

On Being Raised in and Leaving the Exclusive Brethren: Resonances in Adulthood

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Introduction

Despite a heightened awareness of the association between mental health and religion in the fields of psychology and psychotherapy, relatively little literature exists regarding people born into and raised in high demand groups and subsequently leaving. These people are often referred to as the 2nd generation – though with respect to the group we are looking at today it might be more accurate to call them 3rd or even 4th generation.

At the INFORM seminar last November we heard from current members of new religious movements and we heard from some who had left such groups and seemed to have adjusted fairly well. However we did not hear the voices of those who have struggled or who are still struggling.

My aim today therefore is to bring the voices we have not heard and rarely hear to this conference. We rarely hear them because they are often too distressed to speak.

In this paper today I am focussing on the Exclusive Brethren as an example of a high demand group. I do not intend to get into the semantic and definitional argument here about whether they are a New Religious Movement or a fundamentalist sect or even a cult.

Today I will cover the following;

- first a brief overview of this group and their beliefs and practices
- then a thematic analysis of some of the written materials I have received, focussing on the experience of being a child in the brethren and on the experience of leaving
- and finally I will present some quantitative research exploring the resonances in adulthood

As an insider researcher I should state that I was raised in the Exclusive Brethren and left as a teenager when my parents chose to leave in 1960. At that time the then leader of this group, James Taylor Junior, had brought in a doctrine that stated that we should not eat with those not in fellowship with us. To make this clear to you, as I was still at school this would have meant I could no longer have school lunch with my fellow pupils. My parents believed that this was not based on scripture and like many others could not keep silent and so were withdrawn from. Being still at home I simply left with them. I am now a lecturer and a chartered counselling psychologist.

The Exclusive Brethren

From their website the Exclusive Brethren describe themselves as follows:

A Christian Fellowship Known as the Exclusive Brethren

They do not take a name, but are called Exclusive Brethren by many.

Exclusive Brethren are believers on the Lord Jesus Christ. They hold the truth of His deity, and accept the authority of Scripture as the inspired word of God

There are over 40,000 Exclusive Brethren worldwide, who gather on the first day of the week for the Lord's Supper and daily for reading of the Scriptures, and prayer for all who are in authority. Exclusive Brethren are located in over 300 local assemblies in 19 countries located in both northern and southern hemispheres.

A relatively small group then, which began in the 1820s when John Nelson Darby, commonly referred to as JND, began the journey that would lead to him leaving the established church to, as he said:

“ practice the teachings of Holy Scripture in their original purity “

Again from their website :

The brethren like many groups practise separation

Separation

The Exclusive Brethren practice separation from evil, recognising this as God's principle of unity. They shun the conduits of evil communications: television, the radio, and the Internet. Their charter is 2 Timothy 2:19 "The Lord knows those that are his; and, Let every one who names the name of the Lord withdraw from iniquity."

It is this doctrine of separation from evil and the interpretation of it that former members say has led to many difficulties and schisms.

In a fellowship based on separation from evil, there is bound to be a preoccupation with the group's borders. Thus there have been inevitably a number of splits the first already occurring in 1840s when those who took the less drastic line on separation became known as the "Open Brethren".

There have been many schisms over the years and therefore many off shoot groups.

To get some sense of what this doctrine of separation means in practice we can turn again to their website:

Separation

As a matter of conscience, their social activities and links are reserved exclusively for those with whom they celebrate the Lord's Supper. This sacred remembrance of the Lord Jesus and His death is the core of their Christian fellowship, and the inspiration to live a life apart from worldly pleasures and pursuits; a precious heritage passed down the generations.

How does this translate into daily life? Whilst the exclusive brethren will say they do not have rules, from the outside perspective there are rules.

What the brethren might say is that there are things “we do not do” and anyone doing any of them would bring into question their right to be part of the brethren community. The idea is individual conscience and the sign that your conscience is in line with assembly conscience is that you wouldn't be happy doing any of the things the brethren “don't do”.

Nevertheless a list of things the brethren do not do has been created and here are just some of them

Some of the “things the brethren do/do not do”

- Do not live in semi-detached houses or flats
- Do not share drains
- They are expected to attend all meetings
- Children attend EB schools
- They have no friendships outside the brethren
- Women wear long hair and head scarves
- Mortgages can only be obtained within the brethren
- They don't marry outside the brethren
- They used to say no computers, fax machines, mobile phones
- They don't have TV or Radio
- They don't eat in restaurants or stay in hotels
- They don't go on to Further Education or have careers
- They don't go to the Cinema, Theatre, Concerts

Since this list was created some of these 'rules' may have changed – I understand for example that some use of computers and mobile phones is now 'done' and some further education allowed.

