

Life after Centrepont: Accounts of adult adjustment after childhood spent at an experimental community

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This study explores how former child members of a controversial community, in which child sexual abuse and drug use are known to have occurred, account for the effects of this on their adult lives. The narrative accounts of 29 participants were analysed to identify key areas of psychological adjustment they described after leaving the New Zealand community known as Centrepont. Participants' accounts highlighted challenges in negotiating the initial transition, family relationships, friendships and intimate relationships, livelihoods, stigma and changing belief systems. Themes within participants' accounts reflect disadvantage and suffering as a result of growing up at Centrepont as well as some advantages, also attributed to this environment. While this research shows that there may be some significant adjustments to be made after childhood spent in such communities, it also cautions against a polarized perspective which focuses exclusively on either positive or negative consequences of this kind of experience.

Since the 1970's the psychological impact of alternative communities, known popularly as 'cults', have been the subject of considerable discussion and debate (Aronoff, Lynn & Malinoski, 2000). Much of the existing research, however, has focused on those who had joined these groups as adults and less is known about the consequences of this lifestyle for those who grew up in these environments. This paper explores how the former children of the controversial New Zealand community, Centrepont, account for their adjustment to adult life outside of it.

As Freckelton (1998) notes, there are differences of opinion on almost all aspects of alternative communities, including the terminology used to describe them. Those who use the label of 'cult' generally see these communities as exercising a malevolent control over their members and as intrinsically harmful (Langone, 1993). But recent researchers have challenged assumptions that these communities are

necessarily problematic and choose to use the term 'New Religious Movements' (NRMs) for groups with shared sets of beliefs (Beckford, 2003) or 'intentional communities' which specifically refer to residential groups who hold a shared set of values (Sargisson & Sargent, 1994). We preferred to use the more neutral term 'community' in our research in order to respect participants' potential sensitivities around these labels.

Not surprisingly the clinical and research literature on the psychological effects of cults/NRMs reflects the diverse perspectives suggested by the different terms. The research on 'cults' has noted significant psychological difficulties in former members including symptoms such as anxiety, anger, low self confidence, flashbacks, depression, guilt, dissociation, passivity, psychosis as well as a unique experience of confusion that has been described as 'floating' (Conway & Siegelman, 1995; Martin, 1993; Singer & Ofshe, 1990; Singer & Lalich, 1995). These psychological

difficulties are described as being the consequence of manipulation, loss of control and other forms of maltreatment that occur in cults (Langone, 1993; Singer & Lalich, 1995). While adverse experiences in cults are thought to have negative impacts on former members' adjustment, some researchers have suggested that giving up a strong investment in a community may also be a significant source of distress (Lewis, 1987). Based on a review of clinical reports and the empirical research in this area Aronoff, Lynn and Malinoski (2000) concluded that cult membership is linked to adjustment difficulties although they acknowledged that it was not clear whether difficulties could be attributed to the cult itself or were a product of leaving it.

In contrast, others have highlighted some of the potentially positive consequences of what they generally call NRMs (Anthony & Robbins, 2004). Richardson (1995) argues, on the basis of a review of the research, that there is no evidence to suggest that members of these groups have more mental health problems than others and that there are likely to be psychological benefits that continue even after a member leaves. This finding has been echoed in some more recent research (Namini & Murken, 2009). Specific benefits identified as arising from involvement in NRMs include the provision of 'structure' (Buxant, Saroglou, Casalfiore & Christians, 2007) and group cohesion (Galanter, 1989) as well as some of the general advantages that have been attributed to conventional religious

beliefs (Van Dyke & Elias, 2007).

Much of the research in this area has been concerned to evaluate the mental health status of former cult/NRM members but there is less research on how former members themselves experience leaving a community and rejoining 'the outside world'. There are, however, descriptions in the clinical literature which suggest that former members face some significant challenges after leaving a community. These may include practical adjustments related to daily living as well as a range of emotional and social demands (Singer & Lalich, 1995). The latter include pain at the loss of the community (Ward, 2002); difficulty in establishing autonomy (Martin, 1993); loneliness and a sense of alienation (Singer & Lalich, 1995); confusion over what went right or wrong at the community (Martin, 1993) and a re-evaluation of the philosophical ideas held by the group (Singer & Lalich, 1995).

The research reviewed above focuses largely on adults and there is less research available on the adjustment of children after experiences in these cults/NRMs. Children require separate and specific consideration as they will not normally have entered the community of their own volition and may have limited experience of the world outside of it. While again, there is little empirical research in this area, clinically-focused reviews have discussed the experiences of children in cults (Whitsett & Kent, 2003; Langone & Eisenberg, 1994). This literature draws attention to the way that communities with cultic features may undermine the functioning of families and open the possibility for children to be exposed to various forms of abuse, including physical, psychological and sexual abuse. Siskand (2001) argues that children may be particularly vulnerable to harm because adults cede their parental authority to the community's leaders, members are relatively isolated from external supports and because the shared belief system can put the practices of adult members above the law.

