

Transcript of talk: Evolution of understandings regarding undue influence in cults/sects and how this can inform recovery.

FECRIS European Conference 15th June 2024

Speakers: Dr Linda Dubrow-Marshall and Professor Rod Dubrow-Marshall, RETIRN and University of Salford, UK

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Hi, we're going to speak today about the evolution of understandings regarding undue influence in cults and sects and how this can inform recovery. I'm Dr. Linda Dubrow-Marshall and I co-created the MSc (Masters of Science) in the Psychology of Coercive Control at the University of Salford. Along with you, Rod.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

Hi, and I'm Rod Dubrow-Marshall from the University of Salford. And also from RETIRN UK. The Re-Entry Therapy Information and Referral Network which we will tell a little bit more about later. We've been a longstanding correspondent member of FECRIS, and we're really grateful to FECRIS for giving us the opportunity to speak today.

As an overview of our talk and presentation, we're going to start by looking at the words or terms that you use to describe and explain undue influence, in cults or sects and their evolution over time. And in particular we're then going to look at the psychological changes and the harm that people experience while they're in a cultic group or sect. And we are specifically going to ask the question, what does the research tell us about those psychological changes and the harm that people suffer.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

And then what are the implications of these understandings from psychology for models of recovery for people that have been in cults or sects and what is our general guidance for recovery? And we'll be looking at all of that now.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

So starting off with the definition of undue influence which comes from contract law and specifically the law of tort. The underlying requirement for the common law test of undue influence is the evidence of coercion, and note that word coercion. We see it cropping up over and over again in the different definitions that we find that define how cults and sects operate.

For Peisah, Finkel and Schulman in 2009, they define undue influence as the overpowering or overbearing of the testator's volition, judgment, or wishes, by the substitution of one mind for another. And the part of that that I always think is striking is that notion of the substitution of one mind for another. Again, a common theme with regard to the effects of cults on people.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

But what does that mean? Does that mean when we think of recovery that we need to restore the person's former mind, which is akin to exit work or deprogramming as it originally started. But a mind is not a static thing. So if you've been in a cult or sect you will have changed and you may not return exactly to who you were before and

this sometimes is a source of consternation for family members who are expecting that to happen. Also people can learn from their experiences of having been in a cult about how to withstand influence. So there may be some important learnings from it.

Now there are many terms that are used for undue influence, and many of these are overlapping. So there's brainwashing, thought reform, mind control, coercive persuasion which preceded the concept of coercive control. Bounded choice which we'll talk about later. Indoctrination. Ideological totalism. Totalistic identity. Trauma coerced attachment, and modern slavery. You may be more or less familiar with these various terms, and we will touch on them.

Starting with brainwashing, we have a definition going back to 1956 by Hunter and this has in it the picture of a person becoming a living human puppet, a human robot, without the atrocity being visible from the outside. So we don't see the owner. The aim is to create a mechanism of a real person and flesh and blood with new beliefs and new thought processes inserted into that captive body. So this is like the search for a slave race that can be trusted never to revolt. Unlike real slaves in the past. In modern slavery you'll always be amenable to orders like an insect to its instincts, so you effectively lose your own mind.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

Next we see how Zablocki defined brainwashing as a result of charismatic influencing cults as being a re-socialization process. Starting with that charismatic influence, the totalistic social structure leading to the brainwashing or re-socialization where increasingly over time, though increased exit costs a result of both relational enmeshment. Getting caught up relationally in the group with hyper credulity, and then leading to that form of uncritical obedience.

And Zablocki's work has many echoes in the earlier work of Lifton in defining thought reform. He did his work on the Chinese thought reform movement, but also more recently on the on Aum Shinrykyo cult and other cults besides, where that control, that social or milieu control loads the language or the ideology, and often requires from the members a demand for purity involving a confession of sin or not being enough of an adherent to the group, combined with mystical manipulation the supposed amazing powers of the leader, or the leadership leading to that overall doctrine of a person which is fundamentally based on the notion of sacred science, whether in religious or political terms, and ultimately an overall dispensing of existence. And it's that dispensing existence that is responsible, of course, for the psychological harm and damage that cults create for their members.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

And working alongside Lifton was another pioneer, Margaret Singer, who identified key tactics of thought, reform, mind control and coercive persuasion. And so she looked at the person's sense of self or self identity being destabilized. And you can do this partially by making a person reinterpret their history. That's very destabilizing, and it leads to a different view, a radically different view of the world and a new version of reality and causality. And this makes the person dependent on the organization or the leader, and turns them into a deployable agent, because everything is reinterpreted in their life. They now have a new interpretation, and they depend on the leader to give structure and substance to that.

And another really important theorist and researcher is Janja Lalich, who came up with the innovative bounded choice theory which says that people make choices which are delimited in cults and sects because they don't have the full repertoire, the full range of choices available to them. And why not? Because of the milieu control and the coercive persuasion. Therefore it's bounded or limited.

