

# **Exit Counseling and the Decline of Deprogramming**

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## **Abstract**

An old model of forcibly deprogramming persons from controversial ideological organizations has given way to progressive, non-coercive models that emphasize dialogue within voluntary "exit counseling" settings. These non-coercive models approach counseling events partly as family crises that usually require careful preparation with relatives and friends. Counselors structure the meetings in ways that work within the value systems of the groups from which they are trying to remove their subjects. Moreover, they attempt to empower their subjects by giving them degrees of autonomy and control as the counseling sessions proceed. This new generation of exit counselors avoids the questionable and often forcible practices that deprogrammers undertook in the past. They also are attempting to regulate their profession by limiting their cooperative work with other counselors to those who adhere to a code of ethics. Nevertheless, competition and debate exist among counselors who use slightly different non-coercive models. This study discusses and positions these developing trends in exit counseling within the historical and cultural contexts in which forcible deprogramming first emerged but gradually declined.

In the early 1970s, a countercult movement emerged in response to controversial, ideologically driven groups throughout the Western world. This oppositional movement challenged these groups' attempts both to attract youthful converts and to gain societal legitimacy. Such challenges included allegations that the groups used coercion, manipulation, and deception in their efforts to recruit and maintain members. On this important issue of recruitment, the ideology of the countercult movement intended to "confer a specific deviant status on those individuals who joined new religions" (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 25) or other ideological organizations such as fringe political parties and many motivational programs (Coates 1994: 93; see Robbins and Anthony 1982: 283). The deviant status insisted that converts had been brainwashed, and this interpretation legitimated the exercise of specific forms of intervention against members of these high-demand ideologies. At the time, the interveners referred to their actions as "deprogramming," which assumed that young converts were "unable to manage their own lives and decisions . . ." (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 125). Sociological research on deprogramming concluded that persons (called deprogrammers) who undertook the practice saw their mission as "restoring earlier-valued social relationships" (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 125), but more generally, family and friends of these converts shared deeply rooted concerns about the converts' well-being in a variety of areas (Langone 1993: 22-23).

Considerable scholarship focused on certain aspects of deprogramming, particularly on the array of legal issues that related to the practice. While a few academics looked at deprogramming as either a necessary evil or an appropriate response to a social and mental health crisis (Delgado 1977; 1984), most sociologists were highly critical of it (for example, Wright 1987: 93-98). Some critics discussed deprogramming in the context of alleged religious repression (for example, Shupe, Spielmann, and Stigall 1978) and reputed civil liberties violations, while others referred to its vigilante status (Shupe and Bromley 1980). In addition, most social scientists objected to the increased interpretive role that deprogramming provided to both the mental health

profession and the popular media regarding the dynamics of new religions (see Robbins and Anthony 1982).

This scholarship, however, needs to be revisited following the virtual elimination of involuntary extractions (at least in North America) since the early 1990s, and their replacement with systematic programs of voluntary exit counseling. North America's most active "exit counselors" responded to pressures imposed by the target groups, legal decisions, and professionalization, and they developed intervention techniques that appear to be effective and far less controversial than deprogramming in facilitating members' decisions to leave high-demand ideological groups. Although these "successes" might be the consequence of well-understood processes of attitude change in social psychology, most exit counselors continue to describe their achievements according to "mind control" or "thought reform" models. Such models are the subject of fierce debate among sociologists of religion, but they receive much more support within the mental health community.

In this article, many of the insights about exit counseling come from one of the authors (Szimhart), who became a professional deprogrammer and exit counselor in 1986. Now semi-retired because of other commitments, Szimhart estimates that he was involved in more than 300 cases, with perhaps less than 10% of those cases involving the forcible acquisition of deprogrammees. In 1991, he decided not to participate further in forcible deprogrammings, partly because he had faced criminal charges over a failed deprogramming in Idaho — a legal case that he won two years later in a jury trial. ". . . [T]he jury believed that while [co-defendants Kenneth] Paolini and [Joseph] Szimhart may have broken the law, it was probably necessary in this case" (Dvorak and Ronnow 1993). In September 1991, when a national magazine featured an article about him, Szimhart's "average fee [was] between \$300 to [sic] \$400 a day. At least a quarter of his consultations [were] pro bono and over the phone" (Disend 1991: 35).

The other author (Kent) is a sociologist who has spoken with and interviewed hundreds of persons who hold various relationships to controversial groups: current members; former members; relatives of current or former members; law enforcement; etc. (see Kent, 2001). Many of his

interview subjects had been the targets of deprogramming attempts; several parents (and one former law-enforcement official) also spoke to him about their efforts in this regard. Because many of the interviews that he conducted were with people who were active during a period when forcible deprogrammings were common, he was struck by the contrast between the earlier activities in the 1970s and 1980s and the virtual collapse of such activities during the mid- to late-1990s. The motivation for this article, therefore, is a desire to identify and analyze a major shift within the countercult movement — a shift that one of the authors (Szimhart) has experienced directly.

### **A Traditional Overview of Deprogramming**

Deprogramming came into being in the early 1970s, not only because of the countercult movement's activities, but also because of desperate and bewildered family members' need for it. As the numbers of young adults increased who were involved in high-demand ideological groups (especially religious ones), "growing numbers of families became concerned with the role of cults in their children's new and disturbing behavior: dropping out of school, cutting ties to families and friends and sometimes disappearing completely" (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 59). Moreover, parents who were able to obtain information about their adult children's beliefs and behavior inside their newly joined groups often grew deeply concerned about their offspring's physical and emotional well-being (Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver 1984: 129).<sup>i</sup> By believing that their children were "brainwashed," parents construed that the unconventional activities and beliefs of their loved ones had arisen through the "mind control" techniques of the organization. Certainly memories of Charles Manson's grip over his followers haunted parents, and the brainwashing model gained even greater support during the mid-1970s' spectacle of Patricia Hearst's transformation from kidnap victim to terrorist. As her story unfolded, it reinforced in parents' eyes the ability of abusive groups to orchestrate dramatic personality changes.<sup>ii</sup> More ominously, the 1978 murder-suicides of Jim Jones and his followers in Guyana represented a worst-case scenario that all parents of so-called "cult" members feared.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet even in the months before Jonestown, when Flo Conway and Jim Siegelman wrote about "the sudden, drastic

alteration of personality in all its many forms" and called it "snapping," parents were certain that these authors were describing what had happened to their young adult children (Conway and Siegelman 1978: 13). Deprogramming, many parents hoped, would "snap" them back out of the "cult" mindset. Indeed, four years later, these same authors published survey findings that seemed to prove the therapeutic value of deprogramming. Based upon "more than 400 former cult members from 48 different groups" (Conway and Siegelman 1982: 88). They reported:

More than two-thirds (71 percent) of those in our survey were deprogrammed, but only about 40 percent were abducted. In almost every case, those who were deprogrammed recovered more quickly and experienced fewer long-term effects than those who were not. Deprogrammees needed an average 10 months less rehabilitation time than non-deprogrammees (14 months instead of 24 months) and reported, on the average, less than half the long-term effects (Conway and Siegelman 1982: 92).<sup>iv</sup>

Parents and other loved ones, therefore, believed that they had scientific proof for the value of deprogramming, even if the deprogrammers had to use some measure of force.

Not only did many loved ones believe that deprogramming had therapeutic value, but also the deprogrammers themselves promised to restore independent thinking to individuals, thereby allowing them to make decisions about their lives outside of the restrictions of the ideologically high-demand groups to which they had belonged. Sociologists writing about deprogramming, therefore, may have underplayed the more altruistic motives of many deprogrammers when they concluded that, in significant ways, they were "agents to whom parents delegated authority in order to restore their sons and daughters to career paths more in line with the parents' own conceptions of normalcy" (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 121). Many deprogrammers said that it was equally if not more important to restore (what they called) critical thinking to persons who, in the deprogrammers' view, had lost the capacity to think critically because of techniques of

manipulation that "cults" used on them. Psychologist Brock Kilbourne (1983: 380), therefore, captured only some aspects of deprogramming when he defined it as a "practice which aims to return cult converts to prior and conventional commitments to family, work, and community, and may entail the use of force." Worth emphasizing, however, is that parents and relatives also saw deprogrammers as counselors who would assist "cult-involved" loved ones in realizing the potential consequences of injurious or dangerous behaviors in which many of them were engaged.

The stereotypical portrayal of deprogramming was that it involved force to combat the previous "programming" of the members by the so-called "cults." According to Coulter (1984: 98), the need for deprogramming was "based on the assumption that a barrage of experiences and indoctrination has resulted in the closing off of the person's brain to normal critical debate, and that this can only be undone by a similar barrage of new information about the group to which he or she belongs, to break down that resistance to criticism." Presumably, many deprogrammers felt that the only way to undo the alleged damage caused by "brainwashing" was to employ somewhat similar tactics that the so-called "cults" used to "program" members in the first place. They imposed these tactics through the use of force if they deemed it necessary.