There appear to be fewer positive accounts of children's experiences in community living as opposed to adults although Sargisson and Sargent (1994) suggest that there are some benefits

for those who grow up in what they call 'intentional communities'. They attribute benefits to factors such as the availability of adult attention, consultative parenting and having other children to play with. Pro-social psychological effects noted for children growing up in Kibbutzim also seem to support claims for the value of collective living for children (Aviezer, Van IJzendoorn, Sagi & Schuengel, 1994). But while this body of literature offers some insights into experiences children can have in communities it is acknowledged that there is very little research available on which to base conclusions about the long term effects of these kinds of experience (Langone & Eisenberg, 1993; Whitsett & Kent, 2003).

It is also possible that cults/NRMs offer the potential for both good and bad experiences and with this, both good and bad outcomes for members. Wright (1984) for example notes that people who leave NRMs are often ambivalent about their experience, and are able to identify both advantages and disadvantages. His research also suggests that in spite of difficulties with the experience former members felt they learned from it and were able to use this knowledge in their post-cult lives (Wright, 1994). More recent qualitative literature has also drawn attention to the diversity in the way that people chose to narrate similar experiences. Writing about sexual abuse survivors, researchers have, for example, noted that they may choose to represent this experience and its effects on their lives in different ways which foreground negative psychological effects or highlight resilience and transcendence (Harvey, Mishler, Koenen & Harney, 2000; Reavy & Brown, 2007). It is possible then that those who have had childhood experiences in communities may offer diverse accounts of the damage and or benefits they feel they have experienced as a result.

The literature clearly reflects divergent views on the likely harm or benefit of cult/NRM membership for later adjustment. This may be a consequence of fundamental differences in ideological position (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001) but it is also likely to be a product of the diversity of groups

that can be included under this broad category. According to Langone (1993) cults are marked by devotion to a person or cause, mechanisms of control and persuasion that force adherence to the beliefs and practices of the group, the dependence of members on the group leader and their exploitation. But as Freckelton (1998) notes, there is little homogeneity amongst these groups and it is likely that some have more negative cult-like features than others. Communities may also vary from those which affiliate with religion and those that are linked to other value systems including psychotherapy (Schwartz & Kaslow, 2001). Research clearly needs to take into account more specific features of each community including, for example, child sexual abuse which is known to have harmful psychological effects (Maniglio, 2009).

Centrepoint: The context

Centrepoint operated in Auckland between 1978 and 2000. Drawing from the Encounter Movement, it had as its central mission the transformation of inter-personal relationships to be more open (Oakes, 1986). One of its more controversial characteristics was its emphasis on open sexuality, including for children. These values were expressed in the organisation of life at the community, which included shared sleeping arrangements in 'long houses' as well as open showers and toilets (Sargisson & Sargent, 2004; Levitas & Sargisson, 2003; Oakes, 1986). In terms of its resources, it operated communally, with members handing over their assets to the general pool on joining Centrepoint (Levitas & Sargisson, 2003; Oakes, 1986). Centrepoint also utilized 'therapeutic' strategies both in and outside formal group therapy to challenge inter-personal boundaries and encourage open expression of emotions and sexuality (Levitas & Sargisson, 2003). The practices of the community in relation to child sexuality and to illegal drugs became the focus of police investigation and resulted in the imprisonment of a number of its senior members, including the leader, Bert Potter, on child abuse and drugs charges. The community was closed by a court order in 2000.

There were estimated to be 200-

300 children who spent some or all of their childhoods at Centrepoint. We were aware of contrasting viewpoints amongst this group as some had spoken out publically decrying the abuse they had experienced at Centrepoint while others had expressed their loyalty to the community and espoused its benefits.

In the broader study from which this article draws, participants provided detailed descriptions of their experiences growing up in the community (Gibson, Morgan, Woolley & Powis, 2010). These experiences highlighted features of the Centrepoint environment with the potential for adverse psychological effects, including early sexual experiences and child sexual abuse, parental neglect, psychological manipulation and recreational drug use by children. But participants also described some positive experiences at the community including support from a range of adults, strong peer group connections, child-friendly facilities and opportunities for communal interaction and activities.

