did not see the difference between making a sacrifice for God and obeying people. One of the demands that he willingly tried to meet was to strive to attain the sinless moral perfection of God. Marius accepted the challenge. He dearly wanted to be perfect for God, whom he referred to as “my God”. He quickly learnt that it was extremely difficult to “do everything right” and to evade the scorn of the leadership and the group. He said:

“...one does not want to be looked down upon as not being ‘led by the Spirit’”.

It was particularly difficult, as the leaders kept on shifting the goalposts and giving incongruent feedback concerning his actions. Once he attained a certain expected standard (for example, to pray for four hours per day and to do recruiting for another four hours), it was suggested that “a real child of God could do much more” and should be willing to sacrifice his total “former sinful self” to God. He would then react by praying even more, fasting for longer periods or working even harder to recruit new members. Unfortunately, the acknowledgement and love which he experienced in the church initially gradually waned, and he found himself increasingly being punished or frowned upon for not being able to maintain required standards and for not keeping up with the ever shifting goalposts. At an intra-psychoic level the group leaders had thus managed to create tremendous emotional instability, cognitive dissonance and moral doubt. Furthermore this principle (the demand for purity) was relentlessly chipping away at Marius' self-concept.

The cult of confession

Personal confession in this cultic church (“The Church of Christ”) was used as a tool for “purification” where members would sit with a senior member or in a group and were expected to confess the most personal and private details of what they perceived to be their sins. The confessions were interspersed by spells of uncontrollable crying, singing and

worshipping, which caused a high level of emotional excitation, and an expansive mood (DSM IV, 1998: 282). Marius recalled that he could not think clearly during such sessions, and that he felt very vulnerable. Confession comprised a person's most private thoughts, as "everything" was to be confessed. Marius learned that "the gravest sins" were instances of disobedience to the church. He explained the rationale behind this as follows: "When you disobey the church, you directly choose to disobey God's instrument on earth. That is disobeying God." Such syllogistic reasoning shows why group members saw the leader and senior members of the church as virtually infallible. Evidently this is a case of illogical thinking, brought about by a semantic ill-formed cause-effect link between this particular church and God.

Marius said that when the tension peaked during confession he "broke down, cried and confessed" (clearly an abreaction). Thereafter he was "magnanimously" again "saved" from his emotional crisis by the very persons who induced it. The process would then start all over again – without having been resolved. He would spend hours in prayer obsessively looking for "impure thoughts" or "sinful behaviour" on his side and spend all his mental and emotional energy on means of eliminating them. Other pathological elements brought to the fore by means of this "tool" (confession within the cult) are eliciting an expansive mood, the loss of ego-boundaries, excessive feelings of guilt and also obsessive behaviour in that Marius was incessantly trying to meet unattainable, changing goals. Furthermore, there were repeated abreactions, without a resolution of the tensional elements leading to the build-up of ambivalence, anxiety, shame and guilt.

Sacred science

The leader would often share his new visions and prophecies, with the group members. This strengthened the irrational idea of the "holiness" of the leader, the sacredness of the church and the infallibility of its doctrine. This drove Marius to pray and fast for even longer periods in order also to attain a higher level of spirituality. No questions or personal needs could oppose or challenge this "truth".

It was at this stage that direct explicit orders to Marius were no longer necessary. He had been sufficiently indoctrinated and conditioned for subtle cues to be enough to elicit behavioural change. Marius recalled always checking on himself to see if there was a "negative thought", a "disobedient wish" or a "sinful need". He restrained himself from ever longing for friends and family, as they were a part of his "sinful past". It

was probably at this point that Marius laid down his autonomy and emotional responsiveness and accepted the new group identity that was offered to him.

One day he set aside his schedule to do some required studying and had no time left to do the required daily recruiting. At church he explained why he had not succeeded in inviting anybody to the meeting that day. There was a cold silence and he felt guilty. During the Bible study there were references to the price of being Christian and that lukewarm Christians were unacceptable to God. He recalled feeling abandoned and rejected because he was subsequently ignored and excluded from the conversations. Only when he could take it no more and repented of his “sin” and undertook to improve, did they act lovingly towards him again. In his regressed state he eagerly accepted this.

From the above it is clear that triggers for eliciting excessive feelings of guilt were established by the cult leadership. Various elements of psychological disturbance are evident from Marius’ account of what he experienced. There are clear signs of obsessive-compulsive behaviour and of dereism (thinking not concordant with logic or experience). There were also signs of irrational thought and of a regression to magical thinking (similar to what Piaget describes during the pre-operational phase of cognitive development). Emotionally he regressed and there are elements of inappropriate and even of blunted affect.