The actual repertoire of tactics that deprogrammers used, however, was quite wide and diverse, and they varied according to the peculiar demands of individual cases. As David Bromley realized, "there are numerous possible combinations of coercive and voluntary deprogramming, rehabilitation, and therapy" (Bromley 1988: 195). When deprogrammers used force, it usually occurred in any of four aspects of the "deprogramming" event. First, the "deprogrammers" (or parents working with them) frequently grabbed their unwilling "targets," placed them in vehicles, and transported them to pre-arranged locations (Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver 1984: 129). (Critics, of course, called these acts assault and kidnapping). Second, deprogrammers detained their targets (at least initially) against their wills (acts their critics called forcible confinement). Third, they sometimes restrained persons who physically resisted, seemed at risk of self-harm, or were likely to try to escape. Fourth, some deprogrammers denigrated detainees' religious

beliefs or leaders, justifying these actions as attempts to stir cult-deadened emotions (but eliciting charges from critics of religious rights violations). Even in the 1970s, however, serious divisions existed between deprogrammers who used force and at least some exit counselors who insisted upon non-coercive contact and interaction with members whom they hoped would leave controversial groups. Indeed, one exit counselor, former Scientologist Nan McLean (from Ontario, Canada), testified against deprogrammer Ted Patrick when he forcibly confined Scientologist Paula Dain and then brought in McLean (who did not know about the circumstances) to assist him (Dain v. Patrick 1979; McLean 1979; Superior Court 1980).

The deprogramming movement was disorganized, with no national or even regional conferences having been held before the 1980s to discuss and evaluate the deprogramming process (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 123). Frequently, families and deprogrammers connected through the social networks within various "anti-cult" groups such as the Parents Committee to Free Our Sons and Daughters from the Children of God (FREECOG, which formed around 1971 to combat the Children of God), the more-widely focused Volunteer Parents of America (VPA, which formed in southern California in 1973), and the Citizens Freedom Foundation (CFF or C.F.F., which formed in 1974 as an overall educational organization [Coates 1994: 94; Rambur 1974]).<sup>v</sup> In turn, CFF changed its name to the Cult Awareness Network (CAN) in 1985 (Crampton, n.d.: 12a), and CAN (like the CFF) held conferences that deprogrammers attended in order to meet others in the occupation and obtain parental contacts for future work.

An insinuation by an FBI agent that CAN might have been involved in planning a deprogramming appeared in a 1992 sworn affidavit by Special Agent Scott Salter. In referring to an earlier incident in which deprogrammer Galen Kelly allegedly (and, it turned out, actually) had kidnapped the wrong woman for deprogramming, agent Salter reported that the intended victim's mother "placed calls to the Cult Awareness Network in Chicago in the three months prior to the May 5, 1992 abduction" (Salter 1992: 8). He did not indicate, however, what the mother and any CAN personnel discussed, so one cannot deduce that CAN was involved in any way with this kidnapping/deprogramming incident.

However sympathetic many early CAN members might have been to deprogramming,<sup>vi</sup> the organization itself played no formal role in facilitating or monitoring deprogrammers' activities. In 1988, CAN's Board of Directors even passed (by unanimous consent) a policy stating "No officers, Board Members, or paid staff of the Cult Awareness Network or its affiliates may participate in involuntary de-programming" (Cult Awareness Network 1988: 12). With all of the major countercult organizations officially distancing themselves from deprogramming, neither the active members of these organizations nor the deprogrammers themselves developed any formalized, professional, or ethical standards during the first two decades that deprogrammers operated. Discussions, however, about such standards were taking place during the mid-1980s within the social networks of CAN (see Giambalvo 2000: 1).<sup>vii</sup>

### **Early Forms of Deprogramming--Ted Patrick and the Coercive Model**

In the 1970s and 1980s, many types of deprogramming existed, but the one that received the most attention from both the media and academics was the coercive method that Ted Patrick practiced (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 122). Patrick was Governor Ronald Reagan's Special Representative for Community Relations in California (Patrick and Dulack 1976: 37), and he became interested in the activities of the new religions when members of the Children of God attempted to convert his son and his nephew. Around the same time, he was receiving numerous complaints about the activities of this organization from concerned citizens. After his subsequent investigation, Patrick concluded that these organizations were "programming" individuals, and that the only way to return independent thinking capabilities to these people was to forcibly break the "mind control" that new religious "cults" had over their members. Thus, in 1971, Patrick coined the term *deprogramming* (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 123). In what may be the only systematic study about the impact of coercive deprogramming on a controversial group, Bromley concluded that Patrick "played a dominant role in the early history of deprogramming," through his own coercive extractions and "through the network of trainees and disenchanting members who subsequently followed in his footsteps" (Bromley 1988: 198). The combined efforts of

these deprogrammers "certainly had an impact" upon the Unification Church in the mid- to late-1970s and early 1980s (Bromley 1988: 204).

According to Shupe and Bromley (1980: 122):

coercive deprogramming was marked by abducting and detaining members of 'cults' against their will, haranguing them for extended periods of time under emotionally charged conditions, and then achieving in such individuals rapid redefinitions of their former religious experiences and beliefs that culminated in their apostasy.

Again, however, these sociologists may have stereotyped the process, because the image of "haranguing" deprogrammers belied the obvious fact that persuasion and dialogue were the preferred techniques whenever possible. Nevertheless, the logic and practice of coercive deprogramming began with the concerned but extra-legal (and, critics insisted, vigilante) response of one man, at the same time that families began meeting to discuss common grievances and concerns about the influence of high-demand religions or other ideological organizations in the lives of their loved ones.

### **Published Responses to Deprogramming by Critics and Target Groups**

According to deprogramming critics, a combination of pressures on the individual resulted in physical and emotional fatigue that supposedly wore down the member's resistance to accepting the deprogrammer's views (see, for example, Coulter 1984; Melton and Moore 1982; Richardson *et al.* 1986; Shupe and Bromley 1980; Stoner and Parke 1977). Such representations of coercive deprogramming had occasional basis in fact, although some of the members already were fatigued from the regime of "cult" involvement, and actually gained rest and strength during the deprogramming experience. Predictably, however, the harsh and degrading tone that many academics (especially sociologists)<sup>viii</sup> used to describe the process appeared in counter-deprogramming publications that various target groups themselves distributed to their members. The Children of God, for example, published at least three articles for its members against deprogramming. One article

was a reprint of a March 1975 Canadian newspaper article critical of Patrick and deprogramming (Harpur 1975). Later, in September, COG published a member's tale of the two deprogramming attempts that he had survived (one by Patrick himself [Cephas 1975]). Roughly two years later, the group reproduced another media article, this time from a Belgian magazine, which was very critical of Patrick and deprogramming ('*Special*' Magazine 1977).<sup>ix</sup>

The most successful publication against deprogramming that a target group produced, however, was a 9-page "how-to" manual that surfaced in various countries during 1976 and 1977.<sup>x</sup> Dedicated to Ted Patrick, the fake manual advocated numerous techniques that deprogrammers were to use against their targets: food termination, sleep withdrawal, shame-inducement through nudity, physical coercion, verbal stress, the destruction of the target's holy works from the controversial group, and sex with the target individuals (POWER 1976: 5-7). Copies of this manual appeared in Australia (Cheyney 1977; Hooks 1978; *Perth Sunday Independent* 1977; Tobin 1977), Canada (Flinn 1977; Marshall 1976), (probably) New Zealand (*Central Leader* 1977), the United Kingdom (Beckford 1985: 228-230; Ezard 1976), and the United States.<sup>xi</sup> The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) received the manual as a factual account, and it appeared in an information booklet that (at the time) Moonie sympathizer Dr. Herbert Richardson of the Toronto School of Theology prepared for the ACLU's February 5, 1977 conference on "Religious Deprogramming." Exactly one month later, the ACLU adopted a resolution "condemning use of deprogramming by parents attempting to recover their children from high-demand religious cults" (*Philadelphia Daily News* 1977).<sup>xii</sup> In addition, the Belgian magazine article that the Children of God translated and distributed to its members worldwide referred to the manual ('*Special*' Magazine 1977: 5).

