

# Misunderstanding Cults

## Searching for Objectivity in a Controversial Field

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## 10. Compelling Evidence: A Rejoinder to Lorne Dawson's Chapter

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*Stephen A. Kent*

At stake in this debate with Lorne Dawson about 'brainwashing' is a body of social scientific literature that has rejected the applicability of the term in relation to groups often called new religions. My research on brainwashing programs that both Scientology and the Children of God/The Family imposed upon hundreds of their respective members challenges this body of literature, but only in a limited way. I specifically demonstrate that Scientology's Rehabilitation Project Force (RPF) program and The Family's Victor program were efforts that fit the classic definition of brainwashing. Both programs utilized forcible confinement, physical maltreatment, and social degradations, in combination with intense ideological study, forced confessions, and obligatory personal 'success' stories. The groups in question combined these techniques in the attempt to retain members. (Almost all of the existing social scientific literature refuting brainwashing examines its inapplicability as a concept to explain groups *acquiring* members [i.e., converts], but the efforts of Benjamin Zablocki, myself, and others is to see the brainwashing model enter social scientific discourse for a specific set of circumstances directed towards membership *retention*.) While persons who escaped or otherwise departed from the RPF indicate that Scientology's brainwashing efforts do not always succeed, even in the short run, I hypothesize that these programs had a profound impact upon most persons who went through them. This hypothesis, of course, should become the subject of research, but (specifically regarding Scientology) the isolated and highly controlled environment in which the RPF (for example) operates makes normal scientific research

next to impossible. I also suggest that at least four other groups – Synanon, the Ecclesia Athletic Ass[ociatio]n, Colonia Dignitad, and People’s Temple at Jonestown – appear to have implemented brainwashing programs as a retention strategy.

Dawson has accepted the established body of dismissive sociological literature, even though it has neglected to address the harsh and demanding dimensions of the RPF as first described in publicly available material in 1980 (Burden 1980). Subsequently, RPF information has appeared in at least two court decisions (one American, the other British), sworn affidavits, newspaper and magazine articles, radio (and most recently television) accounts, Internet postings, and books by and about Scientology. (With the exception of the recent television shows [A&E 1998; ABC News 1998], I provide the citations for this material in the original article). Part of the challenge that my study presents, therefore, is that it causes readers to wonder why prominent social scientists such as Dawson have ignored such a large and diverse body of material in their conclusion that the term *brainwashing* should be rejected. Readers also may wonder why some social scientists resist considering the possibility that brainwashing exists as a member-retention strategy in specific instances.

Dawson’s reaction to my study’s challenge attempts to undermine the accuracy of the article’s methodology (along with the methodology that underlies my more extensive RPF analysis, which is available on the World Wide Web [Kent 1997]). Indeed, he shows remarkable fervour in that attempt, having been retained by the Church of Scientology as an expert witness in an Edmonton, Alberta, case in which I already was scheduled to testify. Even though the civil case in question had nothing to do with the RPF, Dawson wrote much of his critique ‘at the request of the Church of Scientology, to help prepare a defence against Dr Kent’s testimony at this trial’ (Dawson 1999: n2). The trial, however, was supposed to have been about Scientology’s alleged efforts to use the law in an attempt to harass, if not destroy, its opponents (what used to be called Scientology’s ‘fair game’ practice) – a practice that critics insist still occurs and which may explain why some of my informants demand anonymity. The RPF connection to this trial remains a mystery.

Mention of my informants, however, highlights another challenge that my article raises. I take seriously the accounts of former members; Dawson adopts the position shared by some sociologists of religion that the accounts of former members (whom Dawson calls ‘apostates’)

are highly suspect. He speaks about the presumed effects that exit counselling and deprogramming have upon members of controversial religions, and then raises the general question about the reliability of accounts of any kind that either former members or current members offer about a particular faith. The accounts by former members are, in Dawson’s words, ‘contested testimony.’

### How Does Dawson Build His Methodological Critique?

Most remarkably, Dawson begins his critique of my methodology by exempting himself from examining any of my documents – Scientology’s own printed material about the RPF – the court decisions, the affidavits, the testimonies, and so on. These documents are vital for evaluating my triangulation efforts (to which I will return shortly), but Dawson claims, ‘[t]he specific factual claims [that] Kent makes may or may not be true. I do not have access to the materials he uses in order to make my own assessment.’ Now, one wonders why he did not ask Scientology for the key documents, but I suspect that had he done so, then he would have received the same response that I did a year or so ago – no documents. Even though the RPF material has nothing to do with Scientology’s alleged upper level secret beliefs, the organization classifies the RPF materials as confidential documents with restricted access.

