The vulnerability of growing up on the religious fringe

Amanda van Eck Duymaer van Twist
Why this Research?

• Can children be brainwashed?

• Will they be as stigmatised as their parents who are part of a ‘cult’ or ‘extremist’ group?

• Do they stay or leave?

• What happens to those who stay?
  • Do they believe the same as their parents?

• What happens to those who leave?
  • Can they adjust to the ‘outside world’?
The Findings

• Stigma sticks
  • affects one’s past (memories), present, and future (internalised labels).

• Segregated socialisation may beget segregated lives.
  • Those who stay choose life on the fringe
  • Those who leave still feel they are on the fringe - frequently report adjustment issues and feel like ‘outsiders looking in’.
Support

• Self-help support
  • Former members who ‘understand’
  • Comfortable – same language
  • provide new theological, doctrinal and moral frame
    • Provide secondary socialisation

• Consequences:
  • Burn their bridges with old community, alienate from family
  • Continued us/them attitude
The Passage

The young former members journey from one distinct place to another, passing through a liminal stage where their primary socialisation doesn’t apply and for which they have not been socialised yet.

For many an isolated journey, or one they travel in small numbers, enclosed from other people’s experiences.

The passagee is often looking for an ‘agent’ who will help - for some the agent will define and control aspects of the passage
In the Wilderness

Young former members feel like strangers in society they enter:

• Discrepancy in knowledge and skills
• Discrepancy in norms and values
• Feeling of not fitting in, having been ‘branded’, that other will find out they are ‘faking it’
• Lack the appropriate mindsets
• Fear of the ‘outside’
Ideological Battles

• Those who stayed ‘understood’ the difference between inside and outside, embellished it, and used it as an example of why their way and/or values were superior.

• The ones who left often came to the opposite conclusion, pointing to the differences, occasionally enhancing them, and using them as an example of why the sect is inferior.
  • Often exacerbated by the support they received, where past was criticised as immoral and heretical

NB real abuse has happened, not to be downplayed. But the ideological battles often overshadow the real abuse
Parents/leaders argue the kids are mere pawns
• have to ‘sell atrocity stories’ to gain acceptance outside
• Pawns in political and ideological battle between group and its critics
• Personal issues politicised and whole group blamed
• The young ex-members are not thinking for themselves

Former members argue the parents are mere pawns:
• Parents are middle management
• Leadership always blame the ‘bad apples’ with personal problems for institutional problems.
• Not thinking for themselves - brainwashed
Passing

• Many end up in communities/networks opposed to those they came from
• Mixing and matching does not work
• Reject the old and do whatever it takes to ‘pass for normal’

But the social dynamic they end up in is similar to that of their childhood. They may have joined the wider society but they still feel on the fringe and end up in sectarian opposition to the community of their past

This may be sample bias of course
Implications

- Segregated socialisation may be a real stumbling block for integration
- Those who left feel neither here nor there
- Does the sectarian attitude remain?
  - They feel more ‘here’ by opposing themselves to the old ‘there’
  - At least those in my research did
Questions for Further Research

• A wider sample
  • Always more questions to ask to more people

• Comparisons
  • Those raised in established religions who lost their faith
    • Normlessness, alienation and fear?
  • Second and later generations of immigrant communities
    • Feel neither here nor there?
    • Stigmatised?