Loading the language

In this church, certain stereotyped phrases, redefined and therefore void of generally intelligible content, were used with a view to indoctrinating group members. An idiosyncratic “vocabulary” was used in which neologisms abounded but with an initial poverty of content. These words gradually gained specific “loaded meanings” within the group – meanings spliced in by the group leadership. People outside of the church/cult, were described as “people who do not love God” (clearly an illogical generalisation). “Family” meant the fellow-members in the church, and not the member’s biological family.

Marius said: “While in the group a person grown to resent and even detest parents and family.”

“The church of Christ” meant the one church that functioned under one management and which followed the doctrine of that specific church.

“Anyone merely questioning the church [cult] was accused as sowing doubt.”

No other Christian church was recognised. Former members were described as “people who have fallen away”. Life was turned into a black and white caricature scenario by calling anything and everyone outside of the church, “the world”. The implication was that only the insiders were under God’s grace and all the “outsiders” were “of the world” and thus “evil”. “Love” was considered to be the act of obedience to that specific church. “Bearing fruit” was reduced to recruiting new members for the church. If no new members were recruited, the member was regarded as not having borne any fruit, and was then considered to be “outside God’s will”. The underlying intention of using “loaded language” in this way, is isolating the individual from his bonds of love and affiliation to his family and the real world outside the group. If the group leadership can manage this, they have created a gullible and malleable being that they can ruthlessly exploit. Loaded language evidently has the capacity for seriously curtailing critical thinking. It does this to the extent that the individual develops “cognitive tunnel vision” in a manner of speaking, and then single-mindedly tries to fit into the paradigm set by this “jargon”.

The effect that “loaded language” had on Marius was impoverishing his thought content, forcing him to an all-or-nothing thinking and demanding over generalisations and illogical, distorted thinking patterns. In order to accept this kind of speech, Marius intra-psychically had to submit to a considerable amount of cognitive distortion. The emotional outflow of this being feelings of anxiety, of shame and guilt, of rejection, of extreme vulnerability and of depression. It would seem that, by identifying with the group, Marius started using reaction formation as a defence mechanism in order to try to preserve a measure of ego-integrity.

Doctrine over person

When Marius accepted the demand that he should submit to the doctrine of the cult/church, he started unconditionally and totally to trust their judgement. No individual thought, emotion or action weighed more than the doctrine. He happily subjugated himself, not understanding that he was doing this for people and not for God. Clearly this is reaction formation. Previously he had been able to assess an experience or a situation by using his intelligence, his ability for logical reasoning and evaluation, his cultural background, his education and his own personal frame of reference as guidelines. However, while in the cult he only had his new or

pseudo identity where the only guideline was the doctrine which the group followed – he was thus too inhibited and riddled with feelings of guilt to do any reality testing. Where he had previously been able to form an opinion of a situation by observing it, by thinking, reasoning and attributing meaning to it, he could now only reason within the boundaries of the “sacred doctrine” to which he was committed. In the words of Lifton (1989: 431): “..the doctrine is ultimately more valid, true and real than is any aspect of actual human character or human experience.” It was not his sincerity but his obedience that was assessed by the authoritarian cult leader and senior members of the group. In this sense, sincerity (that comes from being totally honest by using critical thinking, creative and problem solving skills) was replaced by a blind obedience which forbade all critical thinking. Form had to take precedence over substance and therefore overvalued ideas (unreasonable, sustained false beliefs) had to be adhered to, which are precursors to a state of delusion (DSM IV, 1998: 282). Elements of depersonalisation and of derealisation were evidently also emerging as Marius complied with this cult requirement.

Dispensing of existence

When Marius became disillusioned with certain aspects of the church and the application of the doctrine, he shared his disillusionment with some of the senior “church” members . He did this in the belief that if they saw and understood the problem, they would immediately agree to rectify it. Instead of agreeing with him or reasoning with him sympathetically, he was told that “...if you leave the church, the blood of Jesus will no longer protect you.”

He was told that he was “an embarrassment and a shame to the Lord and to the fellowship.”

He was fully aware of how he himself was required to act towards ex-members. Ex-members were ostracised. They were not talked to by any of the group members, they were not talked about and were considered to be dead. When they were discussed, they were used as forewarning examples of what members’ lives might turn out to be if they did not continue to “love God” (ie: stay in the group and comply with all the demands and requirements set by the group leader). This overwhelmed Marius with feelings of anxiety, self-condemnation and self-rejection to the extent that he was driven to a delusional state of self-accusation (DSM IV, 1998:283).

Members were also told that “bad things” would happen to them when they “were not under God’s protection”. When Marius became ill, he was

told that this could be a sign that he was “falling away” and that he should stay and repent in order to recover. In his regressed state and with logical thinking being suspended because of extreme feelings of guilt, Marius was left in an acute state of vulnerable gullibility.