In the UK we have a law on coercive control which makes separate definitions for controlling behavior and for coercive behavior in relationships and families. So the person is isolated from sources of support. The resources aren't theirs to use on their own. They're exploited. There is no possibility of escape. Everyday behavior is regulated, and people are assaulted, threatened, and humiliated, and all of this is done purposefully to harm, punish, or frighten their victim, and to gain control.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

As with undue influence or influence more broadly. As Singer explains so eloquently, influence is, of course, on a continuum from education, through advertising propaganda that is more overt and sometimes ethical through to indoctrination, which takes a much more hierarchical stance, evolving disciplinary techniques, punishments, in other words, for people not complying, through to the notion of thought reform where Singer expanded on that definition from Lifton and the dispensing of existence. This is the way in which cults and sects take over people psychologically, and our understanding of this has developed in a number of ways.

For example the Totalistic Identity Theory that I developed with Linda, Paul Martin and Ron Burks and colleagues out of the research that we did together at Wellspring Retreat and Resource Center. Totalistic identity is akin to notions of ideological totalism where the identity of the group is based around the ideology and becomes unhealthily dominant. Cognitively, the group keeps the person stuck, not allowing them to move to other aspects of their identity, it becomes fixed with unhealthy consequences. The normal ability to move up and down, as you can see in the diagram is cut off, and instead, the cult or sect dominates. That's why we call it a form of totalistic identity.

This model, which is evidence based from the Wellspring research, can also be compared to the notion of trauma coerced attachment or trauma bonding, which has been noted across a variety of coercive contexts with a powerful emotional dependency on either the partner in abusive relationships or the group or group leader. In the case of cults and sects and the current group members, this can lead to actual feelings of gratitude and loyalty towards the cult or sect, meaning, of course, that when we interact with current cult members, sometimes they will appear superficially, as if they are willing in their adherence, when, in fact, of course, their minds are taken over, and they have a totalistic identity in which they are psychologically bonded or trapped, which, of course, is why, moving onto the next slide, this is also a form of modern slavery.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Indeed, and the UK also has a law against modern slavery, which means, if you should have known, that the person is held in slavery, then that counts, and if you require this person to do forced labor for you, and you should know that they're being forced, then you can be prosecuted in the UK for modern slavery. Now for those people who think that there's no mention of cults in the psychiatric community. The American Psychiatric Association which publishes the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual mentions sects and

cults specifically in their diagnosis of other specified dissociative disorder: identity disturbance due to prolonged and intensive coercive persuasion. And here a lot of the terms we've been talking about: brainwashing, thought, reform, and indoctrination, and the emphasis here is on the effect or impact on a person's identity.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

So what does the research tell us? There's been a huge growth in research over the last 20 to 30 years on cults and sects showing consistently some of the following findings. Cults often involve huge power imbalances that can lead, as we were just saying, to profound changes in identity. Where the influence then often becomes self referential. When cult members act on behalf of the group, it actually reinforces that part of their identity which is dominant and dominated by the group, making them feel sometimes as if they're doing it willingly, even though they're actually being controlled by the group and the group leadership.

And it's been consistently shown over decades that this often causes psychological harm. The Aronoff and colleagues review in 2001, and Linda and I have had 2 chapters published in successive volumes of the Encyclopedia of Mental Health in 2015 and 2023, showing that the harm that cults cause has been widely documented over many years.

Also, there's a lot of research and evidence to show that there's controlling and coercive behavior and psychological abuse in modern slavery. There is also increased amounts of research looking at how psychological effects are taking place over time leading to harm that is directly connected to the coercive control or persuasion or undue influence.

There are consistent findings of dissociation, depression and anxiety, often consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD and often complex PTSD, even though length of exposure isn't necessarily a reliable predictor of extent of harm. In other words, people can be harmed after quite a short time. In groups it does vary from individual to individual. And of course there's a huge area of work that needs a lot more attention around people that are born and raised, or second generation survivors or adults and people in multi generation or family groups, and of course, groups and families can be sometimes very hard to distinguish. The case of the 'Cult Next Door' in the BBC. The Documentary about Aravindan Balakrishnan, the Maoist cult leader, exemplified that very clearly.

Most survivors had strong adherence to the groups when they were a member. That's what the evidence tends to show us that most people had strong self identification akin to a totalistic identity when they were caught up in that trauma bond with the cult or sect or its leader. The brain, therefore, was not washed or wiped to empty as the phrase brainwashing can imply, but was actually full of the group and its ideology. And that's, of course, why, sometimes people believe that they're acting on their own free will, even though they're being controlled. So what we've come to understand is that what we see in cults is an interaction between that totalistic identity and the control, the milieu control and the coercion the people are facing within the groups. And there's big implications, then, from this, for recovery.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Yes, the language of coercive control and controlling and coercive behavior allows us to remember there's a person in there who's being controlled by their environment or

milieu, they are controlled by their partner, their group, and if you get them out of there, there's still that person there. They still exist. They've just been exploited and controlled and the milieu control sustains the totalistic identity, and if you get them outside of that, then they can recover, and indeed form a healthy identity in recovery.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

We often draw the distinction ~~out~~ between exit and physical disengagement that takes place over time, but also recovery and rehabilitation. We see these as parallel processes of physical disengagement, but also rehabilitation. There may be that initial physical exit, but actually the deradicalization, deidentification with the group takes place, usually over a longer period. And that's the work that we've developed through RETIRN, UK.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Which is already in its 20th year. It stands for re-entry therapy information and referral network and with re-entry into the community as needed. We often use motivational interviewing and psycho-education in the work that we do, and we refer to other people. No one can do this alone; people might need doctors, lawyers, and community supports and family supports to help people in their recovery.