Suspensions about the deprogramming manual's authenticity quickly surfaced in Australia (Tobin 1977), and a prominent Canadian reporter linked it to Scientology (Marshall, 1976)—a connection strengthened later with references found in Scientology's Guardian Office material uncovered in the 1977 FBI raids against the organization. In the United Kingdom, however, the prestigious *Guardian* newspaper (not related to Scientology) carried a concerned article about the manual's

contents (Ezard 1976). A suspicious Australian group, the Better Family Relations Association, criticized the manual in the press, as did New Zealand's Family Unity and Freedom of Worship (*Central Leader* 1977). British sociologist James Beckford located the manual and the organization (named POWER, or People's Organized Workshop on Ersatz Religions) that published it in the context of efforts to discredit both Britain's countercult "parents association" named FAIR, and individuals who had a countercult reputation (Beckford 1985: 230). More disturbingly, new religions' supporter Frank K. Flinn accepted the manual's authenticity in his article against deprogramming in a Canadian "new religions" newsletter in 1977 (Flinn 1977), as did Australian psychologist Michael W. Ross, who published a highly critical academic article against it (Ross 1979). If, by manufacturing the fake document, the Guardian Office's intention was to horrify the public and its decision-makers by portraying deprogramming as a violent, sexually exploitative practice, then the tactic had considerable success.

### Controversies and the Decline of Deprogramming

Several issues concerning the American First Amendment rights of individuals being deprogrammed arose during and after the late 1970s, and these issues had parallels in countries throughout the Western world. Often, in the eyes of the law, the forcible abduction of members of new religious movements was kidnapping. According to Shupe and Bromley (1980: 130) the use of forcible abduction was "the single most important reason that deprogrammers were never able to establish themselves as a legitimate occupation."

In the United States, "[t]he First Amendment embraces two concepts--freedom to believe and freedom to act" (Bromley and Richardson 1980: 240). Other Western countries have analogous protections legally guaranteeing religious worship and religious behavior. Consequently, supporters of new religions whose members were targets for deprogramming condemned deprogramming for allegedly violating these basic human rights (see Levine 1980: 34; Robbins 1979: 43; Ross 1979: 205). Deprogramming's American critics claimed further that intervention to extricate and deprogram members of new religions was ethically wrong because "such interference with the rights of nonconforming religious

believers is constitutionally illegal and it violates the moral principles—chiefly the rights to equal concern and respect—on which the constitution is based” (Robbins, Shepherd, and McBride 1985: 95-96). According to Slade (1979: 81), “a number of decisions in state and federal appellate courts have supported this religious freedom” and “the laws guarantee that courts and court officers cannot be used to deny an individual’s basic rights to freedom of religion, speech, association, and privacy.”

For defenders of deprogramming, the issue was not freedom of religion and practice, but free and informed choice. Robbins and Anthony (1978: 77) stated that “the First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, but necessary to each guaranteed freedom is freedom of thought.” Again, since supporters of deprogramming believed that authoritarian new religions controlled the minds of their members, these supporters were convinced that intervention often was the only way to return the members’ independent thinking capabilities. From this perspective, forcible seizure and physical restraint did not violate the First Amendment. Rather, by restoring the individuals’ ability to think freely, the deprogrammers returned peoples’ First Amendment rights (see Delgado 1977; 1984).

Indeed, deprogrammers and their supporters insisted that even though the practice of forcible removal was illegal, it was necessary to prevent the commission of an even greater evil. They insisted that the group’s control mechanisms inhibited members’ physical and psychological safety to the extent that members could not leave voluntarily (see Shupe, Bromley, and Oliver 1984: 129-132). Occasionally “the necessity defense” (or a variation of it) served to acquit deprogrammers whose failed efforts eventually landed them in court (see, for example, *District Court of the United States* 1974: 77-80).<sup>xiii</sup>

Deprogrammers also necessarily believed that members of new religious movements were “brainwashed” or operated under “mind control.” They reasoned that, for a person to be deprogrammed, he or she first must have been “programmed.” As popularly defined, *brainwashing* means that an individual or group has absolute control over another’s thinking and reasoning. The original definition of the term, however, is more directly related to the thought-

reform and coercive-persuasion techniques employed in the Korean POW camps and post-Mao Chinese re-education programs (Lifton 1961; Zimbardo and Andersen 1993: 107). According to Philip Zimbardo and Susan Andersen (1993: 106):

It is a person (or various persons) in a convincing social situation—not gadgets or gimmicks—who controls the minds of others. The more worried we are about being regarded ignorant, uncultured, untalented, or boring, the more likely we are to take on the beliefs of those around us to avoid being rejected by them.

Taking a somewhat broader approach, Streiker (1984: 127) stated that the use of the term *brainwashing* “should be restricted to instances of acute depersonalization accomplished through the use of force and life-threatening stress.” No proof exists that any magical “brainwashing” formula exists, but the debate about the appropriateness of the term continues as social scientists attempt to identify the circumstances in which use of the term may be appropriate (see, for example, Kent and Hall 2000; and articles in Zablocki and Robbins [eds.] 2001).

Most new religious organizations recruited members through persuasion, manipulation, and/or deception and did not resort to the use of force. Nevertheless, controversial religions frequently used front groups to deceive recruits about the true nature of their organizations. Some used manipulation to indoctrinate members, gradually cutting off members’ ties to the outside world in an attempt to ensure that they became completely dependent upon their new sectarian environments. Group leaders and members also placed potential recruits in situations (such as high-speed praying, chanting in foreign languages, frenetic physical activity, complete stillness, etc.) for which they had no previous frames of meaning, and then provided meanings by (mis)attributing spirituality to those activities and the resultant feelings or sensations that they evoked (see Kent 1994). Deprogrammers might have perceived these conditions as “brainwashing” or “mind control,” but as Robbins and Anthony (1978: 77) stated a number of years ago, “. . . it seems far-fetched to equate movements such as

Hare Krishna or the Unification church which exhibit a rapid turnover and a high dropout rate (even without deprogramming), with POW camps."

Critics of coercive deprogramming said the practice was as bad as, or worse than, the recruitment and re-socialization techniques used in the controversial new religions (Bromley and Richardson 1980: 79; Stoner and Parke 1977: 230). Robbins, Shepherd, and McBride (1985) argued that while deprogrammers criticized the imposition of force and total environmental control that "cults" supposedly used to coercively change a person's opinion, the deprogrammers themselves used such tactics as "brainwashing," "mind control," and "coercive persuasion." One sociological study (Kim 1979: 201) argued that deprogramming itself was a form of coercive persuasion.

In a study that analyzed 94 parents' responses to a questionnaire (the parents self-reported to a non-random sample) concerning their experiences with deprogramming, Langone found, "on the average, one-fourth to one-third of forced deprogrammings result in the convert's returning to the cult," although an additional 9% of these returnees eventually left voluntarily (Langone 1984: 74). When a deprogramming attempt failed, the member often returned to the new religious organization even more committed to its doctrines and lifestyle than before the intervention took place. Members of new religious organizations, for example, were under the impression that they were being persecuted in the same manner as the early Christians had been (Stoner and Parke 1977: 253). Coulter (1984: 102) stated that:

kidnapping cult members, restraining them against their will and subjecting them to brutal assault on their personalities until they finally confess they are wrong and agree to renounce their beliefs . . . does nothing but strengthen the claims of the cults that they are suffering from religious persecution because of their beliefs.

Members believed that, like the Catholics, they would work their way to world respectability and acceptance. From this perspective, individuals who escaped a deprogramming felt that they have "won a battle" (Stoner and Parke 1977: 253). Because controversial religious movements claimed to be

victims whose members suffered persecution as a result of their beliefs, these groups taught their members to expect confrontation. In this way, deprogrammer interventions served to strengthen members' beliefs in the accuracy of the groups' predictions (Coulter 1984: 102).

Stoner and Parke (1977: 269) contended that many deprogrammers were:

ill-prepared and untrained in handling the psychological aspects of the intricate task they so readily undertake. Many, too, were lacking in the practical organizational skills that are necessary for projects that involve the sanity and self-images of those they seek to rescue.

Because controversial religious organizations promise their members peace, love, world unity, and happiness, deprogrammed members often felt shattered when they accepted that they had been lied to, and that the goals they had worked so hard for were unattainable. Even with their dreams of love, peace, and happiness destroyed, recently deprogrammed members often entered a state of identity confusion known as "floating" (which might be a form of dissociation), in which they vacillated between their "cult" and "non-cult" lives. During this time, an individual was "most likely to day-dream about his [or her] shattered religious dreams and long for the security of life within the religious cult" (Stoner and Parke 1977: 271). Pavlos (1982: 148) concluded, ". . . it seems clear that all too often the highly structured life of the cult wins out and the cultist becomes even more committed to an extreme cult lifestyle."

