

The Impact of Power Dynamics and Psychological Control on the Mental Health and Development of Individuals Raised in Cult: A Thematic Analysis

Shreha Sathyamurthy¹, Harsha Vardini B², Harshini Venkat³, Dhivya V⁴

^{1,2,3,4}Department of Psychology Kumaraguru College of Liberal Arts and Science Coimbatore

Abstract

Cults function by establishing coercive power dynamics that exert profound psychological control over individuals who were raised within their confines. This research utilizes Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to delve into the lived experiences of a former cult member, shedding light on the long-term effects on mental health and identity development. The findings reveal several significant themes: childhood trauma and neglect by parents, suppression of personal autonomy, emotional manipulation tactics, punitive isolation practices, financial exploitation, doctrinal indoctrination, paranoia driven by fear, and a sense of existential dissonance post-escape. These themes highlight a marked erosion of individuality, cognitive dissonance, and persistent psychological distress, which often presents as chronic anxiety, dissociative experiences, and a fractured self-concept. The study accentuates the urgent need for targeted therapeutic approaches to support the psychological recovery and societal reintegration of individuals who have left cult environments. By bringing these experiences to light, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological trauma induced by cults and the intricate nature of adapting to life after such experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Cults have been associated with their eccentric notions, charismatic leaders, and behaviors that lead to isolation. Such groups are highly controlled in nature where manipulative and coercive measures are used to exercise power and control over people, potentially leading to far-reaching psychological and personal consequences (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). These types of environments can create the inability for a stable identity, healthy relationships, or proper use of the world around through growing up in such conditions (Hassan, 2016).

Power dynamics in cults are especially scary. To maintain control and to make members comply with them, the leaders of cults use what is known as psychological control methods-including, for example, fear, guilt, or even emotional manipulation (Langone, 1993). These strategies also deepen the sense of mistrust and dependency, in which the people start believing in their minds that their identity and security are only dependent on the group. The impact for the children can be very devastatingly disastrous. Such parenting has been found to provoke lifelong psychological disorders, including anxiety, depression, and eventually a disintegrated personality (Shaw, 2014). The distance from the outside world deepens these problems by severely restricting access to opposing viewpoints and healthy social contact.

The sizable body of literature on the psychological impact of cult involvement, however, does not substitute in filling this gap in knowing the real experience of members who were raised in a cult. Much of existing work has focused on adult members or those who joined cults as adults, where their specific developmental challenges have been ignored when people enter a high control environment from birth (Singer, 2003). Hence, the current research is very much needed to explore in-depth the lived experiences of these individuals because it can shed light on the long-term effects that power dynamics and psychological control have on their mental health and development.

The present study attempts to fill this gap by using Thematic analysis to explore the narratives of ex-members of cults. Focusing on personal accounts regarding how these individuals perceive and make sense of their upbringing within a cult group, it is seeking valuable insight into the complex interplay of both power dynamics and psychological control patterns with resultant mental health impacts. It is from understanding these experiences that therapeutic practices and support mechanisms may be formulated for those recovering from cult-related trauma, while informing a greater awareness of the complexities surrounding life after cult involvement.

LITERATURE REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Cults are often characterized by rigid hierarchies, ideological extremism, and manipulative control tactics that deeply affect members' psychological well-being (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). While much research has examined the experiences of adults who voluntarily join cults, there is a significant gap in understanding the psychological development of individuals raised in cult environments. Unlike adult converts, these individuals do not choose cult membership but are subjected to lifelong indoctrination, making their experiences unique in terms of identity development, emotional regulation, and autonomy (Hassan, 2016). Power dynamics within cults operate through psychological control mechanisms, including emotional manipulation, surveillance, isolation, and financial dependence (Langone, 1993). Such tactics lead to chronic fear, suppressed autonomy, and dependency on cult leaders, which can have long-term effects on mental health (Shaw, 2014). Research has linked cult environments to severe psychological consequences, including complex PTSD (C-PTSD), anxiety, dissociation, and difficulties with trust and identity formation (Singer, 2003). However, the experiences of individuals raised in cults remain underexplored, particularly regarding their struggles with reintegration into mainstream society after leaving these high-control groups.

This literature review examines existing research on cult power structures, psychological control, and the mental health consequences of being raised in such environments. By synthesizing findings from psychology, sociology, and trauma studies, this review provides a foundation for understanding the impact of power dynamics and psychological control on identity development, autonomy, and emotional well-being.

Theoretical Framework

This study is guided by five key psychological theories that explain the mechanisms of power dynamics, psychological control, and their impact on mental health in cult environments.

1. Lifton's Thought Reform Theory (1961)

Robert Lifton's Thought Reform Theory explains how cults manipulate members' thoughts, emotions, and behaviors to ensure loyalty. Key elements include:

Milieu Control – Restricting external information and enforcing ideological purity.

Confession and Guilt Manipulation – Using shame and public confession to maintain psychological control.

Doctrine Over Person – Prioritizing cult beliefs over personal experiences, discouraging critical thinking. This theory is relevant to the study as it explains how children raised in cults develop distorted self-perceptions due to constant ideological conditioning and fear-based loyalty to cult leaders (Hassan, 2019).

2. Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth, 1978)

Attachment Theory highlights the importance of secure relationships in childhood for emotional and psychological development. In cults:

Parental figures are often emotionally unavailable, as loyalty to the group overrides individual bonds.

Children may develop insecure or disorganized attachment styles, leading to difficulties in emotional regulation, trust, and self-identity (Shaw, 2014).

Lack of external socialization further reinforces dependency on the cult, preventing healthy interpersonal development.

Attachment disruptions in cults can result in long-term relational difficulties, which former members struggle with even after leaving the group (Langone, 1993).

3. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979)

Social Identity Theory explains how individuals derive a sense of self from group membership. In cults:

Members are taught to reject external identities and adopt collective group identity.

Cults create an “us vs. them” mentality, reinforcing fear of outsiders and discouraging individual autonomy.

Personal identity becomes fused with cult ideology, making post-cult identity reconstruction extremely challenging.

Former members struggle with self-definition and decision-making, as their identities were shaped solely by cult teachings (Buxant et al., 2007).

4. Learned Helplessness Theory (Seligman, 1975)

Learned Helplessness Theory describes how prolonged exposure to control, and punishment leads individuals to believe they have no personal agency. In cults:

Constant surveillance, emotional abuse, and punishment condition individuals to feel powerless

Children internalize helplessness, believing they cannot change their circumstances.

After leaving, survivors often struggle with decision-making and self-efficacy, doubting their own abilities (Ward, 2011).

This theory helps explain why individuals raised in cults often struggle with autonomy and confidence even after escaping.

5. Complex Trauma and Post-Traumatic Growth (Herman, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)

Being raised in a high-control environment can result in Complex PTSD (C-PTSD), characterized by:

Emotional dysregulation – Persistent anxiety, fear, and difficulty trusting others.

Identity confusion – Fragmented sense of self due to lifelong indoctrination.

Social reintegration struggles – Difficulty forming healthy relationships and adapting to mainstream society.

However, Post-Traumatic Growth (PTG) suggests that some survivors develop resilience and a new sense of purpose through therapy, education, and supportive communities (Hassan, 2019).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study is designed to explore the relationship between power dynamics,

psychological control, and mental health outcomes in individuals raised in cult environments. Cults operate within rigid hierarchies where leaders exert absolute authority over members, shaping their beliefs, behaviors, and perceptions through systematic manipulation (Lalich & Tobias, 2006). Psychological control mechanisms, such as emotional manipulation, isolation, and fear-based obedience, are employed to suppress individuality and ensure conformity (Hassan, 2016). These factors create an environment where personal autonomy is stifled, and members are conditioned to believe that their well-being and identity are solely dependent on the group (Langone, 1993).

Within such environments, individuals raised from birth experience a unique form of psychological conditioning that shapes their cognitive, emotional, and social development (Shaw, 2014). The suppression of critical thinking, combined with enforced dependency on the cult leader, results in a fragmented sense of self and difficulty in forming an independent identity (Lifton, 1961). Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) explains how individuals in cults adopt a collective identity, reinforcing an "us vs. them" mentality that isolates them from external influences. The constant reinforcement of fear and guilt as tools of control leads to learned helplessness, wherein individuals internalize a sense of powerlessness and struggle with decision-making even after leaving the cult (Seligman, 1975).