With reference to the cult leadership Marius said that “...their underlying motive for bringing up past hurts was not for us to bring them to God for forgiveness and healing, as the Bible says. Rather, it was to have ammunition for a later stage, either to manipulate or to bring up the past in order to make one feel guilty when required.”

All problems and emotional upheavals he and other members experienced were blamed on “sin” and “demons” – and Marius unquestioningly believed it. Reality in this situation was: “If you stay, you are one of us a person; if you leave, you will have ceased to exist for us and (by implication) for God”. He did not want to lose his friends in the group or the love he experienced. Most of all he did not want to “fall from grace”. He therefore desperately tried to change. Assuming that his questioning the church was a “demonic attack”, he proceeded to “rebuke Satan”. When his personal problems persisted, he was told that God was trying to change something in his life. So, he soul-searched even more, but increasingly became agitated and could not find peace. He proceeded with exhausting hours of “speaking in war tongues” to “fend off the devil”. He reported going into a state where he lost contact with reality and where he “saw demons”. Clearly he had entered a state of psychosis in which delusions and hallucinations were intermingling. These induced psychotic episodes were used by the group to convince him that, “because he now belonged to God”, Satan was out to get him. There was a clear loss of reality contact and of ego boundaries. Marius was then tenuously trying to hold on to his sanity – not being able to distinguish reality from hallucination, deluded and riddled with feelings of guilt, self-accusation and remorse.

5. Conclusions

- It is clear that while in the cult, Marius was subjected to all eight the principles or “tools” of mind control as described by Lifton (1989).
- He was deceived into entering the cult – which later left him with feelings of betrayal.
- He was socially alienated because of enforced inter-personal disconnection from family and friends and a mistrust which was inculcated.
- He was emotionally destabilised by negative evaluations and labels from the group leaders.

- He was extremely self-critical and developed a negative self-concept and eventually a loss of self-identity as he merged with the group-identity.
- Excessive dependency was demanded – which resulted in extreme regression.
- There was a loss of ego-boundaries to the extent that at times there was depersonalisation – implying a disconnection from the self.
- His awareness was narrowed and distorted.
- His cognition was blunted, as individual critical thinking and creativity were actively discouraged and frowned upon.
- His decision-making ability was undermined.
- His normative functioning regressed to that of a pre-school child. Reward and punishment became the only yard sticks as all autonomy and power were handed over to the group leadership.
- Feelings of extreme anxiety and dread were elicited.
- Marius increasingly felt inadequate, guilty and full of self-reproach.
- He became severely depressed.
- A psychotic state was induced in which he became deluded and actively hallucinated.

In summary one can say that within the cult, prior important relationships and interpersonal bonds were severed. The focus was on emotion, to the detriment of cognition. Positive emotions were reserved for the group and its leadership and negative emotions for all else. The group and its causes were thus elevated and cognition and intellectual analysis were actively discouraged. Feelings of personal worth and individual worthwhile life goals, outside the group context, were dismissed and branded as sinful.

6. Recommendations

In view of the above, the following is suggested regarding the therapeutic process: (Brief reference is also made to the therapeutic process with Marius in the case study.)

The keys to recovery after having been subjected to an abusive religious group seem to lie in the opposite to what was experienced in the group. In a sense the integration process is the mirror image of the disintegration process. It is recommended that in therapy the line of action run contrary to the distorting influences that the individual encountered in the group/cult. The following more specific recommendations are made, interspersed with references to how they feature in Marius' therapy.

- In therapy the ex-cult member (client) should have adequate authoritative information regarding cults and the process of mind control. In therapeutic relationships with more than 20 ex-cult members, as with Marius, it was found that understanding the process that they went through, is a necessary part of recovery. This was also the case with Marius.
- The therapist may need to do trauma-debriefing as victims of mind control often manifest with some of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), very similar to those who have been exposed to a traumatic event. The difference is that people who experience a crisis usually know what the traumatic event was, that caused the stress. Examples of such events are the death of a loved one, the termination of a relationship, rape or hijacking. Victims of mind control, however, tend to be unaware of what exactly caused their crisis. “Typically, clients’ awareness of what happened to them is restricted because they lack a conceptual framework that can adequately attach meaning to their experiences” (Martin, Langone, Dole & Wiltrout, 1992: 219-250). As therapy progressed, Marius gradually realized what he had lost. He expressed his loss of relationships but felt that his biggest loss was the loss of autonomy and independent thinking.
- Help them to rebuild a trust and confidence in themselves and regain contact with their own identities.
- Enable them to see themselves as independent, able individuals.
- Facilitate life skills such as problem recognition, problem solving, creative thinking and decision making skills.