### **Conservatorships**

In the period from 1975 to 1977, American judges commonly granted temporary conservatorships and guardianships to parents concerned about the mental stability of children involved in new religions (Robbins 1979: 42). A conservatorship was a court order that legally allowed parents to remove their children from the new religious organizations. To obtain the court order, the parents had to convince a judge that their child's mental and physical well-being was sufficiently jeopardized to warrant such action (Enroth 1977: 199). By 1981, ". . . [b]ills that would allow



courts under certain conditions to assign temporary guardians to adults who have joined so-called cults ha[d] been introduced in Connecticut, Illinois, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania and Texas" (Berreby 1981: 3). In the next year, the Kansas House passed along a bill to the Senate that would have given "parents a clear right to retrieve their children for deprogramming from religious sects" (*Tampa Tribune* 1982). Among the most successful organizations to use conservatorship laws was the Tucson, Arizona-based Freedom of Thought Foundation, whose deprogrammers extracted more than 70 young people from various controversial groups during slightly more than a year of operations (which began approximately early 1976) (Chandler 1977a: 57; 1977b: 1; Townsend 1977: 5; see Shupe and Bromley 1980: 139-141).

The new religions soon learned, however, that they enjoyed formal protection under law, and they attempted to sue the deprogrammers for libel, violation of civil rights, and false imprisonment (Shupe and Bromley 1980: 130). Robbins (1979: 42) summarized the fate of American conservatorships as follows:

In 1977, in *Katz vs. Superior Court*, an intermediate appellate court in California threw out conservatorships granted by a lower court and propounded stringent criteria for the granting of such petitions in the future. After the State Supreme Court refused to review the case, judges all over the country became more circumspect in granting temporary conservatorships and guardianships in *ex-parte* hearings (hearings in which the potential conservatee is not represented) and without a definite indication of overwhelming incapacity on the part of the devotee.

Not surprisingly, targeted new religious or cult organizations worked to get legislation changed so that conservatorships were difficult if not impossible to obtain (Singer and Lalich 1995: 281). The legal victories on the part of several controversial religions resulted in a significant decline in legal deprogrammings in the late 1970s (Robbins 1979: 42). As late as 1980, however, a Bozeman, Montana judge

granted to parents Sherwin and Marilyn Desens conservatorship over their 34 year-old daughter Nancy Desens-Jacob, who had joined a group called the Brotherhood and, by doing so, allegedly had "surrendered her money, her free will, her marriage, her children, her parents and her body" (*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, 1980).

### **Less Coercive and Non-Coercive Deprogramming in the 1970s and 1980s**

As Bromley and Shupe realized, not all deprogrammings were punctuated with violence and force. Bromley indicated that the deprogrammers in the 1970s and early 1980s "began to discover that non-coercive tactics often were just as successful as coercive deprogramming in convincing [Unification Church] members to renounce group membership and were less disruptive to family solidarity in the event of failure" (Bromley 1988: 198; see Shupe and Bromley 1994: 9; Lewis 1989: 395). Regrettably, no systematic survey of deprogramming styles exists, so scholars must rely upon media portrayals, popularized books, and accounts by group members against whom deprogramming efforts failed (see, for example, Biermans 1986: 67-71). Consequently, most of the academic discussions of the process have presented it in a stereotypically violent and coercive manner, perhaps paralleling the alleged production of "atrocious tales" that deprogrammed people supposedly invented about events in high-demand groups (see Lewis 1989). Almost all academic accounts have de-emphasized if not ignored less violent and less confrontational forms.

In what might be the only academic study of a deprogramming, however, Dubrow-Eichel (1989; 1990) found only a brief moment of coercion in the initial contact between the deprogrammers and the unsuspecting Hare Krishna member, with no subsequent coercion (and no physical or emotional violence) during the five-day event (see Dubrow-Eichel 1989: 38-39, 105). Because of both the anecdotal literature and critical academic studies, which "suggested that confrontation played a central role in successful deprogrammings," Dubrow-Eichel "was surprised at how rarely the deprogrammers engaged in personal confrontations" of their deprogramme (Dubrow-Eichel 1989: 109). This pattern of minimal coercion and no violence was

quite common (see, for example, Disend 1991, involving one of the authors [Szimhart]), but no exact figures exist that allow quantification.

In this non-violent context, the deprogramming took on dimensions of (among other things) both a therapeutic relationship and a discourse containing persuasive conversation, teaching, and moral discussion (Dubrow-Eichel 1990: 207-211). It had communicative dimensions, cognitive dimensions, and social-affiliative dimensions (Dubrow-Eichel 1990: 210-213), and only one of the five deprogrammers who succeeded with the deprogramming had any professional training in communications (Dubrow-Eichel 1989: 35). The deprogrammers were socially skilled but (with that one exception) professionally untrained. Current practices within exit counseling produce results similar to those achieved under non-violent, minimally coercive deprogrammings, and they take place in conditions in which virtually all coercion has been removed.

### Exit Counseling

Partly because of the legal risks and ethical issues arising from coercive deprogramming methods, so-called countercult counselors developed new, non-coercive means of intervention with members of controversial ideological movements. Likewise, several of the counselors working within the "countercult" movement obtained advanced degrees in programs related to mental health (e.g., psychology, social work), and their professional status would have been jeopardized by involvement in coercive or violent acts. Indeed, for years, a number of persons prominent in the countercult movement (Dr. John Clark, Priscilla Coates, Maurice Davis, Daphne Green, James and Marcia Rudin, Dr. Margaret Singer, and others) had counseled so-called "cult" members in non-coercive exchanges whenever those persons contacted them. Such non-coercive dialogues became increasingly important during the 1980s and 1990s, as persons in controversial groups developed extensive histories of involvement (sometimes dating back decades) that required lengthy periods of dialogue as they processed and understood their experiences. In essence, the relatively "quick" interventions of most deprogrammings of comparatively young people during the 1970s and early 1980s were increasingly unlikely to work. These pressures

and limitations, combined with successes that deprogrammers and others achieved with minimal (and, in many cases, no) coercion or violence, provided the social context in which a new form of intervention developed. This new methodology became known as *exit counseling*, *noncoercive deprogramming*, *thought-reform consulting*, *voluntary cult interventions*, or *re-evaluation*. "Deprogramming has been replaced by a more respectful approach, which is educational in nature, more professional in delivery, more effective in outcome and, because it is voluntary, generally non-traumatizing" (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 60).

By the early 1980s, some deprogrammers were attempting to address the issue of forcible removals and kidnapping that others among them used. In, for example, an "Ex-Moon" newsletter from July 1980, Leslie Elliot wrote:

This letter grows out of a recent conversation between Steve Hassen, Gary Scharff, and myself — all of us being former Moonies as well as "deprogrammers" — and Bob, a counselor friend of Steve's interested in becoming a "deprogrammer." A number of us have been concerned about a seeming lack of standards for what constitutes an ethical as well as effective "deprogramming."

This letter is to solicit your opinions and ideas on what methods or techniques are ethical, how parents should be prepared a [*sic*] and counseled, whether "rehabilitation" is desirable or not, fees for deprogramming services, etc. [*sic*] (Elliot, 1980).

By 1983, Hassan was teaching about non-coercive interventions in workshops he led, titled "Communicating With Cult Members." Also that year, deprogrammers apparently met in the context of the CAN conference in an unsuccessful attempt to establish ethical standards and techniques (Blocksom 1992: 3).<sup>xiv</sup> Interestingly, exit counseling had become sufficiently well known by then (1983) that the leader of The Way International, Victor Paul Wierwille, warned his organization's members about it:

The deprogrammers' emphasis has recently shifted from violent abduction to a more subtle method, often called *Voluntary Exit*. Parents are now exhorted to subtly trick their children into talking to deprogrammers. Many of the same tactics as before (lying, etc.) are used in the "setup," but the abduction is less violent whenever possible (Wierwille 1983).