What happens then to those who do these things?

What do the brethren say – they speak of assembly discipline and it seems this is based on two processes often referred to as 'shutting up' or 'being withdrawn from' .

A former member told me that the process of 'shutting up' or 'shrinking from' was never intended to be a sanction, but a way of protecting the community from connection with a wrongness. So if there is a clear wrong, but it isn't clear that the person is beyond hope, and the wrong is not something obvious and public, then "shutting up" is the way forward. It is a positional change in which the person is no longer taking active part in the life of the community, and that position can be pointed to, but is intended to be provisional.

In practice what this can mean is that the person shut up has no contact with anyone, not even their own family, except for visits by the priests and in some cases this has lasted several months which some have described as a form of house arrest and very isolating.

"Withdrawing from" is often quite final if the person is considered no longer fit to be part of the community. The point in each case is the community, and the person is secondary in every sense.

Being withdrawn from can mean losing their families, social networks, jobs, homes, everything really. Being 'out of fellowship' can mean marriages being ended and even children being separated from their parents.

A former member wrote:

"When I was eight years old I was kidnapped by the brethren (to "save" me from my father who had left and who was therefore "unclean").

I was kept in the basement in a brethren family house. The words that would describe my feelings then are extreme discomfort, homesickness and desolation.

Rosie

Seceders have been sometimes described as evil – On a personal note I have been described as the 'embodiment of evil'. I was told I was doing Satan's work.

Nearly 10 years ago I started an email support group for former members of the exclusive brethren. Over the years the group has developed into quite a community. From these emails and from other contacts with former members I have collected a considerable quantity of written material. These I have informally thematically analysed and some of these themes I will present to you now.

Talking about their experiences as children

A number of important themes emerged and some of these will now be discussed.

Fear

One theme that has emerged very strongly is the experience of intense fear as children

Fear

"Hell fire, brimstone, ashes, burning hell, all very graphic images presented to us as children and all very real, not metaphorical at all.

Terrifying images"

Jane

Fear

"Fear is a great part of my make-up. I just feel it is always there, maybe because everything in my childhood was loaded with such enormous significance. Every action, every decision had the potential for disaster.

Disgrace, humiliation and rejection were parts of everyday life. People were thrown out of the community and never spoken of again....All the time I could never be sure that my next action or my current thought might not be a violation of the unwritten

codes which I didn't fully know and all that was needed was for someone to find out that about my thoughts or intentions for the weight of the judgement of the righteous to fall upon me."

Mary

Jane was one of many who spoke about the images of hell traumatizing her. Mary seems to have experienced a very invasive sense of fear.

Guilt

Mary goes on to speak of her feelings of guilt she experienced as a child which is another theme that emerged.

Guilt

The highly negative and judgemental atmosphere of Exclusivism with its emphasis on sin and punishment really did present itself in intensely graphic terms to my mind as a child. I cannot quite stop myself even now from imagining that there is some hidden depth, some deep significance, some inevitable but to me, unknown outcome to every action that I am not aware of or have not taken into account which is going to result in my being pronounced guilty of some grave misdemeanour that I hadn't intended to commit."

On a personal level I remember very clearly still a sense of deep guilt but I never really knew what it was that I had done wrong.

Friendships

Children need to play with other children in order to develop social skills. Here are some quotes from leavers about their experiences of making friends

Making Friends

In EB life you don't learn to make friends, you just sort of inherit them. So you don't learn the rules of friendship-making, the growing appreciation of the person whom you have chosen to befriend, and the growing trust in that person's reliability and character etc.

Sandy

At school I felt like a special yet abnormally special and gifted finger amongst a sea of worldly, lost rough sore thumbs. I was viewed, along with other EB kids, as strange and Mormonish by "worldly kids". We were teased, belittled.

Within the brethren special friendships were strongly discouraged

Mark

The intersection of the EB world and the real world could be toxic, or explosive...the artificiality of the restrictions poisoned normal friendships.

