

The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing Up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment

An Academic Conference Presentation Paper By

Gill Harvey,
Middlesex University/Metanoia Institute

Abstract: *Family and religion have been shown to be important to the majority of people in both the United Kingdom and the United States. Numerous research studies suggest that childhood relationships and environment are influential to mental health and well-being, with research on religious families significantly increasing in the last few decades. The purpose of this study is to explore counselors' experiences of the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood, across the Abrahamic traditions within the United Kingdom. The primary objectives are to psycho-educate professionals to recognize and understand the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood, and to add to the sparse literature on this largely hidden topic. In-depth, qualitative, non-structured interviews were conducted with eight counselors (one withdrew at pre-analysis stage), who were collaborative co-researchers throughout the process. The focus of this article aligns with one of the interpretative readings of the interview transcripts undertaken by the researcher and co-researchers during the research process, namely appraising issues of power and control. The author outlines her insider researcher background, chosen methodology, co-researcher recruitment, and ethical considerations, before sharing the co-researchers' stories around the power and control dynamics of a fundamentalist religious upbringing. The co-researchers' adult religiosity is briefly outlined, before some brief reflections conclude the article.*

Keywords: Power, Control, Fundamentalism, Religion, Mental Health, Religious Trauma

Introduction

Maybe the journey isn't so much about becoming anything. Maybe it's about unbecoming anything that really isn't you so that you can become who you were meant to be in the first place.¹ The focus of this article is on one aspect of the findings of my doctoral research project,

¹ Attributed to Paulo Coelho.

called “Both Sides of the Coin: Counselors’ Stories of the Influence of a Fundamentalist Upbringing on Mental Health and Well-being in Adulthood.” The author originally presented on one aspect of the findings with the talk, “The Power and Control Dynamics of Growing Up in an Abrahamic Faith Environment” at the Global Center for Religious Research’s International eConference on Atheism in September 2020, and the information presented then will form the basis of this article.

Being an “insider researcher” has provided the author with the very personal answer to one frequently asked question in academic circles, namely “Why does this research matter?” Indeed, her own developmental experiences have been the bedrock on which her doctoral work of the last four years has been built, and have provided the resilience to cope with the onerous, rigorous demands of engaging in such a personally relevant research project. Born in the mid-1950s in a small town in Wales, in the United Kingdom, the second child of a working-class family, the author recalls her early years as being happy and secure. This was because her family was historically and multi-generationally steeped in chapel religiosity dating back to the Welsh Christian revival (1904–05), and they lived in a small community where everybody cared for everyone else. However, while outward appearances suggested that she was growing up in a loving, secure family environment, the reality was significantly different, following her mother’s radical conversion to a fundamentalist, evangelical Christian, cult-like group when she was just three years old. Following her conversion, her mother became a strict, absolutist, authoritarian disciplinarian, who used aspects of religion as a manipulative tool, with threats that the author would go to hell for minor misdemeanors being common, alongside scary tales of “the second coming of Christ,” and the risk of being “left behind” when the rapture happened. The author’s father, although constantly physically present in her growing-up years, was passive and emotionally absent. Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, she now has much more understanding of the imbalance of power and control that were present in her growing-up years, particularly as a child or young person, in comparison to the powerful position that her parents held. It has taken many years of processing the effects of her own religious trauma in therapy and elsewhere, as well as coming to terms with the painful ostracism and shunning she continues to be subjected to by members of her own family-of-origin, once thought to be her “nearest and dearest.” However, she now understands that the family, although no longer religious, continues to operate like a cult, having both “insiders” and “outsiders.”

During this research process she has realized that, while for many years she was convinced that she and her siblings were the only ones who had grown

from “their own cultural and social frames” of reference.¹⁶ It is also crucial to note that each child’s experience of a religious upbringing is “unique and idiosyncratic” with religion being only “one element among many influences in childhood.”¹⁷ It is arguably also essential to have awareness of the tension that religious parents hold, between the “right to give their children a religious upbringing and a duty to avoid indoctrinating them.”¹⁸ Consequently, while parents arguably have “a moral right” to share their religion with their offspring, this potentially “violates the child’s right to an open future,”¹⁹ especially if exclusivist religious beliefs result. Convincingly, Heimlich argues that “the difference between healthy faith and dangerous faith, where children are concerned ... is whether children are living in a religious authoritarian environment”²⁰ in which they are totally controlled and disempowered.

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¹⁶ Frisk, “Growing Up,” 65.

¹⁷ Birtwistle and Smith, *Children Growing Up*, 1.

¹⁸ Hand, “Religious Upbringing Considered,” 545.

¹⁹ Morgan, “Religious Upbringing, Religious Diversity,” 367.

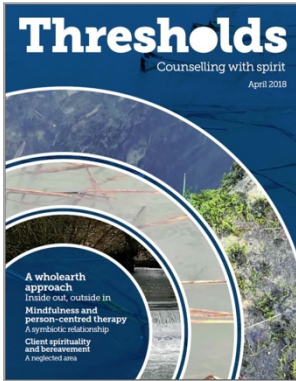
²⁰ Heimlich, *Breaking Their Will*, 20.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Gill Harvey, D.Psych, BACP (Senior Accredited), ACC (Accredited) is a therapeutic counselor/psychotherapist, supervisor, researcher, and trainer working mainly in private practice in the United Kingdom. She is also the program leader for the MA in Therapeutic Counseling and Psychotherapy at Waverley Abbey College. Gill completed her doctorate at Metanoia Institute/Middlesex and has recently carried out research on "the influence of a fundamentalist religious upbringing on mental health and well-being in adulthood." She can be contacted at: counselling@gillharvey.co.uk; gill.harvey@metanoia.ac.uk or www.gillharvey.co.uk; @GillHarvey20.

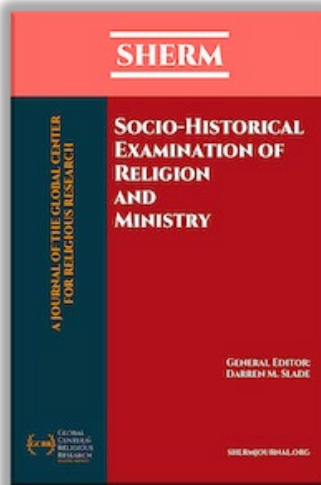
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