Method

A retrospective narrative-based research study was conducted to explore participants' adjustment from the Centrepoint community to the outside world and their views on how their childhood experiences had impacted on their adults lives. The study adapted a Voice-Centred Relational narrative methodology (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; 1993; Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003) to analyse the accounts of participants. This method was chosen for a number of reasons. Firstly, as a feminist methodology, this approach is concerned to allow the 'voices' of those with less power in society to be heard. This seemed appropriate for research on the former Centrepoint children who, despite having been the subject of public media and court proceedings, had had little opportunity to tell their version of their experiences. Secondly, this approach treats experience as fundamentally relational. This was particularly suitable for understanding the impact of Centrepoint which had had the transformation of social relationships as fundamental to its ideology. Thirdly, while this approach has much in common with other narrative methodologies, it

differs in encouraging researchers to attend to different perspectives within a single account through the use of multiple readings of the same transcript. This is designed to illuminate both the obvious and less obvious 'voices' contained in the narrative. We thought that this would be useful, not only in identifying differences between participants, but also in capturing potential diversity within as well as between participants' accounts. Finally, this method also places emphasis on responses of the researchers and encourages a reflexive awareness of the way they attend to different strands in a story and also shape it in particular ways. This is particularly important in the study of controversial communities such as Centrepoint, which are known to evoke polarized perspectives amongst researchers (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). We used discussion amongst the group of researchers to challenge the temptation to provide simplistic or one-sided interpretations of the data (Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

Participants

Letters of invitation to participate in this research were sent to about 180 former Centrepoint children, now adults, whose names were available on a database, held by a Trust that administers the assets of the former Centrepoint. The research invitation was also advertised on their website and by word of mouth. A six month recruitment period resulted in the 29 participants (an estimated 10-15% of all the children believed to have spent their childhood at Centrepoint). Although probability sampling was not required for this qualitative study, there was concern to reflect the diversity of perspectives that was known to exist amongst the former Centrepoint children. Fortunately, those who volunteered included a reasonable balance of former members who felt largely positive about their experiences at Centrepoint and those who felt largely negative (although many had mixed opinions about this). This allowed us to reflect a reasonably full range of experience. Some participants, however, reported that they were aware of other former children, who had experienced their involvement with Centrepoint as particularly damaging and who were reluctant to have any involvement with

the organization that now managed its assets. It is, therefore, possible that those who had had the most difficult experiences at Centrepoint were not well represented in this study.

A detailed breakdown of the demographics of the participants cannot be provided here because of the need to protect participants' anonymity, but they ranged in age between early adulthood and middle age. There were 6 men and 23 women in the participant group who were all of New Zealand European or European descent. Participants had spent varying amounts of time at the community, ranging from those who had been born there and spent all of their childhoods there, to those who had spent only a few years there.

Data collection

Participants took part in an unstructured narrative interview at a venue of their own choosing. Following standard narrative method, participants were simply asked to tell us about their childhood at Centrepoint and its impact on their adult lives. If they did not respond to this they were asked: 'How did you come to be at Centrepoint?' which provided a starting point for their narrative. They were assisted to continue their story with prompts but the interviewers were careful not to structure the direction of their account with the researchers' questions or prompts. Interviews lasted between one and four hours with the average time being approximately two hours. Participants were allowed to stop the interview at any time they chose. Given the sensitivity of the issues discussed, participants were given access to free counselling if they needed this after taking part in the research.

Analysis

The interviews produced over 1000 pages of transcribed interview material. Transcripts were returned to participants for checking and amendments. The transcribed data was then analysed using what Gilligan and her colleagues call the 'listening guide' (Gilligan, Spencer, Weinberg & Bertsch, 2003). In the 'listening guide' the transcribed interview is copied into the right hand side of the margin while the left hand side is used to identify and reflect on themes and researchers' responses

related to an identified 'reading' focus. In this study we used four readings that drew on, but adapted those usually used in this method. The first reading focused on the plot. This standard narrative reading allowed us to identify and trace some of the key areas of adjustment experienced by participants after leaving Centrepoint. The second reading drew more specifically from Gilligan's approach (Gilligan et al., 2003) and focused on the way that participants represented their relationships and themselves in their relational context. We introduced two further readings to elaborate our understanding of the way that participants characterized themselves and their experiences in relation to psychological difficulty. In one we focused on 'vulnerability' in which we tried to listen carefully to the stories that participants told about their suffering and difficulties after leaving Centrepoint. In the other we focused our attention on the 'resilient' voice of participants to ensure that we were able to also hear the strength in their accounts. The last two readings were particularly important in ensuring that we did not allow a dominant theme of either vulnerability or strength in a narrative to mask its counterpart.

While we have explored the narrative structure and content of accounts in other papers (Gibson, Morgan, Woolley & Powis, 2011; Gibson & Morgan, in press) in this paper we chose to highlight common areas of adjustment identified by participants while also acknowledging the diversity reflected in their accounts.

Findings

The immediate transition to the 'outside'

Participants' accounts highlighted immediate challenges in dealing with practical demands they had faced in leaving Centrepoint. Most families had few or no financial resources, as all their assets had been handed over to the community. One participant describes her memory of this experience:

We went to the Salvation Army and got everything – pots and pans, a bread board and things. But yeah, on the bones of our ass we had to start again.