Peter

Critical thinking

In order to maintain boundaries and preserve the purity of a closed group, members, including children, are usually discouraged from asking questions or thinking independently. We find this in many high demand groups or cults.

Thinking Critically

"I recall as a child the message to me was clear, asking questions, thinking for myself was not acceptable, it was a sin and would be judged. We could not question the Man Of God.

Faith to me meant blind submission. If I doubted or questioned anything it was because somehow I lacked faith and had got away from God. Being curious was a lack of faith"
Jane

Dissonance

Members report receiving mixed messages – “we are worthless sinners and we are a special people, the elite”. Dissonant feelings were common.

Dissonance

I recall comforting myself as a child when being rejected by my fellow school mates – I would say to myself “I am special because I have seen the light unlike them”. And yet at the same time I believed I was worthless. How can I be special AND worthless?
Jane

Roger Stott, a dear friend and colleague who has helped me over the years with my work but who died sadly a year ago, wrote this to summarise the message given to the children from his perspective – as he saw it.

Children are taught that their whole natural personality is corrupt and unless they completely denounce their whole natural condition, their thoughts, the intellectual capacity to reason and introspect about God and the nature of existence, feelings, actions, and instincts they are in an anti god state and will be damned. Spiritual health and enlightenment come through the realisation that you are wholly bad. Common sense is worthless, self respect is wrong, the human mind is seen as ignorant and wicked and therefore should not be nurtured or listened to.

The message is that normal development of the mind, body and personality is to be dismissed and condemned. The child's discovery of its own physical body, its likes and dislikes, its own kind of curiosity, its instinct to rebel and be independent, is crushed and dismissed by the constant reiteration of the ugliness and the worthlessness, the darkness, of 'the natural man'.
Roger Stott

Those in the audience who have read Carl Rogers will recognise that what Roger seems to be saying here is that he believes that the Rogerian language of unconditional acceptance is incompatible with the brethren teachings of worthlessness. The expression and development of the self is repressed in order to gain acceptance but what is accepted is not the real organismic self but a proxy self.

The experience of leaving the Exclusive Brethren

There are many different ways which lead to people leaving

- they may choose to leave as my parents did
- they made leave simply because their parents left (as I did)
- they may be made to leave via the process of being withdrawn from

From my research it is those who choose to leave who manage the transition best.

Leavers of any closed group have to enter an entirely new sociocultural environment — they are likely therefore to have difficulties with adjustment. 2nd (or 3rd/4th) generation former members experience particular difficulties on leaving.

These include:

- having spent all their childhood in the group they know little about the world outside and may not have the life skills needed and thus be ill equipped to survive. In the BBC Everyman programme one of the brethren interviewed said

“ When someone goes out of fellowship, as you'll know, it's a major major change for them. They're not equipped for world.”

BBC Everyman Programme. The Exclusive Brethren 2003

- leaving may have been traumatic and include great loss. Former members of the brethren talk about the loss of family, friends, jobs, houses, their whole structure of life
- having lost family and friends and not having the skills to make new friends easily many report a strong sense of isolation and for a group of people used to rarely being alone this is very difficult
- they have no previous culture or personality to return to so identity problems are common
- Former members report fearing leaving because of the consequences in this life and in their eternal life. They report being told that there is no happiness outside the group and this can prevent them from taking the step. Many have also reported being told that there will be terrible consequences if they do leave such as demon possession, incurable disease and even death.

Two quotes to illustrate this – the first from someone who has left recently:

After I had stated I was intending to leave the brethren, I had many dark warnings about the cold hard world outside, telling me that there was nobody caring, that everybody was selfish and nasty and ready to use me for what they could get and treat me as disposable afterwards. Daniel left 2007

I was told categorically, in words that filled me with terror that if I left God would punish me. The words they used were “God is not mocked”, with the warning that the Devil would get me. They also said “God commandeth the lightning where it shall strike”. I can tell you that for a few years after I left, I was terrified of thunder

storms.

Joy left 1968

Evidence of their teachings about the world outside comes from their current leader who said:

"What we're trying to bring is the young people through now to see that the world is, the whole principles of the world have to be scorned and disdained and just hated, really, hated.