Especially because some of Wierwille's followers had been targeted in earlier deprogramming efforts (Buell 1982; Lewis 1981; *New York Times* 1981) and were also targeted later (Ostrander 1992), this shift in tactics was of great interest to Way leaders and members. Nevertheless, despite the diminished role of violence in the exit counseling practice, Wierwille still scorned it. "The point of this new mental terrorism," he concluded, "is to prove to the victim that the 'cult' is irrational, illogical and dishonest, but that the deprogramming establishment provides the 'mental health' counseling to reintegrate victims into their former, old society" (Wierwille 1983). If we disregard the scornful tone of his statement, few exit counselors would have disagreed.<sup>xv</sup>

By the mid-1990s, this more respectful approach appears to have replaced forcible "adult" deprogramming completely in North America, especially because of several high-profile cases that deprogramming targets brought against their unsuccessful deprogrammers. By far the best-known case was that involving CAN itself.<sup>xvi</sup> A civil court decision linked CAN to a failed deprogramming and forced the organization to declare bankruptcy. The controversial decision held CAN's national office responsible because a CAN contact person provided a mother with the name of a person (Rick Ross) who did both voluntary and involuntary interventions with "cult" members.<sup>xvii</sup> After having completed two successful (and legal) deprogrammings with the two minor children, Ross accepted the mother's offer to attempt a third deprogramming that involved an additional son, Jason Scott, who was a young adult. In early January 1991, this deprogramming failed, and it led to criminal charges that Ross eventually beat. The law firm of a prominent Scientologist, however, encouraged and then handled Scott's successful civil lawsuit against Ross, his deprogramming team, and CAN (Goodstein 1996a; Kent and Krebs 1998: 40-

41; Russell 1999: 16). Although evidence indicates that the CAN contact person was *not* acting in the capacity of a CAN volunteer when she made the referral (Kent and Krebs 1998: 40), a jury was convinced that she was a CAN agent following CAN procedures, and it held the national CAN office responsible for her actions. This court decision against CAN almost certainly marks the end of illegal deprogramming in North America, although its *legal* form still might persist in rare cases, as when parents have underage children or other minors in their care whom they wish to extract from controversial ideological organizations.<sup>xviii</sup>

The most important feature that distinguishes exit counseling from deprogramming is that exit counseling remains completely voluntary, although in some cases the initial family encounter might surprise the exit counselee. The main goal of exit counseling is to get members to re-evaluate their membership by offering them new information and education (Singer and Lalich 1995: 286). Exit counseling is comparable to planned interventions for someone who has a drug or alcohol problem (Dubrow-Eichel 1990: 208; Singer and Lalich 1995: 286; Tobias and Lalich 1994: 59). Often the exit counseling process includes the recommendation for follow-up sessions with post-exit counselors. Some of these follow-up sessions may take place in rehabilitation facilities (such as Wellspring in Ohio, or the recently opened Meadow Haven in Massachusetts).

David Clark *et al.* (1993: 155) describe exit counseling as "a voluntary, intensive, time-limited, contractual educational process that emphasizes the respectful sharing of information with members of exploitatively manipulative groups." The first step of the process involves a person who knows the member (usually a parent or a spouse) contacting a counselor. If the counselor agrees to help, then the family and counselor proceed. The exit counselor next focuses on the family's needs by providing information to these relatives about the particular organization. Exit counselors see their role in this early stage as assisting family and friends to "learn about cults in general as well as the specific area they are involved with and about manipulative influence techniques and thought reform processes" (Singer and Lalich 1995: 286).<sup>xix</sup> (Disagreement exists, however, among some contemporary exit counselors regarding the time, depth, and

amount of education and preparation families need or should receive.)<sup>xx</sup>

A second dispute exists between information-oriented exit counselors and those who combine information with techniques intended to elicit change within the "cult clients" (see Clark *et al.* 1993: 173-178; Hassan 2000: 69-70). Heated exchanges, for example, over these and related approaches took place at the 2000 and 2001 American Family Foundation conferences. If the member is involved in an unknown group, then the exit counselor collects sufficient information about the group before the intervention can proceed. The family also might receive counseling if the counselor detects communication problems among members. Then the family must plan how to persuade the member to speak with the exit counselor. Only if the family is successful in convincing their loved one to the meeting do they proceed with the intervention (Clark *et al.* 1993: 156; Singer and Lalich 1995: 287). Costs of such interventions vary, but they can run between \$500.00 and \$750.00 per counselor per day (which might not include expenses such as preparation, food, lodging, and travel for members of the intervention team). Apparently, some exit counselors charge more, while others charge within the low end of the scale for the family education phase and increase the rate for the actual exit counseling period. In 2002, Szimhart learned from a client that one intervention specialist required \$5000.00 per day or \$500.00 per hour. But he estimates that the mean for most exit counselors remains under \$1000.00 a day.

In practice, the planned meetings between counselors and target members take three forms, with variations within each configuration. First, straightforward ("overt") meetings occur when a targeted group member agrees to talk openly with an exit counselor or former member (see Hassan 1988: 118). Second, covert interventions employ strategies that include role-playing (Hassan 1988: 123-128). For example, an exit counselor might "casually" meet the group member at a social function, strike up a relationship, and guide the person to a discussion about the group, with or without a family member present. Third, some meetings come as a surprise to the target person. After extensive family preparation, one or more exit counselors arrive shortly after the family has announced the meeting to the previously

unsuspecting member. Whether a group member becomes involved in the exit-counseling process through overt, covert, or surprise methods, he or she has ultimate control over the proceedings and can terminate discussions immediately or at any time later. The net effect of client control is that the group member feels empowered over an aspect of life, which is a feeling that exit counselors hope to expand in the individual as the exit counseling continues.

The exit counselors who make these interventions usually operate within one of four ideational frameworks:

1. Some counselors are secularists whose interventions involve little if any emphasis on people's beliefs (unless those beliefs are obviously harmful). Many counselors who currently operate (or previously operated) within this framework (for example, Giambalvo 1995; Streiker 1984; Tobias and Lalich 1994) approach their clients with an educational model. They assume that accurate information will distance people from controversial ideological organizations. Tobias and Lalich (1994: 59) describe exit counseling interventions as "planned meetings of the member, family, friends, and a team of professionals who use an educational model to enable the member to reach an informed decision about his or her allegiance to the group."

Other counselors vary within this framework by emphasizing a therapeutic approach that makes use of educational material in the context of attempts to develop rapport with the client. Among the most comprehensive variations along these lines is the Strategic Interaction Approach developed by Steven Hassan. This method places less emphasis on education dissemination to a family about a client's alleged cult and greater emphasis "on the growth of the entire family and support network, as well as on the cult member." Hassan states that this approach helps "to identify factors that make people more vulnerable to mind control, such as learning disorders, unresolved sexual issues, or pre-existing phobias" (Hassan 2000: 71). In sessions with target "cult" members, Hassan hopes to establish rapport with his "clients" in order to facilitate discussions

about their self-identities, their fears, and their doubts about their groups (see Hassan 1988: 148-167).

Because of the allegedly deceptive recruiting methods of controversial religions, the educationally oriented counselors assume that "many prospective group members have no accurate knowledge of the cult and almost no understanding of what will be expected of them as long-term members" (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 28). The secular framework in which these types of counselors conduct themselves might involve correcting facts regarding religious writings and histories, but it does not value any religious ideology as a proper ideational framework for exit counseling.

2. A second framework is a conservative religious one. Many standard exit-counseling strategies—family preparation, introduction of critical literature to the family, and follow-up counseling after the intervention—also apply to this framework, but its emphasis is on bringing people back into previous faiths. Christian exit counselors, for example, may attempt to "correct" alleged misperceptions about Biblical teaching, or they may witness to the alleged truth of the Gospel. At the same time, they also might use many of the same "mind control" arguments that are popular within exit-counseling circles. Counselors who work for the Watchman Fellowship in Alabama, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, Christian Research Institute (both based in California), or Western Australia's Concerned Christian Growth Ministries are examples of this religious persuasion toward exit counseling. Sometimes, secular counselors (such as Steven Hassan) are willing to integrate religious dimensions into their exit-counseling efforts if the situation warrants (Hassan 2000: 144-147).

Even though some instances of Christian-based exit counseling have occurred, many Evangelicals and Pentecostals have deep-seated concerns about all forms of exit counseling—concerns that date back to the early 1970s when some of Ted Patrick's cases involved youth who had made commitments to high-

demand Christian sects (see *Newsweek* 1973). By the early 1980s, deprogrammers had targeted members of such groups as the Assembly of God, Maranatha Campus Ministries, and Jews for Jesus. (Members of the latter group sometimes were deprogramming targets of the militant Jewish Defense League [Frame 1983; see Alnor and Enroth 1992: 18-19]).

Concerns continued among conservative Christians even after the rise of exit counseling, and a controversial 1992 article in an Evangelical publication presented these concerns dramatically. Two prominent Evangelicals and critics of abusive "cults," William M. Alnor and sociology professor Ronald Enroth, wrote about what they saw as "ethical problems in exit counseling":

The result of our inquiry is that out of approximately 15 major exit counselors operating in America, only a few appear to conduct themselves in a manner that communicates a sense of integrity and ethical concern. The field of exit counseling is full of men and women operating like loose cannons in a shadowy world of secrecy that contains little or no controls on their activities and offers little or no enforcement of ethical standards. Further, the amount of money major exit counselors charge is often excessive and unjustifiable, especially since in many instances their clients were vulnerable parents--driven by panic over the conviction that their children are involved in a cult. Fees in excess of \$20,000 per case are not unusual (Alnor and Enroth, 1992: 15).