But the initial adjustment went beyond these practical issues to include an emotional and social adjustment that one participant described as being like "coming from the moon...and landing on the earth again". These adjustments seemed to focus on the transition from communal to non-communal living:

But what I found difficult when we lived in a small house was that we've got our family unit and there just wasn't enough people around, really.

Another participant described how she had become so used to the norms of communal living that she had been unsure about whether she could enter the kitchen in the house she shared with her family and help herself to food. She explained that having toilets with doors, after Centrepoint's communal showers and toilets, had also felt strange to her. Some participants chose to continue to live in communal arrangements, albeit on a smaller scale than Centrepoint, rather than living in nuclear family arrangements. One explained how her choice to continue to live communally made it easier to adapt when she left Centrepoint:

I made sure I found a flat that had quite a few people in it, just to make it easier.

In addition to these adjustments, participant narratives also revealed strong themes centred on the emotional loss of the community. Even though some participants acknowledged experiencing abuse at Centrepoint, for many it had been the only home they had known or remembered. They described their experience of leaving Centrepoint as being wrenched from their childhood home:

... just a lot of crying, and just getting your head over that this is how life is, and to move on and accept it's over. I think when we were young; we never really thought it would end.

Some narratives also spoke about the loss of the ideal that the community had represented. One participant, for example, described how his departure from the community left him with an on-going sense of emptiness:

I feel a little bit incomplete a lot of the time, you know, like something

missing.

But there were also narratives which reflected excitement about leaving the constraints of Centrepoint for the 'outside world'. For one participant, this was particularly so because she was able to spend more time with her mother, while another spoke about how she wanted more 'structure' in her life. For others there was simply the relief of escaping the abuse that they had been subjected to. One explained that it didn't matter to her where she was "as long as [she] wasn't there".

But even amongst participants who spoke about how Centrepoint had been harmful for them, there was an acknowledgement of complicated feelings of loss and confusion associated with the absence of familiar people and social arrangements at Centrepoint. This finding coincides with the general observations of other clinicians and researchers who suggest that adjustment from the community to the outside world may involve both loss and disruption (Martin, 1993). It is perhaps unusual that some participants sought greater structure outside of the community but this may reflect a desire to escape the particular way that Centrepoint defined and practiced 'freedom'.

Negotiating family relationships

Over half of the participants in this study had come to Centrepoint with divorced or separated parents and it is likely that Centrepoint's emphasis on non-monogamy and sexual openness may have further challenged the structure of the nuclear family. The narratives of participants who had come to the community during the course of their childhood described how Centrepoint had changed the way they related to their parents. They spoke of how Centrepoint had weakened their attachment to their nuclear parent(s) as they became less involved in the direct care of their children and handed over this responsibility to the broader community. Strong themes of neglect emerged in the narratives as participants' told of having to 'fend for themselves:

The adults were committed to their mission which was sort of a therapeutic endeavour or whatever you want to call it...and

the kids kind of were left to fend for themselves a lot, you know.

Participants who had been born at the community also described being relatively distant from their parents but seemed to accept this as the norm.

Participants' narratives spoke of the difficulty in establishing or re-establishing family connections in the aftermath of Centrepoint. Some described how they had wanted to regain the sense of intimacy and the closeness that they had lost in their family relationships as this participant put it:

I still feel like we are still trying to reconnect our family...we don't have what normal families have ...you don't have that wider sense of home I suppose.

Accounts also emphasised particular conflict and disconnection when participants or their family members had been involved in sexual abuse at Centrepoint, either as victims or perpetrators:

And that sort of tore our family apart a little bit, you know. Like me and [my sibling] would fight about it, me and my [parent] would fight about it, and ... dealing with the fact that I was unsure and one said it never happened and there was a lot of confusion going on there.

But even where families were described as generally supportive, participants' accounts described how relationships were not always entirely comfortable, as experiences at Centrepoint generated areas of 'silence' between family members: children could not easily ask questions about their parents involvement in abuse; parents may have been reluctant to acknowledge guilt, and siblings protected one another from knowledge about their experiences as suggested in the following account by a participant:

We have different experiences of Centrepoint. I have, you know, more years' experience than her that I went through and I sometimes don't know how much does she know about what I experienced at Centrepoint compared to what she experienced.... We haven't talked

about it a lot; there's been things I've held back on with her about...

But, in contrast to these themes of disconnection in relation to families, there were also narrative threads that suggested increased closeness to family members after Centrepoint. One participant, for example, explained how for her, it seemed that only her family could understand what they had all been through at Centrepoint:

We share everything....and they've been through it all with me....I've always been able to lean on them for support.

This capacity for closeness was, in some cases, attributed to a parent recognising the difficulties their child had experienced at Centrepoint. Closeness was less possible when parents were described as not 'taking responsibility' for what had happened to their children.