We have to get a hatred, an utter hatred of the world. Unless you've come to a hatred of the world you're likely to be sucked in by it, and seduced by it . You must hate the world, every feature of the world, at every point you hate it"

B.D. Hales White Book 161
Reading Sydney March 2006

Imagine hearing these words as a child sitting in the meeting room

One former member reflecting on her experience of the process of leaving said:

Reflecting on the process of leaving

- The process of leaving felt crucial and fundamental, like crossing from one side of a chasm to the other. The combination of feeling alienated from this world on the one hand and 'special' on the other ie. not of 'this' world, was in my bones - put there from day one, by the parents that loved me.
- In leaving, I felt a great, almost overwhelming fear of the unknown and being literally, completely on my own in a world I was ignorant of. Also I carried a huge sadness at distressing my parents, particularly the fact that I couldn't make them understand that I still loved THEM.
- The process of leaving involved being deceitful, and behaving in ways that seemed separate from and against my nature - whatever that was!
- I quickly realised that the scant knowledge I had of the world was at least one generation out of date - so I was still 'special', but in a negative, strange, humiliating way.
- Just to 'get through' something or to be invited to 'join-in' anything was the height of my expectations.

Resonances in adulthood

Moving on to my final section the questions I want to address is "What impact, if any, might the experience of being raised in such a environment have on the child's development – and what impact might the process of leaving have on psychological health in adulthood."

We do not know.

Studies on childhood sexual, physical and emotional abuse usually seen as

repeated stress at critical and sensitive stages in the development of a child's brain have demonstrated long lasting negative consequences in adult life. What is also possible is that some forms of strict religious upbringing could have similar detrimental and long lasting sequelae.

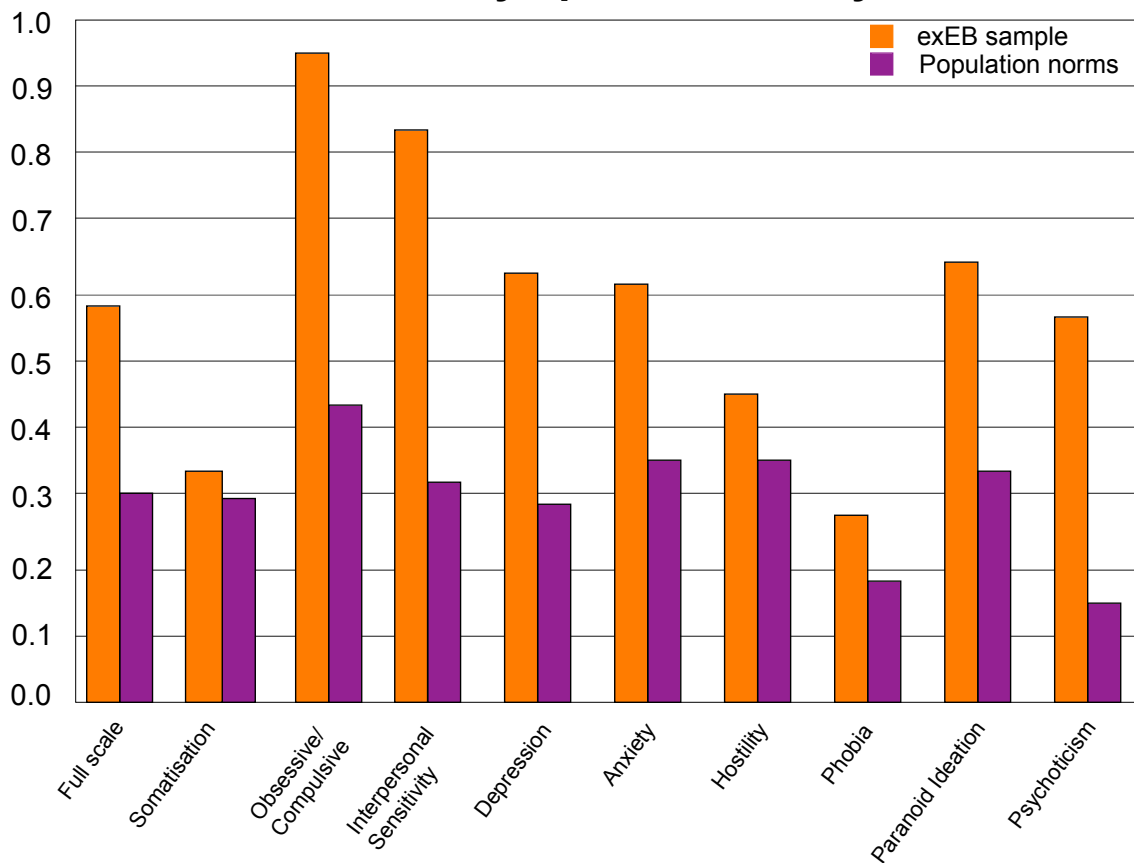
Evidence is emerging that suggests persisting fear and the neurophysiological adaptations to this fear can alter the development of a child's brain, resulting in changes in physiological, emotional, behavioural, cognitive and social functioning. This makes exploration of this area important – we do need answers.