The long-term consequences of such environments manifest in various psychological distress symptoms, including anxiety, depression, complex PTSD, and relational difficulties (Herman, 1992). Attachment disruptions in childhood further exacerbate these challenges, as emotional connections are often severed or conditioned by cult ideology (Bowlby, 1969). For those who leave these high-control groups, the journey toward self-recovery is complex, marked by struggles in trust, self-efficacy, and reintegration into mainstream society (Singer, 2003). However, Post-Traumatic Growth Theory (PTG) suggests that some individuals, despite their trauma, find ways to reconstruct their identities and develop resilience (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Understanding these interconnected factors will provide a clearer picture of the psychological effects of cult upbringing and inform better intervention strategies for survivors (Ward, 2011).

Research Gap

Although extensive research has been conducted on cult dynamics and their impact on individuals who voluntarily join and leave these groups, there remains a significant gap in understanding the experiences of those who are born and raised within such environments (Hassan, 2019). Much of the existing literature focuses on adult members and their challenges in deprogramming from cult ideology, with limited attention given to the unique developmental challenges faced by children who grow up entirely within these restrictive settings (Langone, 1993). The long-term psychological consequences of early indoctrination, particularly in terms of identity formation, emotional regulation, and social integration, have not been adequately explored (Shaw, 2014).

Furthermore, while studies have analyzed how cults manipulate individuals through thought reform and social control (Lifton, 1961), there is a lack of qualitative research that provides first-hand narratives of former cult members who were raised in these groups from birth (Singer, 2003). Psychological assessments and survey-based research have offered insights into cult-induced trauma, but they fail to capture the depth of lived experiences, including the struggles of reclaiming personal agency and reconstructing identity post-cult (Buxant et al., 2007). Additionally, existing models of trauma recovery are often generalized, not accounting for the distinct challenges faced by individuals who have never known a life outside of the cult environment (Ward, 2011).

By addressing these gaps, this study aims to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how power dynamics and psychological control shape the lives of individuals raised in cults. The findings will offer valuable insights into the long-term mental health implications of cult involvement from childhood and provide a foundation for developing more effective support systems and therapeutic interventions tailored to the needs of former cult members (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Summary

This study examines the profound impact of power dynamics and psychological control on individuals raised in cults, focusing on the long-term consequences on their mental health, identity formation, and ability to reintegrate into society (Shaw, 2014). By utilizing documentary analysis and thematic analysis, the research identifies recurring patterns of emotional manipulation, isolation, and suppression of autonomy that characterize cult environments (Hassan, 2019). The findings aim to highlight the psychological mechanisms that enforce control, the struggles faced by survivors in reclaiming their sense of self, and the challenges of adapting to life outside the cult (Singer, 2003).

Ultimately, this research contributes to the broader understanding of cult-induced trauma, shedding light on the complex interplay between psychological control and identity suppression (Langone, 1993). The study's findings will inform mental health professionals, policymakers, and researchers in developing interventions that facilitate healing and resilience among individuals who have escaped high-control groups (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). By exploring the lived experiences of former cult members, this research hopes to offer a more nuanced perspective on the psychological aftermath of being raised in a cult and the pathways to recovery (Ward, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

Approach

This study adopts a thematic analysis approach to investigate the impact of power dynamics and psychological control on individuals raised in a cult. This focuses on understanding how people interpret and make sense of their lived experiences, making it well-suited for exploring the complex emotional and psychological effects of cult environments. The analysis centres on a single participant featured in a documentary, providing a rich narrative of their experiences. Key themes include emotional manipulation, identity loss, and the struggle for autonomy. By examining one person's story, the study seeks to illuminate broader patterns of trauma and psychological impact that arise from living under cult control. This qualitative approach emphasizes the personal reflections of the participant, facilitating a deeper understanding of how cult dynamics affect mental health and development over time.

Data Collection

Data for this study collected from a documentary that features a participant's personal narrative about their experiences in a cult. The primary source of data is the participant's verbal accounts during interviews within the documentary, which transcribed verbatim for accuracy. This approach captures the nuances of the participant's emotions, thoughts, and reflections regarding their time in the cult, including the psychological control and manipulation they experienced. The focus will be on significant themes such as emotional suppression, fear, and isolation, which highlight the cult's impact on the participant's mental health.

Participant

The participant in this study is a former cult member featured in a documentary that chronicles their life experiences. They spent a significant portion of their formative years within a cult, exposed to strict

psychological control and emotional manipulation. The participants' narrative reveals their experiences with power dynamics, isolation from the outside world, and the suppression of emotions. Their testimony highlights the severe impact these factors had on their mental health and identity. The participant reflects on the fears instilled by the cult and how those fears shaped their worldview. By focusing on this individual's experiences, the study aims to uncover the psychological ramifications of cult life and the long-term effects on personal development and emotional well-being, providing valuable insights into the complexities of navigating life after such experiences.

Procedure

The study follows a systematic procedure to analyse the participant's experiences as depicted in the documentary. Initially, the documentary was reviewed multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of the participant's narrative. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure an accurate representation of their words. After transcription, thematic analysis was employed to identify significant patterns related to emotional manipulation, fear, isolation, and identity challenges. This coding process helped categorize the data into relevant themes that reflect the psychological control exerted by the cult. The analysis focused on how the participants articulated their experiences and the meanings they ascribed to them. Additionally, attention was paid to non-verbal cues observed in the documentary, as these provided further insight into the participant's emotional state. By using thematic analysis, the study aimed to explore the participant's reflections and internal struggles, offering a detailed understanding of the psychological impact of their cult upbringing.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, which focuses on identifying and interpreting patterns within qualitative data. The transcribed interviews from the documentary were systematically examined to uncover recurring themes related to power dynamics, emotional suppression, and identity loss. Initially, each section of the transcript was closely read to highlight significant statements and experiences articulated by the participant. These excerpts were then coded into broader themes reflecting the psychological effects of cult membership, such as feelings of fear, isolation, and dependency. The analysis emphasized the participant's interpretations of their experiences, revealing how cult dynamics shaped their worldview and sense of self. Furthermore, the research explored the lingering effects of psychological control on the participant's mental health and their journey toward reclaiming identity after leaving the cult. This detailed analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological ramifications of cult experiences and the processes involved in healing and reintegration.

FINDINGS

1. CHILDHOOD TRAUMA AND PARENTAL NEGLECT: IMPACT ON EMOTIONAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENT

The participant's childhood trauma shows emotional and psychological damage that resulted from years of parental neglect and domestic violence. From a young age, they were exposed to an environment filled with violence and hostility, which shaped not only how they viewed themselves but also how they understood relationships with others. The home, which should have been a place of safety and love, became a source of constant fear and insecurity. One of the most painful aspects of the participants' childhood was their mother's apparent indifference. The participant vividly recalls how their mother functioned as if they did not matter, displaying a lack of care that cut deep. This indifference was likely a coping mechanism for the mother, who may have been trying to avoid triggering the anger of the abusive

father. However, for the participants, this lack of love and support from their own mother left lasting emotional scars. It created a sense of emotional detachment, making them feel isolated and disconnected from the one person who should have been their primary source of comfort. The participant shared their confusion and hurt over the fact that other family members seemed to accept this abusive dynamic without question. This passive acceptance of the violence and neglect was difficult for the participant to understand, especially as a child. They could not comprehend why the rest of the family allowed such harmful behavior to continue without challenging it. The participant suspected that, out of fear or survival instincts, the family members had learned to suppress their emotions and avoid forming meaningful bonds with one another. This emotional disconnection, which became a way of life within the household, only deepened the participant's feelings of isolation and abandonment. The family's learned behavior of emotional suppression created an environment where expressing care or love was seen as a threat. Any emotions that could potentially lead to conflict were shut down, resulting in an atmosphere of coldness and detachment. The participant observed how family members, possibly to protect themselves from the father's abuse, deliberately avoided any emotional closeness. This normalization of emotional distance made the participant feel even more isolated, as there was no space for warmth or affection in the household. The lack of emotional connection contributed to a deep sense of loneliness and emotional neglect. One of the most traumatic aspects of the participant's experience was the way their mother would actively get them into trouble with their abusive father. The participant recounts how their mother would report even minor infractions or mistakes to the father, knowing that it would result in severe punishment. This behaviour was especially painful because it represented a betrayal from the person who was supposed to protect them. Instead of shielding them from harm, the mother seemed to collaborate with the abusive father, further contributing to the participant's suffering. The punishments that followed were not only emotionally devastating but also physically violent. The participant recalls how these incidents would escalate into angry outbursts from the father, leading to brutal beatings and kicking. This violence left them feeling powerless, as they had no control over the situation and no way to escape the abuse. The participant's sense of betrayal was compounded by the fact that their mother, who should have been their protector, was the one who initiated these violent encounters by reporting the participant's behavior to the father.