Participants' accounts suggest that the transformations in family relationships at Centrepoint may have continued to impact on their relationships with family members after leaving the community. Some narratives carried strong themes of disconnection, conflict and silence in these relationships. While much of the research on cults/NRMs has focussed on disruptions to relationships with family members who remained outside of the community (Langone, 1993) less is known about how these experiences impact on relationships between family members who spent time together in a community. Whitsett and Kent (2003) have discussed how cults undermine family relationship ties and it is perhaps not surprising that these effects might last beyond the period spent in the community. Sexual abuse in families has also been recognised to have significant disturbing effects on family connections (Crosson-Tower, 2005). But it is also possible that a closeness borne of shared experiences may help to draw family members together. This is a possibility that has not been documented in the literature in this area.

Establishing intimate relationships and friendships

Participants acknowledged the communal ethos of Centrepoint as fundamental to their experience there.

In positive representations this was depicted as allowing easy and continuous social connection with others as the following extract suggests:

All summer there'd be a volleyball net out and people would come and go and you'd just be playing volleyball after dinner or there'd be tennis games or soccer games. So there'd be just constantly people around.

In less positive narrative accounts this on-going requirement to interact with others was seen as a burden. Some described feeling trapped by the confines of the community and others felt the burden of communal expectations which regulated social behavior.

But regardless of whether the communal social interaction was represented as helpful or not, participants recognised that an adjustment needed to be made to more independent living arrangements outside of Centrepoint. Themes reflecting isolation were present in many of the participant's accounts of their adult lives. One participant, for example, described how she felt the stark differences between her life at Centrepoint and a new experience of living alone:

I just didn't have anyone that I could share and I was really not used to that. I had always had close friends or someone there that I could talk to and it was strange to come home after a night out with a bunch of friends and be sad by myself.

The contrast between communal life at Centrepoint and life 'outside' was described in some cases as being exacerbated by difficulties in relating to 'outsiders':

I didn't have the social skills to, to really deal with normal people. 'Outside people' – they were always bit scary to me.

Participants provided other explanations for difficulties in integrating socially outside of Centrepoint. Narratives spoke of an awareness of being 'different' with some participants explaining that they felt that their experiences at Centrepoint had set them apart from others their age. Participants also described how Centrepoint had presented a negative perception of

the outside world and how they had struggled to overcome their learned prejudices against 'outsiders'.

Accounts also suggested that the Centrepoint experience had left some participants wary of manipulation or the misuse of authority as the following extract suggests:

I kind of, I watch people a lot more and check them out before, and start talking to them, you know, the third or fourth time I meet them rather than being straight in there.

Themes of mistrust were linked in many narratives to participants' experiences of having had their sexual boundaries transgressed at Centrepoint.

But in contrast there were also narrative accounts that emphasised the value of social experiences that participants had had at Centrepoint and highlighted positive impacts on their adult lives. Accounts spoke of the way that Centrepoint had helped participants to develop social confidence:

It basically gave you the opportunity to be an adult and be involved with adults and not just adults that are your parents. So I remember actually, hearing that the teachers commenting on these kids that were going through from Centrepoint, saying 'These kids have the most amazing people skills we've ever come across'.

From this perspective the range of social interactions at Centrepoint was seen to have been important in allowing participants the opportunity to practice their social skills across the diverse range of adults and children at the community.

The shift from living communally at Centrepoint to the relative isolation of life outside of the community was recognised as an important area of adjustment in participant accounts. There were strong themes that emphasised loneliness, a sense of being different and difficulties in trusting others after Centrepoint. This finding is consistent with the clinical observations of former cult/NRM members (Singer & Lalich, 1995) but also provides some insight into the reasons participants give for these experiences. Nonetheless,

some accounts highlighted the social confidence that communal living provided to former members, which corresponds with the literature on the prosocial benefits of communities (Sargis & Sargent, 2004)

Becoming a parent

Taking on the role of a parent emerged as a significant adjustment period in participants' accounts of their lives after Centrepoint. While this task would be widely recognised to require adjustment for any adult, particular experiences at Centrepoint were seen by participants as impacting on their ability to meet the demands of this new life event. Participants explained how parenting in a nuclear family was very different to parenting at Centrepoint where parenting was a collective responsibility. Some narratives emphasised the experiences of neglect that children had experienced at Centrepoint and talked about how having a child themselves had provided the impetus to work on their own psychological difficulties or to try and to identify the way they wanted to parent 'differently'.

The experience of having a child also evoked anxieties about sexual abuse experiences participants had at Centrepoint. Having a child or having their child reach the same age as they were when they were abused at the community made participants newly aware of the significance of the sexual abuse at Centrepoint as the following participant describes:

Looking back, its like, [my child's age]! You know, it's like, geez, I couldn't imagine, younger than [my child] and yeah, just like all the kids, all the girls from [my child's] classroom or something, it's just quite bizarre that...