Later, Alnor and Enroth added more items to their list of concerns about exit counseling and the people who conduct them. This expanded list included a religious critique of non-Evangelical worldviews. These added items were "a lack of appropriate educational credentials, deficient accountability structures,

inadequate follow-up, and the fact that certain evangelical exit counselors believe it 'unethical' to guide cult members into a fuller understanding of correct biblical doctrine" Alnor and Enroth 1992: 19). (Not surprisingly, this article initiated heated exchanges among persons who disagreed with their conclusions, factual presentations, and methodology.)<sup>xxi</sup> In sum, exit counseling raises a series of concerns among many Evangelical Christians, and these concerns contain their belief that they have an ethical, moral, and religious obligation to gain converts for their faith.

3. The third framework within which some of the exit counseling community operates is purely skeptical. Sharing similarities with the secular framework, it distinguishes itself by its singular emphasis on rational thinking. It discounts all irrational beliefs and utilizes a humanistic, agnostic view that depends heavily upon the scientific method for testing reality. Exit counselors utilizing this approach rely extensively upon people who are associated with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) and its publication outlets--Prometheus Books and the journal, *Skeptical Inquirer*.
4. A fourth persuasion, which we call liberal-spiritual or transpersonal, involves what sceptics call fringe therapies (Ellis, 1989) and what religious conservatives call New Age and occult (Brook, 1989; Martin, 1989). The Spiritual Emergency Network (SEN), based at the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Menlo Park, California, most represents this view. Founded in 1980 by Christina Grof at Big Sur's Esalen Institute, the SEN ten years later had a mailing list of 10,000 people and handled more than 150 calls monthly. At that time, SEN boasted more than 1,000 "helpers" who included doctors, psychotherapists, and "spiritual practitioners" (Thompson 1990: 57). Members of this group tend to look within the person for the cause and cure involving why he or she "joined" a supposedly destructive group, and these helpers are wary of authoritarianism and "fanaticism" (Grof and Grof

1989; Lash 1990). Although these helpers might not call themselves deprogrammers or exit counselors, they nevertheless represent another approach to helping people understand and assimilate the experiences they have had in abusive religions.

When meeting with a "client," an exit counselor (or the exit counseling team) typically has a plan but is flexible, depending upon the member's reactions and openness as he or she is presented with information (Singer and Lalich 1995: 287). The exit counselor usually approaches the member and presents his or her involvement with the organization as a family problem, which it usually is. "The exit counselor asks the cultist to participate in a review of information that may help him and his family better understand and cope with their problems" (D. Clark *et al.* 1993: 156). In a typical scenario, "[a]t first the person may be defensive and resistant, then he or she will become a more active participant in the process--asking and answering questions, expressing suppressed doubts and providing more examples of what is being discussed" (Singer and Lalich 1995: 289). Because the individual in the counseling setting is out of the ideologically controlling milieu, he or she can feel free to discuss his or her concerns about the group in an atmosphere of acceptance. These concerns might involve deceptive fundraising, recruiting, and other nagging questions that members cannot discuss in the environment of a totalistic organization. Likewise, the client's experiential base and level of knowledge will depend upon his or her relationship with the controversial group (e.g., as a staff member, manager, workshop attendee, non-staff believer, etc.).

Regardless of the framework within which exit counselors operate or the flexibility with which they proceed, many of them also believe that these organizations prey on vulnerable people. Tobias and Lalich (1994: 28), for example, have identified several personality characteristics that might predispose individuals to involvement with new religious movements. These characteristics include: dependency (which involves a desire to belong and a lack of confidence), unassertiveness, gullibility, low tolerance for ambiguity, cultural disillusionment, naive idealism, a desire for spiritual meaning, susceptibility to trance-like states, and ignorance of how groups can manipulate individuals.

(Omitted from this list are more complex, sociological analyses of conversion, which suggests that the emergent exit-counseling movement, like its deprogramming predecessor, relies most heavily on psychological and social psychological explanations for its interpretations of how and why people become involved in problematic religions.)

Because a controversial, high-demand, ideological organization provides the support and structure that an individual might have been lacking in his or her life, leaving the group and abandoning one's social network (in the context of a highly structured lifestyle) can be extremely difficult. Understanding these difficulties, exit counselors provide members with support and information that can assist them in breaking away from the group (Singer and Lalich 1995: 280). Exit counselors believe that the educational process enables defecting members to develop an understanding of the true nature of their group involvement. "Armed with information and resources, and often backed up by an educated and supportive family environment, former cult members are more prepared to face the recovery process" (Tobias and Lalich 1994: 61).

To effectively present information to the member, counselors believe that they must be experts on what they frequently call *thought reform* techniques or programs. They also must have in-depth knowledge about the particular organization that the person is in. Consequently, they build extensive libraries of books, videos, internal documents, and media accounts of various controversial groups, and they use these sources throughout the counseling interventions (see Disend 1991: 32). Educational presentations of some of this material to families preparing for an intervention likely takes two or more days, with the actual time spent with the person in the group taking up to three or four days (and occasionally longer if situations and schedules warrant).

Because exit counselors must "know the cult's language and idiom and its history and content and have extensive documented data about the leader" (Singer and Lalich, 1995: 287), a former member with in-depth background information often is on the counseling team. A former member might prove to be very helpful when the client invariably raises questions about the group leader or manager's authenticity or divinity. The presence of a healthy,

thriving, former member also shows the subject that he or she will not inevitably come to harm because of leaving the group. Although some exit counselors will take cases that involve a wide range of groups, others specialize in only one or a few controversial ideological organizations. (Inevitably, rivalry occasionally occurs among some exit counselors as they attempt to carve out specializations and public-expertise profiles within a market whose potential customers increasingly acquire "cult" information from the Internet.)

No pressure or coercive manipulation exists in the intervention, and the team respects the final decision of the member. If he or she decides to leave, then the exit counselor provides information to the exiting member about how to cope with reintegration to the world outside of the organization (D. Clark *et al.* 1993: 156). This reintegration may include a one- to three-week stay in a rehabilitation center where ex-members receive further education through contact with professionals and "cult" experts (Singer and Lalich 1995: 290).

According to Clark *et al.* (1993: 161), "the most important question to discuss and answer is how the cultist has changed since joining the group, for concern about the destructive changes is the family's ethical justification for considering an exit counseling." If no proof comes forward that the group is harmful to the individual, then the exit counseling does not proceed. Getting clients to consider their groups' roles in producing any destructive or harmful changes is an important tactic that exit counselors use, and this tactic might counterbalance demonized and outmoded images of "deprogramming" that the controversial groups themselves still teach to members. Nonetheless, supporters of exit counseling insist that the key to a successful intervention is the support and understanding of the family members and the team toward the client. A debate exists about whether or not exit counselors should aim for immediate behavioral changes, but all counselors seem to agree that initially providing and discussing information, and then following up with a reassessment is important if they are to succeed in helping a client undergo such changes. Conducting the intervention in a respectful and non-argumentative setting also is important, in order to avoid making the individual feel persecuted or defensive (as

coercive deprogrammings tend to do [Singer and Lalich 1995: 289]).

Non-coercive exit-counseling interventions have received little media attention compared to the dramatic "kidnap/deprogram" approach feature films and articles portray (Szymhart 2001). One book published by an Australian couple (Larsen and Larsen 1997), however, is a rare, perhaps unique, testament about the non-coercive intervention; his wife, who underwent the process; and family members, who assisted approach. Titled *Cult Encounter*, it contains extensive commentary by the husband, who coordinated the husband and the exit counselors in their efforts. Rick Larsen hired Szymhart and his colleague, Patrick Ryan, in 1993 to exit-counsel his wife of more than 20 years regarding her devotion to a small, American group called "Extra-Terrestrial Earth Mission" (ETEM). The group's leaders had influenced Helen to change her name to "Xanthe," leave her family, and move more than 2,000 miles from home. The intervention succeeded, but the text shows how complex and unpredictable an exit counseling can be. No other source provides readers with firsthand descriptions of all aspects of an exit-counseling intervention, from its planning stages to post-"cult" recovery issues.

### Conclusion

The exclusion of violence and coercion from the exit-counseling process has removed major ethical and legal barriers that might have hindered the academic study of deprogramming. Although some academics still might protest that exit counselors define their activities in psychological, rather than in social psychological or sociological, terms, the fact remains that these counselors play important roles in the contemporary battle between controversial religions and the so-called countercult movement. Researchers have only the vaguest ideas about what combination of predisposing individual conditions (such as existing discontent) and situational contingencies (such as interventions during times of status or job uncertainty within the group) combine to make an intervention successful or not. The individual's length of time in a group (see Bromley 1988: 200-202), relationship with leadership, group roles, and the type of group socialization probably contribute to an

intervention's success and failure, but scholars simply do not know with certainty. Research difficulties include the fact that exit counselors guard certain aspects of their activities, fearing that target groups will learn of them and prepare their members accordingly. Nevertheless, as more exit counselors obtain professional training, the likelihood grows that some of them will be willing to subject their techniques to social scientific study.

