Pressure to Behave, Believe, and Become: Identity Negotiation Stories from People Who Grew Up “Cult”

Patricia A. Millar
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ABSTRACT

This research explored how identity transitions are accomplished when individuals experience distress in relationship to the social systems in which they are embedded. Study participants grew up in cultic groups, where they were parented by committed members. Twenty-two people who chose to leave or were ejected from 12 cultic groups provided low point, high point, and turning point stories for an exploratory narrative analysis.

Life story narratives revealed a jarring disconnect between what participants were expected to believe and become and how they experienced themselves. The research interviews provided richly textured data about the experience of growing up cult, the process of leaving, and what helped or hindered as participants navigated new social contexts. A categorical content analysis showed that participants experienced pressure and a sense of isolation. Adverse events such as neglect, abuse, and violence were reported. Many experienced the loss of family and friends as the exit cost for leaving. The research showed that a crystallization of discontent motivated participants to leave despite resource deficits and considerable uncertainty.

During the process of constructing identities more congruent with an emerging sense of self, participants rejected worldviews inculcated during childhood. Results challenge theories that situate identity negotiation as a stage-specific dilemma that occurs during adolescence. The analysis indicates that exposure to diverse views and role models; exploration of personal truth and experimentation; and skill development in critical thinking and reality testing were important
to successful adaptation. A key finding suggests that existing therapeutic approaches grounded in cult education and recovery from abuse would benefit from a complementary focus on identity development.

Keywords: narrative identity, identity construction, childhood trauma, posttraumatic growth, stages of change
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To my dad, who faced multiple life transitions with values forged in bold defiance of injustice and intolerance: Thank you. You offered me the world cracked open and said dive in. Take risks, try new things, follow your heart. Don’t be afraid. You’ll find your way. And I did. You believed in me and in life itself, and found new hope in the midst of despair. So did I. The living and learning are worth life’s difficult moments. Despite the multitude of ways in which human beings mistreat one another, we each have the opportunity to create a life worth living. When faced with callous indifference and the misuse of power, when we personally experience violence and abuse, possibilities remain. Groups can embody mutual respect, learn how to collaborate, and share what we call leadership. Humans nurture more often than they destroy. People are remarkably resilient, adaptive, and agentic.

To Jeff, my loyal and true partner, who always believes in me even when I doubt myself: Thank you for gifting me this time to explore. Thank you for not insisting that my topic lead to viable employment. You know more than anyone how important this doctorate is to my own identity. It is part of my legacy and your support made it possible at this time and in this way.
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Chapter 1 – Introduction

The Importance of Identity Development

People need to establish an identity of their own, a coherent sense of self, to function effectively in the social world. Erikson (1959, 1968) identified identity development as a central task of young adulthood and argued that a fundamental objective of this activity includes wrestling with questions of occupation and ideology—how to make a living and what to believe. This understanding has been expanded to include other domains of life such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and relationships (Josselson, 1987, 1996; Kroger, 1997; Shorter-Goeden & Washington, 1996). Researchers have mapped the identity domain for decades now by asking difficult questions such as how a core self comes to be, how it evolves and adapts over time, what aspects of self are unchanging, and what the relationships are between our inner, outer, multiple, and collective selves. Some inquirers question how people continue to develop their identities throughout the lifespan, in new contexts, and when faced with “turns in the road” (Josselson, 1996; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2001). This is where I situate my inquiry, in the study of identity transitions.

Identity Transitions: The Lived Experience of Leaving a Cultic Group

My focus as an identity researcher is to look at context-specific resolution strategies for identity dilemmas experienced by people who choose to undertake a significant life transition. As a scholar-practitioner, I hope to expand our understanding of how individuals make sense of themselves within nested, interrelated, and sometimes competing social systems in a pluralistic, globalized society.
As contact is multiplied and heightened between diverse peoples around the globe, societies face monumental challenges in learning how to interact with one another in constructive rather than destructive ways. Contact is inevitable between diverse people given the economic, political, and technological influences that affect us all. As social scientists, we need to conduct research that adds to our collective understanding of how to enhance human interaction when we encounter differences. At the most extreme, people need to learn how to alleviate violent conflict. But questions of difference arise in everyday life. Useful and pragmatic research projects can produce findings that inform individual and social action.