Far easier for Dawson would have been for him to do an Internet search on the Rehabilitation Project Force. After all, Dawson himself has published an article (written with two others) on using the World Wide Web to research new religious movements and the anticult movement (Cottee, Yateman, and Dawson 1996). If he had followed his own advice, then he would have found hundreds of Web pages devoted to the RPF. (The AltaVista search engine alone found 307.) Among these pages are many of the key documents that I used: the crucial Flag Order 3434 RB; the American court decision about Lawrence Wollersheim; the British court case that mentions the RPF; and testimonies or affidavits from Vicki Aznaran, Tonya Burden, Dennis Erlich, David Mayo, Monica Pignotti, Anne Rosenblum, Andre Tabayoyon, Hanna Whitfield, Robert Vaughn Young, and Stacy Young. Additionally, important material about the Rehabilitation Project Force’s Rehabilitation Project Force (the quite severe RPF’s RPF) appears in a widely circulated book published by Scientology (Hubbard 1976). The only external source that I cited and that Dawson also

used was Russell Miller's biography (1987) of Scientology's founder, L. Ron Hubbard, and even that source had at least eleven mentions of the RPF. In sum, I cannot accept Dawson's statement, '[a]t present, I have no means at my disposal to specifically assess the veracity of [Kent's RPF] depiction.' The easiest means of assessment at his disposal was only a few mouse clicks away.

Because Dawson failed to assess the accuracy of my description of several RPF programs ('[t]he specific factual claims Kent makes may or may not be true'), he has no basis for then making analogies between the RPF and other institutions. If he does not know how the RPF works, then he cannot say to what its operation is similar. So, for example, he likens forms of RPF discipline to 'the military, Catholic religious orders, and other kinds of religious communities around the world and throughout human history' (cf. Singer with Lalich 1995: 98–101). He makes this claim, however, based merely on the RPF's title. Likewise, he dismisses my conclusion that the obligatory RPF success stories represent (in his words) 'something unusual and manipulative,' and then provides examples (once again) of conversion testimonials from several religious traditions. Dawson seems not to appreciate that the RPF testimonials are obligatory – required by policy – for persons who wish to 'graduate' from the program (Boards of Directors of the Churches of Scientology 1980: 7). Unless people give the testimonials, they can remain in the RPF indefinitely.

On this issue of the obligatory success stories, Dawson quoted me as saying that they "'may have provided some protection [to Scientology] in the future if former RPFers became critical of their incarceration in the program'" (Dawson 1999: 14, quoting Kent 1997: 60). He summarily dismissed this statement as 'speculation.' This precise scenario, however, played itself out on American television at the end of 1998. In *ABC News's* hour-long television show on Scientology (which the program *20/20* aired on 20 December 1998), Scientology provided the newscast with copies of Vaughn and Stacy Young's signed RPF success stories, since now these former members were indicating that the RPF was abusive. Vaughn Young insisted, '[t]hey want it in your own handwriting. So that when your handwriting's done [*sic*], they say, "See we have it in his handwriting. He confessed to this. He did this."' Investigative reporter Tom Jarriel then queried Scientology spokesperson Mike Rinder about the signed documents, saying, 'Vaughn Young says he was forced to sign a statement he did not believe in, and it was a prerequisite to get out of what he wanted to get away from.' Rinder

responded dismissively: 'Well, you know, what do you want to believe? Do you want to believe what Vaughn Young wrote at the time and signed, or do you want to believe him now saying, ["I didn't mean to write that"]?' (*ABC News* 1998: 9). In essence, the Scientology spokesperson used the signed success story in an attempt to discredit the accuser, neatly side-stepping the fundamental question about the coercive conditions under which Young first wrote and signed it.