Also worth researching is the way in which controversial groups respond to these new, non-coercive tactics. Thus far they still appear to instill fear among their members about the alleged violence that "deprogrammers" necessarily will perpetrate against them. In reality, several of the more prominent exit counselors implemented a "code of ethics" that calls for their associates to refuse to work with any counselor who engages in unlawful restraint during an intervention (see Giambalvo *et al.* 1996: 102-103).<sup>xii</sup> The code also attempts to professionalize the exit counseling process by clarifying "client/consultant" relationships, "consultant/consultant" relationships, and "consultant" relationships with media and the public (Giambalvo *et al.* 1996). At the core of (what this code calls) an ethical exit "consultation" is "the presentation of information concerning the principles and practical applications of thought reform. This presentation is done in a manner that is legal . . ." and conforms to the ethical standards that these counselors publish (Giambalvo *et al.* 1996: 99). As this code or similar ones become normative among active exit counselors, researchers will want to identify the manner in which groups respond to what will be an entirely legal threat to their membership.

Most importantly, exit counselors will want to locate the techniques they use and the results they obtain within a context of other therapeutic and social environments. Only systematic studies, for example, will reveal whether exiting an abusive ideological organization shares similarities with leaving abusive family settings (Cartwright and Kent 1992; see Carbo and Gartner 1994). Similarly, parallels may exist between addictions counseling and exit counseling, and understanding such parallels likely would contribute to the literature about both dependency and empowerment. In sum, exit counselors will enrich the broader understanding of social life by positioning their activities and techniques within



existing and emerging bodies of academic and therapeutic literature.

Having called for systematic studies of exit counseling processes, we nevertheless must say that the number of people (at least in North America) who remain full-time in the occupation of exit counseling probably remains at no more than a half-dozen. This small number, however, does not reflect the hundreds of persons throughout North America who now have sufficient knowledge about one or more high-demand groups that they perform occasional, usually less intense interventions than do the full-time professionals. These less intense interventions can be quite effective when members are feeling doubts about their continued ideological involvements and who therefore are receptive to new information. They can be as simple as mere telephone conversations or several in-person conversations. Many of the persons involved in these less intense interventions are secular in their approaches, but religious interventions occur as well.

Various factors might explain the low numbers of full-time exit counselors, not the least of which is the availability of previously obscure information now on the Internet. No longer do loved ones have to rely primarily on "cult specialists" to provide facts and opinions about particular groups. Indeed, it is entirely likely that more of these loved ones are taking this information and attempting to do exit counseling on their own, although some of the exit counselors speak about how family and friends usually lack both the emotional distance and the deep knowledge and resource base needed to conduct most sessions successfully. In one form or another, therefore, society continues to need people who are at least versed in the social psychological rigors of assisting others in leaving high-demand groups—whether or not these people have developed their expertise through professional training.

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### Endnotes

i For example, prominent countercult figures Curt and Henrietta Crampton, of Redondo Beach, California, decided to attempt a deprogramming of their daughter, Kathy, from the Love Israel (the Love Family) group after reading in a newspaper that two or three men in it died from breathing toluene during a religious rite (Kent interview with Crampton and Crampton 1989: 12). Eventually they learned of deprogrammer Ted Patrick, and they hired him to attempt the deprogramming. Patrick convinced the Cramptons to

allow a crew from CBS national news to film the deprogramming (Kent interview with Crampton and Crampton 1989: 24). After parts of the deprogramming were aired over three nights, the Cramptons "started getting calls from all over the country saying, 'Our child, our daughter, our son, was not in the Love Family, but all the things you were saying has happened to them [sic]" (Kent interview with Crampton and Crampton 1989: 45, see 46-47; *Daily Breeze* 1974). After the deprogramming, Kathy returned to the group, and her parents' worst fears about her physical safety almost came true. She nearly died after childbirth when her placenta did not pass after delivery and remained inside her for three days. Even though she was delirious during that time and at one point stated to the leader's primary wife that she should seek medical attention, the woman refused her request by saying, 'Oh no, you don't need to go to a doctor—just believe in God, just trust. God'll take care of you'" (Kent interview with Kathy Crampton 1989: 5-6, see 4). In a subsequent exchange about the attempted deprogramming, Henrietta Crampton revealed that Kathy's "health has been affected due to her poor diet while there [with the Love Family], especially during pregnancy and while nursing, and untreated hepatitis, which most of the Love Family had at the time. She had reconstructive surgery after leaving the group to correct a childbirth injury" (Crampton 1995). For Patrick's version of the failed deprogramming, and a picture of Kathy Crampton, see Patrick and Dulack 1976: 131-153. A contemporary account of events appeared in a three-part series in the *Daily Breeze* (Coil 1973a; 1973b; 1973c). For more about the Love Family (also called Love Israel), see Balch 1988.

ii For example, William M. Rambur, president of the Citizens Freedom Foundation (which we discuss below), stated to his organization's members, "If Randolph Hearst and the FBI used force to remove his daughter from the influence of the SLA [Symbionese Liberation Army], no one would accuse them of kidnapping. If force had been used to remove victims from the influence of Charles Manson, many lives would have been saved and that action would be called a rescue" (Rambur 1975). For a summary of Rambur's story

concerning his travails over his daughter's conversion to the Children of God, see Conway and Siegelman 1978: 79-83.

iii In an unpublished history of the Cult Awareness Network, for example, parent activist Henrietta Crampton observed, "[t]he massacre at Jonestown, Guyana [on] November 18, 1978 was devastating to families with loved ones in cults. The fear of another massacre in some remote commune became a real concern" (Crampton n.d.: 8).

iv For the debate over the appropriateness of Conway and Siegelman's statistics, see Kilbourne 1983; Maher and Langone 1985; and Kilbourne 1986. For an article critical of Conway and Siegelman's basic findings, see Lewis and Bromley 1987.

v CFF's first newsletter contained a brief article about deprogramming that revealed the organization's official distancing from, but passive support for, deprogramming. In an article entitled, "What is Deprogramming?," CFF's president, William M. Rambur (whose daughter was in the Children of God), said the following:

There must be a *clear* understanding of "deprogramming" and the roles that Mr. [Ted] Patrick and CFF play in this endeavor.

Deprogramming is a misleading and therefore an unfortunate label applied to the process of releasing victims from the control of individuals through the use of mind control techniques. Once released, the victims, rid of the fear that held them in bondage, are encouraged to again think of themselves and to take their rightful place in society, free from further threats to their peace and security.

Mr. Patrick has undertaken the task of "deprogramming" and through his efforts we have learned of the large number of individuals and groups who misuse mind control methods to further their own cause.

Although we subscribe to the need for Mr. Patrick's activities, none of the parents' organizations [i.e., FREECOG, VPA, or CFF]

have programmed funding in support of his activities. Mr. Patrick's financial arrangements are totally exclusive of parent group control and accounting.

As an organization, CFF is not involved in any phase of the deprogramming, however this does not preclude CFF from assisting victims through charitable medical, legal, educational and other established facilities.

Undoubtedly there is a need for deprogramming, but there is an even greater need and that is to prevent use of detr[i]mental mind control methods whether being practiced deliberately or otherwise. This is the function of C.F.F. (Rambur 1974: [1-2]).

In sum, many people affiliated with these early parents' groups supported deprogramming, and quite a few of them had used deprogrammers in efforts to extract their own family members. The organizations that they formed, however, did not get involved actively with deprogrammings per se, even though members circulated information about deprogrammers among themselves and to outside enquirers. So, for example, a 1983 "handbook for newcomers" that the CFF published contained a section entitled "Deprogramming: What Do I Ask?" It concluded with the advice, "It is extremely important that you and the deprogrammer/exit counselor agree fully on what you expect of each other. Your local CFF affiliate will be able to put you in touch with other families and assist you in finding answers to all your questions" (Citizens Freedom Foundation, 1983: [13-14]).

vi An example of this sympathy appeared in a letter that the Cult Awareness Network published in its newsletter in January 1986. The Secretary of a CAN/CFF organization in St. Louis, Missouri, asked readers to send financial donations to Ted Patrick, who was incarcerated at the time for a failed deprogramming. She indicated, "If it weren't for Ted, my daughter (and many more!) would not be free.... [H]e is dedicated to saving people from these terrible cults" (Rogers 1986).

vii In charging that CAN promoted deprogramming, Scientology used the fact that CAN had deprogrammer Galen Kelly provide security for the organization and received payment from it for work that he performed for it (*Freedom Magazine* n.d.: 20-23; 95-96). Scientology also reproduced a sworn declaration by deprogrammer Mark Blocksom, in which he stated that various CAN officials, including its national director, Cynthia Kisser, and former CFF/CAN Executive Director, Priscilla Coates, assisted him with various deprogrammings (Blocksom 1992: 2). Subsequently, however, Blocksom admitted on the CBS news program, *60 Minutes*, that this declaration was "embellished, to say the least. It's not — it's not true." (Blocksom quoted in *CBS News* 1997: 20). In the context of interviewing lawyer and Scientologist Kendrick Moxon, CBS reporter, Lesley Stahl, summarized that:

"Blocksom says he was a drug addict when he signed that declaration five years ago after he was approached by one of Moxon's private detectives. Blocksom maintains there [w]as an implied promise of money, which never materialized, if he could implicate CAN and Kisser in illegal deprogramming. Clean and sober now, Blocksom wants to set the record straight."