Some narratives expressed a fear that participants' experiences of abuse at Centrepoint may have had some impact on their capacity to parent their own children:

[You] want to fix the damage not only to yourself but to your child as well. Because they're like a sponge they absorb everything you say. They're being affected by the way you were influenced, too.

But in contrast to these negative

representations of Centrepoint and its impact on adjustment to parenting, other narratives highlighted the advantages of having a range of 'parenting models' at Centrepoint. One male participant, for example, spoke about modelling his parenting on the men he had known at Centrepoint. He explained that the community allowed considerable scope for fathers to be involved with their children and, in spite of the abuse that had taken place, there had also been good fathering role models:

'Cause, I saw a lot of real, yeah, just very nurturing fathers, good fathers that spent lots of time with their kids.

Becoming a parent was an important adjustment area for former Centrepoint children. Themes in participants' accounts included those that related to increased awareness of the significance of child abuse at Centrepoint and fears that correspond to the growing awareness of the inter-generational effects of abuse (Frazier, West-Olatunji, St. Juste & Goodman, 2009). But in spite of these concerns some were determined to use the parenting 'failures' at Centrepoint as the impetus for developing better parenting skills themselves. Other narrative threads highlighted the value of having a range of parental role models at Centrepoint. There is no existing research which examines the effects of cult/NRM experiences on parenting. This is important as those who were children in the communities that proliferated in the 1960's and 1970's may now be in a position to reflect on their own parenting experiences.

Establishing livelihoods

The resource arrangements at Centrepoint were intended to shift values away from individual responsibility for livelihood to collective forms of responsibility. Its belief system emphasised the importance of sharing resources and responsibilities and members were expected to participate in the work required to keep it running. Even the children were expected to engage in collective tasks at Centrepoint:

Every Saturday morning was a working bee, which was: everyone go and clean the windows, go and do the toilets you know and all of that sort of stuff. And it was really

great, worked really well and everyone got stuck in and had a really good time.

In practice, however, while members may have felt a sense of responsibility for the day-to-day functioning of the community, the broader financial arrangements were taken care of by the leadership structure. One participant explained how his mother had described the advantages of living at Centrepoint:

She was saying to me: 'You know what I love about this place? The best thing? You don't have to worry about money. You don't have to worry about any bills – I haven't paid a bill in 10 years'.

Narratives highlighted the adjustment problems that had been created by families leaving the community without any financial resources. Many accounts reflected themes of bitterness associated with the permanent loss of resources to Centrepoint with participants talking about how their parents had taken all their resources to the community and how their 'inheritance' had been 'stolen'.

Narratives also suggested that Centrepoint provided poor role models for the individual goal orientation required in the world outside of Centrepoint:

There's been so much role playing missing, like simple things like no-one had savings accounts, parents didn't earn money, no-one owned a car, no-one paid a mortgage.

But in some accounts, it was not a shift in values and priorities that interfered with the participants' capacity to take care of themselves financially. Some participants emphasized the emotional damage inflicted by child abuse and manipulation at Centrepoint. One participant who told of experiencing years of sexual abuse described how this had affected her ability to work:

Probably around my early twenties when I sort of started to really realise the cost that I paid. ...And like that's sort of like a time in your life when, you should be launching into life, you know, getting your career and all that. And I was just like literally dead in the water for about 10 years.

I couldn't. I managed some jobs, but it was just, a very, very intense thing to have to go through.

Illicit drug use was described as being common at Centrepoint and many participants spoke about how they had continued using these. Some narratives represented this as a habit while others described it as a way of dealing with significant emotional distress related to abusive experiences at Centrepoint. Many narratives linked drug use with other stresses and described how it had had negative consequences on their ability to pursue lasting or meaningful work.

In contrast to negative themes that emphasised the absence of resources, role modelling and the impact of emotional trauma, there were accounts that suggested that the communal lifestyle had given participants greater capacities in relation to employment than those of their peers. Participants described how the community had fostered a 'work ethic' and how involvement in collective work had given participants confidence in their abilities that they used to good effect the outside community:

And I love working. I started just starting a new job and probably I'm the youngest one there, and most people have [specific] qualifications. I haven't done anything. So I you know, I attribute stuff like that to the community... I'm not scared to take on; I'll go for the biggest challenge. I never set my sights low. And that stuff they always taught you at the community is to be who you are to not be scared of anything.

Narrative themes related to livelihood highlighted participants' bitterness about the loss of family resources to the Centrepoint community. In addition, accounts suggested some difficulties in adjusting from the communal resource arrangements and beliefs at Centrepoint to the individual achievement orientation of the broader society. Participants described the absence of role models, recognised to be important developing financial management skills (Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). Traumatic experiences such as sexual abuse at Centrepoint were also described as impacting negatively

on participants' ability to support themselves effectively. But in contrast to these themes of disadvantage, some narratives referred to the work ethic and a sense of self confidence fostered at Centrepoint as being valuable in their work adjustment. The latter would seem consistent with the role of self efficacy in accounting for career success (Anderson & Betz, 2001). While literature has focussed on psychological adjustment from cults/NRMs there is less literature which explores the area of vocational adjustment for former members. Langone (1993), however, has suggested that there may be value in recognising and building on the skills developed in the community and using these to assist with integration into the conventional workforce.