The final, but absolutely crucial, point to make about Dawson's decision not to examine any of my documents is that he exempted himself from seeing the extensive, and varied, forms of triangulation that I used. This self-imposed exemption is most peculiar, since Dawson himself lists the broad range of my sources. I obtained data from nine different types of sources. First, information provided by former members came from court decisions, legal affidavits (many sworn under oath), in-person and telephone interviews, Internet postings, books about Scientology, magazine accounts, and newspaper accounts. Second, the position of Scientology towards its RPF program came from the organization's publications and internal documents. Third, in the chapter that appears earlier in this book, I also utilized information from one current Scientologist – a source that Dawson missed and one to which I will return in a moment. I had first-hand accounts from twenty-two people who had been on the RPF and/or the RPF's RPF, with an additional ten accounts of people who saw the program in action. Consequently, I had information about the RPF from thirty-two people. (Ironically, Dawson calls this sample 'small and skewed,' but he was the second author on an article about a Buddhist group in Halifax that used information from interviews with only fifteen members [Eldershaw and Dawson 1995: 7].) Most of my RPF sources date from the 1980s and 1990s. In material collected or presented by judges, lawyers, reporters, a professional writer, former-members-turned-authors, and myself, there appear remarkably consistent accounts about RPFs in three countries (possibly seven programs in the United States, one in the United Kingdom, and one in Denmark). These reports describe Scientology's first RPF program in 1974, and then identify others that operated (at least in one case) into the 1990s. In sum, the multiple forms of triangulation that I used – multiple data collection methods, varied sources, different investigators, accounts over time; and accounts across space (see Fielding and Fielding 1986: 25; Maxwell 1996: 75–6) qualify my RPF research as multiply triangulated studies.

If Dawson had read the chapter published in this book carefully, he

would not have erred by claiming, '[n]o one from the church, from either its leadership or membership, is interviewed or quoted.' As my chapter clearly indicated: '[r]ecently an active Scientologist posted some of his RPF experiences on the <alt.religion.scientology> newsgroup,' and then cited nine of his postings. In the body of the text where I discussed examples of 'physical maltreatment,' it stated very clearly: '[a] current Scientologist and former RPFer in the Los Angeles Scientology facility wrote about inmates having to clean a narrow, roach-infested tunnel beneath the food preparation area that was criss-crossed with hot pipes and smelled so badly that in one instance he passed out (SB 1998b: 2).' His actual descriptions of this narrow, odorous tunnel area were dramatic, but Dawson did not see them since he failed to check my sources.

This Internet informant was a second-generation Scientologist 'in good standing' who decided to post on <alt.religion.scientology> partly because he was bothered by his organization's efforts to limit the free speech of members on the Internet. (He specifically reacted to Scientology's dissemination to its members of an Internet censoring software program that prevents computers from reading numerous Web sites, newsgroups, subject discussions, and postings by perceived opponents.) In addition, previous postings on <alt.religion.scientology> by another Scientologist had 'really inspired' him. He concluded his first posting by inviting newsgroup members to 'feel free to ask me what you will,' and promised that 'I will answer to the best of my ability and honestly' (2). All indications from his subsequent postings are that he attempted to keep his promise, as demonstrated by the range and content of the facts and issues that he discussed (including his time on the RPF and the RPF's RPF).

Other Scientologists have to be able to speak freely if they are going to be useful aides to researchers. They also must know that they will not suffer retaliation from the organization. (For his part, SB realized that his participation on the newsgroup was 'pretty much taboo' [SB 1998a, 1]. Actually, it violated at least six different policies about handling 'entheta' or negative information about Scientology [Chester 1996].) Along these lines, note 2 of my earlier chapter in this book contained several examples from Scientology's policies that directly curtail the free speech of its followers, at the same time that the organization labels such free speech actions as 'suppressive acts.' More dramatic, however, is the 'Non-Disclosure Bond and Release' that 'a religious volunteer at the Church of Scientology' must sign, and which attempts

to prevent any current or former Scientologist from ever discussing a program like the RPF. Parts of the four-page, eight-section document state:

3. Except as required by law, I further agree that while I am performing my duties as a religious worker or as a staff member of any Church, Mission, or affiliated organization of the Scientology religion, and at all times thereafter, any 'confidential information' that I possess or come to possess will remain confidential and will not be revealed, disclosed, implied, or told by me, directly or indirectly, to anyone other than those individuals who are authorized to receive such information. I further acknowledge and agree that the term 'confidential information' includes all information of any Church, Mission or affiliated organization of the Scientology religion, their staff members, volunteers and parishioners that is not publicly available and generally known to others concerning internal organization, personnel, functions or past, present or future activities.

4. My intention in signing this agreement is to protect the Church from the disclosure of information which may tend to harm, damage, injure, or otherwise adversely affect the Church or any of its activities, functions, or personnel.