Indeed, she added, "CAN was never charged with a crime," and a private investigator that Scientology hired to dig up dirt about CAN and its officials reported back to his client that he was unable to find any evidence that CAN was involved in deprogramming (Stahl in *CBS News* 1997: 20). As Blocksom concluded, "it irritates me that they [i.e., Scientology officials] persist in using this statement as a propaganda tool to support their position about [the] Cult Awareness Network" (Blocksom in *CBS News* 1997: 20).

viii We just quoted, for example, sociologists' Shupe and Bromley's comment about deprogrammers "haranguing" their targets. Within the countercult community, Shupe and Bromley's (1980) choice to label deprogrammers as "vigilantes" (however defensible the label may have been) caused a rift between the countercult community and sociologists that lasted for years, and to some extent still

persists today (see Coates 1994: 95 and n. 9). Shupe and Bromley, however, might have taken the vigilante label from a 1976 description of Patrick by a judge who sentenced him to a one-year jail term for falsely imprisoning a Hare Krishna young woman. As summarized in the media, North Orange County, California Municipal Judge Logan Moore described Patrick as "a 'vigilante' who had no respect for freedom of religion" (*Sun Sentinel* 1976).

ix Also worth mentioning is the fact that, in 1991, the Unification Church began "compiling a list of all Unificationists who have been kidnapped or legally restrained since 1985" (*Unification News* 1991).

x Evidence that this manual was the product of the B1 (Bureau 1 of the Guardian Office, devoted to intelligence and information collection and dissemination) appears in material confiscated in FBI raids against Scientology in 1977. Many of the relevant sources are poorly identified, and therefore are difficult to cite. See, however, the Guardian Office document that includes "23.10.76 [October 23, 1976] Get out the Depgming [deprogramming] Bkt [booklet]...." Also see the slightly damaged document that contains, "12. Dpgming manual PO's [print offs?] for postage and envelopes; mailing lists done up; FSMs [field staff members, or Scientologists hired by the Guardian Office for specific operations] lined up to type the envelopes.... 15. Depgming Manual comp[lete?] on 50 booklets" [underline in original].

xi From the late Henrietta Crampton, one of the authors (Kent) obtained a photocopy of a letter that Dr. Ron Enroth of Westmount College, Santa Barbara, California had written to her (dated 2-4-77 [February 4, 1977?]) about the manual. A person had sent the manual to Enroth, and he was attempting to determine its origins. Subsequently, Crampton added a note to a photocopy of Enroth's letter indicating that he had called Scientology's center in Santa Barbara and asked for the person who had mailed it to him. Not knowing who Enroth was or why he was calling, the person who answered the phone at the center indicated that the party whom he had called was not in but that he could leave a message. This response proved to Enroth, Crampton, and others that Scientology was behind the manual's dissemination. Further evidence of the manual's American

time, a federal appeals court overturned the decision because the prosecutors withheld valuable information that could have affected Kelly's fate (Gray 1994a; Hall 1995). Eventually, Kelly pleaded guilty to misprision (Gray 1994b). Also worth mentioning was the 1988 case in Denver, Colorado, in which private detective Dennis Whelan and deprogrammer Robert Brandyberry were acquitted of kidnapping and conspiracy charges in a failed attempt to deprogram Britta Adolfsson out of the Unification Church (Pankratz 1988). A similar acquittal occurred in an early 1990 case, in which, "[d]espite strong evidence of guilt, a jury refused to convict parents of kidnapping their daughter to get her out of a cult" named Great Among the Nations (*Cult Awareness Network News*, 1990). Similarly, Galen Kelly was among four people acquitted of allegedly conspiring to kidnap a duPont heir out of a political group led by Lyndon LaRouche, but only because the jury was not convinced that the parties (which included the heir's father) ever had agreed to a kidnapping (Nelson 1993; see Salter 1992). Not so lucky were three family members and two deprogrammers (Glenn Robertson and Mary Weeks), who in a 1986 Seattle trial pleaded guilty to coercion in a failed deprogramming attempt of Scientologist Kathy Mason (Emery 1986). In the United Kingdom, an English jury acquitted a man of attempting to kidnap and then deprogram a former friend out of Scientology after his lawyer argued that "some of the evidence suggested a regime in which [the target of the failed kidnapping, Kathleen Wilson] was effectively enslaved and robbed of her free will" (Steele 1995).

xvii In a widely circulated, 1998 letter that Ross sent to the President of the American Family Foundation, he stated that he ceased doing involuntary deprogrammings in May 1995 (Ross 1998: 3).

xviii Ironically, Scott received little money as a result of this lawsuit, despite a \$1.8 million judgment against CAN and as much as a \$3.4 million judgment against Ross. In a bizarre twist, Scott eventually reached a "settlement of agreement" with Ross, "entitling Scott to \$5,000 and 200 hours of Ross's time 'as an expert consultant and intervention specialist,' according to the confidential settlement agreement"

(Goodstein 1996b). In essence, Scott accepted counseling from the very man whom he had sued for attempting to "deprogram" him.

xix We note that Singer and Lalich's use of the terms, *cults* and *thought reform processes* will upset some social scientists, who dispute the use of both terms despite their widespread use within some academic circles.

xx One set of recent disputes took place between Rick Ross and several voluntary exit counselors who were closely aligned with the American Family Foundation and the "Ethical Standards" statement that several of them produced and signed in 1996 (Giambalvo *et al.* 1996). Much of the debate revolved around the decision of exit counselors who have signed the "Ethical Standards" statement not to refer persons to potential exit counselors (or whatever they call themselves) who have not signed the statement, regardless of those counselors' reputed expertise on particular groups. This refusal has economic consequences for the parties who receive referrals and the parties who do not, and for families who believe that they need an intervention but have limited financial resources (Ross 1998). The parties involved in this disagreement have not resolved it.

xxi We thank David Clark for informing us about some of the issues in the debate around this article. He pointed out, for example, that, a year after the article appeared, the same journal published another article about deprogramming and exit counseling, which (among other differences) provided lower figures for 'typical' exit counseling efforts: "Deprogramming typically costs \$10,000 or more mainly because of the expense of a security team. Exit counseling typically costs \$2,000 to \$4,000, including expenses, for a three-to-five day intervention, although cases requiring extensive research of little-known groups can cost much more" (Langone and Martin 1993: 2). We also have seen some correspondence that took place in this debate.

xxii For example, the document states:

A subscribing consultant must inform the concerned party(ies) that should a client be prevented from leaving the site of the consultation or physically restrained in any



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manner (unless legally sanctioned permission has been obtained), the consultant will terminate the consultation immediately (Giambalvo *et al.* 1996: 102).

Perhaps worth noting, however, is that the ethical standards guidelines do not directly instruct "thought reform consultants" or exit counselors to immediately contact the police if they find themselves in a situation that involves a client's confinement or restraint. Worth comparing is the statement of ethical standards by another exit counselor/"cult intervention specialist" (Ross 1999).

### Acknowledgments

This paper is based on a presentation delivered at the Association for the Sociology of Religion (New York City), August 1996. Appreciation goes to the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) for providing research funds that assisted Stephen A. Kent in accumulating information used in this article. Special thanks go to David (Dave) Clark, Priscilla Coates, Carol Giambalvo, Corinne Hines, Erin Kruger, Chris Nordin, and Kyla Rae for their help with various aspects of this study.

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**Joseph Szimhart.** began research into cultic influence in 1980, after ending his two-year devotion to a New Age sect called Church Universal and Triumphant. He began to work professionally as an intervention specialist and exit counselor

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in 1986 on an international scale. From 1985 through 1992, he was chairman of an interdenominational, cult information organization in New Mexico and lectured throughout the state. He has written many reviews and articles about cultic issues for *Skeptical Inquirer*, *Cultic Studies Journal*, and other publications. He continues to consult for the media and maintains a website for information about cults: <http://www.users.fast.net/~szymhart>. For family reasons, he minimized his exit counseling work since 1998 to take a position with a psychiatric emergency hospital. Mr. Szimhart continues to pursue his fine art career, currently working on several commissions. (szymhart@fast.net)