- **"She had to prove to him that she did not care about me at all."**
 - **"But the others in the house, they really believed in it... I don't understand how they managed to accept such things without question."**
 - **"They had to consciously reject anything which aroused emotions or sense of bond or connection with anyone else."**
 - **She would go and tell him about it and get me into trouble, which often led to enormous explosions of anger and a lot of beating and kicking."**
- 2. CONTROL AND RESTRICTION OF AUTONOMY: THE IMPACT ON PERSONAL FREEDOM AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING**

The participant's experiences with control and restriction reflect not only physical limitations but also the profound psychological effects of being constantly monitored and denied basic freedoms. From their recollections, it becomes clear that their autonomy was entirely suppressed, with every aspect of their life controlled by those around them. The strict limitations extended to even the simplest actions, like looking out of a window, which might seem insignificant but symbolizes how the participant was cut off from the outside world. This physical isolation served as a form of emotional and psychological control, reinforcing their powerlessness in the situation. By denying access to such a basic human experience, being able to

look outside and feel connected to the world, they were confined to a small, controlled environment. This reflects the extreme measures taken to limit their contact with the outside world. It was not just about physical confinement but about limiting their exposure to anything beyond the narrow world the group or household dictated. This type of control fosters feelings of isolation and helplessness, as the individual cannot engage with the broader environment, cutting off any sense of independence or personal growth. The participant highlights that while other members of the group were allowed to go outside, even then, it was only under strict supervision, always in pairs. The few who had slightly more freedom were those who had to work, but even their autonomy was limited by rigid rules. This controlled movement within the group shows a lack of trust and a deep desire to control all actions of the members. The inability to act independently, even for small tasks, suggests a system where personal autonomy is seen as a threat to the larger group's control. The participant, who was not even allowed the small amount of freedom others had, experienced this at an extreme level, where their every move was regulated and dictated by those in power.

The restrictions were not limited to movement within the house but extended to important life activities like going to school, seeking medical help, or leaving the house at all. This level of control not only stifled the participant's freedom but also hindered their personal development, education, and access to basic needs like healthcare. The denial of these basic rights reveals a deeper issue: the complete erasure of the participant's autonomy. The control extended to all aspects of their life, cutting them off from education, social interaction, and even necessary healthcare. This kind of control is not only physically limiting but deeply dehumanizing, as it denies the participant the ability to make decisions for their own well-being. On rare occasions when visitors came, the participant would sometimes be allowed to go outside. However, even this limited freedom was only granted under specific circumstances, showing that their movements were still strictly monitored and controlled by others. This suggests that their limited exposure to the outside world was conditional and only allowed when it suited those in control. The fact that the participant could only leave the house in the presence of visitors indicates that even these moments of freedom were not truly for the participant's benefit but more about maintaining appearances or following specific rules set by those in charge.

- **"They wouldn't let me, for example, even look out of the window."**
- **"The other members always had to go in a pair. They were not allowed to go on their own, except a couple of members who were going out to work."**
- **"I was never allowed to even go out of the house or go to school or even go to the doctor."**
- **"On the rare occasions that people visited, sometimes I used to be taken out."**

3. CULT-LIKE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURES AND LEADER DOMINANCE SUPPRESS INDIVIDUALITY AND ENFORCE CONFORMITY.

The participants describe their experience in a controlling, cult-like group where the leader held all the power, and the members lost their sense of individuality. They explain how, at first, the group seemed like a small political organization, almost like a Communist Party. But as time went on, it started to feel more like a religious cult, with strict rules and complete control from the leader. Here people could not make decisions for themselves and had to obey the leader, no matter how strange or inconsistent the rules were. The participant highlights how the leader would constantly change the rules. One day, the leader would say something, and the next day, it would be completely different. This was confusing for the participants, but they noticed that the other members never questioned it. Instead, they just followed along as if it did not bother them. The participant could not understand why the others would agree so easily with these

changing rules, and they describe them as "zombies," blindly nodding and going along with everything the leader said. It really shows how much the other members had been affected by the group's control, losing the ability to think critically or challenge anything the leader said.

This kind of environment, where everyone follows without questioning, creates a culture of conformity. The participants clearly felt that the other members had lost their individuality and had become part of a system where thinking for themselves was no longer possible. They seemed to just accept the group's ideas without considering whether they were right or wrong.

The participants, however, did not feel the same way. They noticed this behaviour and felt disturbed by how easily the others had accepted the leader's control.

Another crucial point the participant makes is that no one in the group was allowed to go anywhere alone. They always had to go in pairs, and no one could leave the house or go out without someone else. This rule seems to have been another way for the group to keep control over its members. By making sure no one was ever alone, the group made it difficult for anyone to have private thoughts or act independently. The participants felt this was just another part of the leader's strategy to control them and keep them from thinking or acting on their own. This rule of always being in pairs was a constant reminder that they were being watched and always controlled.

The participants also talk about how they did not understand how the other members had fallen so deeply into this system. They could not figure out why others would accept such strict and unreasonable rules. This confusion highlights the participant's sense of isolation within the group. While everyone else seemed to accept the rules and the leader's power without question, the participant struggled to understand it. This made them feel even more separated from the rest of the group, as they were the only ones who saw how wrong the situation was.

Communist Party on a small scale, and as time went on, it became more and more like a Quasi religious organization

- **"It's like saying one thing one day and something completely different the other day**
- **But the others in the house"**
- **"They really believed in it, and the"**
- **"I don't know. I don't understand how they managed to sink to such a level where they accepted such"**
- **"It was like they were just they were just nod along, almost like zombies"**
- **"But the other cult members always had to go in in a pair. They were not allowed to go on their own"**

4. EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION AND SUPPRESSION MAINTAIN CONTROL OVER MEMBERS, STIFLING PERSONAL EXPRESSION

The participant describes how emotional manipulation and suppression were central to controlling the members of a highly structured and oppressive group. The group's leader created an environment where personal feelings and emotional connections were treated as negative, even dangerous, influences that held people back. The use of psychological control, fear, and punishment helped maintain the group's power structure, while emotional suppression stifled any personal expression or independence.

The participant begins by explaining how the group members were taught to reject any emotions or bonds with others. The leader constantly reinforced the idea that emotions were "chains" that prevented people from achieving their full potential. The participant does not remember the exact wording, but the message was clear: any feelings of attachment or connection were seen as weaknesses. This teaching made

members believe that emotions were something to be avoided, as they interfered with the group's goals and the leader's vision. It stripped away their individuality, turning emotions into a burden rather than a natural part of the human experience.

This rejection of emotions is a powerful form of emotional suppression. By discouraging members from forming emotional bonds with others, the leader isolated individuals within the group. Without the ability to express or even recognize their feelings, members lost an important part of their identity. The group became their only source of connection, but even that connection was superficial, as it was based on conformity and obedience rather than genuine emotional support. This suppression of emotions helped the leader maintain control because it weakened the members' ability to think critically or form independent relationships that could challenge the group's authority.

One of the keyways the leader reinforced this emotional suppression was through punishment. The participant recalls how the leader would beat or punish people, claiming that it was for their own good. The leader justified these violent actions by saying that he was "protecting" them from something worse. This manipulation made the group members believe that even their punishment was a form of care. In this twisted logic, the leader's violent control became something to be grateful for, as it was presented as a shield against a more significant threat. This distorted reality left members confused and complained, as they were made to believe that the leader's harsh treatment was necessary for their protection and personal growth.

This use of punishment as protection also played into a broader strategy of fear-based control. The participant describes how members were constantly warned about the dangers that awaited them if they ever strayed from the group or showed any sign of independence. The leader often used fear to keep them in line, telling them that if they were alone, terrible things would happen. This kind of fear-based manipulation kept members constantly on edge, reinforcing their dependence on the group for safety and security. The idea that something terrible could happen to them if they left the group was a way to maintain control, making the outside world seem dangerous and untrustworthy.

The participant also shares how they were made to believe that members of a "fascist state" would come and harm them if they ever left the protection of the group. This instilled a deep paranoia, where members felt like they were constantly at risk of being taken away or harmed by outside forces. This fear made it impossible for them to imagine a life outside the group. The leader's control extended beyond the physical space of the group's environment; it infiltrated their thoughts, creating a mental barrier that kept members from seeking help or even thinking about leaving.

This fear-inducing paranoia also served to further isolate the group members from the outside world. They were made to believe that the group was the only place where they could be safe. The fear of the unknown outside world kept them compliant and made the leader's control seem like a necessary protection. This tactic is common in cult-like environments, where leaders exaggerate external threats to strengthen their own power and influence. By making the outside world appear hostile and dangerous, the leader discouraged members from leaving or questioning the group's authority.

