

**Research Dissertation
Outline Proposal/Eol form**

Student name: Elaine Greener

Proposed Title:

Between the Devil and Beloved's Ocean: A heuristic inquiry exploring the process of integration and reconciliation between cultic and spiritual experience.

What is the purpose of your proposed project and how may it inform counselling practice? (please list the main aims and objectives)

Aims:

To research the lived experience of reconciling cultic and spiritual experience and to explore how counselling/psychotherapy has potentially helped or hindered this process.

To address gaps in the literature concerning this process.

To explore the strengths and limitations of current therapeutic approaches working with cult survivors. To propose modifications and adjustments, or alternative therapeutic approaches.

To challenge existing narratives around cults and cult-survivors within the counselling/psychotherapy profession and propose areas for further research.

Objectives:

To conduct a critical literature review of narratives around cults and cult-survivors and current therapeutic approaches to working with this population and identify gaps, strengths and limitations.

To conduct a heuristic, self-search inquiry, using internal frame of reference together with awareness of internal bias (Moustakas, 1990; Sela-Smith, 2001, 2002) that explores recovery from cultic experience and the process of reconciling this with spiritual experience and explores the lived experience of this process in therapy.

To analyse the data using thematic analysis.

To present the findings and to create a discussion and conclusion that may present new concepts, challenge existing narratives and propose adaptations or alternative therapeutic approaches.

Background literature

There is an emergent, hybridised body of literature surrounding cults and cult survivors (Thomas, 2024), but research pertaining to therapeutic approaches to working with this population and their effectiveness is limited. Current therapeutic approaches centre around debunking the cult leader and exposing them as a traumatising narcissist (Stein, 2021; Shaw, 2014; 2023; 2024), deconstructing the cult experience and reconstructing an individual sense of self (Jenkinson, 2019), and acculturation (Pretorius, 2024). Psychotherapeutic narratives around survivors are largely othering and pathologizing with a focus on factors such as vulnerability, predisposition or psychopathology (Castano et al, 2022) and addiction (Bever, 2023). Humanising narratives are emerging, such as the desire to surrender to a “big other” is born of essential human tendency (Yadlin-Gadot, 2023), but research is sparse concerning cult-survivor integrity, strength, and resilience. Further, many people have profound spiritual experiences in cults which current therapeutic approaches often explain away in terms of dissociation or hypnosis (Jenkinson, 2019; Shaw, 2024). This potentially negates or diminishes genuine spiritual growth and awareness and frustrates the integration of full experience.

Heuristic research is effective in challenging existing narratives and finding new, nuanced perspectives and meanings (Carr, 2019). Further, it aligns with spiritual or contemplative practice (Kilrea & McCaslin, 2020; Nash, 2023; Sultan, 2024) and functions as a bridge between counselling and research (Sultan, 2020). By exploring my own, lived experience of reconciling spiritual and cultic experience and the experience of therapy around that process, my research will expand current understanding of cults and cult-survivors and contribute to the development of therapeutic approaches working with this population.

The theoretical framework for this proposed research falls within the humanistic, existential and transpersonal realms of counselling and psychotherapy. The literature which informs this proposal is drawn from theory and research on cult dynamics, psychotherapeutic theory and research concerning cult survivors, and literature around heuristic research.

Proposed methodology:

I will undertake a qualitative, heuristic, self-search inquiry where I am both the participant and researcher, based on the stages outlined by Moustakas (1990), critiqued by Sela-Smith (2001,2002) and expanded by others such as Kilrea and McCaslin (2020) who propose the concept of spiritual, deep heuristics. I will be the only participant.

Following ethical approval, I will embark upon the non-linear, six stages of inquiry: initial engagement; immersion; incubation; illumination; explication; and creative synthesis. These may involve activities such as reflection, meditation, focusing (Gendlin, 1981), dream-work, journalling, reviewing historical journals, creative art-work, reading. This process will produce the data for thematic analysis.

Main Ethical considerations:

Heuristic research can invoke difficult emotions which require processing and can have an ongoing impact. As a researcher and trainee therapist in placement I have a professional responsibility to myself and clients for self-care and working according to capacity (BACP, 2018). Risk will be mitigated by: maintaining my established self-care routine of socialising, daily swimming, sauna and jacuzzi, good diet and sleep patterns; enlisting support and understanding from friends, family, placement supervisor and coordinator; an existing agreement with my therapist for focussed support; agreed blocks of time away from clients.