Results from the current study document the lived experience of people who found a way to navigate and adapt when moving between cultures. Relationships identified between dominant cultural narratives and the personal stories of participants in this study document multiple pathways for those who leave and suggest a shift is needed in therapeutic orientation for the people who try to help them.

I studied individuals who spent their youth in so-called “cultic” groups. Cults are relationally and ideologically intense social environments. Having been parented by committed members, my study participants faced adulthood with an added burden of choice: whether to embrace or reject identities and ideologies transmitted from committed group members, including biological parents. The decision to leave involved consequences, including ostracism, rejection, and withdrawal of material support as some “cult kids” chose to leave childhood “havens” and reject expected paths while facing the uncertainty of a much larger social world (Boeri & Boeri, 2008; Kent, 2004; Zablocki, 1998).

Research indicates that childhood members of cultic groups sometimes reach adulthood inadequately prepared to function effectively, much less optimally (D. L. Adams, 2008;
Goldberg, 2006). People who emerge from cultic groups need help understanding how the world works. Role models may have never demonstrated how to set up a bank account, obtain credit, invest money, or hold a job outside the group. The prospect of finding employment can seem insurmountable given no job history, internships, or sketchy academic credentials (Leisure Whitlatch, 2009). Guidance on dating relationships, marriage, and child-rearing may vary sharply from what the person now imagines will work best. Furthermore, these challenges may be exacerbated by feelings of low self-esteem, a sense of alienation, and longstanding prohibitions against activities of all kinds (Giambalvo, 1993).

Cults approve of a limited array of social roles and behaviors. Children are isolated from the larger society and subjected to controversial practices. For some, this includes criminal activities such as physical and sexual abuse, forcing young girls into unwanted marriages, and physically restraining those who try to leave (Chapman, 2008; Gripman, n.d.). Psychological abuse has been reported by former members of manipulative groups (Almendros et al., 2009) and anecdotal reports from former members suggest that children may experience physical abuse while living in cultic groups (Gibson, Morgan, Woolley, & Powis, 2010; Langone, 1995; Singer & Lalich, 1995; Siskind, 2001). In short, charismatic leaders and committed members collude to maintain dynamics of social power that privilege the leadership and maintain the social order (Lalich, 2004; Zablocki, 2001). These conditions result in a wide variety of adjustment issues when people choose to or are forced to leave these environments (Aronoff, Lynn, & Malinoski, 2000; Malinoski, Langone, & Lynn, 1999).

For those raised in cultic groups, shared beliefs at the level of family and tribe may conflict with those that dominate mainstream society. Cultic environments impose constraints on critical thinking, dissension, and even curiosity. These groups have developed extreme
methods of social influence to manipulate and control members (Chambers, Langone, Dole, & Grice, 1994; Zablocki, 2001; Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). Being socialized in a cultic environment compromises one’s ability to explore alternative systems of belief. Many cultic belief systems are organized into a framework of prescribed behaviors that, when adhered to rigorously, are believed to yield great benefits. Conversely, dire consequences are predicted to occur when mandates are disobeyed (Zablocki, 1998). Ex-cultists report lingering fears long after leaving their groups.

My study aims to extend current research based on Erikson’s (1968) conception of identity and ideology and contribute to recent scholarship on the relationship between personal and dominant societal narratives (Hammack, 2008). This brings a narrowly focused study about cult kids into a more general discussion about issues of relationship between nested groups. It takes a population that is easily “othered” and renders it in terms that are salient to broader issues of contested identities, opposing collectivities, and the dynamics of group ideology in general.

**Theoretical and Applied Significance**

Cult kids learned how to live in a group that is set apart, in which the group ideology is in opposition to dominant views of society (Kaplan & Loow, 2002). Children who grow up in an oppositional subculture are likely to experience a sense of being different and in conflict. As adults, some choose to join contemporary society. They may not be entirely comfortable. They may not feel as though they fit in. It may be difficult for them to form friendship bonds and secure attachments (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 2009). They may not have resolved all of the challenges associated with rejecting family and friends along with an extremist ideology.

Having confronted these challenges, my participants provided rich data about the process of growing up cult, choosing to leave, and assimilating into U.S. society.
These narratives enhance our collective understanding of how difficult identity transitions are accomplished. They describe how some people negotiated a complex social terrain and situated themselves in a pluralistic world in spite of a heritage worldview that instilled contempt, distrust, enmity, or fear for most participants.