The participant's experience reveals how deeply the emotional manipulation affected the group members. By controlling how they felt and reacted to emotions, the leader not only stripped away their individuality but also made them emotionally dependent on the group. They were taught to fear their own emotions and to rely on the leader's guidance, even when it came in the form of punishment. This environment of emotional suppression and fear created a cycle of control that was difficult to break free from.

- They had to consciously reject anything which aroused emotions or sense of bond or connection with anyone else
- He used to say, well, I can't remember word for word, but the essence of it was this, that all the feelings that they had were chains upon them, preventing them from devoting
- And he used to say that when he beat people up or punish people, he was protecting them from the much greater wrath of jackie
- members of the fascist state would come along and take me away and do horrible, harmful things to me
- I was always told that if I was on my own, bad things would happen to me

5. ISOLATION AS PUNISHMENT DEEPENS MEMBERS' DEPENDENCE ON THE GROUP WHILE CUTTING OFF EXTERNAL CONNECTIONS.

The participant explains how isolation was used as a form of punishment within the group, increasing members' dependence on the group while severing ties with the outside world. The participants share their experience of being physically isolated, emotionally cut off, and distanced from family, which led to a deeper attachment to the group as the only available support system.

The participant recalls a time when they were left alone in a room, with others closing the door and holding it shut, leaving them completely isolated. This physical isolation served as a form of punishment, reinforcing their sense of separation from others. Being shut off from the rest of the group, even for a brief time, heightened the feeling of loneliness and vulnerability. This practice of isolation made it clear that the group controlled who could interact and when, using it to manipulate behavior and maintain power over its members.

Beyond the immediate isolation, the group also imposed strict rules about cutting off ties with family and friends outside the cult. The participant notes that severing relationships with family was a requirement for joining the group. This expectation of distancing from loved ones deepened the member's reliance on the group for emotional and social needs. Without family connections, members were left with no one outside the group to turn to, forcing them to depend solely on the group for any sense of belonging or support. This detachment from family further cemented the group's control over its members, as it stripped away external influences and connections that could offer an alternative perspective or an escape route.

The participant also mentions that the adults in the house were the ones who fully believed in the leader, Jackie. These adults, having fully committed to the group's ideology, were likely enforcing these isolation practices on others, ensuring that new or younger members followed the same path. By controlling social interactions and isolating members, particularly those who might question the group's practices, the adults helped maintain the group's insular nature.

This dynamic reinforced the hierarchy within the group, where those fully committed to the leader's vision exerted control over others, ensuring conformity and obedience.

On rare occasions, the participant was allowed to go out when visitors arrived. However, these outings seemed to be exceptions rather than the norm, serving as a reminder that the group controlled every aspect of members' lives, including their limited social interactions. These brief moments of freedom were likely used to placate members and create the illusion of some level of autonomy, but they ultimately reinforced the group's control by reminding members that even their occasional outings were permitted and controlled by the group's leaders.

The practice of isolation as punishment served a dual purpose. First, it deepened members' emotional dependence on the group, as they had no external connections to turn to. Second, it reinforced the group's

power dynamics by keeping members socially detached and ensuring that any dissent or questioning was quickly quashed. Members who were isolated became more fearful of being cut off from the group, which was their only source of social and emotional support.

- **“I was just like left in the room on my own, and people went out of the door and shut the door behind them and held the door and left me on my own”.**
- **“They had all cut off ties with their families. That was kind of that was kind of a deal breaker for joining the cult, that you had to keep your family at a distance”**
- **“The adults in the house were the ones who really believed in Jackie on the rare occasions that people visited, sometimes I used to be taken out”**

6. FINANCIAL EXPLOITATION AND LOSS OF AUTONOMY WEAKEN MEMBERS' ABILITY TO ACT INDEPENDENTLY

The participant describes how financial exploitation, and a loss of autonomy were key methods of control within the group. The group's structure limited members' financial independence and personal freedom, leaving them entirely dependent on the resources and decisions controlled by the group leaders. This lack of financial autonomy weakened members' ability to act independently, reinforcing their reliance on the group for basic needs and survival.

The participant explains that they and others in the group lived off the money brought in by a few members who were allowed to work. This arrangement highlights the financial exploitation within the group, as only a select few had the privilege of earning money, while the rest of the members were dependent on them. The group likely restricted who could work and controlled how the money was used, creating a dynamic where individual financial independence was impossible. This kind of financial control prevented members from building their own resources or making decisions outside of the group's influence, keeping them financially and emotionally tethered to the group.

The participant mentions that, except for a few members who were allowed to work outside the group, most were confined to the house. This restriction of autonomy—particularly the ability to work and earn independently—further reinforced the group's control over its members. With few members earning money and the group controlling their resources, financial autonomy was completely stifled. Those who were not allowed to work had no way to earn for themselves, deepening their dependence on the group for their basic needs. This control over work privileges and income ensured that members remained loyal and obedient, as leaving the group, or defying its rules would mean losing their only means of survival.

The participant shares that when they were born, there were ten people in the house, most of whom were women, including a union representative and a nurse working at a rehabilitation centre. The presence of these workers suggests that the group allowed certain members to hold jobs, but likely on the condition that their earnings were handed over to the group. This financial exploitation not only took advantage of the labour of these working members but also ensured that their income served the interests of the group rather than their own personal or family needs. Even those who had skills or professions were unable to retain full control over their financial resources, further limiting their autonomy.

The participant's mention of their father, who appears to have been one of the few men in the house, suggests that gender roles within the group might have been particularly rigid, with people potentially having distinct roles or levels of freedom. This dynamic could have further influenced who had the ability to work and how financial resources were distributed. It also suggests that the group may have exploited traditional gender roles to maintain control over its members, with men possibly having slightly more autonomy while women's labour and earnings were more heavily controlled.

In such an environment, financial exploitation serves as a powerful tool for maintaining control. By restricting members' ability to work and controlling how money is distributed, the group leaders ensured that members had no financial independence. This created a cycle where members could not leave or resist the group without losing their source of income and support. The fear of financial instability likely kept many members complaining, even if they disagreed with the group's rules or practices.

The loss of autonomy extended beyond financial matters to other aspects of life as well. With restricted movement and limited opportunities to work, members had little control over their own lives. They were forced to rely on the group for everything, from food and shelter to social interaction. This dependency made it difficult for members to imagine a life outside the group, as they had no financial resources or personal freedom to pursue an independent path.

- **So, we lived on the money that they brought in**
- **except a couple of members who were going out to work.**
- **I was born, there were 10 people in the house, and aside from my father, all the rest were women, one of them was a union rep, and the other was a nurse in a rehabilitation center**

7. GROUPTHINK AND DOCTRINAL CENTRALITY FOSTER A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY THAT REPLACES INDIVIDUAL CRITICAL THINKING

The participant reflects on the profound impact of groupthink and doctrinal centrality within the cult, highlighting how these elements fostered a collective identity that overshadowed individual critical thinking. This dynamic created an environment where members blindly accepted the leader's messages, leading to a form of collective conformity that stifled private opinions and independent thought.

The participant describes the other members as behaving like “zombies,” nodding along without questioning the leader's directives. This imagery conveys a sense of robotic compliance, suggesting that the group's influence rendered members incapable of independent thought or action. Such behaviour indicates a powerful manifestation of groupthink, where the desire for harmony and conformity overrides individual critical thinking. When members prioritize agreement over personal beliefs or feelings, they become susceptible to manipulation and control, allowing the leader to dictate their thoughts and actions without resistance.

The participant notes that if you listened to the leader speak, it might seem like he had good intentions. This observation reflects the deceptive nature of the leader's messaging, which may have appeared benevolent on the surface. However, the participant hints at a “dark undercurrent,” suggesting that beneath the leader's seemingly positive words lay manipulation and coercion. This dichotomy illustrates how cult leaders can exploit language and rhetoric to gain followers, masking harmful intentions behind an appealing facade. It also emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, as members who do not question the underlying motives can become complicit in their own oppression.

The participant expresses confusion about how others could accept such teachings without question. This highlights the power of indoctrination and the influence of groupthink, which can lead individuals to abandon their critical faculties in favor of collective belief. The environment within the group likely discouraged dissenting opinions, making it difficult for members to voice doubts or concerns. As a result, individuals may feel pressured to conform, fearing ostracization or repercussions if they challenge the accepted narrative. This collective mindset fosters an alternative reality where questioning the leader or the group's beliefs is not just discouraged but viewed as a threat to group unity.

Furthermore, the reference to “The Lord of the Rings” serves as an analogy for the allure of the group's ideology. Just as characters in the story become enveloped in a fantastical world, members of the cult can

become so consumed by the group's teachings that they lose touch with reality. This illustrates how cults can create an insulated environment, where outside perspectives are dismissed or devalued. By fostering a shared belief system and centralizing doctrine, the group can effectively shape members' realities, making it challenging for them to recognize contradictions or harm in their circumstances.