Negotiating stigma

There was considerable media publicity around Centrepoint, during its years of operation and continuing up to the present, with a particular focus on the issues of child sexual abuse and drug use at the community. Participants described this publicity as a source of on-going distress and their narratives reflected themes of being unfairly judged and stigmatised by public attention. One participant explained how she experienced the stigma of being associated with Centrepoint:

It's a skeleton in the closet, that you [are]... secretly afraid people might find out and then would judge you. Because it is harsh to be judged on something that is not something that you choose, or you know. Like I guess the colour of your skin.

Participant's accounts suggested that their association with Centrepoint had had considerable impact on their interactions with friends and partners as well as broader social networks. Some accounts suggested that it was this element of the experience which made it particularly difficult to leave the Centrepoint experience behind them:

It's very hard to sort of be free of all that history that, continuing to be secretive about my past even 25 years after it's really been over... I know I'm never going to be free of it.

But while some participants

described how they had been haunted by the stigma associated with Centrepoint, others told of how they had decided to risk social disapproval to be open and honest about their connection with Centrepoint:

For me I had always sort of more tried to leave it behind me and never speak about it anymore but [a friend] sort of helped me to see that where I come from is not anything to be ashamed of ... It made me a lot more open to saying 'Yeah that's where I'm from and this is who I am and I'm still a good person and I'm still smart and I'm not ashamed from where I came from'.

Some accounts, however, suggested that the open acknowledgement of association with Centrepoint was experienced as 'risky' for participants:

I would talk about it and then I would feel like 'Whoah!' you know and I think for some people it is too muchand then you run the risk of feeling like you're being judged or it's not understood ...the aftermath wasn't really worth it so I'd sort of leave it.

Some participants openly spoke about how they did not want to be labelled as victims and resented other former members for speaking out on their behalf:

I definitely want to be kept as far away from the victims as possible 'cause I'm not prepared to spend my life as a victim

Participants' accounts suggest that they continued to feel burdened by stigma associated with Centrepoint. This was represented by some as a form of re-victimisation – especially for those who had already experienced sexual or other kinds of abuse at Centrepoint. Some participants tried actively to resist the stigma associated with sexual abuse and to distance themselves from these claims, a dynamic common amongst sexual abuse survivors (Tomlin, 1991).

Negotiating a different 'reality'

Centrepoint held a strong set of beliefs which were at odds with those of the broader society including those around child sexuality. Participants' narratives spoke of continuous or intermittent negotiation between their

'old values' and those generally accepted in mainstream New Zealand society.

Some narratives alluded to the idea of 'brainwashing' at Centrepoint. Several participants described how they felt their view of the world had been skewed by the ideas they were exposed to at the community using words like 'manipulation', 'indoctrination' or 'propaganda' to describe their experience. One participant explained how she had only become aware of how profoundly she had been influenced by Centrepoint's ideas sometime after she had left the community:

But it wasn't until, probably, that I had kids, that I realised the extent of the brainwashing ... I think when you grow up there you learn stuff you just take as face value and you think that's how everybody's lived and it's not until you get out into the real world and you think, 'Oh my God, this is not what everybody else does'.

Some narratives described a slow process in which participants had realised that what they had been taught to believe at Centrepoint was not necessarily so. One participant spoke about her growing awareness of the way in which she had been taught to view the world:

I knew some things were wrong and I didn't agree with them but it was the things I didn't question that were kind of in there, about relationships and people being happy and all that and I guess it just took me time to figure out that it could be different.

In some cases participants reflected some uncertainty about where they stood in relation to the beliefs of Centrepoint. One participant seemed to acknowledge her somewhat mixed feelings about whether or not Centrepoint was a good place to grow up:

When I was younger I would've said, 'Oh, I'm really glad I lived there', but now I'd say 'I wished I'd had a normal family' ...as we sort of lose touch with it. ... But you still feel, like when you go back, you feel very fond of it yeah.

Accounts also expressed some difficulty in making sense of the combination of good memories of

Centrepoint and an awareness of some of the abuses:

Which is something you can't really get away from. Even though my memories were fine it's just knowing what actually happened there it's difficult.

In some cases participant's accounts also reflected doubtfulness about the validity of participants' perceptions and opinions about Centrepoint. Participants often prefaced their claims with caveats such as 'I'm a bit hazy on the details' or 'I can't be sure'. One participant explicitly said that she sometimes felt confused when talking about Centrepoint as there were so many different views that she found herself becoming less certain of her own opinion. Although she knew what had happened to her and others there she explained that she sometimes felt that she was 'making it up'.