Self-confidence and independence were gained by encouraging Marius to make his own decisions. In therapy he initially had to be supported and encouraged to make even the smallest decision. He was praised for taking control and looking for help. New skills, for example assertiveness, were practiced through role playing.
- They need to be challenged to take responsibility and to function at a developmentally appropriate normative level. As all control was relinquished to the cult, it is necessary for the individual to accept the challenge to take responsibility for his or her own life and process of healing. One of the biggest challenges for ex-cult members is to overcome the dependence that they had developed while they were in the group. It was to be expected that Marius would want to consider the therapist as a new authority figure as he (Marius) was perpetually looking for approval for his behaviour and decisions. That was

addressed by openly discussing his need for approval and indicating examples where he craved the therapists's approval, such as when he embarked on a new relationship. He also needed to set boundaries without fearing rejection – he had to gain insight into why he was willing to take over other people's responsibilities in the first place.

- Help them to resolve their feelings of guilt. It is always difficult for ex-cult members to rid themselves of guilt feelings. Not always considering the process of undue control they went through, they blame themselves for having rejected loved ones, severed precious relationships, et cetera. They also feel guilty before God for not being the spiritual person they had intended to become. In therapy Marius needed support and time to distinguish between his own responsibility for having joined the cult and staying there even when he saw the problems, and the responsibility of the people who indoctrinated him.
- If the client is depressed, this needs to be addressed by means of psychotherapy and possibly also medically.
- Facilitate the identification of irrational thought patterns: One of the aspects that stands out as a part of the therapeutic process, is cognitive restructuring as a therapeutic tool. Firstly, Marius had to develop an understanding of the process of mind control. This was done by explaining to him the elements and process of mind control. He became aware of how they (the cult leaders) had incorporated many irrational beliefs of *shoulds*, *oughts* and *musts*. He was assisted in identifying and disputing irrational beliefs that had been acquired and which were now perpetuated by “self-indoctrination”. These ineffective and irrational thought patterns were replaced by effective and rational cognitions.

An example in this regard is that he had to make a mental shift regarding his belief that there had to be another person between him and God, a person who was to convey God's will to him and who was to guide him and approve of his behaviour. It took a considerable time for this cognitive distortion to be set right.

- Particular attention was paid to language patterns as there is a reciprocal effect between language and thinking – language shapes thinking and thinking shapes language. Marius was helped to change his language patterns by making new and more positive self-statements or affirmations which influenced his emotions and eventually his behaviour.

It is a very small step from not being allowed to say something to not being allowed to think it. Within the cult an own opinion

and specifically an opposing opinion was regarded as impudent and against the will of God. In ordinary conversation one frequently prefixes an opposing opinion with the word “but”. The group members were however actively discouraged from using the word “but” by conjuring up feelings of guilt in linking it to evil and to those cast away in everlasting damnation. In an effort to link this idea to the Bible the homophone verb “but” was used as it features in the book of Revelations where sheep are seen as those who do the will of God and goats not – and that at the end of times the sheep and the goats will be separated. The implication is that those symbolised by goats will go to Hell. With this as background explanation it is very clear how the leaders manipulate the thought patterns of followers by controlling their language. When a group member wants to voice an own opinion and starts off by saying “but”, he is stopped in his tracks by the following comment: “No, no. Goats ‘but’, sheep ‘mê’”.

- Rekindle the relationships with their friends and family. In this regard family and friends can even be brought into the therapeutic process.
- Help them to find worthwhile personal goals in life.
- With reference to Marius’ feelings about being “saved” and his relationship with God the following can be said:

He seemed to have been obsessed with Bible verses, which deal with good deeds. Even at the termination of therapy he was still convinced that his salvation could only be brought about by good deeds and not by grace. He later also withdrew from any activities in his church of origin (to which he had returned). He was especially suspicious of small group activities, as he continued feeling that he could not trust others with personal spiritual information.

Right up to the end of his therapy Marius felt spiritually disillusioned in his relationship with God. His line of reasoning was that he could not understand why God had allowed him to have the negative cult experiences to which he was subjected, when all he wanted to do was to serve God as best he could.

It has been said that success is the best revenge. Becoming happy outside of the cult, rather than getting sick and dying as the cult wishes, is the best evidence of ex-members’ success and the best exposure of the cult leaders’ lies about life outside of the group.

As was seen in this case study Marius was affected in his totality as a human being. It was therefore imperative for healing to take place that all these aspects were addressed in therapy. As explained above, support on emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual levels should be given. This support could temporarily end when clients feel that they are ready to go on with their life, and could then be resumed later. It was found that clients usually needed to resume therapy again some years after they had left the cult.

7. Ethical aspects of the study

For ethical reasons the names of the respondent and of the cult leader were changed and specific information by means of which they could possibly be identified, was omitted. Furthermore, the name of the cultic “church” that Marius had joined is not mentioned in this article. However, members of the congregation refer to it as “The Church of Christ”, and therefore this name was used. Permission was obtained from the respondent to use his history and experiences in the case study. Notes were made during therapy and they can be made available on request.

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