The participant's reflections reveal a troubling consequence of groupthink and doctrinal centrality: the erosion of individual critical thinking. As members align their identities with the group, they may lose sight of their personal beliefs, values, and experiences. The strong collective identity can overshadow individual perspectives, leading to a homogenized way of thinking that stifles creativity, innovation, and self-expression.

- **If you heard him speak, you would really think that he meant well. And it was, it was like there was a dark undercurrent,**
- **But the others in the house, they**
- **they really believed in it, and the**
- **I don't know. I don't understand how they managed to sink to such a level where they accepted such things without question.**
- **which was not immediately noticeable to a person who was so taken up by the message people have read The Lord of the Rings**

8. SPIRITUAL AND EMOTIONAL VACUUMS FILLED BY GROUP DOCTRINE

The participant reflects on how members of the group experienced a profound spiritual and emotional void that was gradually filled by the cult's doctrine. This process led them to detach from their former selves, losing their individuality and personal beliefs in favour of the group's ideology. The participant provides insights into how this psychological control and doctrinal centrality affected the members, leaving them reliant on the group for meaning and direction.

The participant suggests that the members were searching for a sense of spirituality or a higher purpose that was absent in their lives. Instead of turning to traditional forms of religion, they latched onto the cult's teachings, which presented an alternative belief system.

This need for spiritual fulfilment made them vulnerable to the cult's influence, allowing its doctrine to take root in their lives. The cult, acting as a substitute for religion, filled the spiritual void with rigid beliefs, promising members protection and guidance. This reflects how cults can exploit personal or spiritual emptiness, offering an illusion of purpose or salvation that preys on members' emotional needs.

The participant's observation that the leader justified punishments to protect members from a "greater wrath" introduces the concept of psychological control. The leader used fear and manipulation to instil obedience, framing his violent actions as acts of care or protection. This narrative warped the members' perception of right and wrong, making them believe that suffering was necessary and justified under the group's doctrine. By convincing members that punishments were for their own good, the leader further entrenched his control over their emotional and spiritual lives. This form of manipulation prevents members from critically evaluating their situation or questioning the leader's authority.

The participant's account of the leader's speeches suggests a duality in his presentation—on the surface, he appeared well-meaning, but there was a "dark undercurrent" to his words.

This description highlights the deceptive nature of the cult's messaging, which masked harmful intentions behind an appearance of benevolence. The dark undertone suggests that the cult's teachings, while seemingly aimed at spiritual or emotional

fulfilment, were designed to control and exploit the members. This kind of indoctrination gradually erases individual identities, replacing them with a collective belief system that prioritizes the group's ideology over personal growth or freedom.

As the members became more immersed in the cult's doctrine, they grew increasingly detached from their former selves. The participant indicates that they accepted the cult's reality, abandoning their previous beliefs and connections to the outside world. This detachment represents the spiritual and emotional vacuum being filled by the group's ideology, as the members no longer sought meaning or fulfilment from external sources.

Instead, they became wholly dependent on the cult for their sense of purpose and identity. Over time, this dependence deepened, leaving them unable to reconnect with their past selves or break free from the cult's grip.

The cult's ability to replace personal spirituality with its doctrine demonstrates how psychological control works within such groups. By centralizing the group's teachings and discouraging independent thought, the leader ensured that members had no alternative but to embrace the cult's belief system. This process eroded their individual autonomy, leaving them emotionally and spiritually isolated from the outside world. The members' reliance on the group's doctrine also made them more susceptible to further manipulation, as they came to see the leader as their only source of spiritual guidance and protection.

- **But I suppose there was an element of they were missing that religious element in their lives, and they wanted to believe that there was a higher power, so rather than believe in a traditional religion, they were believing in this weird cult.**
- **And he used to say that when he beat people up or punish people, he was protecting them from the much greater wrath of Jack.**
- **If you heard him speak, you would really think that he meant well. And it was, it was like there was a dark undercurrent,**

9. FEAR-INDUCED PARANOIA AND NORMALIZED VIOLENCE IN A CULT ENVIRONMENT

The participant reflects on how fear-induced paranoia and normalized violence were core components of control within the cult. These methods created an atmosphere of constant tension, where members lived in a state of fear and distrust. The participant's experiences provide insight into the psychological and emotional impact of these tactics, showing how they were used to suppress individuality and maintain the group's hold over its members.

One of the key elements of control described by the participant is the use of fear to manipulate members into submission. The constant reminder that external threats, such as the "fascist state," would harm or abduct them was a tool to isolate members from the outside world. By instilling this fear, the cult prevented members from seeking help or questioning their situation. The fear of being taken away or experiencing harm alone made members more dependent on the group, as they believed safety could only be found within its boundaries. This kind of fear-induced paranoia served to erode trust in anyone or anything outside the group, further reinforcing isolation.

The participant also describes witnessing acts of violence at a young age, which became a normalized part of life in the cult. Violence, particularly in the form of beatings, was used as a method of punishment and control. The participant recalls seeing someone being physically assaulted while other members restrained them, demonstrating the collective enforcement of violence within the group. This act was not hidden or considered unusual; instead, it was accepted as part of the cult's daily operations. By normalizing such

violent behaviour, the cult desensitized its members to cruelty, making it easier for the leader to exert control without resistance.

The normalization of violence extended to the use of threats, which heightened the sense of fear among members. The participant recalls being told that if they were alone, terrible things would happen to them. This instilled a deep sense of vulnerability, making members believe they were always in danger unless they remained under the protection of the group. The fear of harm was not just from outside forces, but also from within the cult itself, as the leader or other members could turn on them at any time. This constant threat of violence created an environment where members were too afraid to think or act independently, knowing that any perceived disobedience could result in punishment.

The participant shares a particularly chilling moment where they were told, "Who would know if I killed you? Who is going to know because nobody knows you are even here?" This statement encapsulates the sense of anonymity and helplessness that pervaded life in the cult. Members were made to feel insignificant and invisible, reinforcing the idea that they had no power or value outside the group. The threat of violence, coupled with the belief that no one would care if they disappeared, further entrenched their dependence on the cult for survival. This psychological manipulation made it clear that leaving or challenging the group was not an option, as there was no safety or protection outside its confines.

The overall environment described by the participant is one of intense tension and distrust. Fear and violence were used strategically to break down members' sense of self-worth and autonomy. The constant reminder that danger was always present, both inside and outside the cult, ensured that members remained compliant and fearful. This atmosphere of paranoia created a cycle where members could not trust each other, let alone outsiders, making it nearly impossible to escape the group's control.

- **I remember seeing someone getting beaten up, getting a black eye, and all the other members of the cult were holding that person down while a B punched her face in, and I was five years old.**
- **I was always told that if I was on my own, terrible things would happen to me.**
- **Who would know if I killed you? Who is going to know because nobody knows you are even here?**

10. REDISCOVERY OF SELF AND CRITICAL REFLECTION AFTER ESCAPE

The participant's reflections provide deep insight into the process of rediscovery and healing after escaping a cult-like environment. A central theme in their narrative is the emotional and psychological journey from anger and hatred toward forgiveness and freedom. Having spent the first 30 years of their life confined both physically and emotionally, the participants now seek to redefine themselves through self-awareness, reflection, and a desire to live freely.

Growing up in an environment filled with anger and hatred, the participant acknowledges how these negative emotions deeply shaped their upbringing. However, rather than continuing to harbour these feelings, they express a powerful desire to break the cycle and not become like the people they grew up with. This desire to distance themselves from the toxicity they experienced serves as the beginning of their healing process. The participant's acknowledgment of the anger and hatred they grew up with is a critical moment of reflection, helping them realize the importance of not letting those emotions control their life post-escape.

A significant aspect of this healing journey is the participant's admiration for forgiveness. They describe how they have always been drawn to people who can forgive others, seeing it as a positive and liberating act. This admiration becomes a personal goal for the participant, who now strives to embrace forgiveness as part of their own healing. The participant expresses a strong belief that holding onto hatred or seeking

revenge prevents one from truly being free. For them, forgiveness is not just about letting go of anger but also about reclaiming personal freedom after years of emotional and physical imprisonment. The participant's desire to forgive those who wronged them is not only a step toward personal growth but also a way to regain control of their life.

The transition from living in a small, confined space for 30 years to adjusting to the outside world presents a new set of challenges for the participant. The stark contrast between the cramped conditions of their past and the openness of the outside world is overwhelming. The participant reflects on how difficult it must have been to adapt to a life where there are no physical barriers, both literally and metaphorically. This adjustment to freedom highlights the complexity of reintegration, where newfound liberation brings both relief and difficulty in navigating a world so different from what they had known.