But not all narratives adopted this cautious tone. Some participants seemed to respond to the possibility of doubt with a strident defence of the community. One participant explained how she refused to engage with what she saw as misguided and biased representations of Centrepoint:

Yeah, just because I can't be bothered dealing with the shit that people spin about the place. And they only see the bad stuff, they think of it as a big, everyone thinks it's a cult, and a place where you know, people actually say, 'Were you, did you get raped?' and stuff. And it's like, you know, people are kind of so far from the reality of it.

Participants' narratives described, and also at times reflected, a process of adjusting to a different 'reality' on leaving Centrepoint and re-joining the outside world. When they were at Centrepoint they had accepted its practices as normal, but having left it they struggled to reconcile these beliefs with those outside. Some narratives spoke of 'brainwashing' while others reflected more ambivalence about the values of Centrepoint versus those of the broader society. In general, participants accounts reflected difficulty in managing a variety of competing 'realities' as they moved from Centrepoint to the 'outside world'. While the idea of 'brainwashing' has debatable credibility

(Zablocki & Robbins, 2001), these narratives suggest that there were some significant challenges for participants in reconciling the ideas held by the community with those of the broader society.

Conclusions

As every community will have its unique beliefs and practices it is not possible to generalise directly from the findings of this study to other communities. Nonetheless, this study provides an 'insiders' view on the way that experiences in cults/NRMs can affect later adult adjustment. This analysis suggests an initial adjustment phase may include practical or financial difficulties as well as challenges in the immediate adaptations to a different lifestyle and norms. Relationships within families, which have been transformed by the requirements of communal living, may have to be renegotiated. Lack of skills and or willingness to engage in social relationships outside of the community and possible experiences of loneliness may also need to be addressed. Where resources are shared in communal living arrangements there are likely to be practical implications for adjustment and the different belief systems around money and individual goal orientation may also need to be developed. Former child members of experimental communities can also face on-going stigmatising from the broader community. Finally, shifting beliefs and values from those of the community to those of the outside world are also likely to be a significant problem for former child members as they struggle to make sense of two competing sets of values and different opinions about their correctness. At Centrepoint experience of sexual abuse created an additional burden for those who had experienced this, interacting with other demands they faced in their integration into society.

This paper raised questions which may be significant for others trying to research similar communities. Within participants' narratives, it was possible to find themes which coincided closely with the more negative findings of research into cults. Participants spoke about loss of familiar people and beliefs which has been recognised in the literature to be a significant source

of distress for former members and particularly so for those, like the former children of Centrepoint, who have little knowledge of the world outside their communities (Aronoff, Lynn & Malinoski, 2000). The breakdown in family relationships described by the former Centrepoint children has also been described in other research into communities although its longer term effects have not been studied (Whitsett & Kent, 2003). Child sexual abuse and manipulation at the community have similarly been noted to occur in other communities (Whitsett & Kent, 2003; Langone & Eisenberg, 1993) and the children of Centrepoint described some of the known effects of these things on relationships and other areas of adult functioning (Mullen, Martin, Anderson, Romans, & Herbison, 1994; Fergusson, Boden & Horwood, 2008). Furthermore, the literature has also recognised the damage that arises from the stigma associated with cult membership, an issue which was identified by participants in this study as a significant challenge to their adjustment (Olson, 2000). Finally, much of the cult literature acknowledges the difficulty of making sense of the ideological differences between the community and the outside, an issue with which the Centrepoint participants also struggled (Walsh & Bor, 1996).

But while this largely negative perspective of Centrepoint represents one reality for its former members, it is also important to acknowledge that there were themes in the narratives which coincided with some of the more positive research on the value of communities (Sargisson & Sargent, 1994). While the accounts of participants acknowledged very difficult experiences at Centrepoint, there was also recognition, even amongst some of those who had been abused, that there were aspects of their environment that they felt had benefited them in their adult lives. Positive narrative themes highlighted the sense of belonging in the community, continuous social interaction, having access to a variety of adult role models, collective responsibility and social confidence as being helpful in their adult adjustment.

It is tempting for researchers and clinicians to succumb to the temptation to over-simplify the experiences of former community members and become part

of the often polarised academic debate between what have been called 'cult apologists' and 'cult bashers' (Zablocki & Robbins, 2001). It may, however, be important to recognise that, although dysfunctional communities have the potential to create difficulties for adult life, they may also provide former child members with some strengths and capacities that they can draw on in this process. While this cannot justify the abuse of children that can and does occur in communities like Centrepoint, it is an important consideration in supporting and empowering the former child members of such communities to tackle the challenges they face in their lives. It may also help former child members to resist stigmatised representations. Allowing for the possibility of both good and bad experiences as well as advantages and disadvantages in adulthood may give children who have grown up in such communities the space to find meaning for themselves out of the complex social environment in which they spent their childhood.

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