

Managing Identity After Leaving a New Religious Movement: An Examination of Self-presentation in Ex-members of the Exclusive Brethren

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Abstract: The majority of research about members and ex-members of New Religious Movements has been about people who join these groups by choice. There is only a comparatively small amount of research about individuals known as Second Generation Adults who are born into these groups. Using in-depth interviews with ex-members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (more commonly known as Exclusive Brethren), I examine the experiences of individuals joining mainstream society as adults in the light of Erving Goffman's work on self presentation and stigma. The findings highlight the difficulty these individuals faced in adapting to their new environment and learning new social roles.

Keywords: Identity, Self Presentation, New Religious Movement, Exclusive Brethren, Plymouth Brethren Christian Church.

Introduction

Much has been written about New Religious Movements (NRMs) and the issues arising from membership or defection from these groups (Coates, 2011; Coates 2012; Wright, 1984). However, while there is a wide variety of research available about people who join such groups by choice, there is only a comparatively small amount of research about individuals sometimes referred to as Second Generation Adults (SGA's) who are born and socialised into these groups (Matthews, 2012). This paper looks at the experiences of SGAs who leave a NRM, specifically how such people negotiate their new environment when they enter mainstream society for the first time. In order to do this, I examine the experiences of ex-members of a New Religious Movement in the light of Erving Goffman's work on self presentation (1959) and stigma (1963), which aims to explain daily life and face-to-face interaction.

Background

Research on issues relating to NRMs has covered why certain people might be more likely to join (Barker, 1986; Coates 2010), why they stay with the group (Coates 2012), and why the person who joined might eventually leave (Wright & Piper, 1986). Other research covers some of the issues former members face upon leaving (Coates, 2009; Hookway, 2013; Wright, 1984), and

what support these individuals might need to successfully integrate back into society (Langone, 1996; Boeri, 2002).

Research suggests that due to the high number of people who joined NRMs between the 1950s and the 1980s, there are now a large number of adults who have been born and raised inside these groups (McCabe, Goldberg, Langone and DeVoe, 2007), with an estimated one million children who have been raised in a NRM since 1950 (Kendall, 2011; Bardin 2005). Some of these SGAs are leaving as they reach adulthood (McCabe, Goldberg, Langone and DeVoe, 2007). There is a small but growing body of work which specifically examines these SGAs, who did not make a personal choice to join and have no experience of life before membership. Researchers recognise the issues of this group as being different to those who join a NRM. This research includes an extensive study by Matthews (2012) aimed at helping counsellors treat SGA ex-members appropriately, as well as studies into child rights (Woolley 2005) and safety inside these groups (Kendall 2011). Hookway and Habibis's (2013) work on young people leaving a strict sectarian group examines the management of identity from a sociological perspective. However, there has been little work done on SGAs and researchers have consistently pointed out the need for further research in this area (Matthews, 2012).

One way to look at the changes and challenges an SGA faces when they leave a NRM is to look at the adjustments they need to make, and the new skills they need to learn to successfully assimilate with mainstream society. In this paper, I examine the interview responses of 10 ex-members of the Plymouth Brethren Christian Church (more commonly known as the Exclusive Brethren), in the light of Erving Goffman's (1959, 1963) work on impression management in order to gain insights into the issues faced by SGAs transitioning out of a NRM.

One of the themes central to Goffman's work is how social actors manage impressions of themselves, and the techniques they use in maintaining these images (Goffman, 1959). In Goffman's theory, the self occurs as a result of the surroundings in which it appears or acts. He extensively discusses both the inner self, and the outer self, the latter being a carefully constructed façade which individuals adjust according to their situation.

Using a dramaturgical analogy describing the processes that people go through in social settings in everyday life as performances, Goffman (1959) claims that in order to carry off a successful performance, the performer must not only display the correct manner and appearance, but conceal that which subtracts from the impression he wishes to convey. In later work (1963) Goffman explores the situation of individuals who are unable to conform to the standards that society considers "normal" and how they manage their "stigma", which is anything which discredits the presentation and the identity that they are attempting to project. He describes ways which individuals control the circulation of discrediting information about themselves in order to "pass" as an unstigmatized person.

Thus identity, according to Goffman, can be seen as being developed through micro-interactions in daily life, as one adapts their self presentation to the current framework of action in which they find themselves (Jacobsen & Kristiansen, 2015). It is through this lens that I examine the self that is created as a result of being born and raised in a NRM, and the challenges this presents for SGAs who leave to begin a new way of life in mainstream society.

Method

The participants in this paper were all former members of a group known as the Exclusive Brethren, an offshoot of the wider Brethren Movement (Tonts, 2001; Wilson, 1967). The origins of the many various groups who identify as Brethren can be traced to the 1820's when, following a series of concerns, a small group of protestant believers in the Church of Ireland left the Established Church to conduct informal meetings in Dublin. Within a couple of years, the group had come

under the influence of John Nelson Darby, who had been a clergyman in the Anglican Church of Ireland (Piepkorn, 1970). Darby taught and upheld a doctrine of separation from people and influences deemed to be corrupt or evil, which he argued was required to be fully compliant with the teachings set out in the scriptures. Over the years, there have been many schisms resulting largely from this doctrine that separation from persons who do not meet the stringent standards of the group must be formally declared and practiced. A major division in 1848 occurred when strict followers of Darby split off from those who held a less rigid position, forming the first Open and Exclusive Brethren groups. Further schisms have taken place among the Exclusive Brethren, reflecting the seriousness with which the group takes their doctrine (Wilson, 1967; Piepkorn 1970; Tonts, 2001).