A key moment of self-rediscovery for the participant occurred when their mother was hospitalized. During this time, they began to reconnect with an old love: reading. Reading had been a passion they were forced to suppress due to their previous circumstances, but now it serves as a symbol of personal autonomy and growth. The participant explains how their ability to read had been limited because of the constant presence of their mother, but once she was no longer around, they rediscovered the joy of reading. This rediscovery signifies more than just a hobby—it represents the participant's ability to reclaim parts of themselves that were lost during their time in the cult.

This act of reconnecting with reading also signals the beginning of intellectual freedom and critical thinking. While in the cult, their thoughts and actions were heavily controlled, but now they have the freedom to think independently and engage with the world in a new way. Reading becomes a tool for the participant to explore innovative ideas, perspectives, and emotions, helping them further distance themselves from the rigid doctrines of their past life.

- **I Grew up with anger and hatred in the house, and the one thing that I never want to be is to be that person myself.**
- **I have always loved the idea of people who forgive others, because that is such a pleasant thing to do, and after having spent the first 30 years of my life in prison, now I want to be free. And you cannot be free if you are hating other people or wanting to take revenge on others.**
- **after 30 years, raised in in a small house in cramped conditions, it must have been difficult to adjust to the openness of the outside world.**
- **When my mom was in hospital, I started reading more. I used to read beforehand, but because she was always around, my ability to read was curtailed very greatly.**

11. EFFORTS TO RECLAIM IDENTITY ARE COMPLICATED BY THE LINGERING IMPACT OF CULT MANIPULATION AND TRAUMA.

The participant's narrative reveals the profound challenges in reclaiming their sense of identity after years of cult manipulation and psychological control. Their journey is marked by confusion, self-alienation, and the lingering effects of trauma, which make it difficult to fully rediscover who they are outside of the cult's influence. This process is further complicated by the deep-rooted paranoia and fear instilled in them, creating a sense of disconnection from both their personal history and their surroundings.

From an early age, the participant was exposed to a distorted reality where their personal relationships and sense of self were deliberately obscured. A key example of this manipulation is their uncertainty about their mother. The participant's confusion about whether the woman who raised them was truly their mother speaks to the depth of the psychological manipulation they experienced. In this environment, even fundamental truths, such as familial bonds, were twisted or denied, leaving the participant unsure of their

own identity. This lack of clarity around their family life contributed to their sense of self-alienation and made it difficult to form a stable sense of who they were.

The participant reflects on growing up within this controlled environment, expressing uncertainty about what they believed as a child. They admit that they did not know better than to challenge the narratives imposed on them by the cult. This lack of agency in questioning their reality shows how deeply they were influenced by the group's control. The participant was conditioned to accept the cult's version of reality without the ability to critically assess or question it. This manipulation stunted their ability to develop a personal identity separate from the cult, and even after leaving, they still grapple with the impact of this enforced passivity.

The participant's relationship with their mother was also deeply affected by the cult's teachings. Their mother, like many others in the group, was conditioned to reject her own familial ties. The participant mentions how their mother would claim, "I have no mother," reflecting the cult's effort to sever members' connections to their pasts and families. This rejection of personal history was a key strategy used by the cult to weaken members' sense of identity and further control them. For the participant, this meant growing up in an environment where family relationships were not just discouraged but actively erased, making it even harder to form a clear sense of self.

Additionally, the cult's leader used fear and violence as tools to maintain control over members, further destabilizing their sense of security and self-worth. The participant recounts how the leader would justify acts of violence by claiming that he was protecting them from a greater threat—the wrath of "Jack." This manipulation of fear served to keep members compliant and prevent them from questioning the leader's authority. The constant threat of violence created an atmosphere of paranoia, where members were too frightened to challenge the established order. For the participants, this atmosphere of fear not only suppressed their personal identity but also reinforced feelings of powerlessness and dependency.

Paranoia played a significant role in maintaining the cult's control over its members. The participant describes how the leader would claim that the British fascist state was targeting him and that everyone, including Neighbours who played loud music, was part of a campaign to disturb him. This paranoid worldview was instilled in members, making them believe that they were constantly under surveillance and that any attempt to break away from the group would result in punishment. This sense of being watched and the fear of external threats made it difficult for the participant to trust others or form connections outside of the cult, further complicating their efforts to reclaim their identity.

The long-term effects of this manipulation and trauma continue to shape the participant's sense of self. Even after leaving the cult, they struggle with feelings of alienation and uncertainty about who they are. The cult's efforts to erase personal history and in still paranoia have left lasting scars, making it challenging for the participant to reconnect with their past or form a coherent sense of identity. Their journey toward healing is complicated by these lingering effects, as they attempt to piece together who they were before the cult and who they want to be moving forward.

- **I mean, as a child, growing up, I kind of, I do not know if I seriously believed in it, but I did not know any better than to challenge it.**
- **Many of them, like my mum, she said, I have no mother.**
- **And he used to say that when he beat people up or punish people, he was protecting them from the much greater wrath of Jack.**
- **The British fascist state was always targeting him, and everybody was spying on him, and neighbours, if they played loud music, were part of the fascist states campaign to disturb him.**

12. DISTORTED REALITY AND FICTIVE NARRATIVES ARE USED TO MANIPULATE PERCEPTIONS AND JUSTIFY ABUSIVE PRACTICES.

The participant's memories of childhood are filled with a distorted reality and made-up stories created by an authority figure in their life. This distortion not only affected how the participants viewed the world but also influenced the behavior and beliefs of those around them. A key part of this manipulation was the development of an alternative reality where mythical references and ritualistic behavior's became normal, blurring the lines between what was real and what was fiction to justify abusive actions.

The participant remembers being told that the people they saw outside—the Neighbour's and passersby—were living “horrible lives.” This message was a deliberate effort to instill fear and control, making the outside world seem dangerous and unwelcoming. As a result, the participant's perception of reality was shaped by these stories, leading them to believe that their own abusive environment was somehow safer and better than what lay beyond their home's walls. This manipulation created a warped understanding of life, where the participant learned to view outside experiences with suspicion and dread.

A significant part of this distorted reality was the idea of a "Mind Control machine," which the participant's father referred to as Jackie. The participant recalls that this machine, initially called "the machines" when they were younger, became known as Jackie as they grew up. Jackie was presented as an invisible force that could control thoughts and actions. The participant reflects on how they were made to believe in this machine, a belief reinforced by the father's strong conviction. Over time, Jackie became a part of the participant's reality, shaping their views on control and submission.

The participant's interpretation of these experiences shows the deep psychological effects of living in a world where made-up stories were used to manipulate reality. They describe witnessing people standing in circles, listening to someone speak for hours. These gatherings felt important and took on a ritualistic nature. The participant remembers that sometimes people would faint from exhaustion and would then be slapped or beaten. This behaviour reinforced the distorted reality, normalizing physical suffering and punishment as part of the experience.

The participant sees these gatherings as more evidence of the manipulation and control they faced. Standing in a circle for hours and listening to speeches was framed as a meaningful ritual. However, the participant now understands that these behaviours were part of a larger plan to uphold the false narrative governing their life. The beatings for passing out were explained within this alternative reality, making physical abuse seem like an acceptable consequence for failing to follow the ritual's rules. The participant sees this as a form of collective submission, where everyone involved was conditioned to accept hardship and violence without questioning it.

The participant also refers to mythic stories, like "The Lord of the Rings." They recall how elements from this fictional world were woven into their distorted reality, further mixing fantasy with real life. The participant notes that these references, though seemingly harmless, became part of the larger false narrative justifying their control and abuse. The inclusion of mythical references added a sense of importance to their experiences, making the manipulation harder to see and resist.

Through the participant's perspective, these made-up stories were not just simple tales but tools for control. The authority figure in their life used these stories to create an alternate reality where abusive behaviour could be justified and seen as normal. The participant reflects on how they and others were drawn into this alternative world, where questioning the narrative or the abusive actions was nearly impossible. The creation of Jackie, the mind control machine, symbolizes the power and control that dominated their life, reinforcing the participant's feelings of helplessness and submission.