A Quantitative Study

In 1993, I carried out a quantitative study with 295 participants. They completed a battery of questionnaires including the Brief Symptom Inventory which measures levels of psychological health. I only have time today to look at this measure.

The question I was asking was; do former members of groups like the Exclusive Brethren experience psychological problems in adult life.

Brief Symptom Inventory



Looking at this graph – which shows average scores for my sample of former brethren and average scores for the general population - we can see that the overall measure of psychological distress is significantly higher amongst the leavers when compared to the general population. In fact more than one third of my sample reached the cut off point at which they would be considered “cases” as defined by Derogatis who designed this questionnaire. In fact one third of them

have sought help from various sources including therapists, doctors and other professionals.

The Brief Symptom Inventory also yields some subscales. Let us look at where there are significant differences between the ex brethren sample and the normal general population.

Obsessive Compulsive Behaviour

Here we can clearly see the significant difference between the two samples. The difference reflects perhaps the constant vigilance former members have described developing as children to ensure their safety in terms of rejection and judgement from the brethren and from god – a kind of watchfulness

Interpersonal sensitivity

What emerged here was a sense of personal inadequacy and inferiority. 53% of the ex brethren sample reported they were distressed by being easily hurt
One of the most poignant realisations on leaving is the end of feeling part of a chosen people – elite no more

We know that social support provided by friends leads to positive psychological and physical outcomes in later adulthood.

One member described why some former members have few friends.

“On leaving the brethren you lose your social network so completely it's like an amputation. Making new friends is hard because you don't have 'normal' social skills - even your language is a bit odd ... You don't know how to FIND new friends, let alone trust them when you do, you don't know the culture, can't fit in”

Depression

It is not surprising that this scale shows elevated scores for the ex brethren sample as an association between life events or chronic difficulties and depression has been long established.

Anxiety

If we reflect on what my participants have said about their experience of fear in childhood it is not surprising to find elevated scores on this scale too.

Paranoid Ideation

The high scores here reflect perhaps the existence of thoughts that they are being watched or talked about by others - as indeed many reported they were when in the group

Psychoticism

This scale actually measure a sense of alienation from the world rather than psychoticism as such, and perhaps reflects the experience of being raised in a

group whose holds strongly to a doctrine of separation They now live in a world that is alien to them. This links strongly with the acculturation theories.

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

I also found much evidence of the symptomatology of PTSD such as hypervigilance, nightmares, avoidance of triggers such as the bible, churches, and so on, and flashbacks. Unfortunately I don't have time to go into this here but we are looking at Developmental Trauma probably.

And Finally

Returning to the voices what do former members say about themselves now?

- Today, I feel the two aspects of my life that are still limited by my past, are self-confidence and courage. However, I am no longer content to 'duck and dive' in order to fit in, but want to stand firm in what I am now ie. not just on the inside.

- I am aware of sometimes retreating into a dark, inner place, that still contains some empty remnants of my past, because it is a familiar place. But it is a dead-end and now serves no purpose in my life.

- So my aim now is simply to make the most of my life on this planet, and to treat every day as a new opportunity to do so..... Iris

Many other themes have emerged relating to the psychological difficulties that former brethren experience today. I don't have time to do more today than provide you with a list.

Problems still experienced

- Intolerance of disagreement
- Oversensitive
- Difficulty explaining to others
- Loneliness
- Making decisions
- Abandonment and rejection
- Having no opinion or not daring to voice it
- Anger
- Dissociation
- Destabilising of sense of self
- Lost or uncertain Identity

And so I come to an end and I hope I have given you a taste of some of the very real problems that those who are raised in and leave the Exclusive Brethren, or indeed any other high demand group, experience. As a friend said recently:

"Many who find an escape from the cage find it hard to enjoy their freedom, they don't know how, and for some, the potency of freedom can be fatal."
Tom

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