5. I further agree that for each breach of this promise of non-disclosure that is caused by me, either directly or indirectly, I will pay to the Church of Scientology \_\_\_\_\_ [fill in which Church] One Million Dollars (\$1,000,000). (Department of Special Affairs [1991]: 1, 2)

With Scientologists having to live under the weight of such severe restrictions on their communications, it is impossible to expect either ordinary members or leaders to be acceptable research participants. Indeed, serious ethical questions about endangering research subjects - all related to the likelihood of Scientology retaliation - would arise from researchers even attempting to get Scientologists to speak candidly under these circumstances. Dawson may be able to cite academics who hold out the laudable ideal of researchers speaking to leaders and followers within the groups that they research, but this ideal collapses in the presence of Scientology's repressive and restrictive non-disclosure bond against its own upper-level members. The most that researchers on Scientology can hope to do is obtain information from those rare members who operate outside of the organization's direct controls, as did the Scientologist on the Internet whose postings I cited.

Two additional aspects of Dawson's critique demand comment.

First, he was critical of my identification of forcible confinement and physical coercion as minimum requirements that social scientists had agreed must be present before a program might be identified as brainwashing. Although he claimed that 'this statement inaccurately represents the social scientific assessment of the concept of brainwashing,' Dawson elsewhere had concluded very differently. Specifically, he wrote, 'as the original studies of thought control suggest, the evidence is weak for assuming that the full and involuntary transformation of identity signified by "brainwashing" can occur in the absence of physical restraint and abuse' (Dawson 1998: 116). Dawson and I agree, therefore, when identifying the importance of forcible confinement and physical maltreatment as key (but by themselves inadequate) aspects of a brainwashing definition.

The final set of significant disagreements with Dawson concerns the importance of former members' testimonies. Dawson attempts to discredit my informants through his long discussion about the impact on the credibility of witnesses who had either been 'deprogrammed' or exit-counselled. The fatal flaw in this reasoning, however, is that none of my informants had been through either experience. Dawson assumes that these informants must have gained their negative evaluations of Scientology with the assistance of 'agents' of the so-called anti-cult movement, which is what some sociological literature would have predicted. This type of stereotypical prediction, with its resulting label placed on these informants as 'apostates,' allowed Dawson to think he knows how they left Scientology and why they provided information about the RPF. Indeed, it is troubling that some social scientists, who should be well aware of the potential damage caused to people who receive a deviant 'master status' (like 'apostate'), continue to refine and apply this label at the expense (at least in Dawson's case) of evaluating the content of their claims (see Becker 1963: 33-4; Schur 1971: 30, 52, 69-70). Judging the motives behind actions is very difficult, so researchers cannot always determine why these people have either spoken out publicly or conveyed information privately. Ultimately, however, their motives matter far less than the consistent content of their information. In the case of these RPF accounts, the high degree of triangulation leads me to conclude that the informants are providing accurate accounts. First, people's accounts are consistent with much of Scientology's written policies and documents. Second, research subjects provide similar, first-hand accounts of the same RPF programs. Third, different types of researchers, working in different periods of

time obtain similar RPF information. Finally, some of the people provide information despite risk to themselves.

### Concluding Remarks: How to Understand Dawson's Critique

It seems curious that a respected, well-published, and highly successful academic like Lorne Dawson would contest the propriety of my methods regarding a Scientology institution – the RPF – about which he knows little. The only way his entry into this debate makes sense is to view it within the context of a struggle for interpretive control within a particular body of social scientific literature, with Dawson attempting to defend his previously published positions. The RPF material makes a compelling case for the existence of a brainwashing program, and this program (along with several others) will require social scientists to adjust their positions on brainwashing as an applicable concept for some aspects of specific controversial religions. I include myself among a network of social scientists (see Mullins with Mullins 1973: 21-2) attempting 'theory proliferation,' in which an understanding of brainwashing as a means of retaining members 'expands the range of application of ideas about social phenomena beyond the original domain' of existing brainwashing research (Wagner and Berger 1985: 708). Dawson and others, however, see the efforts of this network as 'theory competition' (708) in which its members' understanding of brainwashing seeks to replace existing literature.

Moreover, the brainwashing debate has become intertwined with other contentious issues among scholars of alternative religions. These issues include the utility of former members' accounts, the possible implications for groups that now operate (or in the immediate past have operated) abusive re-education programs for their members, triangulation when studying high-demand groups, and even the professional reputations of some of the researchers themselves (see Kent and Krebs 1998a; 1998b; 1999; Lewis 1999; Melton 1999; Shupe 1999). Rather than reading Dawson's critique as a careful analysis of my work (which it clearly is not), scholars will find it to be an excellent example of what happens when a social scientist seeks to defend existing theories, models, or concepts against both new information and its resultant theoretical implications.

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