- Then I was told that these people outside, the neighbors and other people you saw walking past were living horrible lives
- What he used to say was that he believed that he had a Mind Control machine who he called Jackie
- Which was not immediately noticeable to a person who was so taken up by the message people have read The Lord of the Rings
- Jackie was an invisible entity, which he called. He used to call it the machines when I was growing up as a child, and later on, he became Jackie.
- Just remember lots of times seeing people standing around in circles listening to a B talk, and sometimes it was. Your four hours, people would stand up, and sometimes people used to pass out, and they would get slapped and beaten up for passing out

13. PARENTAL ALIENATION AND LOYALTY TO THE GROUP OVERRIDE NATURAL FAMILY BONDS, LEADING TO EMOTIONAL DISCONNECTION.

The participant's recollections present a deeply troubling reality marked by parental alienation and an overpowering loyalty to a group, which ultimately overshadowed the natural bonds of family. As a child, the participant struggled to comprehend the fundamental concepts of family, particularly the roles of a father and mother. This confusion left them feeling isolated, unable to grasp what a nurturing and supportive home environment should entail. Instead, they conveyed a sense of resignation, stating, "I just knew that this was karma." This statement reflects not only a lack of understanding about healthy family dynamics but also a belief that their suffering was somehow destined or deserved, which can be indicative of a deeply ingrained emotional pain.

The participant's relationship with their mother serves as a focal point for understanding this alienation. The participant recalls how their mother appeared more concerned with proving her loyalty to an authoritative figure referred to as "B" than nurturing her bond with her own child.

This misplaced priority led to a painful dynamic where the mother's actions communicated a clear message: the participant's needs and feelings were secondary to her desire to demonstrate fidelity to B. Such behavior cultivated an environment where the participant felt neglected, their emotional needs overlooked in favor of external loyalty.

In reflecting on this loyalty, the participant articulates feelings of betrayal, particularly highlighting how their mother felt compelled to show that she did not care about her daughter. This troubling dynamic serves as a vivid example of parental alienation, where the emotional bond between mother and child becomes strained and disconnected due to the mother's misplaced allegiances. The participant expresses sadness and hurt, noting that their mother's actions were a painful form of maternal neglect, which should have been filled with love and protection.

This alienation had profound effects on the participant's emotional well-being. The participant felt isolated and abandoned, struggling to find their place in a family dynamic that prioritized group loyalty over genuine connection. The unconditional love and support that should naturally flow between a mother and daughter were instead replaced with emotional distance and neglect. The participants interpreted their mother's loyalty to B as a rejection, leading them to internalize feelings of worthlessness. In their eyes, they were unworthy of love, having been overshadowed by the need for their mother to prove her allegiance to someone else.

Moreover, the participant's experience highlights the confusion surrounding familial roles and relationships. The absence of a nurturing maternal figure led the participant to question the very essence

of familial love. Without a clear understanding of what a healthy parent-child relationship should look like, the participant was left grappling with feelings of insecurity and abandonment. This confusion is compounded by the realization that loyalty to B took precedence over the mother's responsibility to care for her child, creating a toxic environment where emotional neglect thrived.

The consequences of this parental alienation were not limited to the immediate emotional impact. The participant also noted that the loyalty to the group fostered a sense of collective suffering, where emotional pain became normalized. The mother's actions, in prioritizing B, were seen as part of a larger narrative of group loyalty that overshadowed individual needs.

This collective mindset further entrenched the participant's feelings of isolation, as they witnessed their mother's willingness to sacrifice their relationship for the sake of external validation and acceptance.

In retrospect, the participant's reflections reveal the deep emotional scars left by this dynamic. They express a longing for connection and understanding, underscoring the detrimental effects of parental alienation on their sense of self-worth and belonging. The loyalty that their mother felt toward B ultimately resulted in a fractured relationship, leaving the participant feeling abandoned and rejected.

Furthermore, the participant's experience serves as a poignant reminder of how parental alienation can distort the fundamental understanding of familial love. It creates an environment where the child's emotional needs are sidelined, leading to long-term psychological consequences. The pain of feeling unloved and unwanted, particularly by a parent, can result in a lifetime of struggles with self-esteem and emotional attachment.

As the participant continues to process these experiences, they grapple with the complexities of love and loyalty. They reflect on how their mother's choices shaped their understanding of relationships and their perception of self-worth. The internal conflict of wanting a loving connection with their mother while simultaneously feeling the weight of her loyalty to B highlights the painful dichotomy inherent in parental alienation.

- **I didn't know any I didn't even as a child, I didn't know the concept of father and mother. I just knew that this was karma**
- **she was trying to prove that her loyalty to a B was more than her love for her own daughter.**
- **She had to prove to him that she did not care about me at all.**

14. LONGING FOR NORMALCY AND A SENSE OF IDENTITY DRIVE THE DESIRE FOR ESCAPE AND PERSONAL FREEDOM.

The participants' reflections illuminate a profound longing for normalcy and a strong desire for personal freedom, stemming from their experiences in an oppressive environment. This yearning is deeply rooted in a desire to escape the painful realities of their current life, where simply existing often led to trouble. The participant poignantly captures this sentiment, stating, "But I thought anything would be better than this, and even if it's not better, at least it's different." This desire for change reflects a profound sense of dissatisfaction with their circumstances, highlighting the desperate need to break free from the cycle of abuse and control that defined their upbringing.

The participants' yearning for a different life is underscored by their feelings of entrapment in an environment that felt hostile and unwelcoming. They articulate the suffocating nature of their reality, where the mere act of existing was fraught with danger and punishment. This perception of their surroundings fosters a deep sense of hopelessness, leading the participant to fantasize about alternative lives that might offer the normalcy they crave. The desire to escape becomes a central theme in their narrative, illustrating how the longing for a different existence drives their thoughts and aspirations.

In addition to the desire for escape, the participant reflects on moments of connection and the natural human desire for relationships. They recount having crushes on people, like a neighbour, and express a yearning to connect with them. However, this desire is overshadowed by a pervasive fear of being watched and judged. The participant shares, “I’d really like to be able to talk to that person, but how am I going to be able to do that when people are watching me?” This statement encapsulates the tension between the longing for connection and the oppressive nature of their environment, where the fear of surveillance stifles any potential for genuine relationships.

The participant's reflections reveal how the oppressive environment cultivated feelings of isolation and alienation. They describe other people as “nicer” and “not weird, not robotic,” contrasting them with those around them, who they perceive as “freaky.” This comparison highlights the participant's yearning for a sense of belonging and acceptance in a world that felt foreign and unwelcoming. The longing for normalcy is intertwined with a desire to connect with others, further emphasizing the emotional void created by their upbringing. The participant’s perception of others as more authentic and relatable underscores their struggle with identity, as they grapple with feeling disconnected from the people around them.

Furthermore, the participant’s rediscovery of reading serves as a crucial aspect of their journey toward personal freedom and self-discovery. Reading provides a means of escape, allowing them to explore worlds and experiences beyond their immediate reality. It becomes a tool for understanding different perspectives and, perhaps, a way to envision a life that offers the connection and normalcy they so desperately seek. Through literature, the participant can navigate their emotions and begin to explore their identity outside the constraints imposed by their Environment.

The act of reading symbolizes a form of empowerment, as it opens up possibilities for the participant that are not available in their current reality. It allows them to envision a future where they are free to explore their identity, desires, and connections without fear or judgment.

This awakening to an outsider reality contrasts sharply with their lived experience, highlighting the profound impact that exposure to different narratives and perspectives can have on one’s sense of self.

The participant's reflections also touch upon the theme of identity loss, a consequence of growing up in an environment that stifled individuality and self-expression. The oppressive dynamics they experienced contributed to a fractured sense of self, leaving them unsure of who they were outside of the roles they were forced to play. The longing for connection and the desire to escape serve as catalysts for rediscovering their identity, as they seek to reclaim the parts of themselves that were suppressed.

- **But I thought anything would be better than this, and even if it's not better, at least it's different. I couldn't imagine that anywhere could be so awful as this place where you just got into trouble, just basically for existing.**
- **And then there were times when I had crushes on people, like on a neighbor or something, and thinking, Oh, I'd really like to be able to talk to that person, but how am I going to be able to do that when people are watching me?**
- **I always thought other people seemed so much nicer and not weird, not robotic, not just freaky like the people around me**
- **When my mom was in hospital, I started reading more. I used to read beforehand, but because she was always around, my ability to read was curtailed very greatly. » many of them, like my mum, she said, I have no mother**

15. POST-ESCAPE CHALLENGES INCLUDE PHYSICAL, EMOTIONAL, AND SOCIAL STRUGGLES AS INDIVIDUALS ADJUST TO LIFE OUTSIDE.

The participant's reflections on life after escape highlight the profound challenges they face as they navigate a new reality. These struggles encompass physical, emotional, and social difficulties, illustrating the complexities of adjusting to a world that feels both liberating and overwhelming. The participant's experiences shed light on the multifaceted nature of postescape challenges, revealing the intricate interplay between the newfound freedom and the obstacles that come with it.

