

Abstract

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

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

A qualitative narrative inquiry methodology was used, informed by critical and dialogical narrative analysis. I approached the analysis without any preconceived ideas. Each story's interview was represented in collaboration with the storytellers using their words as far as possible. At the heart of every story lay their experience in the Brethren; the doctrines and practices forming the bedrock. The stories told how storytellers came to leave and how, in leaving, they renegotiated their identities. A cross-story view led to a model of a continuum of enmeshed families. The representations were viewed through the lenses of disorganised attachment and identity theory.

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