A narrative inquiry is able to elicit how people react internally and act into social situations during a significant life transition. Consequently, my study highlights factors that helped or hindered processes of identity formation and social integration both intrapsychically and through social interaction.

I hope the stories shared in my study clarify some of the ways in which people confront and resolve questions of difference in order to form personal and social identities they can fully commit to performing in adult life. Fifty years ago, Erikson made note of an extended period “during which the young adult through free role experimentation may find a niche in some section of his society” (Erikson, 1968, p. 150). Jeffrey Arnett (2000, 2002, 2004) has theorized that post-industrial pluralistic societies such as the U.S. support an extended period of identity exploration that he calls emerging adulthood, adding a context-specific variable to Erikson’s “on-time” stage-specific theoretical framework. Yet cultic groups, organized as they are around a common purpose and driven by a set of beliefs to operate far outside the mainstream, often limit access to the larger social world (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). People who grew up in a cult navigate a transition to adult life beyond the family of origin that is quite distinct from the experience of a typical American who grows up and leaves home as a young adult.

Because the transition to life outside the group can be difficult, specialists in the field of cultic studies tend to educate people about totalist group dynamics and teach critical thinking skills to ex-members (Giambalvo, 1993). Some offer practical advice for getting started and a
broad overview of the recovery process (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). My research findings add to this wisdom by contributing the detail of what people experienced while finding a place to be, discovering what they have to contribute, and learning how to create a life on their own terms. People who grew up in a cultic group need to find a societal niche where they can operate with some degree of confidence. My study gets at exactly what helped people to find a niche and what got in the way for those who struggled.

Empirical studies that deal explicitly with post-cult identity development are scarce. I have not found any research findings that present data in the participants’ voice, which narrative research allows me to do. Exit counselors and cult specialists have expressed interest in this research because they believe we can learn a lot from the detailed personal accounts captured through narrative methods. Clinicians could gain a more nuanced or expanded understanding of the obstacles and support factors that participants deemed most important as a result of my study. Those born or raised in a cultic group contributed time to this research. They believe they can learn from one another—and it eases their sense of isolation to know that others have experienced similar challenges and moved on to create a new life.

Beyond individual healing and growth, this research connects to action on many levels, such as public policy, education, and international relations. Practitioners concerned with religious freedom, interfaith dialogue, and conflict resolution may benefit. Study findings could inform the design of de-radicalization programs—for example, for child soldiers—or be usefully applied to related phenomena such as gang affiliations and exits. Anyone who is interested in cultic, radical, or extremist groups—or coercive situations, such as domestic violence—can discover what individual participants identify as most relevant to the process of leaving and to finding a place in larger society as a result of this study.
Personal Connection and General Research Questions

My interest in pursuing this line of inquiry springs from my personal experience of living in a cultic group. People were harmed, some of them children. Members existed in a dependent relationship to the leader—some more than others—who exerted extremely high levels of social control. The group related to the world through an ideology or worldview articulated by the leader and embraced by the group. This group ideology guided behavior in everyday life, including the idea that the leader was not to be challenged. Specific behaviors related to identity—such as professional development, parenting, and intimate relationships—sharply diverged from those typical in U.S. society. The details of my personal experience are presented in the Epilogue at the end of the study.

To me, the experience of undue influence is interactive and co-constructed. When power inequities and dependencies exist, as is the case for childhood members, this can become a harmful or cultic dynamic. There are situations where individuals are forcibly controlled, like prisoners of war, and these situations informed the work of scholars who examined the nature of undue influence. But the ability to coerce or control can also arise out of situational and interpersonal factors, such as access to resources or a perceived sense of helplessness. Furthermore, the human experience is fundamentally social. The cultic group dynamic exists between each individual and the leader, but it is reinforced daily through interactions with other followers. People involved in a high-demand group—a term many prefer to cult—may have choices available that they are unable to act upon. They may choose, in the context of the group, to do things they would prefer not to do but that they believe are the only options available.
For my dissertation study, I decided to obtain retrospective accounts from people who grew up in cultic groups. I was curious about how others negotiated the transition to adult life when leaving circumstances characterized by extreme levels of social influence. I wondered what was expected of people in childhood regarding identity and ideology and how that related to what they were able to construct as adults. How did they navigate a pluralistic world? What did they do when they encountered competing ideologies? What kind of person are they at this stage of their life and what are their goals for the future? These questions shaped the general direction of my inquiry and the literature review. More specifically, the central research questions for this study are these: (1) How do adults describe leaving a cult and developing an identity outside the group? and (2) What helped or hindered them to find a place in society? These research questions—which arise from experiential, personal knowledge—also have meaning inside the literature, which we will now turn to in Chapter 2.
Chapter 2 – Review of the Literature