Issues around participant confidentiality may arise. This can be mitigated by careful presentation of data and by maintaining control of dissemination of the finished work. GDPR to be followed regarding storage of data – digitally password protected on my laptop and other data securely locked in a box within a locked filing cabinet.

The nature of heuristic research can lead to privileging personal narratives or bias (Etherington, 2004). This will be mitigated by including a comprehensive positionality statement, reflexive awareness of resistance (Sela-Smith, 2001) and the heuristic self-inquiry being conducted following, and framed by, a balanced review of current literature.

Please provide a proposed timetable/Gantt Chart for your study (this can be on an additional sheet/appendix)

To follow when UWTSD deadlines are made available.

Please provide five key references to support your proposal (additional references can be supplied as an appendix)

Jenkinson, G., 2019. Leaving psychologically: Breaking the confluent trance. *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, 10, pp.72-80.

Moustakas, C., (1990). *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*. Sage Publications.

Stein, A., (2021). *Terror, Love and Brainwashing: Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems*. Routledge.

Sultan, N. (2020), Heuristic Inquiry: Bridging Humanistic Research and Counseling Practice. *The Journal of Humanistic Counseling*, 59, pp.158-172. <https://doi.org/10.1002/johc.12142>

Thomas, A. (Ed), (2024). Responses and conclusions. *'Cult' Rhetoric in the 21st Century: Deconstructing the Study of New Religious Movements*. Bloomsbury.

See appendix 1 below for additional references.

Brief Feedback from Supervisory Team:

Appendix 1

Additional References

- BACP (2018). *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*. Available at: <https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/3103/bacp-ethical-framework-for-the-counselling-professions-2018.pdf>
- Bever, L., (2023). *Addicted to a Cult: Comparing Cult Membership to Addiction on a Psychological and Neuroscientific Level* (Doctoral Dissertation).
- Carr, A. (2019). *A Heuristic Study of Counsellors' Understanding and Experience of the Nature of Shame and the Impact of Shame on Therapeutic Contact*. Master's dissertation. University of Chester, United Kingdom.
- Castano, Á., Bélanger, J.J. and Moyano, M., (2022). Cult conversion from the perspective of families: Implications for prevention and psychological intervention. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, 14(1), p.148.
- Etherington, K. (2004). Heuristic research as a vehicle for personal and professional development, *Counselling and psychotherapy research*, 4(2), pp. 48–63. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733140412331383973>.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1981). *Focusing*. 2nd ed. Toronto: Bantam.
- Kilrea, K.A. and McCaslin, M.L., 2020. Deep heuristics: An emergent methodology for transformative, actualizing, & potentiating relationships *Transformative Inquiry in Action*.
- Nash, S., (2023). Working with shame in pastoral supervision. In, *Enriching Awareness and Practice in the Pastoral and Reflective Supervision of Clergy*, p.149.
- Pretorius, S.P., (2024). *Former Cult Member's Reintegration into Society*. ResearchGate. Available at: https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Stephan-Pretorius/publication/361265886_Former_cult_member's_reintegration_into_society/inks/62a7b17d55273755ebe9a419/Former-cult-members-reintegration-into-society.pdf

Sela-Smith, S., (2001). *Heuristic self-search inquiry: Clarification of Moustakas' heuristic research*. PhD Dissertation, Saybrook University. ProQuest Dissertations Publishing.

Sela-Smith, S., (2002). Heuristic research: A review and critique of Moustakas's method. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 42(3), pp.53-88.

Shaw, D., (2014). The relational system of the traumatizing narcissist. *International Journal of Cultic Studies*, 5, pp. 4–11.

Shaw, D., (2023). The Role of Shame in Cults, from Recruitment to Recovery, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 33(6), pp. 779-795, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2023.2263056

Shaw, D., (2024). Shame and Self-Alienation: A Trauma- Informed Psychoanalytic Perspective, *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, 44(3), pp.254-265, DOI: 10.1080/07351690.2023.2226021

Sultan, N., (2024). Heuristic inquiry as contemplative practice. In, *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in Spirituality and Contemplative Studies* pp. 41-49. Routledge.

Yadlin-Gadot, S., (2023). On shame, love, mourning, and desire, *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 33(6), pp. 803-810, DOI: 10.1080/10481885.2023.2263057