The participant begins by acknowledging their unexpected physical disabilities and health issues. This underscores the reality that escape does not automatically equate to freedom from pain and struggle. Instead, the participant must confront the harsh truth of their physical limitations, which complicate their ability to navigate the world around them. The struggle to move about reflects a deeper emotional burden, as the participant grapples with feelings of inadequacy and frustration. These physical challenges serve as a constant reminder of the life they have left behind, making the adjustment to their new reality even more difficult.

In addition to physical struggles, the participant expresses anxiety about social interactions, particularly when meeting new people. They share their fear of being bombarded with questions, especially regarding their past and educational background. This anxiety stems from a desire to protect themselves from the painful memories and judgments associated with their previous life. The participant's apprehension highlights the emotional scars left by their past experiences, which continue to influence their self-perception and interactions with others.

The participants' reflections reveal a broader sense of social disconnection as they attempt to reintegrate into society. The participant is acutely aware of the challenges posed by the vastness and openness of the outside world. This newfound freedom, while exhilarating, can also feel intimidating and alienating. The contrast between the confined space of their previous life and the expansive possibility of the outside world creates a sense of disorientation, making it difficult for the participant to establish a sense of belonging in their new environment.

Moreover, the participants' struggle to find their place in a world that is markedly different from their previous existence contributes to feelings of loneliness and isolation. The memories of cramped living conditions and the dynamics of their former environment linger, casting a shadow over their attempts to adapt to the openness and unpredictability of life outside. The participant's yearning for connection is palpable, yet their past experiences hinder their ability to engage fully with others, creating a barrier that complicates the process of forming new relationships.

The participant's reflections also underscore the importance of understanding and patience during the adjustment period. They navigate a complex landscape of physical and emotional challenges that require time and support to overcome. The transition to a new life is not merely a matter of leaving an abusive environment; it also involves addressing the residual effects of that environment on one's physical health, emotional well-being, and social skills.

The participant's experiences highlight the need for compassion and understanding from others as they navigate these challenges. They may encounter individuals who are unaware of the complexities involved in their adjustment process, leading to further feelings of alienation. The participant's anxiety about discussing their past and their struggles can be exacerbated by the pressure to conform to societal expectations, making it essential for them to find spaces where they feel safe to express their true selves without fear of judgment.

DISCUSSION

This research examined the impact of power dynamics and psychological control on the mental health and development of individuals raised in cult-like environments, focusing on how these factors shape long-term psychological outcomes. Through thematic analysis, key themes emerged, each highlighting the profound and multifaceted ways in which cult membership influences personal identity, autonomy, and mental well-being.

The narratives of participants revealed that childhood trauma and parental neglect contribute significantly to long-lasting emotional and psychological damage. Growing up in environments where basic emotional needs are unmet, compounded by the psychological control exerted by cult leaders, creates deep-seated issues of trust and emotional regulation. Participants described how control and the restriction of autonomy through constant surveillance and limited freedom fostered a sense of entrapment and dependency. Cult-like organizational structures, characterized by leader dominance and rigid hierarchies, suppress individuality and enforce conformity. Emotional manipulation, including the suppression of personal feelings and desires, was a key tool used to maintain control over members, effectively stifling personal expression. Isolation as a form of punishment further deepened dependence on the group while severing members' connections to the outside world, leaving them cut off from potential support systems. Another significant finding was the financial exploitation and loss of autonomy that weakened members' ability to act independently, both within and outside the cult. Participants discussed how economic dependency on the cult fostered a sense of powerlessness, making it harder to leave the group. Groupthink, driven by doctrinal centrality, replaced individual critical thinking, fostering a collective identity that subdued personal autonomy and reinforced cult loyalty. Moreover, the study highlighted how distorted realities and fictive narratives were utilized by cult leaders to manipulate perceptions and justify abusive practices. This manipulation, often combined with parental alienation, further entrenched loyalty to the group, overriding natural family bonds and leading to emotional disconnection from loved ones outside the cult. Many participants noted a deep longing for normalcy and a stable sense of identity, which drove their desire for personal freedom and eventual escape.

However, post-escape challenges were numerous. Participants faced significant physical, emotional, and social struggles as they attempted to adjust to life outside the cult. The spiritual and emotional vacuums left by the group's teachings often made it difficult to reconnect with their former selves. Fear-induced paranoia, normalized violence, and constant tension were common experiences within the cult, leading to lasting feelings of distrust and anxiety even after leaving.

The process of rediscovery of self and critical reflection post-escape was central to healing and reintegration. Participants described how reclaiming their identity was an essential, though complicated, aspect of recovery. The lingering impact of cult manipulation and trauma made it difficult for them to fully trust others or even trust their own judgments, with many struggling to rebuild a coherent sense of self after years of indoctrination.

One of the strengths of this study is the use of thematic analysis, which allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences and the psychological mechanisms by which cults exert control over individuals. This qualitative approach provided valuable insights into how power dynamics and psychological control manifest within cults and how these dynamics shape members' mental health and personal development.

However, there are also limitations to this study. One potential limitation is the subjectivity inherent in qualitative analysis, as the researcher's own interpretations may have influenced the analysis of

participants' experiences. Additionally, the retrospective nature of this research presents another limitation, as participants reflected on past experiences and what they mean to them in the present. The meanings attributed to these experiences may evolve over time, especially as participants continue their journeys of healing and recovery, which raises questions about the long-term validity of the findings.

Future research could benefit from a longitudinal design, tracking individuals over time to see how their understanding of their experiences and mental health evolves as they distance themselves from the cult environment. Additionally, expanding the sample size and including participants from various cults could offer a broader understanding of the impact of power dynamics and psychological control on mental health across different cultural and organizational contexts. Further research could also explore interventions aimed at helping individuals reclaim their identities and develop resilience in the face of cult-induced trauma.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the psychological impact of power dynamics and control mechanisms within cult-like environments, highlighting how these factors shape individual identity, autonomy, and mental well-being. Through thematic analysis, key themes such as emotional manipulation, isolation, financial exploitation, and dependency emerged, illustrating the profound and lasting effects of cult membership on survivors. Participants' narratives revealed the challenges of navigating psychological control, the struggle for independence, and the difficult journey of reintegration after leaving such environments.

The findings emphasize the complex interplay between cult-induced trauma and the long-term psychological distress experienced by survivors. Emotional suppression, groupthink, and loss of autonomy contribute to identity fragmentation, making post-escape recovery a challenging process. Many survivors face difficulties in rebuilding trust, reclaiming personal agency, and establishing a stable sense of self outside the cult.

Despite these challenges, the study also highlights resilience and the capacity for healing. The process of self-reflection and identity reconstruction plays a crucial role in recovery, with many individuals working toward regaining autonomy and emotional stability. Recognizing and addressing the unique psychological needs of former cult members is essential for effective interventions, support systems, and therapeutic approaches.

While this study provides valuable insights, its limitations, including the retrospective nature of participant accounts and the influence of researcher interpretation, must be acknowledged. Future research should adopt longitudinal approaches to track the evolving impact of cult experiences and recovery processes over time. Additionally, expanding the sample to include diverse cult structures and cultural contexts can further enhance understanding.

Ultimately, this research underscores the need for increased awareness, mental health support, and social reintegration programs for cult survivors. By acknowledging their experiences and providing targeted interventions, society can help individuals reclaim their autonomy and rebuild fulfilling, independent lives beyond the constraints of cult-induced psychological control.

REFERENCES

1. Buxant, C., Saroglou, V., Casalfiore, S., & Christians, L. L. (2007). Cognitive and emotional characteristics of new religious movement members: A preliminary study. *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 195(10), 744-747. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NMD.0b013e31815683ac>

2. Hassan, S. (2016). Combating cult mind control: The guide to protection, rescue, and recovery from destructive cults. Freedom of Mind Press.
3. Herman, J. L. (1992). Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence—from domestic abuse to political terror. Basic Books.
4. Langone, M. D. (1993). Recovery from cults: Help for victims of psychological and spiritual abuse. W. W. Norton & Company.
5. Lifton, R. J. (1961). Thought reform and the psychology of totalism: A study of brainwashing in China. University of North Carolina Press.
6. Shaw, D. (2014). Traumatic narcissism: Relational systems of subjugation. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315763587>
7. Singer, M. T. (2003). Cults in our midst: The continuing fight against their hidden menace. Jossey-Bass.
8. Tajfel, H., & Turner, J. C. (1979). An integrative theory of intergroup conflict. In W. G. Austin & S. Worchel (Eds.), The social psychology of intergroup relations (pp. 33-47). Brooks/Cole.
9. Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic growth: Conceptual foundations and empirical evidence. *Psychological Inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli1501_01
10. Ward, C. (2011). The psychodynamics of cult membership: Personality, belief, and behavior. Nova Science Publishers.