So some of the implications for recovery is to provide a safe environment that allows the person to be themselves, to be autonomous, to reflect on the ambivalence they'll have about leaving the group of relationship and to resolve that ambivalence, to be able to think critically again, and not have their thinking shrunk into particular set ways of thinking. To have a full range of emotional responses, not the constricted responses emotionally that we see in cults and sects. So this takes sensitivity on the part of the person working with them. It means you need to understand how group influence works. And it also means that if there's current harm being done, then you confront that. And people have a lot of feelings, of shame and guilt about what they've done in the cult, and you help people to address those and helping the person to be less dependent on other people and more autonomous. And helping them with feelings of betrayal and anger about how they've been deceived.

So some of the challenges are to work flexibly with people. and accept that people may work very slowly, take small steps. They may be very distrusting. They have every reason to be distrusting of people. They may be dissociated and forget appointment times. So these are all things that we tolerate and work with. As we're supporting people in their recovery. So as we work to establish that therapeutic alliance, we're very aware of the power dynamics, and we work very carefully not to exploit anyone. People may find that therapy seems kind of artificial and strange. They're very used to pseudo intimacy. And so they're learning about what real relationships are like. So we're transparent about our roles. And we make it a very safe and boundaried space, with much psycho education.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

Psycho-education addresses the identity issues that the research shows, affects people in the group. If somebody joins the group as adult, that includes a pre group identity and looking at what their post group identity is going to be. And that's a core part of the work that is informed by the research about the harm that groups cause along with

unfortunately group harassment, and also the guilt. And the mourning that people feel for those who are left behind on occasions. If someone grew up in a cult, then they need help in building their own identity from the ground up.

One of the issues that people face is a lack of an ideological framework when they come out. Should I expose the group practices becomes a legal and ethical issue, but also explaining the time that you were in the group, explaining it to both jobs and future relationships, and learning again, to operate outside of the group in practical ways. And importantly helping to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty as people emerge with a range of emotions, existential angst, anger, grief returning gradually over time to critical thinking and the ability to make decisions for yourself giving people choices, but not overwhelming people with those choices.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Whatever got stalled when you joined the cult and gave over your time, labor, and resources to it, now needs to be addressed. Perhaps you interrupted your education, your career. Maybe you're having some emotional conflicts that are unresolved. All this needs to be addressed and repairing of relationships that were disrupted and forming new friendships and relationships. And you need to find that balance between not being too neutral when listening to the terrible things that people have been through but also being open to people's feelings of loss and grief.

So the British Psychological Society Division of Clinical Psychology has come up with an alternative approach to understanding people's problems called the Power Threat Meeting Framework, which emphasizes the person story. What has happened to you? The main problem being an abuse of power as a source of distress. So how has power been operating in your life, and how did it affect you?

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

So 'what has happened to you' allows people to examine through psycho education what type of threats did the cult pose to them? What meaning did they ascribe to that? And what did they have to do to survive in that threatening, abusive environment? In that way psychological harm is seen as a threat response and can be seen as something that is an adaptation to that harmful situation. Psychological trauma, then, is seen as a response to threats and abuse in cults. And that's where psycho education allows people to understand that it's not a problem with them - it is a problem with the abusive group and leadership and that's been seemed to be very beneficial, including at Wellspring and in the work we many others do in the field helping cult survivors. And so the Power Threat Meaning Framework can be really well applied to existing counseling models to help survivors of undue influence in cults and sects. It's a shift to destigmatize and empower individuals, and it can be used to address issues of existential loss. The reemergence of an authentic identity and agency from that totalistic identity in the cult to an authentic identity based on personal agency and autonomy.

All of that work about the different models and theories and definitions of cults and undue influence, the research and the approaches to recovery - we brought all of this together and created the unique Masters program on the psychology of coercive control at the University of Salford in 2017. And it's now fully online since September 2020, with students literally from all over the world, studying fully at distance and we're the only Masters program which examines coercive control, coercive persuasion, undue

influence, across extremist groups or cult or sects, but also in relationships, trafficking and gangs.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

And where we work to help people learn how to prevent these problems and how to help people recover.

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

And many of our students and graduates are either already working in the field. They may be mental health practitioners. They can be lawyers. They can be medical practitioners. That can be in whole range of different areas. Or they go on to work in the field. So our dream was to create new generations of people that are better educated about cults and harm, and how to help people recover. If you want more information about the program or about our work then please do get in touch with us at our email addresses. But thank you very much for listening and Danke Schoen.

Linda Dubrow-Marshall:

Merci Bien

Rod Dubrow-Marshall:

Thanks very much. See you soon, everybody.