Using Roy Wallis's (1978) classification of New Religious Movements where such groups can be identified as 'world-rejecting', 'world-affirming' and 'world-accommodating', the Brethren would appear to meet the criteria for the 'world-rejecting' groups. World rejecting groups, typically believe themselves to be the only holder of the truth, require a high level of commitment from members and require them to follow a high standard of conduct as prescribed by a leader (Coates, 2012; Wallis, 1978). Examples of Brethren practices include not eating or socializing with those who are not members, restricting media and technology unless required for business purposes, attending daily meetings, adhering to a dress code, and either disciplining or shunning members who do not conform to their strictly held beliefs (Tonts, 2001).

As little literature was available on the experiences of SGA former members, a qualitative approach with semi-structured in-depth interviews was chosen to allow collection of rich and detailed information (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) about how the participants had managed the transition from the NRM to mainstream society. All participants engaged in a face-to-face interview using open ended questions focusing on their experiences in social settings before and after leaving the group, lasting on average 90 minutes. Interviews with the participants were transcribed and analyzed with open coding to identify themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Pseudonyms have been used in this paper to protect the identity of the participants.

As a group which members rarely join or leave, almost all Exclusive Brethren have been members since birth, making them an ideal group from which to recruit participants for a study on SGAs. All participants, except for one elderly man whose family joined when he was 2 years old, had been born members of the group, with most saying that their families had been Brethren for up to five generations. The participants in this study were recruited by combination of purposive and snowball sampling. As a former member of the Exclusive Brethren myself, I initially contacted people I knew who had left the group, asking if anyone would be willing to volunteer, and those who volunteered suggested further participants.

Of the ten participants discussed in this paper, six were male and four were female, ranging in age from 26 to 80 years of age. The most recent leaver had been away from the group for five years, and two had left more than 50 years ago, with the majority having left between eight and sixteen years ago. Seven of the participants had left of their own accord, and three had been excommunicated.

Although a relatively small sample, this is in line with the typical sample size in an in-depth qualitative study. While there are no set guidelines, research texts often consider between five and eight participants sufficient for this type of research (Coates, 2011).

Discussion

In this study, many of the participants reported feeling a need to hide their past as a member of a NRM from new acquaintances, for fear of being misunderstood or stereotyped. They reported that in their former lives they had felt different to people outside the group, and that while when

they were younger they had not realized the significance of this, with age came the realisation that they were 'weird' or 'unusual'. After leaving, they were anxious to start their new lives outside the NRM with a clean slate.

Goffman's work on stigma (1963) discusses the discreditable actor who has a past or a 'secret' which would cause those around the individual to view him or her in a negative light. This person may attempt to 'pass', hoping that the discrediting information will remain concealed. However, while the participants in this study hoped to do this, often this was not possible due to their lack of understanding of social situations and lack of knowledge regarding popular culture which often left them with no option but to disclose information about their pasts to explain why they didn't understand things that were common knowledge to others, such as information about television shows or how to visit a restaurant. The participants described standing back and withdrawing from conversations, both while group members and later as ex-members, when in social settings in mainstream society. Consider the following example from one of the participants¹:

I actually found quite a few instances where I was forced to explain what we'd come out of, why we didn't know about certain things, movies and different things, just certain things that most people would know about that we didn't know ... So, it's not always easy to be able to hide that, but we certainly try not to let on now. (Brenda)

Here we see how Brenda is forced to reveal information about herself which she feels is discrediting, because her upbringing has not equipped her with the knowledge to play the role of a 'normal' person. Jeff, another participant, reported that he also had to make decisions about whether to reveal information about his past to new acquaintances:

Sooner or later it would come up for anyone that I was really letting into my circle, as far as friends would go. Because my previous life had been so all encompassing that there were large parts of life in normal society that I was really quite clueless about. Even down to what groups played what music and what actors acted in what films and anything that involved popular culture, because I hadn't been involved in any of that and I was really quite clueless about it. So in just very entry level small talk that would go on in social settings with other people, I didn't even know what was going on. It's a pretty strange situation to be an adult and not know those things... And so that would very quickly mark me out in a conversation as being different from everybody else. I then had to choose, did I then identify why, or was I just quiet and hope that the thing blew over. (Jeff)

According to Goffman, the individual with information to manage about his stigma has a choice of voluntarily disclosing himself, transforming himself from a discreditable person to a discredited one and this is the choice that Jeff is making here. Another participant, Bill, described experiencing similar challenges after he left the group and compared it to events as a child, when he was still a group member trying to appear normal at school:

You tried to make it less obvious that you were so different. But then you knew as soon as the other kids started talking about what had happened last night on telly, or something like that... or a movie that they had seen, there was no way that you could intelligently enter in to the conversation. So then you tend to be quieter in all areas of conversation when a group is talking about things so it's less obvious the things that you don't know about. (Bill)

In this example, we see that in order to manage the impression that his school mates formed about him, Bill adopts a performance of being a quiet child, rather than revealing information that might be discrediting. Jeff also recalled feeling different to outsiders as a child, but felt a sense of community with group members, echoing Goffman's (1959) concept of a team performing on a stage, with 'us' presenting a play to 'them': 'Yes we were very different, and we were meant to be that way. That was how we showed the rest of the world what we stood for.' However, he also realized the ramifications if he failed to support his team by playing his role in the performance:

1 Participant names have been altered to protect their identities.

I can remember being ten, and realizing that if I didn't follow all the rules of being in the Brethren, then I would be excommunicated and then I wouldn't have a family or any of the people that I loved in that community. So that was a scary concept. So I think even at ten years of age I was realizing that there were a lot of things that were out of my control that hinged on either obeying the rules or being excommunicated, and that that could happen to me really as quick as a flash. (Jeff)

In this quote we see that Jeff was not only engaged in impression management with outsiders, but also with his fellow Brethren. Brenda and Bill also reported this realization, and the accompanying fear, highlighting the importance of displaying appropriate behaviours to avoid being 'withdrawn from' by the group, a form of discipline akin to excommunication that would discredit them in the eyes of the Brethren community. Bill makes the following comment while describing how important it was for him to follow rules and measure up in the eyes of the group:

It stops you thinking for yourself, because it's all done for you and you're told don't do this, or this will happen to you if you do this. So, you actually become someone who is just trying to please the people inside the group. However weird and strange that might look from outside, which at the time you don't even think about or care about.

Here Bill is recalling how he performed a role for his fellow group members to retain his membership in the group, his comment echoing many of the participants who described carrying out the roles that were expected of them in the NRM without thinking deeply about them. Many reported that they later struggled when they had to make decisions on their own and attributed it to this.

The participants described a lack of confidence, caused by having to play unfamiliar roles. Older participants, in particular, reported struggling with adapting to the new social settings they found themselves in, explaining that they avoided socializing or attending events because they didn't know how to act. The following examples from Brenda, Meredith and Amanda illustrate this:

One thing I struggle with every day is a lack of confidence. A terrible lack of confidence, a feeling of sort of inadequacy... having been bought up in a tight closed group like that seems to leave its mark and it's just so hard to overcome all the ideas and the way of life completely. (Brenda)

I haven't got confidence. And I think that comes from being the woman that was squashed down [in the group] because women didn't have a strong place. If there was a strong woman in there, it was commented on and they were put back in their box....and that's because she wasn't submissive and that's partly why I think I don't have confidence. (Meredith)

Situations freaked me out more than people. Social situations. In social situations I'm still like that. You ask my friends at work how many times I've put my name down for a social occasion and then not gone. I can't do it. (Amanda)

These participants all attributed their lack of confidence and self-worth to the roles they had learned to play in the group, and reported that they found it difficult to adapt and play new roles, in spite of having left between seven and fifteen years ago.

However, Adrian, who left the group at 19, reported that he was able to adapt to the new role required of him by mirroring the behaviour of those around him. He recalls the realization that he was different, "you became more aware that you existed in a very strange group in society and you were a very odd person compared to what was normal," and started to watch outsiders curiously, watching the way they behaved, and learning how the world outside his group worked. He reported being heavily influenced by outsiders after he left the group, adjusting his behaviors to match theirs, adjusting his presentation to his surroundings.

Not all the experiences the participants reported were negative. Some had fond memories of their time in the group, with one participant stating that she felt that she had 'the best of both

worlds', describing that she had an upbringing that she credited with having made her a more kind and generous person, and now she also had the freedom to live her life as she pleased. An elderly participant fondly recalled stories of 'the good old days' and another was grateful for a firm grounding in reading the scriptures and interpreting their meaning. All participants were firm in stating that they had no interest in returning to the group, in spite of the challenges they all reported facing in their interactions with mainstream society. However, the participants who appreciated some of the more positive aspects of their past were more comfortable with their new friends knowing about their former involvement in the NRM.

Conclusion

Responses from the participants indicate they are aware of the need to project a certain image, both when they were in the group to impress the leaders and other group members, and after leaving, to attempt to hide their past and project an image that would allow them to be seen as acceptable by mainstream society. While the performance they acted out in the group came more naturally to them, learning to successfully act their new role in mainstream society still challenged most of the participants, who were actively managing the information that acquaintances knew about them and their pasts. In negotiating their new environment, most of the participants had struggled with being forced to disclose information that they felt was stigmatizing, when they didn't understand the correct social protocols for a situation. However, those who had been out of the group longer were more comfortable, and were rarely put in a position where they needed to tell anyone. Goffman's theories of interaction in everyday life (1959) and his work on stigma (1963) prove to be useful tools in understanding these challenges faced by SGA former members learning to perform new roles in mainstream society.

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