Seeking a Conceptual Synthesis from Interdisciplinary Roots

As a construct with roots in personality and social psychology, the meanings associated with the word *identity* can be a world apart, so modifiers abound: ego identity, personal identity, social identity, ethnic identity, sexual identity, collective, relational, and multiple identities, to name a few. LaVoie (1994) describes identity as “a self-structure, an internal, self-constructed dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (p. 17). This is consistent with the psychoanalytic perspective and strands of inquiry within personality psychology. For Deaux (1993), identity refers to “social categories in which an individual claims membership as well as the personal meaning associated with those categories” (p. 4), which is how sociologists have traditionally conceptualized the idea of having or constructing an identity. This diversity of thought complicated my inquiry, because I sought a conceptual synthesis that captures intrapsychic and social aspects of identity and emphasizes dynamic interaction, in context, over time. I wanted to know how identity shifts were accomplished by unique actors given specific situational factors of emerging adulthood, conflicting ideologies, and competing identity claims. I wanted to understand how people raised in cultic environments go about (re)defining themselves in new social contexts.

Current theories and models of identity and change do not adequately capture the temporal, contextual, or developmental factors at play during such a shift. This is a transition that can be discussed in terms of identity, but the conceptual framework used for this research objective must also highlight dynamic processes of social relationships within competing sociocultural contexts.
The following figure highlights key concepts that inform my inquiry.

**Figure 1.** Conceptual background for dissertation study.

**Cultic Studies: Definitions, Debates, and Descriptions**

Just what is a “cult?” Cults are described as *self-sealing systems*, closed to information and ideas, bounded tightly against outside influence (Lalich, 2004). They are also called *high-demand groups*, typically led by charismatic leaders. Apologists coined the term *new religious movement (NRM)* because they found the media-hype about cults disturbing and the term cult prejudicial (Introvigne, 1998; Langone, 2005). These terms are problematic, because some cults aren’t religious and demands made upon children vary significantly between groups. Critics, on the other hand, are concerned with the harm that is known to occur in some cultic environments.
Some argue for use of the term *cult* to refer to groups, religious or secular, that adhere to extreme ideologies and engage in practices of indoctrination or manipulation to control or exploit members (Boeri, 2008). While I recognize the terminology debate, I use the term “cult” because it is widely understood and concise. I draw from the published work of several cultic studies scholars (Lalich, 2004; Rosedale & Langone, 1998; Zablocki, 1998) to formulate this detailed description of cultic group dynamics:

*A cult is an organized group, religious or secular, which tends to use extreme and unethical techniques of manipulation to recruit, assimilate, control, and retain members. Cults adhere to and often promote an extremist ideology, embodied in daily practice. To varying degrees, these extreme beliefs and behaviors can be harmful to group members and to outsiders. Members tend to monitor one another and enforce conformity to group norms based on charismatic relationships that exist between leaders and followers.*

Based on this description, a gang might well create a cultic environment, but a high-demand work group would not. Terrorist cells fit the term just as well and perhaps better than religious fringe groups. The notion of harm is captured, as is the nature of the relationships that bind members of the group to one another and to the cult ideology. Sociologist Benjamin Zablocki captures key elements of these high-influence group situations, except for the notion of harm, in this definition: “A cult is an ideological organization held together by charismatic relationships and demanding total commitment” (in Langone, 2008, p. 4). That said, “One man’s cult is another man’s commune.” People perceive and react to manipulative practices in different ways and power dynamics within groups vary. Because my research does not focus on harm as a central question of the investigation, this definition will suffice: *A cult is an ideological organization that uses extreme forms of social influence to significantly shape choices and behavior in everyday life.*